# Personnel Problems Under the U. S. Light-House Board, 1852-1901

By Mary Louise and Candace Clifford

## Creation of the United States Light-House Board

Frequent complaints about the quality of aids to navigation reached Congress, which appointed a board in 1851 to scrutinize every aspect of the Lighthouse Establishment. It recommended that the whole system be revamped under the direction of a nine-member Light-House Board, established in 1852. The country was divided into districts, and a Navy officer would act as inspector in each district. He oversaw personnel matters, making regular visits to light stations to ensure that keepers understood their duties and performed them satisfactorily. This permitted keepers to take their problems to officials within their district rather than dealing with the local customs collector or Treasury Department officials in Washington.

## Political influence

The new Light-House Board arrangements did not eliminate politics from playing a role in keeper appointments. For example, the first keeper appointed in 1879 at Cape Neddick Light Station in Maine, Nathaniel Otterson, was a cousin of the governor of New Hampshire. Some observers felt that Harriet Colfax, who kept the Michigan City Light Station in Indiana from 1861 to 1904, had political support in gaining the appointment because her cousin Schuyler Colfax was a member of Congress.

Victor Smith, having received a political appointment in the Treasury Department in 1860, arranged for his father George to be appointed keeper at Ediz Hook Light Station in Washington Territory, as well as assistant appointments for his sisters Mary and Ella. When her father resigned in 1870, Mary became the keeper. The two sisters moved to Point Fermin Light Station in California in 1874. Mary as keeper earned $800 annually; Ella as assistant, earned $600 per annum.

**A light station was completed at Ediz Hook in Washington Territory in 1865. Mary and Ella Smith became keepers in 1870. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.**

## Instructions to Keepers

The Light-House Board issued detailed Instructions to Keepers in 1852, separating single-keeper stations, where families helped the keeper, from those with more than one keeper. As new and more complex technology was introduced, keepers needed mechanical skills to keep the machinery running, particularly at tall-tower coastal stations that were manned 24 hours a day. A hierarchy of stations developed, and many keepers started out at smaller, less attractive stations and worked their way up through the system. Qualifications for keepers and assistants became more professional as their expertise increased. Machinists and lampists were available to solve the problems that were beyond the skills of the keepers.

Much lengthier instructions were issued in 1881 applying to all stations, regardless of the number of keepers. The 211 instructions covered the care of lights and their appurtenances, lightships, use and management of fog signals, and recipes for whitewash, cement, and water purification. The inspector was responsible for seeing that the instructions were followed and that approval from the Board was obtained for any deviations from them.

**Instruction 1. The keeper is responsible for the care and management of the light, and for the station in general.**

In March 1892 Keeper Elizabeth Williams at Little Traverse Light Station in Michigan wrote to the inspector: "I write you in regard to a quantity of sand which drifted into the yard at this station during a heavy Gale of wind late last fall, and it crosses the sidewalks to a considerable extent. To remove it would take a man and a team two days at $3.00 per day, making a cost of $6.00. The snow has just melted off and I have been digging off all I can of it. Please let me know if you will allow the expense of having it moved." The inspector wrote "OK" at the top of the letter.

**Instruction 4. Watches must be kept at all stations where there is an assistant. The keeper on watch must remain in the watchroom and give continuous attention to the light while he is on duty.**

Letter from J. W. Rich, keeper at Grosse Point Light Station in Illinois, to the inspector, on August 15, 1887: "There are no men here who will work as laborers at the wages Specified. Shall I ask the Collector to appoint a Second Assistant? As there is always danger of fog, I am unable to leave the Station to look up a Suitable person for the position. Mr. Hanson & myself have been alone for ten days."

Keeper C. O. Chapman at Sturgeon Bay Canal Light Station in Wisconsin wrote the inspector on November 13, 1887: "As Mr. Russell has left me I am without a laborer . . .. It is pretty hard to get any one to work for the small wages. . . . My wife is standing watch with me now as I can not get a man."

In May 1891 Keeper John V. Sandell at Wind Point Light Station in Wisconsin wrote to the inspector: "My assistant (John L. Sullivan) have became very car[e]less about the Light house duties he goes out with the other Boy's in the neighborhood away out in the country sometimes nearly 3 miles and one Sunday there came a fog on at Lighting time and he did not come back till 9 pm and I told him if he did it again I would report it and Last Sunday he did not come back from Racine till 8:30 pm and when I spoke to him he said no matter what I said I could not put him out and I have told him not to go out at nights and he disobey's the order and goes anyhow as you gave him privilage to stay till Nov 1st 1887 so he think he can do as he pleases."

Keeper C. H. Lewes at Port Washington Light Station in Wisconsin wrote the inspector on December 27, 1892: "I have a complaint to make against my Assistant, the trouble is caused by his habit of frequenting saloons & . . . coming to the station considerably under the influence of liquor. When I told him . . . that he violated the rules & that such conduct could not be tolerated, he did not seem to consider it of much importance . . .."

The Light-House Board maintained lightships offshore where light stations could not be built, and was responsible for the personnel who manned them. In 1887 the Inspector of the 2nd Light-house District reported . . . "that Mr. John Farrelly, Assistant Keeper of Hens and Chickens Light-ship, cannot be found at New Bedford and is not on board ship. The rumor is, the Inspector states, that Mr. Farrelly has left the city with the wife of another man. He came on shore at the end of the quarter to get his pay, and a Mr. Doane of New Bedford, writes that he heard him say that he would not return to the vessel.

"At this Assistant did not return to his duty at the proper time, . . . the Board has the honor to ask his dismissal from its service."

**Instruction 8. All keepers must acquaint themselves with the workings of the apparatus in their charge.**

The Light-House Board installed Fresnel lenses at all lighthouses under its jurisdiction, an optic far superior to the lamps and reflectors they replaced.

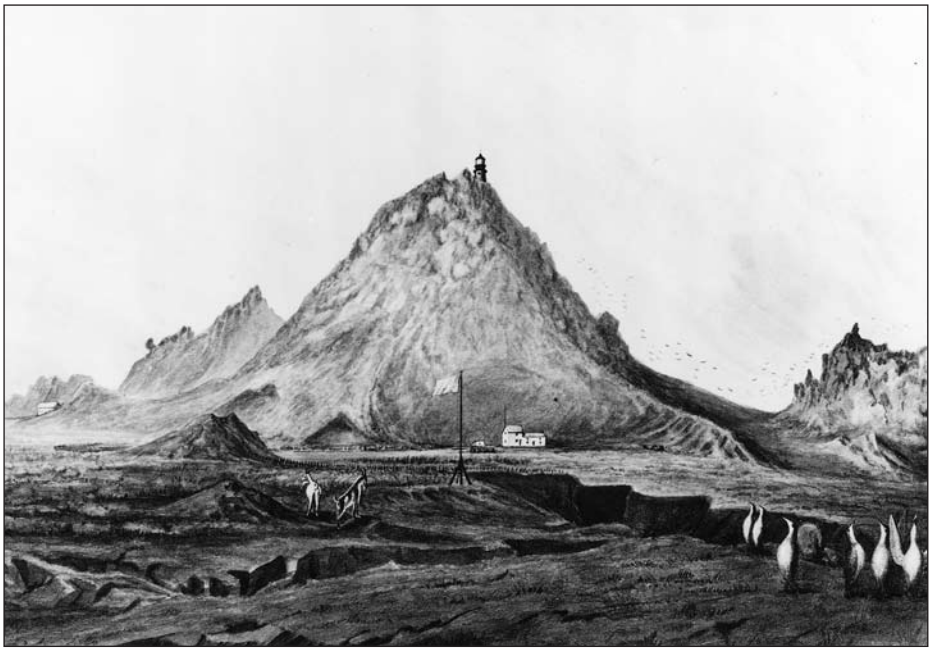
The 4th District Inspector wrote the Chairman of the Light-House Board about the light at Absecon Light Station in New Jersey. " . . . on the night of Aug. 9th, 1884… for at least a half an hour . . . the light was in such a condition as to be entirely useless and that this was due to the neglect of D. L. Albertson, 1st assistant keeper," who was on duty. "Mr. Albertson's excuse is that he was reading and did not think it necessary" to pump up the oil on his watch. "In my opinion for such neglect of duty he should be dismissed from the service."

When a new fourth-order revolving lens was installed at Egg Rock Light Station in Maine, in 1901, Keeper Lewis F. Sawyer reported in his log a week later: "During the first part [of the night], the light was difficult to run correctly overall, I hardly leaving it until 12, turning the lens by hand a large part of the time." Two weeks later he reported "the lens badly cracked in several places, the longest one in an irregular form extending nearly from bulls eye to frame . . ." A lampist was sent to check the lens, but over the following months it continued to stop periodically, frustrating the keeper.

**Instruction 11. A light-house must never be left wholly unattended.**

Keeper A. Hagen at Grosse Point Light Station wrote to Inspector C. E. Clark on July 26, 1888 informing him "that Mr. Palmer, 2nd Asst., quit work at 10:30 a.m. as I was cleaning leaves in the Tower and told me that he did not care for the Light-house, now that I am left alone and the Light all up side down, I most respectfully request that Assistant will be sent me that will obey my orders. I shall get the Light in order to light tonight if fog don't get up."

**Instruction 15. Light-keepers must not engage in any traffic on light-house premises, and they must not permit it by any one else.**



**As one of the more isolated stations in California, Farallon Island took a toll on its keepers. The families of the keepers did not always get along, and there were charges of inattention to duty, thievery, and drunkenness. Drawing courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.**

In that same year the 4th District Inspector sent to the Chairman, Light-House Board, "the resignation of Mr. John S. Lynch, Assistant Keeper at Delaware Waterfront Light Station: About the time of its receipt, I received information that Mr. Lynch had been engaged in assisting the Agent of the rival business houses of this City in securing business from arriving vessels at Delaware Breakwater, and that his resignation was forwarded in anticipation of such a report.

"From Investigation I find the reports true and that he used the lighthouse boat and was in uniform when so engaged."

The Inspector of the 12th Light-house District informed the Board, by letter of 13 August 1887, that, in consequence of reports from pilots that the fog signal at Farallon Island [Light Station in California] could not be heard within a mile to the south and west of the island, he visited the island and found a bad state of affairs existing there, for which the Keeper, Mr. Rugg, is responsible.

"The Keeper, instead of obeying instructions in regard to keeping off trespassers, sealers and egg pickers, had received the family of one of the sealers into his own house. He also allowed egg pickers to occupy the old stone dwelling on the premises and to use the boat belonging to the station for six weeks. He deliberately deceived Captain Hooper of the revenue Cutter *Crown*, by informing him that there were no trespassers on the island, when a party of them were hid in a cave on the island, having gone there when the cutter was sighted. The orders of the Inspector that he should be informed at every opportunity of the state of affairs on the island has been ignored.

"One of the assistants, Mr. John C. Ryan, reported Mr. Rugg for having been repeatedly under the influence and liquor and incompetent to perform his duty. Also, that when he relieved the Keeper, he rarely ever found the pressure of steam higher than 40 pounds, when at least 60 pounds should be carried, which, the Inspector states, would account for the fog signal not being heard a portion of the time. The First Assistant Keeper testified to seeing Mr. Rugg under the influence of liquor. The fog signal was found in bad order by the Inspector, the boilers not having been washed out in nine months. The feeding pumps were ineffective from small and necessary repairs not having been made by the Keeper.

"The Farallon station is one of the most important on the Pacific Coast. The proper operation of the fog signal is especially necessary. A year or two since, a ship ran ashore there in the fog, and there is always danger of a repetition of the disaster. Only competent and reliable men should be in charge of the station . . .."

Keeper W. H. Rugg submitted his resignation. "The Board has the honor to ask that the resignation be not accepted, but the Mr. Rugg be removed, to take effect from 11 August '87, on which date he was relieved from duty."

In 1891 Keeper Lewis Bourissan at South Fox Island Light Station in Michigan wrote to the inspector: "A pound net is being drove near the station and I was asked to do the fishing on halves. I would like to fish for I am short of money. We can fish the net without neglecting our Light House Duties. We have fish that net last year, I and Mr. Fountain, and I would like to be permitted to fish it." The

**While keeper of the Cape Elizabeth Light Station, Marcus Hanna was awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal for rescuing three men off the wreck of the schooner *Australia* in 1885. Hanna, a decorated war hero, had a quick temper when his assistants did not perform to his high standards. Hanna photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard; station photo is National Archives No. 26-LG-1-61.**

inspector"s notation on the letter was "No objections as long as Light House Duties are not neglected."

**Instruction 17. Keepers must under no circumstances allow an intoxicated person to enter a light-tower, nor to remain on the premises . . . .**

Improved procedures did not eliminate temptations. In 1857 the Naval Secretary of the United States Lighthouse Board asked the superintendent of lights to nominate a suitable successor to the assistant keeper at Sandy Hook Light Station in New Jersey, to replace John Brewer, dismissed for drunkenness.

Lighthouse correspondence in the 19th century was often very formal and somewhat quaint. In 1879 the Engineer Secretary of the Light-House Board, Major F. U. Faruhar, wrote to the Light-House Inspector requesting the removal of Keeper Geo. Thurston "for intemperate habits, which frequently unfit him for duty . . ."

Newspaper reporters were more forthright. In an 1887 article about Point Reyes Light Station in California, The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that " . . . a late (and now happily deposed) keeper [was] notorious for his love of the flowing bowl. It is said that he regaled himself, when out of whiskey, with the alcohol furnished for cleaning lamps, and a familiar sight to the [nearby] ranchmen was this genial gentleman lying dead drunk by the roadside, while his horse, attached to the lighthouse wagon, grazed at will over the country."

In 1887 the Naval Secretary wrote that "the Inspector of the 12th Light-house District recently inspected the Point Bonita Light Station, Cal., and while there the Keeper informed him that Mr. H. J. Gardiner, the 3rd Assistant Keeper, reported for duty on the 5th instant, and on the 6th went to Sausalito and returned in a beastly state of intoxication, and that he, Gardiner, was subsequent to that, under the influence of liquor. The Board asked for his removal."

One incident that involved liquor, but not drunkenness arose at Sherwood Point Light Station in Wisconsin in 1890. Keeper Henry Stanley wrote to Inspector C. E. Clark on June 23, 1890: "I like to inform you of some of your mans doings at this station. I had just got one quart of good liquor in the House the day befor you visit this station last and paid $1.50 cent for it and had it on the shelf in the cellar. After your man had left the cellar and had gone I found out my liquor was gone.

"I wish those man that drinked the liquor would be kind enough to send me the money for it. I always keep liquor in the House in case of sickness. Capt. Clark, this is not the first time we mist things in the cellar. Some years ago after your man had been in the cellar we missed eggs, ham, and Graham Bread."

**Instruction 18. Keepers must not make any charge, nor receive any fee, for admitting visitors to light-houses.**

William Brooks took over as keeper of Cape Neddick Light Station in Maine in 1904. He charged 10 cents to visitors out to the island; for another 5 cents they could tour the keepers quarters. When the Inspector learned of these activities, the keeper resigned.

**Cape Flattery Light Station, shown here ca. 1898, included a double frame keepers' dwelling, a fog signal building, a fuel house, and a boat house. When not required for housing, the cottage under the tower was used as a workroom. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.**

**Instruction 19. Keepers must render any assistance . . . to laborers employed in making repairs or alterations at light-stations. In cases where keepers are able to make repairs they are expected to do the work themselves.**

In 1886 Lighthouse Inspector Batcheller wrote the Light-House Board Chairman about trouble at Cape Elizabeth Light Station in Maine: "I regret to have to report a serious quarrel between the Principal and the 2nd Asst. Keeper . . . which resulted in an assault by the latter. The altercation commenced about a trivial matter and, had there not been bad feeling already existing between the parties, would probably have resulted in nothing but words . . .."

"The 2nd Asst. Keeper Mr. Hiram Staples complained to the Principal Keeper Mr. Marcus Hanna, that certain repairs, which he could not make himself, were needed . . .. The Principal Keeper admits saying "anyone but a jackass could make the repairs himself." The asst. claims he said "anyone but a d-----d jackass," etc.

"Whatever statement is correct, the Asst. responded by knocking the Principal Keeper down and, according to the latter, followed the blow with further Blows and Kicks. This the former denies but admits his first blow.

"The Principal Keeper claims that the Assistant was under the influence of liquor, which the latter denies, and I could find no evidence beyond the Principal Keeper"s statement to sustain the charge."

The Inspector recommended that Staples be dismissed from the service and that Hanna be reprimanded "for his undignified and improper part in the quarrel."

**Instruction 21. The utmost neatness of buildings and premises is demanded.**

If the inspector felt the keeper was remiss, he reported it to the Light-House Board with a recommendation.

In 1887 "the Inspector of the 1st Lighthouse District inspected Goat Island Light Station, Me., on 6 July '87, and found it in an indifferent condition, its dwelling being dirty from top to bottom. The Inspector directed the Keeper's attention to his neglect of duty and instructed him to improve the condition of his station.

"On the 5th of this month another inspection was made, and the whole station was found in a dirty condition. The lantern and

tower appeared not to have been swept or dusted for weeks; the lens was covered with lint and dust, the reflector was dirty and the plate glass of the lantern was streaked with dust and spotted with fly specks. The dwelling was filthy " offensive the Inspector states, to sight and smell.

"The Board does not consider the Keeper a competent person for the position he holds and has the honor to ask his removal. The name of the Keeper is Mr. John Emerson."

**Instruction 26. Boats are furnished to light stations where they are necessary ….**

Having the right equipment was often as important as salary to the keepers. In 1863 Acting Collector Victor Smith, Puget Sound District, wrote that "two assistant keepers at Tatoosh (Cape Flattery) Light Station in the Washington Territory, Messrs Noyes and Moore, resigned their positions . . . on account of apprehended danger on the Island for the want of a small boat. The only boat on the rock had been swept away during a violent storm last winter and the Light House Board had been unable to replace it." (Light-House Board procedures took time and new equipment could be slow in reaching remote stations.)

**Instruction 50. The following returns must be made by keepers of light-houses:**

Monthly: Report of condition of station
Fog signal report
Absence report
Quarterly: Expenditure of oil, etc.

In addition to daily logs, which were mandatory after 1872, the monthly, quarterly, and annual reports required substantial paper work from the keeper. He had to be literate and able to keep accurate accounts.

On April 2, 1874, Keeper McCobb at Burnt Island Light Station in Maine noted in his logbook, "Received a copy of General Orders from the Light House Board in which Light Keepers are required to report monthly to the District Engineer the condition of the buildings, grounds, apparatus, etc., under his charge, stating distinctly the repairs and improvements required. In like manner monthly reports will be made to the District Inspector concerning the condition of supplies, buoys, and light vessels. In addition to these, special reports will be made whenever necessary. Light House Keepers will be required to replace broken window glass and to keep their cisterns, pumps and drains in repair at their own expense unless otherwise recommended in each case specially by the Engineer."

**Instructions 135. The keepers of station with fog-signals will be held to strict accountability for the proper care, attention to, and management of fog signals.**

As the fog signals machinery became more complex, keepers needed special skills to keep them running. After an engine-driven fog signal was introduced at Cape Elizabeth Light Station, the Light-House Board in 1869 issued the following directions for its operation: "There are now four keepers at Cape Elizabeth Light-Station. This number is deemed quite sufficient to take care of both the lights and the fog signal. If the Principal Keeper does not possess the skill required in the management of the fog-signal, he should be removed and a proper person nominated. One of the Assistants also, should be competent to manage any steam machinery.

"The keeper and each of his assistants should be given to understand, that he must take his turn of duty in attending the fog-signal as well as the light."

Complaints came frequently from ship captains that fog signals were not operating properly. In December 1883 the Tug *Alaska* ran aground on Washington Shoal in Long Island Sound and a complaint was registered that the master "could get no bearings as the whistle on Little Gull was not blown nor the bell on Race Rock sounded." The 3rd District Inspector informed the Chairman of the Light-House Board that Washington Shoal was "distant 11" miles from Race Rock, and only 2/3 miles from Montauk Point Light Station in New York. The fog signal reports show that there was fog at Block Island and Montauk Point from 4 p.m. of August 19th until 1 a.m. of the following day, and that the fog signals were in operation constantly between those hours. . . .

"As the fog signal at Montauk Point was in operation at the time she struck on Washington Reef, it is strange that the master of the *Alaska* should not have relied on that signal instead of on the siren at Little Gull, which was five times more distant."

A letter from Keeper Andrew J. Allen at Twin River Point Light Station in Wisconsin, to the Inspector in December 1892 announced that his assistant had quit: "Mr. John F. Craig quite [quit] this am . . . on account him and me could not get along . . . he would not obey my orders or take my advice. He claimed to be a first class engineer . . . one night on his watch and he went and started fire in boiler but did not look to see how the water was. The Valve from tank had been left open by mistake and boiler was full of water and no place for steam. He got a pressure of 65 lbs, and started but it would not work. He would not call me because he is to independent and fifty five years old . . . but I knew something was wrong and went

**South Manitou Island Light Station used a bell fog signal until it received a steam fog signal in 1875. The fog signal was housed in the building near the shoreline. National Archives No. 26-LG-56-93.**

to Signal and blowed off some water and soon got it Started. When I asked him why he did not call me he said he knew all about it. The next night he let the light in tower go out, the charger run down.

"How long it was I do not know, but I got up just in time to see, and when I asked him he would not give me any definite answer.

". . . Sunday, he came here with such pitiful story. He had been sent to take full charge and had Telegraphed to his wife at Kansas to come at once. So I let him have two rooms to live in. The lady came but her mail came by the name of Carrie Spencer. . . . last evening they commenced to dance jigs and started the plaster and when ordered to Stop they said they would do just as they please, but I stoped them.

"This morning I asked him to explain there conduct & character and he said he would quite [quit] and I told him the quicker the better because I could not allow such doings. When he first came he wanted to gamble with cards but I would not have it done so long as I am Keeper."

In 1892 Keeper Thomas A. Kitchen at South Manitou Island Light Station in Michigan wrote to the inspector: "I have received your letter of June 9th stating that I have been Reported for not sounding signal on June 1st. I will state correctly to you how the weather was during the time you ask for, and who was on watch at the time. June 1st 7 p.m. Wind N.E. gale & Raining very heavy and dark no fog but Rain. On watch 4 till midnight, Benjamin E. Arnold, 2nd asst. June 2nd from midnight untill 8 a.m. Thomas A. Kitchen was on watch from midnight untill 9 a.m. It rained heavy wind N.E. gale but no fog could I see. I can swear to this. Sir, if I have to sound for heavy Rains, I would like to be informed of it, as I did not know as it was necessary to sound for rain."

## Conflicts Between Keepers

As the number of assistant keepers increased, inspectors had to make judgments when conflicts arose among several unrelated men/families living together in close quarters as they tended a light station. In 1874 "The Inspector of the 1st Light House District informed the Board that during a difficulty brought on by his own conduct, Mr. Nathaniel Bowden, 1st Assistant Keeper at Saddleback Ledge, Me., attacked the keeper of that station, Mr. J. H. Orcutt, and pointed a loaded revolver at his head.

"The Inspector did not regard Mr. Bowden as a person 'fitted for the position he holds, and considers it improper and dangerous for him to remain at this station. The Board has the honor to request the removal of Mr. Bowden.'"

The Naval Secretary wrote in 1887 that "Quarrels have been going on for some time past at Point Arena Light Station, Cal., between William Cassidy, 1st Assistant Keeper, and Julius Selbert, 2nd Assistant Keeper, to the detriment of efficiency and discipline at the station. Each accuses the other of gross neglect of duty, and destruction of government property. The Inspector of the District and the Keeper at Point Arena both consider these two assistants unfit for their positions and a reflection upon the good name of the service. The Board has the honor to ask their removal."

## Sickness, handicaps, accidents, old age, death

Although the Light-House Board preferred vigorous keepers, age restrictions were apparently not strictly observed. The 7th District Lighthouse Inspector wrote the Board in 1859: "The circumstances in which the light was out at Key West [Light Station in Florida] on the 22nd is as follows: 'Mrs. Mabrity, the Keeper, is too old to attend the light and she employs a person to act in her stead. This person had the watch in question, was asleep on his watch on the night of the 22nd September, when the Steamer *Mose Taylor* ran ashore. He was forthwith discharged.'"

Stephen Moore won the keeper appointment at Black Rock Harbor Light Station in Connecticut in 1817, but as his health began to fail, his 12-year-old daughter Kate took over his work and cared for him for 54 years. He died finally in 1871 and Kate received the keeper appointment. She was 83 years old when she retired in 1878. Julia Williams was 80 when she retired in 1905 as keeper of Santa Barbara Light Station in California.

Wives and children, who at family stations had always helped the keeper with his duties, sometimes continued looking after his light until a newly appointed keeper arrived. Some of them, with no other source of income, sought the keeper's position for themselves. Although the Light-House Board preferred not to appoint female keepers, many exceptions were made. Kate Walker at Robbins Reef Light Station in New York was one example. She left the light only long enough to attend her husband's funeral. When Kate, 44 years old and with two children to care for, applied for the keeper's appointment, objections were raised because she was only four feet ten inches tall and weighed barely 100 pounds. Several men were offered the post but turned it down because Robbins Reef was too lonely. Kate stayed on the job for three years, receiving only a laborer's wages, until the official appointment was finally given to her in 1883.

Cornelius Maher, keeper of the Oyster Beds Beacon on the north side of the Savannah River in Georgia, drowned in 1853 while attempting to tow a brig to the city. His wife Mary kept the beacon for the next three years. Charles Anderson, keeper of the Round Island Light Station in Pascagoula, Mississippi, drowned in 1872. His wife Margaret assumed his duties and continued as keeper until her death in 1881. Then her daughter Mary kept the lights burning for four months, until a new keeper was appointed.

No pensions were available for keeper's widows, nor was health insurance available for lighthouse employees. Thomas Murphey, Keeper of Throgg's Neck Light Station in New York wrote the District Inspector in July 1883 that "while adjusting the weight of the fog bell, the ladder slipped on the ice and I fell, fracturing my left forearm. Dr. Loring, Surgeon at Fort Schuyler, attended me, and now sends me the enclosed bill for $20. If it were a case of ordinary sickness, I would expect to have to pay myself, but I trust that the Light-House Board will allow the payment of a bill for setting a limb broken in the discharge of duty. . ." The Inspector supported his claim, writing that "he is about the most reliable and excellent Keeper in this district."

A more serious accident occurred in 1884. The 4th District Inspector wrote the Chairman of the Light-House Board that "Henry Stevens, a seaman on board Lightship No. 40 on Five-Fathom Bank, fell from aloft while in the performance of duty, and was very badly injured, and has been confined to his bed for several months. . . . The Doctor who attended him has presented a bill for $161.05 for professional services and medicine. Stevens received his injuries in the line of duty and I respectfully recommend, if it can be done, that the bill be paid by the Light-House Establishment."

Keepers often worked until they dropped. A. P. Sweetland took over as keeper at Eagle Island Point Light Station in Maine

in November 1871. On March 15, 1883, different handwriting appears in the logbook: "The keeper father is sick, had a Dr. here from Castine brought by the Revenue Cutter *Levi Woodbury*. The bay is full of floating ice. . . ."

March 28, 1883 Today father is better, had a Dr. from Deer Isle. Hope he "father" will be about in a few days. . . .

April 7, 1883 . . . The L.H. Tender *Iris* here today with Inspector and Lampist. Father not much, if any better

April 14, 1883 The Keeper still very ill. We procured another physician: Dr. Ross of Camden, Me.

April 18, 1883 The Keeper died today of heart disease. A beautiful warm day, but one of sadness

April 19, 1883 Cloudy and dreary. The light keeper's remains were taken to Camden for interment today

In June 1892 1st Assistant Keeper Wesley A. Smith at South Manitou Light Station in Michigan reported to the inspector that he was "sick as I strained myself when we repared the boillors though I have done my dooty so far but I must have Doctor's help whitch I cant get here. I think if I could get 15 days leaf I could get cured or helped. There is not enny doctor nearrer than 210 miles."

Family members died as well, causing keepers to request a time off for a funeral. Keeper T. F. Smith at Bodie Island Light Station in North Carolina made such a request in April 1906: "I have to leave the station today with my daughter (who died yesterday morning) for Washington for enternment. I have provided a competent man for substitute. My wife will remain at the station during my absence." Inspector McCrea granted a leave of absence.

Keeper A. Hagen at Grosse Point Light Station wrote to Inspector C.E. Clark on July 25, 1888: "I hereby inform you that Mr. F. R. Graham, 1st Asst. left the Light on his Watch at 12:25 a.m. without calling the Keeper to attend to his sick Infant Baby.

"At 12 a.m. the Keeper got up and looking up to the Light, seen it burning very low, went immediately up to the light, and to my astonishment found two strange Ladys tending to the light. I immediately dismissed the Ladys and stayed in the tower until relieved by Mr. B. Palmer, 2nd Asst. at 1:40 a.m.

"I also inform you that Mr. Graham this morning informed me that he would not do any work on account of his Baby being dead, and that he would write to the office in regard to it."

First Assistant Keeper Robert F. Graham wrote to Inspector C. E. Clark on July 25, 1888: "Our baby died this morn. At 2 a.m. and I asked the Keeper Mr. Hagan to be excused from duty for two days untill after the funeral, but he would not grant it. He said I must write to you and ask it."

In February 1892 John C. Williams, son of Keeper John Williams at Waukegan Light Station in Michigan, wrote the inspector that his father had died. "He appointed me 17 years of age to take care of the light. I will do so until further notice by you. I have tended to the whole business since he was taken sick, two weeks ago today."

**The third tower to mark Bodie Island was completed in 1870. Rather than letting the work out to contractors, the Light-House Board decided to undertake the actual construction. The Board put an emphasis on quality of materials and workmanship rather than on cost. This was quite a departure from the frugal approach of the earlier lighthouse administration. Ca. 1890s photo by Herbert Bamber, National Archives No. 26-LG-71-63.**

## Meager salaries

Keepers were provided with housing, and many offshore stations received some rations and use of a station boat for trips to the mainland to obtain supplies. When the Light-House Board took over in 1852, salaries were still very modest, although new lighthouses on the Pacific Coast after the beginning of the Gold Rush required higher salaries because supplies were so expensive.

Keeper John Scollan at Point Conception Light Station in California wrote in 1860 that he would "resign my position of 2nd Asst. at this Station from and after the 1st of January next . . .. My reason for so doing is the insufficiency of the present rate of salary to support the several charges of purchasing provisions at such an exorbitant price, having them conveyed (at a heavy charge) a long distance over bad roads, on horses and pack mules, brought and kept expressly for so necessary a purpose and the additional work which necessarily devolves in those remaining at the station, during the absence or one or more of the employees in procuring said supplies."

## Supplies

Only offshore or very isolated stations were provided with rations. Many keepers had to travel some distance to obtain needed supplies. Some stations were also provided with water but many had to make do with rainwater collected in cisterns or wells that were not always reliable. In 1882 James D. Armstrong, keeper at Point Peninsula Light Station in Michigan, wrote the inspector: ". . . the well has gone dry and the brick is all decayed and we have no water, only as we take it from the Bay and it is to fit to use. There should be something done to supply this station with water. And the water from the Bay

is so hard that it is impossible to wash either the paint or close [clothes]. The well will have to be blasted as it is solid rock."

A lighthouse tender would make regular deliveries any supplies needed for the care of the light and fog signal which included oil for fueling the light. Since the early days of the Lighthouse Establishment, detailed records were kept of the amounts of oil used at each station. The amount of oil needed to fuel a lamp was actually tested at the General Depot on Staten Island and instructions sent to keepers to that effect. The 3rd District Inspector wrote to the Light-House Board Chairman in 1883 concerning "the greatly increased consumption of lard oil" at the Fire Island Light Station in New York. " . . . the Keeper reported to me that, during the month of November, there had been consumed at his Station 126 gallons of oil. As the maximum quantity of lard oil which the improved first-order burner has consumed in the Lamp Shop [at Staten Island General Depot] and under the most favorable circumstances, is one quart per hour, that quantity was fixed upon as the allowance which shall not be exceeded at 1st order stations where the improved burner is in use. ' . . . the excess of consumption was 20' gallons, or more than 19 per cent over the allowance."

The Inspector "arranged that Mr. Joseph Finck should go to Fire Island and observe the working of the light. He spent the night of the 11th inst. there, and on his return, gave me . . . data which show that the Keeper was not in error, and that the circumstances connected with the increased consumption of oil are peculiar to Fire Island. . . .

"Further investigation shows that pipes for the purpose of increasing the draft of air in the lantern, have recently been put in at Fire Island, and that on November 1st a burner was put in which had been changed so as to increase the size of the tube supplying oil to the wicks. The increased consumption of oil can therefore be attributed to the improved draft . . .. Regarding the Fire Island light as the most important one in this district, if not on the whole Sea Coast, I have instructed the Keeper to maintain the highest flame he can, without regard to the quantity of oil consumed, until further instructions. . . .

"I would like to be instructed as to whether I shall direct the Keeper to lower the flame to the regulation height or allow him to continue to show the best possible light."

The opposite problem arose at Great West Bay Light Station in New York. The 3rd District Inspector wrote Keeper W. H. Squires in 1883 that "your quarterly report, last quarter, shows your consumption of oil to have been 58 gallons less than the allowance. This is an indication of neglect on the part of one or more of the Keepers, and must not be repeated. If you can determine as to which of the Keepers is in fault, I desire you to do so."

After an inspection by the lampist, the Inspector wrote the Chairman of the Light-House Board recommending that "George Skidmore, Second Assistant of Great West Bay light station, be dismissed. He is incompetent. . . . to Skidmore's carelessness and want of attention to his duty while on watch, can be attributed the small consumption of oil at that station and the consequent result a poor light.

"Aside from his inefficiency, he is a troublesome character, and he being on unfriendly terms with the first assistant, the two have not worked together. An investigation of their personal difficulties developed the fact that frequent quarrels took place, and that Skidmore was always the aggressor, and, on all occasions was obscene and vulgar in his language.

"Skidmore is a blacksmith by trade, and has, since his appointment in 1874, worked at his trade in a shop located on government grounds. . . . The dismissal of Skidmore and the removal of the blacksmith shop will increase the efficiency of the station."

At the Racine Light Station in Wisconsin failure to burn the proper amount of oil in August 1887 brought this response from Keeper L. A. Easson: "In regard to burning of oil at this Station have to say that the months of April, May, & June of this year were unusually calm & cloudless, making less draft and shorter nights, than if it were windy and cloudy. According to your instructions when here I have got the ventilators in good working order and have noticed that to make use of them on the calm nights the lights burn better. And trust in future the full allowance will be burned."

Also in August 1887 Keeper A. Hagen at Chicago Light Station in Illinois wrote to the inspector: "Your letter dated 18th inst., stating that in my Quarterly Report ending June 30, the consumption of oil is 4 galls. more than the allowance, has been received. In reply I would say that the difference is that the tubular lantern it has 1" in. wick, and consumes 0.45 p. hour when the Mississippi lantern has a 7/8 in. wick and consumes 0.30 per hour, a difference of 0.15 per hour that makes 4 galls. for the quarter ending June 30."

## Personal issues

In 1875 Elizabeth Williams, keeper of the Beaver Island Harbor Light Station in Michigan after the death of her first husband, wrote the superintendent as follows: "I expect to be married sometime in September, and will it make any difference about me keeping the Light? Those wise people here say of course I cannot have the light if I marry, but I really don't see why I can't keep as good a light then as now. I have kept it almost three years alone and I believe that I have a name among Mariners of keeping one of the best Lights on the Lakes."

Elizabeth continued her duties at Beaver Harbor after her marriage, and in 1884 transferred to Little Traverse Bay Light Station, where she remained as keeper for 29 more years.

In 1883 a letter to the superintendent stated that "Your letter of April 21st, stating that Mrs. Caroline Litigot, Keeper of Mamajuda Light Station [in Michigan], married Joseph Autaya in July last, but has continued since her marriage to sign her former name of Litigot to all vouchers and returns, has been received.

"The Department will be informed of the Litigot marriage, and her name changed upon the records here. No action is considered necessary relative to her having signed her old name to the vouchers and returns, but she should be instructed to sign hereafter as Caroline Autaya."

The matter did not end there, however. In July 1884 another letter "transmitted a petition, referred to this office by Senator Palmer of Michigan, in which it is stated that Mrs. Caroline Autaya, formerly Mrs. Caroline Litigot, keeper of Mamajuda Light Station, has married an alien, who resides with her at the station, and asking her removal.

"If Mrs. Autaya is married as stated in the petition, she should resign or be removed, and a report from you on the subject is requested." Autaya resigned from her position a year later after the inspector noted that health problems were interfering with her duties.

Keeper Joseph Fountain at South Fox Island Light Station in Michigan wrote the inspector: "Having been appointed Keeper in charge… going on three years & I am a man of family & I apply to you if I can get transfer to a shore light so I can get school for my children it is hard to stop here no school my boy is 13 years & my girl 11 years."

Keeper Hans L. Hansen at Grand Point au Sable Light Station in Michigan wrote

**The Mamajuda Light Station, kept by Caroline Litigot from 1874 to 1885, no longer exists. National Archives photo No. 26-LG-51-13.**

to Inspector C. E. Clark on September 19, 1887, with a similar problem: "Please Sir, I wish to apply to you in regards to a change in location . . . to be transferred to some small Light. . .. My children I should like very much to get them in school. Here is no school for miles. I prefer a small place where I can be alone with my family. I do not mind loosing Sixty dollars from my present salary."

In 1883 keepers were issued uniforms consisting of coat, vest, trousers, and cap in dark indigo blue color. Two keepers complained about their uniform caps. L. T. Diemar, keeper at Kenosha Light Station in Wisconsin, wrote the inspector, "Is there caps (uniform) for the warmth in the northern climates? I would freeze to death if I wore one of those cloth caps during cold winter weather, as low 33° to 39° below zero." John H. Roberts, keeper at Manistee Light Station in Michigan wrote, "In very cold weather I wear a warmer cap to protect my ears if there is anything out of order in that plese let me know."

In 1887 the Naval Secretary reported that "Mr. John D. Luding, the Assistant Keeper at Penfield Reef Light Station in Connecticut was arrested on the 7th June '87 for bigamy, and the states Attorney has informed the Inspector of the 3rd District that Mr. Luding has since pleaded guilty to the charge.

"The Board therefore has the honor to ask his removal, and as it is difficult to procure a laborer in the place of this absent Assistant, it is respectfully requested that the removal may be made as promptly as possible in order that a permanent man may be sent to the station."

A March 1888 letter from Georgia Stebbins, keeper of North Point Light Station in Wisconsin, to Inspector C. E. Clark, states that "As the spring advances I am expecting workmen to arrive to tear down the old Light Station. Am I obliged to board them while here? If not, I should consider it a great favor. There are places within a short distance where I am sure they could obtain board and lodging." Obviously a lone woman keeper would be uncomfortable with male strangers living in her house.

Keeper William A. Sanderson at Cana Island Light Station in Wisconsin, wrote the inspector on November 17, 1889, about problems hiring a laborer. . . . "owing to the terrible epidemic that prevails here in Bailey's Harbor and in this vicinity, Diphtheria of the most malignant type, the average death rate in the Village alone being ten (10) per week. And as the Village and Town is under strict quarantine regulations, and no persons being allowed to leave their own dwellings, etc. therefore I have found it quite a difficult matter to induce any person to come here. And my son had to have his clothing, etc. thoroughly fumigated, etc. before he could leave.

"Therefore I sent for a man that I have been personally acquainted with for many years. . .. His father and family kept the Point Detour Light for a number of years . . . this man was brought up in a light house. . . . I hope you will be so kind as to obtain for him the appointment as assistant. . . . His name is Patrick M. Chambers, age 33 years. He commenced his duties here at the station at midnight Saturday Morning the 16th inst."

One wonders if Keeper Stanley at Kewaunee Light Station in Wisconsin was aware of the letter his wife wrote to the inspector on September 7, 1892: "I take the Liberty to write a few lines to you, to see if you would be so kind and see if I could get little for my work here. I have been helping watch this light ever since this Station was build. We have to keep watch every night, as it will stop sometimes. It has never run right. We have to attend the fog Bell also. Please see if I could get a little money for my work. I have tryed to do my best since Mr. Stanley has been light keeper, and working for the good of the Government property in our charge. Please excuse me for taking this Liberty to write to you."

In 1896 lighthouse service employees were classified within the federal civil service system, which eliminated politics in appointments and established age limits and standardized qualifications for service.

*For a detailed history of the lighthouse service during the 19th century, see Clifford, J. Candace and Mary Louise, Nineteenth Century Lights: Historic Images of American Lighthouses (Alexandria, VA: Cypress Communications, 2000). Mary Louise and Candace Clifford have written five books on lighthouses. For more information visit <www.lighthousehistory.info>.*