



Stepping Stones Lighthouse in 1988.

Lighthouse Memories

By Margaret Bock

The first lighthouse keeper in our family was my grandfather, John Ninde Buckridge. He had a picturesque career in the Navy and was part of Perry's Expedition to the China Sea and Japan where the Treaty of Friendship was signed in March, 1854. He was one of three Americans who slept on Japanese soil after the Treaty was signed.

His next venture was as a member of the Paraguay Expedition under LCDR Joseph Hull of Saybrook, CT, which took place from 1856 to 1859. Then he served in the Civil War, was injured and had his right leg amputated at the thigh.

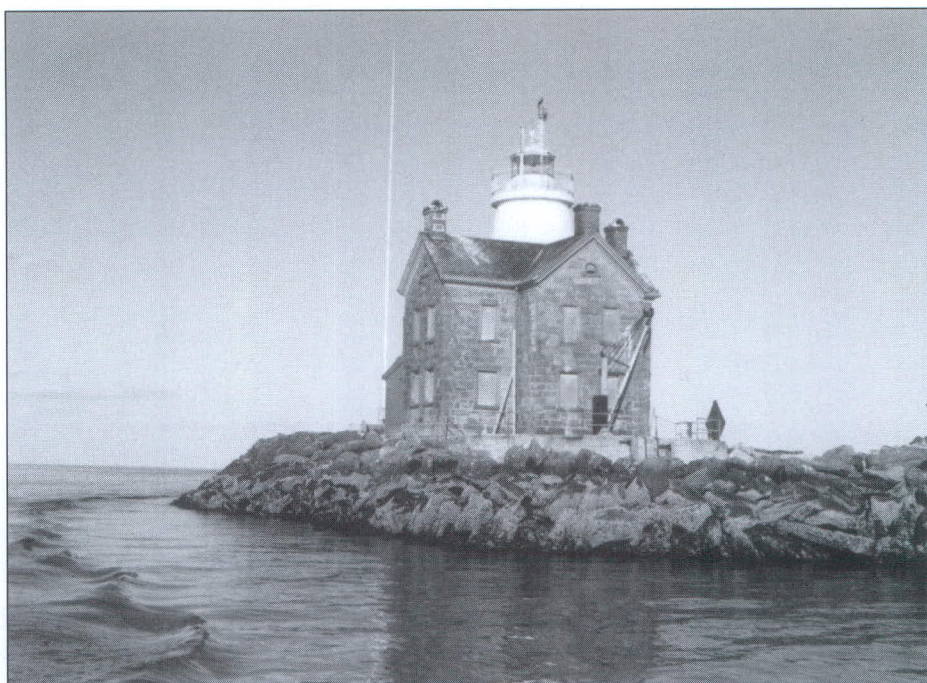
He began a 25 year career as a lighthouse keeper in 1877. He first served as assistant keeper of the Stepping Stones station. Next came the Stratford Shoals lighthouse and then Eatons Neck. The title "assistant Keeper" indicates to me that these were two-man stations. In 1883 he was assigned to the Inner Lighthouse, Lynde Point, at Saybrook, CT as Keeper. Here, at last, he was able to have his family with him. My father, Thomas Buckridge, was nine years old when my grandfather was assigned to Lynde Point Breakwater lighthouse, and he lived in the lighthouse until he married. He was initiated into lighthouse keeping at an early age, for apparently he did most of the climbing for his father who must have found it difficult to climb those tower stairs with a wooden leg.

While they were living there, my Aunt Minnie married Ezra Kelsey of Westbrook, CT in a ceremony in the lighthouse. Newspaper accounts of the wedding even listed their wedding gifts. Uncle Ezra also became a lighthouse keeper. He was first keeper of the Rockland Lake station on the Hudson River and then at Crown Point on Lake Champlain, where he remained until the lighthouse was remodeled into the Champlain Memorial Monument in the 1930's.

Despite his early experiences, my father didn't become a lighthouse keeper until he was 48-years-old. His first station was Execution Rocks, near New Rochelle, NY. He was later transferred to Race Rocks as keeper, with two assistants. He served at that station for seven years. Race Rocks was a treacherous location; sometimes it was so rough it would be a week before they could get to the mainland for fresh food and mail. The dwelling at this station was similar to a house on land except the furnishings were sparse. The short tower was approached from the second floor bedrooms. The men were allowed 30 days leave a year, which boils down to 2½ days a month that dad was able to visit his family in Essex, CT. Needless to say, we were all happy when he was transferred to the family station at Montauk Point, NY.

The Montauk Lighthouse, which was commissioned by George Washington and completed in 1797, is on land. We didn't even own a rowboat while we lived there. The present dwelling, which dates back to 1860, might be called a three family apartment building. Dad, as head keeper, had one half of the house. Our kitchen-dining room was in the basement; the living room and my parent's bedroom on the ground floor; two large bedrooms and one small one on the second floor; and a large attic. The second assistant had four rooms on the first floor of the other half of the house, and the first assistant had the same set-up on the second floor, but with an additional small bedroom over the entrance hall.

There was no electricity, no indoor plumbing and no central heat. Our only sink was in the kitchen — black iron with a hand pump. We had a coal burning stove in the kitchen, and in the winter, a pot-bellied stove in the living room. The second floor was unheated. In the winter my sister and I took hot water bottles to bed with us. In the morning we usually dressed by the fire in the living room. Sometimes there was a fringe of ice in the bedroom water pitchers in the morning. We also had a little apartment building of privies, one for each family — side by side — and always locked, as they



Execution Rocks Lighthouse by R. Tim in 1988.

were not for the general public.

The light [is displayed] 68 feet above sea level and is reached by climbing 137 steps. At that time it took about a half hour to light it. Powered by oil vapor [i.o.v.], it was operational from sundown to sun up. It had a mantle similar to a Coleman camp lantern which had to be handled gently to prevent it from breaking. The weights which powered the clockworks and rotated the lens had to be wound up. The Fresnel lens was carefully cleaned to make sure it was free of dust and fingerprints. Visitors were requested not to touch the lens, but it was so beautiful and sparkling with rainbow colors, that someone always managed to touch it when the keeper wasn't looking.

During the day the lens was covered with a linen curtain, which when worn out, yielded material for bureau scarves and napkins. The beautiful Fresnel lens is now part of the Montauk Point Lighthouse Museum. It was replaced by a contraption that is probably more efficient, but very ugly.

The modernization of the lighthouse began several years after our arrival. The first improvement was a cement road constructed under the WPA program. Sometime around 1936-37 electricity, indoor plumbing and a furnace were installed. Of course we lost our small bed-

room to a bathroom, but we were happy to have the new facilities. Now, after the installation of electricity, lighting the lens was only a matter of turning a switch. We never did have a regular telephone. Our only connection to the "real world" was a telephone link to the nearest Coast Guard station five miles away. This was one of those wall mounted phones with a hand crank. However, one time when I was marooned in East Hampton, I was able to get to the Coast Guard station there and my message was relayed through two other stations to eventually reach my parents.

I hear people talking about foggy weather. Nobody has any conception of fog unless they have lived at the Montauk Lighthouse. Sometimes the fog engines would run steadily for a week or ten days, emitting a loud blast every 13 seconds. All the pictures on our walls would be crooked from the vibrations, but when the horns were finally shut down, the silence would make you feel as if the world had come to an end. If we were caught away from the station during a heavy fog, the driver of the car would have to keep his head out of the window to get even limited visibility, even though we had so called "fog lights" on the car. My sister hit a deer on three dif-



LIGHTHOUSE - MONTAUK POINT, LONG ISLAND, N. Y.

Montauk Point Lighthouse in the 1930's. Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.

ferent occasions during such foggy times. John Flaherty in his book, "Sentries of the Sea," described the fog quite accurately when he said it was as "opaque as buttermilk."

The keepers had watches in twelve hour shifts, 12 on and 24 off. However, they also worked every morning except Sunday from 8 a.m. to noon doing maintenance work. The tower was white-washed every year and the maroon identification stripe was painted every 2-3 years. I remember one time the scaffolding slipped sideways. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the whitewash splattered all

over, making quite a mess to clean up. There was other painting to do, engines to clean and oil and a big yard to mow. I really can't call it a lawn. However, everything had to be kept in immaculate condition for the inspector who might pop in at any moment unannounced.

Then there were the visitors to take up in the tower and clean up after. The tower was open every day except Sunday from 10 to 12 and 1 to 3. It was the responsibility of the keeper on watch to walk up and down the stairs with each group of visitors. Often, in the summer, when there were thousands of visitors,

one man would be stationed at the foot of the tower and one in the lantern, letting visitors up at intervals. Sometimes the visitors were fun and broke the monotony of our semi-isolation. At other times they were obnoxious. Some of them tried to rip the shingles off the house for souvenirs. Another time a group came into the house and one of them played the piano in our living room. They were quite indignant when we told them these were private quarters.

Although we were on land, we were indeed isolated. The lighthouse grounds were almost surrounded by a state park, which helped generate the large number of visitors. Our nearest neighbors in the summer time were the Lathrop Browns, who had a windmill cottage on the ocean side. Mr. Brown was a college classmate of President Franklin Roosevelt. During WWII the windmill cottage was moved and replaced with Camp Hero, which, too, has been idle for a long time. About a mile away was a hotel call the Wyandane Inn. This family had two children, one of whom was a classmate of mine. However, as soon as a weather turned cool, they headed into Montauk Village where they owned another hotel. On the sound side there was a family who had a daughter about my age. Her father was the school bus driver, and her grandmother ran the restaurant in the state park in the summer.

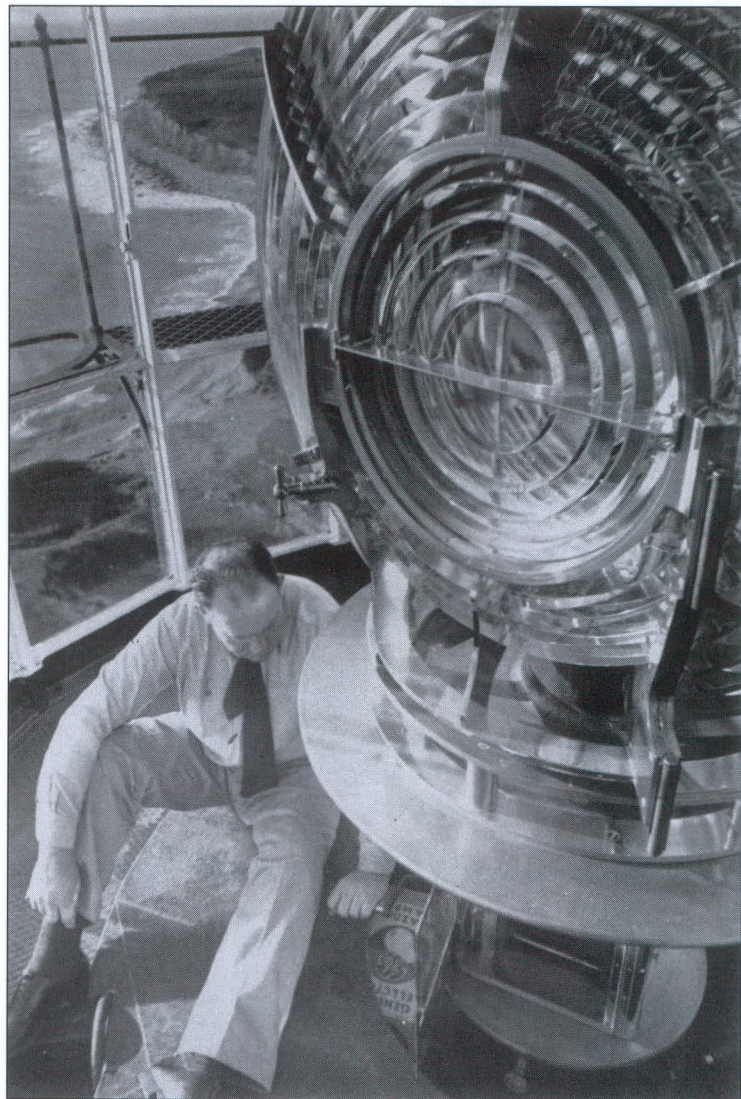
The school bus picked up the lighthouse kids at 7 a.m. and brought us home at 5 p.m. The elementary school in Montauk was 7 miles from the light station and had 8 grades, no kindergarten. When I graduated from Eighth Grade there were three in my class, but we had a full graduation program with each of us giving several presentations. The high school children transferred in Montauk Village to the high school bus which took them to East Hampton, 22 miles away. Children from Amagansett, Springs and Wainscott, an area 30 to 35 miles long, also attended this high school. Yet my High School class only totaled 40.

Someone from the light station made a trip to Montauk Village every day to pick up mail, and maybe a few quarters of milk. The town also had a drug store, food market, a few restaurants and gas stations. However, we went to East Hampton every Saturday to buy our food. And occasionally ventured over to Sag Harbor for a better selection at better prices. Most clothing was ordered from Sears or Montgomery Ward catalogs. Unfortunately the lovely little village of Montauk is now overrun with motels, restaurants and souvenir shops. So much for progress!

Our social life revolved around activities at school and at church. There were dances, card parties, suppers, fairs, youth and adult groups, plays and other entertainments.

We too had a wedding at the lighthouse, although it was not the first one performed there. My sister married Albert Santi and they returned to Connecticut to live in Ivoryton. Alas, by the time I got married, the family was no longer at Montauk, so I was not able to have a lighthouse wedding.

During WWII the Coast Guard took over the Lighthouse Service. Dad was too old to be inducted into the Coast Guard, but since the family quarters were discontinued, my mother moved to Amagansett and eventually back to Essex, CT. My dad applied for and received a transfer to the Outer Lighthouse at Saybrook, CT to be near her, retiring in 1943.



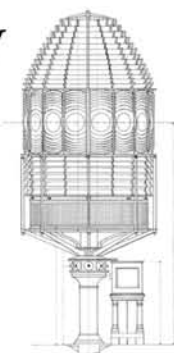
The keeper of the Montauk Point Lighthouse in the lantern room. This 3rd order Fresnel lens is now on display in the Montauk Lighthouse Museum.

The Outer Lighthouse was a three man station. As you might know it is located at the end of a long breakwater, which in those days was lined with fishermen. This lighthouse follows the format which most people associate with a lighthouse, as the rooms are actually in the tower. The first floor contained the engine room; the second was the kitchen; the third a living room; and the fourth a dormitory type bedroom. The fifth was the lantern room itself [ed. families of men stationed in this type of station lived ashore and the keepers rotated between home and the lighthouse].

As you can see, my knowledge of lighthouses is basically limited to my experiences at Montauk Point. Although I have visited many other facilities, visiting them and living in one are totally different experiences. I am very happy to have had this opportunity in my past, and I certainly loved every minute of it. As my husband often reminds me, I may not be a lighthouse keeper's daughter anymore, but, at least, I can always be a light house-keeper!



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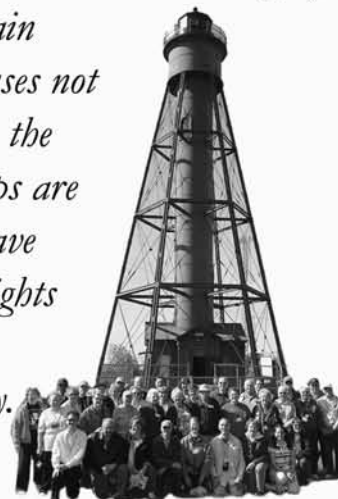
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