

THE LOWER LIGHTS KEPT BURNING! A TALE OF THE CLEVELAND BEACON

By Sara E. Wermiel



Those familiar with the hymn “Let the Lower Lights Be Burning” know it is an admonition to help others in their time of need. The two lights in the hymn, an upper and a lower one, are a metaphor for God and humankind; God looks after the big picture, but we humans must do our part to help our fellow man, on our smaller, mortal scale. The hymn, written by the Christian songwriter Philip Bliss, drew on a story told by the evangelical preacher David L. Moody as part of his revival work. In Moody’s words, “Christ himself is in the upper light, and we are the lower lights, and the cry to us is, *Keep the lower lights burning.*” And if we don’t keep the lower light burning—extend a hand—in the words of the hymn, a “fainting struggling seaman” may not make the harbor, he may be lost!

The story supposedly was based on an actual event that occurred in Cleveland harbor. In Moody’s telling, it happened on a wild, stormy night. A ship sought to enter the harbor, but the captain and pilot could orient themselves only if they saw Cleveland’s two lights. The light of the lower lighthouse was out. In desperation, the steamer tried to make the harbor anyway, and it wrecked against rocks. “The great majority [of the people on the steamer] found a watery grave.” The moral of the tale: we can prevent such disasters, if we keep the lower light burning.

This sentiment is a worthy subject for a sermon: we all need reminding that we can and should help others. But it does seem a disgrace that the light keeper allowed the light to go out. Or did he?

The “rocks” against which the ship collided would have been one of the long piers projecting into Lake Erie from where the Cuyahoga River entered the lake at Cleveland. Parallel piers were built at the river’s mouth to channel the river’s current to keep it from shoaling up. To mark these obstacles in the water, a beacon (the lower light) was



First Cleveland Beacon, erected 1831 on the east pier, replaced by the second in 1851. Print from a painting by Karl Bodmer reproduced by Prince Maximilian Alexander Philipp Zu Wied-Neuweid, *Travels in the Interior of North America between 1832-34*, plate XXXII.

built in 1831 on the end of the east pier. Cleveland’s principal lighthouse (established 1829) sat on an elevated site in the city, at Water and Lighthouse streets.

It seems more than one ship had crashed into these piers, so it is uncertain which collision gave rise to the story that inspired Moody’s sermon. Published in 1877, his story began, “A few years ago at the mouth of Cleveland harbor...,” which doesn’t help fix a date. One clue is provided by Rev. William M. Brooks, who grew up near Cleveland. He wrote that the hymn “was founded on an incident, said to have occurred in my boyhood.” He was born in 1835.

A likely candidate for the storied accident, dating from Brooks’ boyhood, is one that occurred in December 1852. And what actually happened in this case was quite different from the tale Moody heard.

As in Moody’s story, a vessel—in this case, the schooner *Gazette*, which had had a rough voyage from Buffalo—attempted to make Cleveland harbor in heavy weather. According to a witness, “The night had been black and toward morning, stormy and howling. The lake was in terrible commotion—the breakers ran high and were dashing their spray high over light house pier (the lower light)...” As the captain tried to reach the safety of the harbor, the center board broke. The vessel struck the east pier, breaking a hole in the bow, and capsized.

Thus, unlike in Moody’s story, this event happened during the day—albeit a stormy day—not at night, so the collision was not due to the absence of the light. But, so far from being a story of the consequences of human neglect (not keeping the lower light burning), the actual event was filled with courageous and selfless acts.

According to the witness, the people of Cleveland became aware of the accident and thronged to the harbor. The schooner’s crew of six was in the freezing water, clinging to parts of the boat while being tossed in the waves.

Soon, mariners on the shore set out in



Second Cleveland Beacon (erected 1851) at the end of the east pier in Lake Erie. This would have been the “lower light” in the 1850s. Drawing from Gleason’s *Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, Jan. 24, 1852.

three small boats to row out to the drowning men. “Nothing could have been more thrillingly exciting than to witness the daring of these fellows,” the witness reported. Despite



An 1859 photograph of the second Cleveland Beacon. National Archives and Records Administration photo.

the tremendous breakers, the boats reached the men and pulled them from the water. Then, tired, their boats burdened with extra weight, the rescuers had to row back. The crowds on shore must have held their breath; there was a high probability the boats would swamp in the big waves at the head of the pier. But, to help the rescue boats, another group of seamen put out in a fourth boat to man that dangerous spot. The rescue boats passed it safely, and the crowds on shore exploded in relief and joy, "It was a shouting time on land when the rescuers and the rescued reached still water in the harbor." All made it back and the entire crew of the *Gazette* was saved.

Moody's version of the incident—a story he heard secondhand—is a moving one, with a worthy message, and it was widely repeated in the 19th century. Rev. Brooks, in his retelling of the story, explained "if the light in the lower lighthouse, in our hearts, fails to shine, there may be some human wreck which our light may have prevented."

But in fact, the lesson of the actual incident was a different one. Rather than showing the consequences of lights failing to shine, it

showed the opposite: what good people *did* for others, their shining heroism. The rescuers of Cleveland kept the lower lights burning!

Sara E. Wermiel is the author of *Lighthouses (Norton/Library of Congress Visual Sourcebooks in Architecture, Design & Engineering, 2006)*.

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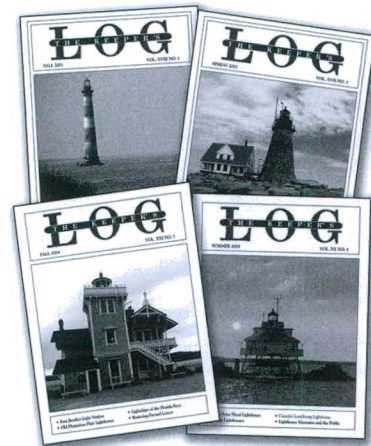
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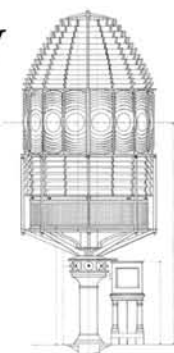
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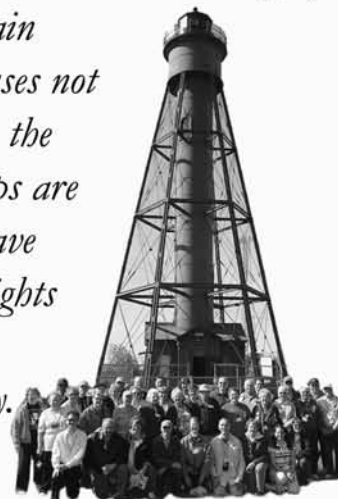
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