

Pages from the Past

A Letter from Montauk Point Light Station

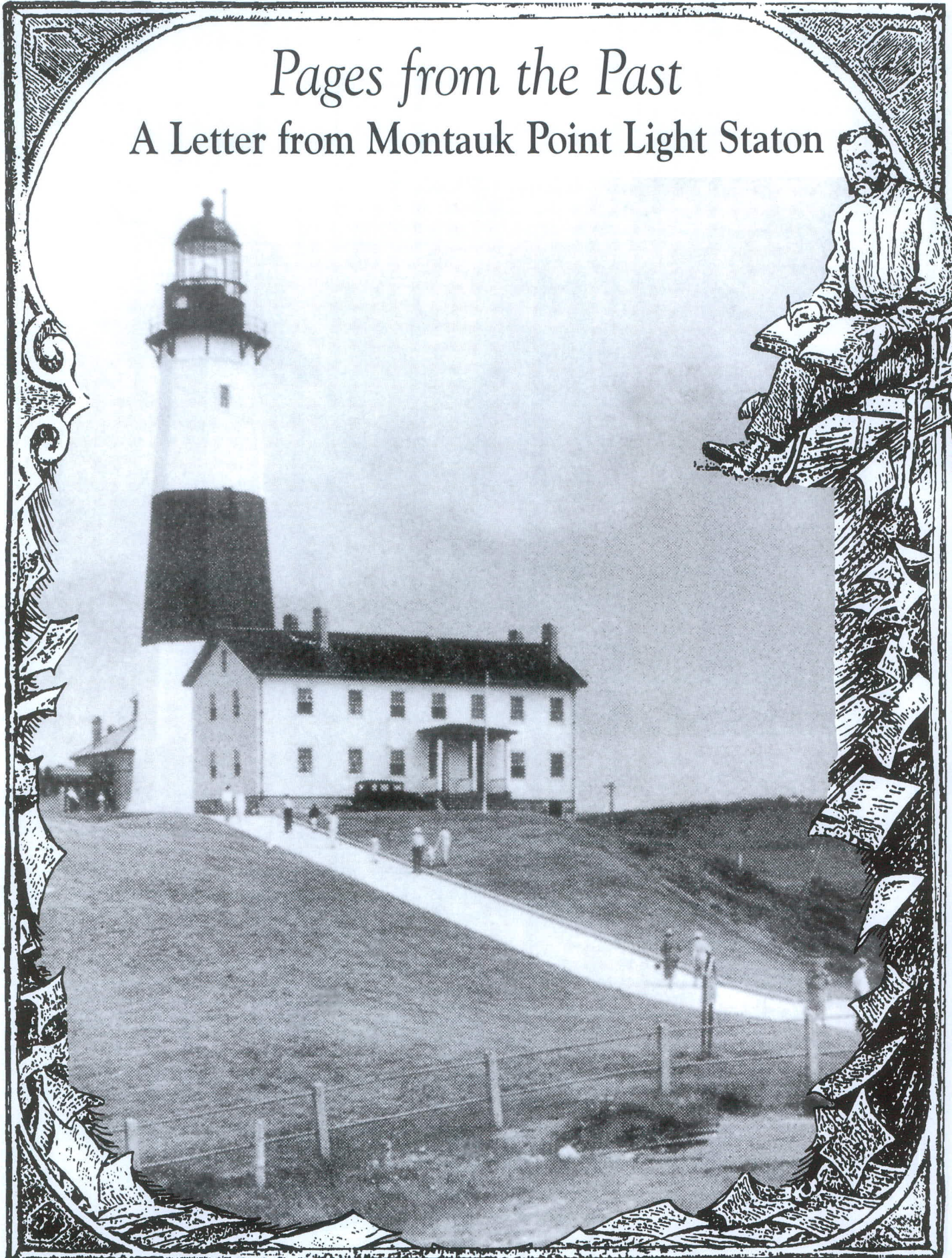


Photo circa 1930.

Montauk Point Light Station

Montauk, L.I., NY
Nov. 16, 1920

Dear Dad,

Your letter arrived today and was sure glad to hear from you. Have moved so many times perhaps your letters haven't caught up with me yet.

I surely didn't receive them or I would of answered long before. But I have every reason to believe that I'll be here all winter and although the road is closed during a couple of the worst months, ought to be able to hear from you quite often.

Somehow your letter seems to bring up the past and the sure enough good times I use to have.

I suppose Charlie [ed. his half brother] is quite a boy now and the girls I [ed. half sisters] suppose they have grown too. I don't suppose I'd know any of them at all.

And Lizzie [ed. stepmother] too I suppose has changed, well time changes us all.

I didn't write much about my self or this place where I am now in my last letter, because I hadn't heard from you for so long that I thought perhaps you had moved and I had lost trace of you.

Well I landed this job and I am home fourteen hours a day instead, in fact the whole twenty four hours.

I use to make about \$35 per week in N.Y. and Burt [ed. his wife] earned \$15 and it took it all to just live.

Of course a fellow doesn't like to have his wife work out. But it's hard to live on one man's pay these days. And Bert just wouldn't stay home, anyways she has always worked since she was a child in France so I had to give in.

I got a good one dad! And it didn't take me long to land her. I only knew her about three months and I was away one of them at that. Funny isn't it dad?

They all say these sudden ones don't last, why I feel like I was going to never get tired of it, it's something that sort of fits me.

I use to have about as wild times as any of the boys but that's done with now, haven't the slightest desire to leave the old kitchen stove or home sweet home if it's only a bed and chair.

In other words I guess I'm contented and there isn't much I want.

I've just about found out that if a fellow's contented it doesn't matter so much what he does.

This is a pretty good job dad. I have four rooms on the ground floor of a two story house, and it's well made too. Hard wood floor, a new stove and I get my coal free. I've six tons in the cellar. It's also piled full of four foot wood. I get my oil for my lamps free and two lamps furnished and things are not like they are made today but solid, solid brass lamps, brass dust pan, good brooms, mops, soap and rags. My rent is free. I'm furnished all the paint I need all Bert has to do is cook my meals and keep the place clean, And as my experience has been somewhat varied I'm not above washing windows, dishes, cleaning lamps and so on. Anyway we sure have a good time dad.

There are as there most always is some things that we don't like about a job and this job is not above any other in this respect. Of course there are other here. There is the Head Keeper and as first assistant, his son then I come in at the end. Father and son are not usually stationed together. But these two are.

Anyway it's the darndest family of the whole darn family.

We will begin with the old lady, she of course is Irish and she is at times, most times, off her noodle, she hits up the joy juice when she can get it, and if she gets her hands on it, the old man's out of the game and that starts things agoing. She really is about the most ignorant person I have ever had the pleasure to run across, she talks in spurts and gurgles and the brogue on top of it all. And her nose is so red she makes me think of Mrs. Squires.

She told us when we came that she didn't have a thing to eat in the house, and she always has two hundred dollars worth of supplies laid away at all times, she always opens a can for a meal and that's about all the old man gets. His stomach must be full of lead drops by the way he walks, I bet he carries about a peck of small stones he has eaten in his daily feed of beans. Well we soon learned that she had seven children only one living now, I'll describe it later. She told us no one would bother us here and no one has and I'm sure i'll not bother her.

The old man is a retired policeman and truly walks like one, he is cranky at times, good natured once in awhile and darn ornery all the time. Every dog knows him for miles around and avoids him by at least



Above — Montauk Point in 1932 looking very isolated. The cliffs are considerably closer to the tower today. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard. Photo on opposite page courtesy of Robert Lewis.

half a mile. He has an automobile some one gave him which he can't drive, but likes to look at, two boats which he never uses, rods, guns and every thing a man can think of. He had rather have them rot than sell or give them away. He also has a flock of turkeys each one has a name and knows darn well he had better hike out early in the morning for the neighbors if he gets anything to eat.

Well the son will be about next I guess. he by nature was intended to be a beach comber by trade. he weighs about two hundred pounds and his eyes stick out about an inch. he is so darn lasy his wife I guess always does his work for him, at least she says she has. he puts about all his work he can over on the old man. And as he is the only son he gets by with it. We stand watches as you may guess and I call him to relieve me, I never go up to his door intending to wake him up enough to come to the door with out having a block of wood my shoes won't stand the jar.

His wife use to answer my racket and stand his watch rather than wake him up. She has had to stand him on his feet to wake him up and before he is fully awake he dreams he is in the bathroom and sort of discolors the ceiling for me [ed. the writer lives below the son].

That just about finishes the family except that the old lady used to manicure his finger nails and what not. He was suppose to attract some wealthy girl for the old woman to live easy on. But he married a poor girl and was married by a minister instead of a priest and anyone that isn't Catholic is sure nothing at all to her. He likes to wear an army shirt now but a while back he jumped five states to keep from being drafted to wear one.

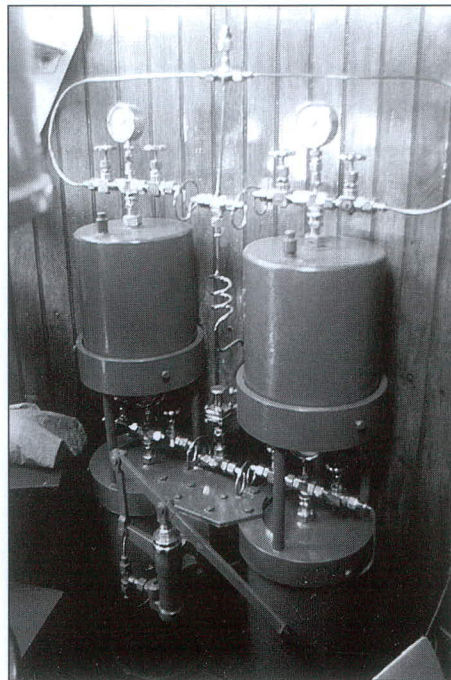
I didn't mean to annoy you with a letter of this kind but I've met all kind of people and of all colors but never run across such a mess of people that needed a wet nurse in my short young life.

Anyway, I make the best of it they talk of what work they are going to do and I say yes, no, sure and let it go at that. the sin lives up over me and last spring he painted every other stair on his brand new front stairs and was going to paint the other tread in a day or two, it isn't done yet. Well that makes it easy for me I just sit in the house and take life easy. I've worked two

day, not more since the first of Oct.. Can you beat that?

I get \$83.95 a month and can do pretty well on that I guess, of course it's seven farmer miles over the bleak country to a small fisherman's town.

Perhaps I'll describe the land. There isn't a tree within a thousand miles I guess, small hills all sand and covered with cranberry bushes that grow about a foot from the ground...a regular no mans land....its on the eastern end of Long Island as far as you can go on foot unless you can walk on water....



Oil and air tanks for an I.O.V. kerosene lighting system. Photo by Ainsley Dixon.

Am on watch now but stay in the house. You see this in an oil vapor light it revolves one complete turn every twenty seconds.. We use an air pressure of 60 pounds. This is a vaporizing tube which the oil passes through from the tanks to the burner or lamp. The tube is heated with two alcohol burners quite hot before oil is turned on. A heat retainer is set on top to help and after it is well heated the oil is turned on and a mantle put on top of burner, something like a large gas mantle only about two inches wide and four inches high. Then the heaters and retainer are taken off and mantle is turned around directly under center of vaporizing tube which by the way is wound with copper wire. I suppose to help retain the heat....any way that's all there is

to it. The light and lamp revolve to the right with the sun and are run by a clock works which is in turn is run by a drum over which a weight and wire runs.

The weight has a place to run in up and down the side of the tower and requires winding and looking after every three hours.

The lens are of French make as was the old clock works which were taken out last month and they worked on ball bearings, while the new clockworks and base revolve on a mercury float which they claim is more accurate.

The lens are quite large being about four feet around. They are rib shaped and made to reflect the light to the center of the lamp upon a more powerful lens.

The tower is about 140 feet high from the ground and the edge of the bank is about a hundred feet high from the water. so a fellow feels as though he is up quite a ways. There are 137 treads going up and half as many for me coming down.

We have two quite large kerosene vapor engines to compress air for two wirrens for fog. which set up quite a racket. The light has been seen and fog horns heard thirty miles at sea [ed. doubtful].

This isn't any exception to any first class light. There are two or three electric lights on the New Jersey coast, but I guess kerosene is more reliable.

Let me tell you the wind does blow here when it gets started...Bert is getting fat but I guess I was built to be thin always...I am going to send you a picture we had taken in Rutland soon after we were married. Bert doesn't take so well and wants to wait until we a better one, but I'll slip it to you along with this book of mine...

Well dad I got amighty fine little girl, she is a year older than myself but she is sensible and that's 3/4 of any woman.

And we are happy as two bugs in a rug of course we have little spats but we laugh at our selves after. She is a worker, can't make her clean with a mop, down on her hands and knees and away goes the dirt.

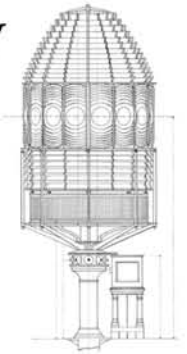
Oh! don't worry about us dad we will be o.k. 40 years from now if we livel that long..

Well good night, and good by for this time, from your loving son and daughter

Phil and Bert



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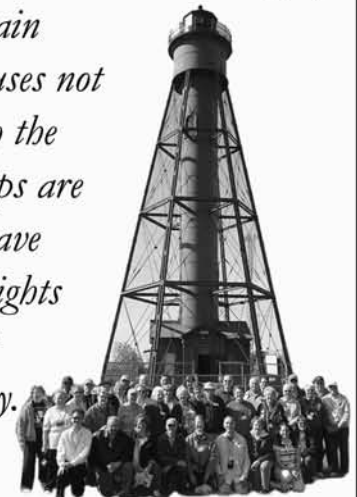
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