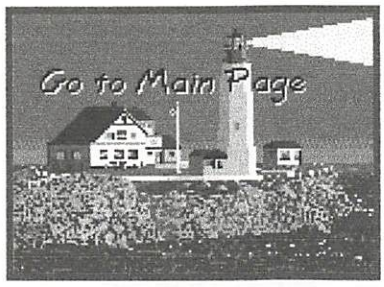
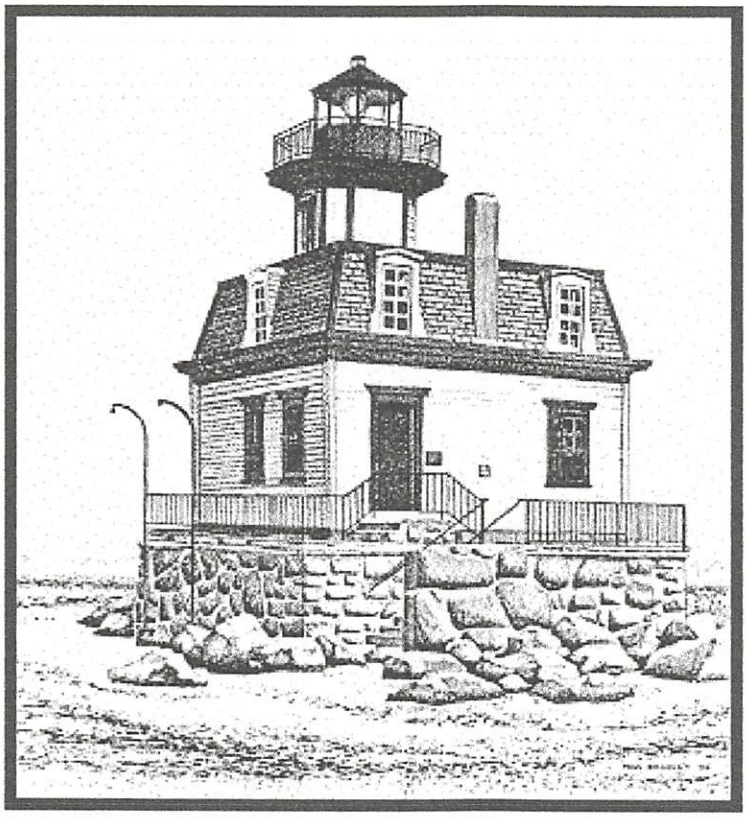
ELINOR DEWIRE
MARINER'S WEATHER LOG
WINTER 1994



Colchester Reef Light

Little Sentinel on Lake Champlain



Sketch by Paul Bradley

At the turn of the century, Electra Havemeyer Webb inherited a fortune from the sugar cane industry and began collecting assorted antiques, beginning with a cigar store Indian in 1906. As her passion for Americana swelled, so did her collection. By World War II she had decided to put it on display and chose Shelburne, Vermont as the site for her museum.

The collection soon outgrew its single-building, eight-acre home, because Mrs. Webb became enamored of American architecture and began collecting historic buildings and structures. One of the earliest of her large-scale collectibles was the Colchester Reef Lighthouse, retired to the Shelburne Museum in 1952 after a long and eventful career as a navigational aid on Lake Champlain.

Colchester Reef Light was one of about ten sentinels to serve the steamers of the lake, many of them

hauling lumber down from Canada to Burlington and Albany. It sat on a stone foundation surrounded by water and warned of a group of dangerous reefs off the tip of Grand Isle, which jutted southward into the middle of Lake Champlain.

According to author Gorden P. Manning, the design for the Colchester Reef Lighthouse was obtained through a contest held by the Lighthouse Service in 1869, meant to interest notable architects and engineers in the business of lighthouse building. The present exhibits in the Colchester Reef Lighthouse include the presumed winning entry, a handsome design by Burlington engineer Albert R. Dow that looks remarkably like the actual lighthouse. However, no mention is made of such a competition in the reports of the Lighthouse Board during those years, nor was the parsimonious and business-like government organization apt to have conducted such an activity. It's likely the "contest" was more fable than fact, and Dow probably negotiated a contract for the design.

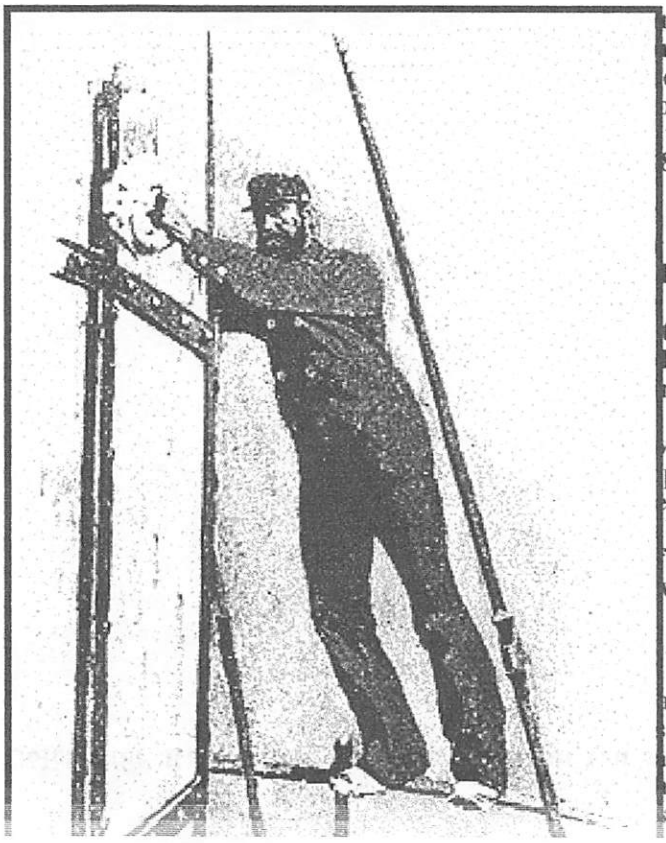
The annual report for 1871 does detail the placement and blueprints for the lighthouse at Colchester Reef, as well as its cost:

"After a careful examination and survey of the locality, it was found that the rock called 'Middle Bunch' was the proper place for the new Light-house. This rock is in the middle of the channel, with seven feet of water over it at low water, and deep water on either side. With a Light thereon a vessel can pass on either side close to the rock...."

The crib for the light's foundation was made in Burlington, towed to the site, sunk, and filled with concrete and stones. Two courses of the foundation stonework were laid before the work season ended in 1870, just high enough to bring the structure above water. The following spring's ice jams tore away some of the stonework, as if to give a hint of the challenges that lay ahead.

The lighthouse was completed and lit in December 1871, exhibiting a fixed white beacon visible for 11 miles. Kerosene oil lamps were used with a Fresnel lens, probably fourth order. There was also a fogbell, operated by an automatic bell striker, that sounded once every 20 seconds in periods of poor visibility. The crank for winding up the striker's weights was conveniently located inside the house.

Herman Malaney was the first keeper, with Walter M. Button as his assistant. When Malaney retired in 1882, Button became the head keeper, and the government decided that an assistant was no longer needed, especially since Button had a wife to live on the light with him and to help with the work. Harriet Button turned out to be a steadfast assistant, but she soon realized that the lake ruled her life.



me miserably apparent in 1888 when the couple's fifth
. They had arranged to signal a friend ashore when the
ded. It was hoped the lake would be clear enough of ice to
r to ferry across to the lighthouse, or frozen enough for
walk the mile from shore to the sentinel on the reef.
88 turned out to be neither.

ice covered the lake that evening when the Buttons' friend
reached shore opposite the light. But knowing Harriet
help they risked a crossing on foot. When they were about
lighthouse, a wind came up and the ice began to crack.
two watched as a fissure opened between them and the
the floe they were occupying began to move northward,
destination.

indow in the lighthouse, Walter Button watched in horror
pped from one cake to another then disappeared in the
north. A short time later he welcomed his new daughter,
le and hearty and screeching a typical newborn's protest.
riend and the doctor drifted in the darkness for several
were able to wade ashore and hail a ride home.

n children found ways to entertain themselves on the
The lighthouse had a four foot wide walkway around it,
s above water on two sides of the stonework foundation.
ters did have a small playground of sorts. They were
ke the boat to a nearby island where the family kept a
ere was always an assortment of pets at the lighthouse,
squirrels that mysteriously appeared one winter day, were

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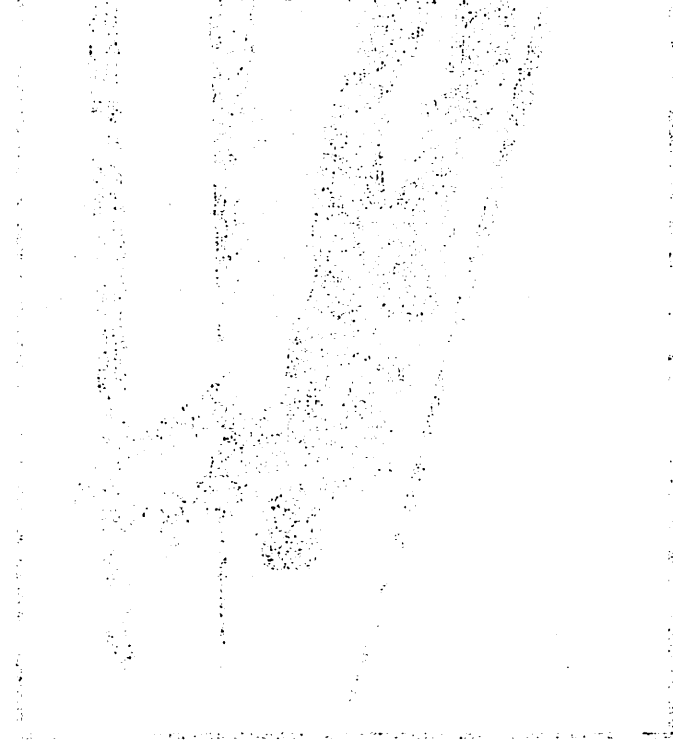
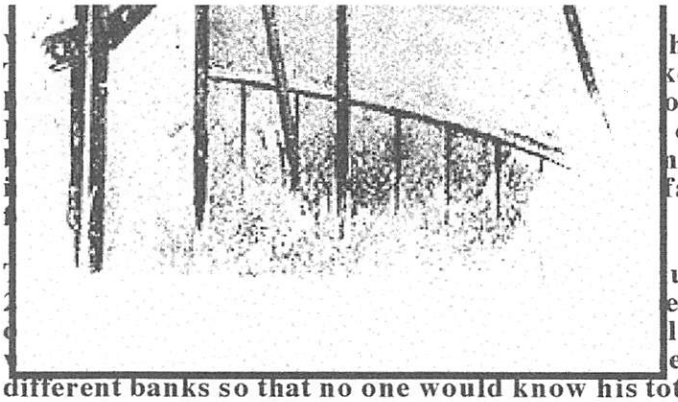




hthouse keys to his son, Chester, who served eight years.
ke Champlain, one is recorded in the younger Button's
on steamer *Mariquita* was returning to Burlington from
of the fact that the night was clear and the lighthouse was
n underway on board the steamer, since its passenger list
fans. Perhaps the skipper was caught up in the revelry and

ulking German immigrant named August Lorenz. He spent
enurious as the service that employed him. Lorenz' guests
l while serving them beans and bread. Lighthouse keepers
e $28,000 during his career, cleverly deposited in three
different banks so that no one would know his total worth.

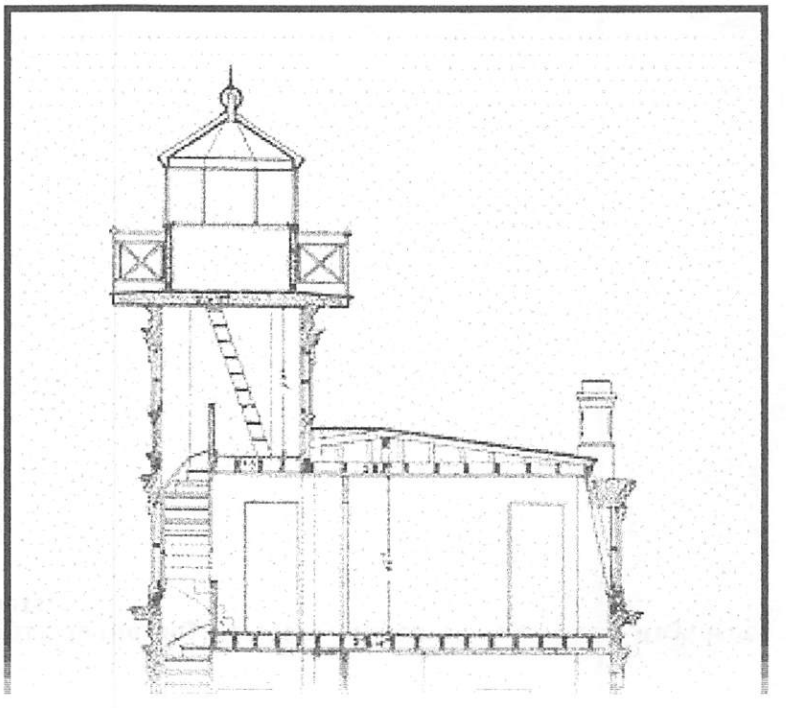
Many of Colchester Reef's lightkeepers went ashore in the winter when navigation shut down on the frozen lake, but not Lorenz. The lighthouse was the center of his life, and he refused to leave it even when chunks of ice ground against it and Old Boreas came howling down the lake. Most winters the lake froze over entirely so that ice fishermen could set up camp near the lighthouse and adventurous shore residents could visit the keeper in horse-drawn sleighs.

Having watched many unfortunate souls fall through the ice, and pulled them out both alive and drowned, Lorenz determined that such a fate would never befall him. Whenever he ventured out on the frozen lake he carried a long, spiked pole that he could use to snag the ice and pull himself out in the event he crashed through the lake. Fortunately, he never needed it for this purpose, but it did come in handy on another occasion –

It was spring, and the lake had begun to break up and clog in places with huge cakes of ice. On this particular day a brisk southwest wind pushed the floe around the lighthouse. During the day Lorenz kept watch over the ice floe to see that it moved along without too much interference, but throughout the dark evening hours he could only listen to the grinding and rending of ice along the sides of the lighthouse's stone base. He was worried that the ice would pile up against the stones on a windy night and push the lighthouse off its foundation.

That evening, it almost happened. Lorenz was in the lantern working when a terrible crash and screech of wood splintering sent him rushing down the stairs. As he entered the lighthouse kitchen, oil lamp in hand, the southwest corner of the room split open, and huge pieces of ice pushed through. Lorenz danced about the kitchen in fright, avoiding the small frozen chunks that scuttered across the floor. After a minute or two the wind reversed, and the monstrous intrusion of ice slid back out, leaving a gaping hole in the kitchen wall.

Residents ashore grew uneasy at the sounds coming from the lake that night -- the ice gnawing at the lighthouse foundation; they worried for August Lorenz's safety. Imagine their relief the next morning when the familiar profile of the keeper was seen at the railing of the lighthouse deck.



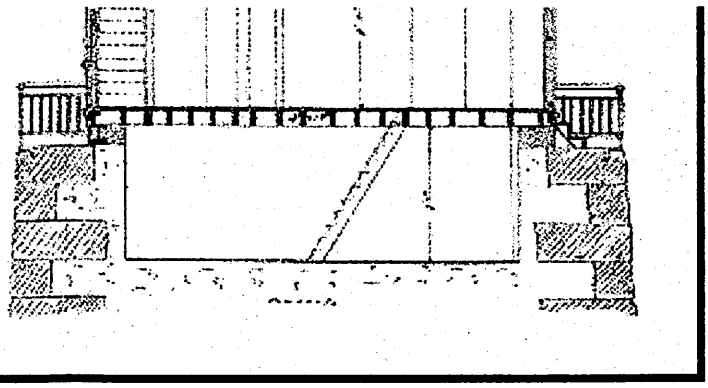
Later in the day he was seen gingerly leaping about on the ice surrounding the lighthouse. His dory, ripped from its davits and carried away during the night, was sitting up-side-down on a floating ice cake not far from the lighthouse. He was determined to rescue it, since he had saved his own money to buy the dory, and he wasn't about to let the lake have it. The wind was slowly moving the little ice cake toward him, and at the right moment he reached out with the long pole -- the one he always carried while on the ice -- and snagged the vagabond vessel.

Lorenz retired in 1931, not by choice but because the Lighthouse Service decided he was too old to remain on duty. The lighthouse was briefly



squirrels that mysteriously appeared one winter day, were pets.

remain on duty. The lighthouse was briefly tended by Joseph Aubin, then decommissioned in



1933 after an automatic flashing beacon replaced it. Shuttered and locked, it sat dark for twenty years before the Coast Guard put itup for sale. The buyer was Electra Havemeyer Webb, who thought a lighthouse would be the perfect companion for the sidewheeler *Ticonderoga,* which she had just purchased and given a new home in the grass at Shelburne Museum.

Colchester Reef Lighthouse was carefully dismantled and removed from its stone foundation, then transported to the museum piece by piece. There it was lovingly reassembled on a replica of the stone base. Huge rocks were piled around it, as if it were still vulnerable to those punishing chunks of ice. The interior was refurbished and opened as a gallery of marine art. Later, some lighthouse artifacts were acquired and put on display, among them a melodious old fogbell like the one that long ago bonged across Lake Champlain when the air was thick.

Visit the Colchester Reef Lighthouse at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont. From its landlocked perch on the grassy grounds of the museum, it's now a sentinel shedding light on history.

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Author's Note from *Sentries Along the Shore*

Below is a list of the lightkeepers who served the Colchester Reef Lighthouse during its 62-year career. The names and dates provide interesting grist for thought. Walter M. Button had three stints as keeper and handed the lighthouse keys to his son, Chester, upon retirement. The Buttons and August Lorenz aside, most Colchester keepers served short terms. Perhaps they were not so well suited to "water, water everywhere." Oddly, James Wakefield, Jr. served before James Wakefield, Sr., and the elder Wakefield served a mere 23 days. The folks at Shelburne Museum could shed no light on that situation. My guess? Could James, Jr. have died while in service at the light, and his father kept the beacon going until Walter Button arrived?

Colchester Reef Lighthouse Keepers

Herman Malaney, 1871-1882

Walter M. Button, 1882-1888

August Pare, 1888-1889

James Wakefield, Jr., 1889-1890

Walter M. Button, 1890-1892

James Wakefield, Oct.- Nov. 1892

Walter M. Button, 1892-1901

Chester F. Button, 1901-1908

William H. Howard, 1908-1909

August Lorenz, 1909-1931

Joseph Aubin, 1931-1933