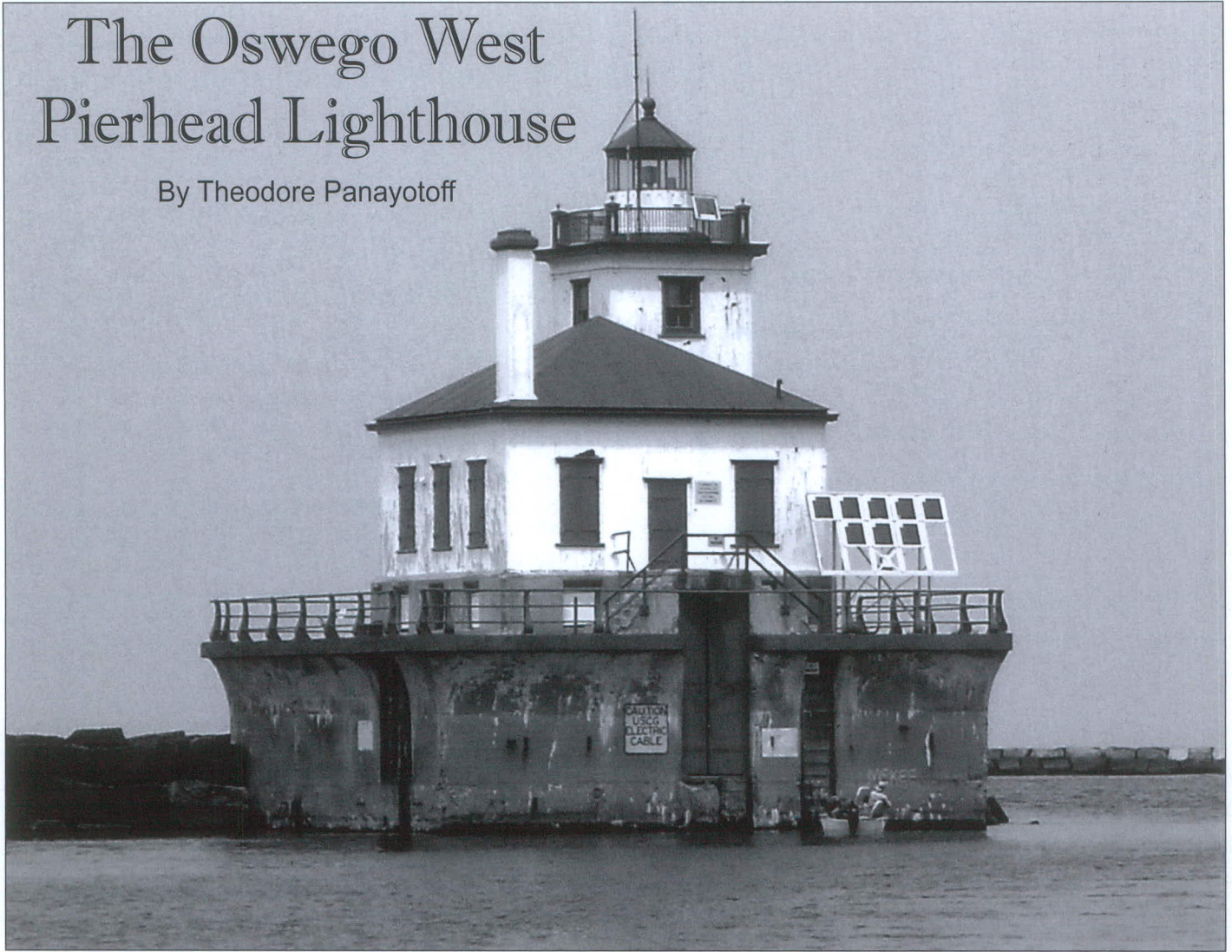


The Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse

By Theodore Panayotoff



The Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse in 2010 prior to the installation of the new VLB-44 lighting equipment. A second small solar panel has been added to the lantern deck railing as part of that installation. The Coast Guard is scheduled to remove the now unused large solar array on the caisson. The radio beacon towers and the derrick were removed some time ago. Photo by the author.

In 2009 the City of Oswego, New York, acquired the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse under the provisions of the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. Restoration work has begun using a seed grant from the New York State Canal Corporation under the management of the city's Oswego Lighthouse Development Committee in partnership with the H. Lee White Marine Museum of Oswego.

History

The Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse, completed in 1934, is relatively new as lighthouses go. It is the fourth lighthouse at Oswego Harbor, dating from 1822. The lighthouses and several other significant lighted aids to navigation have guided Great Lakes mariners transiting the eastern end of Lake Ontario and seeking to safely enter and depart from Oswego Harbor.

Oswego is the easternmost port on Lake Ontario. Oswego Harbor has developed in relation to two canals: the Oswego Canal connecting Lake Ontario at Oswego with the Erie Canal in Syracuse, New York, and the Welland Canal connecting eastern Lake Erie with the western end of Lake Ontario. These two canals played an important role in the commercial life of Oswego and were one of the primary factors that influenced the construction of the lighthouses at Oswego Harbor.

The first Oswego Lighthouse was authorized in 1821 and completed the next year. The 20-foot rubble tower was on the east side of the harbor next to Fort Ontario. The lighthouse included a modest stone keeper's dwelling that was one and one-half stories tall. This lighthouse was ready to support the expansion of Oswego as a commercial port when the Oswego Canal was completed in 1828. The 1822 lighthouse was discontinued in 1837 and the light transferred to a new lighthouse across the harbor. A purchaser dismantled the tower in 1841. The keeper's house became the property of the War Department and was part of Fort Ontario, where it still exists and is used as quarters for the fort's director.



This photo is actually of the Genesee Lighthouse at Rochester, NY, which was built in the same year. It and the keeper's house were identical to the Oswego Lighthouse except for the height of the tower. There are no known photos of the 1822 Oswego Lighthouse as it was torn down in 1841. Courtesy the Charlotte-Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society.

Oswego's second lighthouse, authorized in 1834 and completed in 1837 on the west side of the harbor, was constructed on the new breakwater built to protect the mouth of the Oswego River. The first Welland Canal completed in 1829, which allowed access from Lake Ontario to all the other Great Lakes, undoubtedly contributed to expansion of the commerce in and out of Oswego and the need for



This photo circa late 1800s depicts the Oswego Lighthouse tower after the height was increased in 1869 and before an oil house was erected at the base of the tower in 1906. The keeper's house for the 1822 lighthouse is just visible on the right edge of the photo to the right of Ft. Ontario across the river in the background. National Archives photo.

the new lighthouse. The cut stone tower, initially 45 feet high, was rebuilt in 1855 when a Fresnel lens was installed. It was again rebuilt in 1869 when the tower's height was raised 14 feet and the optic size increased from a fourth-order to a third-order Fresnel lens. Housing was provided for the keeper and his family ashore in property purchased by the Treasury Department in 1847. That house still stands at 22 W. Second St. in Oswego. An assistant keeper was assigned to the Oswego Lighthouse starting in 1864.

The commercial significance of Oswego increased over the years with cargoes of lumber, grain, coal, and salt predominating. Other maritime-related commerce included shipbuilding and fishing. Except for the winter months when the Great Lakes shipping shuts down, steamboats carried passengers between Oswego and the major Great Lakes ports. By the 1870s, Oswego needed a larger harbor with new breakwaters to keep pace with commercial development.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to construct an expanded harbor in 1872. A new outer breakwater was built.

An unmanned beacon was initially placed on the new breakwater, and later, in 1889, the beacon was replaced with a manned lighthouse with its own keeper and assistant keeper. This became the third lighthouse, which was known as the Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse.



This photo is post 1900 when the Breakwater Light's tower color was changed from brown to white. The small building to the left of the tower is a boathouse. The building to the right is the overnight quarters for the keeper with a bed, kitchen and necessary facility. Author's collection.

There were now two lighthouses located at Oswego Harbor: the one built in 1837 and the new Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse.

The Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse was a 33-foot iron tower, initially with a fourth-order, fixed red light but later a group flashing white light. It was also equipped with a mechanical fog bell.

In 1917 the principal Oswego Lighthouse on the 1837 stone tower was discontinued and replaced by a red post light on a 28-foot pole. The Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse was now the principal Oswego Harbor lighthouse. In 1927 the unused 1837 stone tower was torn down, and later most of the remains of the original inner breakwater were removed. The inner breakwater had greatly deteriorated, and there was concern that the tower could collapse and block the channel. A red nun buoy then replaced the post light.

In 1931 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers again began an expansion of the Oswego Harbor to make it accessible to deep-draft lake carrier vessels. A new Welland Canal was to be completed in 1932 to a depth of 25 feet, and this new canal would allow these larger deep-draft vessels access to Lake Ontario from Lake Erie. To remain competitive, Oswego Harbor had to expand. A new arrowhead breakwater system was designed, and the harbor dredged to a depth of 25 feet.

The Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse was shut down and the tower dismantled in 1931.

Also in 1931, a new light, the Oswego Elevator Light, was added to the top of the harbor's N.Y. State Grain Elevator, 146 feet above the lake. This electrically powered group flashing white light was now the principal Oswego light as stated in the *Light List*. The Oswego Elevator Light remained in use until the late 1960s, and the grain elevator was later demolished in the 1990s.

From 1931 until 1934, a temporary beacon was placed on the end of the new west arrowhead breakwater. The beacon was replaced when the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse was completed. This became the fourth Oswego Lighthouse, and it still remains today.

A beacon also was placed at the outer end of the east arrowhead breakwater.

Description

The Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse was constructed on a 50-foot square concrete caisson over a riprap base at the end of the west arrowhead breakwater. This breakwater connects to the remainder of

the 1870-1880's timber, stone, and concrete breakwater, with a total length of more than 6,000 feet for both sections. The interior of the caisson contains the lighthouse machinery room with access through doors on the south and west sides. This was where the fog signal air compressors and the standby electric generators were located.

On top of the caisson is the lighthouse structure itself, one and one-half stories high with the three-story tower on the northeast corner. The 30-foot square structure has a steel frame covered with

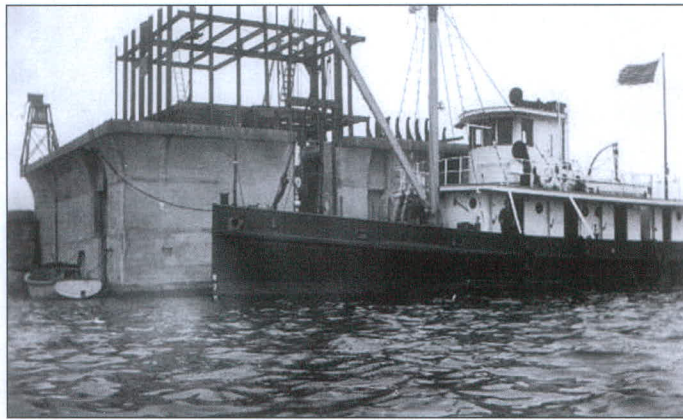
a steel plate "skin." This skin is lined with walls of tile blocks with the interior walls of the same material. The tile blocks are covered with Masonite and then plaster. This construction was common to other Great Lakes lighthouses built in the early and mid-1930s and was a common commercial construction method of the period.

This was a "modern" light and was equipped with a fourth-order Fresnel lens and an electric light powered by a cable from shore with on-board generators for backup. In addition to the light, electricity was used for domestic purposes throughout the structure.

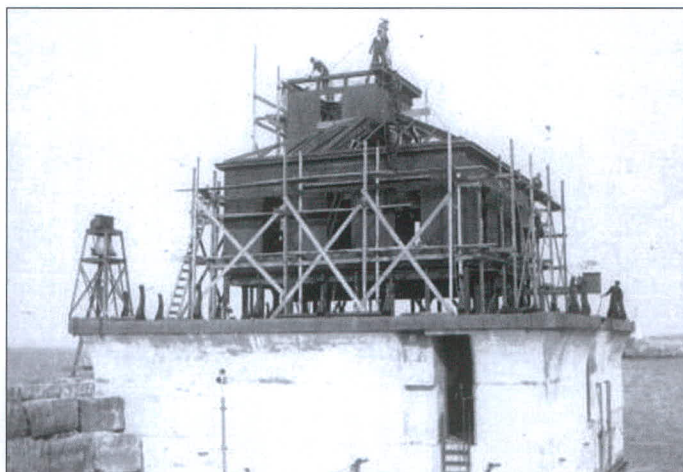
The lighthouse was staffed by a keeper and two assistants. The first keeper and one assistant had previously staffed the Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse. Although the lighthouse included "quarters" on the first floor, the keepers and their families resided in housing provided by the Lighthouse Service on shore. The keeper and one assistant shared a new (constructed in 1934 at the same time as the lighthouse) duplex, and the other assistant lived in the single house owned by the

Lighthouse Service since 1847. The latter house was less than a block from shore and within view of the lighthouse; the new keeper's house was about two blocks from shore.

The "quarters" at the lighthouse consisted of a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. At least one keeper was on duty at the lighthouse at all times, so he had some accommodations while on his duty day or longer if bad weather precluded a duty change, which was not uncommon. The first floor included a radio room (also used as an office) where the radio beacon transmitters and timing equipment, installed in 1936, were located. Above the first floor was an attic that was used for storage, and above that in the tower was the signal room. This was just below the lantern and was where the fog signal horns facing the lake on the north side of the



Above: The tender *Cherry* is alongside the south side of the caisson while the steel frame of the lighthouse is starting to take shape. Note the temporary fog bell (left) on the northwest corner of the caisson. There was also a temporary post light on the northeast corner. **Below:** The outer steel "skin" is being installed on the first floor and the tower is starting to take shape. Photos courtesy Bob Gode and H. Lee White Marine Museum.



tower were located. A standard fourth-order-size cast-iron lantern on top of the signal room surrounded by a lantern deck and railing completed the lighthouse structure.

The lighthouse was equipped with a station launch about 28 feet long. The launch was kept on the west side of the Oswego Harbor at a location acquired by the Lighthouse Service from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The property included a dock, boathouse and boat ramp, and other buildings. In 1939 this property was transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard along with all Lighthouse Service assets and is now the site of the Oswego Coast Guard Lifeboat Station.

The Lighthouse Keepers During the Lighthouse Service Period

The Oswego West Pierhead Light keeper, when the lighthouse began operation in 1934, was Bert E. Egelston. He had been the keeper at the Oswego Breakwater Lighthouse since May 1, 1929, having replaced Charles Tucker. Egelston was transferred to Oswego from the light station at Buffalo, New York, where he had served in various positions since entering the Lighthouse Service April 9, 1917.

Egelston's assistant at the Breakwater Lighthouse, then known simply as the Oswego Lighthouse, was Karl A. Jackson, who had been at the light under Tucker since receiving his first appointment with the Lighthouse Service April 9, 1928. When the Breakwater Lighthouse was discontinued in August 1931 and its replacement was delayed due to funding issues, Jackson was temporarily de-

tailed to the lighthouses at Lorain, Ohio, in March 1932, to Fairport, Ohio, in June 1932, and to Rochester, New York, in June 1933. He returned to Oswego in November 1934 to assume the position of first assistant keeper at the new Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse.

Egelston, Jackson, and their families occupied the new duplex keeper's dwelling at 31-33 West Fifth St.

Starting in April 1935, Carl Sprague served two consecutive three-month temporary appointments in the position of second assistant keeper at the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse. In October 1935, Oskar K. Elmer replaced Sprague as the permanent second assistant keeper. This additional assistant keeper was probably required because of the planned installation of the radio beacon in 1936.

Egelston, Jackson, and Elmer served at the lighthouse with the Lighthouse Service until July 1, 1939, when the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for U.S. lighthouses. With this change, the three keepers initially became civilian employees of the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Lighthouse Keepers During the U.S. Coast Guard Period

On April 1, 1941, Elmer was transferred to the light station at Fair Haven, New York, about 10 miles west of Oswego. Sprague, who was now serving at the Tibbits Point, New York, lighthouse, returned to Oswego and replaced Elmer in the second assistant keeper position.

On August 26, 1941, Egelston, Jackson, and Sprague resigned their civilian positions and enlisted in the Coast Guard as military personnel. Egelston became a boatswain's mate first class and Jackson and Sprague became coxswains.

All three were participants in a disaster at the lighthouse that occurred on Dec. 4, 1942, which cost the life of Jackson and five other Coast Guard personnel, including Lt. j.g. Alston Wilson, the commanding officer of the Oswego Lifeboat Station. The tragedy occurred during the relief of keepers at the lighthouse in stormy weather. Egelston and Sprague successfully relieved Jackson; however, the 38-foot picket boat used for the transfer suffered damage in the process. When the engine subsequently failed, the weather drove the boat onto the east breakwater and sank it. Six of the eight Coast Guard personnel on board lost their lives, including Jackson. For a full description of the tragedy, read an account by Fred Stonehouse in *Wreck & Rescue*, Vol. 2, No. 4.

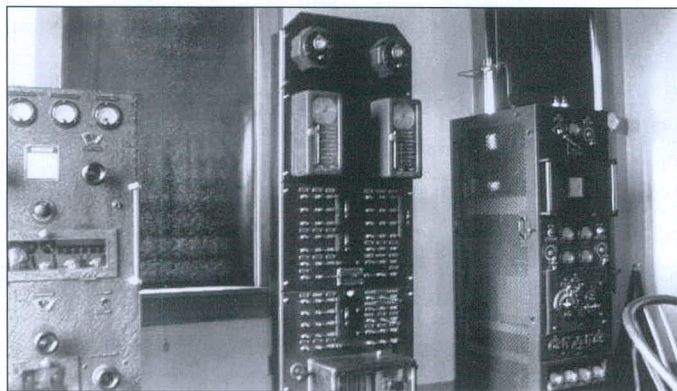
Coast Guard Personnel continued to staff the light station until it was automated in 1968. The Oswego Lifeboat Station functioned as a Group Headquarters and took over responsibility for the lighthouse, as well as the Oswego Elevator Light and the beacon at the north end of the east arrowhead breakwater.

The automated lighthouse was still equipped with its original fourth-order lens and was also still powered by a cable from shore. In 1995 the lighthouse was converted to solar power, and the fourth-order lens was removed and loaned by the Coast Guard to the H. Lee White Marine Museum, where it is the central artifact of a new exhibit on Oswego's lighthouses.

A VRB-25 lighting apparatus powered by a solar panel array and storage batteries replaced the lens. The shore power cable was disconnected at both ends and was probably removed. The latest in lighting technology, a VLB-44 LED light, replaced the VRB-25 in September of 2010.



These photos show the interior of the radio room. Above is the keeper's desk; note the typewriter and the telephone on the left of the desk. Below are the two radio beacon transmitters and the radio beacon timing equipment between them. Photos courtesy Bob Gode (grandson of Bert E. Egelston) and H. Lee White Marine Museum.





Circa late 1930s, the lighthouse launch is alongside the south side of the caisson at the large equipment door into the basement machinery room. The two radio beacon antenna towers have been added on the west side of the caisson and a derrick on the southeast corner. Photo courtesy Bob Gode and H. Lee White Marine Museum.

Acquisition by the City of Oswego

In 2006 the U.S. Coast Guard declared the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse excess. This made it available in accordance with the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. In December of 2006, the City of Oswego, working in partnership with the H. Lee White Marine Museum, submitted an application to obtain the property. In May 2009, the City of Oswego announced that it had been awarded the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse and plans were begun for its restoration and historic interpretation in partnership with the museum.

In 2010 the City of Oswego formed the Oswego Lighthouse Development Committee. Its stated mission is to “plan and execute the restoration, rehabilitation, preservation and ongoing maintenance of the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse structure and to undertake educational, cultural and recreational programs for the general public.” The committee includes city officials, representatives of the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Auxiliary, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the H. Lee White Marine Museum, and members of the public with interest and expertise to bring to the effort.

The committee's first task was to work with the city's Public Works Department to award a contract to conduct a structural survey of the lighthouse and prepare a restoration plan based on that survey. The structural and hazardous material surveys are now completed and they will become the basis for proposals to accomplish the first phase of the actual lighthouse restoration, which is to

remove the existing hazardous material (lead paint, bird droppings and some asbestos), to do structural repairs to address safety issues, and to improve the security of the building from weather and unauthorized entry. Once these goals are met, it should be feasible to employ volunteers for projects at the lighthouse and possibly have some limited public tours.

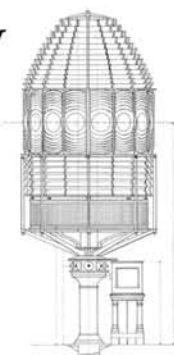
In September 2010, a trip to the National Archives produced a complete set of construction drawings for the lighthouse, over 70 sheets. These have already proved very useful in planning the restoration work.

As with all lighthouse restoration, plans must bow to the reality of available funding. Phase two of the restoration, which will proceed when sufficient funding is available, is to paint the lighthouse.

On a parallel path is the role of the museum, which is to develop and carry out historic interpretation programs at the lighthouse when it is feasible to have public visits. In the interim, exhibits and educational programs are planned at the museum, some in cooperation with the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego. Since the weather permits access to the lighthouse only in the summer, the lighthouse and its history will have a strong presence at the museum throughout the year.



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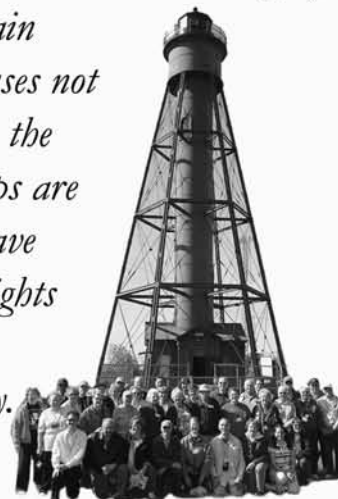
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