

Introduction

Lighthouse keeping in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a rugged life filled with long hours and hard work punctuated by periods of real peril. Not a profession for the fainthearted, it was thought by many to be unsuitable employment for the “fairer sex.”

But more than fifty women in Michigan proved the naysayers wrong.

Acting as both assistants and full-fledged keepers, these women served the sailing community with distinction for more than a hundred years—often juggling their official duties with the demands of raising their families. Several of these women even died while in the service.

But where are their stories told? In history books, in the classroom, on TV, or in the movies? The sad truth is that—with the exception of a book chapter here and there—the contributions of Michigan’s “Ladies of the Lights” have almost been lost to time.

The inspiration for this book was Kathy Mason’s cover story for the September/October 2003 issue of *Michigan History* magazine. Entitled “Mystery at Sand Point Lighthouse,” it attempted to answer questions surrounding the death of keeper Mary Terry, whose body was consumed by a terrible fire that struck her Escanaba lighthouse in 1886. More intriguing than the mystery of “whodunnit,” though, was the inclusion in the article of a table of names of forty-nine other women who had served their country (as lighthouse keeping was a federal job) and their state in this unique profession.

Besides names, the table also listed the lights these women



Historians believe this may be the only known photograph of Sand Point (Escanaba) keeper Mary Terry, who died in a suspicious fire at the lighthouse in 1886. *Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library, Robert N. Dennis Collection of Stereoscopic Views*

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kept—all over lakes Huron, Michigan, and Superior as well as on the Detroit River—and the years during which they served. Some stayed for only a year or less; were they just placeholders until a permanent keeper could be found? And several women were employed between the years 1861 and 1865, begging the question: Were they filling in for a husband called away to war?

And what about the woman who was posted at two lights on Lake Michigan—Beaver Island Harbor and Little Traverse—for a combined total of forty-one years? What was her story? Can we assume that she loved her work, or she never would have stayed so long?

If last names are any indication, it also appeared that some of the women in the keepers' list might have been related and, if so, in what way?

In short, more questions were raised than answered by the *Michigan History* article. But they were good questions meriting more research.

The opportunity to engage in that research came in 2007, when this book's author was hired as the assistant director/curator for the Michigan Women's Historical Center and Hall of Fame in Lansing. The Historical Center houses the only museum in the state dedicated to women's history. And one of the first responsibilities of the new curator was to develop an exhibit to place in the museum's changing gallery.

It didn't take long to zero in on a subject: Michigan's female lighthouse keepers. The topic of lighthouses has universal appeal in Michigan, home of the greatest concentration of lights in the United States. And lighthouse *keepers*—illustrated in our imaginations by a solitary figure surveying the seas from a lofty tower—are viewed as equally romantic. Layer on top of that the prospect of a female face and you have the foundation of an intriguing educational display.

The exhibit was quite popular—more so than any other previously launched by the institution. And it continues to be enjoyed by new audiences each year as it circulates among cultural institutions—museums, libraries, and schools—in the state.

This book was intended to present the themes of the original exhibit—e.g., how did female keepers get appointed to these jobs? how did they tend a light and a family at the same time? were they treated

differently from men?—and to expand on the discussion of its themes. Those who have seen the exhibit will enjoy reading more about the trials and triumphs of these amazing Michigan women. Those who haven't seen the exhibit will be able to pick up the story of Michigan's Ladies of the Lights from the very beginning, when a widow stranded in the Michigan wilderness of the 1840s with eight children to feed decides she can, indeed she must, take up where her late keeper husband left off: serving the sailors of the state until the sun rises again.

✱ A Note about the Lighthouse Service ✱

The history of lighthouse administration in the United States began in colonial times, when England's indifference forced colonial governments to shoulder the responsibility of making coastal waters safe to sail. In 1789, eight years after the Revolutionary War ended, the Congress of the United States created the Lighthouse Establishment to administer the growing inventory of aids to navigation.

Over a period of 150 years, the Lighthouse Establishment was variously known as the Lighthouse Board, the Bureau of Lighthouses, and the Lighthouse Service. (To prevent confusion, the phrase "Lighthouse Service" is used throughout this book.)

In 1939, the Lighthouse Service was transferred to and assimilated into the U.S. Coast Guard.

✱ CHAPTER ONE ✱

Female Lighthouse Keepers: A Brief History

Mary Louise and J. Candace Clifford have written the foremost reference work about female lighthouse keepers in the United States. But a condensed version of that history may be useful to readers embarking on this book.

America's First Female Keeper

The story begins in the early eighteenth century, with the illumination of the inaugural “aid to navigation” in U.S. waters: Little Brewster Island lighthouse in Boston Harbor. First lit in 1716, it was manned—literally—by a fellow known as George Worthyake.¹ Ten more lights were constructed up and down the East Coast, and nearly sixty years would pass before the first *female* keeper in the United States would be appointed. Her name was Hannah Thomas.

Initially serving as assistant, Hannah took full responsibility for the Gurnet Point lights at the entrance to Plymouth Bay (Massachusetts) when her keeper husband John left to fight in the colonial army in 1775. He never returned to his home, having died of smallpox in Canada. In his stead, Hannah assumed the difficult task of maintaining not one but two lanterns on the site, even surviving a skirmish between a British ship and a local militia that was guarding the lights. Her son succeeded her as keeper in 1790.²

✱ The World's First Female Keepers Were Irish Nuns ✱

Lighthouse expert Francis Ross Holland believed that the world's first female keeper likely served in Ireland.³ And the website of the Commissioners of Irish Lights confirms that "Youghal lighthouse [on the southern coast of Ireland] was built in 1190 and was placed under the care of the nuns of [nearby] St. Anne's convent."⁴ The women there were said to have used torches to guide vessels into the harbor, continuing as keepers until the convent was dissolved in 1542.

The Great Lakes' First

According to lighthouse historian Francis Ross Holland, the earliest lighthouses on the Great Lakes were lit at Presque Isle, Pennsylvania, and Buffalo, New York, in 1819.⁵ Two years later, the first tower in Ohio was erected on the tip of Marblehead Peninsula at the narrow entrance to Sandusky Bay. Benajah Wolcott was appointed keeper there and served admirably until a cholera epidemic took his life in 1832. His widow, Rachel Wolcott, became the first Lady of the Light in the region when she was named by the federal government as his replacement.

For two years, Rachel lit the wicks of thirteen whale-oil lamps each night as a signal to passing ships. She then stepped down so that her second husband might take the top job; he kept the light for an additional ten years. All in all, Rachel Wolcott van Benschoten devoted twenty-two years of her life to Marblehead.⁶

Michigan's First

In Michigan, the earliest lighthouse was established at Fort Gratiot (Port Huron) in 1825.⁷ But the state's first female keeper—Catherine Shook of Pointe aux Barques—didn't assume her position until



Michigan's last Lady of the Light, Frances Wuori Johnson, was also the only one to serve during the Coast Guard era.

Photo courtesy of Frances Marshall

twenty-four years later.⁸ Poor health and the demands of tending a light *and* a family of eight prompted her to resign her post in 1851. (More detail on Catherine Shook's life may be found in chapter 11.)

Three years passed before a second Michigan woman appeared in the records of the U.S. Lighthouse Service: Mrs. Charles O'Malley at Bois Blanc Island.⁹ And just ten more of the state's women were on the books up until 1869 despite efforts by federal administrators to compensate keepers' widows with gainful employment.¹⁰

The 1870s were the high-water mark for women in the service, both in the nation and in Michigan.¹¹ During that decade, twenty-two were employed at important lights on lakes Huron, Michigan, and Superior and on the Detroit River. By the 1880s, however, the national population of women keepers began to drop. In Michigan, that number dipped to sixteen and, in the 1890s, to ten.

LADIES OF THE LIGHTS

After 1920, only three women still maintained lights in Michigan; changing technology and the assumption of the Lighthouse Service into the all-male U.S. Coast Guard in 1939 are generally regarded as the reasons. When Frances Wuori Johnson of the White River light resigned her post in 1954, her action marked the official end of the 105-year history of female lighthouse keepers in the state.