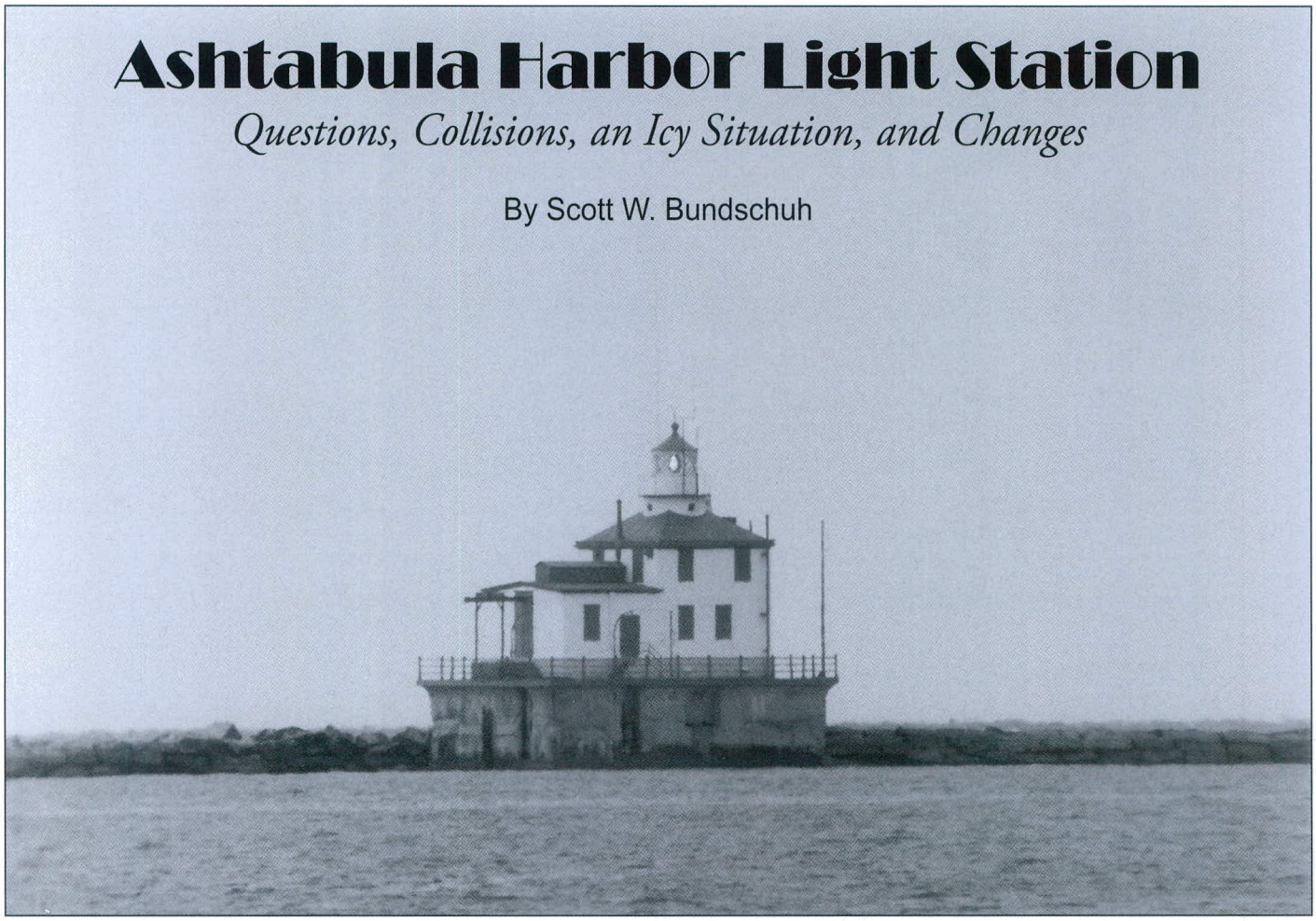
Ashtabula Harbor Light Station

Questions, Collisions, an Icy Situation, and Changes

By Scott W. Bundschuh



The Ashtabula Harbor Light Station in 1993. Photo from author's collection.

Over the years, two dates have been mentioned regarding the establishment of the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station, originally known as the Ashtabula Beacon Light Station. One document states the light station was constructed prior to 1821, while other documents say it was constructed in 1836.

The author believes the correct date is 1836, when the light station was built on a wooden crib approximately 40 feet square and just off Ashtabula's eastern pier at the entrance to the Ashtabula River. The hexagon-shaped tower was short in stature for its time. The tower was painted white and the interior was fitted with a wooden staircase that ran from the main floor to the conical tower room. The flooring in the conical tower at that time was also constructed of wood. In order to reach the light station, the Lighthouse Board had a long wooden ramp constructed that connected the wooden crib to the east pier of the Ashtabula River.

Who was the first keeper assigned to Ashtabula Beacon Light Station? One document states it was a Captain Bigelow, and another document states it was Samuel Minger. Another record shows Minger started as the keeper at Ashtabula in 1837 and left sometime in 1838. So who manned the light station from 1836 to 1837? The author believes it was Captain Bigelow.

Bigelow was responsible for keeping the two-fountain lamp on a catadioptric lens burning day and night. He used sperm whale oil fuel to keep the 600-candlepower light burning. This combustible fuel was stored in a store room in two air tight oil butts. The white light, which flashed every 2.5 seconds, was activated by a weighted centrifugal governor. Focal plane of the light was 42 feet above Lake Erie. The 51-foot height of the tower made it easy to see the beacon from the fifth-order Fresnel lens. On a clear night, the beacon from the light could be seen by vessels some 19 miles from shore.

In 1871 two lots of land totaling .74 acres were deeded to the United States Lighthouse Board for building a house for the keeper (dwelling site was 98 feet x 300 feet).

In 1876 a new Beacon Light Station was built on the west pier head. The tower stood about 40 feet tall. This new light station was erected because the Army Corps of Engineers was constructing a number of new dock facilities within the Ashtabula Harbor. A new single mantle, 35 mm diameter oil vapor, type "A" lamp, along with a new fourth-order Fresnel red lens was installed in the new conical tower. The new installation was operated by a 1,000-pound mercury float with a centrifugal governor that had to be wound every six hours. The 1/8-inch clock cord used in the winding mechanism was 240 feet long and had a two-part lead. The physical clock drum was 6-7/8 inches in diameter and 7-7/8 inches in length.

A new first-class siren fog signal was also installed at Ashtabula Beacon Light Station. The fog signal was powered by a "Spiro" Air Motor that was manufactured by Buffalo Forge Company located in Buffalo, New York. The pneumatics for the type "F" diaphone fog

The original Ashtabula Light Station. National Archives photo.

Ashtabula Light Station circa mid-20th century. Note the fog signal horns projecting from the dormer below the lantern. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

signal were manufactured by Chicago Pneumatic Tool Company, located in Chicago, Illinois. The fog signal was positioned due north, and the sound sequence was a 2-second blast every 18 seconds. The operating pressure was locked in at 35 pounds. The fog signal was 40 feet above the water and housed in a rectangular steel building. The trumpet signal was a resonator that was 4 feet, 6.5 inches in length and 17 inches in diameter and made of cast iron.

During 1878 the light was increased to 14,000 candlepower and remained unchanged until 1995.

According to a note the author found, the light station was moved 471 feet in 1882 and in 1893 there were two range lights installed outside the entrance to Ashtabula Harbor.

Fayette E. Walworth was appointed keeper on February 6, 1894. He resigned on November 1, 1905, due to physical problems.

According to 1896 documentation, George V. Codding started his lighthouse career at Ashtabula as first assistant keeper. He held that position until March 1901 when he became the keeper at the Vermillion Lighthouse in Vermilion, Ohio.

Frederick J. Hartley served as first assistant keeper from January 1904 to March 1907. Hartley served under Keeper Joseph F. Crawford. It is not clear when Crawford was assigned to the light station.

Ashtabula's four-sided Beacon Light Station with wooden clapboard siding was constructed in a pyramid shape and served the harbor until the present light station was built in 1905. That same year a new pierhead light was also built. The reason for this construction was that the Army Corps of Engineers was in the process of widening the Ashtabula River and the construction of a new dock area was just about complete.

The new 1905 light station, now called the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station, was built approximately 2,500 feet north of the Ashtabula River entrance. It was located on the pierhead at the north end of the breakwater and on the west side of the entrance to Ashtabula Harbor. Before completing the new light station and the completion of the river-widening project, the old Beacon Light Station of 1876 was about 60 feet from shore. This gave the appearance that the old Beacon Light Station was floating on the water.

In 1916 the Harbor Light Station was moved approximately 1,750 feet NNE of its previous location. The original 1905 foundation was not removed and still stands today. The new structure was doubled in size and stood on a new 50-foot concrete crib that was constructed to support its new structure. The new two-story building was constructed of steel with thick iron plates. The increased structure size also made it possible for keepers to live at the Harbor Light Station.

Before keepers started living in the light station, they stayed at the Walnut Boulevard House on the light station property obtained in 1871. The house, upgraded from its original size, had approximately 2,000 square feet of usable space. It was constructed of wood and was located about a mile on shore and was able to house two keepers. It also had two storage sheds just behind the house that overlooked Lake Erie. The Walnut Boulevard House is now the home of the Ashtabula Marine Museum.

The newly installed light had a focal plane of 51 feet above the lake. The Lighthouse Board ordered the distinguishing characteristic changed to a flashing white signal of 0.6 seconds on and 4.4 seconds off.

A new radio beacon tower was also constructed next to the building.

On December 19, 1918, Inspector G. R. Kitchens from the 10th Lighthouse District conducted an inspection of the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station. Once Inspector Kitchens made it to town, he had to walk two blocks to the harbor and then take a 1.25-mile boat ride to reach the Harbor Light Station. There were two boats available to Inspector Kitchens. The first was a 16-foot flat-bottom row boat. His second choice was a 23-foot motor boat. In his report Inspector Kitchens stated the flat-bottom boat was not suited for work, so he probably was brought to the Harbor Light Station on the motor boat. In his report, Inspector Kitchens deemed the health of the station as "good" and "disease free." The water supplied to Ashtabula was pumped from Lake Erie to an 868-gallon iron cistern. In his inspection of that water system, Inspector Kitchens stated the water quality was "dirty," quantity "ample," and injury to other "no."

In 1927 the steamer *Gleneagles*, owned and operated by the Canadian Steamship Lines, rammed the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station and drove it back six inches off its foundation. According to all the on-site reports, the *Gleneagles* was heavily damaged, but there were no injuries to anyone at the light station or aboard the steamer. The *Gleneagles* left the Welland Canadian Ship Canal carrying approximately 380,000 bushels of wheat from Fort Williams to the Kingston Elevator. She unloaded her cargo of wheat and proceeded to Ashtabula Harbor to pick up 18 tons of coal for the Steel Company of Canada at Hamilton.

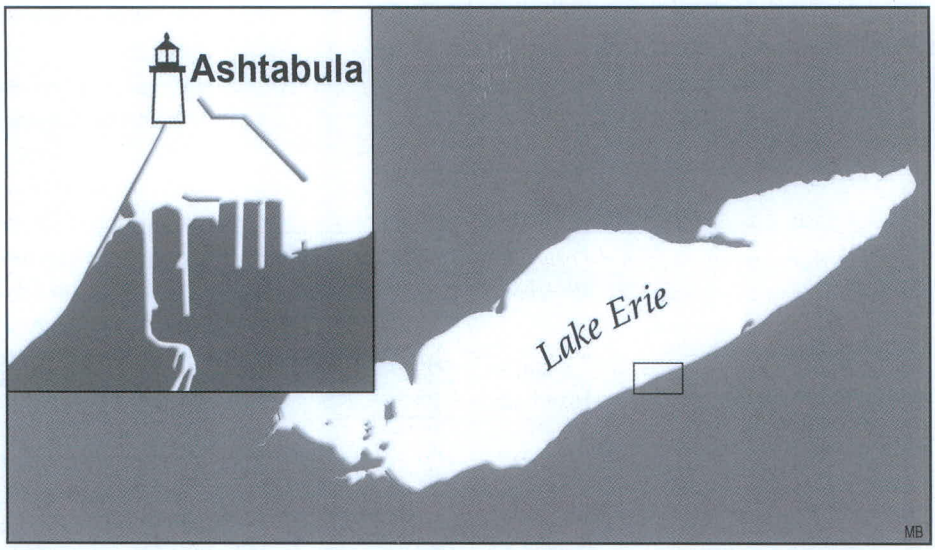
(This would be the second time the light station has been damaged or lost, if we believe that the original Beacon Light Station was

The remains of the original lighthouse foundation. Photo from author's collection.

constructed prior to 1821. Allegedly during 1836 a schooner ran off course and ripped the wooded Beacon Light Station from its cribbing and sent it plunging into the deep dark waters of Lake Erie.)

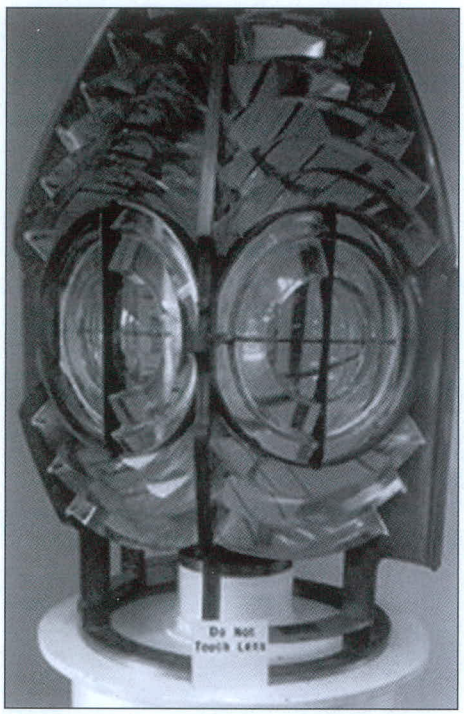
In 1928 a serious ice storm struck the light station. The two keepers inside the light station were trapped in more than five feet of ice. Over the next two days, they managed to thaw enough of the icy layers from the door that they were able to open it. Once the door was open, they chopped and dug their way through the ice to safety.

Sometime during the late 1950s a young man only 19 years old took over the keeper's duties at Ashtabula Harbor Light Station. His name was Noel "Buck" Price. He had many tasks to perform each and every day, but the one people counted on the most was reporting weather conditions to the Cleveland Weather Bureau. Price maintained six hours at his post and six hours off.



The Ashtabula Light Station sits on the southern shore of Lake Erie. Map by Mary Borkowski.

Every day keepers had to carry fresh drinking water and food from the mainland to the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station. When Lake Erie was angry and the waves came crashing across the break wall, keepers were forced to extend their stays. If Lake Erie was really angry, getting food, water, and other supplies to the light station was a real challenge. There were times when keepers went without food or water and were forced to remain at the light station. If the waters of Lake Erie cooperated, keepers would use one of their two boats to commute between the mainland and the light station. Anyone who served at Ashtabula Harbor Light Station stated the accommodations in the kitchen were pretty sparse. Inside the kitchen, keepers had a refrigerator, table with four chairs, small stove, and a small cabinet that housed the kitchen sink.



The original fourth-order Fresnel lens on display at the Ashtabula Marine Museum. Photo from author's collection.

In 1959 the U. S. Coast Guard, which took over operation of the nation's lighthouses in 1939, installed a new fourth-order Fresnel lens. The lens was built in France in 1896 and remained in service until 1995 when it was removed by the Coast Guard. The new lens rotated as per design and emitted a white flash every three seconds.

A new foghorn was also installed and had a sound sequence of two blasts every minute. Although the light station was electrified, the operation of the foghorn required constant tending by Coast Guard personnel.

The Ashtabula Harbor Light Station remained manned by Coast Guard personnel until 1973 when the light and fog signal were automated. During that same year, the flashing sequence was changed back to a flashing white signal of 0.6 seconds on and 4.4 seconds off. According to records, Ashtabula Harbor Light Station was the last remaining light along Lake Erie that was manned by Coast Guard personnel.

In 1994 the National Park Service described the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station fog signal "as an original siren-diaphone."

In addition, a new automatic radio was installed and transmitted a dash-dash-dot type signal (similar to Morse code). The Coast Guard dictated the transmission usage of this dash-dash-dot type signal during specific periods of the navigational season. The new automated radio transmitter was an important aid to the ships navigating Lake Erie.

In 1995 a new 300 mm red plastic lens was installed at the Ashtabula Harbor Light Station. The old fourth-order Fresnel lens was removed by Coast Guard personnel and given to the Ashtabula Marine Museum in 1995.

Presently Ashtabula Harbor Light Station is electrified by two 12-volt batteries. These batteries obtain their power from a single solar panel mounted on the iron railing of the light station.

The Ashtabula Harbor Light Station was left to "Mother Nature's" mercy for many years and its long-term future looked bleak. Granted she had visitors from time to time, but that was by Coast Guard personnel to check her battery and charging systems. Now the future looks very bright for the next generation of lighthouse seekers. Ashtabula Harbor Light Station is going through a rebirth of sorts, thanks to a group of people who want others to see her as she was once long ago. May Ashtabula Harbor Light Station stand as a testimony to what once was and what will be a great place to step back into time.