

The Missing Lighthouses of Illinois

by Tom Tag

Introduction

Lighthouse stories come from many sources. In this instance a chance encounter with a strange old photograph lead to the discovery of two missing lighthouses.

In late 2007 we moved to the Chicago area and shortly after we arrived I decided to make a trip to the Chicago Historical Society to see what they had about lighthouses. I was going through their lighthouse photograph file when I came across a small 5 by 7 inch photo labeled "Old Port Clinton Lighthouse, Illinois." I was familiar with a Port Clinton Lighthouse in Ohio, but had never heard of a Port Clinton, Illinois lighthouse.

My first quest was to locate Port Clinton on a map, which I was not able to do. It was probably another strange place that no longer exists. So the next thing was to look up any references to Port Clinton in the Annual Reports of the Lighthouse Board. I found several references to the building of a light at Port Clinton in the 1856 annual report and it also mentioned a new light being built at Taylorsport Illinois. I hadn't heard of Taylorsport either. Now I had two lighthouses in my new digs and I hadn't known about either of them. I checked again and there is no Taylorsport on the Illinois map. Now I had another mystery to be solved. I decided to research the history of the area at the library to see if I could find a reference to either Port Clinton or Taylorsport. I found a great book *Creating Chicago's North Shore a Suburban History* by Michael Ebner. It mentioned both locations and gave me the answer that Port Clinton is now known as Highland Park and that Taylorsport is now known as Glencoe. Armed with that information I was on my way, literally, to visit the historical societies at both locations. The following stories describe the histories of the *missing lighthouses of Illinois* at Port Clinton and Taylorsport.

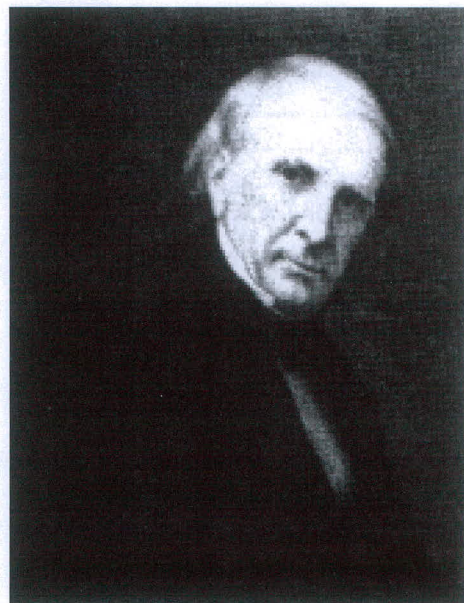
Port Clinton

Port Clinton, now Highland Park, is located on the shore of Lake Michigan about 23-miles north of downtown Chicago. The town of Port Clinton had been laid out by Jacob Clinton Bloom in January 1850. At that time the area was mostly forest with few settlers although there was a steam-powered sawmill located on the shore of Lake Michigan and a 620-foot pier extending into the lake from which lumber was transported south to Chicago. The Port Clinton area was growing in population and by January 1851 it had reached more than 100 residents. Shortly thereafter the Port Clinton Land Company was formed and the men behind that company began to look for ways to promote the area. They decided to promote freight and lumber shipments to various ports on Lake Michigan.

If Port Clinton were to become a major shipping port it would need a lighthouse and better roads. The politicians in the area were contacted and freshman Congressman Elihu Washburne introduced a bill on December 6, 1853 providing for a lighthouse at Port Clinton. On August 3, 1854, the United States Congress authorized \$5000 to build the lighthouse.

During this period other events were taking place that would severely affect the future of Port Clinton. In Chicago efforts were underway to create the Chicago and Milwaukee railroad. Many political leaders were buying property along the proposed rail route and in particular Mr. Walter S. Gurnee was buying extensive properties in the area of Highland Park located just south of Port Clinton. By 1854 Mr. Gurnee had become the president of the Chicago and Milwaukee Railroad and had gained control of the development of its route near Highland Park. Gurnee forced the railroad to build a freight station in Highland Park, very near the property he owned, and forbade the building of even a passenger stop in Port Clinton.

Meanwhile in Port Clinton, plans were going forward for the lighthouse. On Janu-



Congressman Elihu Washburne. Photo from author's collection.

ary 16, 1855 a Deed from the Port Clinton Land Co. was given to the U.S. Government for 1½ acres of land for the lighthouse at no cost. Later on February 13, 1855, the State of Illinois formally ceded jurisdiction of this land to the U.S. Government. On April 3, 1855 the deed was received by the Lighthouse Board and was sent to the Attorney General for approval. The Lighthouse Board received a letter certifying the validity of title to the lighthouse site at Port Clinton on April 30, 1855 and in June the Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board reported that a contract to build the Port Clinton, IL lighthouse had been created. Finally on September 15, 1855, the contract to build the Port Clinton Lighthouse was signed with David Shook, a contractor from the Detroit area. The amount of the contract was \$3350 with the U.S. Government to supply the illuminating equipment at no cost.

On May 21, 1856, the Lighthouse Board told Captain Sitgraves, the 11th District Inspector, to go ahead with the building of the Port Clinton Lighthouse and the Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board reported that the lighthouse authorized at Port Clinton, IL had been completed on June 15, 1856. Later in June, the new lighthouse



Port Clinton Lighthouse ca 1890, note: Government Lantern Replaced. Photo courtesy Highland Park Historical Society.

was inspected, found to be satisfactory, and the inspector recommended that the builder's contract be paid.

The design of the Port Clinton Lighthouse was as follows: The main dwelling was built of red brick and was twenty-four feet square and 1½ stories tall. It had a total of six rooms and a slate roof. The cylindrical tower was twenty-one feet tall to the base of the cast-iron lantern, which had ten sides. There was an oil storage room with two oil butts at its base and a watch room just below the lantern. The watch room and lantern were each reached by iron ladders. The illuminating equipment consisted of a 6th order Fresnel Lens covering 180° showing a white light. The illumination came from a fountain lamp that burned whale oil and there was a spare lamp on site. In addition, the lighthouse stood on a high bluff above the waters of Lake Michigan. The combined

height of the bluff and the tower placed the focal plane of the lens at 70 feet above the surface of the lake.

Several local men were proposed for the keeper's position at the Port Clinton Lighthouse and on July 1, 1856, Mr. Owen Monaghan was selected as keeper. The lighthouse began operations in July 1856; however, there were almost immediate calls for it to be shut down. With a railroad freight station close by in Highland Park, it was felt by many that the shipping port at Port Clinton was useless. Of course Mr. Gurnee and the other railroad men helped to foster these ideas. In addition, the roads in the area were not improved and extended to Port Clinton as had been planned, and its harbor remained just a small lumber shipping port.

By April of 1859, the calls for the closing down of the Port Clinton Lighthouse were too numerous to be ignored and the

Lighthouse Board began deliberations concerning its closure along with the closure of several other lights. Finally on June 6, 1859, the Lighthouse Board decided that Port Clinton was to be discontinued. Keeper Monaghan was asked to submit receipts for all costs associated with the closure. Notices to mariners on the Great Lakes were sent out indicating that the light would be discontinued as of the first of August 1859. The lighthouse illuminating equipment and lantern were removed and sent to the 11th District Depot in Detroit. Just eleven days later, the first petition arrived at the Lighthouse Board pleading that the light be restored.

The light remained closed and the former keeper was allowed to live in the lighthouse dwelling as a caretaker and later as a renter. With the lantern having been removed, Mr. Monaghan built a wooden eight-sided enclosure on the stub of the tower to keep out the elements. On May 21, 1866, the Lighthouse Board received a letter indicating that former Port Clinton keeper Owen Monaghan had moved away and had left a Mr. Martin Conner-ton in charge. Mr. Conner-ton was allowed to rent the property until December 12, 1867 when the 11th

District appointed a new custodian.

During this period the town of Port Clinton was in serious decline as was the pier and harbor. At the same time Highland Park was growing rapidly and the railroad was now carrying both freight and passengers. Port Clinton merged into Highland Park during the period between 1865 and 1869 and the town of Highland Park was incorporated on March 11, 1869.

The question now was what to do with the former lighthouse and its 1½ acre property. In 1870 and again in 1872, the Lighthouse Board received inquiries about purchasing the property. Early in October 1872, the 11th District engineer recommended that the property be sold at auction and on October 10, 1872 the Lighthouse Board gave its authority for the auction to be held the following summer. Starting on

July 2, 1873, and for the following thirty consecutive days, the advertisement shown below was placed in the prominent newspapers in the Chicago and Milwaukee areas.

**Office of Lighthouse Engineer
Eleventh District
Detroit Michigan July 2, 1873**

**Sale of Sites of discontinued
lighthouses at Port Clinton and
Taylorsport Illinois**

In accordance with instructions from the Treasury Department, I will sell at public auctions to the highest bidder at Highland Park, Illinois on Wednesday the 6th of August 1873 at 10:30 am, the sites of the above mentioned discontinued lighthouses. The Port Clinton site will be sold first and the Taylorsport site immediately thereafter. Both sites on the west shore of Lake Michigan the former opposite Highland Park Station and the latter near Glencoe Station on the Chicago and Northwest Railway. On both sites there is a small substantial brick dwelling, formerly occupied by the light keepers. The former site contains about one and one half acres, the latter about two acres.

The terms of the sale are cash in United States or National Bank currency before the bid is accepted.

G. Weitzel
Major of Engineers USA
Engineer 11th Lighthouse District

On August 6, 1873, the lighthouse property at Port Clinton was sold at auction to Mr. Michael Meehan for \$750.00. On the following day, Mr. J. D. Ward and Mr. C. B. Farwell wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury strongly complaining about the sale. They said the sale had not been well advertised, that the government agent holding the sale would only accept cash, that the sales price received was too low and that others at the auction would have paid \$1000 or \$1500 to buy the property, but did not have that much cash with them and only had their personal checks.

The letter was passed to the Lighthouse



Godfrey Wetzel.

Board, which then asked Major Godfrey Weitzel to make a full report. Weitzel was upset! He created a fourteen-page report refuting each of the claims. He became so incensed that he ask for, and was granted, permission by the War Department to demand an apology from both of the men who wrote the letter.

The Lighthouse Board was satisfied that the auction was properly held and on September 12, 1873 they created a title deed for the property and forwarded it to the buyer, Mr. Meehan. This was the last official government act related to the Port Clinton Lighthouse. The lighthouse building was converted into a private residence and was later demolished around 1900.

Taylorsport

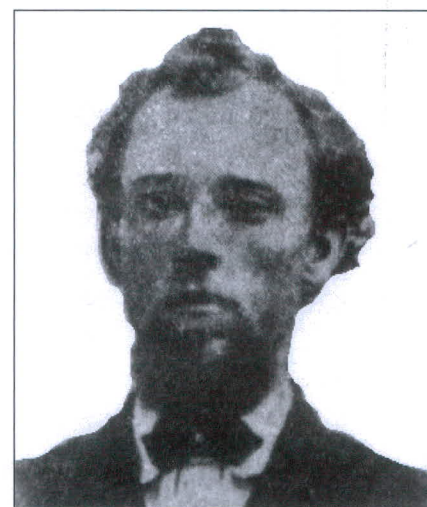
By 1835, Chicago's population had reached 500 and Mr. Anson H. Taylor decided it was too crowded and moved his family north 19 miles. He purchased 160 acres of former Indian land at \$1.20 per acre. The area where he built his cabin soon became known as Taylorsport. Anson was involved with the building of a 500-foot pier that extended into Lake Michigan. The pier was used for shipments of firewood, lumber, charcoal, and local produce to Chicago. In 1840, Anson Taylor built the La Pier House Tavern and Inn on Green Bay Road near the new pier.

By June of 1853 discussions were going on about the possible need of a lighthouse at Taylorsport. On June 29, a letter was sent

from the 11th District Engineer to the Lighthouse Board proposing that a lighthouse should be built at Taylorsport. Nothing was done, at that time, relative to building the light. However, by early 1855 the local political pressure for a light had reached its peak and the Lighthouse Board began to make plans for a Taylorsport lighthouse.

On February 13, 1855, the State of Illinois ceded jurisdiction of land at Taylorsport to the US government. The land in question was owned by Mary C. Taylor, Anson Taylor's mother, and on March 13, 1855, she deeded approximately 2 acres of land to the US Government for the sum of \$100. By August 18, 1855, the Lighthouse Board had received the first proposal for building the lighthouse. They could not proceed because the title papers had not yet been verified. The US Attorney General approved these papers on October 15.

On September 15, 1855, a contract to build the Taylorsport Lighthouse was signed



Anson H. Taylor. Photo courtesy Glencoe Historical Society.

with David Shook, a contractor from the Detroit area. The amount of the contract was \$3350 with the U.S. Government to supply the illuminating equipment at no cost. Unfortunately problems were found with this contract and it was cancelled on November 7, 1855.

In May of 1856 a new proposal for the Taylorsport Lighthouse was received by the Lighthouse Board and on June 9, 1856 a second contract for building the lighthouse was created. This contract was signed with David Shook at a cost of \$3900. He was to build the lighthouse at Taylorsport and have it completed by October 10, 1856. The Lighthouse

Board approved this contract on June 23, 1856. The Taylorsport Lighthouse was identical in design to the Port Clinton light, including a 6th order Fresnel lens. The lighthouse was completed on time, but due to the time of the year the light was not activated, although a keeper named Thomas Mc Mahon had been hired as of August 4, 1856.

In March of 1857, 11th District Inspector, W. J. Smith, reported that the new lighthouse was already in need of repair and suggested that there was no necessity for a light at this location. In May he also suggested that the installation of the illuminating apparatus be delayed until October 1857 and the light not be activated until the spring of 1858. The Lighthouse Board did not agree and sent the illuminating apparatus immediately. It was installed and the light reported ready for activation on July 29, 1857. The Taylorsport light began operation in August 1857.

The 11th District Inspector G. H. Scott again recommended that the light be discontinued on April 2, 1859. Just as had happened with the Port Clinton Lighthouse, the calls for the closing down of the Taylorsport Lighthouse were too numerous to be ignored and the Lighthouse Board began deliberations concerning its closure. Finally on June 6, 1859, the Lighthouse

Board decided that Taylorsport was to be discontinued. Notices to mariners on the Great Lakes were sent out indicating that the light would be discontinued as of the first of August 1859. The lighthouse illuminating equipment and lantern were removed and sent to the 11th District Depot in Detroit.

The keeper, Mr. Mc Mahon, was kept on as a custodian of the former lighthouse property and began to pay rent for the premises. Keeper Mc Mahon failed to build a replacement for the lantern that had been removed by the government. He simply installed a few boards over the opening at the top of the tower causing the structure to begin to deteriorate rapidly. Mc Mahon continued as caretaker until May of 1861 when the first request was received requesting his removal. The Lighthouse Board began looking for a new custodian and Thomas Mc Mahon sent letters protesting his proposed removal. On August 10, 1861, the Lighthouse Board received a letter in which Thomas Mc Mahon refused to vacate the premises. The fight continued into April of 1862 when Mc Mahon finally vacated the premises. On May 7, Mr. Thomas Russell took over as the new custodian.

During this period the town of Taylorsport, just like Port Clinton, was in serious

decline as was the pier and harbor. Taylorsport merged into Glencoe in the early 1860s and the town of Glencoe was incorporated in 1869.

Various people wanted to buy the former lighthouse and its two-acre property during the 1860s and early 1870s. In July of 1873, the Lighthouse Board received a letter from Anson Taylor asking that the dwelling and land be returned to him through a quit-claim deed to the property at no cost. The Lighthouse Board refused this arraignment. Anson tried again on August 4, 1873 when he sent a letter to the 11th District Engineer stating that the Taylorsport property should be sold directly back to him without an auction. He stated that the land was worth little and the former lighthouse building was so close to the edge of the bluff that it may fall into the lake. This request was again rejected.

The sale was an auction on August 6, 1873 the same day as that for Port Clinton (see details of the sale in the Port Clinton story). The former lighthouse and 2 acres of property at Taylorsport was sold at the auction for \$1700 to Augustin D. Taylor (Anson's brother). The Lighthouse Board sent the deed and title to the property to Mr. Taylor in September of 1873. The lighthouse was still in existence in 1900 and was demolished soon after.

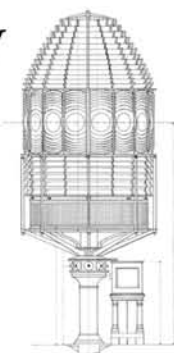
Strange, but true, the lighthouses at Port Clinton and Taylorsport lasted only three years and were never of importance to the shipping traffic of the area. The railroad completely overshadowed the need for harbor lights at these locations. There you have it – *The Missing Lighthouses of Illinois*.



The Taylorsport Lighthouse ca 1900. Photo courtesy Glencoe Historical Society.



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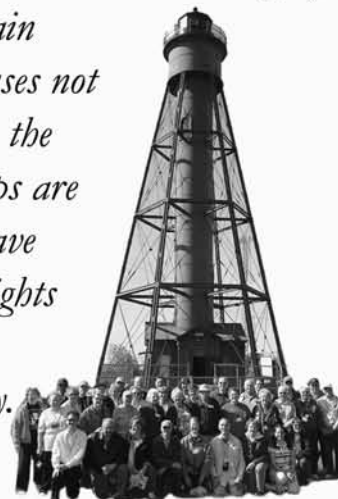
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Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ