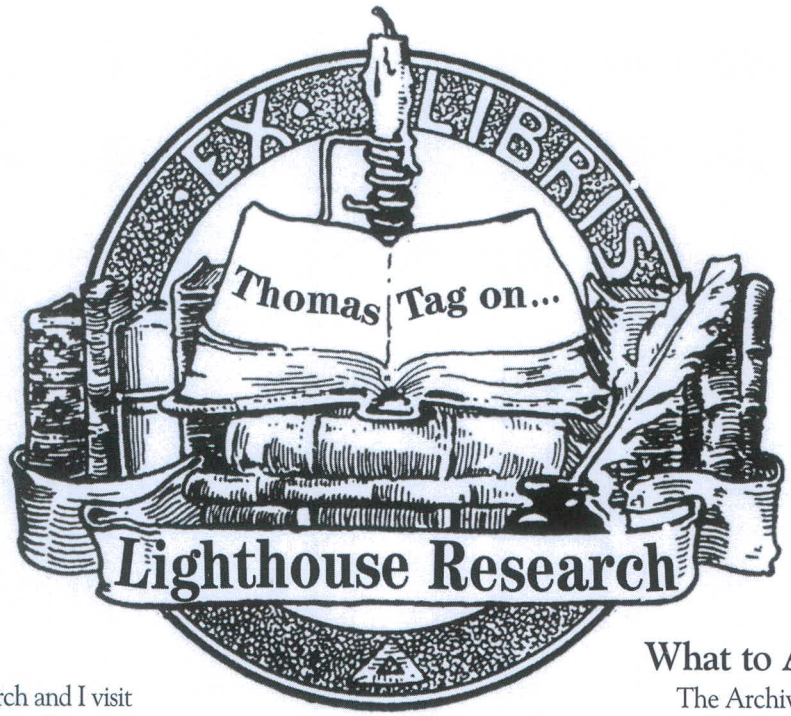


Introduction

I do a lot of lighthouse research and I visit a large number of lighthouses each year. I am always struck by the lack of historical information at many lighthouse sites. When I visit a site I always ask if they have a list of the keepers who worked at the light. Usually the answer is "no," or "well the first keeper was Bill Jones, I don't know any of the others." The same thing happens for general history, I ask if they have a short history of the light and usually the answer is, "no."

In recent years the Coast Guard has begun the transfer of many lighthouses into the hands of the states, non-profit organizations, and others. These transfers have created the need for the development of accurate historical records, for each lighthouse, for use in developing the necessary Historical Building Reports and for the creation of histories that can be given to the members of preservation groups and be sold as historical booklets in the gift shops of the lighthouses. This article will attempt to give lighthouse preservationists an outline of some of the research that can be accomplished at the National Archives.

National Archives

The National Archives are located in a number of locations around the country with the two main locations in Washington, DC.

The principal **National Archives** building is the major location of *lighthouse information*. The address is: Seventh and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW in Washington, DC 20408.

A newer, suburban facility, *Archives II* houses *lighthouse photographs and drawings*. The address is: 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001.

Anyone over 16 years of age can obtain a researcher's identification card and undertake research at the Archives. The main Archives opens at 8:45 am Monday through Saturday, but check with the guards as to operating times, as they sometimes vary.

The main Archives is easily reached using the Metro. Take the Metro to the Archives and Naval Memorial station. When you come up the escalator to the Naval Memorial, you will be directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the Archives building and the researcher's entrance.

When you enter you will be asked to show photo identification and be checked in by the guards. You can then proceed past the guards and to your left to the office where you can obtain a researcher's identification card. You fill out a short form, have your photo taken, and are issued a card in just a few minutes. You may then proceed to the main elevators and go to the fourth floor. When you exit the elevator, turn right and proceed to room 410 at the far end of the hall. In room 410 you will sign in and request help from a research consultant for Record Group 26, which is the record group for the Coast Guard where all lighthouse information is stored.

What to Ask For

The Archives stores millions of items for many subjects. You cannot go in and ask for everything for lighthouse XXX, because things are not stored in that manner. Items are stored by item type such as letters from department X, letters to department X, things related to land, things related to patents, etc. While there are more than 300 different item categories just in the Coast Guard area, only a small number of categories contain the principal information you seek. For each record group there is a 'Finding Guide' that is available in the office where the research consultants are located. The research consultants will help you identify the items you need and will show you how to fill out the necessary forms to have your items pulled from the storage areas and made available for your use. The following are the entries from the 'Finding Guide' for Record Group 26 that you should request:

Entry 6 (A-1) Descriptive Lists of Lighthouse Stations (by lighthouse name). There is a file folder for each lighthouse that contains a booklet of about 20 pages, produced around 1910. It describes the lighthouse and provides many details of its physical construction and contents.

Entry 13 (NC-63) Clippings Relating to Lighthouses (by lighthouse name). This is a file, with the contents stored by lighthouse, which contains clippings from the Annual Reports of the Lighthouse Board. Each clipping will tell about new construction, changes and repairs at the lighthouse.

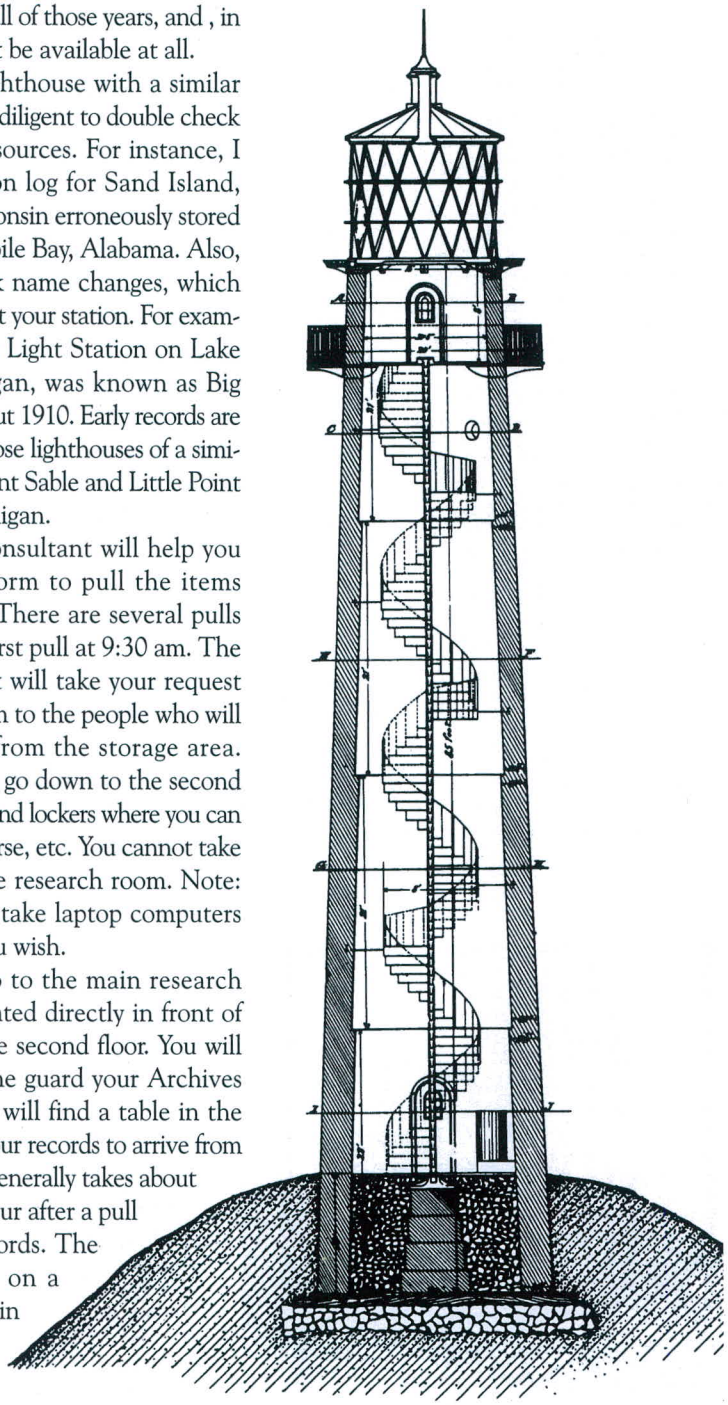
Entry 66 (NC-31) Lighthouse Site Files (by state and then by lighthouse name). This is a file containing all of the records associated with the land at a particular lighthouse. It includes plot maps, deeds, amount paid for the land, resale of portions of the lighthouse reservation if they occurred, etc.

Entry 80 (NC-31) Lighthouse Station Logs (by lighthouse name). These are the actual logs kept by the lighthouse keepers, giving the daily weather and happenings at the lighthouse. These logs are usually available from about 1870 to 1945, however, they may not be available for all of those years, and , in some cases, may not be available at all.

If you have a lighthouse with a similar name to another, be diligent to double check any other possible sources. For instance, I found a light station log for Sand Island, Lake Superior, Wisconsin erroneously stored as Sand Island, Mobile Bay, Alabama. Also, be diligent to check name changes, which may have occurred at your station. For example, Au Sable Point Light Station on Lake Superior in Michigan, was known as Big Point Sable until about 1910. Early records are often mixed with those lighthouses of a similar name like Big Point Sable and Little Point Sable on Lake Michigan.

The research consultant will help you create a request form to pull the items mentioned above. There are several pulls each day with the first pull at 9:30 am. The research consultant will take your request forms and send them to the people who will pull your records from the storage area. Meanwhile you will go down to the second floor where you will find lockers where you can store your jacket, purse, etc. You cannot take these items into the research room. Note: you are allowed to take laptop computers into the room, if you wish.

You can now go to the main research room, which is located directly in front of the elevators on the second floor. You will sign in and show the guard your Archives ID card. Then you will find a table in the room and wait for your records to arrive from the storage area. It generally takes about 45 minutes to an hour after a pull to receive your records. The records will come on a rolling cart, usually in a number of gray boxes. You go to the main counter in the middle of the room and give them your last name. If your records have arrived, you will be given a pink form to sign and date. Then they will go to another room to retrieve your cart and bring it to the main counter and call your name. You can then take the cart to the table where you are sitting and begin your research. Note: there are a number of rules you will have to follow while doing your research and the people at the main counter will give you instructions. You may copy most items yourself, on copiers located within the room, but you MUST show each item you wish to copy to the people at the main counter before going to the copiers. The copiers are operated by money cards and you can get a card from a machine near the main counter.



It will take about a day for you to work with the information in entries: 6, 13, and 66. The logbooks, in entry 80, will take about 3 full days to read if they are available for all years. These logs are very difficult to read (they are all hand written) and may yield much or little information. They are formatted with two pages per month, with each day a single line on the two pages. Generally the left-hand page is a weather report and the right-hand page contains entries for what is happening at the lighthouse. Many times you will read month after month with the only entries being "doing chores" or "cleaning" and then you will come to a great entry about a shipwreck that may cover two or three pages, or an entry like, "my baby daughter Jane died last night, took the body to town."

Another item you may wish to research is a listing of the keepers who worked at your lighthouse. For this task you can order microfilms from the Archives containing most of the records. The microfilms can then be read on a 35 mm. film reader at your local library. Order the microfilm by calling 1-800-234-8861 and asking for microfilm 1373. The cost is $34 per roll including shipping. There are 6 rolls of film covering the lighthouse keepers in the United States.

Roll 1 – The New England states 1845 to 1913

Roll 2 – New York to Virginia 1845 to 1913

Roll 3 – North Carolina to Texas 1845 to 1913

Roll 4 – Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes 1845 to 1900

Roll 5 – Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes 1900 to 1913

Roll 6 – The West Coast, Alaska and Hawaii 1845 to 1913

You may ask, what about the keepers before 1845? In the main research room on the wall by the guard's desk you will find bookcases built into the wall. Look for a sign that says "War of the Rebellion" and to the right of that, look in the bookcase for several shelves of books labeled *United States Official Register.* These books were printed every two years and contain the names of all government employees. Look up "Lighthouses, keepers of" or "Treasury Department Employees" in the index, and then look for the name of your lighthouse.

You can also request additional entries from the finding guide for Record Group 26 to identify keepers for years after 1913, ask the research consultants for:

Entry 110 (NC-31) Classifications of Lighthouse Personnel 1925-1939

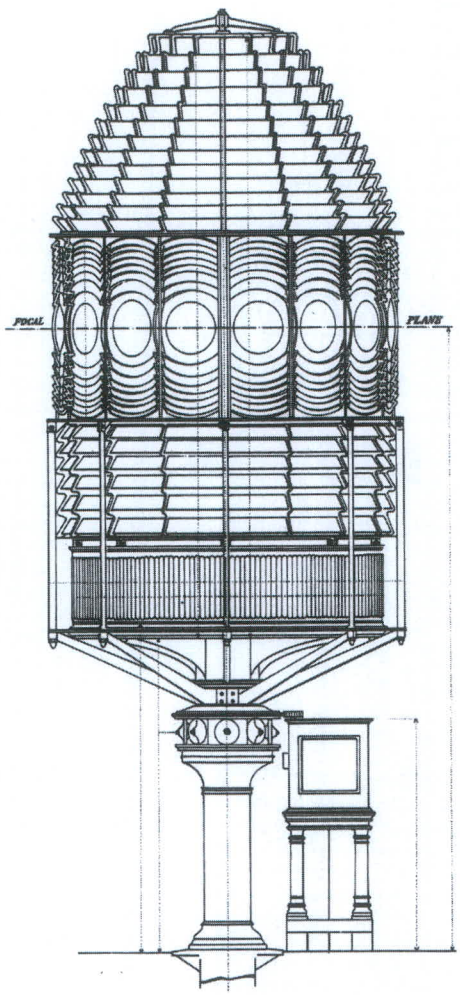
Entry 111 (NC-31) Record of Reclassification of Lighthouse Keepers 1922-1928

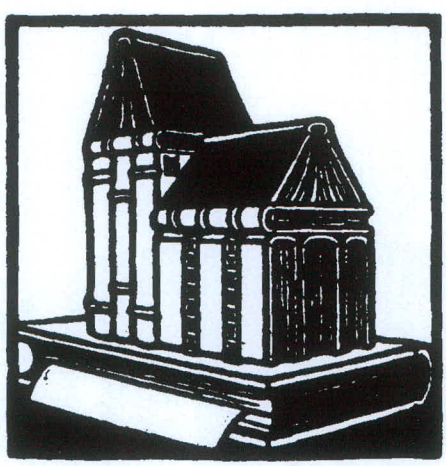
Entry 118 (NC-31) Proceedings of Board for Induction of Lighthouse Employees into Coast Guard

Archives II

Archives II is located north east of Washington, DC in College Park, Maryland. You can get a shuttle bus from the main Archives to take you to Archives II or you can drive there. If you drive, take Interstate 495, north of the city and head east until you get to the New Hampshire Avenue exit. Go south on New Hampshire Avenue and immediately get in the left lane. Turn left from New Hampshire Avenue on to Adelphi Road, go about 1 mile and you will see signs for Archives II. It is open the same hours as the main Archives and your Archives identification card is also valid for Archives II.

At Archives II there are two sources of lighthouse information. The Cartographic Branch on the 3rd floor has drawings and plans of lighthouses and lighthouse properties. Go to the 3rd floor, Cartographic Research Room, and ask one of the research consultants for help in locating information on your specific lighthouse. They have a finding guide by state and then by lighthouse. They will have you fill out the same kind of pull form you used at the main Archives, and will bring you the drawings on a large cart. It is best to ask for all the drawings and plans for your lighthouse rather than specific drawings. You can then look at the drawings and select the ones you want to have copied.





Archives II is also the location of the Still Picture Branch. Go to the 5th floor, Still Picture Research Room, and ask one of the research consultants for help in locating information on your specific lighthouse. They have a finding guide by state and then by lighthouse. They will have you fill out the same kind of pull form you used at the main Archives, and will bring you the photographs in gray boxes on a large cart. It is best to ask for all the photographs for your lighthouse rather than specific photos. You can then look at the photos and select the ones you want. You will be issued white gloves and be given the rules for handling the photos. You can take your camera with you and make your own photographs of their photos. You can also copy certain photos on color copiers or film copiers located in the room, but this is not allowed for all photos, you will have to ask on a case by case basis. You can also request an outside professional photographer to make copies for you and the research consultants will give you the procedure to use and a listing of photographic companies who do this work.

If you follow these procedures you will have the information you need to compile a basic history of your lighthouse. Later, you can return to the Archives and look at the information about your lighthouse in the many other entries of the finding guide.

Good hunting!

Thomas Tag is a frequent contributor to *The Keeper's Log* with historical and technical articles. He has become the person to turn to when questions arise on how lighthouse equipment works.

Other excellent sources of lighthouse information include: The Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and state and local historical societies.