

History of the Cheboygan River Front Range Light

In 1870 Cheboygan had a population of approximately 800 and a growing number of lumber mills along the shores of the Cheboygan River. The Army Corps of Engineers conducted their first survey of the Cheboygan River that year to evaluate the possibility of improving navigation within the river. Determining that the channel could be enlarged to a width of 200 feet and a depth of 14 feet, Congress responded to the Army Corps of Engineers recommendation with an appropriation of \$160,000 to begin the improvement the following year. After dredging the river to the required depths, a free-standing "dummy" crib was placed to mark the outer end of the channel.

Anticipating an increase in vessel traffic entering the improved harbor, Congress responded to the Lighthouse Board's request for funds with an appropriation of \$10,000 for the construction of a set of range lights in the river in July 1876. However, with the Corps of Engineers improvements still in progress, work on the range lights did not begin until 1880, four years later.

The Front Range light was designed as a combination tower and keepers dwelling. The rectangular brown-painted, two-story wood frame building stood some twenty-four by twenty-seven and a half feet in plan. Its integral wooden tower, six feet two inches square, was located at the apex of the north end of the gabled roof. Since range lights are designed to be seen from within a narrow arc of visibility, a wooden lantern, rather than the normal cast-iron multi-sided lantern in general use at the time, was constructed on the tower gallery. The light was equipped with a fixed red Sixth Order Fresnel lens manufactured by Henry-Lepaute of Paris. It was displayed through a single rectangular window on the north side of the lantern where it would be visible to vessels in the Straits off the mouth of the river.

The Rear Range originally consisted of a spindly wooden structure with a vertical oval daymark consisting of horizontal wooden bars. It held a lens-lantern which was located at the top of the structure. The work was completed that same year, and the station was illuminated for the first time on the night of September 30, 1880. With the exhibition of the new range lights, mariners making their way through the Straits towards the dummy crib could bring the two lights into alignment in such a way that the rear light would be positioned

immediately above the front light. By maintaining them in this alignment, the center of the channel could be followed right up the river.

The ranges were established just in time because Cheboygan was in its heyday in the early 1880s. The eight huge mills on the banks of the river shipped 127 million board feet of lumber, and the town's population had exploded to 6,956. The town was growing rapidly and the Front Range light, being located a mere block from downtown, was able to share in the conveniences of its location. In that year the station was hooked up to the city water supply; however, the small plot of land on which it was situated was found to be poorly drained. The station frequently was surrounded by fetid standing water and its cellar inundated. Reporting on the unsanitary conditions at the site, the Lighthouse Board requested the sum of \$1,500 to purchase adjacent property in order to re-grade and improve the drainage. For some reason, Congress turned a deaf ear to the request. It was not until the Board had restated its case in each of its eight subsequent annual reports that Congress responded with an appropriation of \$1,700 in July 1898 to fund the purchase of the much needed land. The process of obtaining title began immediately.

In 1894, with increasing maritime traffic entering the river, the decision was made to place a light on the dummy crib which marked the end of the dredged channel, and that light's management was added to the list of responsibilities of the range light station. Since the light was manually operated and a full-time keeper would be needed to ensure its continued operation, an assistant keeper was added at the Front Range light. With three lights to maintain, the oil storage room in the cellar of the Front Range light was clearly inadequate. In 1891 a circular iron oil house was built on the station property with the capacity to hold 72 of the Board's standard five-gallon kerosene butts which were delivered by the lighthouse tender MARIGOLD during the District Inspector's annual inspection and re-supply visits.

Work on replacing the old wooden Rear Range light with a new skeletal iron tower began in 1900. Standing 75 feet high, the structure was equipped with an integrated ladder to reach the lamp and a small, wood frame cleaning room at its base. With completion of the new tower in December, the old tower was demolished. The Cheboygan River has a relatively strong and fast current and it seldom freezes, even in the harshest of winters. For this reason, the station dock was called into service as winter mooring for the light ships which had been placed to mark shoals and reefs throughout the Straits. It was not

uncommon to see up to six lightships tied-up in front of the lighthouse during the winter.

After eleven years of legal wrangling, title to the adjacent property was obtained in 1909, and the property was graded to its present condition. Some time thereafter, the Fresnel lens was removed from the Front Range, and both front and rear range lights were replaced with locomotive style lanterns with 10,000 candlepower electric lamps which were visible from a distance of 14 miles.

With a major wave of offshore lighthouse construction underway in the Straits of Mackinac in the late 1920s, the Cheboygan River Front Range light took on a critical support role, making the diminutive station one of the busiest on the western lakes. Not only was the station now responsible for the two range lights and the light out on the Crib, it also began serving as the primary support base for the lights on Spectacle, Martin and Poe reefs. All supplies for the lights were delivered to the Front Range, and all inbound and outbound crews mustered at the station. In addition to providing support for these offshore stations, the Range light keepers were also responsible for 41 aids to navigation along the inland route between Cheboygan and Alanson, some 40 miles to the west. When the icebreaker MACKINAW was commissioned in 1945, Cheboygan was designated as her home port. The Front Range light served as shore support for the vessel for approximately 20 years, until proper storage facilities finally were established at her berth off the turning basin near the river mouth.

With the dissolution of the Bureau of Lighthouses and transfer of responsibility for the nation's aids to navigation to the Coast Guard in 1939, civilian keepers were given the option of staying on in their civilian capacity, transferring into the Coast Guard at an equivalent rank, or resigning. While many of the old keepers resigned rather than enter into military-style service, a number stayed on as civilian keepers. Such was the case at the Cheboygan River Front Range light where Keeper Clarence Land, who had entered Lighthouse service as a Mechanic in the early 1920s, stayed on as a civilian keeper at the Front Range light until his death in 1964. Clarence was so well respected that he was posthumously awarded the Albert Galatin Award, the U.S. Treasury Department's highest career service award, which was presented to his wife Marie on the deck of the icebreaker MACKINAW.

The Front Range light served as the primary Coast Guard station for northern Lake Huron and the Straits of Mackinac until the mid-1980s when the decision was made to consolidate all area operations out of St. Ignace because more land for future expansion was available there. After the Coast Guard moved out, the lighthouse and riverside dock were taken over by the US Geological Survey and the Department of Fisheries to serve as their operations base in the western Great Lakes. The lighthouse thus began service as office space for the two federal agencies. A large pole barn-type structure was erected immediately behind the lighthouse to provide the necessary equipment storage and repair space.

In 2001, the Coast Guard decided to make the Cheboygan Front Range light available as part of the first group to be excessed through the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act. The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association successfully filed for ownership of the station, receiving the deed from then Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton at the National Lighthouse Conference held that June in Traverse City. After receiving ownership of the lighthouse, a Michigan Lighthouse Assistance Program grant to undertake an engineering study was successfully obtained. The study identified significant deterioration in the lantern box and gallery which was allowing water into the building and causing moisture damage to interior walls on the second floor. The rubble stone foundation also was found to be in deteriorating condition, requiring that the entire foundation be excavated and rebuilt and that perimeter drains be installed. A second MLAP grant, obtained in 2008, will pay for 2/3 of the cost of rebuilding the lantern box and gallery and re-sheathing them in materials appropriate to the target historical period of significance, determined to be 1910 when commerce in the river was at its zenith. Once the lantern has been repaired, attention and fundraising efforts will focus on rebuilding the structure's foundation.

A wonderful group of dedicated GLLKA volunteers has been opening the lighthouse to the public on weekends and holidays from Memorial Day through Labor Day since 2005, affording visitors the unique opportunity of viewing the restoration effort in progress. The lighthouse still serves as an active aid to navigation, not only serving the large number of pleasure boaters and sport fishermen who frequent the area, but also providing safe passage to the new icebreaker MACKINAW, the Bois Blanc Island ferry boat and a large gasoline barge which enters the river to fill tanks on the shore a couple of times a week.