# The Distinguished Career of John W. Cameron

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*Lighthouse keeper John W. Cameron. (Lighthouse ...*

In 1929 after having completed 30 years of faithful duty in the United States Lighthouse Service and arriving at the age of 70, John W. Cameron, the head keeper at Maine's Portland Head Lighthouse, was forced to retire from active duty.



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*Portland Head Light Station where John W. Cameron ...*

Primarily because of his being stationed at the world famous Portland Head Lighthouse, noted author and fellow lighthouse keeper Robert T. Sterling wrote at the time, "It is very safe in saying, that without a doubt, no man has been more popular as a lighthouse keeper than John W. Cameron. His genial disposition, always the same with all, made him well liked by the thousands who have shaken his hand."

John W. Cameron was born in Southport, Maine in 1859 where he lived until he was 12 years old when his mother died. He was then sent to live with relatives in Charlestown, Massachusetts. After high school he entered the shoe industry and was soon offered a job at the James-Cartland factory in Portland, Maine where he worked for three and a half years. However, his spare time was spent watching the busy harbor and its various vessels, and he was soon lured to the sea.

He applied for a job with the U.S. Lighthouse Service and was hired as a crewman onboard the Lighthouse Tender Lilac under Captain Johnson. During the next three years as a crewman on board the Lilac he had the opportunity to meet a number of lighthouse keepers, and he soon decided that he'd much rather be a lighthouse keeper and stationed on land. He asked for and received an appointment as a 3rd assistant keeper at the Cape Elizabeth Light Station, known as Two Lights because of its twin lighthouses. In 1902 he got a promotion and was transferred to Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse in South Portland. However, in 1904 when there was an opening for an assistant keeper at the prestigious Portland Head Lighthouse in nearby Cape Elizabeth, he immediately requested the job and was accepted.

For the next 23 years John Cameron served under head keeper Joseph W. Strout, whose family had a combined total of over 100 of years of service at Portland Head Light. He and Strout obviously got along and worked well together at the lighthouse, otherwise Strout would have requested a new assistant. When Joseph W. Strout retired in 1928, John W. Cameron was promoted to head keeper. But in 1929 when he turned 70-years old, government regulations required that he retire, and he was replaced as head keeper by veteran keeper Frank O. Hilt.

By the time John W. Cameron's lighthouse career had come to an end, he had witnessed many changes at Portland Head Light in the 25 years that he had been stationed there. He witnessed the change from the kerosene light to electricity and the increase of the intensity of the beam to 32,000 candlepower with a beam that could be seen 30 miles out to sea.

During his stint at the Portland Head Light, a number of movies were filmed there. John Cameron's son, Arthur, recalled that when actress Florence Turner (1885-1946), "The Vitagraph Girl" was making the movie The Spirit of the Light at Portland Head Light, his father was hired for a bit part as the assistant lighthouse keeper, which he truly was in real life. Arthur said, "Pa needed no makeup, as he had a healthy tan, but the director insisted in dressing him up to look like an old sea dog."

During his 25 years at Portland Head Light, John Cameron said he often felt more like a tour guide or historian, answering the same basic questions over and over and giving the same basic answers over and over. Sometimes the throngs of tourists visiting the picturesque lighthouse often interfered with his duties, but he never minded.

Robert T. Sterling who later became a keeper at Portland Head Light, wrote that, for some reason, an often asked question of John Cameron by tourists from afar was how he wintered. "Did the terrible storms disturb him and did he make himself comfortable during the severe winter months? Mr. Cameron's answer was brief and to the point, that 'nobody living in New England during severe winters could brag about being warm'."

When John Cameron retired from lighthouse to civilian life, Robert Sterling recalled that John Cameron and his wife Harriet "Hattie" received frequent visitors to their home from many people whom they had met while living so many years at the world famous lighthouse.

John W. Cameron died on October 31, 1949 and his obituary notice said that he would be buried in the Forest City Cemetery. However, we found his tombstone at the Evergreen Cemetery in Portland, Maine.