LITTLE TRAVERSE LIGHTHOUSE

By Terry Pepper

From the earliest days, the northern Lake Michigan shoreline stretching 30 miles south of Waugoshance Point represented an area of incredible natural bounty. It had an endless supply of wildlife and fertile soil. By the 1600s the area supported one of the largest Indian populations to be found anywhere in North America. In his 1915 book *Stories of the Crooked Tree*, John C. Wright reported that "an Indian might walk a distance of fully 20 miles along this shore and find a wigwam every few rods." (A rod is equal to 16 ½ feet.) Consisting largely of Ottawa, this huge assemblage of natives were in some ways Michigan's first resorters, spending their summers in this virtual Eden, but making the long trek south every year to winter grounds in what would eventually become Illinois and Indiana.



Little Traverse Lighthouse and fog signal as it appeared in 1900. Other than a few more trees, the view from the water is very similar today. Library of Congress photo.

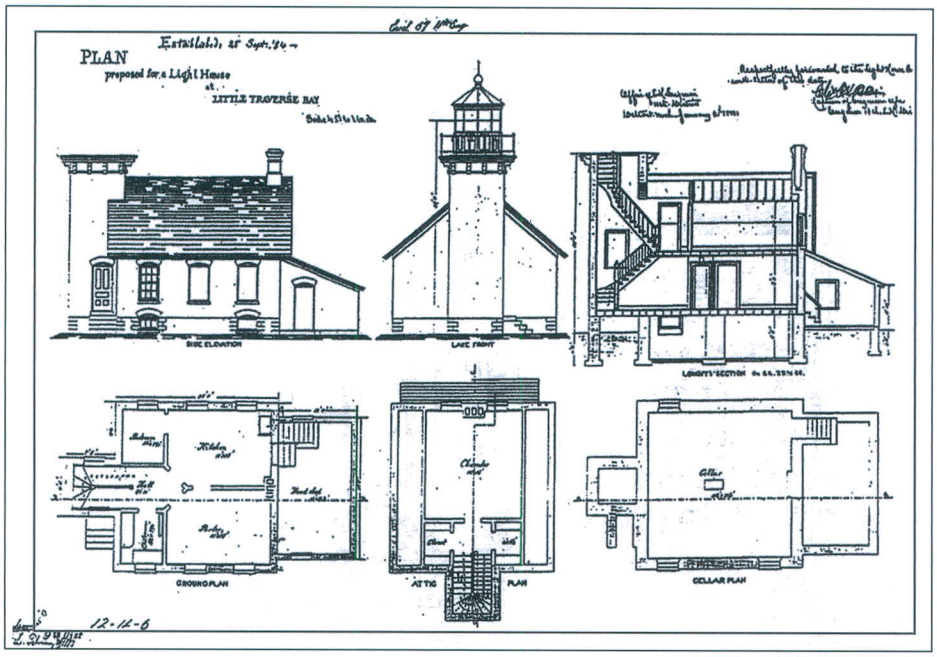
The name "Crooked Tree", to which Wright referred in his book, was given to the area by French voyagers. This hardy group of fur trappers and traders made their way westward from the New World outposts of Montreal and Quebec in large canoes using the rivers and lakes as natural highways. When they reached the vastness of the Great Lakes, they tended to avoid open water, instead keeping close to the protection of the shoreline. With the unpredictability of weather conditions on the lakes, without the benefit of charts or navigational equipment, these early navigators became intimately aware of the waters through which they traveled. They noted and named natural navigational features along the way to serve as future guideposts by identifying important trading and turning points.

As such, they gave the name L'Arbre Croche (which translates as Crooked Tree) to the center of this huge encampment after a large and distinctive pine tree that could be readily seen from offshore (in the area of the current village of Good Hart.) The southern extremity of this huge Indian encampment extended to the shore of a large bay that the voyagers named Petite Traverse, which translates as Little Traverse. Named for the open water across which they had to paddle as they crossed the bay, it was named to differentiate it from a larger bay some 20 miles farther south which they aptly named Grand Traverse. Perhaps more importantly, a long spit of land protruded within the Little Traverse bay, forming one of the most protected harbors of refuge on the entire western shore of Lake Michigan.

The Jesuits realized that L'Arbre Croche represented an ideal central location in which to further its mandate to convert the huge area native population to Christianity. They dispatched a priest from Michilimackinac to establish a new mission there in 1741. However, the mission closed after only a few years and was not reestablished until 1825 by Father Peter De Jean. He in turn relocated the mission to the shore of the natural harbor in Little Traverse Bay in 1827. In 1853 a white man by the name of Richard Cooper established the first store on the shore of the spit of land that formed the protective harbor. Over the ensuing years, the spit of land became known as Harbor Point, and a village known as Little Traverse sprang up on the shore around the harbor across from Harbor Point.

The exploitation of the natural resources surrounding the lakes supported the growing industrial centers on the lower lakes through the 1860s. The number of commercial vessels navigating the Great Lakes increased exponentially, and the need for Little Traverse Bay to serve as a harbor of refuge became of critical interest to the maritime community. Taking up the call of mariners, the Michigan legislature passed a joint resolution of both houses on February 27, 1871, requesting federal funding of harbor improvements. It called for the erection of a lighthouse to guide vessels around Harbor Point and into the harbor within. After simultaneous memorials were subsequently presented in the Senate and House on March 13 of that same year, the matter was referred to the Commerce Committee for evaluation. The Commerce Committee in turn forwarded the request to Brevet Brigadier General Orlando M. Poe, the chief engineer of the Ninth District for his evaluation.

In his report to the Commerce Committee of April 11, 1871, Poe observed that "the



Original plans for the Little Traverse Lighthouse. Sister lighthouses were erected at Sand Point in Baraga on Lake Superior and at Sherwood Point in Green Bay. A fourth sister was planned for Port Austin on Lake Huron, but it was decided to erect a light on the reef instead. Courtesy National Archives.

relation of the harbor of Little Traverse to the navigation of Lake Michigan can be readily seen and appreciated. The harbor itself is excellent in every respect; easy of access, affording good anchorage and a complete shelter from all winds. A Light-house of the fifth-order, together with a Fog-bell of 600 pounds with Steven's striking apparatus, will make the harbor available. In addition to its relation to the general commerce of Lake Michigan, the harbor has some local importance. This is increasing, and, doubtless, will continue to do so."

Following up on Poe's report, the Lighthouse Board requested an appropriation for $15,000 in its annual report for 1873. However, strapped for funds, Congress ignored the request, and although the board reiterated its request for funding the following year, the matter was soon dropped in favor of more important projects elsewhere in the system.

As was frequently the case, treaties with the Indians were frequently and expeditiously "modified" after their original signing. With the passage of new treaty limitations in 1875, the land around Little Traverse Bay was opened up for settlers, which opened the flood gates. Land speculators moved through the area, claiming huge tracts of forest for their respective companies. Lumbering operations followed quickly on their heels. Simultaneously with this commercial boom, word of the beauty of the bay, its sunsets, clean air, cool breezes, and clear water spread throughout the Midwest. An ever-increasing number of moneyed individuals, their pockets bulging with the bounty of the industrialization of cities in southern Michigan and Illinois, began pouring into the area to build summer cottages, mansions, and hotels.

The village of Little Traverse was officially incorporated and renamed Harbor Springs in 1880. With the growth of the adjacent bay front resort towns of Harbor Springs, Wequetonsing, Roaring Brook, Bay View, and Petoskey, there was a commensurate increase in the number of excursion vessels making their way in and out of Little Traverse Bay. Maritime interests again began petitioning for the construction of the lighthouse recommended almost 10 years previously. This time, with the support of political pressure applied by the resorters, the response was more positive. Congress approved an appropriation of $15,000 for the establishment of a light at Little Traverse on August 7, 1882. By the end of the year, plans for the new station had been drawn up and a survey team dispatched to identify the ideal location for the new station.

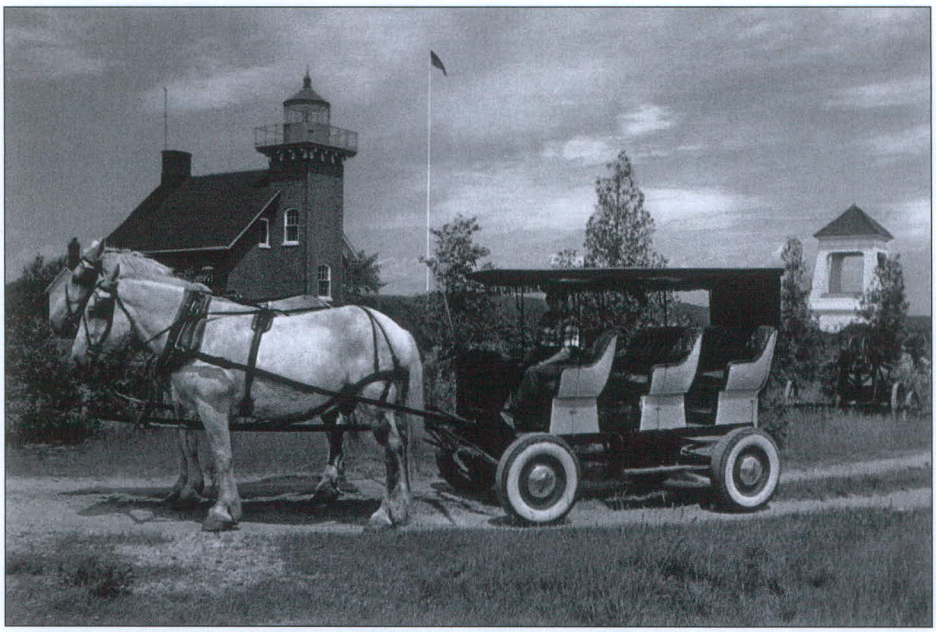
After obtaining clear title to the selected reservation early in 1884, a construction crew was delivered to Harbor Point on May 14, and work at the site began in earnest. By June 30, the basement had been excavated and the cut stone foundation walls laid. Joists for the first floor had been installed and the brickwork carried up to a height of two feet above the foundation level. The 1 ½-story brick dwelling stood 25 feet by 37 feet in plan, with a 10-foot square tower standing 30 feet in height integrated into its south gable end. The tower was capped by a square copper-floored gallery with iron hand railings, centered on which an octagonal cast-iron lantern was installed. The district lampist arrived from Detroit and installed the station's fixed red fourth-order Fresnel lens ordered from Sautter and Lemonnier of Paris, France.

Elizabeth Whitney Williams, 42, accepted a transfer from Michigan's St. James Harbor Lighthouse on Beaver Island where she had been serving for the past 12 years. Construction was completed on September 18, and with the arrival of Mrs. Williams and her husband, Daniel, she climbed the stairs of her new station and officially exhibited the new light on the evening of September 25, 1884, sending the light 13 miles across the bay.

With the creation in 1887 of the Ninth Lighthouse District, which encompassed all of Lake Michigan, a search was on for a location for a buoy depot to serve the northern portion of the lake. The protection



Elizabeth Whitney Williams, keeper of the Little Traverse Lighthouse from September 15, 1884 to her retirement on November 3, 1913. Photo courtesy Beaver Island Historical Society.

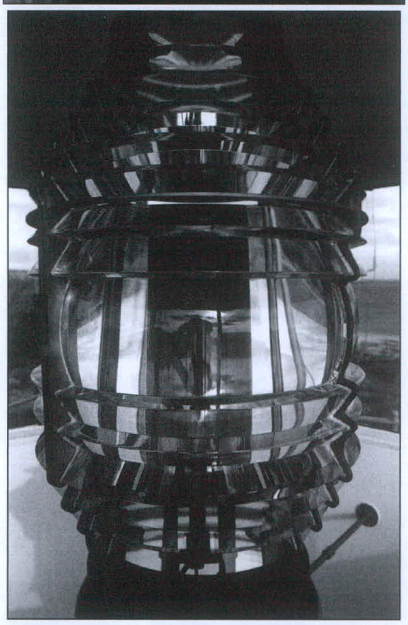




Above: Little Traverse Lighthouse postcard, postmarked 1966, showing the horse and wagon which used to serve as transportation for Harbor Point Association residents. Author's collection.
Below left: Little Traverse Lighthouse circa 1900. Photo from the Michigan Lighthouse Conservancy collection.
Below right: The bell striker in the Little Traverse fog bell tower. This striker is connected to the Gamewell bell-striking machinery in the room beneath by a series of levers and pivots. Photo by Terry Pepper.

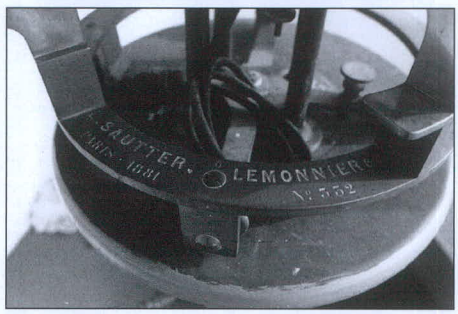












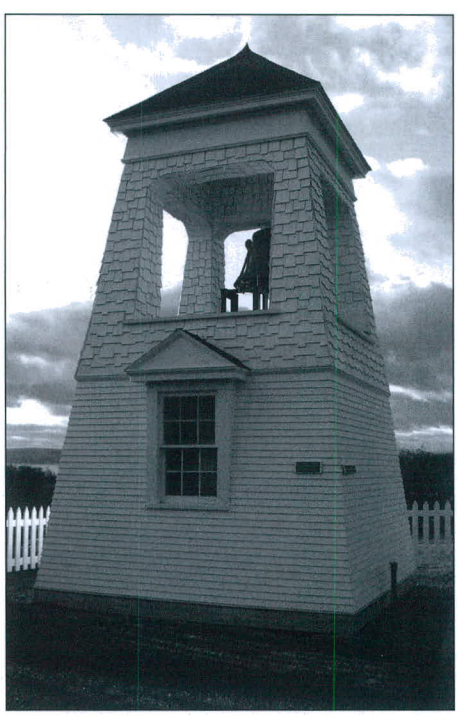
Above: The Gamewell bell-striking machine which was recently installed in the Little Traverse fog bell tower.
Right: Originally serving as a woodshed, the structure was enlarged in 1894 to provide housing for Elizabeth Whitney Williams' horse. The structure was subsequently converted into a garage as horses gave way to the horseless carriage. Photos by Terry Pepper.

Top: The steep wooden stairway which leads from the second floor of the dwelling up to the lantern at the Little Traverse Lighthouse.
Center: The original fixed, fourth-order Fresnel lens on its pedestal in the lantern at the Little Traverse Lighthouse. Note that it is outfitted with a green glass chimney, since it exhibited a green characteristic when it was last displayed.
Bottom: The base plate of the fixed, fourth-order lens manufactured by Sautter & Lemonnier & Cie. in 1881 in the lantern at the Little Traverse Lighthouse. Photos by Terry Pepper.

offered by Harbor Point represented a perfect location for such a facility. The Lighthouse Board requested an appropriation of $50,000 to purchase a site and erect the necessary sheds and wharves at Little Traverse. However, this request was not repeated in subsequent reports, and the buoy depot was eventually established at Charlevoix.

A municipal water supply was established at Harbor Springs in 1891, and the Ninth District Engineer Major William Ludlow took advantage of the availability of water by having the station hooked up to the system that same year. Three years later, a summer kitchen was erected and a new woodshed was constructed. The old woodshed was converted into a barn for Mrs. Williams' horse, and wooden sidewalks laid to connect all of the station buildings.

To serve the pleasure boats transporting vacationers in and out of the harbor in thick weather, a fog bell tower was established on the point in front of the lighthouse on June 1, 1896. Standing 18 feet tall at the eaves, the tower was divided into upper and lower sections. The bell was suspended in the open upper section, and a Stevens automated bell-striking apparatus was located in the enclosed lower section. Powered by a weight within a vertical wooden shaft, the weight was cranked to the top of the shaft, and as the drum rotated the weight slowly descended. The mechanisms within the Stevens apparatus converted this rotary motion to a linear motion, which was then transferred to a large hammer that struck the bell with two sharp blows every 30 seconds.



Erected in 1896, over the past few years the fog bell tower has been lovingly restored to its original working condition by the Harbor Point Association. Photo by Terry Pepper.



Little Traverse Lighthouse and fog bell circa 1905. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives.

In the early days of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, sperm and lard oil were used for fueling the lamps. Relatively nonvolatile, the oil was stored in special rooms in lighthouse cellars or in the dwelling itself. With a change to the significantly more volatile kerosene, a number of devastating dwelling fires were experienced, and beginning late in the 1880s the Lighthouse Board began building separate oil storage buildings at all U.S. light stations. To this end, a work crew and materials were delivered at the station in 1898, and a brick oil storage building was erected a safe distance from the main building.

Other than the installation of a lightning rod on the tower the following year, Mrs. Williams' life at Little Traverse settled into a peaceful routine for the next decade. While her husband sold boats and photographed the country around the bay, the relative peace and quiet life at the Little Traverse Lighthouse afforded Mrs. Williams the opportunity to write her recollections of her childhood on Beaver Island. It was during the reign of King James Strang, the self-proclaimed Mormon king. She wrote of her life as keeper of the St. James Harbor Lighthouse after the death of her first husband in a boating accident. At the urging of friends, the 63-year-old Mrs. Williams published her famous autobiography, *A Child of the Sea,* in 1905, with her memoirs bringing considerable admiration as people learned of her interesting and trying life story. After 43 years of lighthouse service, she retired in 1913 and relocated to Charlevoix with her husband, where they had purchased a small house.

On November 3, 1913, Alfred Erickson accepted a transfer from the Calumet Pierhead Light where he had been serving as keeper for the past two years. A young man of 26, Erickson entered lighthouse service at the age of 17. His first assignment being as second assistant at Plum Island. He then served at Chicago Harbor and Sheboygan Pierhead stations before accepting a transfer to Calumet in 1911.

Other than a change in the characteristic of the fog bell, from a double stroke every 30 seconds to a single stroke every 30 seconds in 1914, Erickson's life settled into the same quiet routine as Mrs. Williams. The only recorded item of interest from Erickson's tenure at Little Traverse occurred on September 4, 1917, when he was commended by Bureau of Lighthouses Commissioner George Putnam for rescuing a woman who fell into the water when stepping from a boat onto one of the docks in Harbor Springs.

Erickson continued to enjoy the relatively easy duty at Little Traverse until he resigned from service in 1940. After the transfer, the old "wickies" were given the option of continuing as civilians or transferring into the Coast Guard. Many of the old civilian keepers elected to retire. Since Erickson was only 53 years of age, it is likely that he found other



Little Traverse Lighthouse as it appeared in 1988 before the Harbor Point Association began its recent restoration project. Note the unsympathetic addition which had been made to the structure during the Coast Guard era. This has now been removed to return the structure to its original appearance. Photo by Dick Moehl.

work in the area. The Coast Guard changed the characteristic of the light from a fixed red light to a fixed green light.

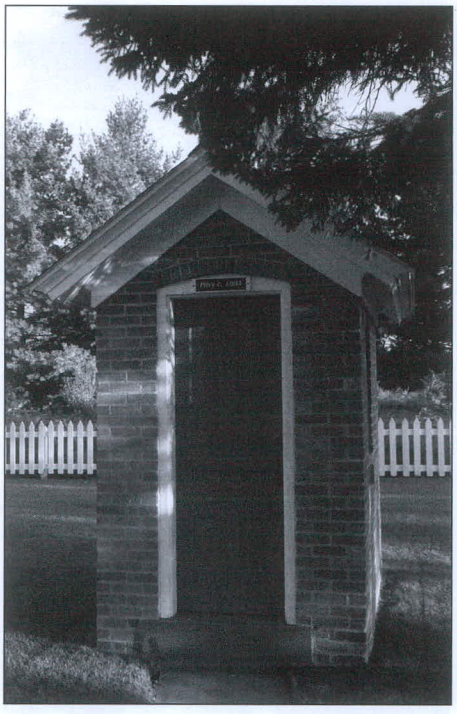
With improvements in radar and LORAN-C in the late 1960s, the vital role played by the old lighthouses and fog signals faded, and a move was on to automate as many lights as possible to eliminate the costs associated with full-time crews at the stations. To this end, a work crew arrived at Harbor Point in 1963 and erected a 41-foot-tall, steel skeleton tower, outfitted with a flashing green electric light. Standing at a focal plane of 72 feet, the new light was visible for a distance of 14 miles. With the display of this new light, the fourth-order Fresnel lens in the tower was extinguished, never to be relighted.

The lighthouse, property, outbuildings, and original Fresnel lens were transferred to the Harbor Point Association and remain under the collective ownership of the association. After formation of a Lighthouse Committee in 1991, the Harbor Point Association has made tremendous strides in returning the lighthouse and grounds to their turn of the 19th century appearance. In the restoration of the dwelling, an anachronistic wooden frame addition at the rear of the lighthouse was removed, the exterior brickwork carefully cleaned and re-pointed, and accurate replica shutters crafted and installed on all windows. Portions of the interior have been restored, with some areas devoted to interpreting the history of the lighthouse and the Harbor Point Association, which was established in 1878. Original plans of the lighthouse are on display as well as many rare photographs of local maritime activity and social life on the point in the Victorian era.

On the station grounds, the original detached brick privy, which was built with the lighthouse in 1884, is well preserved as is the barn that was subsequently rebuilt 1894. Over the past couple of years, the 1896 bell tower and fog bell have been restored and returned to operating condition. While originally equipped with a Stevens automated bell-striking machine, an exhaustive search throughout the country for a duplicate mechanism proved fruitless. Eventually, a very similar Gamewell bell striker was purchased and restored to like-new operating condition. This clockwork mechanism is powered by 900 pounds of weights that are hand cranked up into the tower. Through a series of linkages, the rotating drum trips a lever that causes a large hammer to strike the 1,300-pound bell twice every 30 seconds.

In the spring of 2011, a replica of the original oil house will be reconstructed on the site of the original in accordance with Lighthouse Board plans. With the construction of this oil house, the entire light station will again appear exactly the way it did in 1896, making it one of the most picturesque and complete examples to be found on the Great Lakes.

As a result of its location in the gated Harbor Point community, lighthouse lovers wishing to view the lighthouse have had to satisfy themselves with photographs taken from the water. The lighthouse and grounds are only opened to the public on a few rare occasions. Thankfully, one of these rare occasions will occur on October 1, 2011, when the Harbor Point Association will open the lighthouse to the public for *one day* as a fund-raising opportunity for the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society. Tours will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. Additional information, such as ticket price and tour times, are available by contacting the historical society at (231) 526-9771 or visiting their website: www.HarborSpringsHistory.org.



The restored station privy at the Little Traverse Lighthouse. This spring this structure will be joined by a replica of the oil storage building, which was erected nearby in 1898. Photo by Terry Pepper.