Story of McGulpin Point Historic Site

This promontory has a history which starts perhaps thousands of years ago with Native American use and continues into the 20th Century as a lighthouse location.

According to the oral traditions of the Anishnaabek, Native Americans arrived and settled in the Straits of Mackinac many generations before the arrival of the first Europeans.

Anishnaabek history tells of the Odawa coming to the Straits of Mackinac to expel an earlier tribe living in Northern Michigan. This tribe, according to Odawa historian Andrew J. Blackbird, was called the Mus-co-desh. In Blackbird's story, a great insult was delivered to the Odawa by the Mus-co-desh, who then occupied what is now Emmet County. This insult so infuriated the great war chief Sagemaw that he immediately went back to his villages on Manitoulin Island to gather a war party to right this wrong. The result was the near extermination of the Mus-co-desh and their expulsion from Northern Michigan. The Odawa took advantage of this vacuum and moved into Emmet County, settling first at McGulpin Point.

American written history tells us that John McAlpine and his Native American wife lived on McGulpin Point in the 1760s. After the turbulence of the Revolutionary War the land was surveyed for the new United States of America by Aaron Greeley and ownership was determined. John McAlpine's son and heir, Patrick McGulpin, was given the patent on this land and holds the first recorded deed in Emmet County, Michigan in 1811.

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 Americans started to flood to the Chicago area. During the 1850's, vessel traffic through the Straits of Mackinac was increasing rapidly, and while the Waugoshance Light marked the western entry into the Straits, and the Bois Blanc Island light marked the eastern entry, the absence of a navigational aid within the shoal-ridden Straits themselves made passage during darkness and periods of low visibility extremely dangerous.

To answer that need, the Lighthouse Board petitioned Congress for the construction of a lighthouse at McGulpin Point, approximately two miles west of Fort Michilimackinac. Congress responded favorably to the request on August 3, 1854 with the appropriation of $6,000 for the station's construction.

A clouded title and the Civil War interrupted this effort and it was not until late in 1867 that the State of Michigan condemned the land thus clearing the cloud over the title and obtaining ownership of this land. The land was then transferred to the federal government and work on McGulpin Point lighthouse began

early in 1869. The station was built as a mirror image of the design used at Chambers Island and Eagle Bluff lights under construction in the Death's Door area that same year. This plan, which is sometimes referred-to as the "Norman Gothic" style was also later also used at Eagle Harbor in 1871, White River in 1875, and at Passage and Sand Islands in 1882.

Among the Station's most notable keepers was James Davenport, who after serving at Waugoshance and Little Point Sable, was transferred to McGulpin Point in September of 1879, a position he held for twenty-seven years, until the station was discontinued in 1906. The Davenport family lived the entire navigation season in the lighthouse, but after the close of the navigation season every year, moved to their home in Mackinaw City so that the children could get to and from school, the snow making the trip from town to the lighthouse virtually impossible.

With the construction of the Old Mackinac Point light and fog signal station in 1892, the Lighthouse Board decided that McGulpin Point station no longer served its once critical purpose.

The lighthouse finally passed into private ownership in 1913 when Sam Smith, an early village president and entrepreneur, purchased the property for $1,425. The station was subsequently resold a couple of times. The last private owners were the Peppler family from whom the station was purchased by Emmet County in 2008. Now back into public ownership

Emmet County's mission is to reestablish McGulpin Point Lighthouse as a private aid to navigation (PATON). The U.S. Coast Guard has approved the McGulpin Point Lighthouse PATON application. A contract has been let to Moran Iron Works, Inc., of Onaway, MI to construct a replica ten sided lantern housing from the walls up to the bird spike.

A major maritime event will occur on May 30, 2009 when McGulpin Point Lighthouse celebrates its 140th anniversary with a relighting ceremony as a navigational aid and in the navigational Light List as a PATON.

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Richard L. Moehl
707 N. Huron Street
P. O. Box 219
Mackinaw City, MI 49701