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Port Clinton Lighthouse

"Service History Cut Short"

By Scott W. Bundschuh

Port Clinton, Illinois, was an old forgotten town that was located approximately 12 miles south of Waukegan, Illinois. The entire town was laid out and built by those important entrepreneurs who first settled in this area. They were also responsible for the engineering and building of a 620-foot pier that extended far into Lake Michigan. From all accounts the pier took less than year to build, and soon there was minor shipping traffic running in and out of the newly formed harbor.

Port Clinton was a mixed bag of trades and people that made up its 100 residents (steam-powered saw mill, a lathe, shops with skilled artisans, and stores of various kinds). Living in a fledgling town was hard, but those who lived there held their own through the worst of times. Those important entrepreneurs petitioned Congressmen Stephan A. Douglas to get a lighthouse built in their little harbor town. The details of this petition and how it materialized are somewhat sketchy. The only thing that is known is that Congressman Douglas, nicknamed "Little Giant," was one of the key players responsible for securing the necessary funds for the construction of the Port Clinton Lighthouse.



Currier and Ives print of Stephen A. Douglas. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Congressman Douglas was the chairman of the Committee on Territories in Washington, D.C., and had powerful ties to the Lighthouse Board. Congressman Douglas, Illinois land developer Bloom, and United States Representative Elihu B. Washburne introduced the bill before Congress on August 3, 1853. Washburne was also a member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Each member pressured Congress to approve the construction of the Port Clinton Lighthouse. The United States Lighthouse Board estimated it would cost approximately $5,000 to build the lighthouse. Congress reviewed the cost figures and agreed with the Lighthouse Board estimates. Congressman Douglas assisted with the approval process in Congress, and on August 3, 1854, appropriations to construct the lighthouse were approved. In January 1855 the Port Clinton Land Company deeded two acres of land along Lake Michigan to the Lighthouse Board.

Bloom owned the saw mill in Port Clinton, Illinois, and had the only contract to supply more than 200,000 board feet of road planking to the city of Chicago. Bloom was also a highly respected land developer in the state of Illinois.

Bids were taken by the Lighthouse Board from September 1854 to just prior to the start of the new year. Bids were approved and construction of the Port Clinton Lighthouse started in the early months of 1855. Construction crews and Lighthouse Board personnel took about a year to complete the entire project. Once finished the newly constructed Port Clinton Lighthouse was a one-and-a-half-story brick keeper's quarters with six rooms, a tower that had walls that were 17 inches thick at the base, and a lakeward gable that connected the keeper's quarters and tower. This gable was also designated as a storage room that housed sperm whale oil. The oil was contained in two air tight oil butts.

The lantern room floor was made up of stone and was capped off with an octagonal cast-iron room with exterior railings. The Lighthouse Board ordered a fixed white sixth-order Fresnel lens from Paris, France. When it arrived from Paris, the new Fresnel lens was manually hoisted into the newly constructed lantern room. The light source at that time came from two fountain lamps that consumed 3.14 oz. of oil per hour. The center elevation of the lantern room was approximately 22 feet above the tower foundation, and the lighthouse sat atop a 52-foot bluff (known today as Moraine Beach). The focal point designated for this light was fixed at 70 feet above the mean of Lake Michigan. The white beacon that shined through the sixth-order Fresnel lens was visible for six nautical miles, providing the weather was good and the skies were really clear.

The architect decided the roofing material of choice for both structures (keeper's quarters and lakeward gable) would be red slate.

The water source came from Lake Michigan, and water storage was a cistern that was excavated to a depth of six feet below the existing grade of the keeper's quarters. The containment tank that surrounded the cistern was constructed out of brick from the St. John's Brickyard.

Records show there was only one keeper stationed at Port Clinton Lighthouse. Owen Monaghan (immigrant from Ireland) was appointed keeper on July 1, 1856, at a starting salary of $350 per year and remained at his position until 1860. Records also revealed that Keeper Monaghan took great pride in his work and the lighthouse was well maintained while in his custody.

According to other documents, the town of Port Clinton and the harbor never grew to their full potential. This caused the

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The Port Clinton Lighthouse. Photo from the Thomas A. Tag collection.

Lighthouse Board to reevaluate the need for a light in a city that wasn't growing and a harbor that was somewhat inactive. The other problems facing the Lighthouse Board were the start of the Civil War between the North and South that was lingering on the horizon and a lighthouse that really didn't serve any type of major maritime traffic. After careful consideration, the Lighthouse Board decided it would be best to close Port Clinton Lighthouse in 1860.

According to Keeper Monaghan's daughter, Keeper Monaghan witnessed one of the most tragic maritime accidents recorded in Great Lakes history. According to his daughter, he watched from the lighthouse as the lumber ship *Augusta* rammed and sank the *Lady Elgin*. He wasn't able to signal either vessel because the light had been discontinued. His daughter stated that prior to this tragic accident and loss of human life, he begged the Lighthouse Board to "turn the light back on," but his numerous requests were refused.

I got the feeling that former Keeper Monaghan witnessed other near tragic or tragic events that really concerned him while he was still living at the lighthouse. I believe that's why he continued to ask the Lighthouse Board to "turn the light back on." What was the official reason why Keeper Monaghan finally left the Port Clinton Lighthouse? According to his daughter, he was asked by the Lighthouse Board to stay on at the lighthouse, but if he decided to stay he would have to pay rent. According to his daughter, he declined the offer and sent a very short letter to the Lighthouse Board:

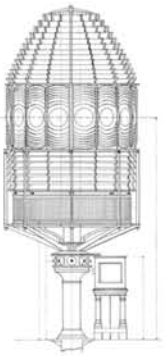
"I beg to inform you that I wish to leave the lighthouse which has been in my custody since the lighthouse has been disconnected. I will thank you to instruct me at your earliest convenience to whom I shall give up the possessions of its premises. I would like you to have someone come out and inspect the premise prior to my departure."

Monagan's daughter stated her father wanted to make sure the Lighthouse Board felt he had taken proper care of the Port Clinton Lighthouse.

If Port Clinton Lighthouse were still standing today, it would be situated along the shores of Lake Michigan in a Chicago suburb known today as Highland Park. The actual placement of the lighthouse would be at the junction point known today as Broadway and Edgecliff Drive just off Sheridan Road. Today that spot is now occupied by the B'nai Torah Synagogue.

As I wrote this, I've had time to reflect on the lighthouse, those who once lived in the town of Port Clinton, and the man (Monaghan) who kept the light burning well after the flame was extinguished. The unfortunate part of this whole tragedy is that the only remnants of the Port Clinton Lighthouse are the stories told by Monaghan's daughter, those of us who investigate the history of Great Lakes lighthouses, and those of us who want to know more about the history of old towns that once stood along the shores of Lake Michigan. Time has marched right on past the Port Clinton Lighthouse, its short four-year service history is a footnote in time, and the state of Illinois has let this lighthouse pass away into the dark abyss of time. What a tragedy and loss of history to those who once called the town of Port Clinton, Illinois, home!

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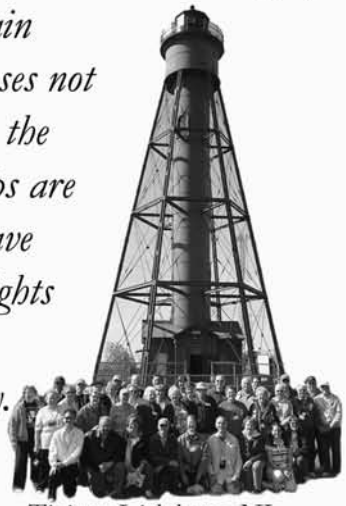
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