Life at Squirrel Point Lighthouse

By Timothy Harrison

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Squirrel Point Lighthouse in Maine shortly after ...

Now that the Citizens for Squirrel Point have an official lease from the United States Coast Guard for Maine's Squirrel Point Lighthouse, which gives new hope for the future of the lighthouse, we thought it would be appropriate to share with you some of the history of this quaint light station that is the favorite of so many people.



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George Parker Matthews, the first lighthouse ...

Located on the Kennebec River about seven miles from Bath, Maine, the Squirrel Point Lighthouse was established in 1898, the same year that the USS Maine was sunk in Havana Harbor, which led to the Spanish-American War. The lighthouse is of similar design to the other nearby Kennebec River lighthouses at Doubling Point and Perkins Island.



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Marion Austin is shown here on his 90th birthday ...

While the Squirrel Point Lighthouse may look idyllic to most, even today the area is rugged and is not the easiest station to get to, as Charles L. Knight found out in 1916 when, during the height of World War I, he arrived at Squirrel Point Lighthouse to take over a the keeper of the light. Knight had previously held a job as a clerk for 14 years in the office of the Lighthouse Inspector for the U.S. Lighthouse Service when he decided he wanted to be a lighthouse keeper. In Robert Thayer Sterling's 1935 book, Lighthouses of the Maine Coast and the Men Who Kept Them, Charles Knight recalled, "My first station was on the Kennebec River and, as it was spring and the warm summer days had begun, I thought everything was rosy for me. But I had no idea what an isolated section I was going into or the hardships I would have to put up with."



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A winter scene at Squirrel Point Lighthouse with ...

However, life at the lighthouse must have been much harder in 1898 for the station's first keeper, George Matthews, who had to start from scratch at a new lighthouse. Fortunately, unlike keeper Knight, Matthews came to Squirrel Point Lighthouse with lightkeeping experience; he had been stationed as an assistant keeper at Maine's Whitehead Lighthouse from 1892 to 1898.

When George Matthews' wife, Hattie, died at the lighthouse on July 8, 1910, he was left alone to keep the station;



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Close-up early view of Squirrel Point Light ...
Photo by: Charles L. Knight

however, his daughter often came to visit him at the lighthouse. During one of those visits, on April 12, 1911, she gave birth at the lighthouse to a son, Marion. In 1912, at the age of 66, Matthews left Squirrel Point Lighthouse, probably due to retirement. He died in October of 1920 at the age of 74.



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Charles L. Knight proudly takes a moment to pose ...

Every lighthouse family had similar life experiences at lighthouses, but some handled it differently than others. Lighthouse keeper Charles L. Knight, who became the keeper at Squirrel Point Lighthouse in 1916, wrote, “The first year on the light station seemed to be a continued vacation. But it was not so with Mrs. Knight, for believe me it isn’t that so much men as their wives who suffer from isolation on the bleak places. When a man goes ashore for mail and supplies, he meets people and converses with them. It’s a change and brings him in contact with other people once more. As the rules require that no keeper may leave his station without leaving somebody in charge during his absence it is in many cases up to the wife to supply the vacancy.”



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Charles L. Knight and his family at Squirrel ...

A different view was taken by Annette B. Skolfield, wife of veteran keeper Clarence Skolfield, the last civilian lighthouse keeper of Squirrel Point Lighthouse, who served at the lighthouse from 1955 to 1968, when wrote at the time of their retirement the following letter to the National Fisherman newspaper:



>> Click to enlarge <<
Lighthouse keeper Eugene Coleman (l) and Charles ...

It is with mixed emotions that I write this letter and very difficult for me to put all



>> Click to enlarge <<
The 1844 Steam Tug Seguin as it steamed by ...

I want to say on paper – as words don’t come easily.

Clarence is now retired and we are going home to North Harpswell to live on the old home place where he was born and which has been in the family for generations.

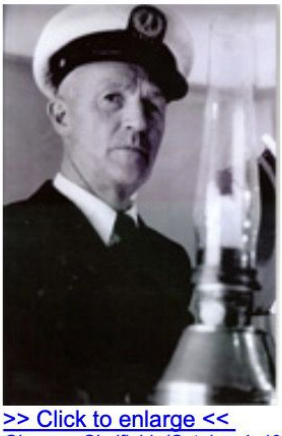


>> Click to enlarge <<
This nice image of Squirrel Point Lighthouse was ...



>> Click to enlarge <<
Harold E. Seavey, shown here with Addie Norton ...

I realize our tour of duty is over and had to end sometime.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Clarence Skolfield, (October 4, 1901 – June 13, ...

Change is inevitable but it takes so many work associations away. Then, too, our best working years are behind us.



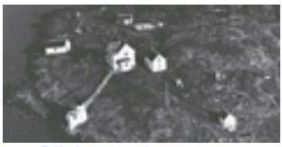
>> Click to enlarge <<
Lighthouse keeper Charles L. Knight with his wife ...

I shall miss life here, being close to the water, the quietness, and privacy which one acquires in places like this.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Squirrel Point Lighthouse keeper Charles L. ...

I shall miss the sunrises, the sunsets, watching the fog rolling in from the ocean, the snowflakes softly falling to the rays of the lighthouse beams, then the arrival of the first geese heading north in the spring, some stopping over on the marshes to rest – the walks in the woods and my winter birds who come to the feeders.



>> Click to enlarge <<
This vintage aerial photo shows the entire ...

We have made many friends over the years which we will always treasure, and I will have fond memories of the stations we were on – Seguin, Perkins Island and here.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Clarence Skolfield built this skiff for his use ...

We wish the best of everything to the family who comes here to replace us and hope they will be as happy as we have been.



>> Click to enlarge <<
It was a crisp cold winter morning after a fresh ...

One must have self-discipline, be self-sufficient, take disappointment in their stride, learn patience, and above all work together to be happy.



>> Click to enlarge <<
On Christmas Day 1980, Squirrel Point Lighthouse ...

I don't know where the years have gone to, it has been a good living and if I had my life to live over, I wouldn't have it any other way.



>> Click to enlarge <<
This vintage post card of Squirrel Point ...

We have moved our personal things and as we pushed off the boat from the boat slip for the last time, I couldn't help but feel sad.



>> Click to enlarge <<
On Christmas Day 1980, Squirrel Point Lighthouse ...

The lighthouse keepers who served at Squirrel Point often faced danger crossing the river and were witnesses to tragedy or near tragedies. In recalling one such day to Robert T. Sterling, lighthouse keeper Charles L. Knight said he never would have left the lighthouse if he had known. "About a quarter of a mile over I encountered a twenty mile gale. As I had the wind on my after quarter I went along very nicely and without trouble. But the test came on my way back, for then I had head wind and a choppy sea.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Coast Guard light keeper Ken Rouleau is shown ...

"My sister was on a visit to the light at this particular time and she and my wife were anxiously watching for me to make the trip back. Fortunately the tide had slackened so that I had no strong eddies to encounter, but even if all this was in my favor, with such a strong breeze going I was at the mercy of the great waves that at times swept by me like an avalanche.

"If I ever had to do in at the ores while I was in the service I had to do it now, and I pulled for two solid hours and at times it seemed I was going back instead of forward. But after a while, with much perseverance, I managed to reach my station without an accident."



>> Click to enlarge <<
This vintage view of the interior stairway in the ...



>> Click to enlarge <<
The lighthouse looks miniscule compared to the ...

But that was not the only time keeper Knight encountered danger on the water; in fact, he remembered and often recounted a number of them. But some stood out more than others.



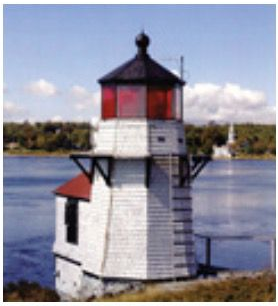
>> Click to enlarge <<
The cement foundation behind the oil house is ...

“I remember an incident that occurred when I was about to take a furlough. I had engaged my father to fill in as a substitute in my place. It was a January morning and the glass outside the station registered 15 below zero. But even with it that cold, it was in my opinion, a good morning to cross the river.



>> Click to enlarge <<
The memorial marker of lighthouse keeper Clarence ...

“The weather was a bit snappy but with plenty of hot bricks and the heaviest clothing we could wear comfortably I and my family pushed out into the stream. As quick as one could wink the river became flooded with ice. Where it came from I could hardly tell. A low vapor set in like a fog. Mighty ice cakes large enough to have embraced a quarter of a mile race track showed up. One big ice cake struck us and nearly set us halfway across the river and I was racing to for my life to get on the other side when another caught under the boat and fairly lifted us out of the water. I caught the glimpse of a clear spot and did I row for my life! I saw another coming, and had it got between us and the shore I would have given up all hope. If we had been caught in the ice floe, before help could arrive, we would all have been frozen to death. As we struck the Phippsburg shore we were unable to catch hold of the wharf, and the ice cake in striking the boat hurled us away up on the bank of the river. On that trip one member of our party froze both ears and another froze the sides of his face; but we had won a race with death by a fraction of a second.”



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The church steeple from the Phippsburg ...

Along with his family, veteran lighthouse keeper Harold E. Seavey arrived as the head keeper at Squirrel Point Lighthouse in May of 1937. He had previously been stationed as an assistant keeper at Great Duck Island Lighthouse from 1929 to 1933 and at Cuckolds Lighthouse from 1933 to 1937. While in high school, Seavey’s daughter, Myrtle, wrote a book titled Strumming Along Life’s Highway where she wrote, in referring to the family’s arrival at Squirrel Point Lighthouse, “It is quite a change than it was on the Cuckold Lighthouse because we now have a cow, hens, and four dogs. We have a chance for a garden and it is more like a home.”

Another of Seavey’s daughters, Patricia, who arrived at Squirrel Point Lighthouse when she was four years old recently wrote about life at Squirrel



>> Click to enlarge <<
Patricia, James, and Pauline Seavey enjoy lunch ...

Point Lighthouse where she recalled that her parents grew a variety of vegetables – potatoes, carrots, peas, cucumbers, lettuce and tomatoes. “A lot of vegetables were canned each year and would last through the winter. Some of our meat was from a pig, which we raised and then slaughtered. We had chickens that we got eggs from and a cow for our milk and homemade butter. Fish were caught form the Kennebec River. A lot of baking was done for our biscuits and desserts. Ice cream was homemade and in the spring the maple trees were tapped for maple syrup.”



>> Click to enlarge <<
When Navy ships would pass Squirrel Point ...

When school was in session the Seavey children lived with their maternal grandparents on the mainland and only went to the lighthouse on weekends when the weather permitted. Their mother, Addie Norton Seavey, always stayed at the lighthouse with their father, until later years when she got a job on the mainland and she would then also return to the lighthouse on the weekends. While at the lighthouse the children entertained themselves with board games, toys and playing outdoor games. Patricia recalled that they used to dress the kittens up and push them around in the doll carriage.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Patricia Seavey is turning the grinding stone for ...

Unlike Charles Knight, who came to Squirrel Point as a keeper who had previously held a desk job, Clarence Skolfield arrived at the lighthouse with a lifetime of maritime and lighthouse keeping experience. At the young age of 16, Skolfield had shipped out as a quartermaster on the Arizonian, a freighter with World War I cargo for Italy and France. He then worked on a number of other vessels until he decided to stay closer to home to take care of his mother, who had been widowed when he was 15 years old.



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Squirrel Point Lighthouse keeper Harold Seavey ...

After a year of full time lobstering, he took a summer job as a pleasure boat captain for a wealthy family, a job that lasted 10 years. During that time, he continued to fish in his 28-foot boat Nannette, which was the affectionate name he called his wife Annette. In the winter months he worked at a saw mill with his cousin George Skolfield and the two of them also operated an ice business. During this time Skolfield also built a number of boats that he successfully sold. This wide array of job experiences landed him a job with the U.S. Lighthouse Service and in 1936 he reported to Seguin Island Lighthouse as an assistant keeper, a position he held until 1944 when he became the head civilian Coast Guard light keeper.

In 1946 Clarence Skolfield obtained the transfer that he had requested to become the keeper of Perkins Island Lighthouse on the Kennebec River, where he served until 1955 when he was transferred to the nearby Squirrel Point Lighthouse, which was a more desirable light station, because unlike Perkins Island, Squirrel Point Lighthouse had electricity.

Unfortunately, like most lighthouses, Squirrel Point Lighthouse also has tragedy associated with it. Sklofield was keenly aware that he came to Squirrel Point Lighthouse to replace a keeper who left the station because of a tragic family tragedy when three-year-old Scotty Reynolds, son of Coast Guard lighthouse keeper Stanley Reynolds, fell into the Kennebec River and drowned.

During his time at Squirrel Point Lighthouse, Skolfield continued to build small crafts to sell to supplement his income. Any other spare time was spent hunting with his faithful hunting dog Lady. Skolfield said that being stationed at Squirrel Point Lighthouse was a “hunters haven with ducks and geese ever present and deer abound on the islands that dot the river and can be found everywhere.”

When Nicholas G. Pitarys, a reporter for the Portland Maine Sunday Telegram, asked Skolfield in 1963 about retiring, he said, “Retire? Well I’ll be eligible next

year, but I hadn't thought too much about it. I suppose I'll stay just as long as this station is kept open." When Skolfield finally retired in1967, it was widely believed that he was the last civilian lighthouse keeper in the United States from the days of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, who had actually started his career as a lighthouse keeper.

Coast Guardsman Joseph Robicheau was the last official keeper of Squirrel Point Lighthouse. He lived at the lighthouse from May of 1980 to November of 1981with his wife Leanne and children. The winter of Christmastime in 1980 at Squirrel Point Lighthouse was especially brutal for Robicheau and his wife, their two small children; Jennifer, age 4, and 2½ year old Michelle. The wind-chill was literally 50 degrees below zero and the miniature septic treatment plant underneath the large deck of the keeper's house had frozen solid. So the family bundled themselves up in layers and rode a mile through the woods on a sled pulled by a snowmobile to get to where their car was parked on the Arrowsic side so they could go out for a Christmas get-together and holiday dinner.

For a while after the Robicheau's left, the light at Squirrel Point was monitored by the keeper of the nearby Kennebec River (Doubling Point) Range Lights. Eventually, the Squirrel Point Lighthouse was abandoned and left to the elements, and eventually fell into a chain of legal events with strange twists and turns that has now ended with the Citizens of Squirrel Point, who hope to restore the lighthouse to its glory days.