Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 1989 <www.USLHS.org>

Pages from the Past

Rock Island Light Station
St. Lawrence River, NY



The Rock Island tower in 1944. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo

Willard E. Cook, a disabled soldier of the 94 Reg., New York Volunteers lost a right arm at 2nd battle of Bull Run Aug. 30, 1862. Appointed lighthouse keeper at this station Apr., 1870. Born July 30, 1823 in the town of Ellisburgh, County of Jefferson, state of New York.

July 16, 1872 - Weather hot and dry. Flies still continue to inspect the light nights and do not pay any attention to the placard of instructions to visitors, but will persist in lighting and walking on the glass of the lantern, to the great annoyance of the keeper, who has used all the gentle means he is master of, for their removal, has even used hand and feather brushes, as arguments to persuade them to leave, but all to no purpose.

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July 23 - A Propeller [steam ship] just passed down the river, time 9:50 pm, lights at mast head and cabin well lighted, making a beautiful sight for a night as dark as this.

July 25 - A small fishing skiff with a man and wife, came to this light for shelter during the storm, they had to spend the night.

Aug. 2 - Today President U.S. Grant and wife, General Sheridan and Mr. Pullman, passed down the river at 8 o'clock pm in a Steam Yacht, destination to Pullmans island near Alexander Bay. It is understood that President Grant is out for a pleasure excursion and not to swing around the circle for the purpose of making speech. Such a wonderful man.

Aug. 6 - President Grant is having and receiving great crowd of people at Pullman Island.

Oct. 22 - Calm all of last night, this has been another pleasant day, quite warm for the season. River very low, the light keeper walked across with low shoes on, from the lighthouse island, to the small island just above it, today, without wetting his feet, an unheard of thing since the lighthouse was built.

Oct. 26 - This has been a very rainy lonesome day, and raining yet at this writing time.

Nov. 16 - This is the first freezing day this fall, and this has been a regular old fashion winter day. Sailors are no doubt thinking of home tonight.

Nov. 26 - Steamer *Midge* is lying wind bound at the foot of this island tonight, is here to move keeper's goods and family to Clayton for winter quarters.

July 12, 1873 - River flies very many and very troublesome about the lantern nights. Part of a raft lies on the head of Robert Peel Island, so called in the memory of the burning of the Steamer *Robert Peel*, some 30 or more years ago, by a band of desperados calling themselves patriots. The leader afterwards appointed to this lighthouse station by U.S. Grant, kept it eight years.

Aug. 18 - A great swarm of white flies swarming around the lantern tonight, look as much as like chaff as anything and a great annoyance to the keeper. There is a great variety of different kinds of flies which make their visits at different periods during the summer which is a great source of annoyance in keeping the light, lighting onto the glass of the lantern.

Oct. 20 - Keeper built a flight of stairs, starting near the wood house door and landing on top of the rock, towards the pump, at his own expense.

Nov. 7 - Keeper put third and last coat of paint on the ice house today and painted the boat.

Dec. 14 - This is the third season in succession that the present keeper has kept the light with his own hand, without missing a night during the lighting season. This is the fourth season here, but the first there was four nights observed in the month of November, by reason of the last sickness and death of his mother.

Keeper intends to leave the island tomorrow to enjoy a little respite after a long confinement, the last month nearly having been spent alone, since his family moved to Clayton. Not a living human soul except the keeper has set foot on the island until today for over three weeks. That is solitude in good earnest. Thus ends this journal for this season. Hoping that the same hand may open it again on the opening of spring.

Mar 27, 1874 - Keeper moved his family from Clayton today.

May 10, 1875 - A wild duck flew through one of the plate glass of the lantern breaking the center of the glass large enough to let the duck through into the lantern where the keeper caught him. It injured the duck so badly that the keeper killed him the next morning, and also had to put in a new plate glass.

Sept. 1 - Two gentlemen visitors at this light station today thought that they would enjoy the pleasure of a bath in the river. Not being swimmers they took the precaution to put on a life preserver on each of them, which proved to be a good thing, in their case, for in their sporting and paddling about, they soon got out beyond their depth and began to float down in the current which was very strong at the place where they were. When they saw their helpless condition they made a call for the light keeper, who was not far distant and he went to them with a boat and towed them back to shore. [Remember, our keeper only has one arm] The whole thing as it ended was a funny affair, one that will be remembered by the party that was in it.

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Sept. 21 - To make it easier for my wife in carrying water, I received permission from the L.H. Eng. to move pump from top of rock into kitchen.

Apr. 17, 1876 - I am lighting the light for the keeper, he being kept away from the station by reason of sickness of his wife, which terminated in her death on Sunday at noon, the seventh day of May at the Walton house in Clayton where the keeper and family lived during the Winter.

May 10 - Keeper resumed his duties as light keeper after the burial of his wife on the 9th of May.

May 12 - Keeper's two daughters left the station for their homes each taking with them a child of the keeper to live with them, thus leaving the keeper alone at the station to perform his duties as best he can. This light is a one man light.

[Printed in bold letters in the Log] The keeper of this light lived a widower from the seventh of May till the twenty sixth of Sept. of the same year.

Sept. 26, 1876 - keeper married today to Mrs. Jane Taylor by Rev. George Rockwell of Alexandria Bay on board Steam Yacht Hermie while running below Fredrick Island towards Fishers Landing at 12 1/2 o'clock pm. Took dinner at Grand Central and returned to light house after dinner to be ready for duty as light keeper [Keep' - so much for the honeymoon!]

Oct. 10 - Keeper moved his wife from her home two miles below here today to lighthouse.

Jan. 15, 1877 - Keeper and wife returned to L.H. today from a visit among friends, crossed the ice from Fishers Landing on foot. Ice good for walking, but not for team.

Mar. 20 - Keeper and wife and two children returned from Wakertown [keep' - from now on the keeper and his wife become very social, going everywhere, something that he didn't do with his first wife].

Dec. 18 - This is the eighth year that the present light keeper Willard L. Cook has had charge of this light station with only 25 nights absence during the eight seasons...

1 Mar. 1879 - [Ed.–Keeper relieved - no reason, but I suspect his new wife had someting to do with it]



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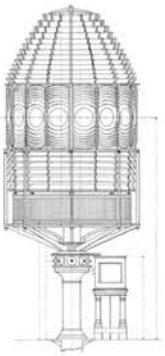
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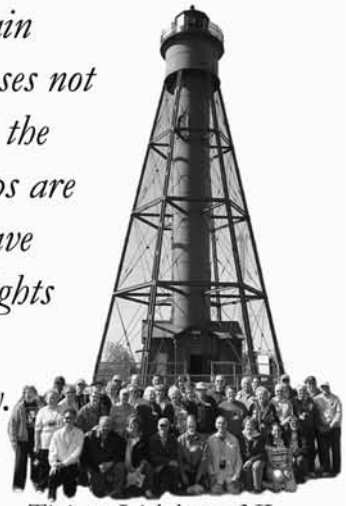
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