Elizabeth Whitney Williams: A Child of the Sea

By Beth Sylak

On the end of the Point stands the lighthouse with its red light flashing out at night over the waters, looking like a great red ruby set with diamonds as the electric lights are shining around the bay and harbor. What more is needed of nature's beauty to make the picture complete?

Elizabeth Whitney Williams wrote these words in her autobiography, *A Child of the Sea, and Life among the Mormons*, about the Little Traverse Lighthouse on Harbor Point, Michigan, where she was the keeper for 29 years. Her story, much like the Fresnel lens she describes in the above passage, helps to illuminate the trials of a female lighthouse keeper in an age when women rarely worked outside the home. Her life and her astonishing four decades of service as a light keeper are the focus of this article.

Born on Mackinac Island in 1842, Elizabeth's family was soon on the move and had settled on Beaver Island by the time she was 4 years old. Her father, a ship's carpenter, had found work on the island from the notorious Mormon leader "King" James Jesse Strang. Williams' autobiography focuses mainly on this time in her life. She writes about the tensions between the Mormons and other factions on the island and offers her own insight into that tumultuous time in Beaver Island's history. Eventually the schisms between the Mormons and the other groups on the island would result in another move for the Whitney family, to Charlevoix in 1852 and later to Traverse City.

After the assassination of King Strang by his own followers and the release of the island from Mormon control, the Whitney family returned. Shortly after going back to the island, in 1860, Elizabeth met and married Clement Van Riper. Her first husband was a cooper who had come from Detroit to the island for his health. Clement was appointed a teacher at the local Native American school soon after their marriage, and Elizabeth passed a happy two years helping him by teaching European gardening methods. She was particularly proud of the "Chief's Garden," a huge flower garden which the Native Americans had cultivated under the direction of Chief Peain in a three-acre plot of cleared land. She writes in her autobiography that they "took the flower seeds of the different kinds, sowing them like grain and raked them in. Well, such a flower garden was never seen! There was every flower in the catalogue growing up together." The huge flower garden was a spot of relaxation and fun for the native community, and Elizabeth felt these two years of her life were well spent.



Elizabeth Whitney Williams. Image courtesy of the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society.

Elizabeth and her husband were neighbors to the McKinleys at this time, who tended the Beaver Island Harbor Lighthouse. This arrangement would prove crucial to Elizabeth's close connection to lighthouses and keeping in the years to come. When the keeper of the light, Peter McKinley, resigned his post to due ill health, Elizabeth's husband was appointed to take his place. Prior to his resignation, Peter McKinley's daughters had taken over the keeping duties for their father, though without official recognition of their efforts.

Elizabeth's husband was also often in poor health and many of the keeper's duties fell to her, specifically the cleaning and polishing of the fourth-order Fresnel lens. Elizabeth thought of tending the light as both a duty and a pleasure, writing, "My three brothers were then sailing, and how glad I felt that their eyes might catch the bright rays of our light shining out over the waste of waters on a dark stormy night."

Women taking on light-keeping duties unofficially for ill husbands or other family members was more common than the strict gender divides and roles of the day might have suggested. Light keeping was normally thought of as a man's job, involving heavy physical labor and an enormous investment of time. However, many woman rose to these challenges and earned the respect of their communities through their actions. Only a small number of these women were ever officially appointed as light keepers. Elizabeth would become one of those few after a stormy night in 1872.

Clement, Elizabeth's husband and the official keeper, rowed out to help rescue the crew of a sinking ship during a storm and never returned. His



Daniel Williams, photographer and Elizabeth's second husband, captured this image of the steamship Manitou rounding the end of Harbor Point. The idyllic lighthouse setting belied the demanding, around-the-clock efforts required of Elizabeth to keep the light brightly shining. Image courtesy of the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society.

body was never recovered and the sole duty of keeping the light burning in the tower during the three-day gale fell to Elizabeth. She wrote in her autobiography about the event, saying, "The lighthouse was the only home I had and I was glad and willing to do my best in the service…. I now felt a deeper interest in our sailors' lives than ever before, and I longed to do something for humanity's sake."

A few weeks after her husband's death she was officially appointed the keeper of the lighthouse. Clement's death left Elizabeth "weak from sorrow," and other sorrows soon followed, including the deaths of two of her brothers and three of her nephews to drowning. She recorded her feelings in short poems and verses to fallen seamen, but her devotion to her light keeping duties was perhaps the clearest tribute she could offer.

In 1875 Elizabeth remarried, this time to photographer Daniel Williams, and requested a transfer to a mainland station. She does not express in her autobiography the reasons for wanting to leave the lighthouse on Beaver Island, but does write briefly about how much the separation from her childhood home affected her. Only the last few pages of her memoir reflect upon her time at the station to which she was transferred, known by locals as the Harbor Point Lighthouse and officially as the Little Traverse Lighthouse.

The Little Traverse Lighthouse had only just been finished when Elizabeth accepted the transfer there in 1884. Situated on Harbor Point in the town of Harbor Springs, Michigan, the lighthouse would be home to Elizabeth and husband for the next 29 years. The lovely resort communities surrounding Harbor Springs allowed Elizabeth's husband, Daniel, ample inspiration for his work as a photographer, and the station allowed Elizabeth enough leisure time to complete her autobiography. She was also responsible for keeping the lighthouse and the keeper's quarters ready for visitors at all times as resorters often dropped by for tours of the lighthouse and fog signal building.

Elizabeth retired from light keeping in 1913, and she and her husband moved to Charlevoix, Michigan. They spent another 25 years together in quiet retirement before they passed away, within 12 hours of each other, in January of 1938.



In 1913, after 29 years of guiding ships into the harbor, light keeper Elizabeth and her husband Daniel retired to Charlevoix. Image courtesy of the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society.



The Little Traverse Lighthouse as it looks today. Photograph courtesy of Mary Cummings.

Little Traverse Lighthouse is now privately owned and immaculately restored. The Harbor Springs Area Historical Society in cooperation with the Harbor Point Association is pleased to offer a one-day-only public tour of the lighthouse. The site is otherwise inaccessible due to its location in the private, gated association of Harbor Point.

The tour will take place Saturday, October 4, 2014, and advanced reservations are required. The cost is $30 per person and reservation forms may be found at the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society website, HarborSpringsHistory.org. Alternatively, tours can be reserved by calling the Historical Society at (231) 526-9771.

Spots for this special tour are limited, so make your reservations soon.