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Pages from the Past

Manitou Island Lighthouse
Lake Superior

Keeper James Corgan—



Manitou Island Light station in 1913. Note that there two whistle fog signals, one at extreme left and one at the right. The boat house is left of the tower. Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.

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August 5, 1875—Principal Keeper left for Houghton at 4:30 p.m. with Steam Launch "Little Will" for inspection. Went to L'Anse saw there the Hon. Jay Hubball from this district who informed me that I and my wife were to be removed from this station, the cause thereof he did not know. Also of the removal of P.C. Bird of Eagle Harbor and Ashman of White Fish Point Light. And in anticipation of removal I sent in my own and my wife's resignation to take immediate effect. Which I do willingly and without the slightest regret except the gratulation of my enemies and I should have resigned ere long had I not been forced to, from the mere fact of the L.H. Board revoking the order for a 2nd assistant at this station. And I envy not the successor of mine of his acquired position hoping only that he and his successors will be as competent and perform the duties imposed as faithfully as has the subscriber and that he may leave of his own free will not by the caprices and by any "red tape" that might happen to think his removal necessary for the good of the service because he does not bend his knee or pull his forelock to them but prefers being a man and be treated as such. And now to my successor I leave this journal to continue to mark events as true and impartial as I have done also the rest of the books which I think he will find as correct and well kept as most LH records and not like a number of keepers known to me who are unable to keep their accounts and get others to do so for them, and cannot keep track of less than one gill, for fractions of a gill would overrun their arithmetic.

As a keeper ceasing to exist I give to my successor a wish that he may have all the good luck possible for one man to have as long as he keeps this station for he needs it especially in boating. And from his enemies Oh Lord deliver him for they are manifold. — Jas. Corgan.

Aug. 22, 1875 - Arrived at this station and relieved James Corgan from duty as principal keeper of this light and assumed charge thereof on Friday the 24th of the same month. James Corgan left on the same day that I assumed charge of this light station on his own steam launch "Little Will" — Henry Pierce.

There is a group of light stations in proximity to Manitou Island: Copper Harbor, Eagle Harbor, Eagle River and Gull Rock. Apparently the keepers sailed, rowed or motored between them, calling on each other. One is James Corgan who was rehired because in May of 1882 he is the keeper of the Gull Rock station. He and his two sons call on Keeper Pierce according to Pierce's Log. The Log of Keeper Pierce is uneventful between 1875 and 1882. He records periods of fog and fog signal operation, inspections and arrival of visitors. Then in May disaster strikes.]

May 19, 1882 - Reuben Hart left Copper Harbor at 8 a.m. for this station alone in his own sailboat a good one with wind SSE and blowing a good fresh breeze. He made several stretches coming down passed Gull Rock about 4 p.m. and lay to at two mile point of isle. He seemed to be engaged in fixing something around the boat for over one half an hour, he being observed by Mr. Corgan, Assistant Keeper at Gull Rock. He was next seen by his assistants Mr. Henry Fergeson and John Gustafson when just emerging from behind the north fog signal coming out of the north bay on his last stretch out before coming about to enter boat landing. Wind fresh at time and he kept on running close and [sails] reefed down and crossed the outer end of the reef that runs out E of LH. He then came about and headed for boat runway with a free sheet. Shortly afterwards he shipped a portion of sea, he immediately commenced to throw out stone which he had in [the boat] for ballast, but before he got many out another sea came and entirely engulfed him and the boat [went] completely out of sight. This when he was not more than 500 feet away [from the station dock]. The boat appeared again and seemed to right herself for a moment, but only for a moment, she then capsized on her beam and by this time Mr. Hart appeared and climbed onto the upper most part of the boat and divested himself of his outer clothing and motioned to his two assts. They standing by the boathouse door at the time. They made a pusillanimous [ed.-cowardly or fainthearted] attempt to get the LH boat out of the boat house, but Fergeson 1st Asst. refused to assist Gustafson 2nd Asst. to get her more than partially out of the house, saying they could not go to him, saying they could not handle the boat although begged by Gustafson to make an attempt to save the life of their principal. But *no* he would not. He allowed him to drift past and away from them imploring them by signs to come to him. He was so close that the two assts. ran out onto the rocks in an attempt to throw him a rope. They saw him over two hours afterwards when lighting the lamp still clinging to the upper most fragment of the boat and floating and drifting toward the Canadian shore. This is the account given to me by John Gustafson in the presence of Henry Fergeson on Sunday, May 21st 1 p.m.

To think of the suffering of that poor man drifting to his doom, with the two men he had chosen [as assistants] in plain sight to aid him in his lonely task of keeping this station and *t hey* standing idly by and see him for hours drifting hopelessly away to a death, that the Indian torture is no more cruel and hanging a relief. I repeat I cannot think of it that it don't make my flesh creep. And still those men have a slight balm for their consciences "if they have any." They engaged themselves with Mr. Hart with the explicit understanding that they were not boatmen. Gustafson could row a boat some, but could not sail. Fergeson could do neither, and therefore Mr. Hart knew their inability. But still *I cannot nor will not* try and mitigate the

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condemnation that is due them for their cowardly action. They admitted that there was no sea at Crib and that there would have been no difficulty in getting the boat out. Fergeson soon afterward started around north side of the island to light a signal fire on the west end thinking that I had returned with Mr. Hart, he could then attract my attention and make known to me, when I would come to him, of the sad accident and have me go to his rescue. But as fate would have it I came part way to the rock that afternoon and the wind being so much ahead and freshening I returned to Copper Harbor. Mr. Corgan called my attention to a signal fire on point of island. Launched my row boat and went over there and there found John Gustafson, 2nd Asst., who first imparted to me the news of Hart's sad fate. I walked around to LH and saw Ferguson and Gustafson and they solicited my aid in the matter and desired to telegraph the Inspector CDR. J.C. Watson relative to the accident and that they were unfit to perform the required duties at the station and wished to leave immediately.

May 22 - Arrived at Eagle Harbor and telephoned the following dispatch from the Delaware mine to the District Inspector, "Reuben Hart Manitou keeper capsized and cast away evening of the 19th towards Canadian shore. Assistants utterly incapable and wish to leave the station immediately. Will await your answer. —J. Corgan." At 8:30 p.m. I received answer as follows, "To Jas. Corgan, Eagle Harbor. Take temporary charge at Manitou, employ two men if assistants desert. Employ man to assist at Rock, Write particulars. Watson, Insepctor." I then wrote him the particulars as heretofore stated. I also sent a telegram to Reuben's mother at Duluth . . .

May 23 - I started from Eagle Harbor at 6 a.m. for Copper Harbor, cold riding, snowed last night, ground almost covered at Delaware (mine). Arrived at Copper Harbor at 10:15. Commenced making endevours to get two men to go to island with me for I have no desire to keep the company of those incompetent cowards. Could not find anyone who is competent who wants to go.

24 - Left Copper Harbor for the Rock at 12 p.m. with Chas. Corgan and Thos. Letcher. I will leave Corgan at Rock and take Dan Corgan to assist at island and then will put those two assist. ashore.

May 24 - Got to the Rock at 3 p.m., landed and stayed a short while. Took Dan Corgan and left for Island and got there at 5 p.m. and found that the LH Tender Warrington had been here at 10 a.m. and got weather note and left in search of the missing keeper in obedience to a dispatch sent by the Inspector. She took a couple of circles and then left for Passage Island where they are erecting a LH.

May 25 - Took inventory of all the groceries here belonging to keeper at invoice prices to be returned or sold to incoming keeper. Arranged everything with assistants and relieved them of any duties and will put them on first steamer passing down.

May 26 - They had not long to wait, the Barge Iron Chief came along. I launched the Rock sailboat and run out to her and put them aboard at 4 p.m. and returned to the Rock and remained overnight.

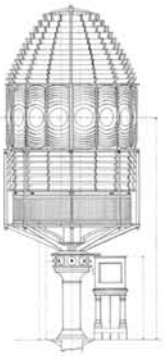
May 27 - Returned to the island at 12 p.m. and found that the [LH tender] Warrington had been here at 6 a.m. but had no tiding of the missing keeper or boat . . .

May 30 - Dan started for Copper Harbor with the mail at 10:30 a.m., the wind being light he will have to row most of the way. The coincidence is striking as the above noted Friday being a conspicuous day in the happenings of Mr. Hart and assistants, it being on Friday April 28 that they first came here and a Friday, May the 19th, that he was cast away and on Friday, May 26 that they again left the station for their return ashore.

This is my first entry in this journal since Aug. 16, 1875 and I then little thought I should be requested to again take charge of this station even for a limited period and least of all under such sad circumstances and I earnestly hope that I nor no other person may be called upon in the long future to assume the duties here under similar circumstances. I now again commit to the incoming keepers the charge of these books and entries, in same and wish them whoever they be . . . health and happiness, unanimity, competency in their duties and a will to perform them when called upon, and especially if life is at stake. So that the pages of this journal will never again be used to transcribe heartless desertion of one keeper by another as in the case of Reuban Hart by his 1st and 2nd Assts. Henry Fergeson and John Gustafson on May 19, 1882 at 5 p.m.

Hart's boat was picked up by a merchant Stmr. fifty miles NW of here over three months after his loss. The boat having been floating around in the lake and had not touched shore. It was taken to Duluth, his body was never recovered to date, Sept. 6, 1883. — Jas. Corgan.

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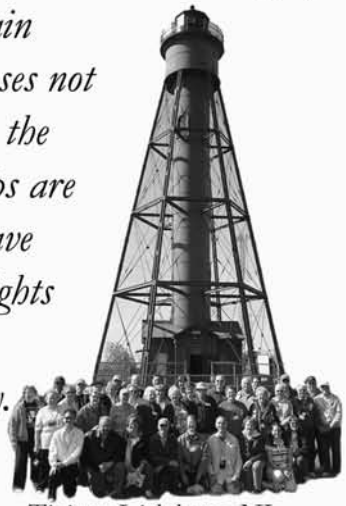
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