

Return to Petit Manan Light Station

By Mazie Freeman Anderson



Petit Manan Light Station in the 1950's. The foundation of the assistants' duplex is in front of the tower. The fog signal building to the right of the tower, then the keeper's house with ancillary buildings. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Lighthouse Memories

My heart beat faster as we approached the island. It had been 26 years since I last saw Petit Manan. Visitors are always warmly greeted on this lonely outpost, and we were no exception. A young Coast Guardman met us at the slip and made us welcome. We identified ourselves and asked permission to tour the island.

There is something about a lighthouse which stirs the imagination and delights the soul. Perhaps it's the lighted beacon, a symbol of safety to vessels plying unpredictable winter waters. Maybe it's the solitude of a lighthouse, with its promise of tranquility. Or it could be the very permanence of the lighthouse, standing proudly as it defies the turbulent seas. Whatever the reason, people have always been intrigued by them.

I have a special reason for my deep affection for lighthouses. I was born in one and raised on four stations during the first 17 years of my life. My memories of those years are a mixture of sounds, sights and smells: hissing of the lamp and roar of the breakers, the erratic flight of storm-tossed seabirds and the menace of the towering seas, the pervasive odor of kerosene and the clean smell of polished brass.

My father joined the Lighthouse Service in 1926; in 1928 he was transferred to the Petit Manan station, an island in the open ocean off Schoodic Point, Maine. We lived there for 12 years, and it is this island station I remember best.

As we slowly walked the path from the boathouse to the top of the island, I was filled with excitement and anticipation.

It was strikingly quiet on the island—no children played among the

rocks or in the fields. No friendly island women greeted us, as had been the custom many years before. Only three Coast Guard men were living on the station, and without their families.

Gone was the duplex where we had lived as children. The lovely 12-room house had been torn down since family quarters were no longer needed. In my childhood our quarters consisted of six large rooms on one side of the duplex. The second assistant lived on the other side; the head keeper had a house of his own.

I can clearly remember that day when the lighthouse tender *Hibiscus* brought us to Petit Manan from Isle of Shoals, our previous station, one afternoon in early spring. As we approached the island I was fascinated by the height of the tower, which at 120 feet dominated the tiny, treeless island.

A small boat carried us from the tender to a wooden boat slip where we landed. We walked the short distance to the white duplex which would be our new home. I soon learned that I could peek out at the lighthouse from my bedroom window because our half of the duplex was nearest the tower.

Our furniture and boxes of household goods were brought ashore. While my parents busied themselves settling in, my sister and I ran about exploring. The first floor had three large rooms: a kitchen, dining room and living room. Upstairs were three bedrooms. A skylight in the upstairs hall gave us a view of the tower. This was necessary in keeper's houses as it allowed the keeper on watch to make sure the light remained lit throughout the night.

After looking over the accommodations we descended the wooden stairs into the basement that was half filled with a huge concrete cistern. Rainwater was collected from the roof and piped into this cistern, it was our only source of water on the island. I grew to love the sound of the water as it gushed and gurgled, and I often sat on the cellar steps while the cistern was filling. The rains usually came often enough to keep us adequately supplied, but if there was a dry spell the Lighthouse Service tender would pump water ashore through huge hoses.

Petit Manan had several buildings besides the keeper's quarters. The whistle house had huge engines which ran the fog horns. The long, mournful sound delighted me, for as a child I thought it was used to dispel the fog. My father finally explained to me it was to warn passing ships of the danger of the rocks. Oil measures were kept in this building which were used to fill the lamps and beacon. They were of various sizes, but all were made of brass and had to be polished everyday. This was a chore the keepers hated, but I loved to watch. Sometimes they would even let me help. Today, I keep one of the small measures on my living room table, and polish it frequently.

Next to the head keeper's quarters was the oil house. Here we stored coal for our stoves and furnaces and oil for our lamps

and the beacon. We also had a boat house where we kept a dory and larger boat which was used for weekly trips to the mainland. The building I loved most, however, was the log room. It was in this room that I spent many hours reading the old Logs, for none had been removed from the station since the lighthouse was built. There were notations about terrible storms, shipwrecks, malfunctions of machinery, and often amusing accounts of landlubbers who had visited the station. It is very comforting to me to know that those log books are now on file in the National Archives. I recently sent for and received copies of my father's log: there on the yellowing pages, in his own hand, is a part of history.

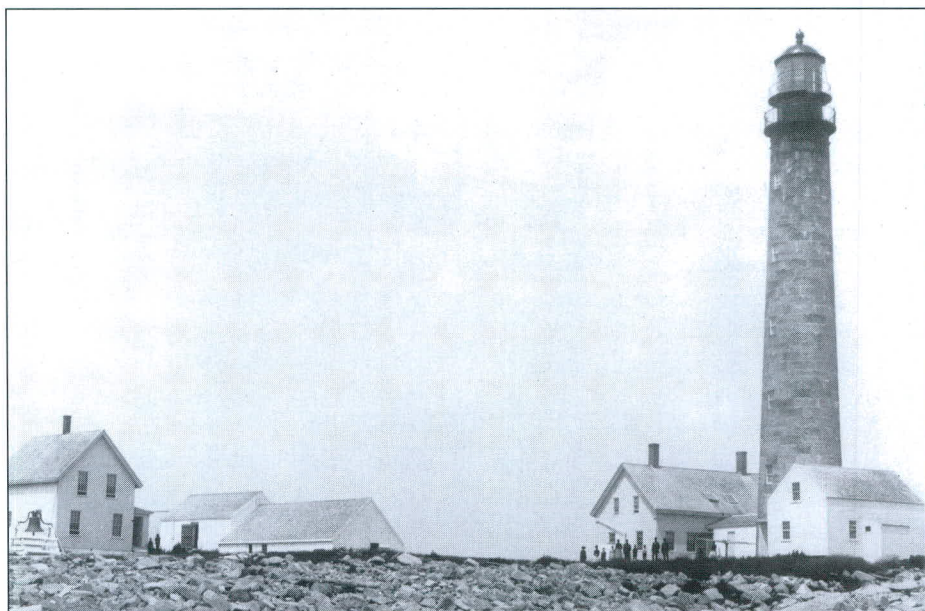
The Petit Manan light station was established in 1817, but the present 120 foot high granite tower was constructed in 1855. The tower required very little attention; however, the exterior trim had to be repainted every two years. Painting the dome, lantern, railings and window trim black was quite an undertaking. The keepers had to stand in a sturdy wooden box lowered from the top of the tower by block and tackle. The job was always done on a calm day, because even a gentle breeze at

that height would toss them about, making the work even more difficult. My mother never watched when it was dad's turn to be lowered for painting, but the island children thought it was great sport.

Painting the dome was an even more difficult job. The men, with ropes tied around their waists, stood on the railings surrounding the tower and painted the top. Only once during those years do I recall a near tragedy. As daddy was being lowered in the box, one of the ropes broke and he swung back and forth in the wind until the other keepers managed to lower him to the ground.

Many a time I climbed the circular stairway to the tower with my father when he was on watch. As we walked up the circular iron stairs, we rested twice to catch our breath, usually at a window recessed into the wall. I used to climb into the recess and look over the buildings below. Sometimes I'd see my mother waving from the kitchen window. If I yelled, I could hear my voice bouncing off the granite walls below.

Lighting the beacon in those days was truly a marvelous operation. Oil was carried up the stairs to the lantern room in 5 gallon cans. The light source was called an incandescent oil vapor lamp, very simple in principle but most inconsistent



Petit Manan station circa 1900. The keepers and their families are standing by the back of the assistant's duplex. Note the fog bell at left. The bell was rung by hand until a head of steam could be raised for the fog signal. In this era the signal was a steam whistle producing a characteristic of a three second blast, nine seconds of silence, a three second blast and then 45 seconds of silence. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

in actual operation. It was started by pre-heating the vaporizer with an alcohol torch. Then the kerosene vapors burned with intense brilliance upon a gauzelike mantle. Once the lamp was lit and burning brightly, the keeper left the lantern room through an iron trap door and entered the room below to "wind up the clock." This set a framework in motion, which revolved flash panels around the fixed lens producing a fixed light with a timed flash. This 2nd order lens is known as an FVF, or Fixed Varied with Flash lens.

A close watch was kept during the night because such lights were prone to go out for no apparent reason. When this occurred, all haste was made to relight the lamp before it cooled too much. It was a long walk up those stairs and the keepers often had to make three trips a night.

We had several boats at the station which we used in good weather, but often in the winter the ice would close us in. Because we had a telephone connected to the mainland by submarine cable we could call in the Coast Guard in an emergency. During the times we were iced-in, a Coast Guard ice breaker would periodically bring us mail and food.

Many times my father's life was in danger. It was part of his job to go to the aid of a ship in distress [ed. - actually it wasn't an official part of a keeper's job]. Often, late at night, a ship's bell would toll a call for help. Dad would throw on his oilskins, light a lantern and go off into the wild night. My mother never left the window during those times. She'd stand there quietly watching for daddy's light, awaiting his safe return with the distressed seamen. Hot coffee would be ready; food and assurance of a good bed awaited any seaman who came to our door.

One morning mother came down to the kitchen and found two fishermen sleeping soundly by the stove. They had developed engine trouble during the night and rowed ashore. Without bothering to seek out the keeper on watch they entered the house and went to sleep on the floor knowing they would be welcome. No doors were locked on Petit Manan.



Petit Manan Light Station September 1891. The building in front of the tower is the assistant keeper's duplex. A keeper stands in front of the barn and the keeper's house is at right. Note the cow in the middle of the photo. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

As the children on the island grew to school age, education became a concern. There were usually 5 or 6 children among the three keepers' families and there was a small well-equipped schoolhouse on the island. Few teachers, however, cared to live so far from the mainland. In some cases, the keepers of isolated stations boarded their children in towns on the mainland during the school year. However, in our case the Maine Seacoast Missionary Society heard of our plight and provided teachers. They were brought to the island on the missionary ship *Sunbeam*.

Once a week, in good weather, we went five miles to the mainland where we kept a car and drove to Milbridge to shop. We purchased large quantities of food supplies.

Then we returned to the island. I loved the boat rides and always sat in the stern watching the seagulls, and occasionally a whale, go by. Sometimes the fog closed in around us and father would use his compass to get back to the island, but I was never worried. The fog horn droned on, louder and louder as we approached the island. Sometimes mama would be at the landing looking anxious,

especially if we were late. "Are you cold? Are you hungry?" she'd ask. "Hurry up now, there's lobster stew on the stove, and I made a cake."

Our biggest food problem was keeping fresh milk on hand. One time the keepers all pooled their money and bought a cow. Getting her out to the island was a major task, but once ashore, we had the luxury of fresh milk everyday. Then, one day the cow ate oil-soaked grass and departed for 'greener pastures.'

During the summer we would have picnics on neighboring islands, lobster feeds on the beach, and walk the shore endlessly seeking treasures of the sea. The shoreline, among the rocks and seaweed, was my playground for many years. I played there with my dolls as a child; there on a sandy beach I built dream castles. Tiny fish lurked in little pools of water left by the receding tide, and I once spent many hours catching small minnows and carrying them back to the sea.

We children gathered flowers for the table and picked cranberries for mother's cranberry duff. She made it by steaming them in a cloth bag and made a vanilla

sauce for it. Of course we caught lobster, fish and mussels and father shot wild ducks which mother fixed with brown rice. We swam in tide pools and fished. We were never bored in summer.

Holidays were celebrated on the island and I think we enjoyed them even more out there. On the Fourth of July we sent rockets high into the sky. Far off on the mainland we'd see similar displays, and each year we would try to outdo them. The three families would gather in the middle of the island and set off a spectacular barrage of fireworks.

In the winter, though, we stayed away from the cliffs and edge of the ocean. The rocks were covered with ice and a wrong step could toss us into the churning seas. The winter storms were spectacular. Gale force winds battered away at our tiny island, tearing at the buildings, sending sheets of water over the windows and streaking them with salt. Often the waves rolled down the hill by our kitchen

window, as we watched with noses pressed against the panes. We never tired of watching the snowflakes falling past the beam from the lighthouse — a breathtaking sight — but snow never accumulated on Petit Manan; it didn't stand a chance of surviving in the salty air.

At Christmas we always managed to have a tree brought over from the mainland. Packages and cards arrived from relatives and friends and somehow there was always something to fill our stockings which hung near the big black cook stove. Usually the gifts were of the home-made variety, like fudge and popcorn balls or cookies, but that exotic treat, an orange, always bulged at the stocking's toe. On Christmas morning we would awake to mother singing carols downstairs as she prepared our hot oatmeal and fresh biscuits. We'd steal a quick peek to see if Santa had come, but were always ordered to "Eat your breakfast first, then

you may have your stocking." Father would sit there in his robe and slippers winking at us as we polished off our breakfast.

One morning we awoke to find a ship aground on a dangerous reef near our island. She was on her side and waves were breaking over her bow. The keepers hurried to the rescue, but found no one aboard, and it was impossible to salvage any of the cargo in the heavy seas. Soon the ship was smashed to bits. We later learned the crew had abandoned ship in a small boat and rowed to a nearby island where landing was easier than on Petit Manan. Landing at our slip was often impossible because of the mountainous waves which tore at the island, and the treacherous rocks just offshore of the landing area. On real stormy days we went outside and watched the sea. Gigantic waves grew larger and larger as they approached the



Petit Manan Light Station before the keeper's houses were replaced. The original stone head keeper's house is at left, a bell fog signal tower to the right of it and the original stone tower, sans lantern, at far right. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

shore. They hit with sudden impact, throwing sheets of water high into the air, which broke into soft yellow foam that ran over the island. After a storm, we cleared the island of driftwood, broken lobster traps and seaweed. No matter how fierce the storm, or high the waves, we were never worried as we could always retreat to the tower if things got too bad. In fact on one occasion during our twelve years there we had to seek shelter in the tower.

The dreary winter months finally passed and spring returned to the island. We escaped the house and ran out into the sunshine once again, coursing the entire length of the island over and over. We explored the shore to find all the treasures the sea had deposited during the winter: lobster traps and buoys, driftwood, old bottles, old shoes and battered beach balls. The keepers inspected the buildings for damage and the wives got busy cleaning the windows and shaking out rugs. A few seedlings were put out with the hope they might fare well in the shallow soil. In short, we really celebrated spring.

Soon it would be time for summer visitors who came nearly everyday in rented boats. The men invariably wore baggy shorts, loud shirts and straw hats. The women wore denim and smiled a lot. They asked a million questions, peered inside buildings, huffed and puffed their way to the top of the tower, smearing the brassworks as they went. They even asked to see the inside of our living quarters, but we always refused them. After they left, we'd clean up the candy wrappers and empty pop bottles they carelessly tossed around the island. It was always a relief to see them go.

All the buildings on the island were kept a pristine white by the keepers. The station had to be maintained in excellent condition to meet the scrutiny of the twice yearly government inspections. How the keepers' wives dreaded the arrival, spring and fall, of the inspectors from Boston. On the day they were due, everyone rushed over the island making sure all was immaculate and in order — even our living quarters got a good going over. I never heard of any reprimands, but I'm sure there were some, if not on

our island, then perhaps on others up and down the coast.

The three keepers never left the lighthouse unattended. Watches were set up running from eight to twelve, twelve to four and four to eight. Each keeper took a four hour watch. When one keeper was ashore — each man received eight days off a month — one of the others took over his watch. The station had to be manned constantly because we never knew when fog might roll in requiring a keeper to turn on the fog signal.

One of the nicest parts of growing up at the lighthouse, however, was always knowing where to find my father. He may have been in the log room writing, in the whistle house polishing brass, in the boat house painting, or on the shore picking up wayward lobster traps. When I needed his company, he was neither too far away, nor too busy to share a few moments with me.

My mother kept busy with the housework, cooking and cleaning and polishing the cook stove. On wash day she did the laundry outside with wash tubs and a scrub board and hung the clothes to dry in the ocean breeze. Sometimes, when she could spare the time, she would take us to the top of the cliff to watch waves breaking against the ledges below. Other times we would walk around the shore and build sand castles on a small, sandy beach. But we were never to go near the shore during high tide due to the danger of being swept away. If a child was out of sight for too long a large bell was rung to bring the errant child home.

On Saturdays and Sundays we rested. The three families gathered for lobster bakes and other dinners. Everyone got along very well. You almost had to on such a tiny island.

All good things must come to an end and after twelve years we were sent to another station, where we stayed until father retired. Then we moved to the small village of Jonesboro. After 17 years of lighthouse tending, mainland living took a lot of getting used to, and I had a hard time adjusting. Even now, many years later, I yearn for the sound of the foghorn and the crashing waves, and the smell of polished brass.

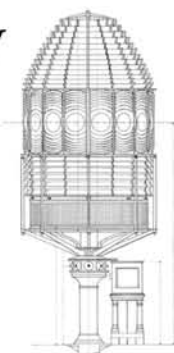
It was nearing dark by the time I had finished my walk — as a visitor — around the shores of Petit Manan. My brother was waiting for me at the boat. It was time to head back to the mainland. We cast off and rowed back to the ship. Neither of us spoke. We were both filled with the magic of the moment. We climbed aboard the ship and headed for the mainland.

I watched Petit Manan grow smaller and smaller, remembering our departure in 1940, when dad was transferred to Great Duck Island off the Maine coast.

As we sped away from Petit Manan, tears were so near the surface that I could not speak. Suddenly a beam of light spilled over the water as the Coast Guardsman lit the beacon. It was a sight that had always thrilled me as a child, and it made my heart grow lighter. I thought of my father. He retired from the Lighthouse Service in the forties and lived near the ocean in Maine. There he could walk the shores and look out at beacons which had been his way of life for thirty years. He died peacefully in Maine. At his funeral, the same missionary pastor on the *Sunbeam* who visited us at Petit Manan said the final words.



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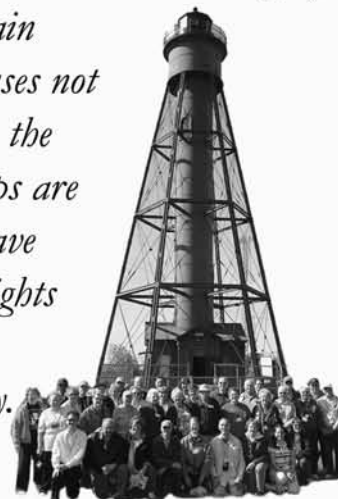
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