

The Keeper Had a Horse...and a Mule

By Elinor DeWire



Historic images of the 1790 Happisburgh Lighthouse on the East Anglia coast of Great Britain confirm that horses have always been part of its story, providing brawn for the keepers, companionship, and transportation to the nearby village. Today, a pony grazes happily in the fields surrounding the well-preserved station. Photo by Bob Buttle.

March 23, 1885: Today our fine horse was delivered to us. We've called her Polly. No more kow-towing to the neighbors for the loan of their bullocks to haul our stores up from the landing.—Akaroa Head Lighthouse, New Zealand

No other animal was so useful or critical to the establishment and operation of light stations than the equine. Until the advent of motorized engines, true horsepower (and sometimes mulepower) was the foundation of almost all lighthouse work. Horses and mules carried the first surveyors to lighthouse sites and obediently served the crews who built the stations, hauling materials to construct the towers and working side-by-side with their human counterparts as the light towers and their ancillary buildings rose. When light stations were completed and went into operation, reliable quadrupeds often stayed behind to provide transportation and strong backs for an assortment of chores, not to mention much-needed companionship.

The names of these devoted animals were seldom recorded, but evidence of their role in lighthouse history can be found at numerous light stations. Both North Head Lighthouse and Turn Point Lighthouse in Washington have their historic "Mule Barns" designed by lighthouse architect, Carl Leick. Thirty Mile Point Lighthouse in New York has its horse and carriage barn, built in 1875 for \$90,000. Sand Hills Lighthouse in Michigan, now a B&B, also has its barn; so does Reedy Island

Lighthouse in Delaware and Point Sur Lighthouse, California. In fact, many light stations still have their historic old barns—too many to list here. These vestiges of the pre-automobile era speak volumes about the service and value of horses and mules, though today most of the barns function in new capacities as gift shops and museums.

Scattered remarks about the four-footed members of lighthouse crews appear in government documents, light station logbooks, and personal diaries. An early example was a letter from New York's Old Field Point lightkeeper, Elizabeth Smith, asking the Lighthouse Board for a small barn to house her horses. Old Field Point Lighthouse was isolated in the 1830s, and a horse and wagon were crucial for getting supplies. The horse barn was constructed and then rebuilt in the 1870s, underscoring its importance.

Julia Williams, keeper of California's Santa Barbara Lighthouse in the 1850s, had a trusty and indispensable horse. Wooden buckets were slung over the mare's back and she was walked a mile each day to the nearest stream. Often, Williams' children rode bareback behind the pails. At the stream, the horse had a drink and the children were bathed. Then the buckets were filled, and the family walked back to the lighthouse. Some



The supply mule train for Point Sur Lighthouse, California, appeared hitched and ready for work in this 19th century image. Landing supplies from offshore was tricky. The mules could safely make the trip to the site by road and negotiate the steep hill to the light station. U.S. Lighthouse Society archive photo.

days, the tired old horse rebelled and threw off the heavy buckets. Williams would patiently calm her, refill the pails, and tempt the mare with some sugar. The assuaged horse always relaxed and plodded home.

Ponies served lighthouse families too, as workers and as entertainment for children. Rany Jennette, who grew up at lofty Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in the 1920s and 1930s, recalled rounding up wild ponies on the Outer Banks. His father, Unaka Jennette, sold some of the ponies to supplement his income. Those he kept for his children were branded with a "J." The ponies and other livestock were allowed to roam free on the barrier island until about 1930, when a law was passed requiring them to be fenced. Pens were built behind the keeper's house and the animals were confined. The ponies hated the pens and often escaped. Today, wild ponies still roam the lighthouse grounds at Assateague, Virginia, and Currituck, North Carolina.

Three-thousand miles west of the Mid-Atlantic's barrier beaches, horses labored to build a lighthouse and fog signal at Point Bonita at the entrance to the Golden Gate. The tower stood watch on a rocky outcrop. A steam-powered winch lifted supplies from Bonita Cove to a tram car that ran up the steep cliff. There, "horse-cars" took over the work, running on a narrow gauge track to the site of construction. The horses worked long hours, then were turned loose on the point to graze in the grassy fields.

After the lighthouse went into service in 1855, two horses were permanently assigned to the light station to pull carts filled with coal for the fog siren. West Coast historian Ralph Shanks wrote of them: "Once the fog signal was complete, both the horses and the steam engine would do a lot of puffing, since the signal's boiler fires would consume over seventy-five tons of coal a year, and every last chunk of it would be hauled along the railway."

Several California lighthouses became famous for their horses. In the 1920s, Billy lived at Point Reyes Lighthouse north of San Francisco. He served as the four-legged ve-

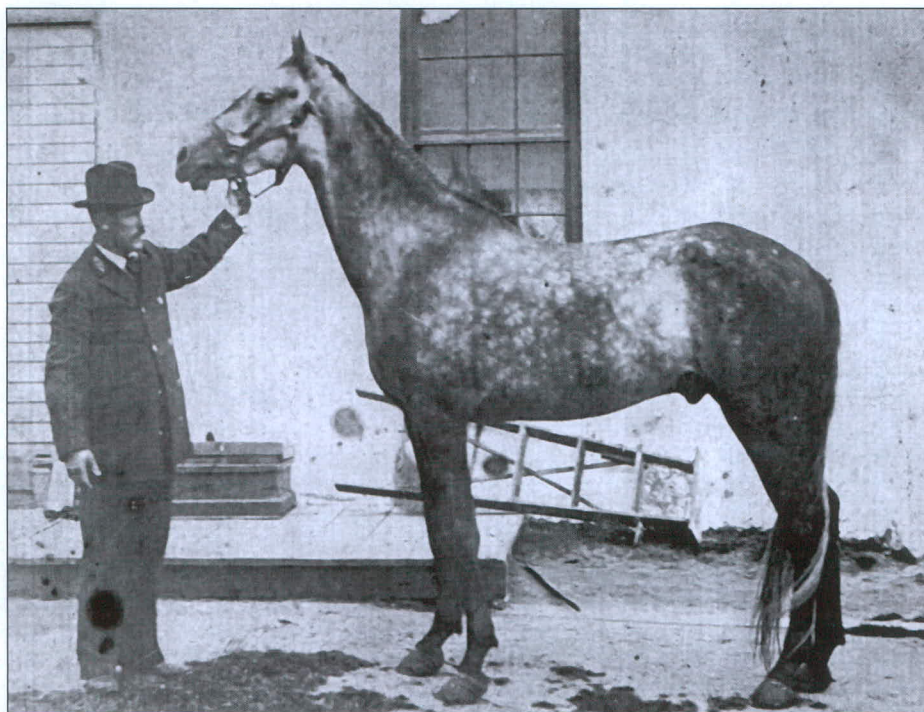
hicle for the family of keeper Gerhard Jaehne, but especially for one of the Jaehne children who had polio and wore a brace. Billy carried the kids to school each day, a three-mile trip to the Mendoza Ranch where the children were taught by a traveling schoolmarm. Herman Jaehne, one of the keeper's sons, recollected: "Billy was so gentle that if one of us kids fell off, he'd just stand there until we got back on. We'd ride him to the second dairy ranch [Mendoza Ranch] and they'd take care of him during the day while we were in school, and then we'd be able to ride him back home."

Point Reyes Lighthouse had many other horses. When it opened in December 1870, horses hauled coal for the station fog signal and pulled the water wagon. The wagon was a wooden flatbed affair on which a large cylindrical tank was mounted. Water was transported from a ranch several miles away, and most of it was used for the steam boilers in the fog signal building. In 1873 the horses hauled 42 tons of coal and 20,000 gallons of water. They also carried the lighthouse families into the town of Olema, 20 miles away, for groceries and mail. The road was bumpy and riddled with potholes. The *Marin Journal* noted in 1889 that the lighthouse "horses indicate the labor necessary to cross the sandy space by slowing down to a ho-hum walk."

Other horses worked the fog signal apparatus itself. At both Point Judith Lighthouse and Beavertail Lighthouse in Rhode Island, the station horses provided the brawn for an experimental horse-driven fog signal designed in the 1850s by Celadon Daboll of New Haven, Connecticut. The horses walked around a windlass to drive the air compressor for a large wooden fog trumpet. Beavertail Lighthouse sat at the entrance to the notoriously foggy Narragansett Bay and was for many years a testing station for fog signals. Daboll's "Equine Fog Trumpet" worked by inflating a bellows system and forcing its air through a narrow opening to vibrate a metal reed. The sound was then amplified by the huge trumpet and directed over the bay in a thunderous blare. Earlier versions of the device were small and hand-cranked by the light-keepers. The horse-powered version alleviated the human labor and allowed for a larger trumpet and much greater volume of air.



A horse and wagon outside Long Point Lighthouse, Cape Cod, and the keeper striking a pose on the lantern gallery suggests a photographer visited the station. The trek to the lighthouse would have been arduous in loose sand. U.S. Coast Guard photo.



Rhode Island's Point Judith lightkeeper, Henry Whaley, loved his horse and showed him off for a photo, circa 1900. The handsome steed appeared to be a dapple gray. Courtesy of the Whaley Family, Marise Sykes.

Horses and mules also labored to relocate light towers when necessary. In 1878, when erosion threatened to topple the little cottage-style sentinel at Santa Cruz, California, it was jacked up onto log rollers and slowly pulled inland to a new location by a team of horses. A larger relocation project took place at Florida's Cape Canaveral Lighthouse in 1893 after the shoreline changed and made the light difficult for mariners to see. A temporary railway was built from the tower to the new site, about 2,000 yards inland. The iron plate lighthouse was dismantled, and the pieces were loaded onto small rail cars pulled by mules to the new site. The mules also provided the muscle to help hoist the plates into position as the tower was reassembled.

Oregon's Heceta Head Lighthouse was constructed with horsepower. The story is a bit of Oregon history Siuslaw Forest Service ranger Phyllis Steeves calls "tough but magical." Heceta Head was isolated in 1892. There was no road to it, but there was a fairly smooth landing beach below the headland. One of the first construction tasks was the landing of horses and lumbering equipment to clear a crude road up to the plateau where the houses, barn, and light tower would be built. Fifty-six men were hired, including five teamsters to handle the horses and wagons.

The wagon road was completed in April 1892 and work quickly began on the buildings. The barn was completed first, followed by the dwellings. Next, the tower was constructed of brick and cement. These materials were shipped from San Francisco to the mouth of the Siuslaw River and then hauled by horse and wagon over a wilderness road, barely wider than a deer trail. Horses also hauled dynamite from the small town of Florence and helped convey the three-ton first-order lens up the wagon road to the tower.

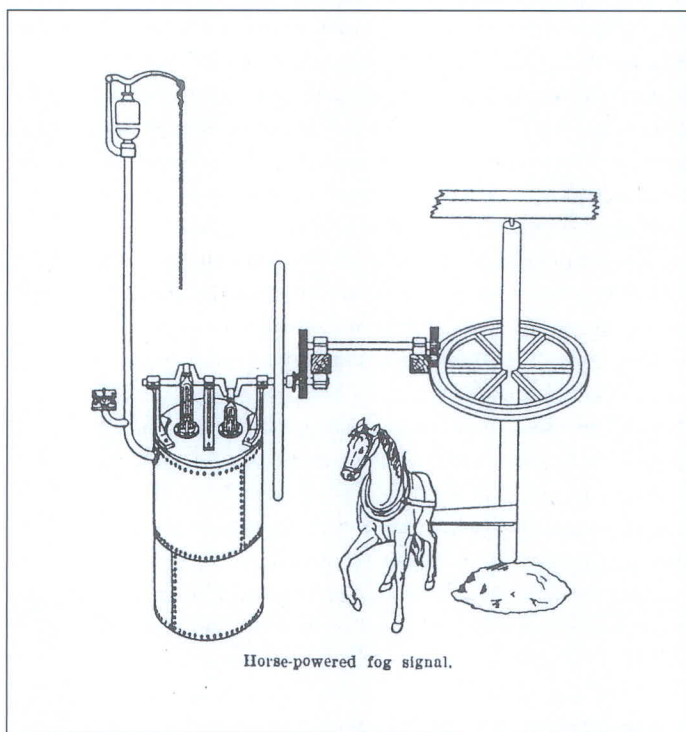
Horses were purchased for the keepers when the station went into service in 1894. They had a brand new barn and plenty of fenced pasture. Old-time photos of the station show the lighthouse children rid-

ing the horses to school and the keepers going on horseback to the little community of Florence, 13 miles away, for mail and supplies.

Lighthouse mules were employed at a number of Pacific Coast lighthouses. "Employed" is no exaggeration. Mules were officially assigned to these stations when they were young, sometimes helping to construct the light stations, then remained on duty as part of the lighthouse crew. Many spent their entire lives serving at lighthouses. When they died, keepers wept inconsolably, as if they had lost human family members, and buried the trusted, beloved mules on their stations.

The mule work at Point Conception Lighthouse, south of San Luis Obispo, California, was typical. Materials were landed in a nearby cove and hauled up to the site. Mules arrived on the construction schooner as part of the crew. Possibly, they provided the muscle for the hoist, and most certainly they packed supplies, tools, and building materials up the trail to the lighthouse site. Completed in 1854, the tower had been designed prior to purchase of the optic and was discovered to be too small to

house a first-order Fresnel lens. As a result, it had to be rebuilt with a larger lantern; so, again, the mules and men went to work.



Horse-powered fog signal.

The Lighthouse Board was impressed enough to include a diagram of the unusual fog signal in its *Annual Report* for 1852 with the caption: "Fog seldom lasts all day. It will require about one-third of the time to work the horse to keep up a regular series of signals." A decade later, Celadon Daboll's cousin, Charles Daboll, designed an engine-powered signal and put the horse out of a job. Photo from the Coast Guard Archives.

A fog signal also was included in the Point Conception Light Station. Major Hartman Bache, a great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin and the supervisor of the project, sketched the 1,600-pound fogbell being hauled to the point by a team of two lead mules and four rear oxen. It was an odd combination, but given the weight of the bell and the rough terrain over which it was hauled, sure-footed and even-tempered mules were the best choice to head the team. When the beacon finally was lighted in February 1856, the station included a barn for the mules that were left behind as station workers.

Harry Weeks, the son of Point Conception lightkeeper H.A. Weeks, remembered the importance of the mules in 1900. He described their abode as "a very big barn" and recalled how hard they labored when the tender brought supplies. As the tender neared the dock and sounded its whistle, the mules were caught and harnessed to the buckboard wagon. They lugged the supplies from the beach to the station. Weeks recalled that "this was through heavy sand and very hard work for the mules."

The mules that served at Southeast Farallon Island are well-documented. Their names and activities pepper the pages of the station journal from its construction, beginning in 1852 through the early 20th century. The island lies some 23 miles west of the entrance to San Francisco Bay and rises to a peak of about 317 feet above sea. It is one of several islands that present a hazardous obstruction to shipping entering and departing San Francisco Bay.

When the bark *Oriole* arrived at Southeast Farallon Island with materials and a work crew to build the light station, men began hacking out a crude switchback trail to the top of the peak and carrying tools and bricks on their backs. It was extremely arduous work and no one was surprised when the workers rebelled and demanded a mule. Major Hartman Bache was sympathetic.

Jerry arrived a short time later, horribly seasick and braying hoarsely from a rough ride on the supply ship and the effrontery of his captors removal of him from a comfortable pasture ashore. He was pushed into the surf and swam to the island, which would be his home for the rest of his life. The young mule quickly adjusted to the work and quelled the men's complaints. His resentment at having been so roughly treated on the ship was softened by the warm affections of the men. His principle job was to haul quarried stone from the lower elevation of the island up the switchback trail to the lighthouse site. But he also provided the muscle to work winches and pulleys.

A short stone tower was completed, and then Jerry hauled bricks to give it a masonry lining to stand strong in the harsh wind. A stone house was built at the base of the trail on the leeward side of the island. The entire station, including a mule barn, was completed by the autumn of 1853, except for installation of the first-order lens which had not yet been shipped from Paris. Jerry and a few of the men were left behind to guard the new light station until the optic was delivered.

The wait dragged on until December 1854 when the lens finally arrived. Carefully, men and mule carted the heavy, delicate sections of prisms and magnifying glass up the trail to the tower. The lens assembly began with excitement, but as with several other early West Coast lighthouses, a mistake in the tower's design meant the lantern was not large enough to hold the lens. The optic was placed in storage on the island while the tower was torn down and rebuilt to the proper size. Jerry and the men must have been frustrated at having so much work to redo.

A year later, the 41-foot lighthouse was illuminated for the first time.



Equines were hard-working members of the crew at Farallon Light Station, California, working both on construction and maintenance of the station. Pictured is the pack mule assisting the keepers. Courtesy of the Nautical Research Center.

Jerry, now several years old and accustomed to his bachelor existence on the island, had hauled the first drums of oil to the lighthouse. Two years later, Jerry flattened his ears in annoyance and galloped to the far end of the island when the station's first fog signal roared to life. It was a locomotive whistle mounted on top of a natural blowhole on the island. The action of waves crashing into a cave below the island caused air to rush through the hole, sounding the whistle. It served, rather unreliably, until 1871 when it was replaced by a steam whistle.

Jerry disliked the whistle even more, for it meant hours of work hauling sacks of coal to feed the boilers that created steam. He soon learned that the arrival of the supply tender was heralded by its distant whistle. His keen sense of hearing meant he was always the first of the lighthouse crew to hear the tender approaching. Its shrill cry sent him off to the nether parts of the island to hide. When the keepers came to fetch him, he led them on an annoying chase before surrendering to the bridle and pack saddle. Perhaps the best part was his reward: The tender always brought a fresh supply of hay and grain, since there was little grass on Southeast Farallon Island.

Jerry died on Christmas night in 1874. The keepers estimated he was more than 30 years old. They sobbed miserably at the loss as they carved a headstone for him that simply read, "JERRY." Afterwards, they wrote in the station logbook that Jerry held the distinction of living on Southeast Farallon Island longer than any other resident. He truly was its first keeper.



Astoria-based architect Carl Leick included mule barns at many northwest lighthouses. This one, at Turn Point Light in Washington's San Juan Islands, lost its equine residents years ago, and now serves as the site's museum. Author photo.

About 1885 a mule named Patty arrived at Southeast Farallon Island on the tender *Madroño*, along with a horse named Jenny. Patty would gain a small measure of fame in the station logbook and in photographs as a crew member and pet. By this time a blacksmith shop had been built to service the animals' feet, challenged by the island's rocky terrain. Sure-footed and gentle, Patty pulled the tram cart to transport supplies and coal along a 3,559-foot-long narrow-gauge railway. She and Jenny packed oil and equipment to the lighthouse via the steep switchback trail.

The loyal beasts also provided much-needed amusement for the many children of keepers William Beeman and Cyrus O'Caine. The kids put straw hats on the two equines and wove wildflowers and kelp in their manes. They made up elaborate tales of shipwrecks, buccaneers, and devastating storms and enlisted Patty and Jenny in acting out the stories. So beloved were these two that when the tender arrived in December, bringing a Christmas tree and gifts for the children, there always was something for the equines too—carrots and apples, drizzled with honey and rolled in sugar. Patty died of old age in 1913 and was buried by the East Landing where she had toiled so devotedly for more than 25 years. Her grave is marked by a plain concrete slab. One lightkeeper wrote of the much-loved jennet mule:

*Mule Patty. Always good,
Caused no trouble where she stood,
Always ready and seldom sick,
Died of old age without a kick.*

Overseas, horses and mules put their hoofprints on lighthouse history. Scotland's achievement in building a sentinel on Bell Rock in the sea bight between Fife Ness and the Red Head of Angus was nothing short of phenomenal. It took eight years to complete and was the *magnum opus* of marine engineer Robert Stevenson, grandfather of writer Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1810 the last stone was set in the gracefully tapered tower, but first the celebrated block was paraded through the countryside between the stone-works at Greenside and the port of Leith. Pulling the cart that bore the final stone was, according to one witness, "the faithful and trusty horse, Brassey." The stocky shire mare was groomed from head to hoof, with special attention given to the feathery fetlocks that fell about her dinner-plate size feet. Her polished tack was bedecked with colorful flags and ribbons, and a rainbow of streamers was woven into her mane and tail. Behind her

followed a long retinue of proud masons and sailors. Brassey had pulled load upon load of stone for the lighthouse from Greenside to Leith. Hauling the tower capstone was a well-earned honor.

Sandy Cape Lighthouse, established in 1870 in Queensland, Australia, also relied on the muscles and backs of horses. The cast-

iron lighthouse was fabricated in England and shipped around Cape Horn to Brisbane, where a local contractor was hired to construct the station. A 200-ton vessel, *The Resolute*, transported the tower sections and lantern room from Brisbane and the cement from Sydney. Materials and horses were brought ashore on barges, and then a trolley system was built that traveled on wooden rails to the construction site some 315 feet above sea level.

All materials were unloaded onto the trolleys and hauled up to the construction site by the horses. The first stage of the railway rose about 155 feet over one mile. The final 160-foot elevation consisted of a lift system powered by a horse walking around a windlass, with the trolleys traveling up a 60° sandy slope. It was backbreaking work for the men and the horses, especially in the summer heat. Once the lighthouse went into service, the horses remained at the station to work the trolley to bring supplies to the four keepers and their families. The trolley system was maintained well into the 1920s.



Patty the mule was the beloved pet and crew member at Farallon Light Station in the 1880s. She provided power for the station tram cart, served as a pack horse, and kept the lighthouse kids entertained. She appears in most of the group pictures taken during the late 1880s. Photo courtesy of California State Library.



A tram on a narrow-gauge track ran from St. Augustine Lighthouse, Florida, to the beach a century ago. A sure-footed horse did the work of pulling people and supplies between the tower and shore. Sadly, in 1873, three children drowned when the tram jumped its tracks and threw its passengers in the water. Courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Akaroa Head Lighthouse, commissioned in 1880 on Banks Peninsula, an eastern cape of New Zealand's South Island, was considered a punishment assignment by lightkeepers. Nicknamed the "Penal Colony Light," it was the most isolated and difficult Kiwi sentinel until horses were brought to the station in the 1880s. Polly was the first of many. The horses' principle duty was to carry passengers and provisions via a long and steep trail from the light station through numerous ranch gates and across a 2,225-foot pass to civilization in Akaroa Harbour.

About 1945 a docile mare named Mary served the families. Her sire was a New Zealand Cup winner in 1932. Mary's age when she came to the lighthouse was unknown, but it was certain that she was no perky filly. One keeper's wife, who frequently grew bored with the lonely life, would saddle Mary and head for town with her four children riding in the saddlebags. Another keeper rode Mary to town every Friday to fetch his son from school for a weekend at the light station, then returned him to school on Sunday. Mary plodded along the lighthouse trail at a slow pace, so slow that the boy could walk alongside her, which he often did so that his father could have the saddle.

Keepers were known to fall asleep on Mary, wakened only by the absence of her gentle rocking gait when she reached a gate. Tom Clark, who was keeper of Akaroa Lighthouse in the late 1950s, remembered that Mary was smart enough to operate the gates herself. "Mary would have known the road even if blind-

folded. The six gates gave her no cause for alarm, and in performing the operation of opening and closing a gate, she did virtually everything except place the chain on the hook."

Perhaps the most amazing lighthouse equine was Old Neb of St. George Island Lighthouse off the Florida Panhandle. Neb was born on Little St. George Island about 1900 and later was taken to the lighthouse to work. In the 1920s when the deputy commissioner of lighthouses in Washington, D.C., suggested a used truck be purchased for the lighthouse, he was informed no truck could negotiate the deep sand. But Old Neb could. The lightkeeper claimed Neb was "better than a Ford truck." So Neb was acquired from his owner and lived out his remaining years at Cape St. George Lighthouse in a special barn built just for him.

Neb usually was harnessed to a wagon to fetch supplies from the landing area, but during heavy rains the wheels got mired in the sand. The keeper requested a saddle and bridle so Neb could be ridden instead of hitched to a wagon. The gear was purchased and Neb became a sturdy pack horse and source of joy for the lighthouse children, who loved to ride him and were amused by his quirky habits, including his fear of snakes.

Old Neb was still at the lighthouse during World War II when he was replaced by a Jeep. A small ceremony was held to "officially retire" him. The lighthouse crew joked that he was the only horse on a government pension. It was estimated Old Neb was in his 40s when he died. His story may have inspired the lyrics to a popular song, whose unknown composer transposed the final letter of his name:

*You can't keep a horse in a lighthouse;
It isn't a home for Old Ned.
A horse's place is on dry land;
He'll never keep healthy on sea foam and sand.
Oh you might keep a horse in a garage,
If you bring him his meals on a tray;
But you can't keep a horse in a lighthouse—
Neigh, neigh, neigh!*

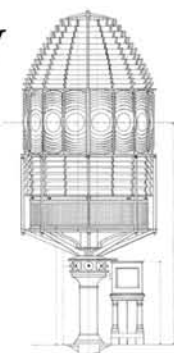
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Based on Elinor DeWire's 2007 book, *The Lightkeepers' Menagerie: Stories of Animals at Lighthouses*.



At the Plymouth Light Station in 1910, lightkeeper Willis Higgins proudly showed off his horse in much the same way a family man today would show off a nice car. U.S. Lighthouse Society archive photo.



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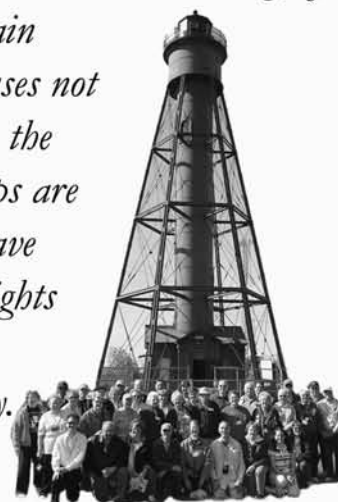
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Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ