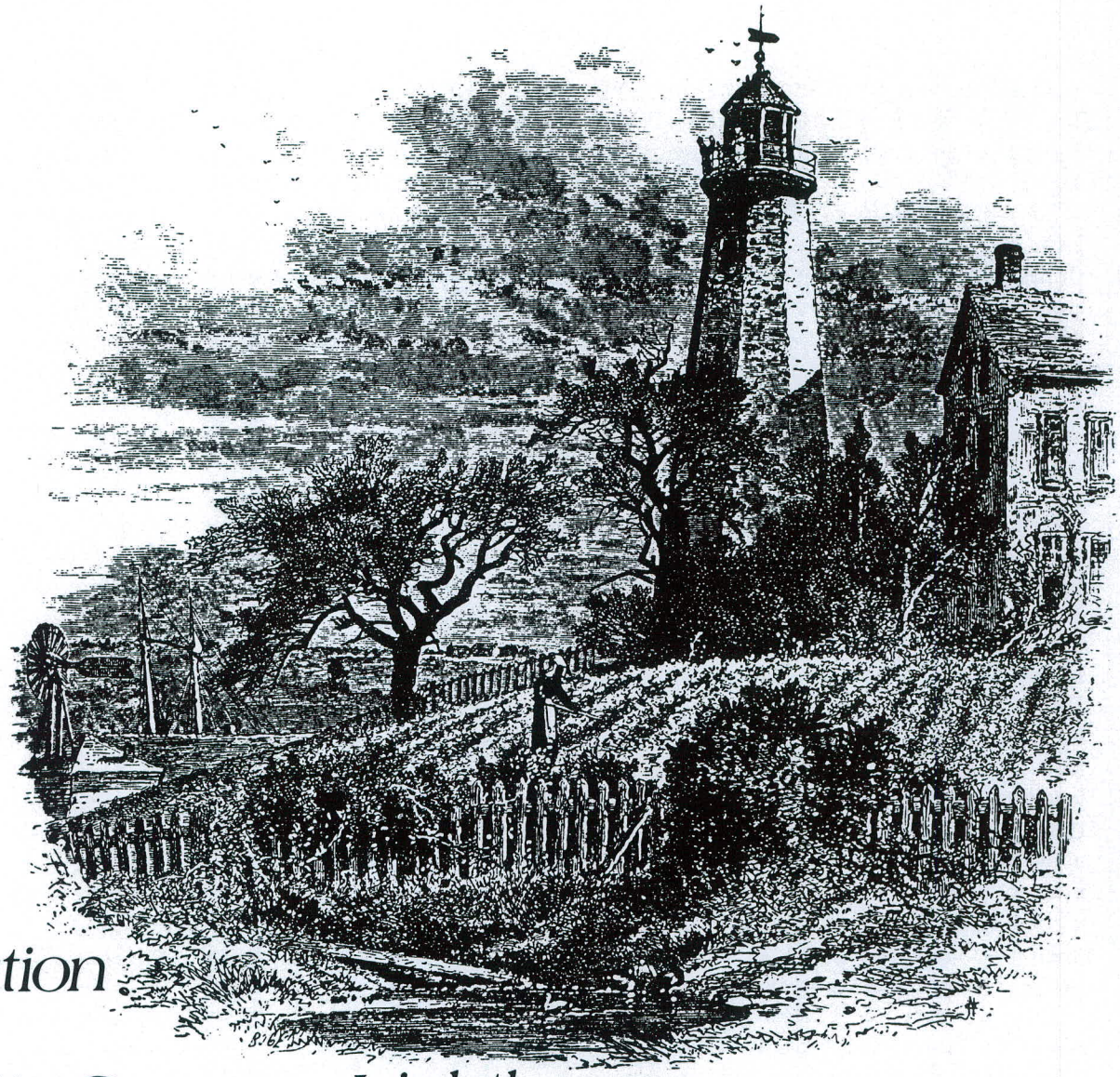


Restoration of the Charlotte-Genesee Lighthouse

by Bill Davis

On the bluff once called Lighthouse Point, where the Genesee River enters Lake Ontario, stands the Old Genesee Lighthouse, one of the oldest existing lighthouses on Lake Ontario—built in 1822. Not only is the lighthouse an important part of the story of the Genesee Country but the site has its own story to tell.

In the 1500s the river became one of the main thoroughfares for the Seneca Nation of the Iroquois. The domination of their war parties stretched from New England to North Carolina and as far west as Illinois. They have been called the Romans of the New World.

French explorers and Jesuit missionaries visited the river in the late 1600s and early 1700s. In 1788 the land was acquired from the Senecas.

In 1792 William and Mehitabel Hincher and their eight children traveled over a hundred miles on ox-drawn sled to settle on the site. Hincher and his eleven-year-old son began to trade with Canada in a small boat probably about the size of a bateaux. John Jones established a trading post just over the bluff.

Trade increased as settlers brought their ashes from burning the forest to clear the land. These were converted to potash. They also brought pork and whiskey to trade for salt and other supplies. By 1805 Thomas Jefferson decided that a 50-mile stretch of the Lake Ontario shoreline should be designated as the Port of Genesee. Sam Latta would be the collector. His first-year receipts were $22 against expenses of $24.

Rochester, just six miles south of the port, developed power from three waterfalls and became one of the principal flour milling centers at that time. Schooners from the north laden with wheat would return to Canada with flour from Rochester's mills.

The marshy bay at the mouth of the river was flanked by two sandbars. Ships were

guided into port by a lamp hung on the "Pilot Tree" and another lamp hung from the top of the Commercial Hotel.

By 1822 Congress authorized a lighthouse at the river entrance. John Canfield, District Collector, purchased the four-acre site from Mehitabel Hincher for four hundred dollars after DeWitt Clinton had agreed to give jurisdiction of the site to the federal government. Canfield awarded the contract to Ashbel Symonds to build a forty-foot-high, rough split stone tower, a two-room stone keeper's house and to dig a well 52 feet deep, all for $3,301. The work was completed in seven months.

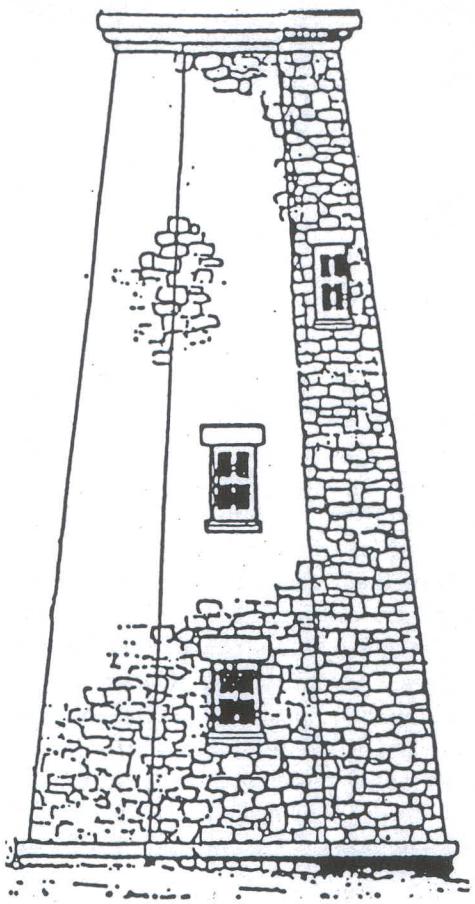
The eight-sided lantern (surmounting the tower) was made of iron with 2½" square support posts imbedded six feet into the tower stonework. One hundred forty-four panes of fourteen-by-twelve-inch glass would form the storm panes (windows). The dome was copper. Ten "reflecting and magnifying lamps" sixteen inches in diameter would be furnished and installed by Winslow Lewis. The fuel was whale oil.

The full story of Winslow Lewis could be the subject of another article. He played a major role in equipping and supplying U.S. lighthouses from 1812 until the 1840s.

Lewis had borrowed the parabolic reflector and Argand lamp design then in use in Europe and placed a green tinted lens in front of his patented lamp. It was superior to the spider lamps then in use and used less than half the fuel. However, the green lenses actually reduced the light and were eventually removed. Congress awarded $60,000 to pay Lewis for his patent and for outfitting all fifty-five American lighthouses and maintain them for seven years.

In the 1850s and '60s, as a part of the program to convert all U.S. lighthouses to the Fresnel lens, the Genesee Lighthouse was modernized at a cost of $2,000. The old wooden steps were replaced by a circular stairway supported by a new interior cylindrical wall of brick. Wooden sashes were replaced by iron, and the cut stone coping was replaced. On top of the new coping a cast iron deck was mounted to support the new ten-sided iron lantern. The 144 small panes of glass were replaced by 10 panes of the "best French plate glass." A fourth order Fresnel lens was installed which could be seen for 20 miles. The masonry was repointed and whitewashed.

The two-room keeper's house had proved inadequate for the first keeper, Giles Holden, and his ten children. He built an addition for his family that he subsequently moved across the street when he finished his seventeen-year employment with the Lighthouse Service. There were several proposals to replace the house but it was not until 1863 that a new eight-room keeper's house of brick was built using the stones from the first keeper's house for the foundation. It was connected by a passageway to the tower.



For 100 years the decapitated tower was capped with a wooden deck.

To complement the main light, a lighthouse was built at the end of the west breakwater which had been constructed in 1829. This structure was damaged by a storm and rebuilt in 1854 and equipped with a 6th order Fresnel lens. In 1881 it was replaced by a cast iron structure. As an economy move the fourth order lens was moved from the Genesee lighthouse to the pier light in spite of the many protests of the ship's captains. Then just 3 years later, in 1884, the cast iron lighthouse was moved to Cleveland and a new wooden lighthouse was built on the breakwater using the lantern room from the old Genesee lighthouse.

For 100 years the massive decapitated tower on Lighthouse Point was idle. A wooden deck covered the hole where the cast iron lantern had been located. Vines grew over the stonework, offering a nesting place for birds and accelerating the deterioration of the masonry. The windows were sealed with six-inch concrete slabs.

A proposal to tear down the lighthouse to improve the turning radius of a nearby railroad was rebuffed by the action of Charlotte High School students for whom the lighthouse was a school symbol.

The keeper's house continued to be well maintained and served as residence for the keeper of the breakwater light and then Coast Guard personnel after the light was automated in 1932.

In the fall of 1982 the Coast Guard offered to lease the lighthouse site to the Charlotte Community Association to operate as a museum. The Community Association formed a new group—the Charlotte/Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society chartered in 1983 by the State of New York as a not-for-profit educational institution.

Restoration

Research into the history of the lighthouse (National Archives, Coast

Guard files, publications, newspapers, libraries and museums) turned up a number of important items: all of the land transactions for the site, the original contract to build the lighthouse (but no drawings), clippings from the Annual Report to Congress of the Lighthouse Establishment pictures of the breakwater lighthouse and lantern and newspaper accounts of the 1863 conversion.

Our original plan was to restore to the 1822 era but we could find no existing Winslow Lewis lamps and with no drawings reconstruction of the 1822 lantern was not possible.

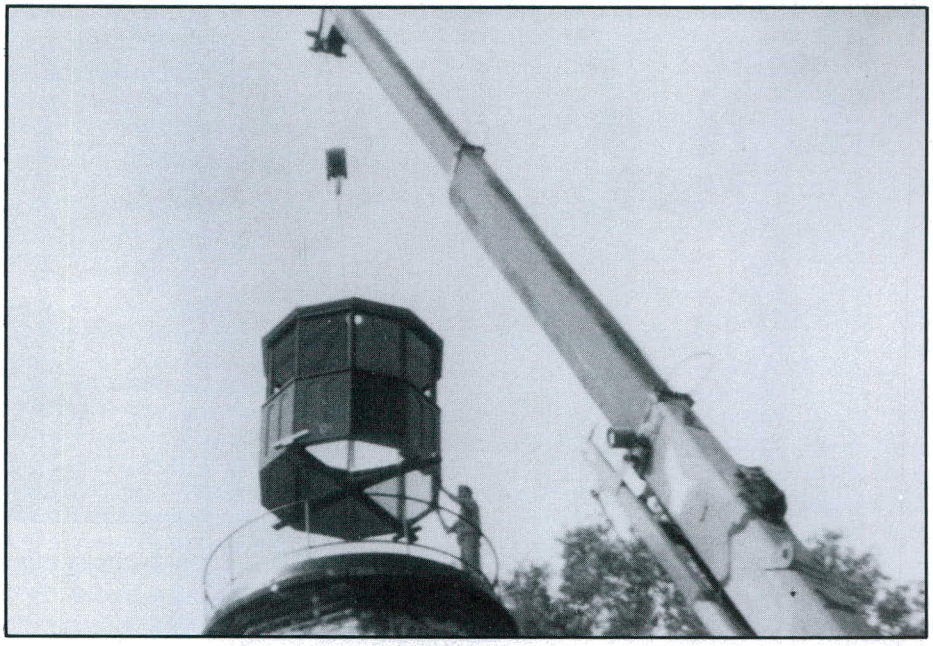
After discussions with F. Ross Holland (a national expert on lighthouses), the National Park Service and Jim Woodward of the U.S. Coast Guard (an expert on Great Lakes Lighthouses), we decided to restore it to the 1860 era. Thus our keeper's house and tower would be of the same vintage.

Although we were unable to find a drawing of the 1860 lantern, we had the base plate on the tower, a newspaper article of the conversion and a picture of the lantern after it was moved to the end of the pier.

The preliminary estimate of $60,000 to reconstruct the cast iron lantern staggered us since we had only accumulated about two hundred dollars.

After talking over the options with blacksmiths, shipbuilders and local machine shops we finally approached Edison Technical High School. The head of the mechanical department, Don Laniak, saw our project as a real challenge. Don is an experienced foundryman and pattern maker and has worked on other restoration projects. He suggested that the lantern room frame be built in the shop as a large scale precision pattern. The ventilating ball was cast in sections that were within the capacity of the school's electric furnace. They worked to a general design suggested by Jim Woodward.

As the project gathered steam we accumulated about $10,000 in gifts, grants and volunteer services.



Bill Davis's son was the rigger for the lifting operation.

Our target completion date was set for June 1984 so that the renovated lighthouse could welcome the Tall Ships coming to Rochester in July for that city's Sesquicentennial celebration.

Next we began a search for a fourth order Fresnel lens. Jim Woodward again came to the rescue and found one the Ninth Coast Guard District would loan us. He offered his services, and those of Tom Meakin, to install it once the lantern room was finished.

One crew began to work on the tower. The concrete slabs were chipped out of the tower windows and new sashes installed. A local contractor instructed us in proper "pointing" procedures for the exterior and supplied us with materials and scaffolding.

Other volunteers began landscaping the grounds, removed some large willow trees that threatened the structure and converted the two-car garage into an exhibit center.

An archaeology dig on the site by St. John Fisher College found the old well still intact, the remains of the first keeper's house, one Indian arrowhead and the original lightning rod from the tower.

There were some cliff-hangers. We scheduled the installation of the lantern on a Thursday to enable Jim and Tom to install the lens on Saturday. Wednesday we were notified by the contractor (who had volunteered to hoist the lantern onto the tower) that the crane operators were on strike. After several frantic efforts to find alternatives we were rescued by an Army Reserve unit and their crane. The lantern went up in jig time and was bolted in the same bolt holes used in 1853. The glaziers enclosed the lantern that afternoon and all was ready for Jim and Tom, augmented by volunteers from the local Coast Guard unit, to install the lens on Saturday.

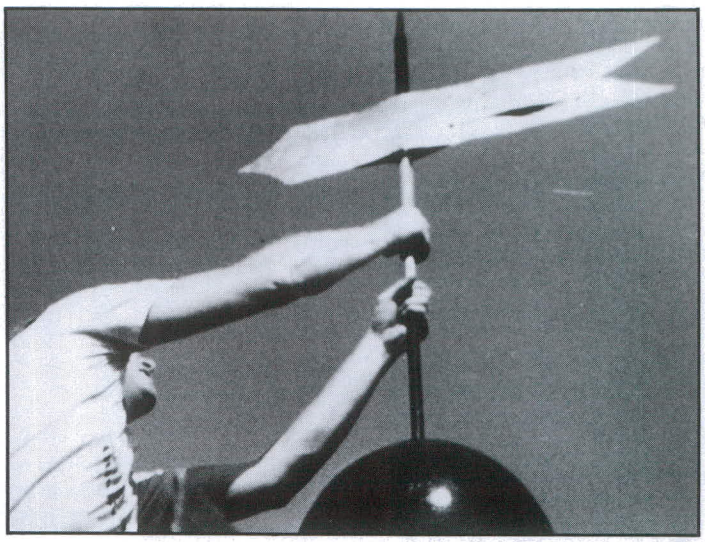
In July an estimated ten thousand people visited the lighthouse as it once more welcomed ships to the harbor much as it had a hundred years before.

Annually our visitors number about three thousand including about one thousand school children. We take our restoration story to community groups in the fall and winter with slide shows.

Our restoration and preservation project has produced five slide shows and four publications.

In May of 1984 the restoration of the Genesee Lighthouse by the Charlotte/Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society was one of eleven









Upper Left: **The author engaged in "pointing up" the stone of the tower. When the restoration project began this tower was covered in vines.** ***Upper Right:*** **The finishing touch—a historically accurate weather vane.** ***Middle Right:*** **Because of a limited budget the lantern room was constructed of wood.** ***Lower Left:*** **The 1822 stone tower was originally connected to the 1863 keeper's house with a covered walkway.** **(All photos courtesy of the author, Bill Davis.)**

transportation projects from across the country to receive a Preservation Award at services conducted by Secretary of Transportation, Elizabeth Dole.

The archaeology dig at the Genesee Lighthouse revealed the foundation of the 1825 keeper's house was built to the same specifications as the Sodus Point Lighthouse on Lake Ontario. Bob Gullo from St. John Fisher College who worked on the Rochester dig has been responsible for exposing much of the Sodus foundation that is still intact. We have recently found at Oswego (at Fort Ontario State Park) a keeper's house built in 1822 to the same specifications. It is still standing and serves as the home for the curator of the fort.