



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

Honk If You Love Nobska

*By Terry White and
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Summer visitors have just discovered what locals have known for a while. The Nobska foghorn sounds different. For nearly as long as anyone can remember, a dense fog has always called forth the music of the horn--two deep voiced blasts every thirty seconds. The West Chop foghorn, heard in parts of Falmouth outside of Woods Hole, has been a similar reliable presence, singing a duet with Nobska for the benefit of boaters in the Sound.



The original Nobska Lighthouse built in 1828.

Now these fog signals are no longer automatically activated by a fog-detecting device near their respective lighthouse towers. Instead, they're triggered by a Mariner Radio Activated Sound Signal (MRASS). Mariners use a VHF-FM radio signal to turn on a foghorn when they need it. The sound that results is lighter and fainter than what we're used to hearing, and it stops automatically after forty-five minutes.¹



Fog bell mechanism at Nobska c 1900, with ferry Monahansett in background.

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that in this digital age, foghorns are now available exclusively by streaming on demand.

Before you get upset about the death of a timeless Cape Cod tradition, let's reflect on the history of Nobska's foghorn. It wasn't always there. It hasn't always been loved. And sometimes, it even packed a dangerous punch.

In the earliest days of the Nobska lighthouse, originally built in 1828 and replaced in 1876, there was no foghorn. For a while there was a bell tower at Nobska, but it was removed sometime between 1905 and 1910 when its



Nobska Point, 1961.

function was taken over by a foghorn. In 1910, experiments were made with fog *whistles*. A variety of these instruments were tried, but none proved satisfactory. Reed horns were also tried, but "several of the prominent summer residents [were] vigorously opposed to the installation of the new fog signal," so consideration turned to a submarine bell, again without success.ⁱⁱ

By 1951 a foghorn was installed and proved its value when it was credited with the safe return to shore of two young fishermen. Having lost their way in a fog, the fishermen "did not wait for rescuers. They pointed their bow towards the lowing of the foghorn which they knew to be Nobska."ⁱⁱⁱ

The mechanism behind the sound that the fishermen heard consisted of

a wall filled with gleaming brass wheels, knobs and dials....Occupying the concrete floor are generators and an air compressor....Revolving wheels, regulated by clock mechanisms, open and shut the valves that put life and voice into the great foghorn....Two discs of a powerful metal alloy, each a foot in diameter, vibrate together when the compressed air rushes past them at 30 pounds per square inch and from the vibration of these discs comes the deep voice of the foghorn that is heard so many miles at sea.^{iv}

The foghorn was not automatic in those early days.

Whenever the keepers cannot see West Chop light, or when visibility has fallen below five miles, they must turn on the foghorn.... The two keepers split the day into five and seven hour watches, which they alternate. Most of the day is spent in maintaining the light, foghorn and radio beacon in working trim....Few...are aware of the patient and devoted job done by the men who tend the light.^v

Until October 1973, the horn was located on the land side of Nobska Road, where it blasted its mighty message right across the pavement. Signs posted by the road warned drivers to roll up their car windows while passing the lighthouse. Even with this precaution, the sudden sound could be dangerous. Tom Mountford, now a Museums volunteer, was a policeman in the 1970s. One night, he rode his motorcycle past the lighthouse just as the foghorn activated. "I was right in front of it. It pretty much blew me sideways off to the very edge of the pavement. I was lucky I didn't crash into the guardrail fence."^{vi}



Nobska Point with runners passing, c1985.

In 1961 the Moiles family of Worcester had stopped their car in the road to look at the lighthouse. Just as Mrs. Moiles asked, “What are those two little horns right over there?” the two little horns let loose. Mr. Moiles recalled

The sound of that horn will carry for at least 12 miles...and we couldn't have been much more than 12 FEET away...

You'd really have to be there at the right time to know what we're talking about. But we can tell you that the baby woke up—and stayed awake for quite a spell, our son's baseball hat flew right off his head, and this nervous twitch came on us all of a sudden...

We stepped on it and got out of there in a hurry.^{vii}

In early September of 1973, Seymour Klein, visiting from New York, saw the warning signs but still lost control of his rental car due to “startlement and fright when the horn blasted.” His car skidded 70 feet, plowed through a wooden safety rail, and came to rest “precariously poised about a quarter of a way down the rocky precipice.” Mrs. Klein was transported to Falmouth Hospital for a leg abrasion, while Mr. Klein and the family poodle were unharmed. A tow truck from Teaticket Auto Body was summoned to remove the car from the rocks. On the plus side, Klein told Patrolman Ahmed Mustafa that he appreciated the friendly concern shown by bystanders, particularly Mrs. Milton Soares of Davisville, who had offered him the use of her car. “None of that would have happened in . . . New York City,” he declared.^{viii}

Shortly after the Kleins’ accident, an electrical horn was installed on the water side of the road. Although it sounded off at 132 decibels, the horn’s new location, along with its updated design, significantly reduced the noise on the roadway.^{ix} Thankfully, only one Falmouth Road Race, the first one in August of 1973, was run under the threat of Nobska’s horn. Starting in 1974, no runner has had to worry about timing a sprint past the lighthouse to avoid being blasted.

In October 2018, Museums volunteer Terry White searched for the foghorn, and found it perched on the water side of Nobska Road just east of the lighthouse. The horn was hidden in the trees on the slope of the point, and seemed rather small, given the power of its voice. At that time, the horn was activated by a sensing system of two globes on the wall of the small brick building on the inland side of Nobska Road. One globe sent a light beam and the other sensed it. When the fog became sufficiently dense, the detector could no longer detect the beam and activated the horn, triggering the old, familiar sound that most of us can still remember.



Photos taken by Terry White at Nobska, October 2018. Sound mechanism is within the wooden structure. Sensing globes are on outbuilding wall.



Postcard, c1980.

Automated systems like this one weren't perfect. In the winter of 2009, the horn refused to stop signaling. The *Vineyard Gazette* reported, with well-concealed irritation, "Day and night, under clear skies, in snowstorms and rain showers . . . the Nobska Light foghorn in Woods Hole has sounded four times every minute since before Christmas. It finally stopped yesterday [January 7], after being fixed."^x

Under the new on-demand system, such a mishap is less likely to occur. On May 14, 2019, Friends of Nobska Light announced that an MRASS device had been installed at Nobska.^{xi} The horn won't sound for prolonged periods anymore, but if you keep your ears alert during a fog, you may still hear its haunting yet endearing voice.

ⁱ See <https://friendsofnobska.org/news-about-nobska>. See also <https://www.mvtimes.com/2019/09/13/west-chop-foghorn-demand/>.

ⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, December 15, 1939, "Thirty Years Ago," Page 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, August 24, 1951.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Falmouth Enterprise*, June 25, 1957.

^{vi} Email, Tom Mountford to Meg Costello, December 6, 2019.

^{vii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, October 24, 1961, p. 8.

^{viii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, September 4, 1973, p. 1.

^{ix} *Falmouth Enterprise*, October 9, 1973.

^x *Vineyard Gazette*, "Whither Weather, Nobska Foghorn Sounds Nonstop," Mark Alan Lovewell, January 8, 2009.

^{xi} Friends of Nobska Light, Facebook entry on May 14, 2019. [See link.](#)