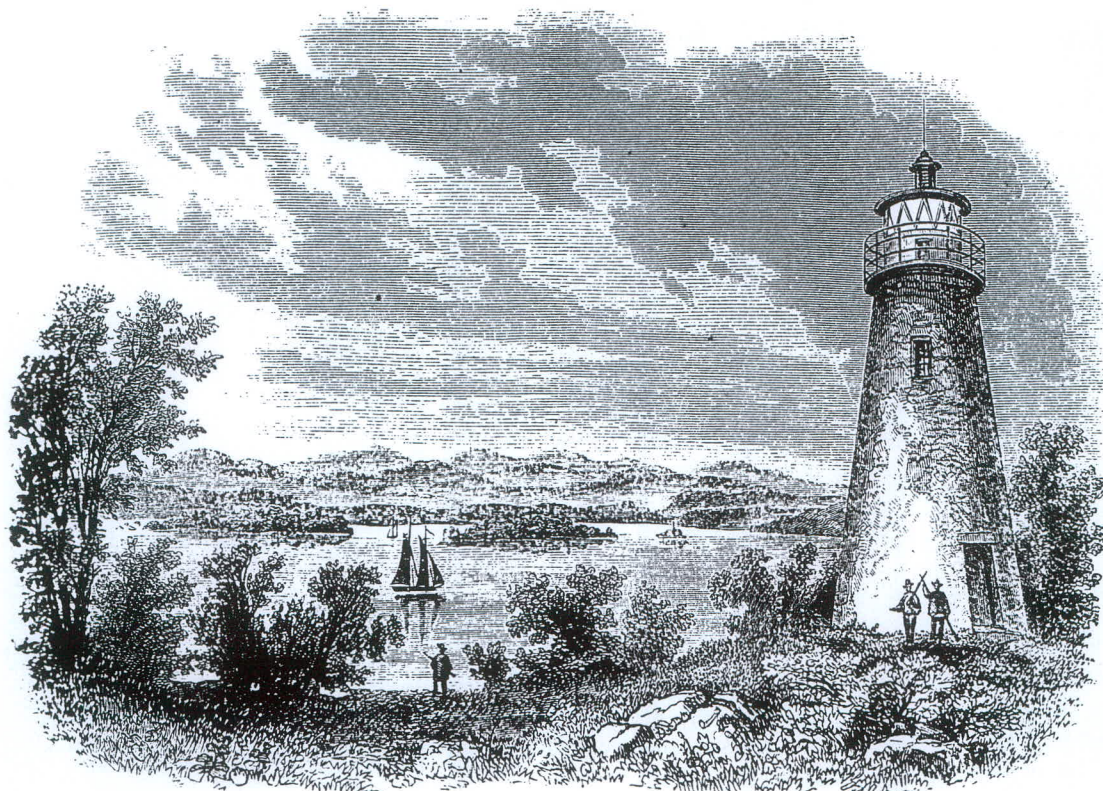


The Lighthouses of Lake Champlain



SCENE OF THE BATTLE ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN.



This article was excerpted from the *Lake Champlain Album, Volume II* by Morris Glenn.

The line cut above is from a 19th century Harpers magazine and depicts the original Cumberland Head lighthouse constructed in 1838. The structure was rebuilt in 1868.

Many people are amazed when they learn lighthouses exist on the Great Lakes. Geography lessons taught in our nation's schools appear to have failed to impress upon the students the vast size of the Great Lakes and their importance in the development of our nation. The five major Great Lakes are inland seas, hundreds of miles long, studded with major cities and lined with lighthouses (both Canadian and American).

If one is amazed to learn of lighthouses on the Great Lakes, imagine their surprise to learn that eleven light stations were constructed on Lake Champlain, that dagger of a waterway extending south from the St. Lawrence River, neatly cleaving Vermont from New York.

The more permanent structures which were built to aid navigation on the waters of Lake Champlain remain today, reminding us that the lake was indeed once a bustling avenue of commerce. The trip from Whitehall, NY (at the very southern tip of the lake) to the fast-growing cities of Burlington, VT and Plattsburgh, NY sometimes took days for the sloops, schooners and sloop-rigged canal boats of the 19th century. If there wasn't a favorable wind, night navigation was also necessary. The faster steam vessels also required night voyages to operate on efficient schedules and to amortize the owners' investment. Therefore, at an early date it became a priority for local politicians to begin the legislative maneuvering that would induce the government to construct lighthouses and lighted beacons to aid shipping on Lake Champlain.

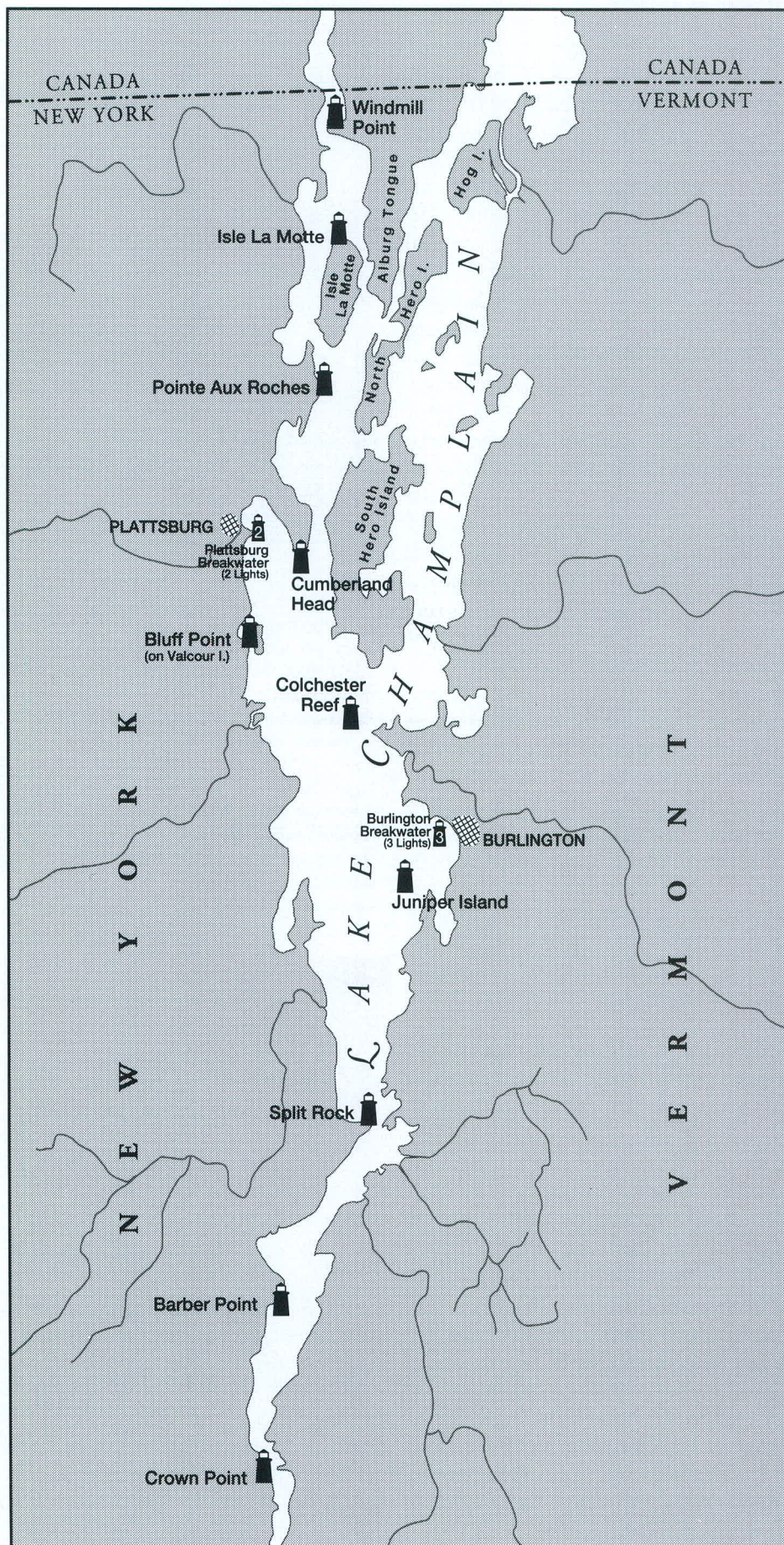
The entire length of the lake between the years 1815 and 1835 was covered with a bewildering array of private lights, mounted on posts and tended by local farmers. Each large shipping company had its own system, and each system operated on a different schedule. This all started to change when an Act of Congress on March 3, 1825, authorized the construction of the Juniper Island Light Station, the first government aid authorized for Lake Champlain. The Juniper Island station replaced a private beacon which had been established by a commercial shipping company. By 1897 the Lighthouse Service had completed a rather complex aid to navigation system comprised of 11 light stations, 10 other minor lights and 15 post lanterns along Whitehall Narrows at the south end of the lake.

To put the importance of a lighthouse on Juniper Island in perspective; it was completed in 1826, just 7 years after the first two lighthouses were established in the Great Lakes (Presque Isle and Buffalo on Lake Erie).

The original Juniper Island optic consisted of ten lamps each backed by a reflector. The original structure deteriorated to the extent it had to be replaced by the present iron tower in 1846.

The Lake Champlain system represented a major investment for the Government and was an indication of the volume of water borne traffic on this major north-south route of commerce. With the completion of the Champlain Canal, linking the lake with the Hudson River, the U.S. Government recognized the economic benefit of Lake Champlain as it became a major commercial artery between the Great Lakes, New York and Vermont. Iron ore, as well as processed iron, became the lifeblood that flowed along the waterway. Lake Champlain iron was instrumental in winning the Civil War and in supplying the railroad tracks and other iron products for western expansion.

In March 1832 Congress authorized a second lighthouse at Split Rock. This structure stands today and is one of the most picturesque and photogenic landmarks on the shores of Lake Champlain.



The land for the station was sold to the government by Congressman Reuben Whallon in 1837 for \$500 (when the station was discontinued in 1931 it was sold for \$2,700). The contract to build the lighthouse was awarded to Peter Comstock on September 9, 1837, for \$3,225. This tower was replaced in 1866 with a new combination tower and keeper's quarters costing \$9,600.

In 1838 the Cumberland Head lighthouse was established near Plattsburgh, NY. The tower and dwelling were constructed of dark blue limestone. Initially the tower was outfitted with 11 lamps backed by reflectors. In 1868 the entire structure was relocated to a site more visible to the mariner. But the new site became unacceptable when the surrounding trees matured. The owners of the land surrounding the station offered to cut the trees at \$100 an acre (a very steep price in those days). The government bought the land instead.

Juniper Island, Split Rock and Cumberland Head were all initially outfitted with the old fashioned reflector system. After the Lighthouse Board was established in 1852, Fresnel lenses were installed: at Juniper Island in 1853, at Cumberland Head in 1856 and at Split Rock in 1857. All the optics were 4th order and displayed a fixed white characteristic. The new Lighthouse Board also constructed nine more light stations and several minor lights.

Isle La Motte was established in 1857 as a red cast iron tower of the generic design used at Cape Neddick, ME, Point Montara, CA and numerous other locations. Our research indicates that the keeper's dwelling wasn't constructed until 1880. Perhaps this light was tended by a Lamp Lighter, a part time employee of the government who only visited the tower to light the lamp, then retired to his home until sunrise. The tower was equipped with a 6th order lens displaying a fixed white light 46 feet above the lake.

Also in 1857, the Lighthouse Service constructed three lights on the Burlington, VT breakwater's north extension (north and south lights) and the south breakwater. Two were described as movable beacons and one as a Post Light.



Above—Split Rock Light Station commissioned in 1838. This structure dates for 1867. Note the keeper's garden at right.

Right—Split Rock lighthouse in the late 1980s.

Below—Cumberland Head Lighthouse in the late 1980s. Photo, and that at right, by Keeper Elliot Tayman. Our Human Interest story in this issue concerns one of the keepers of this station.



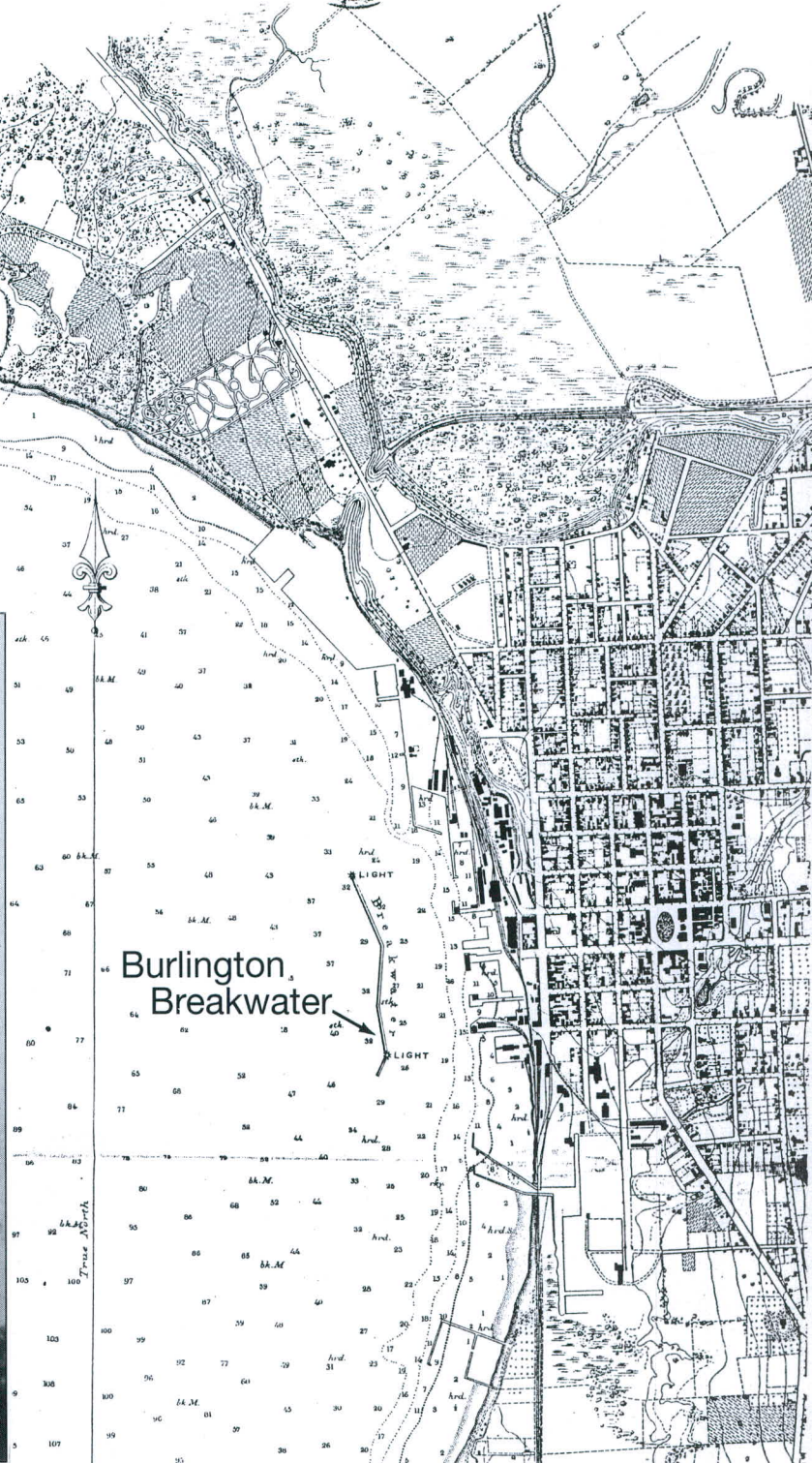
Initially, the keeper assigned to these aids to navigation lived ashore and walked the breakwater to service them each night. However, it soon became apparent that during heavy weather this was a very dangerous situation. In 1875 a keeper's cottage was erected on the north end of the breakwater. Several times the beacons were destroyed by fire, and in 1876 the south beacon was overturned during a winter storm. By 1879 the keeper's dwelling was not fit for habitation and was sold. A Lamp Lighter was probably employed after that to tend the lights of Burlington Harbor.

Rock Point



Above—One of the three small towers constructed on the Burlington, VT breakwater. The Plattsburg breakwater had two structures similar to this tower. For a short while, a keeper's house was located on the Burlington breakwater, but it proved uncomfortable and dangerous and was removed. For the most part the breakwater lights were tended by a Lamp Lighter who visited them once a week. Photo courtesy Feinburg Collection, SUNY, Plattsburg.

Right—The Lighthouse Service tender *Nettle* serviced the light stations of Lake Champlain and worked unmanned lights in White Narrows, at the southern end of the lake between 1878 and 1911 when she was sold. Constructed in 1878 for \$3,900 the vessel was 58 feet long and was manned by two officers and a crew of three. National Archives photo.



In 1858 the Lighthouse Service constructed three more light stations on the lake.

Windmill Point, VT — Located at the north end of the lake: This station consists of a sturdy little house and tower constructed of dark blue limestone. The house is connected to the tower by a passageway. The 40 foot high tower was originally equipped with a 6th order Fresnel lens displaying a fixed white light visible for 13 miles.

Point Aux Roches, NY — Located just north of Plattsburgh, this station has a limestone tower similar to Windmill Point, but the attached dwelling is constructed of wood. Again, the lens was a 6th order, displaying a fixed white light.

Crown Point, NY — Located at the south end of the lake, Crown Point is the most unusual of Lake Champlain's



Three Sisters of Lake Champlain

Top—Windmill Point. U.S. Coast Guard photo

Left—Point Aux Roches—National Archives photo

Below—Crown Point before conversion. Old Post Card

In 1858 the Service constructed these three sisters. Except for height, the towers are nearly identical. Note all three have trapezoid panes in the lantern. The houses are similar except the Windmill Point house is constructed of granite.



light stations. Considered a legend by the people of the area, the tower is now a monument and part of a public park. As early as 1838 a Naval officer realized the need for a light at this location to assist vessels navigating the area past Chimney Point. The original structure was a dark gray limestone tower connected to a white wooden dwelling, probably similar in design to the Point Aux Roches station. It was equipped with a 5th order lens, and like most of the Lake Champlain lighthouses, displayed a fixed white light.



1912, the Champlain Memorial Commission altered the tower to commemorate the great explorer Samuel de Champlain. They used the base of the original tower and the metal stair cylinder. Eight doric columns were placed around the central staircase. An ornate cornice and parapet and a one-of-a-kind lantern room surmounted the columns. Statues of Champlain and others were placed around the lower portion of the tower. The government discontinued the light in 1926 and the ownership of the structure passed to New York State. The keeper's house was razed and today only the tower remains.

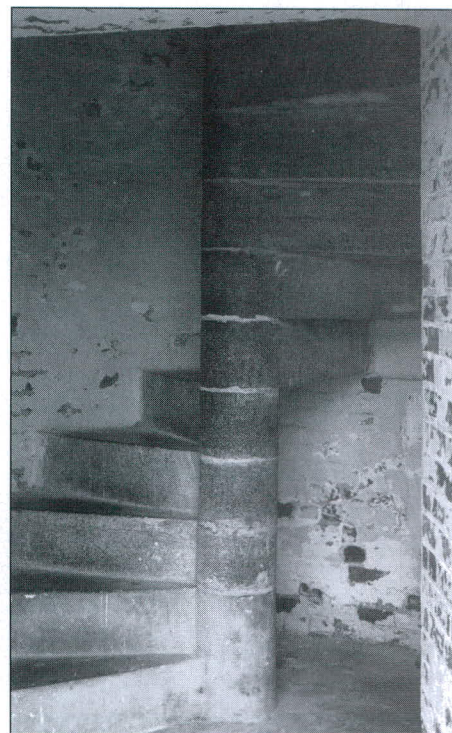
It was several years before the last three light stations were constructed on Lake Champlain.

In 1871 the Bluff Point, NY station was completed on the west shore of Valcour Island near Plattsburgh. The structure is a two story Mansard roof dwelling with an integrated tower of dark blue limestone. This charming, and popular design, was also employed in Rhode Island, Connecticut and on Long Island. Another 5th Order lens with a fixed white characteristic was used. In recent years, the lighthouse was owned by a retired dentist from Massachusetts. His family used it as a summer vacation home for many years, and then a few years ago he donated the property to New York State.



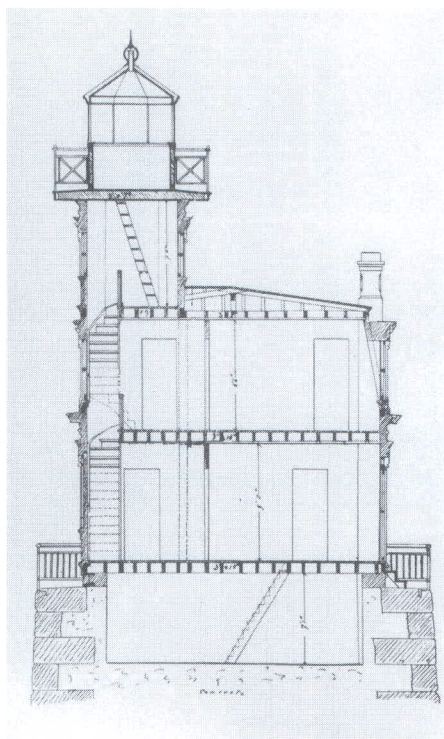
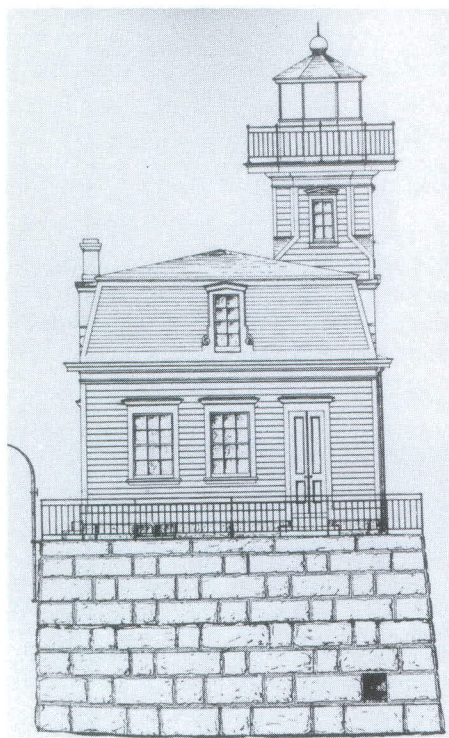
Left—When Crown Point was converted to a Memorial in 1912 the dome was replaced with this fantastical “hat.” Photo by District Inspector Al Schadow in 1990.

Also in 1871, the Lighthouse Service constructed a lighthouse on Colchester Reef in the middle of the lake off Burlington, VT. The mansard roof structure, similar in design to Bluff Point, is situated on a stone crib just large enough to hold the lighthouse. The government discontinued the light in 1933 and it remained abandoned and deteriorating until it was purchased by the Shelburne Museum (Burlington, VT) in 1952. The structure was taken apart and reassembled on the grounds of the museum where it was restored and interpreted.



Above—the granite stairs of the original 1858 light tower remain within the walls of the structure. Left—Crown Point in the late 1980s. Photo by Keeper Elliott Tayman. For a number of years after Crown Point was converted, it remained an active aid to navigation and the keeper's house was attached to the tower. See the rear cover photo, courtesy of Keeper Robert Lewis.



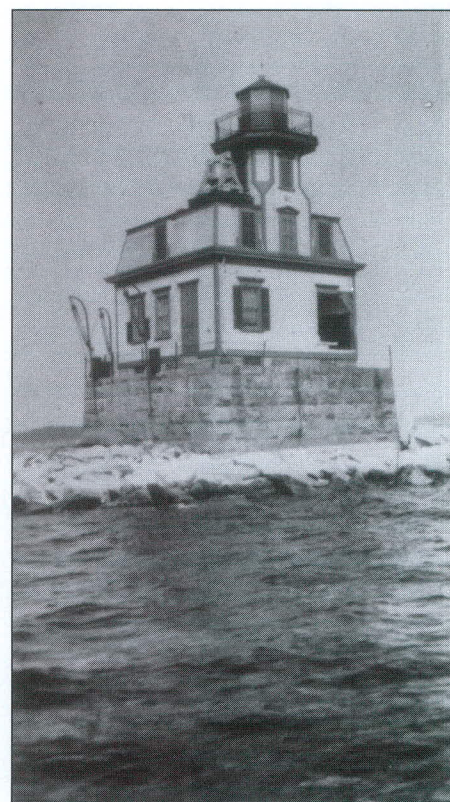


Left and above—Architectural drawings of the Colchester Reef Lighthouse, the only Lake Champlain lighthouse on a crib structure.



Above—The Colchester Reef lighthouse safely ashore at the Shelburne Museum in Burlington, VT. Photo by Keeper Paul Bradley.

Below—Colchester Reef Lighthouse “on station” on April 10, 1923. If you look closely you can see a gaping hole on the right corner of the building, caused by ice piling up against the structure. U.S. Coast Guard photo.



The Colchester Reef station was constructed on a dangerous rock, seven feet below the surface at low water, known as Middle Bunch. The lighthouse cost \$20,000 to construct, the most expensive of those on the lake and the only one out on the lake. A wooden crib was constructed at Burlington and towed to the site where it was sunk and filled with concrete and stone. The crib was surrounded by two layers of cut stone. The first winter the outer layer of stone was stripped from the crib and had to be replaced at a cost of \$4,500.

A storm in 1873 badly buffeted the structure, scaring the keepers and damaging the lens. To strengthen the foundation, \$5,000 was spent to place rip-rap around the crib. A sixth order lens was installed, but unlike the other lights of the lake, this one displayed a fixed red light.

Barber Point, NY — Located near Westport, NY was the last lighthouse constructed on Lake Champlain. The same design as the Bluff Point station was used, and a fifth order lens displaying a fixed white light was installed. The station was sold by the government in 1936, and it recently became the property and summer home of one of our members.

The tools of the lighthouse trade were many and varied. The task of maintaining the oil or gas lamps was very complex and required the use of many tools particularly designed for the work. Around 1900 the Lighthouse Service began converting aids to navigation to electricity and to incandescent oil vapor (i.o.v.) lamps. The i.o.v. burned very brightly and efficiently, and it required careful attention to the task at hand. But electricity was also on the scene and the use of this illuminant spelled the eventual doom for the manned lighthouses of

Lake Champlain. However, conversion in remote areas, like the lake, was slow because power lines had to be strung or engine-generating equipment installed. By the late 1920's and 30's power lines had reached many areas of the lake, lamp changers were available and, in some cases, acetylene or electric storage batteries could be employed to power minor lights. Timers or sun relays were developed to switch a light on when darkness fell and off at sun up.

The decline of lakeborne commerce also contributed to the demise of the manned light stations on the lake. By the late 1930's all of the light stations had been discontinued. Today the lake is laced with lights and buoys, mostly in place to assist the recreational mariner. The range of these battery and solar powered aids is from 3 to 7 miles, certainly ample for the task at hand. But an interesting era of intense waterborne commerce and manned lighthouses on this unique lake has passed into history. With the exception of Bluff Point (owned by New York State) and the Colchester Reef lighthouse (on the grounds of the Shelburne Museum, at Burlington) the remaining stations are all privately owned and generally off limits to the public.



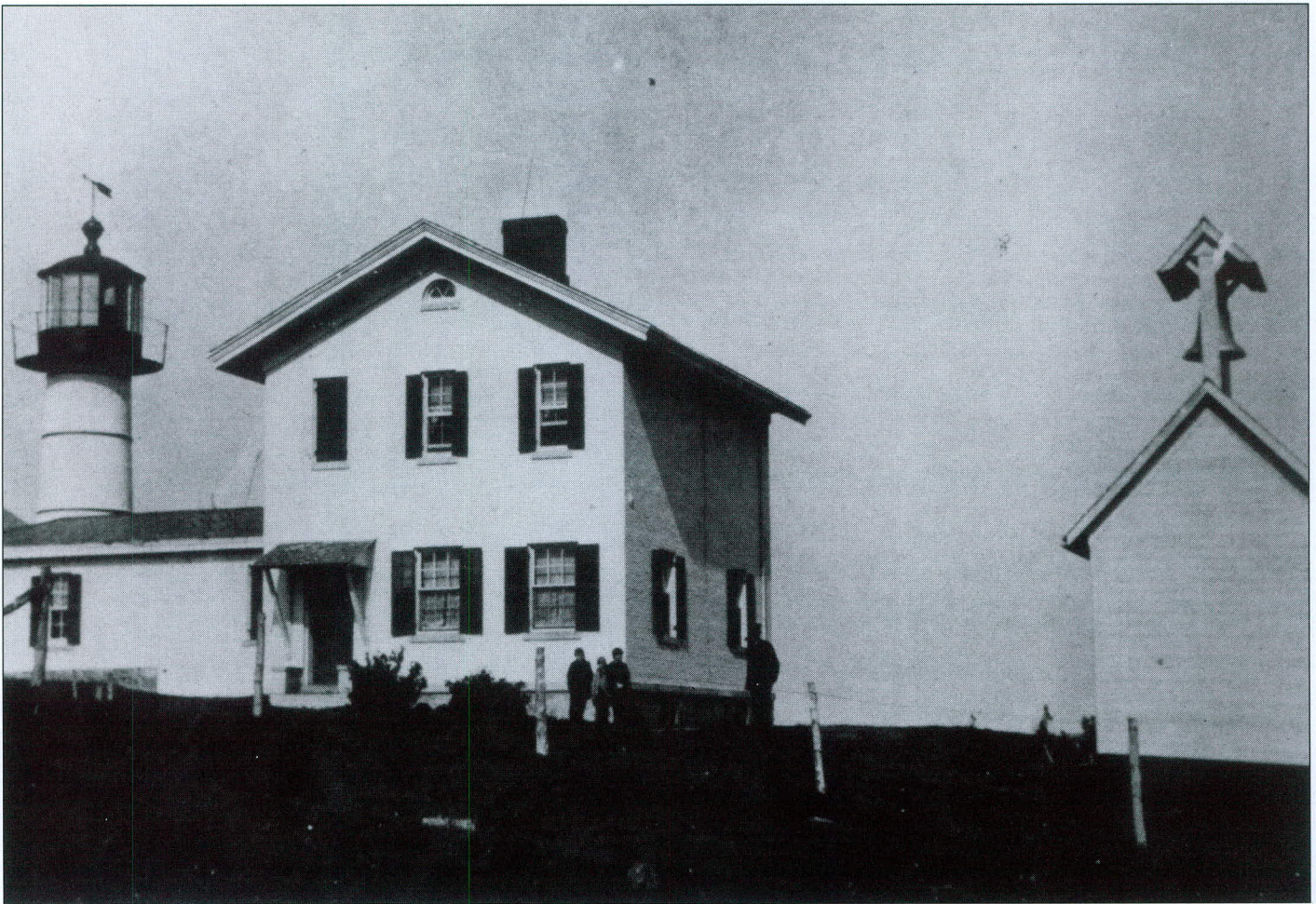
Above and left—The Isle La Monte Light Station showing very little change between the late 19th century (left) and the late 1980s (above). The station was established in 1857 and reconstructed in 1880. The original color of the tower was red; it's now a very unighthouse-like pink. The tower is a generic cast iron tower found at many areas of the country (Cape Neddick, ME; Nobska, MA; Jeffery's Hook, NY; etc.). Top photo by Keeper Elliott Tayman. Left photo courtesy Special Collection, Feinburg Library, SUNY, Plattsburg. In the left photo, note the linen curtains of the lantern have been drawn.

Lake Champlain Twins

Right and below left—Bluff Point Lighthouse (on Valcour Island) was constructed in 1874. The right photo, circa 1880's, shows the keeper's wife. The photo below was taken in 1987 when it was owned by member Adolph Raboff. Keeper Raboff purchased the lighthouse and 13 acres in 1954 and used it as a summer cottage for this family. In the mid 1980's he offered it to the State of New York if they would preserve the building. At first the state said that they would tear it down as it was in a wilderness area, home to many bird species. Keeper Raboff balked and the state backed down. The lighthouse is presently under the care of the Clinton County Historical Association.



Above and left –Barbers Point Light Station, an identical twin to the Bluff Point lighthouse. The above photo, by Keeper David Cook (1991), shows a recent addition to the rear of the structure. The lighthouse is presently owned by a Society member from New York City who uses it as a summer home. The National Archives photo, at left, shows the station sometime after 1884 (as the keeper is wearing a uniform). From left are the barn, wash house/storage building with attached privy and the keeper and family in back of the lighthouse.



Juniper Island, Lake Champlain's first light station, was established in 1825. The station was reconstructed in 1846 and the cast iron tower is similar to the Monomy Point tower off Cape Cod. Note the bell fog signal at right. A weight driven clockworks mechanism was located in the building under the bell. During periods of reduced visibility the keeper activated the clockworks. A cam pulled a wire rope every 15 seconds which caused a clapper to strike the bell. Photo courtesy of the Special collections, Feinberg Library, SUNY, Plattsburg, NY.

Hannah Thomas at Gurnet Point Light, Massachusetts, 1776-1786 ♦ Catherine Moore at Black Rock Light, Connecticut, 1817-1879 ♦ Margaret Stuart at Bombay Hook Light, Delaware, 1850-1862 ♦ Abbie Burgess at Matinicus Rock Light, Maine, 1853-1872, and White Head Light, Maine, 1872-1892 ♦ Mary Reynolds, 1854-1866, Maria Younghans, 1867-1919, and Miranda Younghans, 1919-1929, at Biloxi Light, Mississippi ♦ Charlotte Layton, 1856-1860, and Emily Fish, 1893-1914, at Point Pinos Light, California; Juliet Nichols at Angel Island Light, California, 1902-1914 ♦ Catherine A. Murdock at Rondout Creek Light, New York, 1857-1907 ♦ Harriet Colfax at Michigan City Light, Indiana, 1861-1904 ♦ Mary Ryan at Calumet Harbor Entrance Light, Indiana, 1873-1880 ♦ Julia Williams, 1865-1905, and Caroline Morse, 1905-1911, at Santa Barbara Light, California ♦ Mary Terry at Sand Point Light, Michigan, 1868-1886 ♦ Nancy Rose at Stony Point Light, New York, 1871-1904 ♦ Ida Lewis at Lime Rock Light, Rhode Island, 1872-1911 ♦ Elizabeth Williams at Beaver Island Harbor Light, 1872-1884, and Little Traverse Light, Michigan, 1884-1913 ♦ Mary and Helen Smith, 1874-1882, and Thelma Austin, 1925-1941, at Point Fermin Light, California ♦ Kate McDougal at Mare Island Light, California, 1881-1916 ♦ Laura Hecox at Santa Cruz Light, California, 1883-1917 ♦ Kate Walker at Robbins Reef Light, New York, 1894-1919 ♦ Margaret Norvell at Port Pontchartrain Light, Louisiana, 1896-1924, and West End Light on Lake Pontchartrain, 1924-1932 ♦ Emma Tabberrah at Cumberland Head Light, New York, 1904-1919 ♦ Fannie Salter at Turkey Point Light, Maryland, 1925-1947

Women Who Kept the Lights: An Illustrated History of Female Lighthouse Keepers

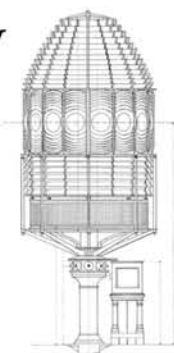
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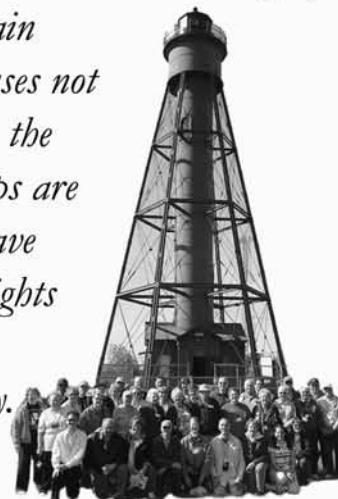
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