

Marine History Lines

Journal of the Western Lake Erie Historical Society

Fall - Issue 2021

Lighthouse Ladies of Western Lake Erie

by Joyce A. Lane and Martha Boden Young

(adapted from a previously-published version for "Marine History Lines" by Martha B. Young)

The Great Lakes were a liquid highway that became the easiest and fastest mode of transportation during the early settlement of the United States. Lake Erie was the last to be discovered and explored by Europeans. Until 1669 it was the turf of hostile Iroquois tribes and settlers avoided crossing that border. Shipping was generally lucrative, but efforts to maximize profits led to many collisions, fires, groundings, and drownings. Lighthouses were built only after a great deal of pressure by interested parties was put upon the federal government.

The Lighthouse Service was created in 1789 under the ninth piece of legislation enacted by the first Congress. In 1852, the Lighthouse Board was born and became a part of the Coast Guard in 1939. Improvements in technology automated and thus "unmanned" many lighthouses. The National Lighthouse Historic Preservation Act of 2000 has a goal to transfer all lighthouses to private hands, but currently only about fifteen per year are transferred.

The American Lighthouse Board looked for literate and hard-working men between eighteen and fifty years of age. A family man was preferred because his family provided free labor. Keepers were, of course, federal employees. In 1884 the Board created uniforms for men—not women—for the 24-hour per day on-call jobs. Low wages forced many keepers to obtain extra jobs. Government supply vessels came twice per year to the lighthouses and inspectors toured the light stations for efficiency and cleanliness.

Harlen Hatcher wrote that "the storms on Lake Erie were (and are) sudden and fierce and there is little room to run from them. In the early days, without a safe harbor from the storms, the ships usually faced disaster." Lake Erie hasn't changed in that respect.

Marblehead Lighthouse (called Sandusky Bay Light until 1870), located two or three miles north of the entrance to Sandusky Bay, is the oldest active lighthouse on the Great Lakes. It became operational in 1822. The Battle of Lake Erie was fought a few miles north of Marblehead in 1813 (War of 1812). During the Civil War, 10,000 Confederate soldiers were imprisoned on Johnson Island within sight of Marblehead, and these prisoners could see its beacon. Rachel Wolcott was the first female lighthouse keeper on the Great Lakes and appointed on October 25, 1832 as Marblehead's second keeper. Her first husband, Benajah Wolcott was appointed on June 24, 1822. Benajah was a widower whose wife, Elizabeth, died in 1809 of "miasma." The couple had three children: William, Phoebe, and Selina. After the War of 1812, with a Revolutionary War pension, he married Rachel Miller on March 10, 1822.

In 1822, Benajah built a limestone house for his bride three miles from the lighthouse. This home has an Ohio Historical Marker and is also known as the Old Stone Fort. It is now on the National Historic Register (1991) and is one of the oldest buildings in northwest Ohio, showcasing early domestic architecture in the

Firelands. The house had a kitchen, glazed windows, well water, and an outhouse.

Rachel and Benajah had two children, Henry and Elizabeth, who were about five and six years old at the time of their father's death on August 11, 1832 of cholera. Benajah contracted it from burying bodies that were thrown overboard and washed up on the lighthouse's shore. He is buried in the family cemetery located on "God's Acre" of the Wolcott Estate, which can be accessed off the Huron Trail.

Like Rachel Wolcott, Johanna McGee became keeper of the Marblehead Lighthouse upon the death of her husband. George H. McGee was keeper from 1873 and died at age 45 on June 17, 1896. Appointed keeper on July 8, 1896, Johanna retired on March 16, 1903, making her one of the longest serving Lighthouse Service employees with over thirty years of service, including a number of years preceding the Marblehead years. It was common practice for the Lighthouse Service to appoint the widow as keeper in that there were no provisions for pensions or death compensation.

During her tenure Johanna saw many changes: a new barn in 1896, fifteen feet added to the lighthouse in 1897 with a watch room, and a new clock-like mechanism installed to make a ten-second flashing signal. The lights were changed to replace the whale oil lamp.

Turtle Island, located in Maumee Bay, is named after the Miami chief Little Turtle, active during the Indian Wars of the 1790's. In the late 1700's, the British seized the island and built a fort there to cut off supplies to the American forces. When defeated by General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, the English realized they had to defend the Great Lakes and the Battle of 1794 was held there.

After previously selling Turtle Island in an auction, the U.S. Government repurchased the property for a much-needed

lighthouse in 1831. Its light guided vessels into the ports of Toledo and Manhattan (Point Place). In 1867, the lighthouse was rebuilt due to erosion and its dilapidated condition.

The waters around Turtle Island were not deep enough for turn-of-the-century deep water freighter traffic, so the Army Corps of Engineers dredged a channel to Lake Erie from the Maumee River which improved the Toledo port. To mark this new channel, the new Toledo Harbor Light became operational in 1904, so the Turtle Island Light was "darkened" on May 15, 1904.

Mary V. Drake was First Assistant from March 7, 1865 until September 1, 1871 when she and her husband, Colonel Charles F. Drake (Keeper), were removed from Green Island, located just west of South Bass Island. The Drakes are famous for the Green Island Lighthouse fire, one of the Great dramas in the history of Lake Erie.

December 31, 1862 (or 1863, both dates are given) began as a mild benign day. Pitt Drake, their son, joined others for a New Year's Eve party on Put-In-Bay, some two miles away. Soon after and without warning the temperature dropped from 60 degrees above zero to 25 degrees below zero in a single hour. A winter gale of terrible proportions had moved down the lake surrounding Green Island and its inhabitants with freezing conditions, howling winds, and a frenzied lake lashing against the shore.

Almost simultaneously the family and the party-goers on Put-In-Bay saw flames shooting up from the lighthouse. The fire, fanned by the winds, soon engulfed the adjoining keeper's house. Attempts to save the building were futile. Colonel Drake, fearing his family would freeze to death or perish in the fire, moved them to an outhouse and covered them with a feather bed and mattress.

Pitt and other horrified onlookers watching from Put-In-Bay could only wait and hope.; any would-be rescuer would have drowned. By morning the weather had abated only slightly, and somehow some people made their way across the ice-shifting waters of Lake Erie. The rescuers, fearing that the family had perished, found them in need of food,

shelter, and medical attention, so that the family was taken back to Put-In-Bay for the refuge and care they sorely needed.

Arthur G. Bauman was the third and last light keeper in the history of the Maumee Bay Range Lights (Crib Light). His mother, Wanda Bauman, served with him as an unpaid housekeeper and substitute light keeper when he was away from the range.

The shipping season was over and the Coast Guard, as in previous years, removed the Baumans from the Crib Light. The date, December 15, 1956, was also Mrs. Bauman's 86th birthday, but there was no time to celebrate in that they had to pack all of their belongings for this, their annual trip. For the first time since 1941 the light keeper and his mother, after fifteen years of service, would not be returning to the range lights.

The range lights, 1300 feet apart and located in the center of the shipping channel, were in the early 1900's important aids to navigation. In 1907, a concrete causeway was built connecting the two lights; between them stood the keeper's dwelling, the boat house and the buoy house. During 1925, three ships collided at the Crib; and, there were others. On October 14, 1953 the Alpena was the last vessel to hit the Crib.

To the lake carriers, now larger, faster, and with better navigational equipment, the Crib was an ever-greater navigational hazard. To boaters, the Crib was a beacon and a sturdy refuge where small boats found shelter during storms. The lake carriers prevailed, and the federal government finally decided to remove the Crib and did so in 1957.

The Baumans said the Light had been good to them, and Mrs. Bauman felt it kept her son healthy. The duties of the light keeper were her duties as well, so that in addition to her housekeeping Mrs. Bauman maintained the lights, kept watch on the ever-changing winds and weather, and the passing ships. It was a busy life, often difficult and at times dangerous.

She had no regrets leaving the house on the range as it was old, drafty, needed repairs, and even five miles out in Lake Erie was difficult to keep clean. She did, however, have a refrigerator, a gas stove, and a television set the last two years and both she and her son felt that the TV was "the best thing that ever happened." All in all, it had been a good life on the range.

In July of 1944, 86-year-old Mrs. Frances Elizabeth "Lizzie" Gampher, mother of eleven, died at Locust Point Beach near Oak Harbor, Ohio. Officially, she had been housekeeper and assistant to her son George, who had been lighthouse keeper for twelve years from 1924-1936 on West Sister Island, located about eighteen miles east of the mouth of the Maumee River. To mariners and fishermen, she was "mother" Gampher; to her all men were alike once they were dunked in the cold waters of Lake Erie. Whether the victim pulled ashore was a yachtsman whose boat had sunk, a fisherman, or a rum runner whose boat had been shot out from under him, she provided warm clothing, wrapped him in warm blankets, and fed him hot soup and coffee.

Life on West Sister Island found the Gamphers cut off from the outside world from November to March. One year they ran out of supplies and had no bread for twenty days. For most of their years on the Island, they were without even a radio until a rum runner gave them a battery set. The solitude and isolation they experienced would have been unbearable to many, yet Mrs. Gampher said she was never lonely, always had plenty to do, and found it exciting.

The Gamphers were instructed to hang a red flare from the lighthouse if serious injury or other emergency arose. The flare was used several times but not for personal illness. One time in December 1927 (or 1932, both dates are given), George Gampher discovered two fishermen offshore and brought them ashore. The men, half dead, had been adrift twelve hours in a small open boat in an ice choked Lake Erie, temperature near zero. "Mother" Gampher

nursed and fed them and five days later rescue planes became marooned on ice-locked West Sister Island. Eventually rescued, the fishermen survived. Another time, a plane carrying two Toledo aviators was forced down on the Island; "Mother" was their nurse until help arrived.



MARINE HISTORY LINES

is the The Publication of
Western Lake Erie Historical Society,
4 Times a Year. We Welcome
Articles by Members

Selected Sources Consulted:

Monographs

Charles E. Frolunan, *Put-In-Bay, Its History* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1971). Harlan Hatcher, *Lake Erie* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), 148-160. Lydia J. Ryall, *Sketches and Stories of the Lake Erie Islands*, 1813-1913 (Norwalk, Ohio: American Publishing, 1913), 410-420.

Western Lake Erie Historical Society Archives

"'Mother' Gampier, Who Aided Shipwrecked on Isle Dies, Exciting 12 Years Spent by Parent of Lighthouse Keeper on West Sister," May, 1945. Bill Glass, "History of Maumee Bay Range Lights" in Steve Cook, Historian file.

Newspapers

"84 Year-Old Locust Point Woman Would Like to Return to Lighthouse," *Ottawa County News*, December 4, 1942.
"Former West Sister Keeper of Light Claimed by Death," *Ottawa County News*, July 21, 1944. "Woman on 86th Birthday Takes Leave of Crib Light," *Toledo Blade*, December 16, 1956. "Boaters to Bid Range Lights Farewell," *Toledo Blade*, June 26, 1957.

MARINE HISTORY LINES

Official Publication of WLEHS

5848 Lakeside Ave. Toledo, Ohio 43611