December 2015

Robert Thayer Sterling Correspondence

Robert Thayer Sterling 1876-1958

Maine State Library

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STERLING, Robert T. (Thayer)

Born at Peak's Island, Maine, on May 28, 1876.

Died April 24, 1958.
Mr. Robert T. Sterling  
Portland Head Light  
Portland, Maine  

Dear Mr. Sterling:

Recently we noticed a brief announcement of the forthcoming book, LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST.

For some years we have been gathering together in an exhibit collection works of Maine authors. This collection has grown rapidly, now numbering several hundred volumes, all delightfully inscribed by the authors.

Of course we are very proud of this part of our State Library, and are anxious that every contemporary Maine writer be included. Therefore, we hope that you will not forget us when your own book is published.

In the meantime, we would greatly appreciate it if you could write a few biographical paragraphs for our files. We are very grateful for all such information as our Maine authors care to give us.

Very truly yours,

MAINE STATE LIBRARY

By
February 20, 1935

Mr. Robert T. Sterling  
Portland Head Light  
Portland, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

Fearing that our plea of January 7 may have been laid aside in your busy life, we are venturing to write again in regard to LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST, which we understand will be published this spring.

We mentioned our Maine Author Collection, for which we would like a copy of this book, and also the biographical file which we maintain in connection with our Author Collection.

Will you kindly tell us if we may expect an inscribed copy of your book upon its publication. We assure you we would be very grateful for this kindness.

And in the meantime, if you can find a few moments in which to write for our biographical files, a few paragraphs concerning your life, we would appreciate it, for we wish to keep as complete a biographical file as possible of our Maine authors.

Very truly yours

Maine State Library

hm Secretary
Maine State Library 
Augusta 
Maine 
Att: Hilda McLeod, Secretary 

Gentlemen:

I have your letter of February 20, and would say that I have been so busy that I have neglected to comply with your request of January 7.

I was born at Peak's Island, Maine, on May 28, 1876 - the son of Josiah and Nancy Libby Sterling.

After finishing my education in the public schools, I took up newspaper work and was for a number of years reporter for various Portland papers, covering the waterfront news.

On June 24, 1903, I married Martha Sterling of Peak's Island, and we have one son, Robert Thayer, Jr.

It was while I was engaged in newspaper work that I decided I would like to take up the vocation of a lightkeeper. I took the Civil Service examination and passed the necessary requirements, and was appointed to the service on September 3, 1913. After serving some few years on off-shore stations, I was finally transferred back nearer home, my station being Cape Elizabeth Lights. I remained there for ten years and while on that station I began my newspaper work again during my spare time - writing feature stories for different papers. In 1928 I was transferred to Portland Head Light, my present station, and I started writing stories of Maine's Lighthouses, for all of them have an historic trend.

In the Fall of 1934, I was approached by the Stephen Daye Press, Publishers, of Brattleboro, Vermont, regarding a book on the Lighthouses of Maine. After an agreement was made with them, I took up the work of writing a book, my subject being "ROMANCES OF THE ISLANDS AND LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST". The Stephen Daye Press has advertised the book to be published some time in June.

I shall be pleased to send you a copy of my book upon its publication.

Sincerely yours,

Robert T. Sterling
"But to lis He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore."

Robert Thayer Sterling, assistant
keeper at historic old Portland Head
Light, is one of those who have had
the keeping of lights along the shore,
along the Maine Coast from Boon Is­
land to the St. Croix, as a life's work.
And now Thayer Sterling has writ­
ten a book about keeping the shore
lights burning, a book of ships and
seas and flashing beacons. "Light­
houses of the Maine Coast" is its
title. It is a Maine book, by a Maine
man, about Maine people and the
shipping, past and present, of the
stormy old Maine Coast. Its publisher,
though he does business in Vermont,
is a native son of Maine, John S.
Hooper, former Auburn boy, whose
Stephen Daye Press will release Rob­
ert Sterling's book on June 28.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin, who says
he must have learned to walk by the
beams of Halfway Rock Light in his
father's house on nearby Pond Island,
has this to say of lighthouses in the
introduction he has written for Thayer
Sterling's book:

"Lighthouses are the same the world
over. They go down deeper than the
color of skins or religions. They go
down to pity and mercy and faith.
They prove that men are one family,
after all. They are a chapter in that
book of universal brotherhood which
the nations of the future may write.
They are the best foundation for a
league of nations. One fine point made
in this book about lighthouses is that
the enemy spares them in time of
war. Lighthouses, and women and
children."

Human Interest Stuff

Thayer Sterling is not content to
tell merely his own story in this book,
though his experiences through years
of service at old Portland Head and
earlier, at Great Duck Island and else­
where up and down the Maine Coast,
"would fill a book." no doubt. But he
has elected to get the stories of other
light-keepers, old friends in the ser­
vice. He has gone to captains and
engineers of lightships, talked with his
friends on the busy lighthouses visiting
all the light stations, and interviewed
men and women "on station" and
off, all along these rugged shores, for
his story. Really the book is a progres­
sion of lighthouse stories, stories of
every variety, some comic, many
tragic, and all of them rich with that
quality newspapermen call "human
interest."

There are stories of the perils faced
by the men and women on duty at
lonely light stations, perils they must
overcome even on approaching or
leaving their posts by boat; tales of
the long, weary vigils during storm
and calm; of thundering seas sweeping
over exposed stations far offshore,
driving the keepers into their towers
for shelter while mountainous waves
batter down every movable thing out­
side. But, always, the light must be
kept burning brightly, for the ships
and the men on the dark waters be­
yond.

Thayer Sterling, because he himself
has lived through similar experiences,
writes as no layman could possibly
write, the intimate, revealing story of
the lighthouses of the rugged old
Maine coast. If in places the book
seems to deviate too much space and
time to a dull accounting of the or­
ganization and set-up of the Light­
house Service itself, the author more
than makes up for this routine stuff
in the true stories he tells of the
adventure, pathos and romance of the
lives of the men and women in that
service.

The author quotes, word for word,
from the salty language of his fellows
in the service in many of these stories.
Notable among these sea yarns is the
tale of a former Portland Lightship
chief engineer who describes a wild
night when the old light vessel broke
adrift from her moorings and drifted
don among the fishing fleet on
Georges Bank. Next morning there
was comic consternation in the fleet
as the "dog-barking navigators" of the
Banks fleet gazed in amazement at
the old red beacon ship with "Port­
land" in huge white letters on her
side.

Boon Island Light

There is the Boon Island keeper who
says the wild gale in which the
steamer Portland was lost was "only
a breeze" compared to other storms
he has weathered on the desolate,
sea swept islet off the southwesterly
tip of Maine.

They grow flowers on Boon Island.
But to Jo so, the keeper's family must
bring soil out in boxes and barrels
from the mainland. And there is
genuine pathos in the keeper's de­
scription of his feelings, and the feel­
ings of the "women folks" and the
children, when a wild summer storm
smashes down upon the rocky island
and huge seas sweep away the tiny
garden plots and the blooming flowers.

Stranger than fiction are many of
the true stories Thayer Sterling and
his fellows in the service have to tell.
There is the story of the dog washed ashore on one isolated light station far out at sea, who recovered and became the pet of the light keeper's little daughter, but never could be lured into the water or into a boat again; how the child became attached to the dog and was broken-hearted when the animal's fisherman-owner eventually came to the island to claim her pet; how the dog, faced at last with the choice between the girl and his former owner, made his own decision when the fisherman got into his boat to leave the island.

There is another good dog story in the tale of the wreck of the Clara Bella on Two Bush Island, which recounts the near-tragic adventure of two men saved from death at sea by a dog's frantic barking ashore.

Weird Tales

Again, delving into Maine Coast mythology and legend, the author tells of the strange events preceding the establishment of Ram Island Light in Fisherman's Island Passage. There was one vessel, for instance, warned away from the jagged rocks just in the nick of time one black night by the apparition of a woman holding a lighted torch aloft. Another mariner, on a perfectly clear night, was said to have been saved from piling up a new vessel on the island by a brilliant flash of lightning which came without rhyme or reason, apparently, to reveal to him the menacing breakers ahead.

Tales of this sort, and the true, actual experience stories of Robert Sterling and other in the lighthouse service, serve to make this volume a book of the Maine Coast. It is illustrated with more than 100 photographs of lighthouses, headlands and islands of the ragged old shoreline from the St. Croix to Kittery.

"Lighthouses of the Maine Coast" marks a milestone, too, in the life of its publisher, John Hooper, who began publishing books with the old Stephen Daye Press in Brattleboro three years ago. Hooper, himself an ardentrooter for the beauties of his native Maine and the Maine Coast in particular, has been "working his way back" to Maine, to use his own expression, ever since he entered the publishing field. He means, by that, his eastward progression, in the books he has published: first there was a volume of Vermont poetry; his next important books dealt with New Hampshire. And now, with the release of Thayer Sterling's book, John Hooper feels he has at last returned to his native State. He expects this book to "go to town" convincingly. In the opinion of this reviewer, the book will do just that.
Robert Thayer Sterling, assistant keeper of Portland Head Light, author of "Lighthouses of the Maine Coast."

Books With New England Flavor Successful For Young Publisher

John S. Hooper, formerly Of Auburn, Takes Pride In Forthcoming Volume Entitled "Lighthouses Of The Maine Coast"

John S. Hooper, who was born at Castine 38 years ago, has been trying to work his way back to the Maine Coast for the past three years. In June, he says, he will be back at least within sound of the sea.

All this, of course, is metaphorical, for John Hooper visits the Maine Coast several times a year. By "work ing my way back" he refers to his slow progress toward the coast of Maine not as a traveler but as a publisher of books.

Hooper started publishing books with the Stephen Daye Press in Brattleboro, Vt. back in 1933. His first attempt was a series of four books, a Vermont travelogue titled, "Green Mountain Series." Closely following these he published "Salt of Vermont." a volume of poetry by Walter Hard.

Next came "Mount Washington Reoccupied," an interesting work on the weather observatory recently installed on New England's highest peak. And another Stephen Daye book, "Modern Ski Technique," followed closely up n its trails to delight not only New Hampshire folk but winter sports enthusiasts everywhere.

Hooper's first novel was "From This Hill, Look Down," whose author, Eliot, Merrick, left New York City to become a dirt farmer in northern Vermont, writing chapters between chores. The second novel from the Stephen Daye Press will be "Hundred Maples," by Elaine Goodale Eastman, scheduled for publication some time in April.


But it is in a book he will publish next June that John Hooper takes greatest pride at the moment. This will be "Lighthouses of the Maine Coast," written by Robert T. Sterling, assistant keeper of Old Portland Head Light. On the jacket will be one of the strikingly beautiful marine photographs for which Ralph F. Blood, local camera artist, is famous. More than 100 other photographs of Maine Coast lighthouses and beauty spots will be used as illustrations. Hooper is justly enthui
Washing her down, one of the most dangerous jobs in the lighthouse service.

Heading the Stephen Daye Press are John Hooper himself, Marion Hooper, his wife, and Ruth Hard, daughter of the poet, Walter Hard. "I'm everything from editor-in-chief to office boy," says John. "We're having a good time, and we're still making a living."

Meanwhile he has been getting favorable reviews from book critics everywhere and books from the Stephen Daye Press have enjoyed national and international sales. Recently he sold the English rights to "Black Angels of Athos," a book on the world's oldest monastic group, written by Michael Choukas, a New Englander born in Greece.

And all this time, John Hooper has been gradually "working his way" as he says, back to his native Maine coast. He will "arrive" at last, he says, with his book on lighthouses of Maine early next Summer. That book, he enthusiastically believes, will be "something to write home about."

Portland Sunday Telegram
April 21, 1935
July 1, 1935

Mr. Robert T. Sterling  
Portland Head Light  
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We have read the complimentary reviews of Lighthouses of the Maine Coast, and we wish to add our congratulations to those of your many friends.

We intend to add it to our Maine section of the library, for lending purposes, as it seems to just the sort of material which we need. We are also anticipating the inscribed volume which you so kindly offered us for our Maine Author Collection. We enclose label and postage, and thank you for your generosity.

May we extend to you a cordial invitation to visit the State Library and the Maine Author Collection when you are in Augusta.

Very truly yours

Maine State Library

hm

Secretary
August 10, 1935

Mr. Robert T. Sterling
Portland Head Light
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We dislike to appear insistent, but we are particularly anxious to add the inscribed copy of LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST, which you so very kindly offered to present to our Maine Author Collection.

Already we have purchased a copy for general lending purposes, and it is proving exceedingly popular. Congratulations should be extended, not only for the interesting and valuable contribution to the literature of Maine, but also for the attractive manner in which it is assembled. It is indeed a splendid book, and one, the author of which we are proud to claim as a Maine man.

Very truly yours

Maine State Library

hm Secretary
August 26, 1935

Mr. Robert T. Sterling
Portland Head Light
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We hope you are as kind as your letter of February 25 indicates, and that you will forgive our many letters, asking each time for our gift copy of LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST, but the success which the book is enjoying from our eager patrons in the lending section of the library effects a particularly anxious interest on behalf of the Maine Author Collection. We do appreciate your very gracious gesture of offering to present us with an inscribed copy, and hope that before too long you will be able to spare a moment to accomplish this. You are assured in advance of our very sincere gratitude for your generosity.

Very truly yours

Maine State Library

hm Secretary
Portland Head Light, etc.
Aug 19th 1935

Dear Madam,

In the first edition there are a few typographical errors which the publisher and I wish to correct. We are waiting for the second edition to make corrections. Then you may correct the first edition by it. I wanted things to be correct before sending the book to the Maine State Library. You will hear from me in the near future.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Haye, Secretary.
December 9, 1935

Robert Thayer Sterling
Portland Head Light
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We hope no unsuccessful delay has occurred in the issuing of the second edition of LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST, for we are still awaiting our promised copy for the Maine Author Collection. We congratulate you upon the popularity which your book has enjoyed, and hope that we may soon have the copy, inscribed to lend it further value and interest, in the library's exhibit collection.

Very truly yours

Maine State Library

hm
Enc: Return label "postage

Secretary
April 1, 1936

Robert Thayer Sterling
Assistant Keeper
Portland Head Light
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We have had so many requests to see the Maine Author copy of LIGHTHOUSES OF THE MAINE COAST that we are requesting Campbell's Book Store of Portland, Maine, to forward a copy to you.

Will you be so kind as to inscribe it for us, and send it to the library. We enclose a label and postage for this purpose.

Please be assured that we appreciate your consideration in wishing us to have a copy of the second edition, but we feel that owing to the numerous inquiries for the Maine Author copy, we should have this book in some edition on the shelves.

Very truly yours
Maine State Library

hm Secretary
Dear Madam:

I was sorry to get your letter regarding my book, that you had never had an autographed copy of it in the library. The Stephen Daye Press notified me that they had sent you one with my compliments last summer. They had autographed copies for they sent 25 books here to me to be autographed and I returned them to the publisher. I am very glad you have called my attention to this for I want you to have what I can afford to give.

They have been so pleased with my first book that they have kepted after me to write another. In fact they wanted me to the past winter but you must remember I am a Civil Service man and without the consent of my superior officer who is the Commissioner of Lighthouses I cannot specialize or commercialize on anything too much without his consent. Therefore I prefered to waite another year before I began my new book which I know you will be just as well pleased as you have Maine Lighthouses. This I shall begin in the latter part of the summer. I shall again ask Prof. Coffin to write my introduction as the subject is well in his memory and he will not have much difficulty in trying to gain inspiration. I shall well illustrate it as I have Maine Lighthouses and shall do my own photography during the early summer season.

I have inscribed a little verse for you such as I have occassionally used to those who requested it. For your own information I want to say that over 300 copies of my book was sold last summer by me here at the light and I never kept count of how many I autographed for out of town people. I am looking forward to as large a circulation this season as last.

Sincerely Yours
Maine Light Forces reached 3,000 copies the first of Dec. 1935, and is now in its second edition.
April 8, 1936

Robert Thayer Sterling, Assistant Keeper
Portland Head Light Station
Cape Cottage, Maine

Dear Mr. Sterling:

We have received the delightfully inscribed Lighthouses of the Maine Coast, and we are indeed glad to add it to the Maine Author Collection, and to express our congratulations upon its success.

The new book interests us, and we sincerely hope it will be published soon after completion. We are eager to place it with your present splendid volume in the Maine Author Collection.

Please accept our appreciative thanks for your kindness and interest, and our best wishes for the new volume.

Very truly yours
Maine State Library

hm Secretary