



A wood cut of the Port of Genesee from an 1856 *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*.

LIGHTING THE PORT OF GENESEE

By Bill Davis

The Port of Genesee was established by President Thomas Jefferson in 1804. The port district stretched approximately 70 miles along Lake Ontario's south shore, from Oak Orchard to Sodus Bay, New York. The port's center was where the north flowing Genesee River met Lake Ontario, a marshy bay guarded by two sand bars.

President Jefferson appointed Samuel Latta to be Collector of Customs. In the first year he gathered \$22.50 in revenue compared to expenses of \$24.00. From that small beginning, the port would grow to be one of the busiest on the south shore of Lake Ontario. Along the Genesee River there were five boat building yards, a large dry dock, three railroads, three grain elevators, ferries crossing the river and lake, and a number of small recreational boats

that conveyed tourists to river and lake front resorts.

Until 1822, lake captains were guided into the Port of Genesee by a torch or lamp on a huge pilot tree and a lamp on the top of an early hotel. For the light station, the government selected a 31-acre site on a high bluff overlooking the harbor.

The contract to build the lighthouse, two room keeper's house measuring 20 feet by 34 feet, and dig a well (which turned out to be 52 feet deep) was awarded to Ashbel Symons for \$3,301. Michael Cook was hired as mason.

The two page contract and specifications contained all the necessary information for building the light station; no drawing was required. The keeper's house was typical of those built at other early Great Lakes light stations. The 40-foot

tower, constructed of local sandstone, was capped with an iron lantern, which held 144 panes of glass. The interior staircase was made of wood. One specification for the light station is especially interesting:

Separate proposals will be received for fitting the lighthouse within one month with patent lamps and reflectors, tin butts for keeping the oil and all the necessary apparatus in the same manner as the lighthouses in the United States have been fitted by Winslow Lewis.

This specification confirms the close connection of Winslow Lewis to Stephen Pleasonton, then in charge of lighthouses for the Treasury Department.

Early correspondence reveals that the job of the lighthouse keeper was highly desired even though the annual salary was \$350.

Giles Holden came to Charlotte as Assistant Customs Collector. He applied for the keeper's job, but, even with strong endorsement of some local figures, he lost out to an elderly veteran who died after a very short service. With an even longer list of influential citizens who praised Mr. Holden's knowledge of the port, and pointed out that he had been in the fever prone area for five years and had not succumbed, Giles Holden was selected. He served 12 years, raised a family of ten, then retired and moved across the street. He was a leading citizen of the village and county.

Navigating the entrance of the bay was still a problem, so the U. S. Government built two 2,500-foot piers approximately 360 feet apart. With subsequent filling behind the piers, the bay was eliminated and boat basins created.

In 1838 a report by Lt. Charles T. Platt to the Secretary of the Treasury stated:

The Genesee Lighthouse is lighted with 10 lamps and the same number of bright reflectors, fixed. The lamps are in bad condition, owing chiefly to wear. So far as the keeper is concerned, all is correct. The oil and other supplies furnished

by the contractors are without fault.

The light-house wants repairing; the deck leaks; the lantern wants glazing, fourteen of the glass being more or less broken.

... This light-house ... may be discontinued as soon as the one recommended in a former report is established at the end of the pier.

A beacon was built on the west pier in 1838. It used the Winslow Lewis system of lamps and reflectors. Battered by storms, it was replaced with another wooden beacon in 1854.

The beacon optic was a fixed, 6th Order Fresnel lens illuminating an arc of 270°. The location was temporary due to a planned extension of the pier. The tower was similar in plan to beacons erected at Conneaut, Ashtabula, and Fairport, Ohio.

The west pier was surmounted by a strong foot bridge allowing the keeper to serve the beacon even in the most severe gales. Because of the long distance from the keeper's dwelling and lighthouse to the beacon, one keeper, Alonzo Corey, transported his supplies to the end of the pier by a horse-drawn cart.

In 1853, the original, stone lighthouse was still operating. As part of the national effort to change from the Winslow Lewis system of lamps and reflectors to Fresnel lenses, Captain A. W. Whipple, Engineer of the Tenth Lighthouse District, directed the changeover at the Genesee Lighthouse. A brick cylinder wall was carried up the interior walls to support a circular cast-iron stairway. A new cast-iron lantern was erected on top of a cast-iron base. The small, original panes were replaced by ten large panes of French plate glass. The lantern was capped with a gilt weather vane. A fixed, 4th Order Fresnel lens was installed, and the wood window frames were replaced with iron sash.

A reporter for the *Union and Advertiser* reported, "The cost is about \$2,000 and is truly an economical expenditure for the government ... with an occasional coat of paint or whitewash it can hardly need repairs for one or two hundred years to come."

In 1881, the wooden frame, west pier beacon was replaced by a cast-iron beacon which was glazed and painted. The windows, ventilators of the lantern, and holes in the cowl were furnished with brass wire screens. The beacon was lined with wood. A fog bell and striking apparatus were put in the structure. The 6th Order lens from the wooden beacon was shipped to Buffalo and, much to the dismay of the ship captains, the light from the 1822 lighthouse was extinguished and the 4th Order lens moved to the cast-iron beacon.

The beacon only served for three years. In the spring of 1884, the cast-iron tower was dismantled and moved to the Cleveland Harbor, where it may still stand. A pyramidal wooden beacon was built on the west pier and the cast-iron lantern from the original lighthouse was moved to the new beacon on the west pier, sealing the fate of the original tower for good.

A second, higher, tower was constructed at the shore end of the pier, which, coupled with the tower on the end of the pier, formed a range light. Mariners entering the port, lined up the two lights, one over the other, to guide them into the harbor.

Mariners continued to protest the new lower range lights on the pier were not adequate. The original lighthouse on the hill could be seen before Braddock's Light was passed and was considered by navigators



A rare photo of the Charlotte-Genesee light station showing the original keeper's dwelling and tower with old style lantern. Notice man posing by the fence. National Archives photo circa 1850.



one of the most important coast lights on Lake Ontario. Local mariners were unanimously emphatic, and many of them profane, regarding the abandonment of the old, higher light. One remarked, "In a recent storm, because a fine vessel could not pick up the Charlotte light, he was forced to run for Sackett's [Harbor] and almost sank with a crew of nine men aboard."

But, bureaucracy prevailed and nothing was done.

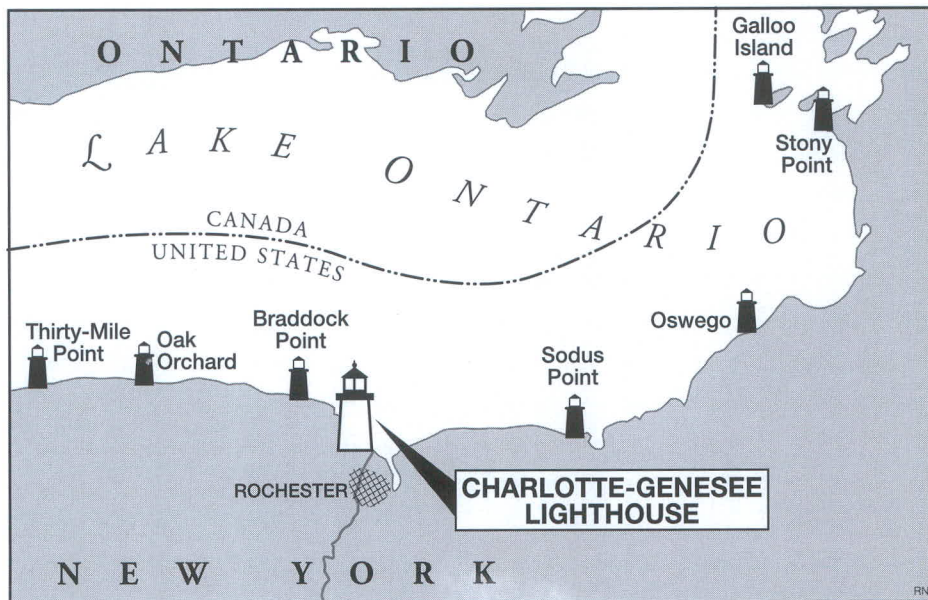
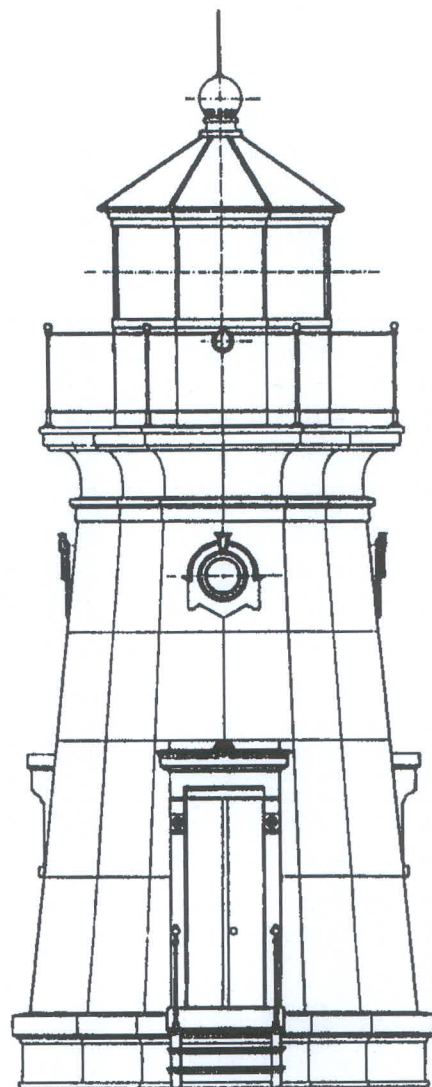
The bell fog signal placed in the beacon in 1881 was replaced in 1890 by a steam powered whistle, which was replaced by an air horn in 1909.

The 1822 lighthouse remained as a gaunt symbol of better days. In time, the windows were sealed with concrete, birds nested in the vines that covered the structure, and even built homes in the tower wall.

In 1902 a beacon was constructed on the east pier. It was a white, square, pyramidal structure. The cast-iron lantern was of similar design to the west pier beacon, but the lens was a smaller, 6th Order Fresnel displaying a fixed red light. At this time, the beacon on the shore at the end of the west pier was dismantled.

Above — The 2nd west pier head light constructed in 1854. Rochester public Library photo.

Right — The third west pier head tower, constructed in 1881 and moved to Cleveland in 1884. Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard Academy Library.



In 1931, Keeper George Coddington, who served at the site for 26 years, saw a major change in his routine. The beacon at the end of the west pier was replaced with an iron structure. The east pier beacon was controlled from a control house on shore. A radio beacon was installed. For his last few years of service, he no longer had to trudge out the long pier, which could be perilously icy, or row a boat to service the light. That warm control room must have seemed like seventh heaven.

The two-room keeper's house lasted until 1863. Responding to an inspection that described the horrible condition of the dwelling, a handsome new eight-room, brick house was built, at a cost of \$5,000.

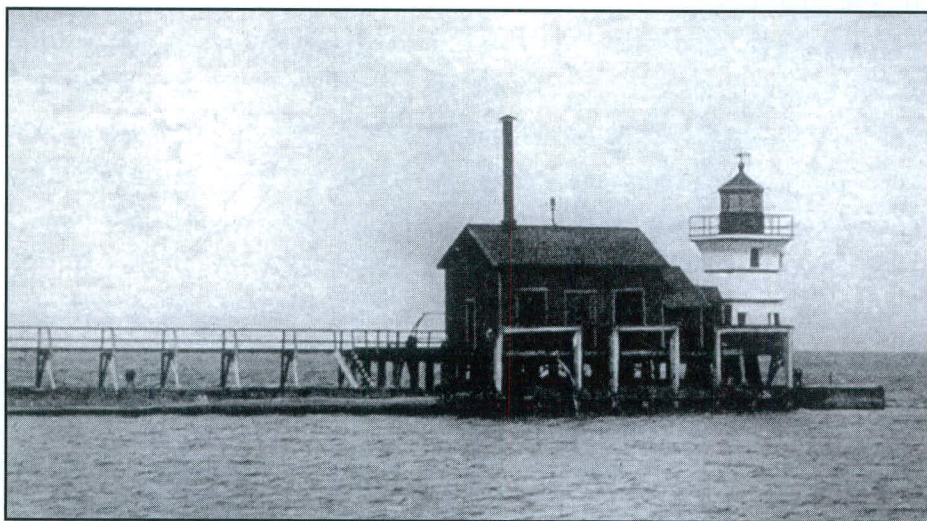
Stones from the original house were used in the foundation of the new house. The new structure served as the keeper's house until 1939 when it became the residence of a Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer until 1982. The property was then leased to the Charlotte Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society to operate as a museum.

The keeper's house was in fair condition, since it had served as a residence since 1863. However, the original lighthouse needed lots of tender loving care. The lantern and lens were gone. The windows had been sealed with concrete, and vines covering the structure provided a haven for birds. Some had even penetrated the wall to establish nests.

The goal of the Historical Society was to have initial restoration done to welcome the tall ships stopping in Rochester for its sesquicentennial in 1984. The initial restoration work resulted in a national award for the Historical Society in 1984 (see "Restoration of the Charlotte-Genesee Lighthouse" in *The Keeper's Log*, Volume 2, Issue 4). The project included constructing a replica lantern (done by Edison Technical High School students) and the installation of a rare, 4th Order rotating lens.

For the past ten years, the focus of the Historical Society has been its educational mission. It serves the community, not only with traditional visiting hours, but by developing 15 historical slide shows in video format for use by libraries, schools, and community groups. Additionally, almost as many people are reached with special events like narrated bus and boat tours, historic walking tours, classes at the Rochester Museum and Science Center, slide shows for community groups, and slide shows presented to school classes.

In 1994 a major effort was started to prepare for the light station's 175th Anniversary. An Adopt-A-Stone program was started to enlist community financial support. Over 700 light tower stones were "adopted" at \$10 each. Larger donors adopted windows and doors and even the lantern itself. As a result of this community response, a number of new projects have been completed. A blacksmith volunteered to make the window hardware. A contracting firm volunteered much of the cost of a high crane and a team of dedicated masons to complete the tower re-pointing. The interior of the first floor of the dwelling has been restored with period wallpaper and paint. New exhibits have been placed in the Village Room, the Lighthouse Room, and the Transportation Room. The garage has



Above — The fourth west pier head tower constructed in 1884. Early Post Card.

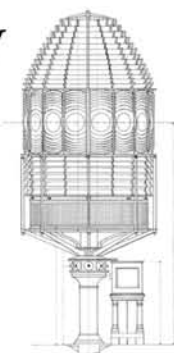
Below — The original tower, now with a replica lantern and the 1863 keeper's dwelling as they appear today.



Regular visiting hours, from mid May to mid October, are Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Special tours can be arranged all year by appointment. For more information about the Charlotte-Genesee Light Station, call (716) 621-6179, or write them at The Charlotte-Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society; 70 Lighthouse St.; Rochester, NY 14612.



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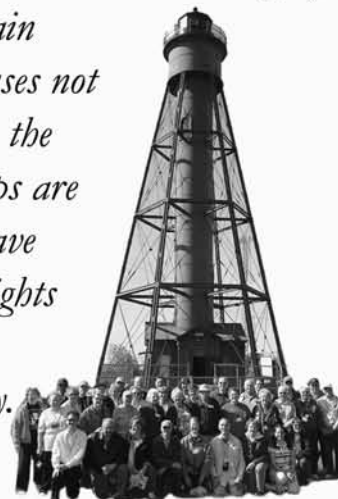
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984.

Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



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