



Cape Elizabeth Light Station, ME
Shirley Morong photo.

Lighthouse Memories

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

I am enclosing the story of a shipwreck [the *Oakey L. Alexander*] that happened while my husband was stationed at the Cape Elizabeth Light Station in Maine. We were living in the station dwelling at the top of the hill. It was fortunate that no one was on the bow of the ship when it broke away. All the members of the crew were rescued by the Coast Guard. The article is taken from my journal, which I wrote at the time.

Soon after this episode, historian Edward Rowe Snow visited us. He had been talking to the local Coast Guard about the sinking of the *Oakey Alexander* and stopped by to ask about the rockets we had seen that night. He learned that a radio distress message had been sent that night at 2:48 [am] from the *Novadoc's* Capt. A.J. Vallis, that the ship was in trouble twenty-two miles east of Portland, ME. She was reported to have a broken hatch, was shipping water and running before the wind. That was the last message ever heard from the vessel. A search was conducted by the Coast Guard, but no trace of her was ever found. It was presumed that after she fired distress rockets she went straight to the bottom of the ocean.

Sincerely,

Shirley Morong

Ed. – Also see “Family Tradition – The Morong Keepers” in the *The Keepers Log*, Spring 2001 (VOL. XVII, NO. 3). For another account of this fascinating rescue, visit: www.cascobay.com/history/shipwrek/oakey.htm. Shirley's late husband's grandfather, Fred Morong, was the author of the famous poem “Brassworks” which has appeared in *The Keeper's Log* on two occasions

March 3, 1947

This is a day long to be remembered. The wind blew up to 80 miles per hour and it rained and sleeted all night. There was no electric power from 4 pm the day before until noon on this date. We had to keep the generator operating all the time after the tower optic was placed in operation. We used an Aladdin lamp until it went dry, then I found a lamp that had some oil in it.

Clif, my husband, went down to the whistle [fog signal] house to stand the 8 pm to mid-night watch. He showed me what to do in case the power came back on – put the switch at the foot of the tower from left to right and screw the knob on the generator toward the right as far as it would go. However, he called after he arrived at the whistle house and said that it was reported that power lines were down from Cape Elizabeth to South Portland. I checked on the light and generator until Clif got off watch and neither one of us slept much as the generator was located under our bedroom and the noise kept us awake.

In the morning Clif aroused me by saying there was a ship in distress just beyond our lighthouse and he hurried down over the hill to the Coast Guard station. I looked out our bedroom window and saw the glare of the signal. I also heard the generator slowing down and then choking, so I went down [into the] cellar and shut it off. It was time to put the light out anyhow.

The children and I went to the front room window and watched the surf as it rolled up over the stone wall and into the cove. Then we saw Clif at the station with the tractor, trailer and breeches buoy heading out the road leading from the village. As we lingered at the window, we saw a ship just offshore that seemed to be rapidly drifting toward the rocks. I called the Coast Guard station and found out that was the PORTLAND lightship, which had dragged its anchor until it had caught on some ledges just off-shore. The buoy tender *Cowslip*, from the South Portland base, stood by her, but was unable to get a line aboard because of the heavy seas and strong wind. However, the anchor held until the wind died down sometime later.

Trying to attend my household duties, I kept going to the window and my curiosity grew when I saw the station jeep drive to the Coast Guard station, let some men out, leave and then return with more men. Finally Clif came



Breeches Buoy Apparatus

up to the house to get some dry clothes on, as he was soaked, and I learned what was happening.

The 5,284-ton collier *Oakey L. Alexander* bound for Portland, ME had been struck by a huge wave as it neared the PORTLAND lightship and 75 feet of her bow section was torn away. The captain and crew managed to get what was left of the vessel headed toward shore and it struck the ledges sideways. Her distress signals were heard at the Cape Elizabeth Coast Guard Station and the crew responded immediately. They set up a breeches buoy and fired a line out to the doomed vessel. With seas breaking over the vessel and against the shore, the Coast Guard managed to rescue all 32 crew members without injury. It took from 8 am to 10:30 am to get all the men ashore and transferred to the station where they were made as comfortable as possible.

I was able to get over to the site, about a mile from our station, just as the last members of the crew were brought ashore. It was a wild sight with the wind still blowing a gale, bystanders bundled up against the cold, and surf from the heavy seas soaking the Coast Guard crew as they helped each man from the breeches buoy and into a nearby cottage that had been opened up for protection until transportation to the station was arranged.

The *Oakey Alexander* was owned by the Pocahontas Steamship Company of New York. She was enroute to their depot in Portland to deliver 8,200 tons of coal. The ship was



The *Oakey Alexander* on the rocks near the Cape Elizabeth Light Station. 1947 photo courtesy of Shirley Morong.

declared a total loss. At low tide the next day members of the crew, assisted by the Coast Guard, managed to board the ship and remove important papers and personal belongings. What was left of the wreck remained on the rocks for a long time, until it finally succumbed to the steady action of the sea. The crew of the Cape Elizabeth Coast Guard Station received a lot of praise for their rescue efforts, and it was the first time they had used the breeches buoy apparatus other than during drills.

During the day news of the destruction caused by the storm was reported over the radio. Two cottages at Popham Beach were washed away, and fifteen others were badly damaged. Waves as high as a house were seen at the Portland Head Lighthouse, which was also damaged. The fog signal was silenced as the storm caved in a wall and flooded the building. Even the bell outside of the building was ripped away from its base. The storm did a lot of damage throughout the state of Maine.

That night we went out onto our sun porch and saw rockets going up off-shore to the southeast. Clif went down to the Coast Guard Station to report them, but they couldn't be seen from that vantage point. The buoy tender *Cowslip*, which was standing by the lightship, went out to see if they could find the source of the rockets, but found nothing. Clif came home and said he was instructed to keep a watch out for the rockets, they grew farther and farther apart and soon stopped. It was reported that the 248-foot long freighter *Novadoc* had sent distress signals that morning off Monhegan Island and that she reported her hatches were stove in. The Coast Guard cutters *Snohomish* from Rockland and *Algonquin* from Portland were dispatched to look for the freighter, but no trace was ever found. We believed that the rockets we had seen from our house were from that vessel fired just before she sank. We never heard anything more about it and it has remained one of the mysteries of the sea. It was reported that there were 20 men and two women on board.



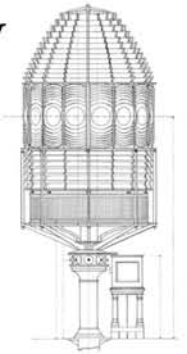
Destruction at the Portland Head Light Station from a similar storm in 1975. Base of tower at left, fog signal building upper middle. Note the fog bell torn from its base. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



Bringing a crewman ashore from the freighter *Oakey Alexander*. 1947 photo courtesy of Shirley Morong.



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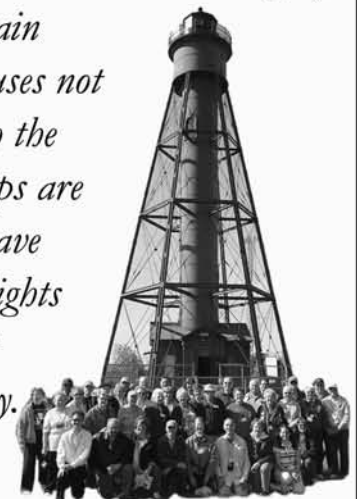
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