

# How Many Cups In The Cupboard? How Many Steps In The Tower?

## LIGHTHOUSE HOSPITALITY IN YEARS GONE BY

By Mary Louise and Candace Clifford

**L**ighthouse keepers were expected to be hospitable to strangers. In 1853 the United States Light-House Board (USLHB) provided light-

house keepers with written instructions:

“Keepers must be courteous and polite to all visitors and show them everything of interest about the station at such times as will not interfere with light-house duties. Keepers must not allow visitors to handle the apparatus or deface light-house property. Special care must be taken to prevent scratching of names and initials on the glass of the lanterns or on the windows of the towers. The keeper on duty at the time is responsible for any injury or defacement to the buildings, lenses, lamps, glazing of the lantern and to any other light-house property under his charge, unless he can identify the parties who have done the injury, so as to make them accountable for it; and any such damage must be reported immediately to the inspector or engineer of the district, with the names of the person or persons, if they can be ascertained. No visitor should be admitted to the tower unless attended by a keeper, nor in the watch room or lantern between sunset and sunrise.”

Many of you probably seek out lighthouses that are open to the public, particularly those where you can wander through the keeper's dwelling and climb the tower. When you visualize the keeper going about his or her daily duties, do you see him working peacefully in the watchroom, serene and solitary, with nothing to distract him? Even when the wind was blowing a gale or the fog creeping in, was he safely sheltered in the tower?

In reality, on a sunny day, he was just as likely to be escorting visitors up and down the tower stairs. During inclement weather, he might be outside helping some poor victim of the storm. In many situations, the keeper and



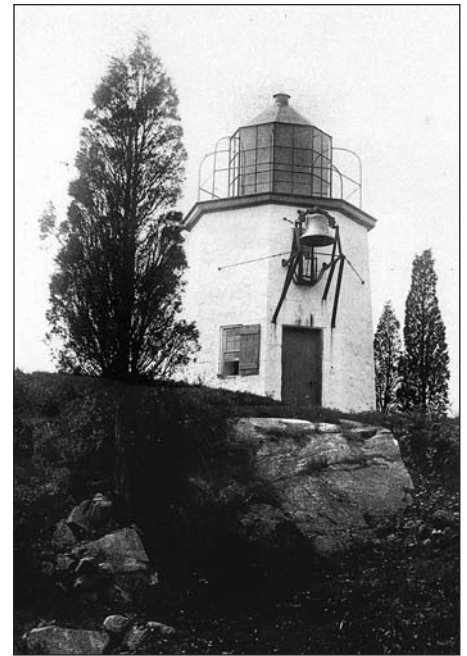
**Black Rock Harbor Light Station off Bridgeport, CT, around 1880. Keeper Kate Moore saved at least 21 lives around Fayerweather Island. Photo courtesy of National Archives.**

the tower were the only haven in a storm, and small keepers' quarters expanded quite mysteriously to take in the many bedraggled victims of bad weather and maritime disasters.

Kate Moore at Black Rock Harbor Light Station off Bridgeport, Connecticut, saved at least 21 lives around Fayerweather Island. She said, “I wish it had been double that number. Of course there were a great many others, washed up on the shore, half-dead, whom we revived, and they all stayed with us until they

received means to leave. They used to eat our provisions and the Government never paid us a cent for boarding them.”

When in 1901 a Hudson River Steamboat Company passenger ship went aground below the Stony Point Light Station, some forty or fifty persons, among them seven women, sought shelter in the keeper's dwelling. Keeper Nancy Rose and her children did what they could, building a roaring fire in the kitchen stove to dry shoes and garments and dispensing hot coffee until the next train to New York could carry the visitors to their destination. How many coffee cups did Nancy have in her kitchen cupboard?



**Stony Point Light Station on the Hudson River, NY. In 1901 Keeper Nancy Rose served coffee to passengers whose ship had run aground. Photo courtesy of National Archives.**

Every monthly issue of the *Lighthouse Service Bulletin* contained a page recording assistance provided by light keepers and tenders to people in trouble on the water. On November 10, 1918, first assistant Arden A. Penn, and second assistant keeper Kiple A. Stryker, of



**In 1932 Keeper Margaret Norvell at Port Pontchartrain Light Station in Louisiana rescued crews of both a yacht and a schooner. Photo courtesy of National Archives.**

West Bank Light Station, NY, assisted two men in a rowboat which had but one oar and oarlock and was half filled with water. The keepers brought the men to the station, gave them dry clothing, food, and lodging for the night, and the next day put them aboard a passing sailboat.

“On November 10, 1918, during a gale, a naval cutter boat from the Gulfport Naval Station with 10 recruits aboard, was blown to the south of the Ship Island Light Station in Mississippi. The recruits went to the light station, where they were given shelter for the night by the keeper, Peter Clarisse.

On December 5, 1918, William J. Tate, keeper of the North Landing River lights in North Carolina, furnished lodging to seven men of the aviation corps who arrived at the station in an open boat en route to Manteo, NC, and again on December 12, on their return from Manteo.

On December 18, 1918, William McDorman, assistant keeper of Great Shoal Light Station, MD, furnished food and lodging to three men who had been oystering in the vicinity of the station, and the weather being foggy had become lost.”

Monthly Bulletins in 1919 recorded the assistance on January 29, 1919, by G. M. Willis, the keeper of Point Lookout Light Station in Maryland, to the captain of the schooner *Sodonia Curley*, which was beached near the light station. Willis stored property from the schooner in his barn and furnished lodging for the captain and his crew.

During a severe gale on August 27, 1919,



**Keeper G. M. Willis at Point Lookout, MD, rendered assistance to the captain and crew of the schooner *Sodonia Curley* that beached near the light station. Photo courtesy of National Archives.**

James B. Hurst, keeper, and V. J. Montague, assistant keeper, Wolf Trap Light Station, safely landed at the light station a man, a woman, and four children, who arrived in a motor boat. Their schooner had sunk four miles away. The keepers brought them to safety on a line, one by one, with the two-year-old hoisted up in a bag.

On October 28, 1919, the steamer *Muskegon*, endeavoring to enter the harbor of Muskegon, struck the south breakwater and rapidly broke to pieces. Assistant keeper Ransom A. Jakubovsky, on duty at Muskegon Pierhead Light, immediately sounded a distress signal, then went to the wreck and with a flashlight directed passengers onto the pier and into the fog-signal house. High seas running over the breakwater made it dangerous to reach shore. Mr. Jakubovsky himself was knocked over several times by the breakers. The survivors were cared for in the fog-signal house until daylight, when they made their way to shore.

*The Morning Tribune* of June 26, 1932, recorded the many lives saved by Margaret Norvell at Port Pontchartrain Light Station in Louisiana. During one storm she threw a rope to the crews of both a yacht and a schooner, bringing them safely into the lighthouse and providing food and shelter for several days until the storm abated. In August 1925 she welcomed passengers from a sinking ferryboat into the station.

“It is not only the shipwrecked to whom Mrs. Norvell opened her doors. In every big hurricane or storm here since 1891, her light-

house has been a refuge for fishermen and others whose homes have been swept away. In the... storm of 1903 Mrs. Norvell’s lighthouse was the only building left standing on the lower coast, and over 200 survivors found a welcome and shelter in her home.”

The visitors who came in good weather to see the keeper’s dwelling and the tower also expected a hospitable welcome. Some of Nancy Rose’s disenchantment with the Stony Point lighthouse on the Hudson River may have resulted from the creation of a state park on Stony Point. After it opened, the lighthouse grounds were overrun in summer months with picnickers and sightseers who wanted to tour the whole place including the tower. Reaching the lantern in the Stony Point lighthouse involved three sets of steep steps and unlocking doors and trapdoors. Nancy and her children may have found the repeated climbing of the stairs and the supervision of



**Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha’s Vineyard showing how visitors flocked to readily accessible lighthouses. Old post card courtesy of the author.**

large numbers of park visitors trying.

When Ida Lewis, keeper of Lime Rock Light Station in Rhode Island, became famous for her rescues, countless visitors came to the island to stare at her. Her wheelchair-bound father entertained himself by counting their number—often a hundred a day; nine thousand in one summer alone. The light at Lime Rock was in a small tower in the corner of the keeper’s dwelling,

which meant that visitors tramped through the family's living quarters. No wonder Ida helped George D. Brewerton, a Newport journalist, write a pamphlet containing her autobiography so she could give it to visitors and not have to answer all their questions.

In an 1896 booklet entitled *Beautiful Santa Cruz County*, Phil Francis wrote that Santa Cruz Light Station "is open to inspection of the public three days in the week..." A visitor writing in 1904 described the keeper, Miss Hecox, as "a most pleasant little woman, standing guard at the front door, armed with a big feather duster." A dusty-looking visitor got a brisk whisking before being admitted inside, for Laura Hecox took *Instructions to Light-Keepers* very seriously:

"The utmost neatness of buildings and premises is demanded. Bedrooms, as well as other parts of the dwelling, must be neatly kept. Untidiness will be strongly reprehended, and its continuance will subject a keeper to dismissal. The premises must be kept clean and well white-washed; grounds in order; all the inside painted work of the lanterns well washed, and, when required, retouched with paint. The spare articles embraced in the list of allowances must be kept on hand and examined frequently, and should be kept clean and in order for use."

The logbook for Burnt Island Light Station off Boothbay Harbor, ME, was begun on July 1, 1872 by James A. McCobb, Light-Keeper. Almost immediately, on July 7, Keeper McCobb wrote of the "many strangers looking around the station." By 1872 Maine had become a popular summer resort for people who could afford to build cottages there, as well as for patrons who stayed at pleasant onshore resorts. The steamship companies, however, saw a growing market of less affluent day-trippers, who enjoyed cruising among the many islands and stopping to picnic and walk about. A lighthouse was splendid entertainment—a novelty, and a tour of the premises cost nothing. James McCobb was not entirely enthusiastic about extending hospitality to all who came to his door. On July 4, 1874, he again noted the "many strangers around visiting the station. Many yachts—both steam and sail, carrying excursions from island to island in the outer harbor during the day." He repeated his comments on July 23:

"Many strangers visiting the station to see the light, it being something new to most of them. Three boats a day from Bath to Squirrel Island, making their trips with passengers. From six to eight steam boats per day are passing this station, showing the increasing importance of



Keeper James McCobb recorded many summer visitors to Burnt Island Light Station, ME in his keeper's journal. Photo courtesy of National Archives.

a light station at this place, and also that some fog signal should be established here."

The following summer McCobb's comments were in the same vein:

June 24, 1875. "Many strangers from abroad tenting about on the Islands and visiting from place to place."

June 26. "Many strangers visiting the station to see the light, Harbor and Bay full of pleasure yachts the whole day through..."

July 8. "Many strangers visiting the station to see the light. Quite good sort of people. Many steamers now moving about us. Two boats a day now from here to Bath."

July 15. "Hottest day of the season....Sailing parties in all directions about the Harbor. Many of them visiting this station to see the light..."

July 17...."Many strangers around. Mostly pleasure parties. Three steamers a day now from Boothbay to Bath passing this station each way besides a fleet of fishing steamers running to Maddox's Porgie Factory."

When summer came around again in 1876, the visitor influx continued. Not many days passed before the steady flow of visitors began to tell on Keeper McCobb:

August 13, 1876. "Dry hot weather continues. All who can are leaving the cities and country back of us and coming to the sea shore to enjoy the sea breezes. Very many are visiting this station daily. Some days more than one hundred have called and in fact so many that they are becoming a real burden, taking up half my time to wait upon them."

The Fourth of July was apparently quieter

than usual in 1877, but by July 14 hot weather had set in.

"Samossset House, Mouse Island, full of company, said now to be doing a rushing business. Pleasure seekers running to this place and to that place to find where the most fun is, and the most amusement located and though not much fun for them here at the station, yet we get as many of them as we want and in fact, a few more."

July 22...."Much company around visiting the station. Some days occupied most of my time not engaged in work about the light house in waiting upon them. Sometimes almost make them-selves troublesome."

On August 6 Keeper McCobb repeated this complaint and added, "Sometimes I almost wish those summer resorts had been in Tophet [Tibet?] before they were located so near this station."

August 17...."Many strangers visiting the station. Shall be truly glad when it is time for them to leave here and go to their homes for at times they do trouble me very much."

The Fourth of July in 1878 "passed off pleasantly. . . Stayed at home all day waiting upon company most of the time who had come on to see the place."

On July 19 James McCobb celebrated his 62nd birthday.

July 31. "Dog days has set in in good earnest....Much company about us now, a little more than we want of strangers coming by night as well as by day to see the station and lantern of Light House, and wanting too to see the light

after it is lighted up at night, though in that they have not yet succeeded for no one has yet been inside of Lantern after dark except myself or one of my family to look after the light since I have been at the station, neither will I allow it otherwise. “

By August 29 his patience had run out: “Much company here today to see the Light House and to make themselves troublesome generally as they could. Wish the Board would issue one more regulation, and that would be that no more strangers could be admitted into the lantern under no consideration.”

His sigh of relief can almost be heard on September 9: “Cool pleasant Sept weather. Strangers who have been stopping through the hot weather on the Islands around us have nearly all left. The cool weather has started them, and the keeper of this station is much pleased with the change the cool weather has brought about. “

McCobb extols an unusually cool June in 1879: “Summer company not so plenty as usual and that is pleasing to the keeper. Would rather have cold rough weather than so much rough company.” By the end of July, the weather had turned fine. “Much company, mostly strangers coming to the station and this time quite civil. Hope they begin to think about other folks has rights as well as them-selves. “

By September 6 he was feeling cranky again. By late September, his patience had given out: “Summer company have now all left the Island and gone to the ??— for anything I care. Wish they might stay away and not trouble us anymore. Am fond of company; still would much rather a large portion of pleasure seekers in summer would stay away.”

By 1880 his frustration was beginning to tell on Keeper McCobb:

August 5....“Much company around. Twelve boats with from three to twelve persons in each have landed on the Island today to see and inspect the Light House, all strangers, and to make themselves generally troublesome. Do wish that Government would stop all strangers from landing at the station, they are perfectly horrid. They are a nuisance all through. May be found fault with for speaking so of them but can't help it.”

August 8. “Strangers came to station today to look through the Light House but it was not opened to them, nor has it been for last two years or more on Sundays to visitors. So much company around, feel as if I would like to have Sunday to myself. They do not appear to like it. Many of them acting as if I was here just [to]

wait upon them and for nothing else. More and more of them coming every year to the islands. Soon will have to have regular hours of the day for company to be admitted. “

After James McCobb's wife died in 1877, McCobb may have found being alone very trying. On October 7, 1880, he “sent his resignation to the Superintendent of this L.H. District to take effect soon as his successor can be appointed. Owing to poor health, the keeper does not at all times feel able to do the duties required of him at the station. He feels the importance of a good light in all kinds of weather.”

If McCobb's disgruntlement with an overflow of visitors doesn't convince you, consider the keepers at Absecon Light Station, located in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They counted 8,500 visitors during the quarter ending Sept 30, 1913. In the quarter ending September 30, 1916, their visitation was 6,500. Dividing that number by the hours during which the station was open to visitors, they averaged 21 visitors an hour. For the quarter ending September 30, 1919, the number was 6,800—averaging 74 per day. Absecon keepers reported 8,900 visitors in the quarter ending September 30, 1920, or an average of 97 per day. In the summer of 1921, 6,300 visitors registered, about 70 a day. In the summer of 1922, 10,500 persons visited, or about 117 persons per day. That same year Cape Cod light station reported 7,300 visitors. Gay Head light station on Nantucket reported 2,600 visitors, and Sankaty Head light station in Massachusetts reported 1,550 visitors.

Even if visitors came in groups, the tower would hold only a handful at a time. How would you like to climb your tower several times every hour, giving your explanation of what was on view, watching your audience every minute to make sure they didn't damage government property or slither over the railing around the lantern?

Miranda Younghans at Biloxi Light Station

1918-1928 managed to do it gracefully. Her obituary in the Gulfport Daily Herald mentioned that “her unflinching courtesy and dignity gave hundreds of casual visitors to the light house a beautiful memory of her...”

Increased visitation became a problem at many lights in accessible locations. Eventually the Light-House Board limited the times that the lighthouse should be open to the public:

Instructions to Keepers: Visiting Hours at the Light Stations in the First Light House District:

“Sunday: On Sundays the light and tower will be closed to all visitors.

Visiting Days: Visitors will be admitted to the light on Tuesdays and Fridays of each week.

Hours, Summer: Visiting will be from 9 a.m. to 12 n., and from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., June 1 to Sept 1.

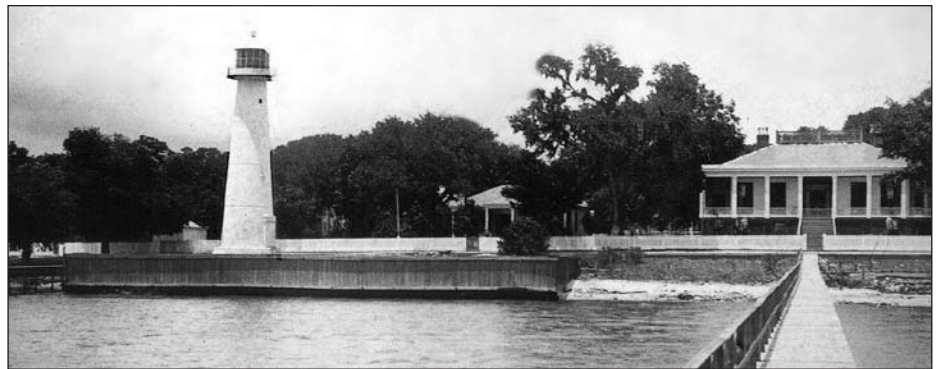
Hours, Winter: Visiting hours will be from 9 a.m. to 12 n., and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Sept. 1 to June 1.

Keepers are instructed that due regard should be observed for visitors who may come from long distances, and in such cases, they are hereby authorized to make reasonable exceptions in carrying out these orders, except on Sundays, when the light and tower will be closed to all visitors.

Visitors will not be allowed to enter the lens of a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd order light.”

Now that the lights are all automated, visitors keep coming to those stations that are now open to the public as museums or historic sites—and are perhaps more welcome than when a keeper was busy with his duties.

This fall Mary Louise and Candace Clifford are planning to publish their fifth lighthouse title, *Lighthouses Short and Tall*, a book for young readers. For more information visit their website <[www.lighthousehistory.info](http://www.lighthousehistory.info)>.



**Biloxi Light Station on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Keeper Miranda Younghans's obituary mentions her unflinching hospitality. Photo courtesy of National Archives.**