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THE INFLUENCE OF HOROLOGY ON U.S. LIGHTHOUSE OPERATIONS

By Chris Hansen

This article was originally published in Volume 52, Issue 389 of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors' **Bulletin** *publication. It is reprinted here by permission.*

Early navigation of United States coastal waters and the Great Lakes was a challenge at best during daylight hours, but it was virtually impossible at night or in conditions of fog.

Beginning in the late 18th century, lighthouses with visual and audible signals became indispensable guides for safe passage in American waters.

This article concentrates on the mechanical aspects of lighthouse operations. It highlights the profound influence horology had in creating effective and highly reliable navigational aids, prior to the advent of automation.

Lighthouse engineers in the 19th century were experts at adopting existing technologies, which is commendable. However, it was the innovations within the clockmaking community that provided many basic principles for rotating beacon machinery, fogbell striking apparatus, and certain lightship mechanisms. In fact, many early lighthouse equipment drawings and historical documents acknowledge this horological contribution by describing the machinery components as "clocks, clockwork, or clock apparatus."

Presenting a story that covers all related clock features of U.S. lighthouses is not possible. However, numerous examples of aids to navigation on Long Island, New York, are featured, since this area on our eastern seaboard is representative of our national coast lines, including features such as oceans, numerous harbors, bays, inlets, and maritime hazards.

For example, the Montauk Point Lighthouse on the eastern tip of Long Island is a fine indicator of advancing technology, from the early mechanical devices to current sophisticated automation. This lighthouse was completed in 1796 and is the earliest station in New York State. Existing documents state that the Montauk Point Lighthouse had a windup clockwork rotating lens, which was replaced and electrified in 1960. Many other examples of horological influences are described in this article.

This story could not be told without the reference material contained in Robert G. Müller's book *Long Island Lighthouses Past and Present*. Also, Ted Panayotoff of the Maine Lighthouse Museum in Rockland has provided a wealth of information, including photographs, regarding the clock-related artifacts in their museum. Other contributors and credits for individual photographs and drawings are included in the references, bibliography, and acknowledgments sections.

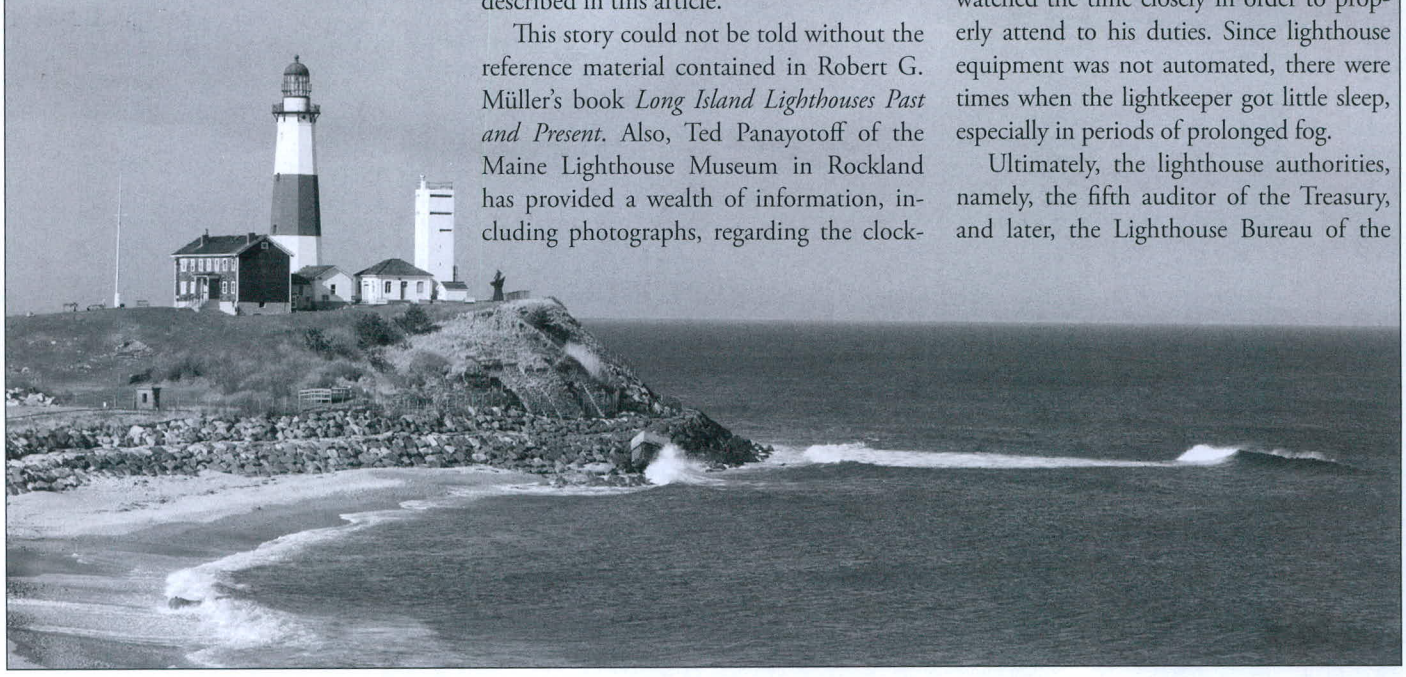
Timekeeping

The first and most obvious contribution to lighthouse technology is in the form of timekeeping itself. Before exploring this field, life in a 19th- and early 20th-century lighthouse should be understood.

The "keeper of the light" led a lonely and harsh existence. He was a person of extraordinary ability and one who could pay attention to details such as timing. Failure to pay attention to the oil that fueled the light or the periodic winding of the fogbell mechanism would be a serious threat to maritime safety and human life.

Timing was critical since the powerful lamps, beacon rotation, and fog signals would only operate for limited periods without the lightkeeper's attention. Hence, he watched the time closely in order to properly attend to his duties. Since lighthouse equipment was not automated, there were times when the lightkeeper got little sleep, especially in periods of prolonged fog.

Ultimately, the lighthouse authorities, namely, the fifth auditor of the Treasury, and later, the Lighthouse Bureau of the



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Treasury, sought to procure timepieces for U.S. lighthouses that would be accurate, reliable, and simple to operate.

As a result, the Howard & Davis Company of Roxbury, Boston, Massachusetts, was selected to provide their No. 4 size weight-driven banjo timepiece with the tablet inscribed, "U.S. Light House Establishment." This procurement and issuance to lighthouses took place between 1842 and 1859. The number of clocks ordered and issued is not currently known.

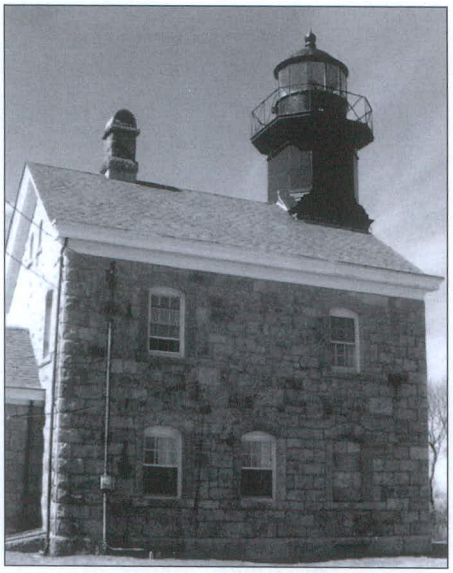
A rare surviving example of this timepiece is shown below. It is owned by the Huntington Historical Society, Long Island, and is in excellent original condition. Note that the currently accepted term "lighthouse" was expressed earlier as two words, occasionally also with a hyphen. The clock is numbered "160," but it is not known whether this was a lighthouse issue number or a general Howard & David sequence number.



This timepiece was originally issued to the Old Field Point Lighthouse, which is on the north shore of Long Island.

The lighthouse was built in 1824, and later replaced on the same site by this structure in 1869. The original 1824 keeper's quarters, where the clock was located, still stands today.

Edgar Stanton MacLay was the second to last lighthouse keeper of the Old Field Point facility. His tour of duty began in 1895 and ended in 1900. In addition to his lighthouse duties, he was a prolific writer of naval history and was also a local builder. He donated the Howard & Davis timepiece to the Huntington Historical Society sometime prior to 1918.



The Old Field Point Lighthouse.

His documented recollections include in part: "This old clock was before me many and many a night. It gave me faithful warning of the time, and I have a deep affection for it."

It is assumed that his statement "faithful warning of the time" meant visual observations, since this timepiece did not strike the hours.

This clock now operates daily and is on display at the Huntington Historical Society.

A later example of lighthouse timekeeping is a Howard-type clock, which has a tablet also inscribed "U.S. Light House Establishment." This clock is unsigned and is owned by the Maine Lighthouse Museum. Since this clock is currently encased in glass, it cannot be determined whether it strikes the hours or is a ship's bell strike.

Also on display at this museum is a circa 1900 photo of a Chelsea, Massachusetts, machine shop that serviced lighthouse equipment. The photo shows a similar banjo with the "U.S. Light House Establishment" inscription hanging on the shop wall.

A most interesting stopwatch, marked "U.S. Light House Establishment" on the back, was made by Galt and Bros, Washington, D.C., and issued to lighthouse keepers (and possibly to lightships for precise timing of various functions).

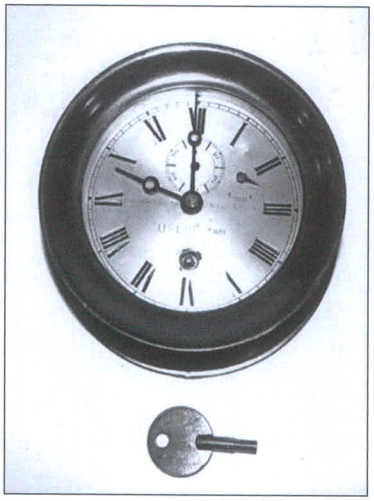
"Boiler room clocks," made in the 20th century, were typically used aboard ships, since pendulums and motions of the sea did not mix well. They were used in lightships but were also used in lighthouses.

A common misconception is that Simon Willard's patent 1818 lighthouse clock was designed for use in U.S. lighthouses. These are poorly understood treasures that were never intended for lighthouse use. The 20th-century term "lighthouse clock" merely acknowledges a similarity in form between the shape of a lighthouse and some of these clocks.



Examples of boiler room clocks. The timepiece above was made by Seth Thomas and is marked "U.S.L.H. Service" in the center of the dial.

The photo below shows a higher quality timepiece that was made by the Chelsea Clock Co., Boston, Massachusetts. It is inscribed "U.S.L.H. Estab."



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The Rotating Lens

The second contribution of horology to lighthouse functions was the "clockwork mechanisms" for rotating the lenses, thus concentrating the light from a fixed source of light within.

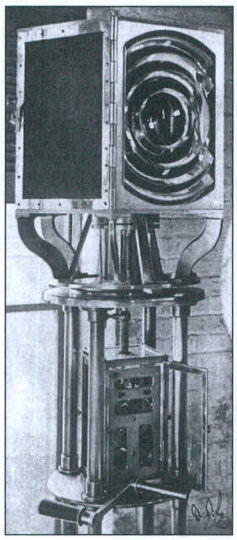
The Fresnel lens was developed in the 1820s and had the power and efficiency to allow for the use of one oil lamp in place of many. These lenses, which were in general use in the United States after 1852, came in seven different sizes known as "orders." Namely, first order (largest), second, third, third-and-one-half, fourth, fifth, and sixth. Due to mass and weight considerations, lenses of various orders required clockwork motors of different capacities and configurations. In the following discussions and graphics, notice that the substantial clockworks for the largest rotating first order lens is quite different from that required for the smaller lens. On average, a clockwork motor would rotate a lens for a four-hour period before requiring rewinding. Thus, the lighthouse keeper was required to keep careful watch of the time.

The only active Fresnel lens remaining on Long Island is at the Eaton's Neck Coast Guard Station on the north shore.

In the August 2006 *NAWCC Bulletin*, Dr. Snowden Taylor (Research Committee chairman) thoroughly covers the Fresnel lens and clockwork rotating mechanism formerly at the Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. His article describes the lens assembly, which turns on large rollers. Because of its weight and mass, it is driven by a large self-standing clockwork containing a fly-ball governor to control the speed of rotation.

This device is a working exhibit at the Martha's Vineyard Museum.

The largest lenses usually have a separate offset clockwork unit with a pinion gear driving a large ring gear on the central pedestal. Smaller and lighter lenses tend to have a clockwork rotating mechanism, which is directly in line and on the pedestal with the lens unit.



An example of a smaller revolving lens with a direct drive from the clockwork is shown at left. It revolves on ball bearings rather than large rollers. Its fourth-order lens flashes a visual signal every 20 seconds.

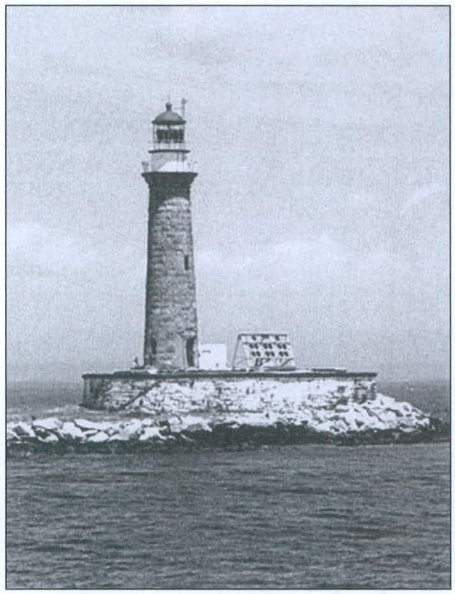
A similar but medium-size unit is on display at the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

The complete story about the French development of the Fresnel lens and its associated clockwork rotating mechanism is described in *NAWCC Bulletin, No. 363* (August 2006). The article is entitled, "The Henry-Lepaute Clock and Lens Work-Producers of the Fresnel Lens," by Thomas Tag.

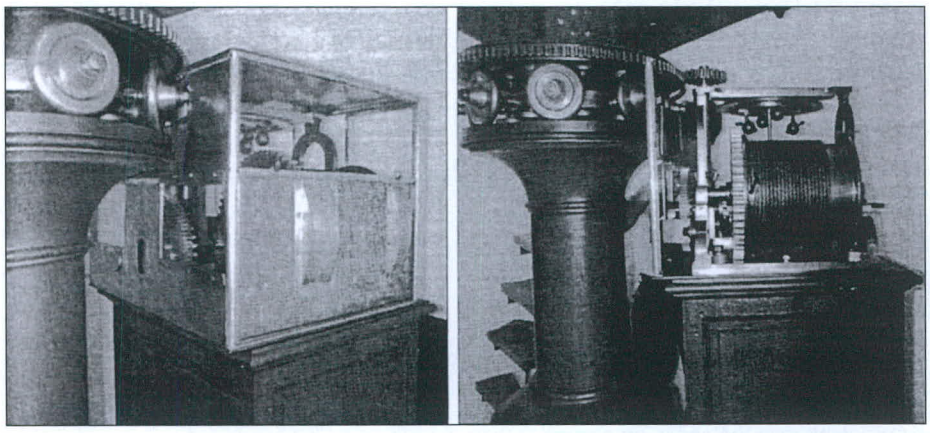
While sizes vary, the principle of operation was basically the same. These rotating mechanisms essentially contained clockwork gearing; a winding drum, including cable or chain; weight and crank; a brake; a method of transmitting rotation to the lens; and a governor to control the release of power and speed of rotation. There are a few different types of governors, but the traditional verge and pendulum type of escapement has not been observed. The weight usually descended through a hole in the lantern deck of the lighthouse.

The East End Seaport Museum and Marine Foundation, located in Greenport, Long Island, has on display a working fourth-order Fresnel rotating lens. This lens, which signaled a flash every 30 seconds, was originally located in the Little Gull Island Lighthouse, which was established off Long Island in 1805. It was transferred to the East End Seaport Museum in 1995.

In 2003 the lens and clockwork was serviced by Jim Dunlap of the Lighthouse and Lens Restoration Company. At the time he wrote in part: "The lens rotates flawlessly and effortlessly with clockwork gears so pristine they could have been manufactured during the last month, not over 100 years ago."



Little Gull Island Lighthouse.



Two views of the clockwork mechanism inside the Gay Head Lighthouse in Massachusetts.

Fogbell Apparatus

The 19th- and early 20th-century fogbell machines are a perfect example of technology transfer from the clock industry, since they operated in much the same manner as tower clocks.

Similarities include a weight-driven system that had a winding drum and crank with a sprocket and pawl or click. Cables or chains would allow the weight to descend down through the lighthouse interior or in some cases, the entire assembly would be mounted in a separate tower.

Various types of clockwork escapements were used to control the release of power and to regulate the speed of the striking hammer. As in a tower clock, a large ratchet

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wheel would activate the lever, linkages, and hammer for bell striking.

The Huntington Harbor (Lloyd Harbor) Lighthouse on Long Island illustrates a typical case where a mechanical fogbell apparatus was installed.



Huntington Harbor Lighthouse.

By 1900 the original 1857 lighthouse, including its location, was declared obsolete, and by 1905 the Bureau of Lighthouses issued a specification which included in part: "A fogbell apparatus shall consist of a 1000 pound bell operated by number 4 fogbell striker."

This refers to a Gamewell fogbell striking apparatus Number 4. As shown in the drawing and parts list dated January 26, 1894, a Number 4 is a chain drive system with a clock, ratchet wheel, escapement arm, and other clock-related features.

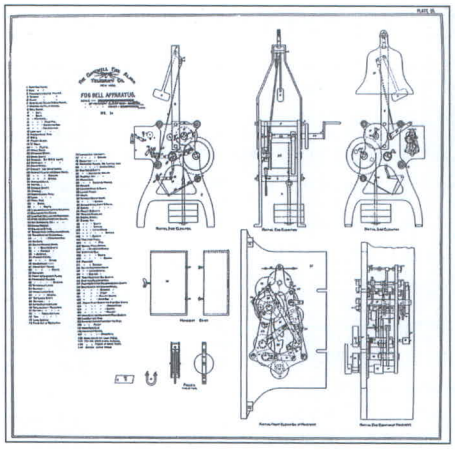
A surviving example of a Gamewell Number 4 apparatus is currently on display at the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

On June 16, 1912, the new light and fogbell station, located at both the entrance to Lloyd and Huntington Harbors, was placed in service.

On my visit to this lighthouse, I noted the tall steel spiral staircase, which included a hollow pipe as a central structural column. The weight and cable were routed through this central column. The weight would descend down the central pipe to the lowest level of the lighthouse. This was an extremely safe installation, since a broken cable and falling weight would be completely contained. Although this appeared to me as a very innovative concept, I now understand that it was not totally unique among lighthouses.

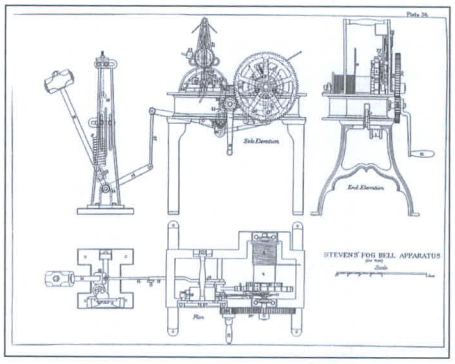
The Huntington Lighthouse Preservation Society (as it is known today) received a lease from the Coast Guard and has restored this structure. The station continues today to be an active aid to navigation with a modern beacon and fog signal. The original fogbell inscribed "Jersey City, N.J. 1911" remains, but the No. 4 fogbell apparatus no longer exists.

Another Model No. 10 fogbell apparatus (not dated) from the Gamewell Fire Alarm Telegraph Co., New York, is shown at the top of the next column. The parts list includes clock-related items such as "escape wheel and shafts, balance, pallets, timing pendulum, winding drum and weights."



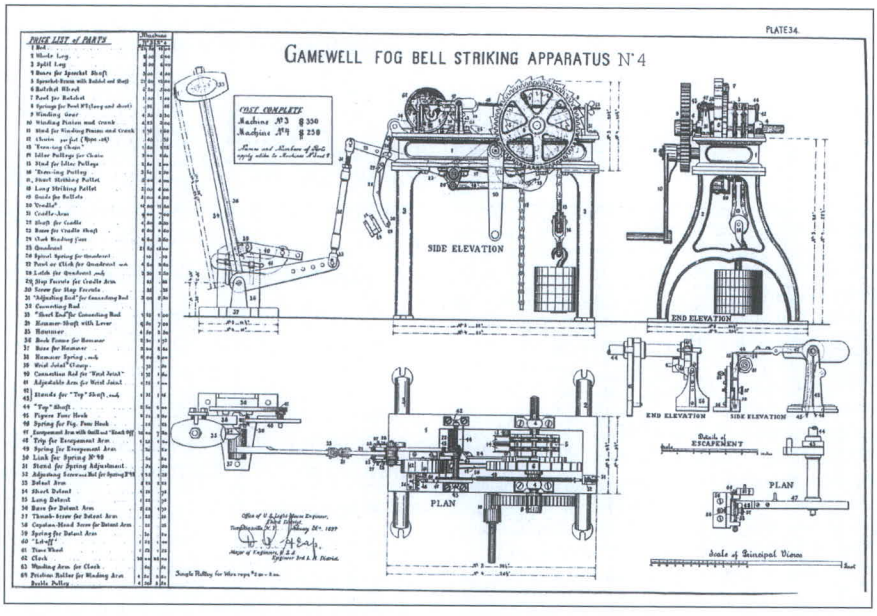
A competing fogbell system was produced by the George M. Stevens Company of Boston, Mass. His models were similar to the Gamewell machinery as they also used "clockwork mechanisms."

In 1868 a Stevens fogbell apparatus was ordered to replace the original one at the North Dumpling Lighthouse—Fishers Island Sound—Long Island Sound, because "it would run 40 times as long as it took to wind it." The previous mechanism in service only ran "4 times as long as it took to wind it." This Stevens replacement allegedly eliminated the need for an assistant keeper.



The possible Stevens model ordered is shown above. Perhaps the reason that it ran for a longer duration per winding is that it had a true clock-type recoil escapement, which was very controllable.

This Stevens fogbell apparatus had an escape wheel, verge, crutch, and pendulum. Details of the typical clock escapement can be seen in the tower-type arrangement shown in the side elevation. This model is noted as the "old style."



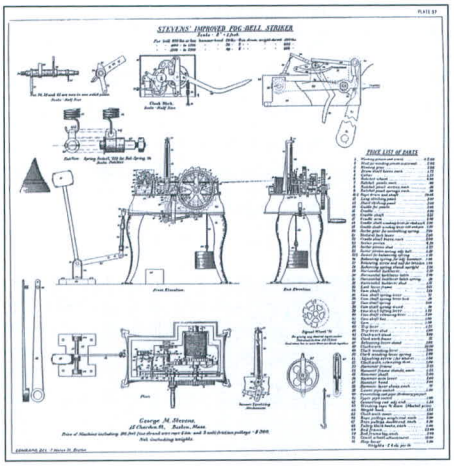
Gamewell Fog Bell Apparatus Number 4. Note the clock feature in the upper left portion of the machine and the unusual escapement details.

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There is an interesting side story concerning Long Island's North Dumpling Island Lighthouse, which was first established in 1849.

In 1986 the island, including the lighthouse, was sold to Dean Kamen, the fifth owner, who declared it the "Sovereign North Dumpling Republic." He named himself Lord Dumpling II. The new nation is reputed to have its own currency, a national anthem, and a one-boat navy. Lord Dumpling signed a non-aggression pact with his friend, President George H. W. Bush.

Other Long Island lighthouses, including the Plum Island Station, also had Stevens fogbell systems installed. The Plum Island Lighthouse had a system installed in 1871 in which the signal struck every 15 seconds.

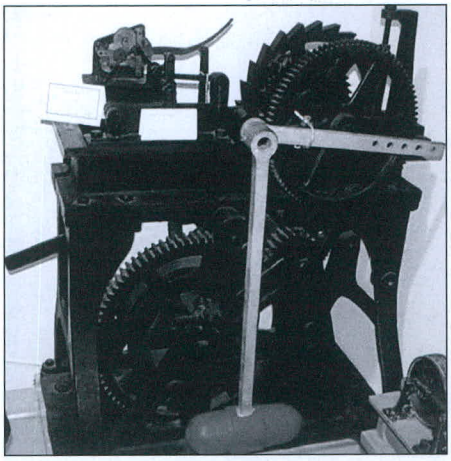


The drawing above shows the Stevens-improved fogbell striker. Note that the recoil-type escapement has now been replaced with a different system, as shown in the clockwork drawing at the top center of this design. Also note the addition of a signal, or count wheel, attachment which allows for the selection of a desired number of bell strikes.

Here, we have clear evidence of technology transfer from the clock industry, since the George Stevens Company, Boston, Massachusetts, also produced tower clocks during the period 1864 to about 1915.

A thorough examination of the history and technical details concerning the mechanical fog signals is provided in *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 244 (October 1986). The article is entitled "Clockwork Fog Signals" by Max F. Homfeld.

Another aid to navigation was the Crosby Automatic Signal Apparatus, which contained a clock mechanism to open and close the valve of a fog siren or whistle. This device,



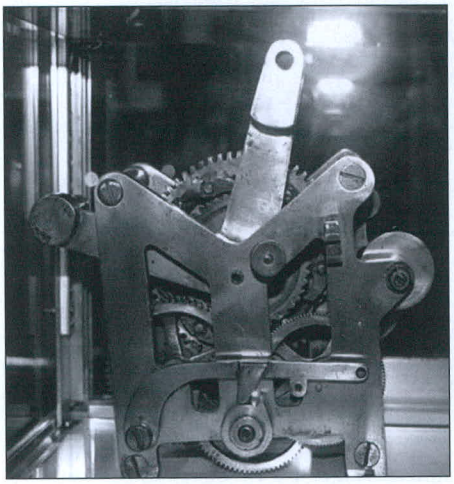
A Stevens fogbell apparatus owned by the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

made in Boston, is shown below, although it is partially incomplete.

Compressed air or steam was used not only to operate the signal device but also to automatically rewind the clock spring mechanism. Note the ratchet wheel and multiple pawls or clicks.

The cam wheel shown at the bottom of the apparatus revolves at one revolution per minute and determines the number and lengths of the blast and silent intervals. While the cam rotates at one RPM, its speed can be altered by changing the position of the fans on the governor. This is a feature also found on tower clock movements.

The Crosby device was always mounted in duplicate, probably as a fail-safe backup measure.



The Crosby Automatic Signal Apparatus.

Clockmaker Becomes Lighthouse Keeper

Felix Dominy, born 1800 and died 1868, was one of the earliest keepers of the Fire Island Lighthouse, which is located on the south shore of Long Island. He was appointed in 1835 and served until 1844.

The Dominy family was by far the most important 18th- and 19th-century name in Long Island clockmaking history.

Nathaniel Dominy IV, born 1737 and died 1812, was the most notable clockmaker, and his tallcase clocks are highly treasured today. Felix, the grandson of Nathaniel IV, was a clockmaker, and three of his four known tallcase clocks are dated 1818, 1824, and 1827.

The Dominy workshop originally attached to the rear of the homestead in East Hampton, Long Island, was acquired in 1957 by the Winterthur Museum. The clock shops were moved and are currently on display at Winterthur.

During the 1830s, Felix Dominy apparently felt that a career change was necessary. In 1833 he was commissioned to cover the dome of the Montauk Lighthouse with copper. Later, during his service as Fire Island Lighthouse keeper, he wrote a letter to his mother stating, in part: "I am going to make a pair of winding stairs like those in the mill for the upper story of the lt. house as the ones there are very close together and we can hardly get up."

Lightships

Lightships never enjoyed the notoriety and romance of the lighthouse, but they were essential partners with America's lighthouses, as part of the federal government's commitment to safe navigation.

One example is the AMBROSE Lightship, shown on the next page, when it was still guarding busy New York Harbor.

Occasionally, these lightships were required to return to port for maintenance and repairs. A RELIEF lightship, such as the one shown on the next page, was dispatched to the area so that mariners would continue to have a familiar navigational reference in the absence of the assigned vessel.

Once again clock technology was used to ensure that RELIEF ship light signals matched that of the permanently assigned lightship. The photo on the next page shows

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The AMBROSE Lightship. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

a spring-wound mechanism known as a "lightship coding clock." It employs a rotating cam wheel (shown in the center of the clock) to open and close a set of electrical contacts, thus emitting a light signal that duplicates that of the absent lightship. Note the clock winding arbor at the five o'clock position.

A set of cams was maintained aboard the RELIEF ship to simulate the light signal for the absent lightship. Smaller cams were for the fog signal timer.

Another horological contribution to maritime navigation was recently reported by James Peghiny (Massachusetts) in the *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 376 (October 2008). During the first half of the 20th century, the Waltham Watch Co. produced various models of a timing device that was used to activate a foghorn once each minute, thus sounding an audible signal.

The use of lightships did not begin until congressional authorization in 1819, and it ended when the last vessel was decommissioned in 1985. Permanent offshore light structures now take the place of the valiant lightships.



RELIEF (*WAL-523*) Lightship, October 1960. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

The End of an Era

Radio beacon clocks were first introduced at lighthouses in 1921. They combined the mechanical technology of spring-driven self-winding clocks with the emerging technology of radio communication. In its earliest days, radio beacon and steam fog whistle signals were sent simultaneously, and mariners would time the interval between the two signals to compute their distance from the lighthouse.

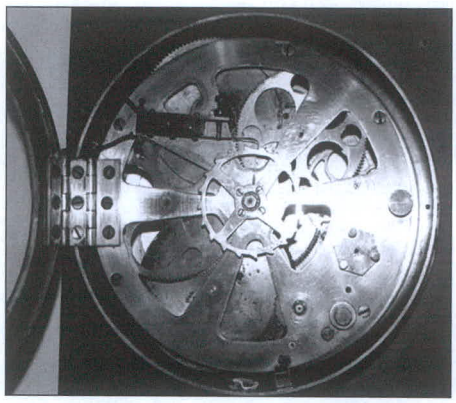
An example of this radio beacon pendulum master clock, which obviously was used only in stationary lighthouses, is shown on the next page. It is a Simplex/IBM Model 25 clock with an Invar pendulum and Graham deadbeat escapement for accuracy; it was wound electrically or by impulse magnet. In the event of a power failure, this mechanism had the capability of running for 12 hours without automatic rewinding. This clock is awaiting restoration at the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

Each lighthouse had two of these clocks to ensure uninterrupted service in the event that one clockwork mechanism failed.

Automation and radio beacon technology introduced in the early 20th century marked the beginning of the end for the legendary lighthouse keeper.

Summary and Comments

I am not a lighthouse historian, but I can recognize an intriguing clock-related story when I see one. This article explores (in nontechnical terms) the contribution of the clock industry to a few areas of early lighthouse operations. These include basic mechanical timekeeping, controlled lens rotation, fogbell activation, foghorn timing, radio beacon transmissions, and relief lightship functions.



Lightship "coding clock."

Exactly how some of these technology transfers took place remains a mystery. It may have been a normal evolutionary process based on observations of clock mechanisms by lighthouse engineers. Also, clock experts may have provided some form of technical assistance to the lighthouse community.

I'm also convinced that there are other clock-related lighthouse items that are not covered in this article. Perhaps others in the NAWCC have information and will write about other developments.

It would be irresponsible not to acknowledge the "keepers of the light," who were a

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unique breed of hearty and disciplined individuals who wound and maintained the lighthouse machinery. They were required to systematically fuel the lamps, and failure to do so would result in certain dismissal. Their existence was lonely, boring, harsh, and extremely difficult on family life.

They endured the hardships of extreme weather and occasionally lost their living quarters in raging storms.



Simplex/IBM Model 25

Twentieth-century automation eliminated the need for their many talents. However, the lighthouse keeper will always be remembered as part of early lighthouse history and will remain a legend in our American heritage.

I have found that lighthouse historians are just as passionate about their field of interest as we clock enthusiasts are about ours. When writing this article, I was determined not to quote directly from any source of information but rather to digest the information and put into my own words. However, I cannot ignore the following statement in Robert G. Müller's book *Long Island's Lighthouses Past and Present*:

> The future of historic lighthouses is up to us. The words and actions of the American public will determine their fates. We can choose to maintain them as monuments to a unique and distinguished heritage, turn them into cheap attractions, or allow them to be damaged or even lost. But just their history tells about the society in which they were built and manned. The history we make by our decisions regarding the future of our historic lighthouses will tell much about who we are.

If we substitute the word "clocks" for "lighthouses," I believe we have or should have the same passion for the preservation of our horological heritage.

… And that's the way it was.

Acknowledgments

I thank the following for their contributions to this article: Dr. Snowden Taylor, for personal communications, encouragement, and review of the manuscript; Mr. Ted Panayotoff, Maine Lighthouse Museum, Rockland, Maine, for numerous communications, information, and graphics of their artifacts; Ms. Carol House, president, Long Island Chapter of U.S. Lighthouse Society, for guidance and permission to use Long Island information; Mr. Steven Eckers, Huntington Lighthouse Preservation Society, Inc., for providing the engineering drawings of the Gamewell & Stevens fogbell apparatus; and Mr. Robert (Toby) Kissam, Huntington Historical Society, for information pertaining to the Howard & Davis Lighthouse Clock.

About the Author

Chris Hansen has been a member of the NAWCC for 43 years and has been a past contributor to the *Bulletin*. He collects, restores, and researches early American clocks, with emphasis on wood movements. He has lectured locally on this subject and recently was curator of a clock exhibit at the Huntington Historical Society. He is a graduate of the State University of New York at Farmingdale and the Penn State Executive Management Program.

Chris retired after 40 years of service with a major Fortune 500 aerospace company on Long Island. His most memorable experience was involvement during the infancy of the project Apollo-Lunar Module (LM) Program. He held director-level positions in new business planning, industrial engineering, aerospace modernization, and Stealth technology.

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When Storms Arose and Ships Wrecked, Lighthouse Keepers Sent the Message, and Life-Saving Service Surfmen Responded.

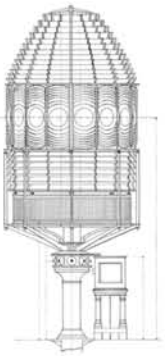


Founded at the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1995 by maritime historians, authors, museum directors, National Park Service professionals and other caring people, the U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association strives to preserve the history, artifacts and architecture of the Life-Saving Service and the early Coast Guard.

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Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

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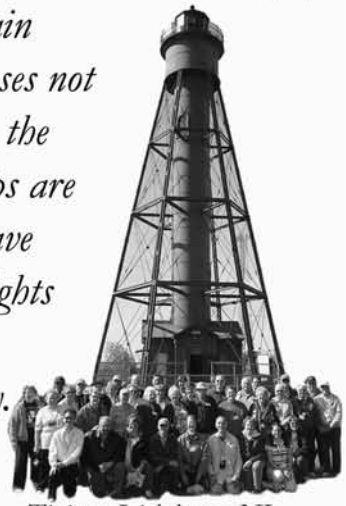
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The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



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