



Burnt Coat Harbor

*Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station, c. 1880*

# BURNT COAT HARBOR LIGHT STATION SWANS ISLAND, MAINE

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with

Donna A. Wiegler, Oral Histories and Archival Photography

On August 15, 1872, F. A. Allen, the first keeper of the new Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station, climbed to the top of the two towers and lit the lights for the first time. The lens in the main tower was a fourth order Fresnel lens, said to be visible from a distance of 12 miles.<sup>1</sup> The smaller tower originally was located where the bell house is today. The two towers were meant to create a range: by keeping the lights aligned, one directly above the other, an incoming vessel would approach the Western Way, an entrance to Burnt Coat Harbor, along a safe course leaving Sheriff and Gooseberry ledges to the north and Harbor Island to the south.

The creation of the Burnt Coat Harbor light house reflected Swans Island's growth during the decades immediately after the Civil War. Benj. F. Stinson and 83 residents of Swans Island and adjacent islands had submitted a first petition for a light house to the U. S. Congress on January 6, 1857. Their request must have been prompted by an awareness that federal support for navigational aids had been re-organized in 1852 and placed under the administration of the new U. S. Light House Board, and that appropriations were being made for light houses along the Maine coast.<sup>2</sup>

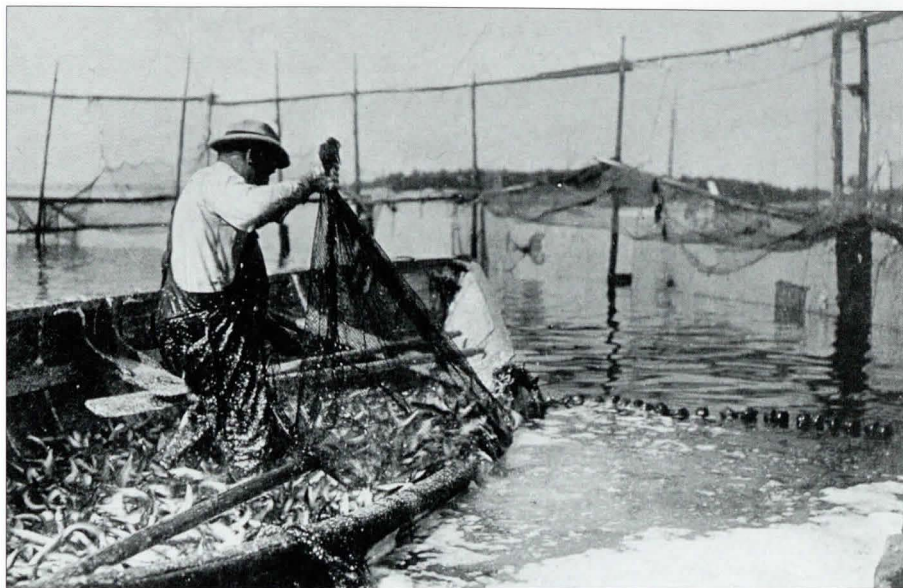
However, this initial request for a light house was not successful, perhaps because the island was not listed on the U. S. Census as a separate community until 1870. In that year, "Swans Isle" with a population of 570 appears in the Census for the first time. By 1880 the population of "Swans Island Plantation" had jumped to 765. This dramatic growth can be attributed to the economic importance of the new mackerel fishery.

Swans Island had been settled shortly after the Revolutionary War.<sup>3</sup> At first, timbering and subsistence farming were the primary occupations, but the fisheries grew in importance as the 19th century progressed. After the War of 1812 the federal government began paying a bounty on cod in order to maintain a class of trained seamen. Fishermen from Swans Island and Deer Isle responded, and typically received 10-12% of the federal subsidy each year prior to the Civil War. By mid-century, fishing was clearly the cornerstone of the island's economy.

*By 1850 Swan's Island was building boats up to 60 tons and seining instead of hand lining. From 1874-1889 Swan's Island boats held either first or second place each year [in tonnage landed] among the Atlantic fleet.... in 1881, three of the ten most successful boats of the Atlantic fleet were from Swan's Island, the schooner A. E. Herrick, Captain William Herrick; the schooner Isaac Rich, Captain John Gott; and the schooner Alice, Captain Hanson B. Joyce .... Joyce was high-liner [the most successful skipper] of the New England fleet for 7 years from 1875-1882. In 1881 he landed from his schooner the Alice, the largest catch of mackerel ever brought in by a single skipper. The 4,900 barrels gave his vessel a stock of \$28,000, which was also the largest amount made in the fleet up to that time.<sup>4</sup>*



*Charlie Rowe's tuna, c. 1905*



*Taking herring from the weir in Toothacher Cove, c. 1920*

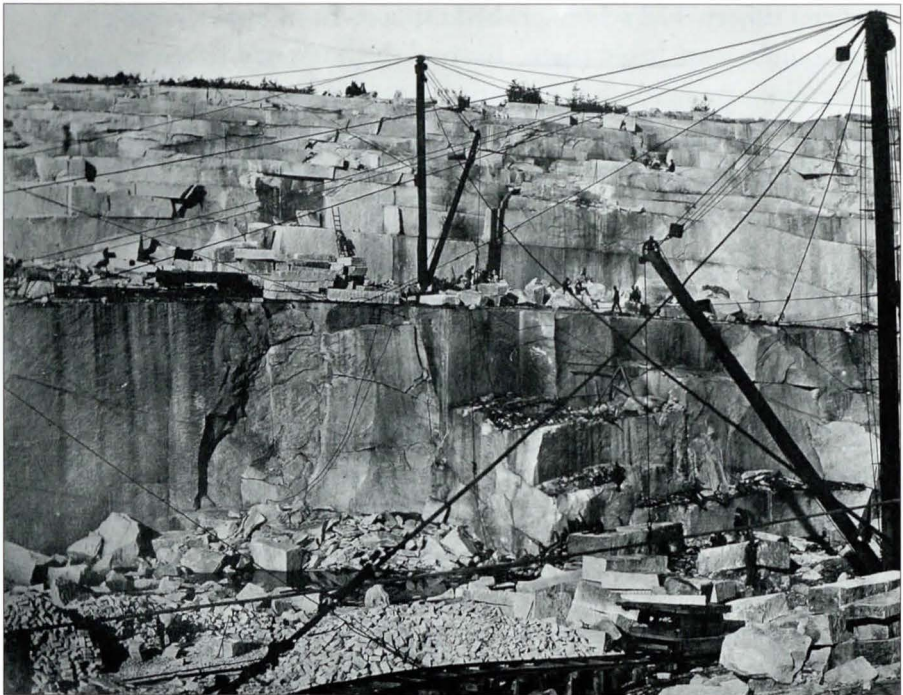
In 1882, Captain Joyce commissioned construction of the *Novelty*, the first steam powered and one of the largest seiners in the fleet. The *Novelty* alone required a crew of 40 men. In the 1880s at the height of the mackerel fishery, 112 schooners had captains from Swans Island, and 35 schooners were based there. Beyond the boats and fishermen, the fishery supported processing plants, coopers' shops, boat building and chandleries along shore. Activity related to the mackerel fishery shaped the harbor scene during the last quarter of the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

Granite quarries provided the second major source of employment and harbor traffic at the end of the century. The Baird Quarry in Minturn, on the east side of the harbor, opened in 1890 and was the biggest, but there were several smaller quarries and numerous "motions" (typically operated by a few men for a short time) scattered across the island.

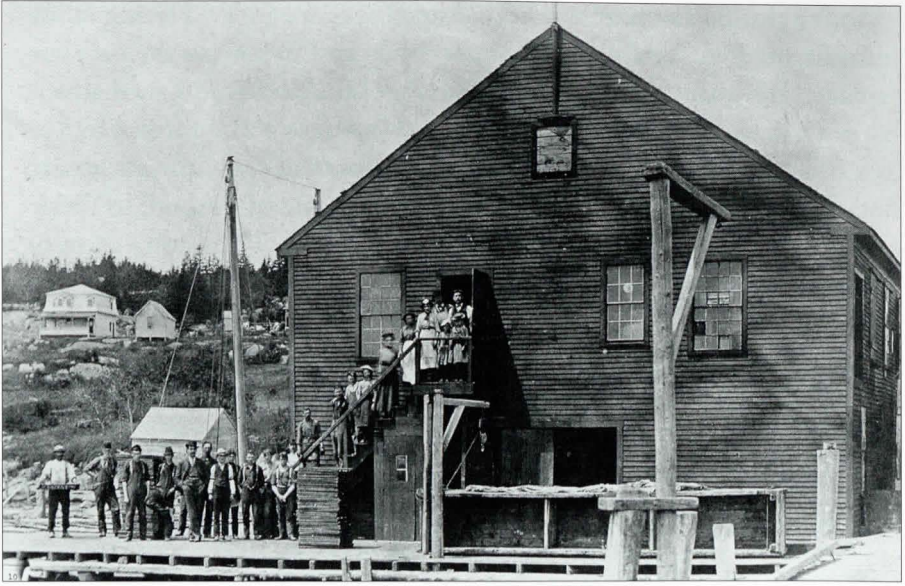
But all this changed, for by 1900 the seiners had decimated the mackerel, and the Minturn Baird Quarry did not survive the Great Depression. (It closed in 1927, and the cobble and curb stones it produced have been replaced by cement and asphalt.) Fortunately for Swans Islanders, lobstering expanded in the early 20th century just as mackerel fishery and quarrying declined. However, lobstering did not need the labor force or the extensive shore-based support facilities that had been required by the booming mackerel fishery; consequently, island-based



*Railroad to cut-down coasting schooner serving as a barge, c. 1920*



*Baird Quarry, Minturn, c. 1920*



*Sardine factory at the Old Steamboat Wharf, c. 1920*

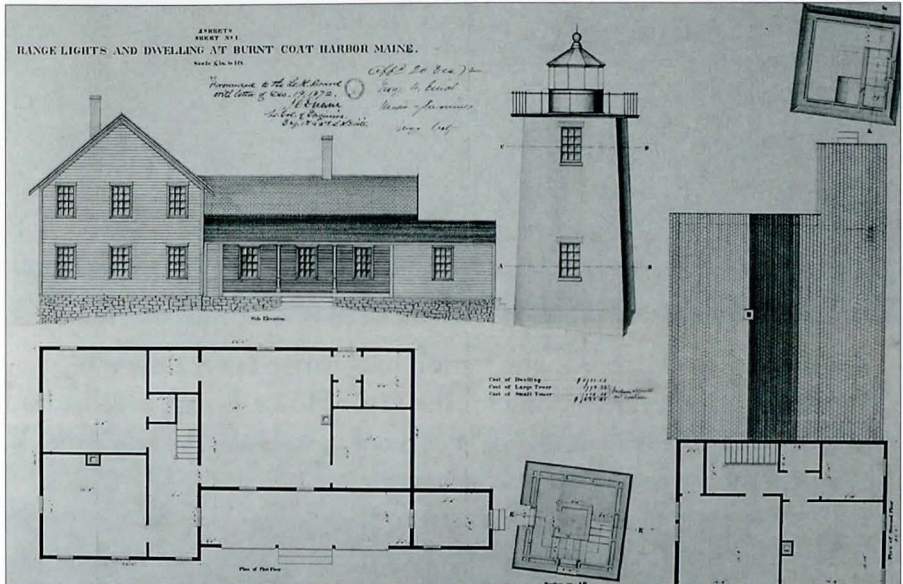
jobs and population have declined throughout the 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

The Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station has changed over time too. E. P. Adams, a surveyor working for the Light House Board, prepared a plan of the site in 1890. It depicts a covered passageway leading from the east end of the keeper's house rear piazza, or porch, to the main tower. A narrower passageway branches off at the southwest corner of the main tower and runs downhill about 80 feet to the lower tower. Notations on the drawing for the lower tower say "brick" and "light discontinued."

The two towers were apparently too close together for the range system to be effective; the lower light was discontinued on August 7, 1883, although its tower was still standing as late as 1890. A bell replaced the lower tower in 1911. The bell initially hung from a tall tapered pyramid housing weights and gears (the apparatus which rung it), much like the mechanism inside a grandfather clock.

The 1890 survey also shows a wooden "Fuel House" located about 8 feet from the northeast end of the keeper's house and a wooden "Hen House, Keeper's Property" c. 50 feet from the northern corner of the house. A wooden picket fence, visible in early photographs, is shown on the survey as are "Plank Walks" running along the front (north) façade of the house and connecting it to the fuel house.

Today the lower tower and covered passages are gone. Having fallen into disuse, they were probably demolished in 1911 when the bell replaced the lower light. The wooden fuel house became a shed and barn when the existing brick fuel storage building was built in 1895 as a fire safety measure. The 1890 survey does not show the outhouse, boathouse or ways for launching the rescue dory and peapod, so these structures may have been built later – or there may be another sheet of the survey we have not seen.



*Range Lights and Dwelling at Burnt Coat Harbor, Maine, 1872*

In 1895 a list of construction included these items: “An oil house was built. A flight of steps was built leading up the bank to the boathouse. Minor repairs were made.”<sup>7</sup> Taken with the 1890 survey, this suggests the boathouse and ways may have been built between 1890 and 1895. The maintenance and construction list for 1897 notes,

*Burnt Coat Harbor, Swan Island, coast of Maine – the boundary fence was rebuilt. Minor repairs were made. The following recommendation made in the Board’s last three annual reports is renewed. ‘This station is situated at the extreme end of the peninsula and is separated from the town by the harbor; in winter the harbor is sometimes filled with ice, so that communication with the town by water can not be relied upon; a roadway for the accommodation of the necessary travel between the public road and the light-station is therefore necessary. The owners of*

*the adjacent land offer to convey right of way to the Government at a nominal price. It is estimated that the legal expenses of obtaining title and cession of jurisdiction to the land thus conveyed, together with the cost of building the road needed, will not exceed \$500. Recommendation is made that an appropriation for this amount be made therefor [sic.]\*<sup>8</sup>*

So as late as 1897 there was no road over the hill.

In its report for 1900 the Light House Board noted that,  
*at many of the older stations the light-house structures and auxiliary buildings for the occupation and use of the keepers are not only dilapidated but out of date [and lack] the privacy and comforts of domestic life which must be provided for a desirable class of employees. It is proposed to effect the necessary improvements in the older stations progressively by a moderate annual expenditure.<sup>9</sup>*

This policy immediately resulted in significant interior work at the Burnt Coat keeper's house. The house had been built without a bathroom, and the original stairs were in a central hall adjacent the entry on the north side of the house. In 1900-1901 a bathroom with an "over-board discharge" was installed, and the stairs were re-located to the back of the house adjacent a vestibule which opened onto the rear piazza. During the same renovation, the old wooden fuel house was up-fitted as a barn where successive keepers kept a milk cow throughout the years 1897-1944.<sup>10</sup> (Different cows, of course!)

Light House Board records document the evolution of the site. Unpublished oral histories and memoirs help animate the scene. Frank L. Milan (1897-1991) recalls growing up in the keeper's house from his birth there in 1897 until he "left Swans Island in 1914 to attend high school on the mainland..."<sup>11</sup> Orrin Milan, Frank's father, was the keeper during the period 1897-1931. The light station appears in Frank Milan's narrative as a grand setting for the adventures of childhood.

*The boat slip was very steep and quite long. I soon learned that if I greased the ways and slipped the boat hook I could get a fast ride and a beautiful splash when the dory hit the water so whenever my father was away from the station I would practice this pastime. It was fun for which I had to work hard, for after each ride I would have to pull the dory up the slip by means of the winch up in the boathouse. Electricity was an unknown thing on Swan's Island in those days so the work had*





*Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station - viewed from the West, c. 1933*



*Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station - viewed from the East, c. 1933*

*to be done by brute strength. When the tide was extra low the bow of the dory would hit the rocks as it slid into the water. This, of course, didn't do the dory any ... good. In fact after a few times of this the bottom of the bow wasn't pretty at all. For several years the Lighthouse tender (I believe it was the Lilac in those days) would have to bring a new dory. The men who brought the new dory always wondered ... how my father could wear out so many dories... I never volunteered any information on the subject. <sup>12</sup>*

*The cow barn had an upstairs room that my father used as a workshop. As is the case with most barn lofts, it had a double door in one end. One day I was near the door sawing a board, probably one of those pine pickets [from the fence], when I lost my balance and out I went. I landed in a heap on the ground some 8 or 10 feet below. Apparently I was none the worse for the experience because I went back up and finished what I was doing.<sup>13</sup>*

*Writing about the barn episode recalls my battle of wits with my mother. In those days raisins came as a soggy mass in a paper carton. I dearly loved raisins and every chance I got I would swipe a package from the house. Since I couldn't eat them all at one time, I would stash them away in the workshop until I could eat them all, then I would go looking for some more. Always I found them in a different place. My mother never said a word ... but she must have suspected what was going on.<sup>14</sup>*

Concerning "ship wrecks and other items about the sea," Milan writes,

*The first one I can remember occurred at Scrag, a little wooded island off the southwestern tip of Harbor Island. This schooner tried to get into Swan's Island Harbor in a heavy northwester but couldn't point up into the wind enough to make the harbor so she dropped her anchor. The anchor or anchors wouldn't hold so she dragged and piled up on Scrag. The next Sunday two steamboats tried to pull her off but it was no soap, and she died right there. The last time I was out by the island some 45 years ago some of her bones were still there.*

Without any transition, hardly pausing for breath, he continues:

*Two vessels came to grief on Johns Island Ledge; one loaded with molasses and the other with coal. I don't seem to remember much about the molasses ship, but everyone knew about the coal vessel. It was so rough that she broke up shortly and spewed the hard coal all over the ledge. Everybody that had a boat hypered themselves out there and there was no shortage of coal the next winter.*

*About this time a three-masted vessel loaded with laths ran ashore on Frenchboro, Long Island. Apparently she tore a good big hole in her bottom because the sea surged back and forth in her just as it did outside. Most of the scavengers were divided into teams of three. One would get down in the hole where the laths were and toss the bundles up on deck, another would take it to the rail and toss it into the boat.*

Here again, I guess just about everybody had all the laths they could use for some time. Not long after, an insurance man showed up and tried to reclaim the laths, but not one was to be found anywhere. What he didn't know was that the woods all over the island was full of laths.<sup>15</sup>



*The Governor Bodwell on Spindle Ledge, January 24, 1924*

*Another time we very well could have had quite a smashup but it was narrowly avoided. The old revenue cutter Woodbury had stayed in the harbor all night. The next morning it was thick as pudding. About noon she decided to go out anyway. She went out by the Lighthouse and disappeared in the fog. In a short time we heard her whistle blowing on her way back. She apparently went out and turned north around the bell buoy and started back. Her compass must have been accurate in both directions, because when she got back to the light she was just about as much north of her outgoing path as it would take to turn her around. I was right down on the point watching for her when she showed up right in close. Apparently just about the time I spotted the ship the men on her spotted the shore. Bells rang all over the place and confusion was rampant on the boat. When she stopped I swear I could have tossed a biscuit aboard. A rock wouldn't have been any feat at all.*

*The next is the Waronock (I don't think that is spelled correctly). She was a brand new three-masted schooner commanded by a Capt. Anderson of Camden whose wife was a cousin to my father. She had just loaded with stone at the quarry dock. To save tug fees it was the practice to hook a rope to a deadeye on a little ledge just outside the*

dock. As the ship neared the ledge and had gained some momentum they would stop pulling from the dock and the ship would glide by into the main harbor. This time someone goofed and didn't stop pulling on the rope until the ship was hard and fast on the ledge. That evening the Captain came over to visit my father and I was all ears.... I think they had the tug Betsy Ross come down from Stonington and pulled her off on the next high tide none the worse for the experience.<sup>16</sup>

Roscoe Chandler (1889-1979) succeeded Orrin Milan as the light house keeper; Chandler arrived in 1931 and remained until c. 1944.



*Roscoe and Mary Chandler, c. 1940*

Donna Wiegler, a resident of Swans Island, recently interviewed several of Roscoe and Mary Chandler's children – Roland (age 94), James (88), Josephine (87) and Bernard (84), and they "tell the story of life at the light house in the 1930s."<sup>17</sup>

All the Chandlers remember their father sleeping at the end of the house, so he could see the light; he always rose early to extinguish it, trim the wick and polish the lens. As required by the Light House Board, he kept a daily log. He white-washed the light tower and painted the bell tower and keeper's house. Inside, the house was always painted grey with paint supplied by the Light House Board. Roscoe cleaned and painted the cistern, for their

water came from rain on the roof collected by the gutters and piped into the cistern. They never opened the valve into the cistern until it had been raining long enough to rinse salt spray off the roof. The furnace burned coal that was delivered by boat, carried by hand up the hill in sacks and stored in the barn by the house. They had two cows, sheep and chickens, and sold extra eggs at LeMoine's store in the village. The Light House Board provided books for the family to read; every fall they

also received two barrels of flour, a barrel of molasses, a barrel of sugar, and a side of corned beef. They gathered raspberries and cranberries on Swans Island and nearby islands. They went fishing (hand-lining outside for cod, in the harbor for pollock, and into the Mill Pond where flounder could be speared) and clamming and lobstering. They dried fish on Marshall Island, and it kept all winter.



*Roscoe Chandler painting the bell tower,  
c. 1935*

All the children had chores, for Roscoe Chandler believed “busy children are happy children.” One chore was cranking the weight to the top of the bell tower; this made the bell ring for six hours as the weight descended, then it had to be cranked up again. Another seemingly endless chore was scraping and preparing for painting, for the whole site had to be kept ship-shape ready for surprise inspections.

*Coastguard inspection was treated like an emergency, you dropped whatever you were doing and started cleaning. ‘Over the fence’ was where you put things to get them out of sight. The family would spring into action when they saw the tender coming. The inspector would arrive on the Hibicus, or Arlex, light house service ships were named after flowers ... [and] wear white gloves to inspect.*

But Roscoe kept the station neat, and they were never criticized.

Looking back, all the Chandlers felt lucky. Roland Chandler summed up his childhood in the light house by emphatically saying, “I loved it!”

The Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station is evocative. Today visitors pass through a spruce forest crowning Hockamock Head, and the keeper’s house and tower both come into view, framed against the sea on the grassy brow of the headland. The light house is still functional, but it is also a memorial, for it calls to mind both the generations it has served and the unfailing stewardship of successive keepers. The tower stands like a fixed star in a broad constellation of aids to navigation; it reminds us of the ebb and flow of history which has created and maintained it.

Watching wheeling gulls and surging swell, we always remember the children and chickens who lived here too.



John M. Bryan is an architectural historian and professor of art history at the University of South Carolina. *Maine Cottages: Fred L. Savage and the Architecture of Mount Desert* is his most recent publication. He and his wife, Martha, are summer residents of Swans Island.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Invented by Augustin Fresnel of France in 1822 and recommended by the U. S. Light House Board, this type of lens “is made of a number of pieces of glass, ground to the same curve, and fitted closely together.... Building up... a lens this way... a drum of glass, cylindrical in its horizontal sections, and lens-shaped in the vertical direction [is] placed about a lamp which occupies its centre....” The walls of the glass cylinder consist of a series of prisms that reflect the rays or waves of light into one plane “where it is intensified by powerful magnification through bullseyes.” *Report of the Light House Board* (Washington: A. Boyd Hamilton, 1852), 71-2; J. Candace and Mary Louis Clifford, *Maine Lighthouses* (Alexandria: Cypress Communications, 2005), page 91.

<sup>2</sup> Putting the initial request for the Swans Island light house into context, it is interesting to note the establishment of the Narraguagus Bay light on the east side of Pond Island (1853), the Green’s Island light on Heron Neck and the Pumpkin Island light in Eggemoggin Reach (both in 1854), the Portland Breakwater light (1855), and the Blue Hill Bay light on Green Island (1856). The Tenants Harbor light was established on Harbor Island in 1857, and the Bass Harbor and the Deer Island Thorofare lights were both established in 1858. Clifford, 197-204. For a concise history of the Light House Board, see: Malcolm F. Willoughby, *Lighthouses of New England* (Boston: T.G. Metcalf, 1929).

<sup>3</sup> There is a division of opinion about the spelling of the island’s name. Should it be Swan’s or Swans? The U. S. Board on Geographic Names does not use apostrophes in place names on official maps. Hence, “Swans” conforms with the Board’s policy.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Crowe, “Burnt Coat and a Shot Across the Bow,” (*Fisherman’s Voice*, June 25, 1997), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Recent articles about Swans Island fisheries, including Crowe’s cited above, are based largely on original, primary research by Galen and Ted Turner, founders of the Swans Island Lobster and Maritime Museum.

<sup>6</sup> U. S. Census, Swans Island Town: 1900 = 758; 2000 = 327. Currently

island residents hold 86 lobster licenses, and approximately 70 boats of various sizes are used in the fishery.

<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report of the Light-House Board* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report of the Light-House Board* (1897), 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Light-House Board* (1900), 29.

<sup>10</sup> *Report of the Light-House Board* (1900), 39. Keepers maintained the Burnt Coat light until it was automated in 1975; the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, and the Town of Swans Island acquired it (excepting the tower itself) in 1994. The buildings are currently being restored, and the buildings and site, the 20-acre Hockamock Head, are open to the public.

<sup>11</sup> Frank L. Milan, "A Lighthouse Huck Finn," typescript, [www.swansisland.org](http://www.swansisland.org).

<sup>12</sup> Milan, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Milan, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Milan, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Milan, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Milan, 8. For additional ship wrecks, see: Robert Thayer Sterling, *Lighthouses of the Maine Coast and the Men Who Keep Them* (Brattleboro: Stephen Daye, 1935), 218-220.

<sup>17</sup> The interviews were conducted in 2006 for the Swans Island Light House Committee. Ms. Wiegler's work was funded by the committee and the Maine Humanities Council. The interviews and related Chandler materials are in the collection of the Swans Island Educational Society.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station, c. 1880. National Archives photo # 26-LG-1-54.

2. Charlie Rowe's tuna, c. 1905. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society. Author's note: Dexter Lee of Swan's Island provided the following information about this image:

*Charles Miles Rowe (September 25, 1885-July 17, 1969). He and his wife, Rena (Lillian Oreanus Grindle) had what is now the Leadbeater house and also owned Dave Richard's house, known locally as the boarding house as that is where the quarry workers stayed when they worked on the quarry near there [my personal observation is that most of the stone quarried from there must have gone into the long wharf that is still visible in front of the Schwabe house]. Charlie 'planted' clams in Rowe Cove and protected them fiercely from outsiders – many still call the cove Charlie's Garden. I can remember being a sternman on 'Pa' Joyce's lobsterboat in the middle of*

*Toothacher Cove and the heavenly smell of Rena's doughnuts frying. Charlie and Rena were among the early founders of the Pentecostal Church (now the Church of God) on the Island and stories have been told about teenagers sneaking up on the house to observe the holy rolling that took place in their house. He was in his 80s when I really knew him, selling a few lobsters at Bill Sprague's wharf, always whistling, memory fading, telling the same slightly off color joke every day. Approximate date of the picture? My guess would be about 1915-1920. I think his father, who died in 1938, is in the picture (sitting with walrus mustache and broad brimmed hat). I will ask Brad Ames, who is Charlie's nephew, and try to get a firmer date and also identify more people in the picture. Also, Bonnie Hopkins is a niece of Rena, but I doubt if she could identify anyone or date the picture. Charlie and Rena had no children. In a follow-up email Dexter Lee added: I talked to Brad Ames today. We think the picture was taken a little earlier. The girl standing in the middle is Charlie Rowe's sister Delia Rowe who was born in 1887. The man with the coil of rope is Charlie's father, Bradford Eugene 'Gene' Rowe who was born in 1852.... [Brad] thought others in the picture were some Kents and Mohlers. The Mohler family first purchased land here in 1901. I would now date the picture as about 1905. He [Brad] thought it was probably taken from where Horace Stanley's wharf was on the eastern side of Toothacher.*

3. Taking herring from the weir in Toothacher Cove, c. 1920. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society.
4. Railroad to cut-down coasting schooner serving as a barge, Baird Quarry, Minturn, c. 1920. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society.
5. The Baird Quarry, Minturn, c. 1920. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society.
6. Sardine factory at the Old Steamboat Wharf, c. 1920. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society.
7. Range Lights and Dwelling at Burnt Coat Harbor, Maine, 1872. National Archives, RG 26.
8. Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station - viewed from the West, c. 1933. Courtesy of Josephine Lamphrey Kelley.
9. Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station - viewed from the East, c. 1933. Courtesy of Josephine Lamphrey Kelley.
10. The *Governor Bodwell* on Spindle Ledge, January 24, 1924. Courtesy of the Swans Island Educational Society.
11. Roscoe and Mary Chandler, c. 1940. Courtesy of Joseph G. Kelley.
12. Roscoe Chandler painting the bell tower, c. 1935. Courtesy of Joseph G. Kelley.