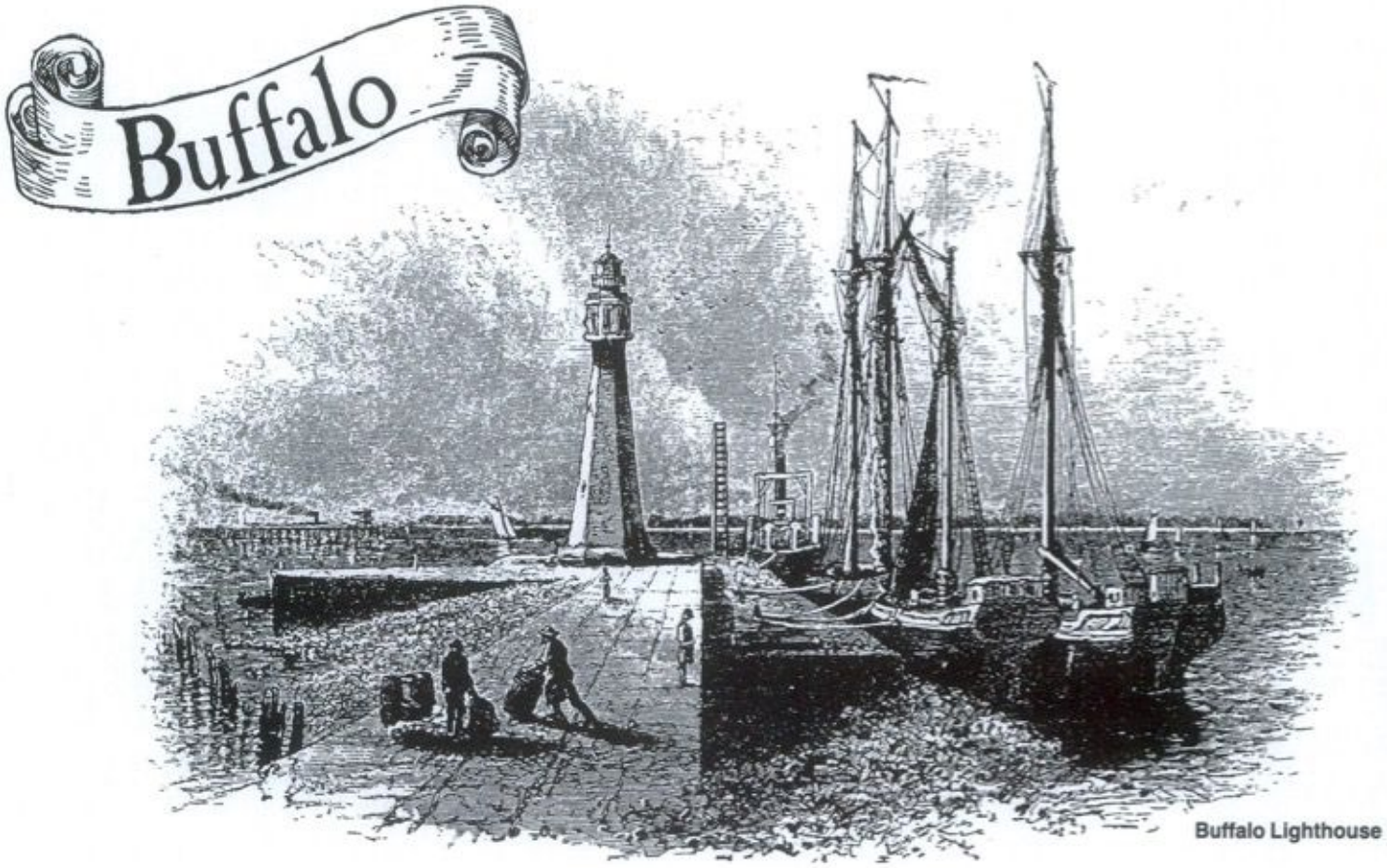


Buffalo Lighthouse

Beacon to the Heartland

by Mike Vogel

For millions of Americans it marked a gateway to the future—a beacon on an inland sea that served as a highway to a continent's heartlands and the promise of new life in a new world. Its light beamed out on the wide waters of Lake Erie, but for the tides of immigrants who settled the interior of a nation the first glimpse of the Buffalo Lighthouse came as the packet boats neared the wharves at the end of the narrow Erie Canal.

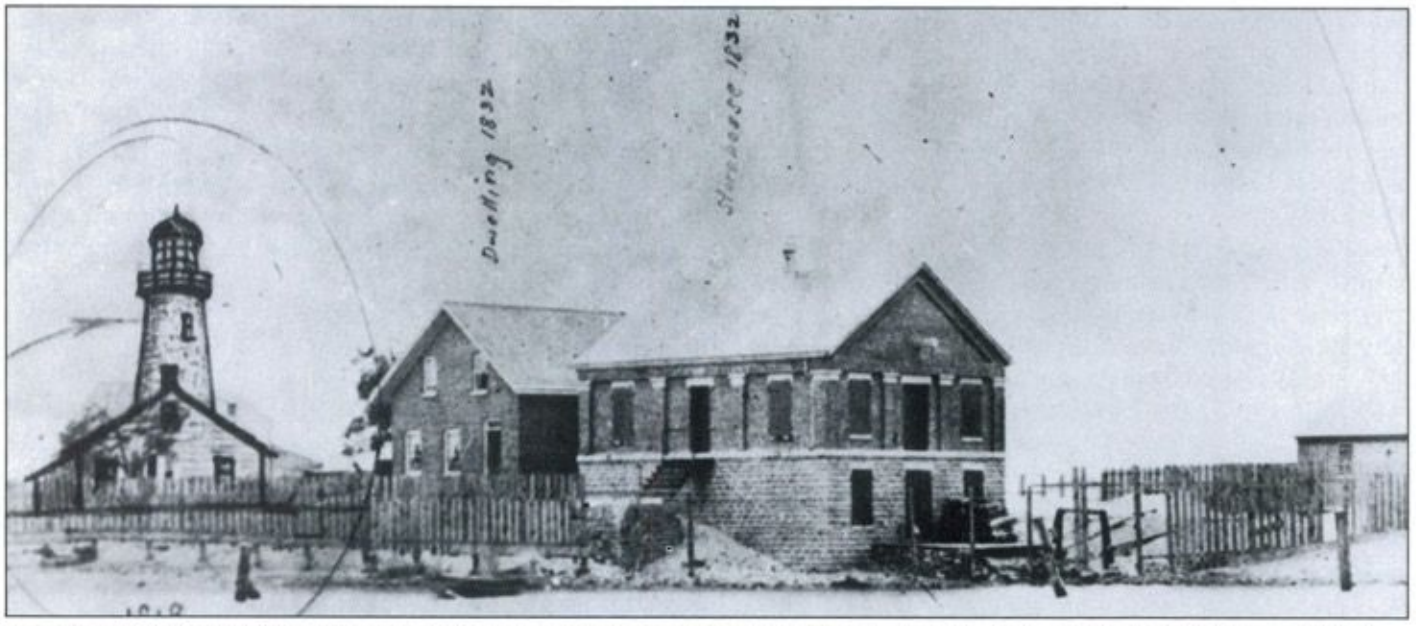
Hundreds of thousands of immigrants ended their Erie Canal journeys at Buffalo's wharves and stayed to build a city. Countless others boarded steamers and packets and ventured past the lighthouse and onto the Great Lakes to build Cleveland, Detroit, Duluth, Chicago, and a hundred smaller towns and cities in between. Like other beacons of America's "northern lights," the tower at Buffalo Harbor stood sentinel not only on a shoreline but on the history of a city.

The Buffalo Lighthouse was one of the earliest, not only on the Great Lakes but in America's lighthouse heritage. Buffalo was only a frontier village in Indian territory when the need for a lighthouse was realized. As an old frontier of France, the western regions of New York State undoubtedly had been marked by temporary beacons at the 17th century Lake Ontario French outpost of Fort Niagara, and Canadian lighthouses were the first substantial towers on the lakes. By the beginning of the 19th century the amount of maritime traffic on the lakes required the construction of lighthouses along the American shores. The village of Buffalo, a handful of cabins and people at the junction of Lake Erie and the Niagara River, was made a U.S. port of entry by Act of Congress on March 3, 1805. Six years later, New York State lawmakers adopted a cession "with respect to a piece of land for a lighthouse in Buffalo, Niagara County," but the building of the tower was sidetracked by the outbreak of the War of 1812 and the burning of Buffalo by the British in 1813. It wasn't until 1817 that Oliver Forward, collector of the port, was commissioned to actually buy a site for a lighthouse at Buffalo. He paid $351.50 to buy some land at the mouth of Buffalo Creek and soon the 30-foot high stone tower of Buffalo's first lighthouse began to take shape.

There is a long-standing controversy over whether Buffalo or Erie, PA (then known as Presq'isle) can boast the first American lighthouse on the Great Lakes. Some normally reliable sources, including veteran Lighthouse Superintendent George Putnam, accord the honor to Buffalo and local history dates the tower to 1818, but modern research seems to favor the Pennsylvania site. A Treasury Department report to the 16th Congress dated Nov. 8, 1820 includes two Great Lakes beacons in a list of 60 American lighthouses, but merely notes that both the Buffalo and Erie lighthouses were "included in one contract, $15,500 for both."

Early Buffalo Harbor wasn't anything but a sand-clogged creek mouth and the State of New York was ready to authorize a survey of the Buffalo Creek entrances. In 1819, the state legislature authorized a $12,000 loan to the city to make harbor improvements. Some historians say this may have included the building of the lighthouse near the mouth of the creek. By 1820 the need for a better anchorage was painfully clear and Buffalo, with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, tried a public subscription drive to fund harbor improvements. However, it was still a frontier town—and pledges of $1,361 amounted to only $110 actually being collected. The harbor engineer hired for the job was fired for incompetency and a local judge, Judge Wilkeson, took over the construction project that marked the birth of what was to become, by the end of the century, the world's seventh-busiest harbor.

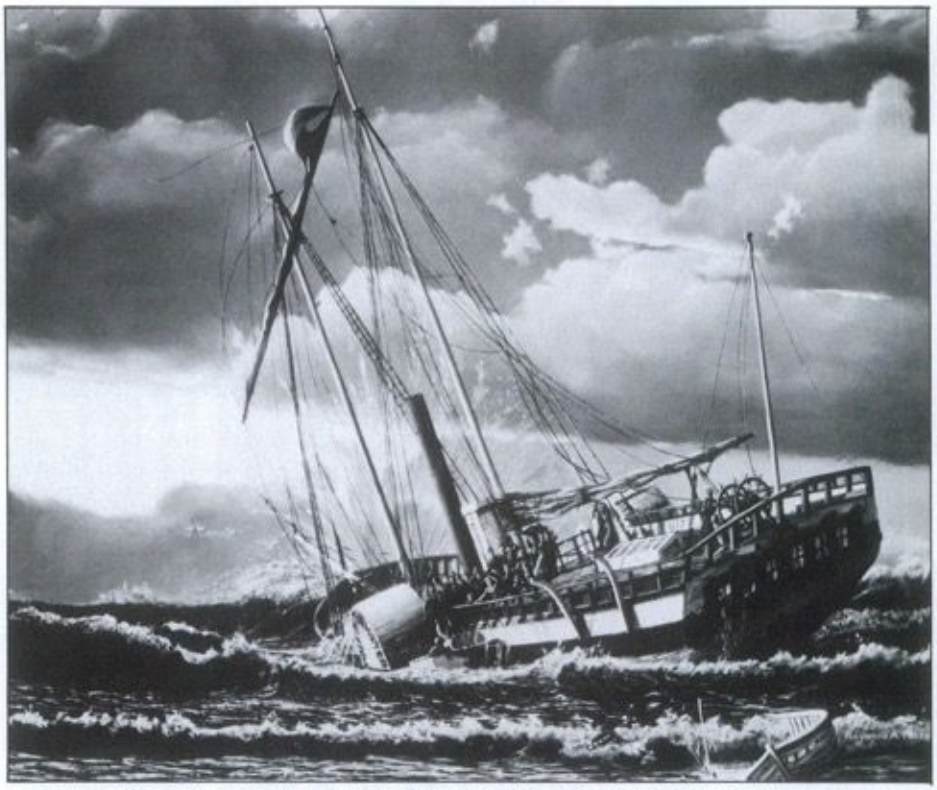
The first lighthouse was built in only 221 days. During this period storms caused havoc and the British captured some of the boats being used to ferry cut stone from the Canadian shores to the construction site. Judge Wilkeson and his crews threw up a brushwork dam to cause the spring floods to scour a new channel and relocate the mouth of Buffalo Creek. He extended a stone jetty out into the lake to provide a better entrance and larger harbor. Storms lashed the work and villagers turned out in howling nighttime gales to repair the ravages of nature, but the structures held and Buffalo had its harbor.



The original Buffalo lighthouse (circa 1819) was replaced by the second tower in 1832. The building to the right is (probably) the assistant keeper's house and the next building to the right a storehouse. Photo courtesy Buffalo News.

The lighthouse on the sandy spit between the creek and the lake was augmented by a private light on the new pierhead for the use of "the steamboat." There was no mistaking which steamboat, for in 1820 on all the lakes there was still only one—and her days were numbered. On the night of Oct. 31, 1821, the ship the Indians had christened *Walk-in-the-Water* was caught by a gale just off the Buffalo Harbor and was "beached about 100 rods above the lighthouse," according to one newspaper account. Mrs. Alanson W. Welton, a survivor of the wreck, later recounted that "the boat struck the beach in a fortunate spot for the safety of the passengers and crew—near the lighthouse—and all were saved. The warm fireside we gathered around at the lighthouse was comforting to our chilled limbs, and our hearts warmed with gratitude to God for deliverance from our peril."

The steamer may have been wrecked, but her valuable steam engines were salvaged and that set the stage for a bitter political battle. Buffalo and the nearby Niagara River community of Black Rock were vying for domination of the eastern end of vital Lake Erie and proposals for a new steamboat were to play a pivotal role.



The vessel the Indians christened *Walk-in-the-Water* was the first steam ship on the Great Lakes. She is pictured here hard aground near the Buffalo lighthouse having been blown ashore during a gale on October 31, 1821. Although the vessel was a total wreck her steam boilers were salvaged and fitted to a new ship, the *Superior*. The photo is of a painting by Raymond Massey, courtesy of the artist.

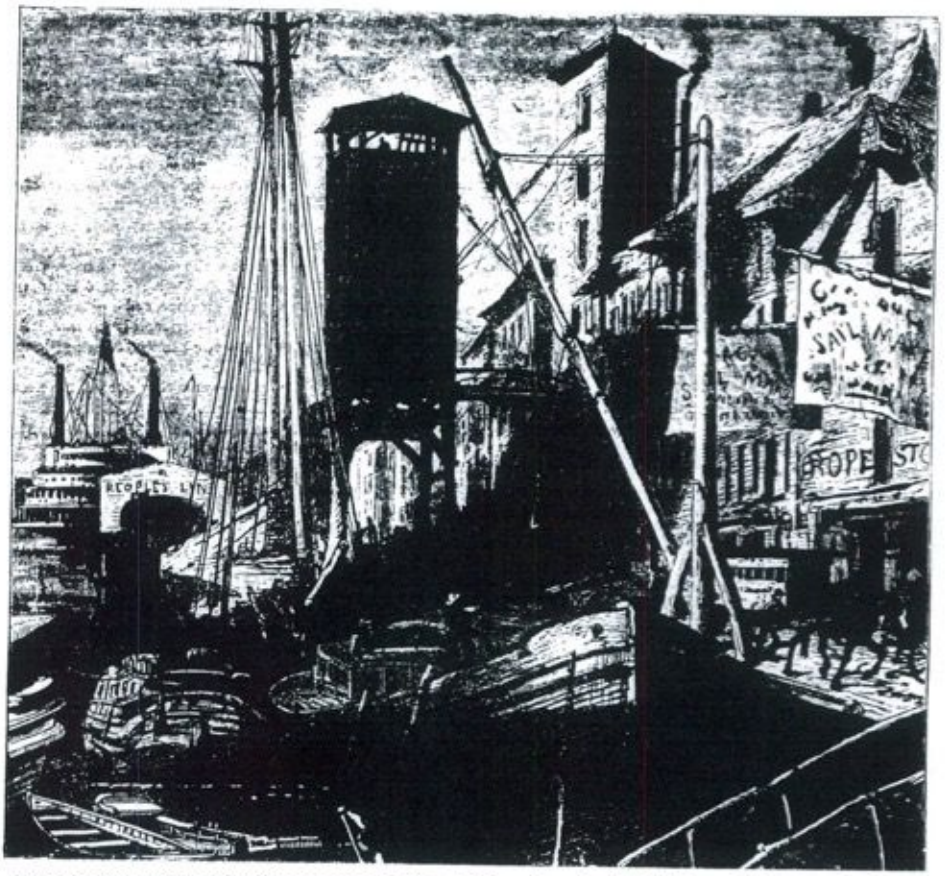
Buffalo had relatively calm lake waters but an inadequate anchorage. Black Rock had a good anchorage, in the lee of the huge stone slab that gave the settlement its name, but treacherous currents. Just beyond the rock swirled the swift current of a river heading toward a nearby and violent plunge over Niagara Falls. The sailing ships heading up river from Black Rock needed the help of the "Horn Breeze," a team of oxen, to overcome the swift current and reach the relative calm of Lake Erie.

A steamboat company agent from New York City visited Black Rock to contract for the building of a replacement steamer, and was regaled with the shortcomings of Buffalo Harbor. Unfortunately for Black Rock the agent's hotel was in Buffalo. Learning of this the inhabitants of the frontier village made rather a forceful presentation to the agent that caused him to agree to build his new ship in their community instead of in Black Rock.

Part of the argument was monetary. Buffalo pledged to pay $150 a day, a huge sum at that time, for every day past May 1, 1822, that the new steamer *Superior* was stuck in Buffalo Harbor. By the end of April the channel and the steamer were ready, but just before the deadline some of the ice remaining in the lake that year jammed in the creek mouth and currents deposited a layer of sand in the channel. Rakes and man-powered dredges were put into play and after hours of backbreaking labor the creek mouth was dredged to a depth of four feet. The *Superior's* boilers were fired, dignitaries from both Buffalo and Black Rock filed aboard and the ship steamed away from the dock on schedule that May 1 only to run gently aground in the creek mouth. The passengers were put ashore and the ship's captain built up enough steam to run the lightened *Superior* over the bar. The bond was cancelled, and the disappointed dignitaries from arch rival Black Rock headed home to what was to become a neighborhood of the growing metropolis of Buffalo.

In 1825 the Erie Canal opened with its western terminus at Buffalo instead of Black Rock. Soon after that a government, goaded by complaints that the Buffalo Lighthouse was useless, too often obscured by "the smoke of the village" and perhaps even at fault for the wreck of the *Walk-in-the-Water,* moved to build a new and better tower at the end of the long stone pier. The Treasury Department appropriated $2,500 for the task in 1826 and the following year contracted "to erect and build a pier, and lighthouse and ice-breaker" to be completed by Nov. 15, 1828. Partial completion and payment were acknowledged in 1829 and the work apparently continued over the next few years. The tower, still standing, has the date "1833" inscribed in the stone lintel over its doorway.

Buffalo didn't officially become a city until 1832, the year before the



The opening of the Erie Canal caused a flood of immigrants to Buffalo and the Great Lakes cities beyond.

lighthouse was completed. It had all of 10,000 inhabitants, half of them foreign born, and the population had quadrupled in the seven years since the opening of the Erie Canal. It was a rough-and-tumble town, especially along the waterfront. In the five year period from 1830 to 1835 seven out of every ten crimes reported in the United States were committed along the shores of Lake Erie and the Erie Canal. The average life span of a lake sailor from the day he first set foot on the deck of a vessel to the day he prematurely died, was 12 years.

The lighthouse that guarded the port is a tapering octagonal tower built of hewn limestone and topped with an ornate lantern and weather vane. Parabolic reflectors and oil lamps provided the light and there was even a lens of sorts in front of each lamp, a green tinted, convex circle of glass that didn't last too long. After several complaints from mariners Harbor Superintendent Isaac Smith and Collector of the port, Pierre Barker, voyaged out onto the lake to inspect the quality of the light. They agreed that the reflectors alone produced a better light, and the lens was removed from the Lewis Argand lamps. One served as a magnifier for the reading lamps of keeper William Jones and his son Fernando. Decades later Fernando donated it to the local history museum.

The new tower was deemed a success. A local newspaper unblushingly dubbed it the "most perfect work of its kind on this side of the ocean and perhaps in the world."

A short five years later in the 1837 report of the Board of Navy Commissioners to Congress on American lighthouses, the Buffalo Harbor Lighthouse was deemed deficient. Lt. G. J. Pendergast, USN, considered the 15-reflector array at Buffalo (only) "a good stationary light on a stone tower, at the end of the harbor pier," but added that the harbor itself was too congested and a new one would be built as "no place on Lake Erie is of more importance in a commercial point of view than Buffalo, none more deserving of the favors of the General Government."

The General Government, of course, took years to act on that suggestion. Before it did, a violent gale known as the Great Storm of 1844 lashed the Buffalo waterfront and severely damaged the lighthouse pier. The October storm lasted three days ending with a sudden 180-degree wind shift that sent a wall of water across the lower city, lifting ships ashore and driving one schooner untouched through a gap in the pier between the lighthouse and land. Survivors of the storm laid the scores of dead in rows in the City Hall and Courthouse, which were pressed into service as temporary morgues.

In 1852 federal lawmakers appropriated $2,500 for a fog bell or whistle at the lighthouse. The bell wasn't delivered that year, or for several years after that. The Lighthouse Establishment Annual Reports cited the unsatisfactory performance of a similar installation in Maine. The Lighthouse Board Report of 1852 recommended Buffalo as one of 20 principal lakes lighthouses that should get a third-order Fresnel lens. Instead, in 1854 "at Buffalo Lighthouse a new chandelier (ed. reflector system) was procured, reducing the arc of illumination from 180 degrees to 110 degrees" while increasing its intensity. In 1856, the fog bell and the third-order fixed white lens were finally installed. This operation required removal of the old lantern and the addition of a course of stone casement windows and a two story metal top including a service room and new lantern. The keeper's quarters remained more than a thousand feet away on the land where the original lighthouse had stood until the 1840s. Commerce continued to increase in Buffalo Harbor and the need for a better light was becoming evident. The new height of the harbor lighthouse put the focal plane of the lens 76 feet above lake level.

In 1868 a detached 4,000-foot breakwater was built 2,500 feet out from the lighthouse to enlarge the harbor. In



1870, the Treasury Department contracted for two more lights on the breakwater, including a large breakwater light station that began to take shape May 18, 1871 on a large wooden crib. The new breakwater lighthouse, with a fourth-order fixed red lens displayed 37 feet above Lake Erie, was established in 1872 and the fog bell was moved from the old tower to the new station.

In 1885, an incandescent kerosene oil vapor lamp (I.O.V.) replaced the lard oil lamp which had been used in the Buffalo lighthouse since the mid 1850s. A recommendation in 1890 that the fog bell be replaced by a steam signal was repeated by the District Inspector in 1891, 1892 and 1893. An appropriation finally came through for a 10-inch steam fog whistle to be ready late that year at the breakwater light station. The foghorn's characteristic of two 3-second blasts per minute was changed in 1805 to one blast per minute and a sound baffle added to eliminate "an annoyance to the people of Buffalo."

The keeper's quarters were rebuilt in 1899 and the buff colored stone of the old tower was painted white in 1900. In 1902, the year after the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo amazed the country with the first major use of urban electric lights and saddened it with the assassination of President McKinley, the Lighthouse Board voted to change the tower's light characteristic from fixed to equal interval flashing white to help it stand out against the growing background of the city lights.

A new four panel Fresnel lens was ordered from Chance Brothers & Co., England at a cost of $3,386.74—more than six times the annual salary of the keeper. The old fixed lens was taken from the stone pierhead tower on April 8, 1905 and the new assembly, displaying a flashing white light every six seconds, took its place. A small square iron oil house was built nearby. The suggestion to give the tower double duty as a Life Saving Station lookout tower was abandoned when a new, pagoda like lookout tower, nicknamed "Chinaman's Light" (both for its appearance and its use to watch for illegal Chinese immigration cross the Niagara from Canada) was constructed 350 feet away.

In 1905, the local lighthouse inspector informed the Lighthouse Board that "the keeper of Buffalo light-



Above left—The second Buffalo tower circa 1900. This 1833 tower was modified in 1856 when the stone casement window section was added below the lantern room. The metal brackets on the right side of the "new" section supported the bell fog signal. The Van Hoey postcard collection.

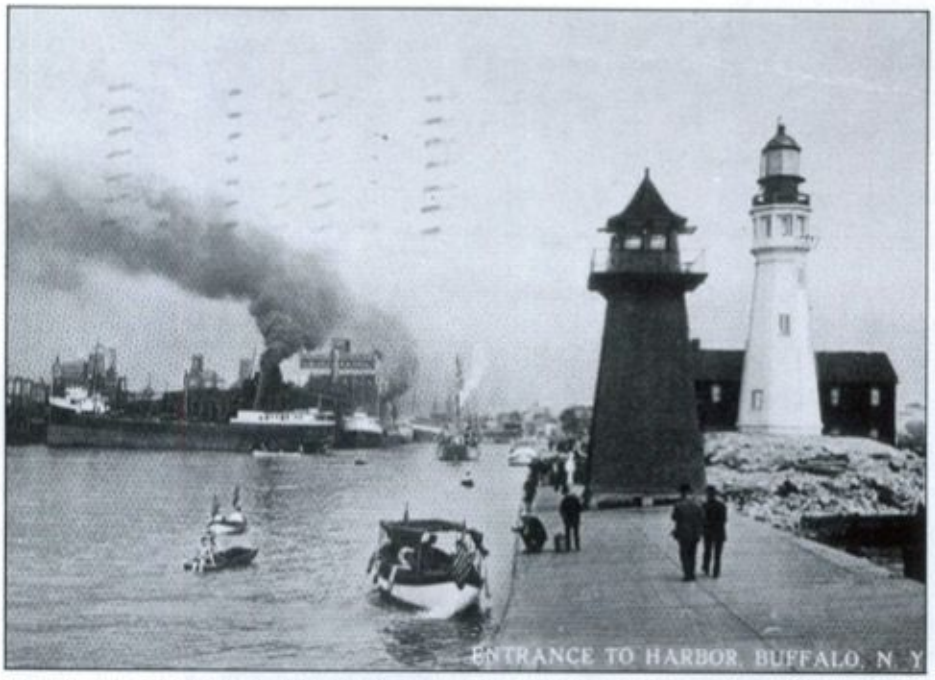
Above—Buffalo Harbor. Note the detached breakwater. The breakwater lighthouses were located on the north end.



The first Buffalo in Breakwater lighthouse was constructed in 1871 and replaced in 1914 after being struck by several vessels. The structure on the left of the crib is the fog signal building. Turn of the century post card. The Van Hoey collection.

station states that the stove in use at the tower in his charge is so small as to heat insufficiently the watchroom, and that he is therefore often obliged to go to the dwelling to warm himself." With unaccustomed rapidity the service moved to add a two ton coal bin to the lower level of the tower in 1906. However, the tower's days as a working lighthouse were numbered. The breakwater light had been taking a fairly regular beating from shipping. It was hit by a tug in 1899, by a barge in 1900, by a freighter in 1909 and by a steamer in 1910—but it was growing in importance as the harbor expanded outward and the old stone tower was becoming once more just a pierhead light.

After repeated requests, the federal government set aside $60,000 to rebuild the breakwater lighthouse and the work was carried out from 1912 to 1914. A compressed air diaphone replaced the old steam fog whistle in 1914 and the third-order Fresnel lens was moved from the "Old Stone Light" to the breakwater station in time for the spring thaw and the opening of the navigational season in 1914.



Above—The structure in the foreground is a watch tower which was dubbed "Chinaman's Light" because of the resemblance of the roof to a Chinese Coolie hat. When this tower was removed the name shifted to the Buffalo Lighthouse tower, right rear. Turn of the century post card. Van Hoey collection.

Below—The second Buffalo Breakwater Lighthouse (1914) was dealt a sharp blow in 1958 by the vessel *Frontenac* which moved the structure back 20 feet and caused a 15 degree list (tilt). The structure was demolished in 1961 and replaced by an automated light on a momo pole. Photo courtesy Buffalo News.



There was sadness in the local lighthouse corps in those years but it had little to do with the modernization of the Buffalo lights or the local establishment's increasingly important role as a district lighthouse depot. It centered on one of the fiercest Great Lakes storms on record, the Hurricane of November 1913 that sank a score of ships and killed more than 200 sailors, including the men of the lightship marking the approach to Buffalo.

The saga of Light Vessel 82 remains one of the tragic stories of the Lighthouse Service. A newly constructed small steel lightship sank off Buffalo Harbor in the hurricane-force winds of that November storm. Wreckage washed ashore not far from the site of the *Walk-in-the-Water's* grounding so many years before. One of the pieces of debris was a wooden door with a penciled message from the captain to his wife: "Good-bye Nellie, ship is breaking up fast." The vessel's six crewmen were never found, but the lightship was

located and raised two years later. Another ship served briefly off Buffalo until a lighted buoy was established to mark the shoals.

While the powerful beams of the breakwater lighthouse offered a guide to the sheltered harbor, the old stone tower remained dark. It saw brief spells of duty as a lookout tower, especially during Prohibition when rum running from Canada was a popular Lake Erie and Niagara River occupation, and it inherited its "Chinaman's Light" nickname when the old wooden watchtower was torn down, but the Buffalo Light now had a third home on the breakwater.

From 1920 to 1929, many different types of diaphones were tested at the Buffalo Station and one of the first radiobeacons on the Great Lakes was installed in the Buffalo Breakwater Light Station in 1925.

The property of the Lighthouse Service sprawled from the site of the first lighthouse toward Chinaman's Light along land fill that almost obscured the fact that the second tower stood on a man made pier. This reservation was both district office and depot for the Lighthouse Service's Tenth District.

By 1955, the old landmark Chinaman's Light was part of a busy U.S. Coast Guard base and was being used to store explosives. But fate had still another twist in store for the tower and its future was brighter than that of the light station which had replaced it.

On July 26, 1958, the huge lakes freighter *Frontenac* swung out of the Buffalo River and toward open water. One of the two Coast Guard keepers on duty at the Buffalo Lighthouse was on the adjoining breakwater fishing and saw the ship's course swing wider than usual. He yelled a warning to his fellow crewman who joined him on the wall as the sound of shouted orders drifted from the approaching pilothouse. Anchor chains rumbled through hawsepipes, but the *Frontenac*'s rendezvous with the lighthouse was sealed and the freighter met the concrete wall with a crash that tilted the lighthouse 15 degrees and moved it backward nearly 20 feet. The million candlepower light, visible 16 miles, was knocked out of service until a temporary light tower was constructed.



The fourth Buffalo Light, an automated beacon atop a 71-foot white tower on the end of a breakwater, was put into service in 1961. That same year the American Demolition Co. of Pittsburgh was awarded the demolition contract for what the press had dubbed Buffalo's "Leaning Lighthouse." The Buffalo Harbor aids to navigation system is thoroughly modern—but its treasured landmark from 1833, the city's oldest building still standing on its original site, and a part of the design of the city seal itself, had outlived its successor.

Neglect again began to take its toll on the building. However, in 1985 the Buffalo Lighthouse Association was formed to undertake major structural restoration of the tower and to enhance its setting under a 30-year license from the Coast Guard. Buffalo's own waterfront renaissance and development project has recognized the site's key role in the city's maritime history. There's hope that a lens will soon beam a welcome light from the tower once again—not to mariners on a storm tossed lake, but to a city that has come home to its heritage and its roots.



Top—The South Buffalo North Side Lighthouse constructed on the south end of the breakwater to mark the southern entrances in 1903.

Above—Mr. & Mrs. Peterson of Hamburg, NY inspect the 3rd Order Fresnel lens which was installed in the second (1833) Buffalo tower. It was relocated to the (north) Breakwater Lighthouse in 1914. When that structure was hit by the freighter in 1960, the lens was given to the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society. Both photos courtesy of the Buffalo News.