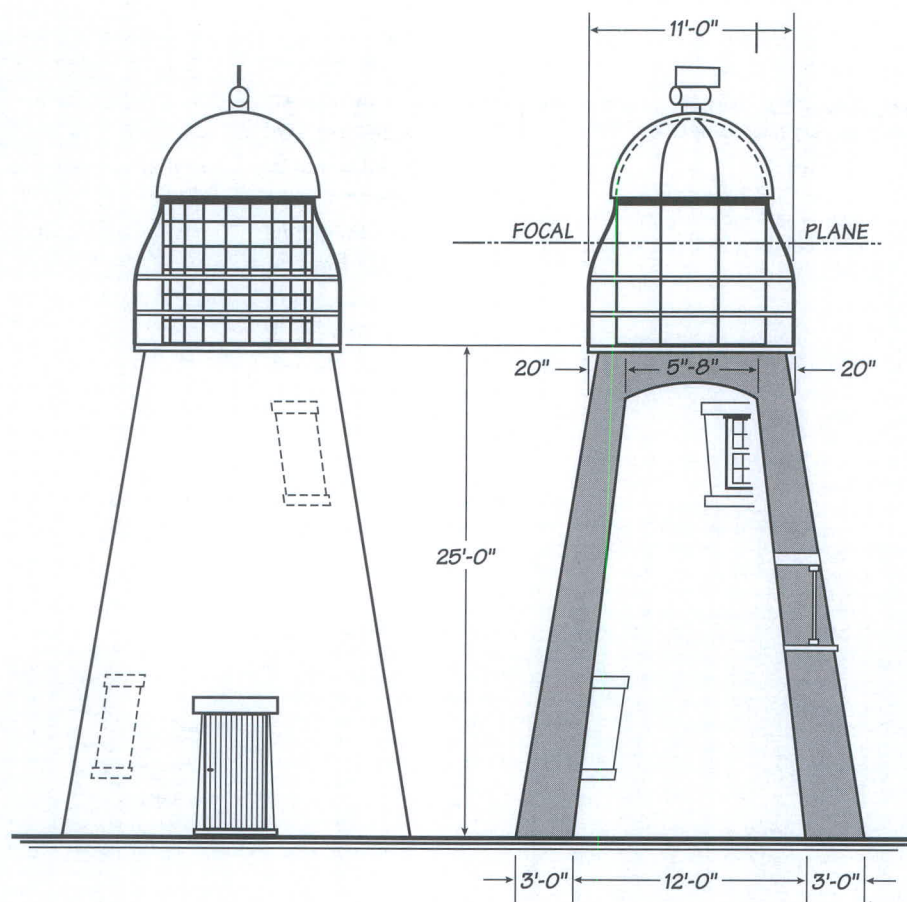




By George Worthylake

Based on a manuscript by Patricia Gruse Harris.

The Little Known Lighthouse of New Buffalo, Michigan



NOTE: Drawing based on specification for construction of lighthouse and keeper's dwelling at New Buffalo, Michigan dated June 1, 1839.



he opening of the Erie Canal in 1822 brought the outside world to the Great Lakes. The huge increase in vessel traffic dictated the establishment of lighthouses and other aids to navigation. But in that era, with

Stephen Pleasonton in charge of our aids to navigation system, the placement of aids was not always done in a logical manner. Some were established for political reasons, others in response to a "squeaky wheel."

The first lighthouses in the Great Lakes were established at Buffalo, NY and Presque Isle, PA in 1822. By 1837, there were only four on the shores of Lake Michigan: St. Joseph, MI 1831, Chicago 1832, Pottawattamie Island at the entrance to Green Bay, WI 1837 and Michigan City, IN 1837.

In 1834, the schooner *Post Boy* wrecked on an Indiana shore, north of Michigan City. Captain Wessel Whittaker walked the beach to Michigan City, secured a horse and rode to St. Joseph, MI to report his ship wrecked to the Customs House in that city. En route to St. Joseph he passed the mouth of the Galien River in Michigan and thought that it was an excellent location for a port. Eventually he obtained partners and they returned to the area, purchased land, surveyed their holdings and laid out a town they called New Buffalo. Captain Whittaker was from Hamburg, NY just south of Buffalo.

Once his town was established Whittaker petitioned for harbor improvements, including a lighthouse. Commerce was picking up in the area and ships were anchoring offshore to load agricultural products. Whittaker convinced ships' captains and others to also petition Congress. Their efforts eventually paid off.

The Army Topographical Corps's LT Homan reported on his survey of the area in November 1838,

At New Buffalo I deemed the most suitable site for one [lighthouse] to be on the high bank south of the entrance to the river; the spot is well marked by letters on the trees, and a proper stake in the ground. The elevation of this site is about forty feet from the lake, and conveniently open to vessels from any direction on it. A building twenty feet in height would be amply sufficient to enable it to be seen as far as any other in that region. The land

upon which this location rests, is the property of Captain Wessel Whittaker, an old resident, and one of the first settlers of New Buffalo. [Land] sufficient for the lighthouse and keeper's use may be had at a moderate cost – say, one hundred dollars per acre. The other point at the entrance to the river is low, and its shape frequently changes by the action of the waters of the river and lake; it would therefore, be imprudent to place any buildings upon it..

An Act of Congress on March 3, 1839 reported an appropriation, "For erecting a lighthouse at New Buffalo, Michigan, on Lake Michigan, five thousand dollars." That amount represents \$84,000 in today's money.

In June 1839, an agent for the government purchased land for the light station from Whittaker for \$200.

The Lighthouse Service requested proposals for the construction of the lighthouse,

Proposals will be received by ... Superintendent of Light Houses on the upper part of Lake Michigan, until the 10th day of July next, for building a light house & dwelling house at New Buffalo, in Michigan of the following materials, dimensions, and descriptions, Viz:

The Lighthouse to be built of stone or hard brick, the form round, the foundation to be sunk three feet, or as much deeper as may be necessary to make the fabric secure...the tower to be twenty-five feet high from the surface of the ground [this is just the height of the tower, before the lantern was added]; the diameter at the base to be eighteen feet, and that of the top nine. The top to be arched, on which is to be laid a deck of soap-stone, eleven feet in diameter and four inches thick...The walls inside and out to be well pointed with strong mortar, and white washed twice over at least.

There are to be three windows in the tower, of twelve lights each, of eight by ten glass, in strong frames, and a door six feet by three, made of double inch boards, cross nailed, with substantial wrought hinges, and a good lock and latch [sounds like a dangerous area].

The contract went on to require Susquehanna stone for the doorposts, stone stairs, a ground floor of brick or stone.

"On the top of the tower to be a wrought iron frame lantern of the octagon form ... the height and diameter of the lantern to be sufficient to admit an iron sash in each octagon,

to contain eighteen squares, eleven by nine, fifteen of which to be glazed of the best double glass from the Boston manufactory; the other three squares of the lower tier to be ... copper." The specifications for the lantern went into great detail about the construction, use of copper, ribs, riveting and brazing. The contract also required a door to the gallery deck, a ventilator with wind vane and a lightning conductor.. All primed with the best white lead and painted black.

The dwelling house to be of stone or hard brick, thirty four feet by twenty feet...one story of eight feet in the clear, divided into two rooms with an entry between; the stairs to lead to the chambers [bed rooms] and the cellar to be in the entry. A chimney with a fireplace in each room ... a cellar under the whole house, with sufficient walls of stone to support the walls of the house which are to be twenty inches thick ... there are to be three windows in each room of sixteen lights ... also a kitchen attached to the dwelling house, fourteen feet by twelve ... walls of stone or brick eight feet high ... two windows and a door, besides the door to communicate with the dwelling house, a chimney with a fireplace, and a sizable oven with an iron door, iron crane, trammel and hooks in the fire place, and on one side of the chimney, a sink, with a spout leading through the wall. Also an out house, or privy, at a convenient distance from the dwelling ... also a well ...

The contract included great detail, even to the making of the mortar, gutters and paint. The contract was to be completed by the following October.

Separate proposals will be received for fitting up the light house, in the same manner that the light houses of the United States have been fitted up by Mr. Winslow Lewis, in two weeks after the light house shall be built, with eleven patent lamps and eleven 14 inch reflectors, each reflector to have six ounces of pure silver, and to furnish two spare lamps and reflectors, double tin oil butts to hold 500 gallons of oil, one lantern canister and an iron trivet, one stove and funnel, one tin wick box, one tin tube box...six wick formers, one hand lantern and lamp ... two files, and two pairs of sissors [sic] ... No payment to be made until the whole of the above work shall be completed and approved.

The editors of the "Detroit Free Press" and "Chicago Democrat," will please publish the

above once a week until the 10th of July next, and forward their bills to the subscriber for payment.

T.H. Lyon, Superintendent

Ionia Co., Michigan, June 1, 1839

Jacob Gerrish, a New Buffalo resident who kept a journal of early events of the community wrote,

Wednesday, July 10, 1839 – Lots of people in to the lighthouse letting Hixon builds the house.

That would be Jeremy Hixon, the contractor who constructed the first Michigan City Lighthouse in 1837. The design of both lighthouses were almost identical. The dwellings were identical and the tower design the same, except that the Michigan City tower was 40 feet high in lieu of 25 feet for New Buffalo.

Hixon got the contract and Truman Lyon, Superintendent of the Lake Michigan District, was ordered to oversee the project and approve the finished construction. If satisfactory, Lyon was to pay Hixon \$3,795 for construction only and another \$695 for "fitting up" the lighthouse.

Pleasanton also instructed Lyon, "When light-house is done at New Buffalo, you will need to purchase a supply of oil, tube glass [chimneys] wicks, etc. to last until ... next June or July. Send estimated cost and I will remit funds for above."

On December 20, Pleasanton informed Lyon he had asked the Secretary of the Treasury to remit \$4,490 for the contractor of the New Buffalo Lighthouse.

Jacob Gerrish, who was a jack-of-all-trades (blacksmith, farmer, store keeper) wrote in his journal,

Thursday, October 3, 1839 – Hixon had horse and wagon to draw brick

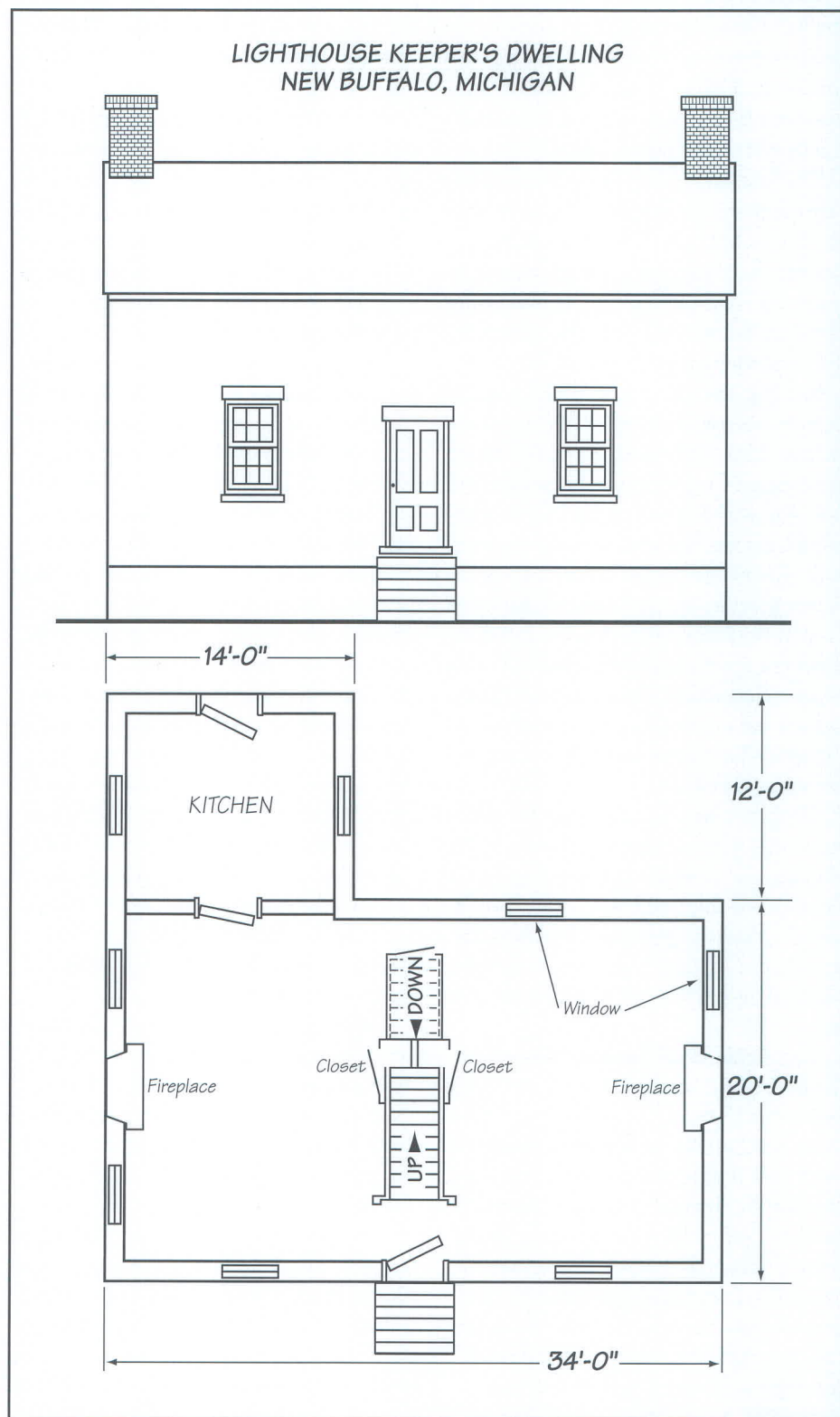
Friday, January 3, 1840 – Carried down Hixon's iron fittings

Saturday, January 11, 1840 – to work in shop for Hixon

Saturday, March 28, 1840 – Made crane for Hixon

Saturday, April 18, 1840 – Fixed jack for Hixon

The design used at New Buffalo is very similar to that used for the first 16 west coast lighthouses constructed in the 1850s, with the exception that most of them had a tower rising through the middle of the dwelling.



Prior to the completion of the station, Pleasonton asked the Secretary of the Treasury to appoint a keeper at a rate of pay of \$350 a year. Lyon received notice on January 3, 1840 that Thomas S. Smith was appointed keeper at the requested pay rate and that he "was to reside in the dwelling."

Hixon did not meet his contract deadline of October 15, 1839 and in February 1840 Superintendent Lyon was ordered to defer payment until the lighthouse was completed. On June 18 Pleasonton sent a letter to Lyon stating that Keeper Smith wrote that the lantern room of the tower, "... leaks so badly in time of rain as to wet the lamps and reflectors, and run down through the deck and arch to the bottom of the light house." Pleasonton related that,

... the keeper has contacted the contractor, but nothing was done since overseer issued certificate of acceptance. It is lamentable that so little dependence can be placed upon the fidelity of persons whom we have had to employ in erecting light-houses on the lake. In this case the contractor and overseer ... You will have the contractor repair the light-house or I will order suit against him AND overseer ... you will give them notice that if work is not completed, I will prosecute to the utmost extent of the law and make an example of them if it be possible ... you employed an overseer without my authority and I can allow no more than \$2.50 a day.

Superintendent Lyon had employed Isaac Adams and William Blakely at \$3.00 a day to oversee the construction, a job that Superintendent Lyon was supposed to do. Pleasonton then wrote Keeper Smith, "... if contractors won't fix [the leaking], I need you to get 2 or 3 statements of what must be done to complete the contract." Smith had apparently tried to get estimates of the work needed to be done, but wrote Pleasonton that he didn't have a copy of the contract and, therefore, they could not determine whether or not the material and work were in compliance with the contract. Responding, Pleasonton sent Smith a copy of the contract on July 16 and wrote, "... Send your report as soon as possible when I will order suit against Hixon if he refuses to make it right. What sort of man was the overseer, to have falsified the inspection certificate."

Work had apparently been going on at the lighthouse as blacksmith Gerrish recorded entries like,

*Monday, June 29, 1840 – Up to city [Michigan City] for pitch for the light house
Wednesday, July 1, 1840 – over to the light house with E. Knight and Wm. Ratcliff to appraise cost of fixing the deck to make it water tight*

Friday, July 3, 1840 – over to the light-house, finished painting the dome and sash

The light went into operation on June 20, 1840. A Samuel Hawes reported on the con-

dition of lighthouses on Lake Michigan in 1840. His report, perhaps a type of Coast Pilot, mentioned,

New Buffalo Light near head of Lake Michigan, T.S. Smith, Keeper, has 12 lamps. It was lighted for the first time on 20th June 1840. The building is very poor, the lantern leaks badly, and the lamps appear to have been made at as little expense as possible, they need to be replaced by new ones, and as much as any other light on the lake. It is all together a miserable concern.

For some reason it was reported that contractor Ratcliff and his wife moved into the lighthouse on June 1, 1840 with Smith, but he was never listed as a keeper and it's assumed that this was a one keeper station, in any event. Gerrish reported,

October 28, 1840 – A.M. over to the light house. Got a can of oil from WM., Two wigwags on the beach.

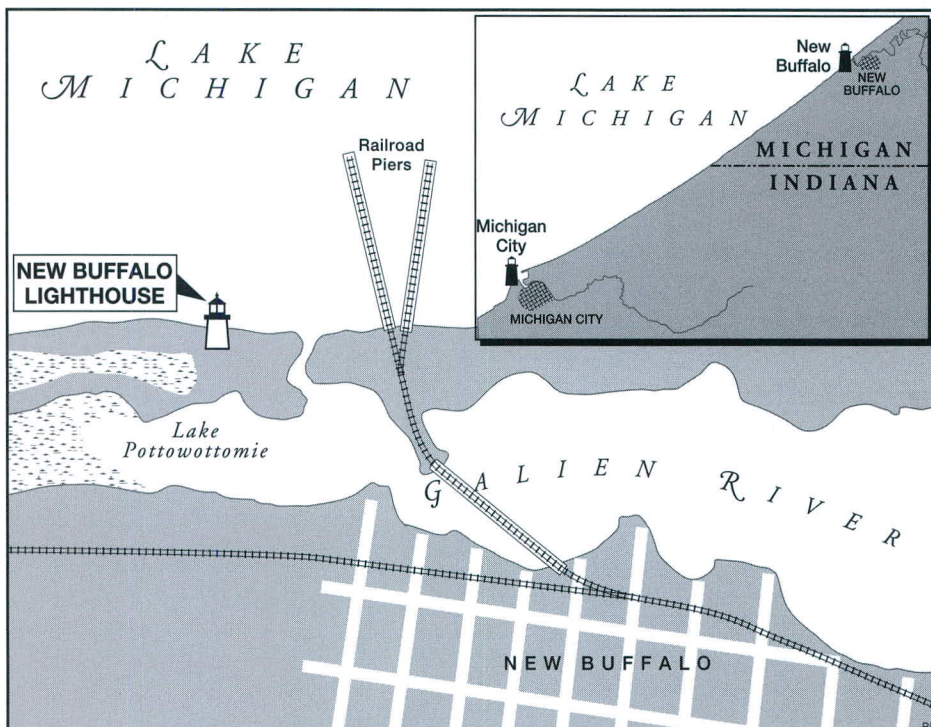
Smith sent his report on the inspection of the lighthouse to Pleasonton, who wrote to the new Superintendent, Francis Sherman, on August 24, 1840, "He (Smith) has a copy of the contract and has it [lighthouse] inspected, as you can see Hixon was bound to supply materials and work to the amount of \$271 – in addition to the work put upon the two buildings by him. Call upon Hixon, tell him to finish or we'll file suit."

The problem must have remained unsolved as Sherman received another letter from Pleasonton in October, "... of referring Hixon's letter to me. If he won't do contract work on the lighthouse, bring suit against him. I will send you a duly certified contract prior to coming to trial."

Apparently the problem was resolved without a law suit. The actual final cost to establish the station was \$5,169 – \$169 over budget as \$5,000 had been appropriated for the project.

More repairs were necessary in August 1841 and Smith was recommended for removal. A letter from Pleasonton, dated August 28, 1841, to Henry Williams, Superintendent of Lights, Milwaukee,

I received your report as to the condition of several lighthouses under your care and the conduct of the keepers, and now notice them in order in which they were presented by you, Viz ... New Buffalo Light. The estimate for repairs here is thirty dollars, and for deepening the well... fifty dollars, making eighty dollars in all. You will cause the work to be done,



the expense not to exceed your estimate. This keeper [Smith] who you inform me resides seventeen miles off and does the duty by deputy, will be reported for removal also, but the man you recommend as having lost both legs [!], is certainly not fit for such a trust ...

Pleasanton wrote to Treasury Secretary Ewing in August enclosing extracts from the Lake Michigan Superintendent recommending that the keepers of New Buffalo and St. Joseph both be removed as they hired stand-ins to do their jobs. He also mentioned the Superintendent's petition for a Mr. Webster, ... *whom he represents as having lost both legs as being highly recommended by all the captains on the lakes, as the keeper for the New Buffalo Lighthouse. I beg leave to object to his appointment, as it is perfectly obvious that a man without legs, though he may be an object of charity, cannot be qualified to discharge the important duties of a lighthouse keeper in the manner the navigating interests require.*

Pleasanton removed Keeper Smith and wrote him, "... Your removal is due to doing duty by deputy – listed by the superintendent and Mr. Hawes [Hawes had the contract to deliver oil to the lighthouse]. You were informed when you were appointed that such action was inadmissible, so the reason for your dismissal is obvious.

The new keeper, Elijah Pressey, was appointed on August 30, 1841 also at \$350 a year. Neighbor Gerrish recorded the arrival as,

Sunday, October 3, 1841 – two wagons came in with keeper of lighthouse. Put up 4 horses at our house.

The Gerrish and Pressey families became quite good friends as Gerrish records any visits between them.

Pleasanton informed the District Superintendent that, "New Buffalo tower to be repointed and whitewashed, deck leaks ... make tight, public ground not enclosed, keeper will build substantial fence for \$75. Employ him to do it. Make necessary repairs to dwelling and fix chimney to keep it from smoking. Well to be cleaned out, new clockworks left at New Buffalo."

Evidently not everybody in New Buffalo was pleased with keeper Pressey's work as a keeper. Pleasanton received a letter from Isaac Adams stating the Pressey was negligent in his duties and recommending Russell Goodrich as a replacement. Pleasanton sent the letter on to Pressey for his response. He

must have been persuasive as Goodrich was never a keeper at New Buffalo.

On September 18, 1843, Wm. Duane Wilson, the new Inspector for Lake Michigan made his annual inspection of his lighthouses and reported,

New Buffalo Light – Found things here greatly improved since last fall, so far as refers to the lighting apparatus and tower, which are now in pretty good order; did some repairing on the reflectors, and to the spout on the house. Notwithstanding the painting and other repairs done to the keeper's house last fall, it does not at this time look much better, on account of the filthy condition in which it is kept. The keeper seems to have been very unfortunate in the choice of a partner, so far as housewifery is concerned. I am fearful he neglects his light occasionally, by improperly absenting himself [the keeper operated a small chair factory]. He did so last winter; which fact, I understand has already been made to your office by some of his neighbors who desire his removal. The light is very seldom required by vessels ... perhaps not once a month. I have heard no complaint in regard to it.

Later in the year the Superintendent reported,

... [the light] is of no service whatever to navigation, and is universally spoken of as a useless light. As the place at which the light is situated contains only a population of some twenty five or thirty persons, affording neither commerce nor shelter for vessels, its abandonment cannot possibly injure anyone.

In July 1845, the Superintendent's report was again unfavorable,

The lighting apparatus was in fair, not the best, condition. I found the keeper absent, but afterwards saw him and admonished him that his lights were not as clean as they should have been, and that they must be always in a perfectly clean condition; from his promises I am led to think he will do better ... there are four lamps in use ... this light is not considered of importance. There were some trifling repairs necessary to be done to the [light] house and dwelling which will receive my attention.

That November the Superintendent wrote, "... The present keeper, Pressey, gives general dissatisfaction. I consider him incapable and respectfully recommend that he be removed..." Pressey was removed shortly after that report and Reuben Smith was

appointed on December 20, 1845.

The next July the Superintendent reports, *New Buffalo Light-House – I had four new burners put in at this place; the dwelling was in a dilapidated state produced in measure by the carelessness of the former keeper. There is no well on the premises and the keeper asks that a cistern be furnished ... which can be procured for \$20. This I deem necessary not alone for the convenience and comfort of the keeper, but as a means of protection in the event of fire. The expenses estimated for repairs to the dwelling and slight repairs to the fence is \$30, making a total in all of \$50.*

By July 10 of the following year the Superintendent reports, "...an excellent light, everything in order, well kept. No repairs excepting a lock on light-house door. Had the old one replaced by a new one."

On June 5, 1847 the Michigan Central Railroad extended its line to New Buffalo, In the fall of that year they started construction of a bridge across the Galien River and built two long piers out into the lake. This was the western terminus of their line. A steamboat line was created which connected Chicago with the morning and evening arrivals of trains at New Buffalo. Suddenly, the light-house was important to shipping. In fact, a light was established at the head of one of the piers to also assist shipping.

Unfortunately, New Buffalo didn't remain the western terminus of the line for long. In 1850 the line bypassed New Buffalo and ended at Michigan City, ultimately reaching Chicago.

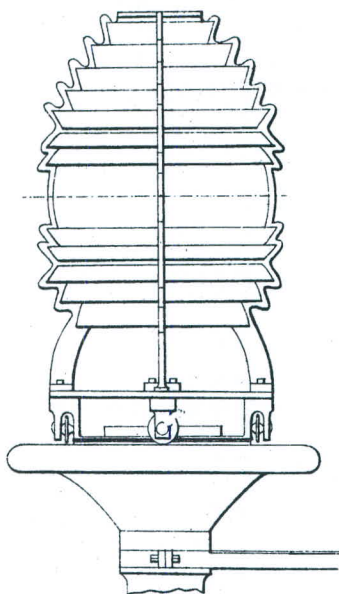
In 1849 Joseph Miller replaced Reuben Smith, who was himself replaced by Reuben Smith in 1853.

In August 1850, Superintendent Henry Miller delivered 164 gallons of winter oil and 39 1/2 gallons of spring oil and submitted the following report:

The appropriation of \$75, which I thought of expending for a footbridge at this place, I have not yet expended: and I find the channel of the river ... and in fact the bed itself ... so changeable, owing to the washing of the lake, that I shall not build the bridge as I proposed. The tower of the light wants painting, pointing and whitewashing, at an estimated cost of \$25. One side of the kitchen wall is caving in, in consequence of the foundation having given way. The whole one side of the kitchen wall will have to be taken down, a new foundation laid, and the kitchen floor raised,

which will put everything in good order. Estimated cost of this, \$75. Conduct of the keeper good.

In 1857, the newly installed Lighthouse Board replaced the antiquated reflector/lamp system at New Buffalo with a sixth order lens which displayed a fixed white light over an arc of visibility of 144 degrees.



Fixed 5th order lens.

Beginning in 1845, then 5th Auditor, Pleasonton recommended to Congress that the New Buffalo Light Station be discontinued. But due to local political opposition his request was disapproved. Eventually, the natural movement and erosion of the river and lakeshore threatened to undermine the bluff on which the lighthouse was located. Because of this, and the obvious lack of maritime traffic, the station was discontinued on August 1, 1859. All movable articles were removed and the station sold at public auction in August 1861. Later an undated newspaper article states, "the lighthouse at New Buffalo crumbled and fell into the water and the piers [railroad piers] crumbled due to deterioration with age and were crushed by the pressure of ice jams bordering the lake in the winter."

Today the harbor mouth is located about 500 yards north of where it was located during New Buffalo's heyday. It's an active hub of pleasure boating and a restaurant with a view of the harbor has been constructed to resemble the old lighthouse, keeping alive the memory of New Buffalo's lighthouse that shined its light out over Lake Michigan 143 years ago ... and it seems like Only Yesterday.

A Lighthouse Society Exclusive

We have developed a beautiful framed presentation of the five lighthouse postage stamps which were issued in 1990. These (real) stamps are displayed with a first-day cover cancellation envelope. Each framed display has a different cancellation.

Crowning the arrangement is the Society logo in gold leaf. We think this fine, limited edition collection would make a handsome addition to your lighthouse collectibles and artwork, gracing the wall of your den or living room.

The price is \$47.50 plus \$5 for shipping and handling. It is available only through the San Francisco office.



U. S. Lighthouse Service Efficiency Star



The 1912 report of the Bureau of Lighthouses to Congress stated, in part, "To promote efficiency and friendly rivalry among lighthouse keepers, a system of efficiency stars and pennants has been established. Keepers who have been commended for efficiency at each quarterly inspection during the year are entitled to wear the inspector's star for the next year, and those who receive the inspector's star for three successive years will be entitled to wear the Commissioner's star..."

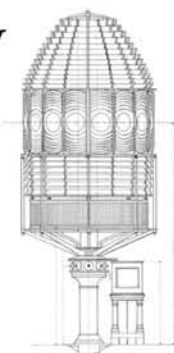
As a Society exclusive (and one of the annual gifts to our District Inspector members) we have had an exact reproduction of the inspector's star created. It consists of red enamel on brass and measures 1-1/8 inches in diameter. If you feel efficient, you may wear one of these on your hat or lapel by sending \$4.95 to the Keeper's Locker (price includes shipping and handling).

We now carry the Commissioner's star, same design but blue enamel on silver, at the same price as the District Inspector's star.

Although our mail order business has moved to Oregon, we will still sell the Efficiency stars, Passport kits and special framed lighthouse postage stamps with a first day cover through our San Francisco office.



Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

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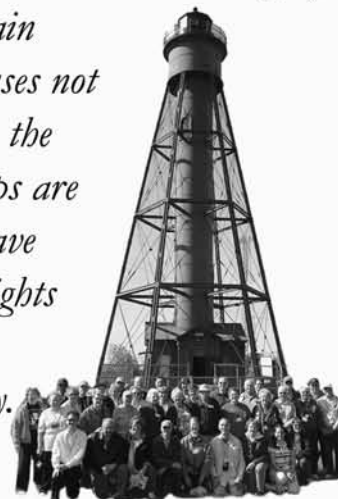
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ