

Plum Island Light - Key historical facts and dates

Curated by Friends of the Plum Island Lighthouse, Inc. Board Member: Daniel May, RADM, USCG (ret)

1783 – Newburyport thriving in shipbuilding and as a center of maritime/shipping activity; the local Marine Society erects several “daybeacons” on north end of Plum Island to aid in navigating the entrance to the Merrimack River at Plum Island.

1787 – The General Court authorizes two wooden lighthouses to be built to replace the daybeacons. The towers serve as “Range” Lights (used in conjunction with each other for safe navigation) and are built on wheels so they can be moved as the shifting sands change. They are built and first lit in 1788.

1790 – United States Federal Government established. President Washington appoints Abner Lowell as the first Keeper of the Lighthouses at Plum Island. (Alexander Hamilton proposes the creation of the Revenue Cutter Service (today’s U.S. Coast Guard); first ship is built in Newburyport and launched as the *Revenue Cutter Massachusetts* in 1791.)

Abner Lowell: First Keeper (1790-1815); followed by Lewis Lowell (1815-1823) & Joseph Lowell (1823-1833) Three generations served; sadly, Lewis died of asphyxiation when keeping a coal fire going in the winter of 1823.

1856 – Fire destroys one of the towers (struck by lightning) and is not replaced – only a single tower remains. A 5th Order Fresnel Lens is placed in the single tower for better illumination; later replaced with a 4th Order Fresnel lens in 1871 (remains today).

1880s – Jetties are built and modified over a 10-year period (repairs/modifications continue through the present) – this stabilizes the north end of Plum Island and the constant shifting sands.

Sept 20, 1898 – Current 50ft wood shingled conical tower is first lit replacing the old octagonal tower.

1927 – Lighthouse is electrified replacing kerosene (1877); whale oil used prior to kerosene

1951 – Lighthouse automated and Keepers removed. Lighthouse maintained by U.S. Coast Guard which incorporated the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1939.

1995 – Barbara Kezer organizes the Friends of Plum Island Light with relatives of the Woods family and approaches the Coast Guard about a license to assist in maintaining the lighthouse.

June 15, 1996 – Official ceremony held granting the Friends of Plum Island Light a license to care for the lighthouse structure and offer tours to the public.

May 10, 2003 – Coast Guard Transfer ceremony; lighthouse transferred to the city of Newburyport and a lease granted to the Friends of Plum Island Light as the “stewards” of the lighthouse – to support the preservation, operation, and maintenance of the structure and to educate the public on the historic maritime significance of the lighthouse.

Add'l Interesting Notes:

- 1) Barbara Kezer, key original organizer of the Friends of Plum Island Light was the granddaughter of Keeper George Kezer (1924-1936)

- 2) Current Friends of Plum Island Light President Jenn Bogard is the great, great granddaughter of Keeper Arthur W. Woods (1905-1919)

- 3) Current Board Member, RADM Daniel R. May, USCG (ret) was the original Coast Guard point of contact for Barbara Kezer and arranged for the first license to the Friends. Later, when in charge of the Boston and northern Massachusetts region, he arranged for the transfer of the property to the city in 2003 and the lease to the Friends which remains today.