

Michigan City

Indiana's Only Lighthouse

by Patricia Harris

At the bend of the Michigan City harbor on Trail Creek stands an historic structure whose beacon served as a guiding light for Great Lakes sailors for more than 120 years. Michigan City's well-lighted port has a long and interesting history, bound to the lake with all its mysteries and beauties.

The story of the lighthouse at Michigan City begins in 1835 when Isaac C. Elston, founder of Michigan City, and his wife, Maria, knowing that aids to navigation would be needed, deeded to the U.S. Government on 23 June 1835, a tract of land running from the bend of Trail Creek to the lake for the purpose of constructing a lighthouse. Michigan City on Lake Michigan was at the terminus of the Michigan Road which ran north from Madison, Indiana on the Ohio River and was Indiana's main north-south route of commerce for many years. Michigan City was Indiana's only port on Lake Michigan and as such exported grain, pork and fish and imported lumber and many other goods for the citizens of the town and the rest of Indiana. 180 vessels sailed into the port of Michigan City in 1855 and by 1869 the number had risen to 645.

The first light was a minor "post light" located 100 feet west of the present lighthouse. A more prominent light was needed for the growing port of Michigan City. On 30 June 1834 Congress appropriated $5,000 for a lighthouse and keepers dwelling at or near Michigan City. Stephen Pleasanton, 5th Auditor of the treasury and head of lighthouse matters, wrote in August of

1835 that two bids had been received, but that neither proposal could be accepted as they were both above the appropriation and nothing further could be done until Congress appropriated a larger sum. On 9 May 1836 they did appropriate an additional $3,000.

Samuel Miller, the first resident of Michigan City, Superintendent of the Lighthouses of Lake Michigan (which included the Chicago, ILL. and St. Joseph, Michigan lighthouses and the proposed Michigan City Lighthouse) advertised for bids. Miller let a contract on 18 August 1836 to Jeremy Hixon, Sr. and Jr. for $7,000 to construct a 40 foot high white-washed lighthouse tower topped with a lantern and a keepers dwelling plus $1,000 to "fit up per advertisement." All of this was to be completed by 20 October 1836. One of our faithful docents of many years, Lucile Striebel, who volunteers twice a month at age 90 is the great, great granddaughter of Jeremy Hixon, Sr.

Delays continued to plague what was to be Indiana's only lighthouse. The construction deadline was not met as the vessels carrying construction materials were driven ashore in a storm in September and their cargoes lost. Supt. Miller asked for, and was granted, an extension for completion of the lighthouse until 1 July 1837. However, the funds appropriated for the lighthouse had to be returned to the Treasury Department as they would not be used in that fiscal year. The contractor had to continue with the work in hopes they would reappropriate the funds. This was done 3 May 1847. Work proceeded very slowly, but finally, Pleasonton wrote Charles W. Morgan on 11 December 1837 that the light at Michigan City was ready to be lit as soon as it was furnished with oil. Two days earlier, on 9 December, Edmund B. Harrison was appointed the first keeper at a salary of $350 per annum. It is possible that the light was not actually lit until the summer of 1838, the third lighthouse on Lake Michigan.

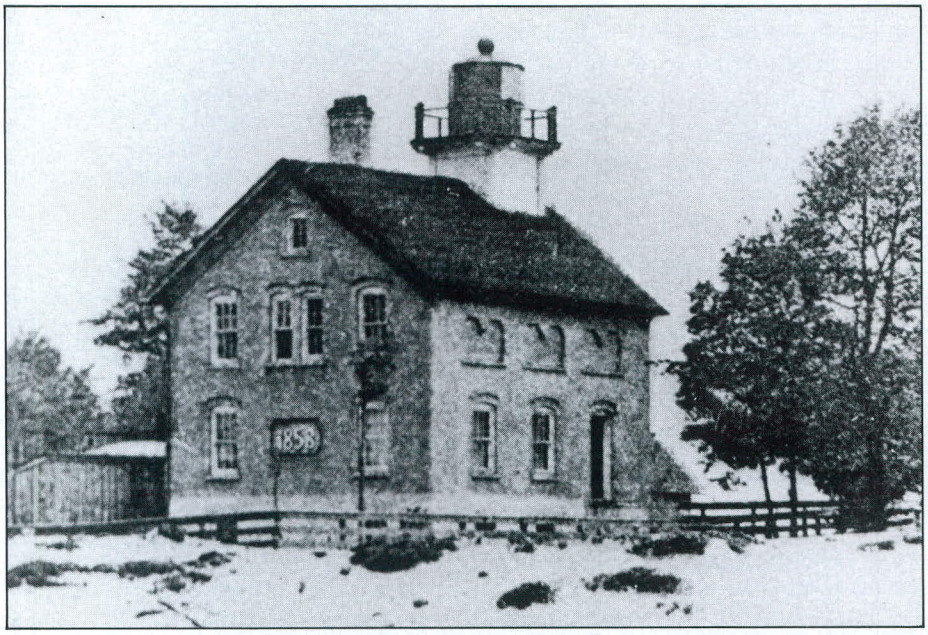
An early writing described it: "A story and a half house, plastered on the outside and dazzling in its whiteness, more of a portico than a veranda ornamented the front and was covered with trailing vines. It fronted south and was surrounded by a grove of small oaks on the west. The well-kept lawn was dotted with shrubbery, flowers and enclosed by a low rustic fence, and from a little wicket gate led a white graveled walk to the residence. The lighttower was a detached cone-shaped structure."

The Michigan City Lighthouse is listed in the 1839 Light List only as light #237 with no other information. The 1849 Light Lists it as #262 having a 40 foot tower with the focal plane being 60 feet above lake level. It had 4 lamps with 14 inch reflectors and could be seen 14 miles out on the lake. A 25 July 1840 Report of Lighthouses on Lake Michigan by Samuel W. Hawes, 5th Auditor, stated that the lighthouse at Michigan City "has 11 lamps of tin with common candle wicking, does not use any tube glasses and consequently shows but a poor light."

Other keepers at this lighthouse were Mrs. Harriet C. Towner, widow of the former pastor of the Congregational Church, and John M. Clarkson.

As the shipping of grain and lumber increased a brighter light was needed to guide the ships. In 1858 the U.S. Government constructed the lighthouse which is now incorporated in the Old Lighthouse Museum structure. It was constructed of Joliet stone for the foundation and Milwaukee brick for the upper structure. The original lighthouse was 20′ 4″ wide by 32′ 8″ long with three complete floors, the first floor was the basement which was partially concealed in the sand on the north. A large "1858," bricked into the south wall is visible today. A single entrance faces east and is reached by a six-step stairway. The original tower of this structure was located on the north end of the peaked roof. The combined elevation of the lighthouse and sand dune upon which it sat was approximately 53 feet above the lake and allowed the 5th Order lens with a fixed characteristic to be visible on Lake Michigan for nearly 15 miles. Sperm oil fueled the beacon. John M. Clarkson served as the keeper of the new lighthouse until he was replaced on 19 March 1861 by Miss Harriet Colfax, cousin of Vice President Schuyler Colfax under President Grant.

In fair weather or foul, the lighthouse keepers climbed the tower and twice at night, at dusk and midnight, trimmed the wick, polished the reflectors, and recharged the light with lard oil. Shortly after daybreak, the process was repeated, and the lights were extinguished until nightfall. So diligently did the keepers perform these tasks over



The 1858 Michigan City Lighthouse prior to the turn of the century. At the top of the opposite page—the lighthouse as it appears today. Photos courtesy of the Michigan City Historical Society.

the years that the Michigan City Lighthouse became known as "Old Faithful."

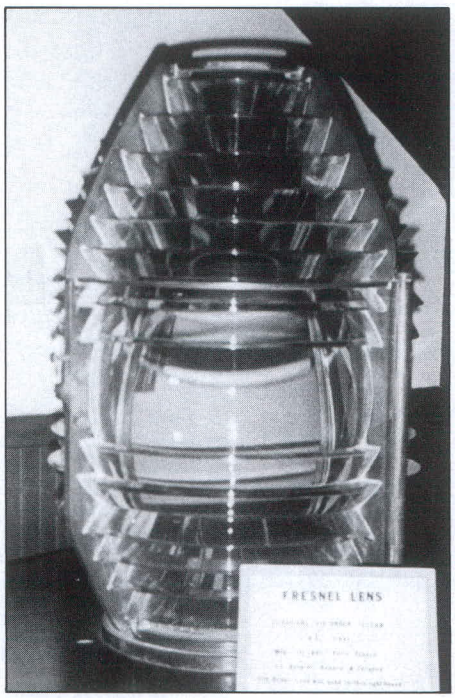
Beginning 20 November 1871 Miss Colfax was also given the responsibility for a small post light installed on the east pier, a distance of some 1500′. In 1875 this beacon was moved to the west pier which extended some 500′ further into the lake. The trip to the east

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pier over the narrow walkway, which was often windswept and icy, was dangerous enough, but the change of location to the west pier made the journey even more hazardous for the keeper. It meant that the keeper now had to cross the creek by boat and walk along the other side of the creek, ascend the elevated walkway, climb the beacon ladder and light the light. Lard oil was used at the time and on cold nights it was necessary to heat the oil before carrying the lamp to the beacon. On one especially cold night, when the waves dashed over the raised walk and it was only by waiting for a temporary lull that the passage could be made, Miss Colfax warmed the lard oil and started on her hazardous trip. Twice she was driven back before she gained the beacon, and when at last she reached it, she found to her dismay and annoyance that the lock had been tampered with and it would not open. In her desperation she finally broke a pane of glass, crawled through the opening and inserted the lamp in place. However, so much time had been lost that the oil had congealed and would not ignite. Lamp in hand, she started back to the lighthouse through an icy shower, slipped, fell, rose and slipped again, but finally reached the end of the pier in safety. The oil was again heated and again she started out for the beacon, this time accomplishing her task. The little woman returned bruised and thoroughly soaked. Many men said no amount of money would have tempted them to perform the task she did, but attention to duty at times like this is what earned the title of "Old Faithful" for the Michigan City Lighthouse.

This beacon on the west pier was carried away and destroyed in a severe gale 14 October 1886. Starting in 1887 the main light atop the lighthouse keeper's dwelling was kept lit year round rather than only during the shipping season (April to November).

In 1894 the Lighthouse Board recommended that a fog-signal operated by steam or hot air be built at Michigan City as a valuable aid to navigation. Early fog signals at this port had been operated by the Rawson Root Lumber Co. and there was a hand-cranked one at the lighthouse. They recommended



The 4th Order Fresnel lens originally in the lantern room of the Michigan City Lighthouse is now part of the display in the museum. Old Lighthouse Museum photo.

an appropriation of $5,500. This recommendation was repeated each year until it was finally appropriated in 1900. However, on 6 June of the same year work was suspended until the War Dept. completed the extension of the piers. Finally, in 1904 the east pier's extension was completed and a 24′ square concrete and steel fog signal building topped with an octagonal tower (10′6″ diameter) surmounted with a black cylindrical lantern was constructed on the end of the east peir. The height from the base to the outer ventilator ball of the lantern was 40′6″. The fog signal building housed two Kingsford Foundry and Machine boilers that operated a 10″ Crosby automatic steam whistle located on the north side of the tower roof. The elevated walkway was extended all the way to the new pierhead light and on 20 October 1904 the lens, a 5th Order Classical manufactured by L. Sautter c̄ Cie Constructeurs of Paris, was moved from the lantern room on the keepers dwelling to the new tower. On the same day the west pierhead and breakwater lights were established.

Miss Colfax, who served so faithfully for 43 years at this light, retired on 14 October just six days before the lens was moved. On 8 October she entered into the journal: "Sold household effects preparatory to vacating the dear old lighthouse." 12 October, her last entry: "Fair, warm wind, smokey atmosphere. Received another call from Mr. Armstrong, my successor." 13 October, entry by new Keeper Thomas Armstrong: "The retiring keeper left the station this 4 p.m. and all her personal effects." Just five months later she died at age 80.

Keeper Armstrong was not able to live in the Old Lighthouse for many months as the dwelling underwent extensive renovation. It was enlarged by adding two rooms to each floor on the north side, the inside was practically gutted and duplex apartments were created. The keeper lived in four rooms on the east side and each of the assistant keepers had three rooms each on the west side. The upper structure was covered with wooden shingles and separate entrances were installed with a round porch on the east and a rectangular porch on the west. The tower was removed from the roof.

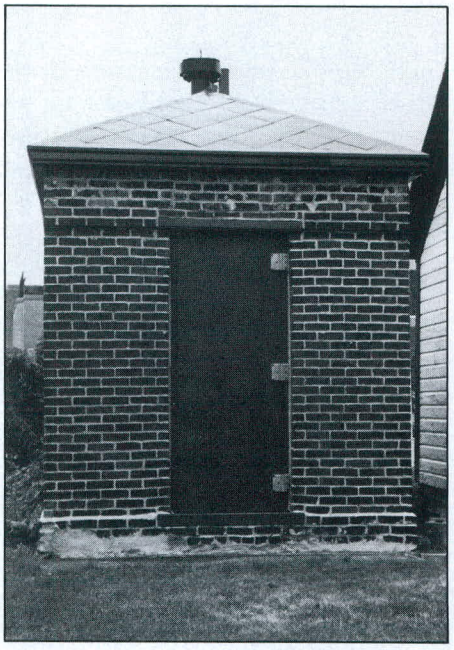
In 1906 city water was piped to the dwelling and a brick oil house with a capacity for 300 5-gallon cans was constructed. Other buildings on the reservation were a double privy, workshop and a 12′×32′ coal shed. The latter no longer stands.

Phillip Sheridan became keeper on 1 September 1918 and beginning with his assignment the U.S. Government no longer provided second assistant keepers. On 1 August 1930 Wallace

Donovan was assigned. He was to be the last keeper of the lighthouse. In 1933 the light on the east pier was electrified and the keeper was able to light the beacon by throwing a switch on shore. Keeper Donovan died in August 1940 and shortly thereafter Asst. Keeper Ralph Moore moved out of the Old Lighthouse.

Under President Roosevelt's Reorganization Act of 1 July 1939 the U.S. Coast Guard took over the Lighthouse Service and after Keeper Donovan's death they assumed charge of the light. Since the Coast Guard had their own station a few hundred yards away, they had no need for the Old Lighthouse. Part of it was rented for a period of time and the Coast Guard Auxiliary called it home for awhile. Then the weather, neglect and vandals took their toll on this historic structure, and the government declared it surplus in 1960.

The Government Services Administration (GSA) sold the property to the City of Michigan City in 1963 for $18,500 provided that the city use it for parks and recreation. On 9 May 1965 the Michigan City Historical Society, Inc. entered into a 20-year lease to restore the Old Lighthouse and establish a museum within two years. Instead it took eight years and about $100,000 plus donated labor and materials to restore the 1858 lighthouse. National Questers and the local Marquette Chapter of Questers donated the funds to replace the lantern room on the lighthouse. On 9 June 1973 the doors of the Old Lighthouse Museum were opened. On 6 November 1974 the Old Lighthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its historically significant architecture and association with lake transportation.



The restored 1906 oil house. Old Lighthouse Museum (Michigan City) photo).



Mrs. Tom Martin reading in the living room of the keeper's quarters at Michigan City, circa 1920. Old Lighthouse Museum photo.

1987 marks the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the lighthouse at Michigan City. The successor to the 1837 Lighthouse, the East Pierhead Light, still guides mariners to safe port and is one of the most photographed lights in the area. The 1858 lighthouse still stands and has thousands of visitors each year who come to see a lighthouse, learn more of the lake lore and local history. Special displays and events have been planned for the anniversary year. Scale models by John Heinz, a Chicago model maker, of Lodner Phillips 1851 submarine and diving armour and Bryon Connett's one-man submarine that crossed Lake Michigan in 1938 will be featured through November. In addition to the keepers living room and bedroom, two Fresnel Lens, our own 5th Order and a 4th Order Classical Barbier, Benard & Turenne of Paris, a display of "Michigan City's Beacons From the Past" has been added for this year. It includes photos of keepers' families, early light lists, and photos of all but the first Michigan City Lighthouse, many displayed for the first time.

June 14, 1987 will be Lighthouse Keepers Reunion. Descendants of all the keepers who served at Michigan City will be invited to lunch on the grounds with society members and friends from 11:00–1:00. The museum will open for regular tours from 1:00–4:00 and the descendants will be there to mingle and reminisce with the visitors. Luncheon will be by reservation and regular admission for the tours. At 1:00 p.m. that day the winning entries in the contest to design a scale model of the 1837 Michigan City Lighthouse will be announced. Models are to be made to scale from the original specifications. Contest rules and specifications, information on displays and events can be obtained by writing the Old Lighthouse Museum, P.O. Box 512, Michigan City, IN 46360, Phone (219) 872-6133. The Old Lighthouse is open daily year round (except Mondays and holidays) from 1:00–4:00 p.m. Group tours are by appointment. The Old Lighthouse is located on Heisman Harbor Road, in Washington Park, Michigan City, IN.