

Lake Michigan's Grosse Point Light Station

By Donald J. Terras
Keeper



Standing on a 25-foot bluff overlooking Lake Michigan in Evanston, Illinois, the Grosse Point Light Station has served as a guidepost to the lake's traffic in and out of Chicago for over 116 years. Its history reflects the triumphs and tragedies of discovery, trade, and progress which marks the development of our nation's interior.



he promontory on which the light station is built was known as Grosse Pointe (great point) by French fur traders as early as the seventeenth century. Father Jacques Marquette, Jesuit Priest and explorer, and trader Louis Joliet and their voyageurs paddled past the point in 1673 on the return from their discovery of the Mississippi River. According to the diary of Father Marquette, he used Grosse Pointe as a campground the following December.

Often facing harsh weather conditions and hostile Indians, the voyageurs, and their large trade canoes, had been the only link to Montreal and Europe from the northwestern territories for over 150 years.

In 1833, the Treaty of Prairie du Chien resulted in the resettlement of many Indian tribes west of the Mississippi River. As a consequence, more favorable conditions were created for pioneer immigration from the east opening the way for increased lake traffic in the form of schooners. By 1870 over 12,000 ships entered and left the port of Chicago annually and Illinois became the leading exporting state in the nation.

Like the voyageurs, early lake shipping followed the shores leaving the vessels vulnerable to the dangers of sandbars and at the mercy of the weather. At an increasing rate, ships foundered in the waters off Grosse Pointe (over the years the U.S. Government dropped the French "e" on Pointe). The danger of the lake received national attention when, in September, 1860, a passenger steamer named the *Lady Elgin* collided with the schooner *Augusta* in waters a few miles north of the point. At the time, Abraham Lincoln and Stephan A. Douglas were campaigning for the presidency. Douglas had a large contingent of Irish supporters in Milwaukee known as the Union Guard, and when he was at the height of his political campaign in Illinois, a group of 300 Irish Union Guards chartered the *Lady Elgin* for an excursion to Chicago

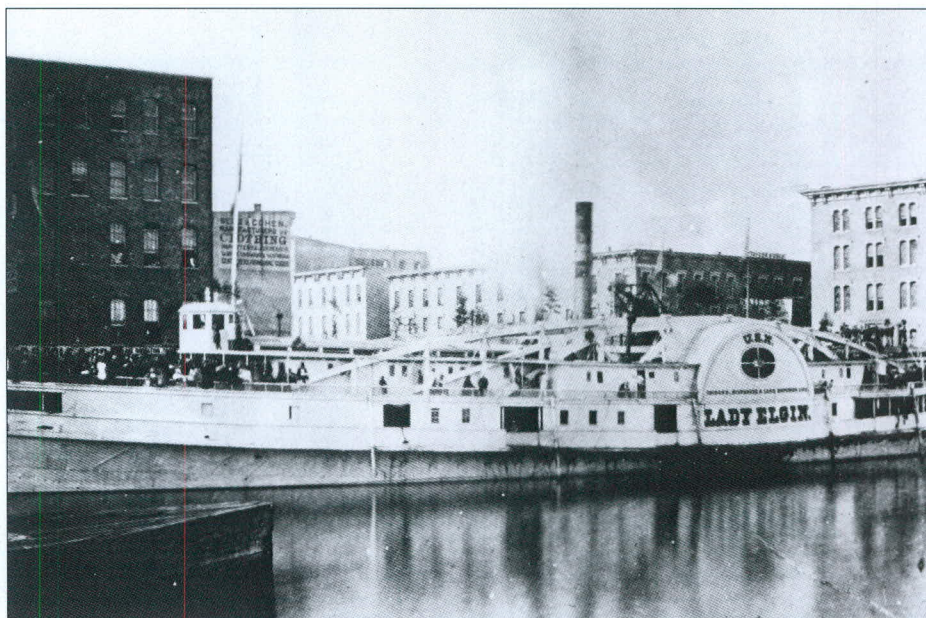
to see their favored candidate. By nightfall, a light fog had settled over the area as the group prepared for their return trip north. By the time *Lady Elgin* reached the waters off Grosse Point the wind had begun to blow and the waves churned with greater intensity. Inside the ship, kerosene lamps lit up the social hall as band members played Irish songs seemingly unconcerned about the storm that was developing. With no advance warning, the lumber-bearing schooner *Augusta* suddenly rammed into the port side of the *Lady Elgin* just aft of the wheel, cutting her nearly in two below the water line. In the words of H.G. Caryl, Clerk of the *Lady Elgin*, "In an instant after the crash all was still. There was not a cry nor shriek; no sound but the rush of steam and the surge of heavy seas."

Apparently, neither captain knew the extent of the damage for when the *Augusta* offered her services to the injured vessel the *Lady Elgin's* Captain Jack Wilson declined. Shortly thereafter his ship foundered and rapidly sank before the life boats could be launched. By daybreak, the Evanston shore was lined with spectators as the unfortunate passengers tried to reach land through the high waves. Some 287 lives were lost in what was, at the time, the worst disaster on the Great Lakes.

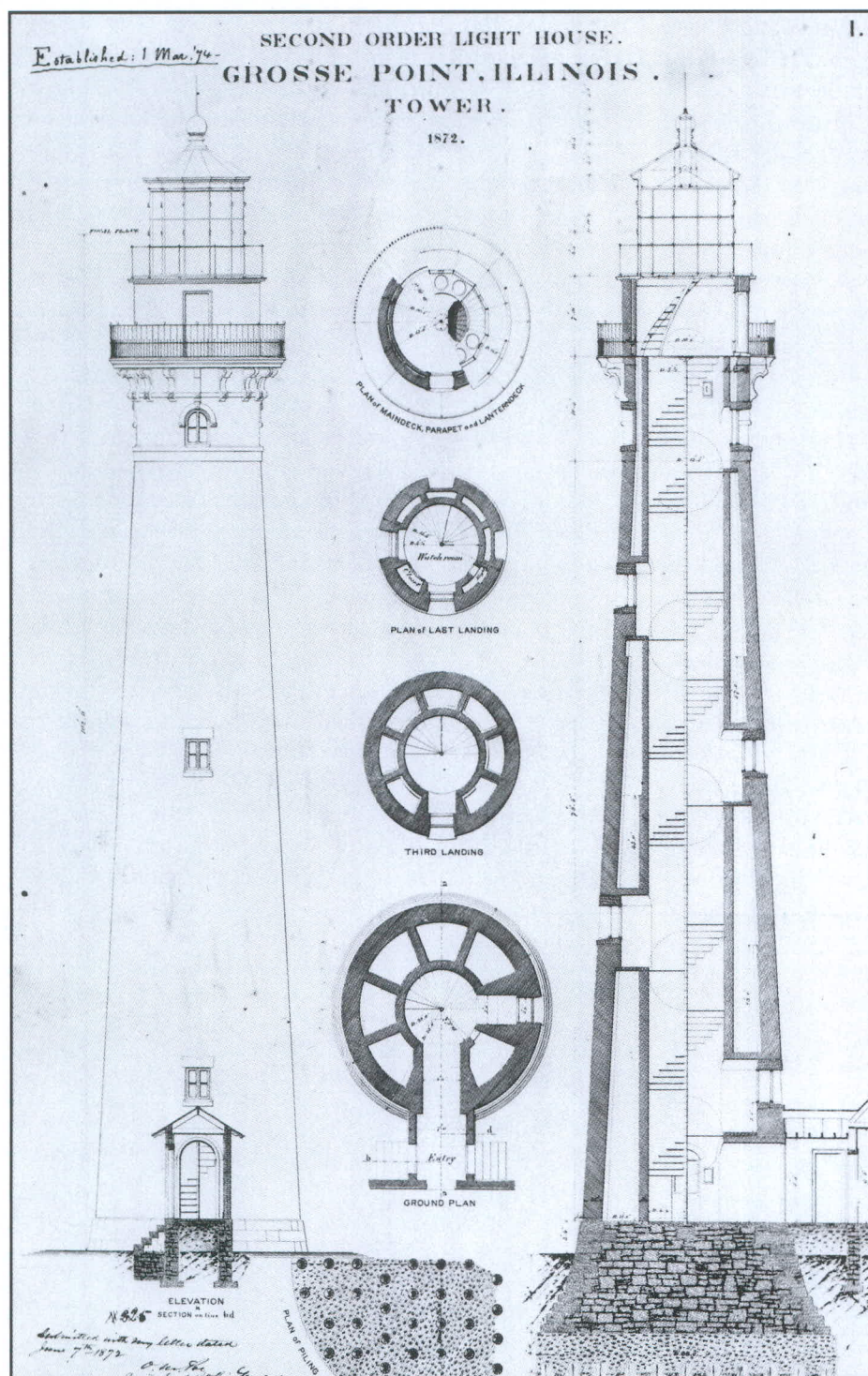
As great as the tragedy was, the sinking received even more attention because of the heroic rescue efforts made by Northwestern University and Garrett Biblical Institute students. Edward W. Spencer, at the time a junior at Northwestern, saved seventeen people before he collapsed and eventually died from his overexertion and exposure to the elements. As a direct result, the United States Life Saving Service established a station at Northwestern University.

Another disaster occurred in these same waters eight years later in 1868. At that time, a wooden steamer under the name *Seabird* went up in flames when a porter dumped coal ashes over the windward side of the ship. The ashes blew back and ignited straw that was stashed in wooden tubs below deck. The ship had been heading to Chicago. Between 68 and 100 crew members and passengers perished.

On November 17, 1869, after a reportedly fierce night of wind, rain, and snow, the schooner *Arrow* was found stranded on one of the shoals off Grosse Point. The crew was holed-up in the ship's ice cabin which was the only part of the vessel above water. After three days of attempted rescues, the crew was finally saved when the storm subsided.



The ill-fated *Lady Elgin* circa 1860. With nearly 300 lives lost it was, at the time, the worst disaster on the Great Lakes. Photo courtesy Chicago Historical Society.



Spurred by events such as these and by the constant knowledge of the hazardous water in the area, Evanston citizens petitioned Congress to erect a lighthouse on Grosse Point. In 1871, \$35,000 was appropriated for this reason and a 100 by 550-foot site was purchased for \$1,200. In 1873 the tower and keeper's house were completed and by March of the following year, the

Grosse Point Light Station became fully operational. The tower was built as the primary lighthouse marking the approach into the bustling harbor of Chicago. Its beacon became the first important guide for the Chicago Port entrance, whose lighthouse was inadequately placed too far inland. Completion of the lighthouse came none too soon. By 1888 there were more ships

arriving and departing the Chicago harbor than in New York. In 1885 the EVANSTON INDEX reported that 8,787 sailing vessels and 3,566 steam vessels had passed by Evanston during the navigation season. During its early years, from 50 to 100 sailing ships a day steered for the Grosse Point lighthouse from the Mackinac Straits located at the northern-most tip of Lake Michigan some 260 nautical miles away. The idea was to aim the unwieldy vessels for an objective short of their goal, Chicago, in order to avoid going beyond the city and turning about.

The Grosse Point Station was designed by Major O.M. Poe and constructed by government engineers. The 113-foot tall tower stands on a bluff some 25 feet above lake level. It was originally composed of yellow brick. However, because of exterior deterioration, a three and one-half inch facing of concrete was added in 1914. The stone foundation of the tower rests on wooden piles descending to a depth of 30 feet. The diameter is 22 feet at the base and 13 feet three inches at the parapet. The tower has two walls, the outer twelve inches thick, the inner eight. The entire thickness at the base is 7 feet while at the top it is two and one-half feet.

The heart of the light station is the second order Fresnel lens in the lantern room. It was manufactured in 1850 by the French company of Henri Lepaute, and both the name and the words "Paris, France" can be seen etched in the brass bordering the glass. The original signal consisted of a fixed white light, varied by a 10-second red flash every three minutes. Three panels of red glass, since removed, were slowly rotated around the lens by a clockwork-like mechanism powered by a 60-pound weight attached to a cable descending within the wall of the tower to the ground. The mechanism was wound up by a crank at the top of the tower. It took eight hours for the weight to reach ground level. This mechanism is still intact today. As the red glass panels revolved, it was possible to color the light for a short time to make a signal that ships could identify as



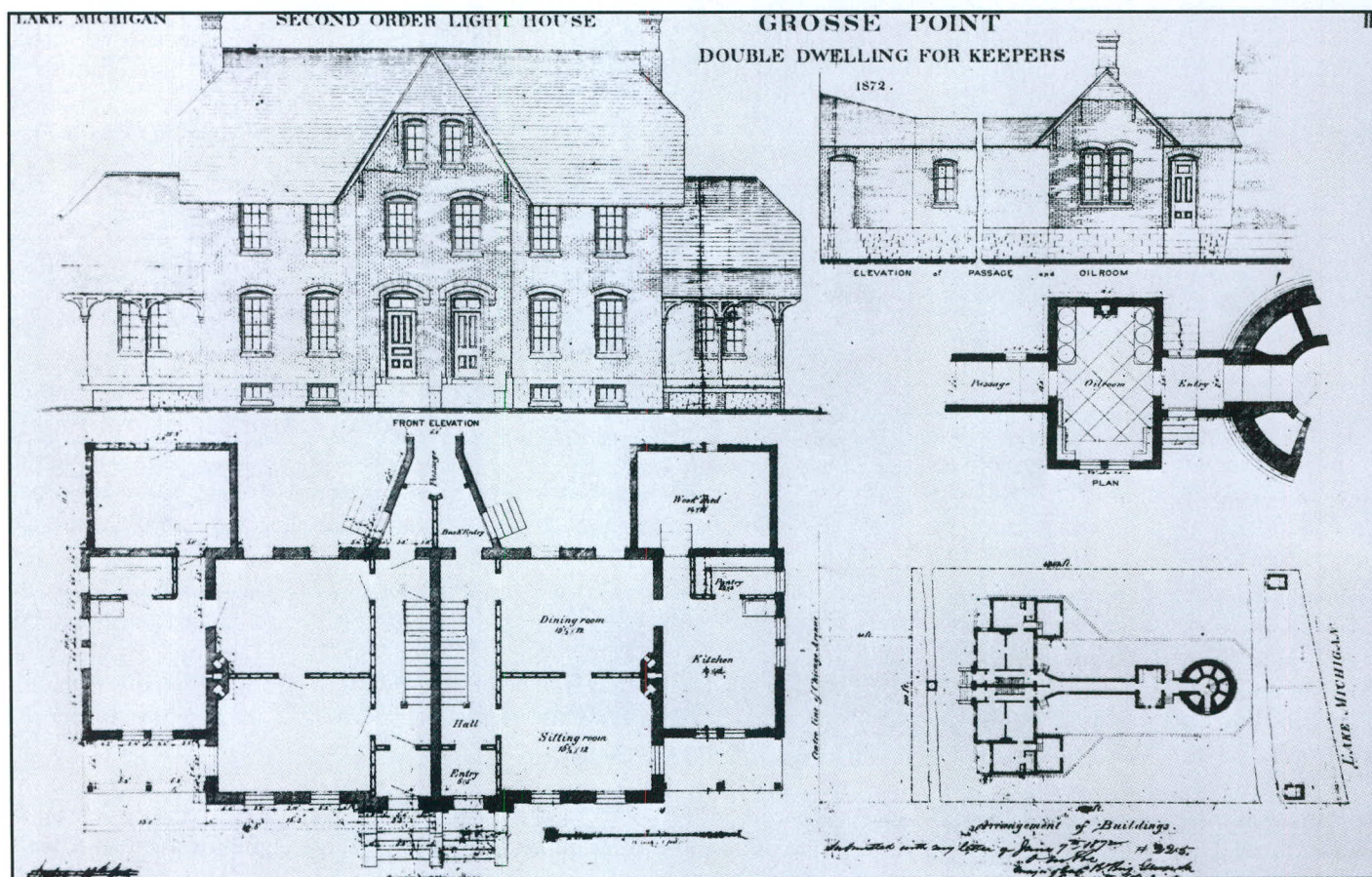
belonging to Grosse Point. On a clear night the light was visible for a distance of nineteen miles.

There is an interesting bit of folklore surrounding this particular lens at Grosse Point. In 1860, our government sent an order to France for three Fresnel lenses, at an expense of \$10,000 each, Congress having accepted the report of a committee recommending the "Fresnel" lenticular system in place of the former method of lamp reflectors. Upon arrival in this country, one lantern was sent to the Pacific coast while the others wound up in Florida where construction on two new lighthouses was about to begin. These projects were interrupted by the civil war. Conjecture is that the Confederate workmen wanted to prevent the lenses from being used to guide Union gunships along the Florida coast so they buried them. After the war, they were uncovered and sent to the main lighthouse service depot on Staten Island, NY for storage until one of them was used at Grosse Point. Although denied by the lampist who originally installed

the lens, this legend persisted through the years. Today, this second order lens represents the largest type used on the Great Lakes. Grosse Point holds the distinction of having the last one that is operational on these inland waterways.

In 1880, to complement the light, two buildings for duplicate steam sirens were built on the bluff overlooking the lake. In the event of fog or reduced visibility one was kept in regular service and the other as a standby, should the primary signal fail.

The keeper's quarters consisted of a 3-story duplex building containing six rooms on either side for use by keepers and their families. Heat in this structure was provided by wood burning stoves and light by kerosene lamps. There was an outdoor "privy" located on the grounds in the rear of the structure and an oil building constructed of brick that was used to house the kerosene and flammable supplies.



For some forty-eight years the daily activities at the station remained much the same until 1922 when the inevitable occurred and the lighthouse was electrified and automated. In 1932, the fog signal was discontinued. By 1935, the government decided to operate the light by photoelectric cell which eliminated the need for a keeper. Shortly thereafter, Edwin R. Bates and other officials of the North East Park District of Evanston (now called Lighthouse Park District) took note of the fact that the government was no longer using the lighthouse grounds or the beach and suggested joint action with the Evanston Historical Society to secure the land for recreational purposes. With the cooperation of Evanston Congressmen George Paddock and Ralph Church the Federal Government deeded the site to the City of Evanston under a terminable grant. The city then leased the area to the North East Park District for its year-round use.

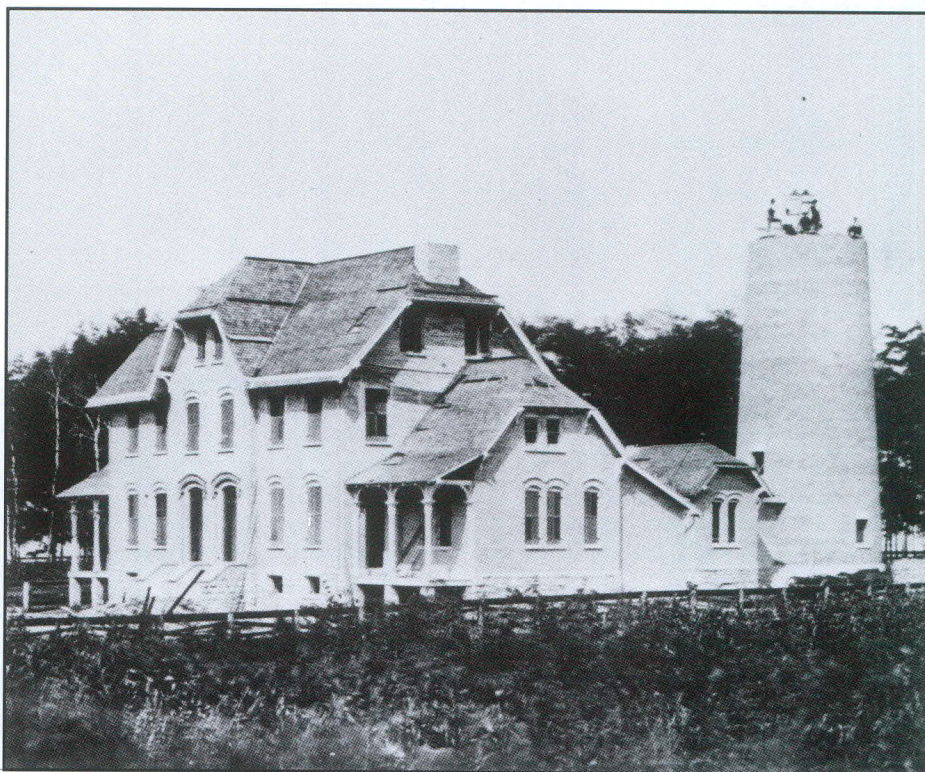
Since the transfer from federal to local jurisdiction, the maintenance and preservation of the lighthouse and grounds has continued to be a cooperative venture between several organizations. The Lighthouse Park District, in addition to pioneering the use of an abandoned lighthouse site for recreational purposes (an idea that other communities have only recently adopted) has been responsible for much of the day-to-day operation of the site since 1935. The City of Evanston, as legal owner of the property, has provided continued support over the years in many areas of management. The Evanston Historical Society has been an active supporter since the transfer of the property and at one point served as keepers of the tower. The Garden Club of Evanston has maintained the wildflower gardens around the site since 1937. More recently, the Evanston Environmental Association and the Junior League of Evanston have been instrumental in the restoration and development of the complex for interpretive purposes.

Interest in the restoration of the light station developed during the 1970s as

the lighthouse neared its centennial and our country its bicentennial. In 1973, a supply room at the base of the tower was restored. In 1975, a joint production between the Evanston Environmental Association and students at Northwestern University resulted in the film "LIGHTHOUSE" which focused attention on the historic structure. The significance of the Grosse Point Light Station was recognized in 1976 when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration continued in 1976 with the stabilization of the keepers' quarters. Painting of the interior of the tower took place between 1977 and 1980. That year also saw the completion of a two-year project to preserve and restore the exterior of the keepers' quarters and tower to their original day-signal colors of beige and red. The two foghorn houses were renovated in 1981. In 1983, a passageway which originally connected the keepers' quarters to the light tower was reconstructed. Over the last six years, restoration projects have been completed on five rooms in the keepers' quarters.

Long-range plans for the site have centered on creative use of the buildings and grounds, without compromising their historic integrity. To that end, the two foghorn buildings have been converted into a nature center and maritime/visitors center for interpretive purposes. One-half of the keepers' duplex is used as an orientation/exhibit area preceding tours of the lighthouse and the other half houses a modern-day keeper. The wildflower gardens around the site are unique in themselves. Developed from plans prepared by the noted landscape architect Jens Jensen, some 150 plant species are exhibited that are native to the area. This is a rare accomplishment in an urban setting.

Today, the Grosse Point light station is licensed as a private aid to navigation. The site is open year-round with tours of the lighthouse held on a seasonal basis during the summer months.



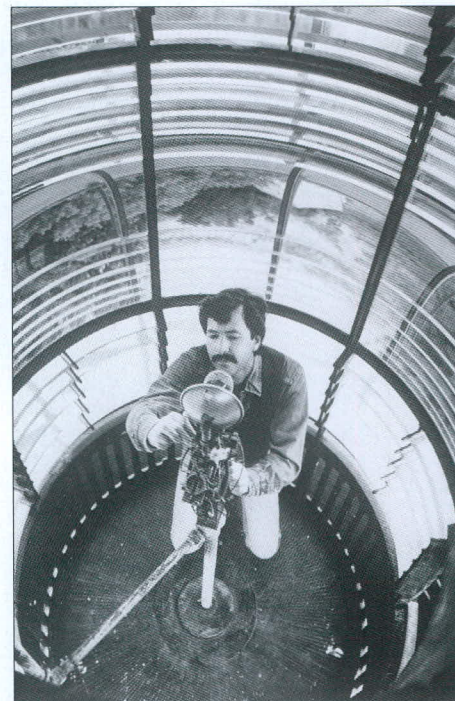
Above - Grosse Point Lighthouse under construction in 1873. Note the workmen on the top of the tower and lack of any safety railing. Photo courtesy of the Evanston Historical Society.



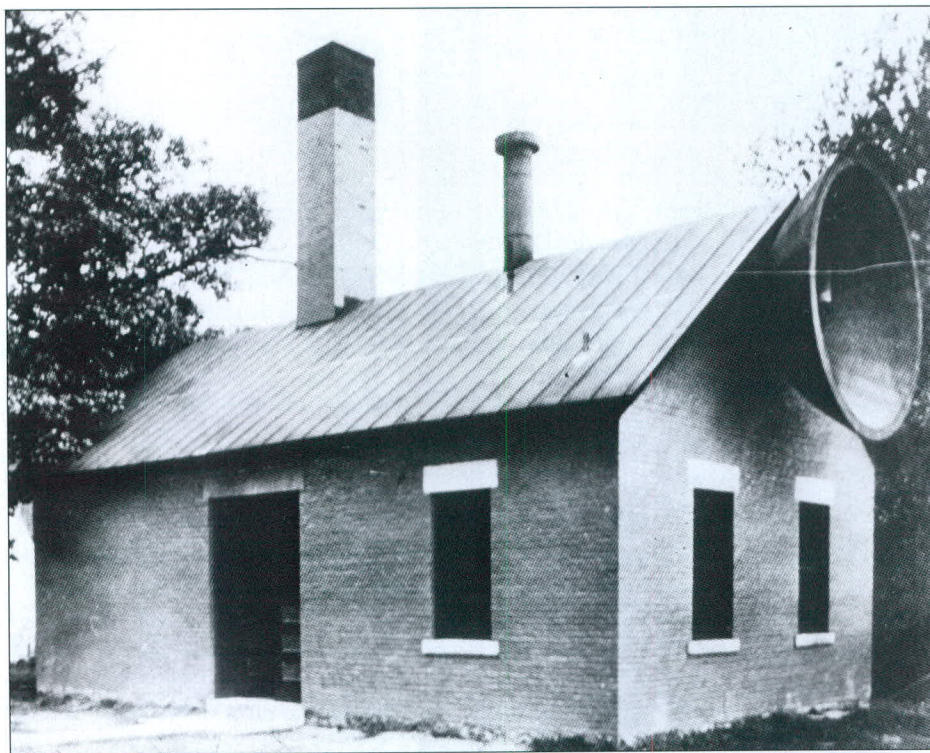
The Lighthouse Service made the mistake of using yellow (Milwaukee) brick in the construction of many Great Lakes Towers. Exposed to the harsh elements, the brick rapidly decayed. Such was the case with the Grosse Point Tower, above. In 1914 the Service applied a 3 1/2" coating of concrete over the brick to arrest the erosion.



Above Right—the restored tower circa 1915. Photos courtesy of the Evanston Historical Society.



Above - Author, and keeper of the lighthouse, Don Terras inside the 2nd Order lens. Photo courtesy of the Chicago Tribune.



Above - One of the two buildings constructed in 1880 to house steam siren fog signals. By the turn of the century the signal had been changed to a 10" steam whistle sounding a 5 second blast, 20 seconds of silence, 5 second blast and 40 seconds of silence. Note the unusually large horn or trumpet. Photo courtesy Evanston Historical Society.

The author, Don Terras, has been Keeper at the Grosse Point Light Station for the last six years. His interest in the history and preservation of the station began during an eight year stint as asst. curator at the Evanston Historical Society. Don holds B.A. and M.S. degrees in anthropology specializing in museum studies and cultural resource management. He hopes to eventually have the Grosse Point Light recognized as a National Historic Landmark.