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Emily of Bois Blanc Lighthouse

by Katheryn P. Seestedt





Bois Blanc Island Lighthouse Straits of MacKinac, Lake Huron. Photo by Roger Schultz 1989

Lighthouse Memories

It was a wild night when the lighthouse fell...Father (Eber Ward) had gone over to Mackinaw two days before and a storm had arisen that prevented his getting back." Thus began Emily Ward's first-person account of her experiences helping her father, when he was Keeper on Bois Blanc Island in upper Lake Huron.

She continued, "The Lighthouse had originally been placed too near the water and every heavy storm was full of peril for the old lighthouse. Our house was very near to the lighthouse - so that if it were to fall a certain way it would fall upon the roof." Emily's anxiety was increased by the knowledge that her brother, Eber Brock Ward, was sailing toward the Island, and his ship would need the Bois Blanc beacon to guide him to safety. She must save everything possible!

She continued her story as though the events were just yesterday, and the grand-nieces and nephews who were her audience sensed the emotion of those memories. "It took all my strength to carry those great lamps and reflectors down the winding stairs...I think I climbed those stairs five times before I got everything movable down."

As the storm raged, Emily and Bolivar Brooks, a young boy who lived with them at the Light, watched while a zigzag line opened from the base of the tower to its top. Soon a second break appeared, and the tower fell. Waves washed over the pile of broken masonry.

After he returned to the Island, Eber Ward sent the following report to Abraham Wendell, Esq, Collector at Mackinaw, MI:

"The Bois Blanc Lighthouse fell on the 9th instant. The dwelling house appears now to be in danger of sharing the same fate from the same cause, viz. the rise of the Lake. Every easterly wind carries away a portion of the narrow strip of land between the House and Lake. In pleasant weather, the Lake is about thirty feet from the house. In eastern storms the sea beats against the house...I believe it would be useless to expend money to protect this building, it appears to me to have an irrepairable fault. It stands below the level of the Lake, between which and the house, the earth consists entirely of coarse gravel and loose stones." /s/ Eber Ward. Dated 12, Dec. 1837.

The fall of this tower (the first of three lights at Bois Blanc Island) culminated a long series of complaints from Keeper Ward to representatives of the

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Lighthouse Service.

On 3 May, 1833, he had written:

"...The tower in the main appears substantial but the cement with which the outside was covered appears not to have been good, much of it has fallen off. The door opens outward instead of inward and is without a latch...The chandelier and lamps were defective and the reflectors and lamps imperfectly secured to the chandelier. Regarding the keeper's house "...the floors are single. The window blinds were very poorly hung, one of which is broken...The window caps and frames permit the wind to pop them into the room. The cellar is not secured from frost... but by far the greatest difficulty arises from a want of good chimnees [sic], in whichever room a fire is kindled, the smoke is often intolerable, and oftimes the tenants are forced to abandon the house... During the three years I have kept this house, those whose duty it was to visit, repair, inspect and report have never appeared, nor has it been visited by any officer of the Revenue." /s/ Eber Ward.

In the same letter, Eber Ward commented upon the lack of any boat for use by the keeper, for his own needs or for his lifesaving function.

After the tower fell in 1837, a decision was made to locate a new light at a site 200 feet south of the old one and one hundred fifty feet from the Lake on an eminence of about twelve feet. The estimated cost was $2000.00. However, in June, 1838, Eber Brock Ward wrote his father at the lighthouse, with the following estimates of cost:

1 ton iron for lantern when wrought	$320.00
Cast sash for same - 1500 lbs.	130.00
Copper for some	460.00
twelve 14" reflectors @ 14.00	168.00
twelve lamps at $5.00	60.00
200 lbs. lead	25.00
Glass for lantern	27.00
Total	$790.00

By January 23, 1840, a new light had been erected, but not a new dwelling; and Eber was still complaining! On 20 August, 1841, he wrote Abraham Wendell, the Collector at Mackingaw City, Michigan, the following:

"Sir, ever since I have been Lighthouse Keeper I have been well aware that the condensed air or vapour that settles on the glass on the inside of the Lantern is a great obstruction to the passage of the light through the glass. A Light that would be distinctly seen ten miles when the glass is dry can hardly be seen two miles when the glass is covered with this vapour.



Emily Ward Photo courtesy of the author

I am informed by those whos [sic] business it is to visit and examine Light Houses that openings ought to be made through the copper dead lights at the bottom of the Lantern, through these openings air could be admitted which would prevent the gathering on the glass. I have lately opened a window in the tower in order to ascertain by experiment whether the admission of air would be of service, and I find the lights appear better, that the vapour does not accumulate so soon nor in such great quantity..." /s/ E. Ward

The records show that this 1840 light was used until a more substantial brick tower was erected in 1867. The structure is now privately owned, and an automated beacon has been installed in the stately old tower.

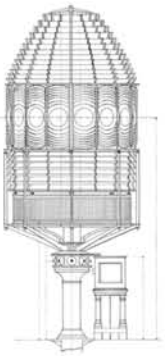
Bois Blanc Island is 12 miles along five mile wide, located in upper Lake Huron about 15 miles east of the Mackinaw Bridge. It has guarded the passage into the Straits of Mackinac at approximately longitude 84 degrees, 30 minutes W. and latitude 45 degrees 47 minutes N. since the days of the voyageurs. Today there is a handful of permanent residents, and the Island is reached by ferry from Cheboygan, Michigan. A small motel and a general store are located near the ferry landing, but going far from the dock area requires hiking, or the use of a 4-wheel drive vehicle on the unimproved roads. Primitive camping is available for hunters and fishermen. Unfortunately for lighthouse fans, the light is across the island on th peninsula which juts into Lake Huron to the north. Reaching the light by land is a rugged experience, but it is possible to approach by water. Very few people hear the crashing waves which so frightened Emily Ward, the lighthouse keeper's daughter, in 1837.

The Ward Family

Samuel Ward (1784 - 1854) is known as the founder of Marine City, Michigan (first known as Newport). Eber Ward (1782-1855) was one of his brothers who followed him from Vermont to Michigan. Eber Ward married Sally Potter, and their children were Emily (1809-1887); Eber Brock Ward (1811-1875); Sally and Abba. Emily never married. She accompanied her father when he became keeper of the Bois Blanc light in 1830. She remained with him until he was transferred to the Gratiot Light at Port Huron, Michigan in 1843.

In Marine City, Emily was known as "Aunt Emily" because of the care she gave to many young children, some relatives, some not. She is remembered for the school she established, known as the "Newport Academy." Eber Brock Ward became a business tycoon, with interests in shipping, steel-making and the railroads. He was influential in political circles, and probably helped his father to obtain the assignment at Bois Blanc Island. Emily was active in her brother Eber's business activities, and he in turn assisted her financially with her school.

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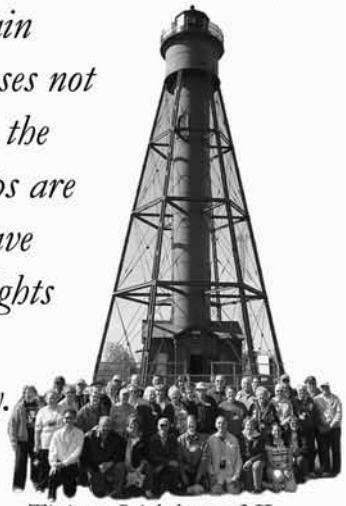
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