Lighthouses and Their Keepers, Part Two (1900-Present)

By Linda Huber

As we celebrate the Marblehead Lighthouse 200th anniversary in 2022, it is important to remember those individuals who helped tend the lighthouse. With Benajah Wolcott as its first Keeper and Edward Herman as its last, the second part of this two-part article continues the story of lighthouse management and what it was like in the day of the life of a lighthouse keeper.

Lighthouse Management (1900-present)

The Lighthouse Board was established in 1852 and by the time it was abolished in 1910, the Board had accomplished all it set out to do, i.e., create a first-rate agency in terms of personnel and aids to navigation. The successor organization established in 1910 was the Bureau of Lighthouses under the Department of Commerce. Referred to as the Lighthouse Service, Congress wanted to have more civilian administration and thereby hired experienced civilians to replace military personnel. Responsibility for river aids now fell under the Lighthouse Service with local citizens known as lamp lighters or lamp attendants tending the river aids.

The first Lighthouse Service Commissioner of Lighthouses was George Putnam who served 25 years and was appointed by President William Howard Taft. Putnam increased navigational aids and incorporated new technology whenever possible, particularly in the area of electronics. Two of his most significant achievements were the passage of the Retirement Act for lighthouse personnel in 1918 and the introduction of the radio beacon as an aid to navigation in 1921. The radio beacon permitted a reduction of over 800 employees.

The most significant impact of technological advances during and following World War I was the automation of lighthouses thereby making human management unnecessary. Several of these technological advances included a device for automatically replacing burned-out electric lamps, a bell alarm warning keepers of fluctuations in the burning efficiency of oil-vapor lamps, the first experimental radio beacon, an automatic time clock for operating electric range lights, a photo electric-controlled alarm device to check the operation of the unwatched electric light, a lightship staffed by remote control, and battery-powered buoys gradually replacing the older acetylene buoys. Electric line service to remote sections in the country by the 1920s-30s provided most light stations with electric service thereby again reducing staff.

By 1939 the Bureau of Lighthouses was abolished and effective July 1 of that year all functions were transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard. Bureau civilian employees were given a choice of a military position with the Guard or remain in the civilian position. About 50% joined the military.

Eventually by the 1960s all these various changes led to automation throughout the entire system and thus resulted in demolishing outdated, though historic, buildings.

Day in the Life of a Lighthouse Keeper (Edward Herman)

Although we have no known records for the early keepers of the Light, Keeper's George McGee (1873-1896) and his wife, Johanna, (1896-1903) provided a good picture of the Keeper's tasks and weather conditions for their time. When the U.S. Coast Guard took over management of the Marblehead Lighthouse in 1943, the last Keeper was Edward Herman. Thanks to his great-niece, Rebecca Lawrence-Weden we have quite a bit of historical record providing a full, rich picture of a day in the life of a lighthouse keeper.

Born in 1878 in Tonawanda, NY, Edward died in 1964 at Lakeside, OH. As a Captain he served in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service on the USS Lot M. Morrill and then was appointed to the U.S. Lighthouse Service serving at the Buffalo, NY Horseshoe Reef Lighthouse. He was the last USLHS Keeper at Marblehead before it was taken over by the U.S. Coast Guard. At Marblehead he was the fourth assistant keeper from 1913 to 1933 and then keeper from 1933 to 1943 when he retired.

His first year at Marblehead must have made him wonder whether it was the place for him. The diphtheria that had plagued the community lasted through the early part of 1914. It was immediately followed by a winter storm that lasted well into March. Records reflect, "The lake is covered in ice. The ice in the lake is two feet thick and is as far as one can see."

Like ships, lighthouses need to be painted, cleaned and maintained on a regular basis. These duties need to be completed during ongoing weather conditions and are in addition to maintaining the light, keeping records and reports as well as performing rescues. Occasional visitors and lighthouse tenders rounded out a day in the life of the lighthouse keeper.

Visitors to the lighthouse may have come via the water but they also came by land traversing the long winding lane to the lighthouse and the keepers were responsible for not only the lane's construction but for its maintenance. The log book records "in five days we did 50 wagon loads of stone and dirt."

Rebecca Lawrence-Weden's website has an extensive, detailed record of the daily and monthly activities of her great-uncle Edward Herman. The website is dedicated to the men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard, to all Lighthouse Keepers and their spouses, and to the U.S. Life-Saving service. It can be accessed at www.lighthousediscovery.com. In addition, Rebecca wrote a wonderful article on Edward for the OCHS oral histories Volume VIII, "*The People of Ottawa County, Milestones and Memories".*

Conclusion

As we enjoy today's well-kept and beautifully maintained grounds of the Marblehead Lighthouse, it is difficult to imagine the challenging circumstances the early keepers faced when performing their duties. A simple 'thank you' doesn't seem quite enough.

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