

HISTORY OF ST. HELENA ISLAND LIGHT STATION

Lying two miles offshore from Gros Cap and ten miles west of Mackinac Island, St. Helena Island featured a natural harbor on the its north shore that had long provided shelter for both Native Americans and Voyageurs seeking shelter from the lake's notorious southwesterly storms. Upon setting foot on St. Helena in 1850, two brothers Archie and Wilson Newton quickly realized the commercial potential the area represented, and after purchasing the 266-acre island from William Belote in 1853, the Newtons established successful fishing, trading, lumbering and cooperage operations on the shore of the natural harbor. It did not take long for others to join them, and a thriving community of over two hundred people quickly grew to support the economic base the Newton's had established.

With the growth in maritime traffic through the late 1850's and 1860's, an ever increasing number of vessels began to use the harbor, and it was not unusual to find over fifty vessels anchored on the island's lee seeking respite from the pounding waves. While the anchorage in the area of the natural harbor was deep and clear, dangerous shoals protruded from both the eastern and western ends of the island, making passage around the island extremely dangerous for Captains without close familiarity with the area. St. Helena Shoal, the worst of these hull rippers, lurked just below the surface for a distance of almost $1 \frac{3}{4}$ miles to the island's northwest, making the western way unsafe to all but vessels of the shallowest draft. To both mark the shoals and provide guidance to coasting mariners, the Lighthouse Board recommended that \$14,000 be appropriated for the construction of a Light at the island's Southeast point in its 1867 annual report. Congress, however, chose to turn a deaf ear to the Board's request and

subsequent reiterations until June 10, 1872 when the requested funds were finally appropriated.

Eleventh District Engineer Orlando M. Poe reacted quickly, selecting a three acre reservation on the island and advertising contracts for the necessary materials and construction labor. Construction began on the island in September of 1872 and continued until November 9, when conditions became too cold for the mortar to set properly. At the close of the 1872 season, all foundation work was complete to the first floor level, including the limestone base of the tower and covered way, and the basement on which the keeper's dwelling would be erected. The work party returned to the island on May 9 of the following year and resumed construction. Over the following month, the double-walled brick tower slowly rose as the masons carefully laid course on course of red brick. At its completion, the tower was capped with a prefabricated decagonal cast iron lantern, with the impressive structure standing sixty-five feet from the foundation to the center of the Third and a Half Order lens. A cast iron spiral staircase wound around the inner tower wall, terminating at its' uppermost at a small hinged iron trap door in the floor to provide access to the lantern. The tower was attached to the brick keeper's dwelling by means of a covered way, also constructed of red brick. The arched opening at the tower end of the covered way was outfitted with a tightly fitting iron door, designed to stop the spread of fire between the two structures.

The dwelling featured expansive accommodations for a single keeper, featuring a dining room, parlor, kitchen and office on the first floor, and four bedrooms on the second floor. A summer kitchen attached to the rear of the dwelling at grade level and a privy located approximately 30 feet behind the summer kitchen completed the station's complement of structures. By June 30, the entire station was complete with the exception of some minor finish work and the delivery of the Fresnel lens from Paris. Thus, the body of work party left the island to move onto other projects, leaving a small crew of four men to finish up. Thomas P Dunn was appointed as the station's first keeper, and reported for duty at the

station on July 29, to set about moving-in his household goods and assisting the four workmen in putting the finishing details to his new station. District Lampist Mr. Crump finally arrived on the island with the new fixed red Third and a Half Order Fresnel lens in August, and set about installing the cast iron base and assembling the lens components. With all work at the station completed, Keeper Dunn officially exhibited the new station's light for the first time on the evening of September 20, 1873.

Thomas P Dunn continued to serve as the station's keeper until 1875, when he swapped assignments with Charles Lousigneau, the keeper at McGulpin's Point. While not common, there were a number of such instances of "station swapping," with the Detroit office apparently willing to facilitate such win-win assignment changes. Few physical changes were made at the station, and Lousigneau continued to serve as the station's keeper until May 30, 1888 when he resigned from lighthouse service. Evidently, Lousigneau's resignation was a surprise to the Detroit office, since no Keeper is listed at the station until July 7th, when Charles Marshall, the First Assistant at Waugoshance Light, was transferred to St. Helena as Acting Keeper. After four years living in the confines of Waugoshance, the Island must have seemed huge to Marshall, and he evidently did an admirable job at the station since he was permanently appointed to the position of Keeper on July 6, 1892.

On May of 1895 the lighthouse tender AMARANTH anchored off St. Helena and unloaded a work crew and building materials for a number of improvements at the station. Through May and June the crew constructed a new boat house and landing crib with 140 foot long boat ways, and installed 200 feet of concrete sidewalk. AMARANTH returned the following month, and unloaded bricks and iron work for the construction of a 360 gallon capacity brick oil storage shed. In the early days, lighthouses had been fueled with either sperm or lard oil, which was delivered by the tenders in rectangular metal containers known as butts. Since both sperm and lard oil were minimally volatile, the butts were stored in a dedicated area in the cellar. However, with the conversion to the infinitely more flammable kerosene as the principal illuminant, the danger of fire increased dramatically, and the Lighthouse Board undertook a ten year system-wide

program of erecting separate oil storage of which the construction of the St. Helena oil house was part.

On May 4, 1896, the lighthouse tender WARRINGTON arrived at St. Helena with a work party to rebuild the wharf at St. Helena Harbor and establish a stone crushing plant on shore to prepare stone for a major repair project being undertaken at Waugoshance Shoal Light. As part of this project, a huge 100 foot by 90 foot timber crib was built on the island and towed out to Waugoshance Light, where it was sunk in place and filled with crushed limestone from the island. The harbor at St. Helena continued to serve as the land base for the project through its' completion in October, whereupon the equipment was reloaded on the WARRINGTON, and returned to the Detroit lighthouse depot.

In yet another assignment swap, after twelve years as Keeper of the St. Helena Light, Charles Marshall transferred to Old Mackinac Point Light Station on November 23, 1900 where he took the lesser position of First Assistant. At the same time George Legatt, who had served as First Assistant at Old Mackinac Point Light Station for the past year took over as Keeper of the St. Helena Light. Unfortunately, Legatt did not last long on St. Helena, as he drowned the following June, once again leaving the island without a Keeper. Captain Joseph Fountain, who had eighteen years of service under his belt at a number of island lights in Lake Michigan including South Fox and Skillagallee transferred-in as the fifth St. Helena Island keeper on July 1, 1901.

While stations without fog signals were historically manned by a single keeper, the decision was made to add an Assistant at St. Helena in 1909. Thus during that summer, a small one-room cottage was constructed approximately ten feet south of the privy, and on October 21, Louis J Belounea was transferred from Squaw Island where he had been serving for two years as 2nd Assistant at that station. The Assistant's cottage basically served only as sleeping quarters for Belounea, since he ate his meals in the main dwelling with Keeper Fountain

and his family. As can be well imagined, the location of the Assistant's dwelling a scant ten feet from the privy created a less than desirable situation, with the associated odors permeating the small structure, and perhaps contributes to the fact four Assistants transferred out of the position in as many years. Finally, the situation was rectified when the dwelling was relocated to an area approximately one hundred feet to the north of the oil house.

Being located relatively close to the growing town of St. Ignace, the island became a popular place for city folk to visit. Such visits were not restricted to the summer months, since being a short three-hour sleigh ride, many people traversed the ice to the island during the frozen winter months. The Lighthouse Service annual report for 1913 lauded Keeper Fountain for his rescue of two men who had almost frozen to death when they lost their way on the ice while attempting the trip.

The light was automated through the installation of an acetylene powered lamp in 1922. Equipped with a sun valve, the lamp was set up to automatically turn on in the cool of evening, and extinguish itself with the warmth of day. Thus, with the constant attendance of a keeper no longer necessary, Keeper Wallace Hall accepted a transfer as Keeper of the Little Point Sable Light on June 30, 1922. The station was boarded up, and responsibility for maintenance of the light transferred to the Old Mackinac Point light keepers, who took their boat to the island whenever trouble with the light was reported by passing vessels.

Without the constant attention and care of a full-time keeper, the station buildings deteriorated, with proximity to St. Ignace and Mackinaw City leaving the station open to vandalism. By the 1980's the station was in extremely poor condition. Everything of any value had been stripped from the structures, all the windows, doors, banisters and much of the floor had been broken up, with vandals going so far as to start a fire on the second floor which burned through the tin kitchen ceiling below and onto the floor. Vandalism of the boat house and Assistant Keeper's dwelling were so advanced, that fearing the structures might collapse on someone, the Coast Guard demolished them to reduce their liability.

At some time thereafter, someone broke down the south wall of the oil house, removing over 1,000 bricks and the iron door, leaving two gaping holes in the side of the structure. As a final insult, rabbit hunters used the oil house ventilator for target practice. The condition of the station was so bad, that the Coast Guard was considering demolishing everything which remained standing with the exception of the tower and its 300 mm acrylic optic, when a miracle occurred in the Straits.

The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keeper's Association was searching for a restoration project for the Association, and seeing the potential in the station that was invisible to most, the Association's President Dick Moehl gathered together a small band of dedicated volunteers interested in saving the station. In 1986, the GLLKA obtained a thirty-year license to the three acre reservation and the station structures, and began planning for the daunting task of restoring the light station. Two years later, the station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Realizing that restoration would take an immense amount of manpower, Dick contacted the Boy Scouts of America, and arranged to receive assistance of two troops from Ann Arbor and Calumet.

Every summer since 1989, the Boy Scouts and GLLKA volunteers have arrived on the island to continue the restoration. As a result of such broad-based community involvement, the effort has been rewarded with numerous national and state grants and awards to assist with the restoration. After ten years of hard work on the island, GLLKA was close to being eliminated as a potential owner of the station, when in 1997, Representative Bart Stupak stepped in and sponsored a Bill through which the station buildings and reservation were transferred to the GLLKA as part of the Coast Guard Authorization Bill. In September 2001, after almost ten years of negotiations, the Little Traverse Conservancy purchased the entire remainder of the island to serve as a nature preserve, ensuring that the island will remain open to the public but will never be developed, thereby helping to ensure the long term survival of the light station.

With immeasurable assistance from Ann Arbor Boy Scout Troop 4, restoration of the keepers dwelling is virtually complete. The privy and oil house have been restored, the assistant keepers dwelling and station boathouse have been rebuilt by the Boy Scouts. Thus, all the structures comprising the original light station will have been restored, and the station is again close to its turn of the twentieth century appearance. Numerous educational programs are held on the island each year, with the goal of creating a new generation of lighthouse preservationists, hoping that the work of restoring and maintaining this beautiful and special place will continue for generations to come.

The work at St. Helena, however, will never be complete. Exposed as it is to the ravages of the lake, deterioration is inevitable, and constant repair, repainting and replacement will be an ongoing necessity. A number of three-day work sessions and one day walkabouts of the island are held each year, and anyone interested in helping in the effort with donations of money, supplies or labor is urged to contact the Association by any of the means listed at the bottom of this page.