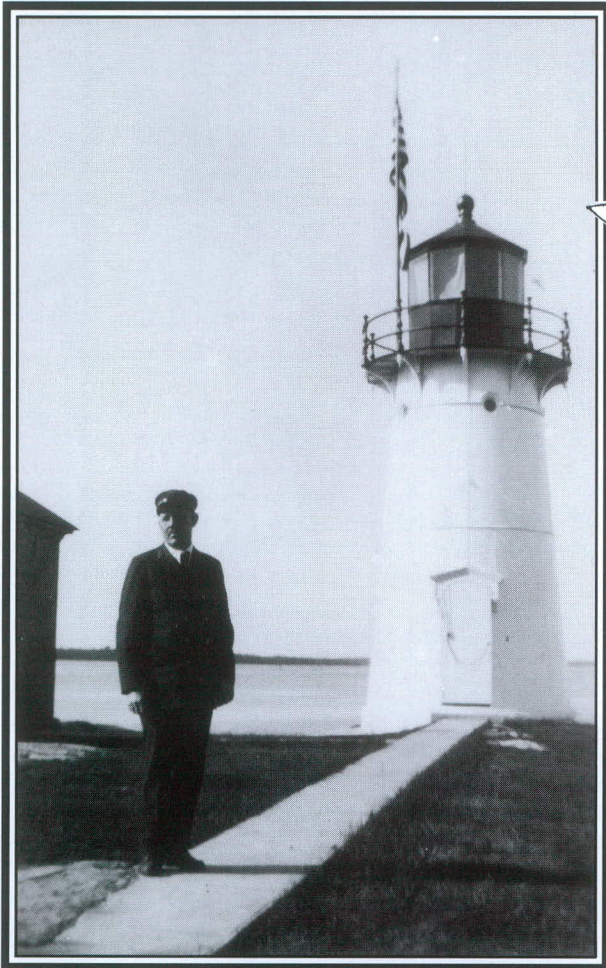


Lighthouse Memories



Keeper Dan Hill at Cross Over Island Light Station. Photo courtesy of D.I. Mike Vogel.



Crossover Island, one of the Thousand Islands, has one thing special about it. It is the only island that is all by itself. It is approximately in the middle of the river between United States and Canada, about 18 miles downstream from Alexandria Bay, N.Y. We never spoke of some thing being North, South, East or West. It was always upstream, downstream the American side or the Canadian side.

I have always had a place in my heart for the river and the islands. My father was the keeper on Crossover Island Lighthouse Station from March 1909 until December 1931. I spent my childhood years on Crossover from the time I was 22 months old, until I was old enough to be out on my own.

The island is set out there like a little jewel with only a little satellite island upstream from it. We used to call it Little Gull Island. It was part of a ridge of rocky bottom that extends about a 1000 feet or more upstream from Little Gull. The island was called Crossover Island because before the Seaway was built all of the steamboats crossed over there

Life on Crossover Island

Growing up on an Island Early in this Century

By Ralph E. Hill

from the American channel to the Canadian channel when going downstream and just the reverse when traveling upstream. Because Crossover is by itself, living there we had a 360-degree view of what was going on around us. We could see as far as Blue Mountain on the Canadian side, all the farm houses and building on the American side. Approximately four miles upstream to Chippewa Point and the chain of islands. We could see the narrows and the islands downstream approximately eight miles away.

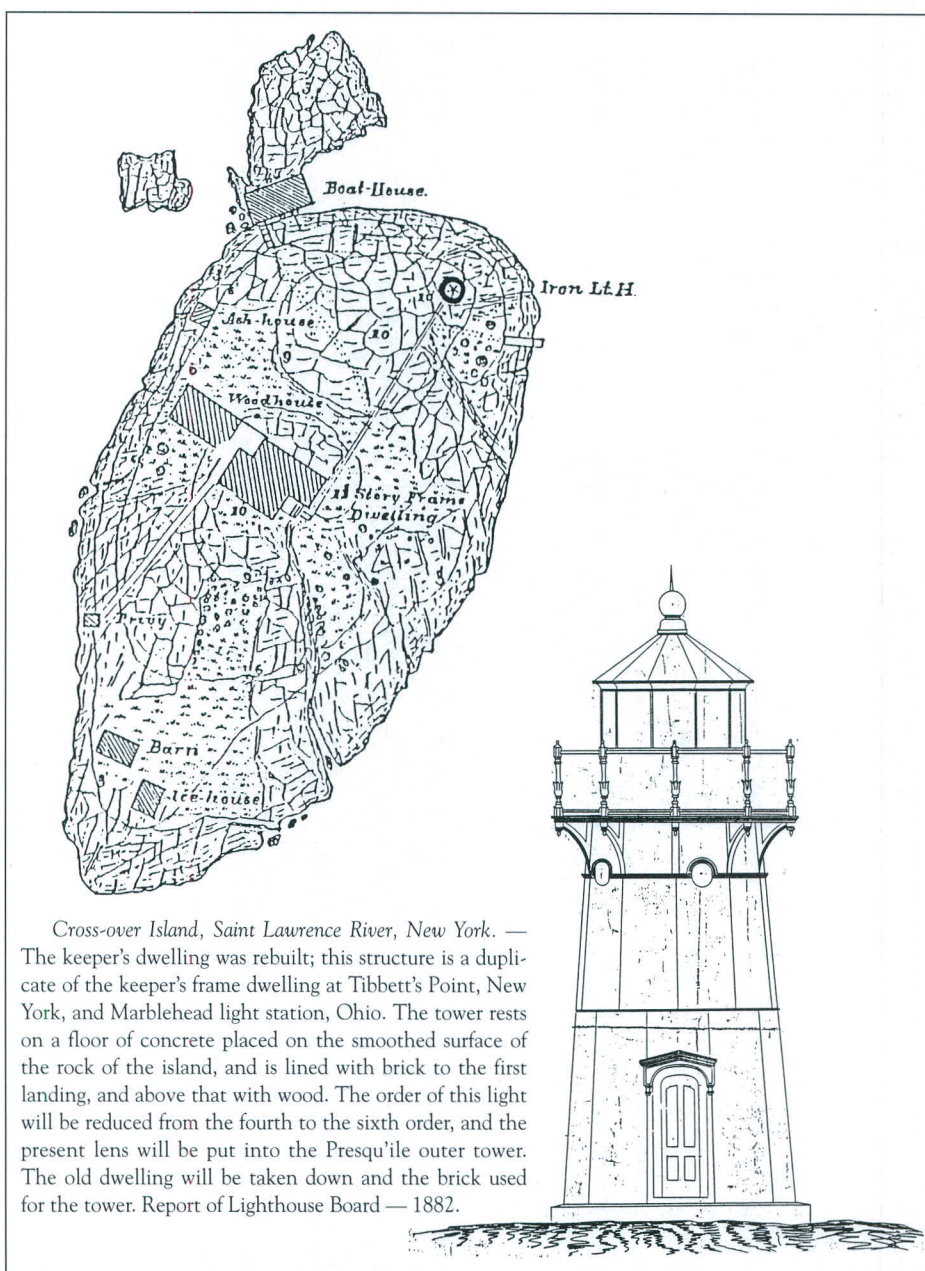
With this range we could watch the storms as they built up and moved across the river bringing the rain, snow or wind and the little water spouts that would some times accompany them. We could see the strange phenomenon known as a mirage, where the islands and the castle on Dark Island would appear to be suspended in mid-air, a real castle in the air. A steamboat coming down from Chippewa Point would appear to be floating along above the water. We could also watch as the rays of the sun seemed to draw water from the surface of the river into the sky. Father used to say that was where rain came from.

Crossover Island is about 75% solid rock. In 1882 the United States Lighthouse Department rebuilt all the buildings on the island. There is a large house with six rooms, two pantries, a rear hall and a front vestibule. The cellar was blasted out of solid rock. In one corner it has a large cistern to catch all of the rain water which is pumped up into the kitchen with an old fashioned pitcher pump. A large brick chimney is built up between the kitchen and the living room extending above the roof. The house has three gables with heavy cross timbers in each gable. Each had a spire that extended above the roof like a church steeple. The roof on the Canadian side sloped down in a long sweeping curve to the first floor at ceiling level.

At the rear door a breezeway connected the main house with a long building which was used as a summer kitchen, laundry and wood shed-coal bin combination. This building had a beautiful maple floor. Mother had a three-burner oil stove in there for cook-

ing in the summer's hot weather. In the laundry she had a gasoline powered washer. There was also a small pot belly stove with a flat top, a small scale version of the type of stove the New York Central Railroad used to heat their stations throughout the country. She used this to heat water for her washing machine. A large copper cable, which was fastened to the chimney and extended above it, was run all the way down the roof over the rocks behind the wood shed and down into the river. This was a lighting rod. It was secured at the water's edge with large rocks to prevent the ice tearing it away.

The tower was built of steel and the first half was lined with brick salvaged from the old house that was torn down. The upper half was lined with wood. On the downriver end of the island is a natural harbor with a boat dock. On this harbor is an icehouse built with double wall filled with sawdust for insulation, and a two-story boathouse. The icehouse and boathouse have a common launching ramp. Upstairs over the boathouse, my father had a work shop equipped with a work bench and all kinds of tools. In later years father built a second dock with a boathouse over the water between making a slip where the



boat could be sheltered. He also installed a hoist so the boat could be raised out of the water for inspection, repairs and winter storage.

Near the tower was a steel building about 14 feet square lined with shelves for storing five-gallon cans of kerosene oil. It had no windows, only a vent at the top. There was one other little stone building I believe was built prior to the reconstruction of 1882. This building was used as an ash house. Wood ashes were thrown in until enough were piled up, then water was thrown over them. The result was lye which seeped out a small hole on the Canadian, or down-grade side. This lye was used for making soap. My family always used this house as a smoke house for smoking hams, bacon and eels.



The present Crossover Island station was constructed in 1882. The keeper's dwelling is at left. At right, in the distance, is the ash house. The boathouse and chicken coop are at far right. Photo courtesy of Seaway Trails, Inc.



The 1½ story wood frame cottage reflects the Queen Anne style of architecture. It is presently a private residence. Photo courtesy of the Seaway Trail, Inc.

The government built a stone and concrete sea wall, starting at the base of the tower where the wall is only about two feet high. This wall curved down and along the American side of the island for approximately three-quarters of the length of the island. It was about two feet thick and in some places as much as six feet high depending on the rocky footing it was built on. Earth was filled in back of this wall to make a fair sized lawn in the front of the house.

In March 1909 when my family moved on the island it had one willow tree in the front yard near the wall, a small scrub cedar growing out of the cracks in the rocks at the extreme upstream end of the island. There was also a white birch on the Canadian side. Shortly after we were there, my father requested permission, which was granted, to plant some fruit trees. However, the winters were too severe for fruit trees and they did not last. After the first time

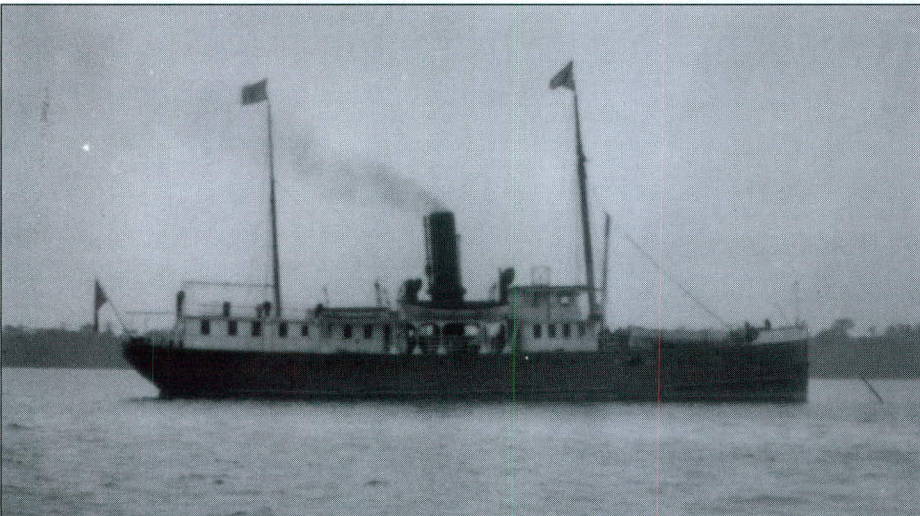
he didn't ask permission but just went on planting, a lilac near the tower, willows in the yard by the side of the house where we used to have our picnic table and willows in other locations around the island.

We were the only family living on the island. In the early part of the century it was a rugged life. We had no telephone, radio, T.V., gas, electric, no running water or indoor plumbing, and no central heating. Cooking was done on a big cast iron stove that burned wood or coal. The house was heated by a big heating stove in the living room that also burned coal. Rain water was collected in a cistern in the cellar and pumped up into a sink in the kitchen. All other water was pumped through solid rock. This had to be carried into the house for cooking and drinking and into the laundry room for washing the clothes. About two years before my father left the island, the lighthouse service did finally furnish a furnace for central heating.

These hardships were all offset by the beauty of living on an island in the middle of the river. We had the pleasure of fresh clean air, swimming, fishing and the ever-changing scenery of the steam boats and big passenger steamers, plus the stately yachts that used to come up the river in those days.



Keeper Hill's wife Cora and six of her brood. A 7th child was born shortly after this 1918 photo was taken. Author Ralph Hill is the middle child on the right. Ralph Hill photo.



The Lighthouse Service tender *Crocus* lying off Crossover Island in the 1930's. The tender brought supplies and occasionally the District Superintendent who inspected the station. Ralph Hill photograph.

Father, along with the caring for and maintaining the light station, spent time in his workshop making furniture and repairing row boats and canoes that were owned by the people who owned cottages at Oak Point. He also built a number of cottages around Schermerhorn Bay. We children entertained ourselves swimming and fishing and exploring some of the other islands and creeks that run inland on both sides of the river. Mother had her flower gardens and her sewing to do during her spare time. It was a hard life, but a full and interesting one.

The family spent the balance of the winter of 1909 and all of 1910 on the island. It was cold and bleak out there. It did not make any difference which way the wind blew, it had its full effect as there was no protection from any direction. Father had to walk to the mainland for supplies and the mail. This was approximately two miles over the ice, exposed to the winter elements all the way. During the summer of 1911 he bought some property from Mr. Billings at Oak Point on the shore of Schermerhorn Bay and built a cottage. This cottage we finished off on the inside for year-round living. The family moved there for the winter, and spent many winters there. Winters at Oak Point gave

us children an opportunity to have other children to play with. There were the two Latham children, Ernest and Rita, who lived just a short distance away in another cottage. I remember they had a magic lantern with slides, and we used to like to show the pictures on the wall, which was just bare white plaster at the time. They were later painted. We could enjoy seeing the same pictures over and over again.

When it got close to Christmas, we children would go into the woods and collect some of the juniper boughs and creeping pine. Creeping pine used to grow under the snow and was a real fine green vine with short soft needles that looked something like pine needles. The vines would sometimes be four or five feet long. They were ideal for making wreaths or just decorating the house. Mother used to pack a large box with the vine and juniper and send them to the Lewisohn girls who came to Oak Point each year. We would also gather wintergreen leaves and the little red berries. These also grew under the snow. Mother would boil them and make wintergreen tea.

Winter at Oak Point was rugged, but we enjoyed it. I suppose because we did not know any other type of living. When I look back, we had a lot of fun as children that the children of today never have the chance to experience.

Mr. Latham managed the farm for Mr. Billings, who ran the general store. Each night on his way home Mr. Latham would walk across the ice, and as he had to pass by our house he would always stop in, and he and my father would chat awhile.

When the snow covered the ice, Mr. Latham would rig up a snow plow and with a team of horses would clear a space for us to skate. We used to put lanterns on the snow piles and skate at night. One winter we had a boy, Jackie Klotz, from New York City who stayed all winter with his family. His family owned a cottage near Oak Point. Mr. Klotz sent to New York City and bought hockey sticks and pucks for us to play with. It was the first time any of us children had ever seen either item.



Boathouse built in 1920 by Keeper Hill. Ralph Hill photo.

We had a nice hill to slide down either on our sled or our one runner "skip jacks." These we made using a barrel stave with a seat fastened about a foot high. You just sat on them and tried to balance yourself while you slid down hill at blazing speed. One side of the hill known as Fox Hole Hill had a small opening in the rocks that led back into a fairly large cave. We were told that before we children started using the hill, the foxes used the cave for a home for their newborn kits. At one time, red foxes were very plentiful in the area and the hunters would be out with hounds during the winter, hunting them around the island.

My father was forever building stone walls at different places around the island. He had the blacksmith at Hammond make him a large grappling hook which he attached to a long pole so he could pull stones out of the water around the island. He would fill in behind these walls with earth brought from the mainland or the islands upstream. This way we could have more space for flower or vegetable gardens.

The house was heated with a large cast iron range in the kitchen and a monster-size round oak heater in the living room. There were registers in the ceilings to allow the heat to go up into the bedrooms above. In the strange way our government operates, after the many years that my father requested a furnace for the house, the Lighthouse Service installed one just four years before they abandoned the station.



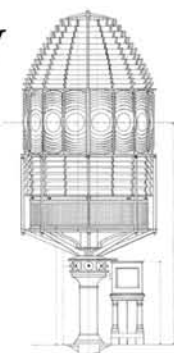
Above – Walter Plantz helping Keeper Hill launch the motor boat. The small shed on the right is the ice house. Ralph Hill photo.

I visited the island in 1983, through the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Gorham of Oak Point who graciously took Mrs. Hill and me out there in their motor boat. At that time the big willow tree and the scrub cedar were still there. The lilac was a large bush and some of the other willows that father planted still survived. The oil house was gone and the boathouse over the slip was also missing. The building where the summer kitchen had been was destroyed

by vandals a number of years ago. All of the other buildings were in excellent condition. I have recently had correspondence with Mrs. Dutcher, one of the present owners, and they have done a wonderful job of restoring everything and maintaining the island. I was very pleased with what I saw. I know my father would have been pleased too, as he was always very proud of the way he maintained the station while he was keeper.



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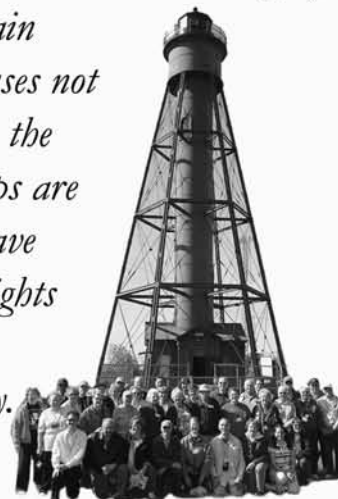
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