

# Lighthouse and lore: Kayak to Wood Island to explore the grounds, wander through history

By **Shannon Bryan** - September 15, 2021



*A visitor approaches the Wood Island Light via the half-mile-long raised boardwalk from the island landing. (Portland Phoenix/Shannon Bryan)*

**W**ood Island Light has seen some things.

Most lighthouses have. These stoic beacons of maritime safety keep watch on treacherous coastlines, which means they've witnessed their fair share of safe passages and awful wrecks over the centuries.

Add to that the inherent mystique of isolated lightkeeper living, and the harshness of whipping winds and tumultuous seas, and we can't help but be lured in by lighthouse folklore.

Wood Island has no shortage of that.



*Wood Island Light and the adjacent keeper's house were built in 1808 and rebuilt in 1839. (Portland Phoenix/Shannon Bryan)*

This small island in Saco Bay holds stories of a bell-ringing dog, a heroic rescue of a ship's crew during a heavy storm, and a tragic murder-suicide that resulted in a lighthouse-haunting ghost.

Constructed in 1808, Wood Island Light and the adjacent keeper's house were first made of wood, then rebuilt out of granite in 1839. The house and conical white tower sit on the

**Kayak to Wood Island:** Launch from Vines Landing on Lester B. Orcutt Boulevard in Biddeford Pool; there is limited parking at the launch and additional parking on nearby streets. Read more about the lighthouse, its history, and the efforts of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse at [woodislandlighthouse.org](http://woodislandlighthouse.org)



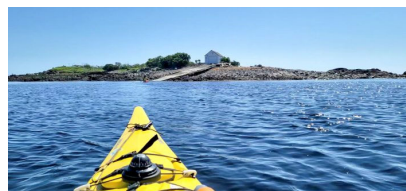
eastern edge of Wood Island, just off Biddeford Pool.

Visitors land at the boat ramp on the other side of the island, where there's a boathouse but no visible sign of any light tower. Walk a half-mile across the island on a raised boardwalk through low shrubs and marsh, and the noble tower comes into view.

Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse leads tours throughout the summer (boating groups over from Vines Landing). During those tours, guests can explore inside the keeper's house and walk the spiral stairs up the tower to look at the light face-to-face and enjoy the same tower's-eye-view of the Atlantic. They'll also get a good dose of Wood Island history from knowledgeable volunteer guides.

Those tours ended last weekend with one last hurrah on Maine Lighthouse Day, but kayakers can still paddle out from Biddeford Pool to wander the grounds, gawk at the light tower, and peek in the house's windows.

The boat launch at Vines Landing is the most convenient place from which to depart (there's limited parking at the launch and more on-street parking nearby). From there, the paddle to Wood Island is a smidge less than a mile. (As always when paddling Maine's coastal waters, mind the winds, the tide, and the water temperature.)



*Kayaks approach Wood Island in Saco Bay after a short paddle from Biddeford Pool. (Portland Phoenix/Shannon Bryan)*

It's a wonderful day trip however you get there, and knowing some of the island's stories makes the experience even sweeter. So, a quick primer:

- In 1865, lightkeeper Eben Emerson rescued the crew of the British brig Edith Anne, after he caught the sounds of screaming over the noise of a wild storm. Along with his neighbor, a fisherman who lived on the island, he launched his rowboat into the riotous waves and found the brig had run aground on Washburn Ledge and was breaking apart. His heroics were commended by the Canadian government and Emerson was rewarded with a pair of brass binoculars.

- Former sea captain-turned-keeper Thomas Henry Orcutt served at Wood Island Light from 1886-1905. His dog, Sailor, kept him company and quickly learned to ring the station's fog bell to greet passing ships. The dog would take the bell cord in its mouth and pull it – a trick Sailor picked up on his own – and never missed a ship.

- During Orcutt's tenure, the island was also the scene of a murder-suicide. Part-time lobsterman Howard Hobbs was a squatter, living in a small shack on the western side. Following an altercation on the mainland, Sheriff's Deputy Frederick W. Milliken arrived on Wood Island looking for Hobbs. Hobbs shot and killed him, then tried to surrender to Orcutt, who turned him away out of fear for his own life. Hobbs returned to his shack and killed himself. Some believe the ghost of Sheriff's Deputy Milliken haunts the lighthouse and island.

- From 1959-1963, lightkeeper Laurier Burnham lived on the island with his wife and two children. In 1960, his daughter, 2-year-old Tammy, got sick and needed immediate medical attention. Problem was, a storm was raging. The Fletcher's Neck Coast Guard station sent seamen, two of whom brought the toddler onto a skiff they'd towed out with them. On the return to shore, the skiff capsized in the waves, sending all three overboard. One seaman swam to safety on a nearby island. Seaman Ed Syvinski held tight to the toddler, even while he sank to the seafloor and had to push himself up again numerous times, and both he and Tammy were rescued. Tammy made a full recovery.

While no keepers tend the light any longer (it was automated in 1986), a trip to Wood Island is a solid way to appreciate its history – the keepers who rescued sailors and raised families – and the marvelous Maine coast.

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