

Making Ends Meet on a Light Station

By Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford



he lighthouse keeper's job engaged him or her 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year in the 19th century. Unless assistant keepers were assigned to the station, there were no days off, no paid vacation. If a keeper left his station, either members of his family performed his duties while he was gone or a substitute was hired and paid by the keeper.

In thinking about the daily tasks associated with keeping the light on the station, it's easy to overlook the fact that keepers might also be busy much of the time with subsistence activities. There were no supermarkets nearby where they could buy everything they needed, nor could they afford to purchase all necessities. Some keepers produced much of their own food by fishing and farming. A garden provided important staples for their diet. Chickens scratched in the dooryard. A pasture sustained a cow for milk, animals for meat, and a horse for transportation.

In 1875 the District Inspector reported on all the lighthouses in Maine. His categories included a description of the reservation in which the lighthouse stood. This was useful to the Light-House Board in determining the extent of the provisions the lighthouse tender should deliver at each station and the attractiveness of the station. The keeper's compensation was often increased for those desolate stations far from a town or unsuitable for a garden. Access to fresh water was a consideration as well. Many keepers had to transport drinking water to remote or offshore locations.

Offshore light stations posed particular problems. The first keeper on Seguin Island off the coast of Maine, Major Polerecsky, received his appointment early so he could commence gardening and farming in March. In November 1796 he wrote, "If I could afford to keep a pair of steers or a horse, I could Save all that trouble & expence in taking the oil on the shore to the house in half this time, but I should run my Self in debt, . . . I have but one Cow here for

my family and one tun of haye I purchased for her, delivered to the house, Cost me 20 dolars and so it is with all the necessaries of life till I Can Raise them. Therefor hope you will be so obliging as to have My Salary Raised to 300 dollars."

Deer Island Thorofare, an island of about three acres, was rocky. "About one-quarter of an acre was enclosed with rough board and pole fence made by keeper, with a small garden inside of it." Franklin Island, near the mouth of the St. George River, was large, about 50 acres. Ten of those acres "were fit for cultivation and in grass, one-half acre of it in garden. Two-thirds of the island was suitable for pasture for cows or sheep. The land is generally rocky through the pasture portion." Egg Rock, at the entrance to Frenchman's Bay, "has about 5 acres at low water and 2.5 at high water. "About one-half an acre has light soil, the rest is rock"—less promising for growing food.

Matinicus Rock, six miles south of Matinicus Island, covered about 29 acres, but was mostly rough granite with heavy boulders on



Isolated Boon Island off the coast of Maine. Buildings are boat house with marine railway, original stone house with wooden Coast Guard addition. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



Fort Point Light Station, Maine had good soil and acreage for a garden. Fog bell tower at left, garage (old barn) next to dwelling. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

top. "Soil here and there between the rocks, about one-half acre in all." We know that Abbie Burgess's family kept chickens, for she tells of rescuing them in the gale of 1856.

Boon Island is so "peculiarly situated that it has been difficult to get anyone who would consent to accept the appointment as keeper for the compensation allowed. All the fresh

water, wood and necessaries for a family must be carried on to the Island, and it is far removed from the coast. In violent storms the sea makes a break almost entirely over the barren rock."

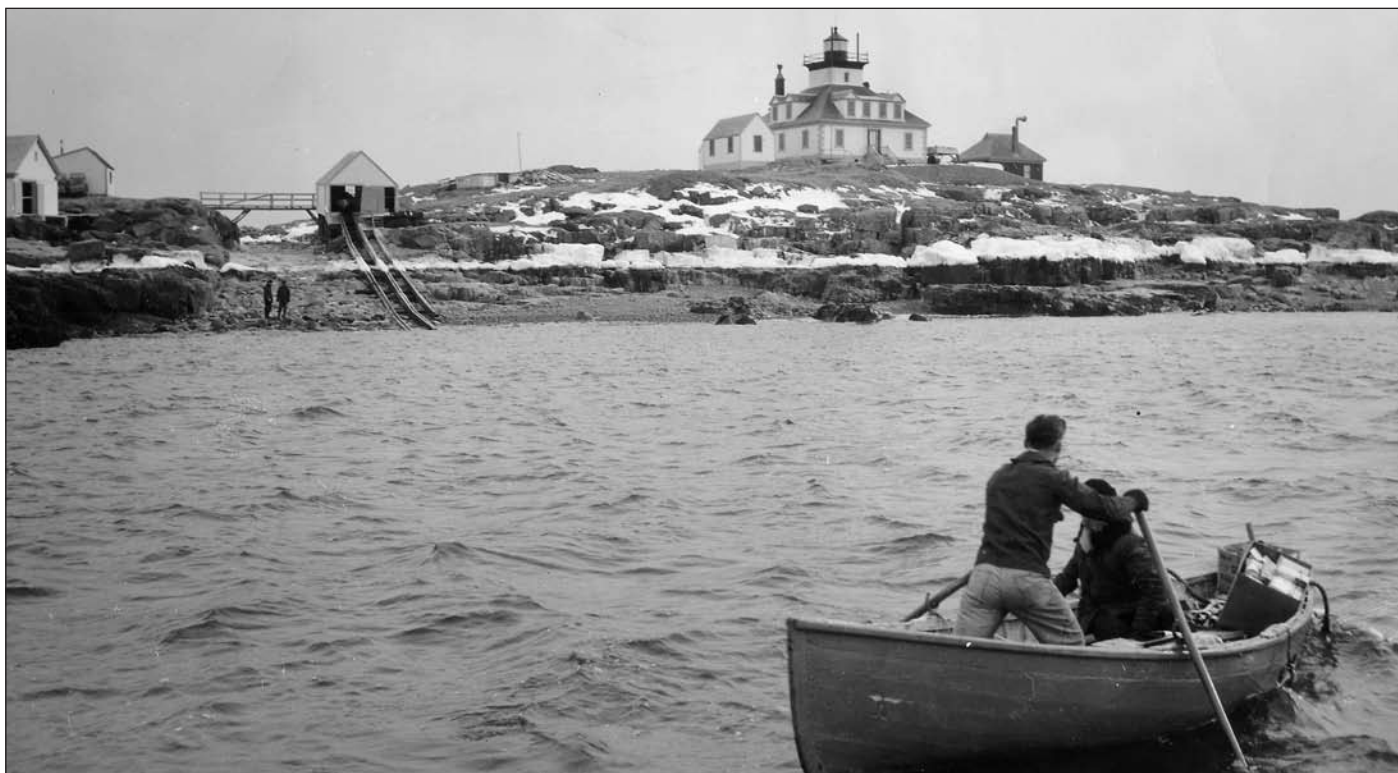
The reservation at Fort Point, at the entrance to the Penobscot River, covered about 6 acres, with good soil from 6 inches to 6 feet deep. One acre was in garden; the

remainder grass. The entries of Keeper Edward S. Farren in his log book tell of farming activities throughout the growing season. On May 10, 1919 he plowed and planted oats. Two days later he "went after my pig."

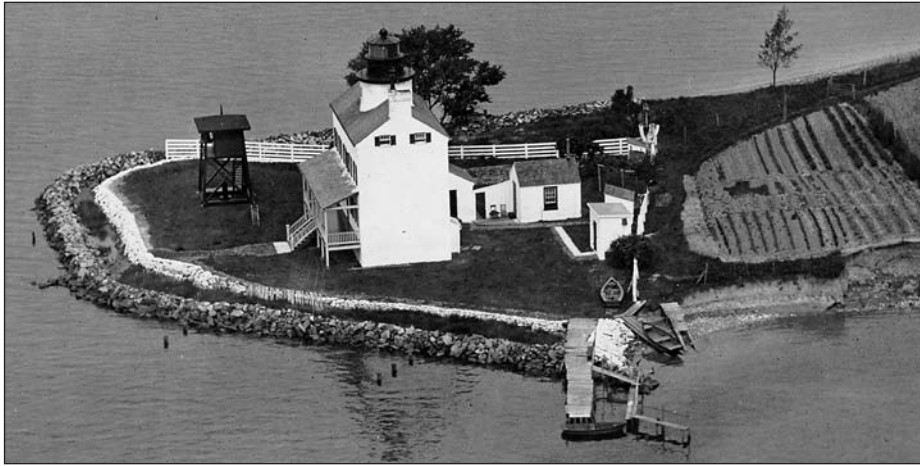
On May 23 he planted a flower garden. On May 26 he went down to Edgar's after quarter of pig. On the 27th, he went "fishing a short time." On June 4th he "worked in my garden hoeing peas and potatoes." On July 1 he "worked in hay all day." On July 25 he mentions having "lots of company" when he was bringing in hay. On August 5, he was still getting in hay for his animals winter fodder. On the 12th he "finished hauling in my oats."

On August 17 he went blueberrying with his mother and brothers. A month later he "started digging my potatoes." He was still digging them and gathering garden stuff when October rolled in. On October 3 he "went to pick apples for winter." On the 15th he "went after winter cabbage," and was still storing cabbage on the 23rd. On the 24th he went clamming, and on November 1st picked apples again.

Two women keepers have left us vivid descriptions of their daily life on a light-house station. Catherine (Kate) Moore did not become official keeper of the Black Rock Harbor Light Station on the north shore of Long Island Sound until 1871 when she was



Bringing supplies to the station on Egg Rock, Maine, was a constant challenge. At far left the two buildings are probably storage, next, the boat house, wash house or storage and far right, fog signal. Note the trumpet for the steam-driven diaphone. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



Blakistone Island Light Station, Maryland, where Josephine Freeman was keeper from 1876 to 1912. From left, fog bell signal platform and right, two privies. This station no longer exists. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

76 years old. Her father, Stephen Tomlinson Moore sought the keeper's post decades earlier, in 1817, after injuries from a fall aboard ship kept him from going to sea on the vessel in which he had invested. In 1889 Kate told a reporter from the *New York Sunday World*, "I was just 12 years old when I first began to assist my father in trimming the wicks. A few years after that his health began to fail and from then on I was practically the keeper." She did her invalid father's work and cared for him for 54 years.

Kate's is the first voice to come directly to us from the ranks of women who kept the lights. "It was a miserable [light] to keep going, nothing like those in use nowadays," she said of the fixed white light, which was 350 candlepower. "It consisted of eight oil lamps which took four gallons of oil each night, and if they were not replenished at stated intervals all through the night, they went out. During very windy nights it was almost impossible to keep them burning at all, and I had to stay there all night."

When asked whether she found the solitude of her life trying, Kate said that she had never known any other.

I never had much time to get lonely. I had a lot of poultry and two cows to care for, and each year raised twenty sheep, doing the shearing myself—and the killing when necessary. You see, in the winter you couldn't get to land on account of the ice being too thin, or the water too rough. Then in the summer I had my garden to make and keep. I raised all my own stuff, and as we had to depend on rain for our water, quite a bit of the time was consumed looking after that. We tried a number of times

to dig for water, but always struck salt.

These kinds of extracurricular activities were common for keepers in their efforts to make ends meet. Kate did not consider her life unusually hard. "You see, I had done all this for so many years, and I knew no other life, so I was sort of fitted for it. I never had much of a childhood, as other children have it. That is, I never knew playmates. Mine were the chickens, ducks and lambs and my two Newfoundland dogs."

Kate was only one of many for whom fresh water was a problem. In 1815 Ebenezer Skiff, keeper at Gay Head Light on Martha's Vineyard, complained that:

"The Spring of water in the edge of the cliffs, has become useless. I cart the water used in the family more than half a mile, necessarily keep a draught horse & carriage for that purpose and frequently have to travel in a hilly common extending five miles to find the horse. Truly I catch some rain water and it is as true that many times I empty it colored as red as blood with oker [ocher] blown from the cliffs."

The Collector of Customs reported of Tybee Island in Georgia in 1839 that "there is difficulty in procuring a supply of fresh Water sufficient for the use of the Keeper's family; we would respectfully recommend that Tin Gutters be put to the Keeper's house to enable him to keep on hand rain water. . . . The Gutters including everything will cost 50 cents per foot."

Julia Williams, tending Santa Barbara Light in the 1860s, rode a horse a mile to a spring to carry home cans of water because rain water rarely filled her cistern. Emma Taberrah at

Cumberland Head Light drank the sulphurous tasting water from the well there, but her keeper husband and children preferred to carry pails of water up from Lake Champlain.

At Egg Rock off the Maine coast Keeper Heber S. Sawyer related in his log the problems with water. On March 12, 1911, he "boated about 80 gals. of water from Bar Harbor this day." On March 14 he "boated two loads of water 110 gals from Bar Harbor. Telephoned Inspector who authorized me to get bids for bringing water on, no one being available asked me if we could not boat it, one of the clerks telling he thought it would be all right for the assistant and myself to both leave the station in good weather." On March 18 he measured the water in the keeper's cistern and found only 19.5 inches there and 17 inches in the assistant's cistern. The next day he boated 35 gallon of water from Bar Harbor, 40 gallons on the 25th.

He also reports that on June 9 the "sea smashed up over 40 lobster traps belonging to assistant & myself that we had fishing." Trapping lobsters and fishing were allowed as long as they did not impinge on light station duties.

Josephine Freeman, who was paid \$600 a year for keeping the Blackistone Island Light in Maryland on the east side of the Potomac River, provided the family's only steady income. She had no paid assistant and was responsible for both the light and the fog signal. She depended on her children to help her.

Josephine followed her father's example of writing a short record of each day's activities in an old-fashioned ledger. A surviving volume of her personal diary describes daily life in a rural lighthouse at the turn of the century.

Josephine's children usually tended the lamp in the lighthouse lantern. January 12: Will wicked the lamp up this morning. January 18. The lamp smoked this a.m. 3 o'clock. Willie had to get up & change the lamp. The tower was black with smoke. Willie & Ida [the housekeeper] washed it off. They were up there cleaning up until 12 o'clock. . . Willie busy fixing the piece belongs in the top of the Tower & he painted it also.

Willie did the manual work expected of a keeper—making repairs and painting, as well as much of the maintenance around the lighthouse. April 6. Willie cleaned the fog machinery today. May 7. Willie fixed winder [window] in the cellar. Put two panes in & one in his winder upstairs. June 9. Willie painting the tower this morning. He painted the tower every spring.

After they moved into the lighthouse, Josephine's husband Billie occupied himself hunting and fishing, regularly providing their dinner. He hunted ducks every day throughout the fall and winter, weather permitting. Billie bred, trained, and sold hunting dogs. He kept a garden as well as cows, hogs, chickens, and turkeys. He did all the shopping, going regularly to the mainland to buy groceries, fruit, vegetables, and on rare occasions meat. He and his sons harvested and sold oysters, clams, and crabs. They did line fishing and put out gill and trap nets. They assisted neighbors in hauling nets, butchering livestock, and the like. The current term to describe Billie's activities would be "subsistence farming."

November 27. Billie & Willie went up in the blind. Killed 12 ducks... I am patching Billie's coat & Bernard's pants... Snow this evening, very bitter. December 1, 1903. . . . Billie got up early to kill his hogs. . . . For the next two days the whole family was busy cutting up meat, putting it in brine, cutting and drying the lard, making and smoking sausage.

Josephine, and her daughters made their own clothes, curtains, sheets and pillow cases, as well as the men's shirts and nightclothes. They also knitted, quilted, darned socks, and repaired all of their clothes. Josephine mended the sails for their various boats.

The women canned throughout the harvest season. Josephine mentions making wine, seeding cherries and canning them, pickling pears, making blackberry and grape jam, crabapple jelly, tomato pickle, chillie sauce, and chow-chow.

The records these keepers left indicate that their livelihood, like that of most rural people in the 19th century, required them to devote a great deal of attention to supplying their basic needs. Much time was consumed by tasks not directly related to the care of the light and maintenance of the station. The light keeper's reputation of being a resourceful, independent, versatile individual was well earned.

The information on Maine lighthouses was gathered for *Maine Lighthouses: Documentation of Their Past*, by J. Candace and Mary Louise Clifford (Cypress Communications, 2005). The segments on women keepers come from *Mind the Light, Katie*, by Mary Louise and J. Candace Clifford (Cypress Communications, 2006), which includes previously unpublished information on Keeper Josephine Freeman. For more information visit <www.lighthouse-history.info>.



The life of a keeper at St. Croix Light Station, Maine... Keeper Edson Small milking their cow, wife Connie Small feeding the chickens. The lighthouse no longer exists. Photos courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard..

