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# Silver Creek and Cattaraugus Creek

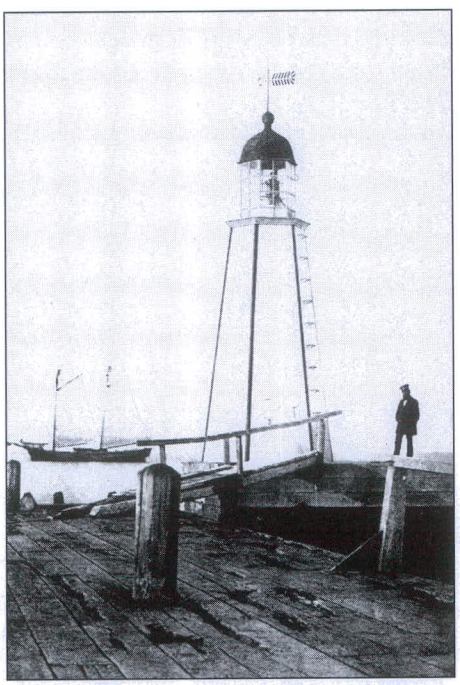
By Thomas Tag

## Introduction

I was on a trip through western New York State on my way to a lighthouse meeting in Buffalo. Being a lighthouse enthusiast, I was driving along the road nearest to the edge of Lake Erie and not on the New York Thruway. As I traveled east I came to the tiny town of Silver Creek and seeing the name triggered a thought that I had once seen reference to there being a lighthouse or beacon located here sometime back in the early 1800s. Just a few miles later, I crossed Cattaraugus Creek and Indian Reservation and again was reminded of that there was a lighthouse located there sometime in the past. I resolved to see if I could locate any trace of the lighthouses and maybe, with luck, determine their histories. This story is the result of the effort to find these long lost lighthouses.

## History of the Silver Creek Area

One of the first records of activity in the Silver Creek area occurred in 1782 when a party of British and Indians, with artillery and other military equipment, spent the months of June and July around Chautauqua Lake, located a few miles south west of Silver Creek. They constructed canoes and made other preparations to navigate the Allegheny River from which they were planning to attack Fort Pitt near Pittsburgh. The attack was later abandoned.



**Similar beacon at Fairport Harbor, OH. Photo courtesy of *Lighthouse Digest*.**

The first settlement in Chautauqua County, New York was made at the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek, about four miles east of Silver Creek, by Amos Sottle in 1797.

Before 1800, the area near Silver Creek was a virgin wilderness with a forest of large hemlocks, black walnut, elm, and beech trees. The few white settlers there lived along Cattaraugus Creek and Silver Creek where they were in the process of clearing the land for planting. Silver Creek flows in a northwest direction into Lake Erie, joining Walnut Creek near its mouth. It is fed by several tributaries.

Around 1805, Cleveland and Dickinson built the first sawmill in the village on thirty acres near Silver Creek. They also attached a wooden hammer and stone bowl to the drive shaft of their mill for pounding corn into meal. This became the first gristmill in the village. The mill and property were sold to John Howard around 1806.

By 1812, Hanover Township had been formed. There were four tiny villages in the township with the two main ones being located near the mouths of Silver Creek and Cattaraugus Creek. About a year later Jacob Morrison, one of the first settlers on Silver Creek, built a small tannery on the side of the waterway.

In 1824, soon after the visit of General Lafayette to the country, the name Fayette was given to what is now Silver Creek Village, in honor to the French patriot and Revolutionary hero.

In the fall of 1827, Oliver Lee sent a stock of goods to Fayette and opened his first business

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in the area. In the spring of 1828, Lee bought John Howard's mill property at Fayette. After Mr. Lee settled on his new property he consulted with some of the leading citizens of the area and they decided that the area should be renamed Silver Creek, to correspond with the name of the creek. Silver Creek derived its name from an Indian tradition that there once had been a silver mine located in the area. Lee also arranged with the town authorities to build a bridge across the waterway.

After Oliver Lee began business in the summer of 1828, he decided to bring additional commerce to the area. He realized the great potential Silver Creek had as a harbor if a pier could be constructed. Mr. Lee, with some assistance from others, planned the building of a large dock. A facility large enough to accommodatesailing vessels and steamers and allow them to off-load large quantities of merchandise. In turn the vessels could export products from the area. The harbor could also become a transportation link for passengers traveling into Silver Creek or leaving for Buffalo and other ports.

The development of the harbor was assisted by the natural formation of the land along the shore of Lake Erie where there was a large bay with a high bluff extending some distance into the lake on the west side. However, piles could not be driven for the pier because of the rocky bottom of the lake. Lee decided to build the pier by forming large cribs of timber, filling them with stone and sinking them. Contracts were signed for the delivery of a large amount of square hewn timber and for quarrying stone from the high bluff on the west side of the bay. A crew began preparing the timber and getting the cribs ready for assembly. The snow of December 1828 was a great advantage in hauling the timber for the pier cribs. Ice also formed on the lake quite early that year and by mid December men and teams begin work hauling the heavy construction materials over the ice. A location for the pier was selected about 350 feet from shore where the water was of sufficient depth for the largest sailing vessels and steamers of that time. Twelve to fifteen teams of horses were employed in hauling stone across the ice and fifty men were kept constantly employed in framing the cribs, placing them in position, and sinking them. This work was continued until late in March 1829, when the workmen were compelled to stop due to the spring thaw. They succeeded in sinking and filling the cribs required for 150 feet of pier running parallel to the shore and about 350 feet from land. The cribs were then planked over forming a pier and business began. Although a small boat had to be used to transport cargo between the pier and shore.

A shipbuilding business, which had been in existence in the area for many years, now began to truly prosper. Several lake vessels were built at Silver Creek, among which were: a steamboat built in 1816, the schooners Lumberman and Alps, the brig Osceola built by John Vail in 1837 and the steamboat W. F. P. Taylor, constructed in 1863, among others.

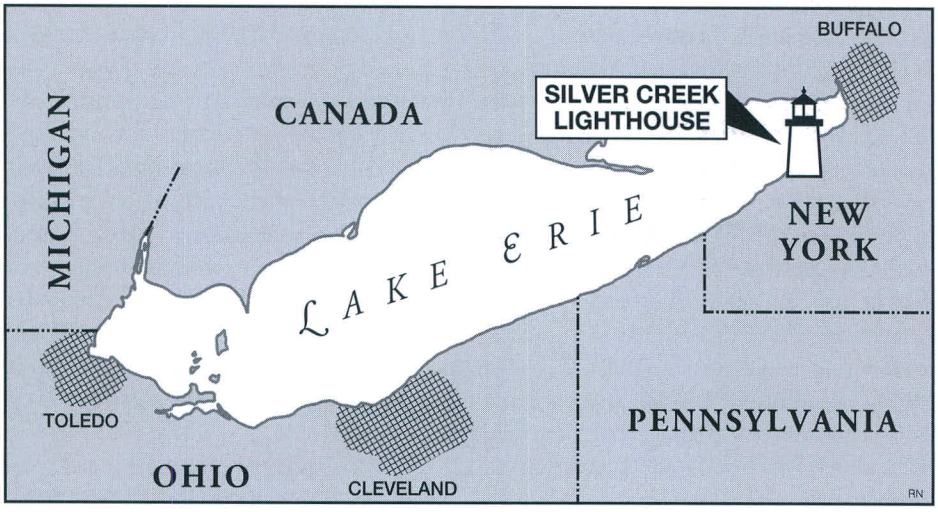
The brig Osceola became famous as the first ship to haul grain from the port of Chicago in 1839. The Osceola was sunk on November 19, 1846, back at the harbor where she was launched after being driven ashore at Silver Creek in a storm with the loss of five of her crew of eight.

During the winter of 1829, work on the pier was resumed and continued until the "L" shaped pier reached shore. This development allowed wagons loaded with fire wood, lumber, and farm products to be driven to the outer end. On the left side of the pier, near the water's edge, a large storehouse was built for storing received goods or those waiting for shipment. On the opposite side of the pier stood what was then called the "Salt House," and a lumber yard owned by W. D. Talcott and Ralph Roberts. The steamboats, Pioneer and Belle, which were then running regularly between Barcelona and Buffalo, began to stop at the Silver Creek Harbor for freight and passengers. Other ships that frequented the harbor were the Peacock, Chautauqua, Diamond and Fashion.

Oliver Lee immediately began requesting a Congressional appropriation for a beacon light to be located on the end of his pier as well as a dwelling and keeper. In the interim, Mr. Lee funded a light on the pier as attested to by his letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, dated July 19, 1832, where he states: "We have a daily steam boat from this place to Buffalo, which is frequently prevented from calling and landing passengers for the want of a light. It is sometimes kept up at individual expense, but not enough for the safety of the navigation."

Several other buildings were erected near the pier and the Steamboat Hotel was built around 1833 for the accommodation of those coming or going by boat. The village was also a point for the purchase of lumber for the eastern market, most of it being shipped to the New England states.

It was not unusual for two or three large sailing vessels to be lying at the Silver Creek Pier at the same time, taking on cargoes of lumber or grain. The business increased so rapidly, and became so extensive, that Mr. Lee was compelled to build an addition to the pier around 1833. This was accomplished by extending the principal pier 100 feet further into the lake and then adding another "L" shaped portion which created a sheltered cove where vessels could be loaded or unloaded in all types of weather.




## The Silver Creek Beacon

Mr. Lee, who was a Supervisor of Silver Creek during the years 1833 through 1835, along with two other prominent citizens, Thomas Forster and Pierre Barker (Collectors of Customs at Erie and Buffalo) continued to petition Congress to build the beacon light. While the Congressional Committee on Commerce reviewed the subject of an appropriation

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for a beacon light in 1832, and again in 1834, 1835 and 1836. It was not until March 3, 1837 that the Federal Government made an appropriation of $4,500 for the erection of a lighted aid at the outer end of the pier.

Although Congress had appropriated the money, no action could be taken until the Board of Navy Commissioners reviewed the proposal and agreed that it was necessary. The Board initially reported in September 1837 that the light was not necessary and a formal report was made to Congress which stated that the light was rejected. The Board of Navy Commissioners reversed their decision and approved the pierhead beacon for Silver Creek on November 17, 1837. On November 20, 1837, Stephen Pleasonton, the 5th Auditor of the US Treasury and head of the Lighthouse Service, requested that an engineer prepare drawings for the aid.

Oliver Lee and Pierre Barker immediately got to work on the project. By January 4, 1838, Oliver Lee had proposed to Mr. Pleasonton that he would "erect the lighthouse and keeper's house, and give a lot of land for the latter, for $4,500, the sum appropriated."

The government accepted Oliver Lee's proposal and he began the project. It was completed by June 30, 1838, and on that date Mr. Pleasonton requested that a keeper be appointed to maintain the light at a salary of $350 per year. Several individuals had been considered for the appointment as keeper. Back on September 28, 1837 a Mr. I. Alexander was recommended for the position, but was not accepted. On July 2, 1838, Mr. Marmaduke Ball was recommended and also rejected. Finally, on July 3, 1838, Captain Moses Fuller was formally appointed to the position of keeper of the Silver Creek Ligthhouse.

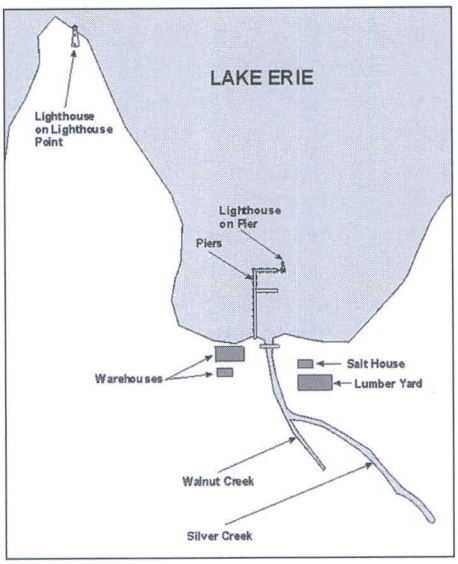
It was not until August 1, 1838, that a formal deed, for the land on which Oliver Lee had built the keeper's dwelling, was signed by Oliver Lee and his wife Eliza, conveying the property to the US Government.

Oliver Lee had been left on his own to construct the lighthouse and keeper's dwelling. He installed several simple whale-oil lamps in a circle on a table within the lantern room to supply the illumination. His lamps were replaced with 9 Glass-Globe Whale-Oil Lamps supplied by keeper Fuller. These lamps had no chimneys or reflectors and were not the standard issue for lighthouses or beacons in the Lighthouse Service. Stephen Pleasonton reported on August 4, 1838, that he had no description of what had been built and had no idea if the service standards had been met, such as a lightning rod for the tower. It appears that Mr. Lee used rather shoddy workmanship during the construction as can be seen from the following report when the beacon was first inspected during the fall of 1838:

"At Silver Creek a new beacon light has been established and finished this season. I find it deficient in lamps, except such as have been furnished by the tender; by whom I am informed that the lamps furnished by the contractors or builders were not fit for use."

"The deck of the beacon leaks badly, so that it would be almost impossible for the keeper to stay there during the night in bad weather."

"The pier, or crib, on which it is placed, is a good one, with the exception that it requires filling in with stone."




**Harbor at Silver Creek after addition of second pier. Drawing by the author.**

"The position of this harbor, exposed as it is to all winds except those from the south and west, renders it sometimes of little avail to the mariner; but yet its commercial importance would seem to require a light at this point."

"The fact of its commercial importance is well attested by the efforts that individuals have lavished for the purpose of rendering this harbor safer and more convenient."

Stephen Pleasonton reacted to this report by ordering repairs through the Collector of Buffalo as follows: "You are authorized to cause all the repairs to be made to the several lighthouses, which you state to be necessary, including the well, which appears to be necessary at Silver Creek. You will take care that Mr. Lee procures in due time the proper lamps and reflectors for the Silver Creek Light. Buffskins will be sent with the oil from New York, but if some coarse cotton shall be required, you will procure a few yards for each lighthouse. You will take care that, until the general supply shall be received from New York, the lighthouses shall want nothing to keep them properly lit."

However, little or nothing appears to have been done because the next inspector's report on July 20, 1839, contains the following: "Silver Creek Light visited July 20th 1839, the lighthouse is leaky and needs roof casting, and a set of lamps and reflectors, the present lamps are common glass, the glass in the lantern; some broken, otherwise in a healthy condition, the roof of the keepers dwelling is leaky for a new house, wants underpinning with stone, it now sets upon blocks and has settled; has the appearance of cleanliness."

Proper lamps were still not in place more than a year later when on August 15, 1840, Stephen Pleasonton ordered George Clinton, then the Collector at Buffalo, to: "I have to request that you will ascertain the number of lamps and reflectors necessary at Silver Creek, procure and have them properly fitted up in the lighthouse at Silver Creek, those now there not being of the proper kind. It would be well to apply to Winslow Lewis at Boston, to furnish them."

On August 9, 1841, a major tragedy occurred when the 176-foot, passenger and freight, wooden-side-wheel steamer Erie sank near Silver Creek with the loss of over 200 passengers and crew. The Erie was headed for Chicago and carried hundreds of Swiss and German immigrants bound for the west. It caught fire four hours out of Buffalo after an explosion and burned to the waterline 6 miles offshore and then sank. This was the worst steamer disaster up to that time and occurred at almost precisely the same spot as the burning of the steamer George Washington in 1838. About 30 people were saved from the Erie by the steamers Dewitt Clinton and Lady. The many salvage attempts began in 1842. Lumps of melted silver coins were removed from her hull in 1852 and 1853, and when her hulk was raised in July 1854, there was over $200,000 in melted gold and silver still aboard.

In late 1841, the nine old glass-globe lamps in the Silver Creek Beacon were finally

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replaced by five fourteen-inch-diameter reflectors and lamps made by Winslow Lewis which were mounted on a chandelier and supplied a fixed light around the horizon.

During this period Oliver Lee also took on additional responsibilities. Beginning in March of 1842, he chartered a sailing vessel to the Federal Government for their use in delivering lamp oil and other supplies to the various lighthouses and beacons on the Great Lakes.

Problems continued due to the poor quality of the original construction of the Silver Creek tower and, in addition, problems were encountered with keeper Fuller as well. The inspector's report for May 5, 1842, reported the following:

"5 lamps – Moses Fuller, Keeper."

"Thirty-six miles from Buffalo, on a wooden pier, is situated the Silver Creek Beacon. With the exception of one lamp, which should be renewed, no repairs were required. The lighting apparatus was very dirty and appeared as if but little attention had been bestowed upon them, yet I learn the light is generally very good. The keeper is an old man, about 60 years of age, given much to intemperance and, I think, altogether unfit for the responsible station. I visited this house about 11 o'clock at night, at which time the keeper was evidently under the influence of liquor. Persons interested in the business and commerce of the lake are very desirous for his removal."

"The deck of and joints on the sides of the beacon leak badly keeping it almost constantly very damp, and unless properly repaired will cause rapid decay."

"The plank around the beacon on the pier have been, with the exception of one here and there, nearly all torn off and washed away by the storms, leaving barely sufficient for a perilous footway to the beacon."

"The keeper's dwelling requires underpinning and plastering, which is deemed necessary for the safety of the building, the cost of which is estimated at $25 or $30."

"Finding a sufficient quantity of oil on hand for a year's supply, I left none. Of the other articles on hand, including 150 gallons summer oil and 30 gallons winter oil, three cans or butts of 30 gallons each."

"Left with Mr. Clinton, for use of this light 1/3 piece cotton cloth and one buff skin."

There were still problems with the new reflectors at Silver Creek. An inspection was made on July 22, 1842, when it was found that the reflectors were not mounted correctly to the chandelier which focused the light both either to the sky or to the lake in front of the beacon rather than to the horizon achieving maximum range and brightness.



**Common glass-globe whale oil lamp, circa 1835. Photo from the author's collection.**

The tower continued have problems due to poor construction. The inspection made in August 1843, found: "I have just received the report of William D. Wilson Esq. the General Inspector of lighthouses on the upper lakes, from which I perceive repairs are required on two of the lighthouses in your district. viz: Silver Creek Lighthouse. The tower of this beacon, he observes, ought to be either lined inside with boards or plastered and the floors re-laid. The cost he estimates at 50 dollars."

As time went on keeper Moses Fuller's capabilities came under further scrutiny. In late 1843 the inspector reported: "Silver Creek Beacon – Things here are rather at loose ends: the keeper is old and imbecile, and scarcely fit to stand the hardships of such a station. I found the lock off the door this summer, and people were permitted to stand, during rainy weather, in the beacon, to fish. I, of course, admonished the keeper in regard to these improprieties; otherwise, the duties of the keeper are tolerably well attended to. No recent complaints have been made in regard to the light."

Still further problems were reported by the inspector in early July 1844, as follows: "Mr. Wilson, in his late report on the condition of the lighthouses on the lakes – states the following repairs to be necessary in your district, viz:" "Silver Creek Lighthouse – Inside of the tower requires plastering, and new floors to be laid over the old one, a new stand required for the oil butt, and also a new lock for the door, the cost of all which he estimates at 45 dollars."

"These several repairs you will be pleased to have done as early as practicable."

In early November 1844, a disastrous storm hit the Lake Erie area. It was reported by persons living near the Silver Creek pier that: "The storm in the fall of 1844 will be remembered by many. It commenced about midnight. A large sloop was lying at the dock, near the lighthouse. The boat broke all lines and in passing by the lighthouse dock, most of those aboard got on the dock, including Charles H. Lee and some three of the crew."

"In the morning the lake was boiling, and to rescue the men from the lighthouse, a small boat was drawn from Irving and the men got ashore. The boat went ashore below the point. A good share of the dock was torn away. A large warehouse was thrown down on the shore, and a large amount of goods and merchandise were destroyed. Cotton good and all kinds of cloth were wound around driftwood. Plenty of potash was lying around, the strong casks being broken."

Stephen Pleasonton sent an urgent message to Jed Lathrop, Superintendent of Lights in Buffalo, on November 15, 1844, reporting the effects of the storm as follows: "By a letter I have just received from Mr. Wilson, the General Inspector of Lights on the Upper Lakes, I am informed that the piers at Dunkirk and Silver Creek have been swept away to the waters edge, and that the lights there cannot be lighted in rough weather."

"He afterwards states that it will require 21 cords of stone, at 8 dollars per cord – 660 feet of 13 inch square white oak timber, and about 2000 feet of hemlock plank, to make the repairs at Silver Creek. He estimates the whole to cost 400 dollars. Whether he intends these repairs to be put upon the pier, or only on the pier head and beacon, he does not state. If they be for the pier, I cannot authorize them, as I consider all the repairs of the piers as belonging to the Topographical Bureau, and it appears to me, that without the piers are repaired, it will be of no use to repair the beacon or pierhead, as it will be impossible for the keeper to keep the light up."

"You are requested to make enquiry of the

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Topographical Agent, and ascertain whether it is their intention to repair the piers, or when. It seems to me that it would be a useless expense to repair the beacon, unless the piers are also repaired, as it will be impossible for keepers in stormy weather to approach them in boats in order to keep them lit. You will be pleased to report to me the answer of the Agent on this subject."

Superintendent Lathrop reported back on November 28, and Mr. Pleasonton then sent him the following response on December 5: "I duly received your letter of the 28th ultimate, and approve of the agreement made by you with Mr. Oliver Lee, under the circumstances mentioned, for the repair of the pier at Silver Creek, with the view to the security of the lighthouse erected on it, the cost of which you state will not exceed $300. I do this however, entirely in the belief that the lighthouse might be lost without it."

"It is not our duty to repair the piers, and in all cases where the pier head on which the lights are built are sufficiently strong to sustain the buildings, no repairs to the piers are to be made. The keepers must visit and light them in boats when it can be done."

After more thorough repairs were made, the problems at Silver Creek Light Station diminished significantly. During 1845 and early 1846, the inspections found only the following needs: "Silver Creek – Nothing recommended here but a new stove for the lantern which he estimated at 5 dollars and the payment to the keeper of 3 dollars for some repairs to the lantern top, which he Mr. Mc Reynolds directed him to make. You will provide the stove before the return of cold weather and pay to the keeper's order the 3 dollars for the repairs to the lantern on its being made."

In March 1847, Congress appropriated money for the construction of a small pierhead light at Cattaraugus Creek, which is located about four miles east of Silver Creek. Stephen Pleasonton decided to build only a simple temporary beacon at Cattaraugus and to have Moses Fuller, the keeper at Silver Creek, take on the additional responsibility of keeping the Cattaraugus beacon for an additional $15.00 dollars a month added to his current keeper's salary of $350.00 per year. The Cattaraugus Beacon was reported ready for lighting on November 22, 1847, and keeper Fuller began tending to that light on November 25, 1847. (See more about the Cattaraugus Beacon later in this story)

Silver Creek village was incorporated on June 8, 1848.

The next inspection at Silver Creek occurred in late July 1848, when Mr. Mc Reynolds, reported on both the lights at Silver Creek and Cattaraugus as follows:

Cattaraugus Creek – I recommend a platform to be made, embracing a cupboard with a lock and key for the protection of the oil, the keeper having nothing for that purpose at present.

Silver Creek Light - I recommend a foot bridge to be built to connect the light with the pier, which I estimate to cost not more than 100 dollars. The underpinning of the dwelling needs repair and some painting to be done.

Stephen Pleasonton ordered both projects to be done.

Things were finally quieting down at both Cattaraugus and Silver Creek and when the next inspection was made in July 1849, the inspector reported: "Cattaraugus Creek Light - Everything here in good order – conduct of the keeper good."

"Silver Creek Light - Nothing recommended to be done at present – keepers conduct good."

The inspection of June 1850, showed the same good results for both locations.

In early 1851, Mr. Risley, Member of Congress for the area, reported that the condition of the piers at Silver Creek was poor and deteriorating rapidly. He requested that the Lighthouse Service rebuild the piers. Steven Pleasonton was not sure who had built the piers and wanted an investigation done before any repairs were made. He was told by William Ketchum, Superintendent of Lights at Buffalo, that the piers had been built privately, but that the beacon was owned by the Government and that the beacon and its crib should be rebuilt. Mr. Pleasonton responded as follows: "I received in due time your letter of the 11th ultimo in relation to the pier and lighthouse at Silver Creek, and have delayed an answer in the expectation that after seeing Mr. Isaac Smith, you would give me more particular information on the subject."

"What I wished to know was whether the private company who erected the main pier at silver Creek was able and intended to keep it up, for in that case we could undertake with safety to keep up the pier and the lighthouse which were connected with it. But if that pier was not to be sustained by the individuals who erected it, our work would be next to useless, as the keeper could not in stormy weather attend the light."

"However, without further delay, it seems proper for me to say, that if you shall receive assurances from the company that the main pier will be repaired in a short time, you may take measures for repairing the part erected by the United States and the lighthouse upon it; provided you can have it done within your estimate of $1000 dollars, to ascertain which it will be proper to advertise for proposals. Let me hear from you upon this subject as soon as possible."

At this time a major railroad was being built into the area and other changes were happening that affected the amount of harbor traffic at Silver Creek. Not sure of the impact the railroad might have, there was reluctance on the part of local businessmen to expend any significant amounts of money for rebuilding the piers.

## The Silver Creek Lighthouse

After the initial discussions about rebuilding the lighthouse and the crib, further discussions were held between William Ketchum and Mr. Miller, the General Inspector of Lights for the Upper Lakes. They decided that it would be better to move the lighthouse to the near end of the high bluff on the west side of the harbor. They asked Stephen Pleasonton if this was possible under the law that Congress had original enacted for the establishment of the light. Pleasonton responded as follows: "I have just received yours of Mr. Miller as to the condition of all the lights on the upper lakes, and I find where he speaks of the Silver Creek Light, he concurs with your opinion that it ought to be removed to a point of land at the upper end of the bay, instead of being repaired and being kept where it is. On referring to the law for the erection of this light, I perceive there is nothing in it, which ought to prevent a removal of the light, if deemed necessary."

"The words of the law are for a beacon light at Silver Creek Harbor, Lake Erie."

"As you and Mr. Miller unite in opinion that the point of land above referred to would be the most legal site, you will cause the beacon to be removed to it provided the Messers. Lee will, as you inform me they will, give us a deed for a proper site with the right for a road to and from it. You will be pleased therefore to take the proper steps to affect these objects."

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Steps were taken to move the beacon. The locals wanted the light at the new location to be a more major aid to navigation and even with the added elevation of the bluff the current height of the tower, just 27 feet from its base to the focal plane, was too short. Therefore, an additional 16 feet of rubble-stone construction was added below the original wooden tower to raise the tower's height to a total of 43 feet from its base to the focal plane of the lantern.

In early August 1851, the heirs of Oliver Lee (who had died in 1846) provided the Federal Government with a deed to property on the bluff, with access rights to the property. Stephen Pleasonton found problems with the deed due to the fact that it had been executed by the guardian of Mr. Lee's minor children and wrote to the Superintendent of Lights in Buffalo as follows: "Your letter of the 20 instant, inclosing the copy of a deed from the heirs of Oliver Lee for a piece of land to which to remove the beacon from the pier at Silver Creek, is received."

"This deed is without witnesses and without an acknowledgment also. I therefore return the copy in order that these things may be added, after they are placed on the original deeds which I request you to have done."

"It would be a proper precaution to take the bond of Messers. Lee conditioned that the two minor children who have signed the deed shall confirm the act after they become of age."

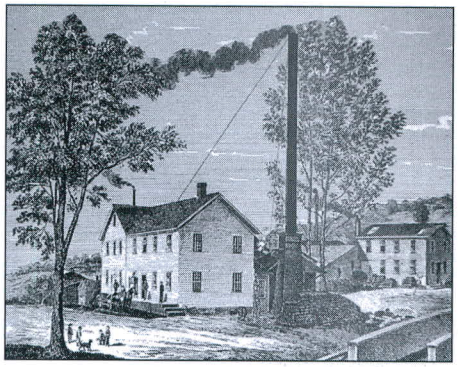
The beacon was moved at the end of 1851, and was in place on the bluff by early 1852.

After the railroads came in 1851 and 1852, the character of the town began to change. The long lines of wagons going west were no longer to be seen, and some of the hotels closed for the want of business. A new road was built into Silver Creek from Upper Irving (formerly Cattaraugus) located about four miles to the east. This more direct route was needed due to erosion had washed away many areas of the old road in 1838 and again in 1844.

In 1853, William R. Greenleaf and Henry Montgomery opened a machine shop and foundry and built stationary engines in Silver Creek. Silver Creek's retail establishments included only five rather small firms. There was also the Bank of Silver Creek. The hotels included: The Steamboat Hotel, Silver Creek House, The Temperance House, The Engle and The Farmer's Hotel. Also located near Silver Creek was Andrus' sawmill and Jonathan Keith's, gristmill. On the west side of the creek were old buildings, which had once been used for a distillery, and a sheep-skin tannery.

The piers continued to deteriorate and by late 1853 little was left of the harbor. In October 1854, Captain J. C. Woodruff of the Topographical Engineers of the 10th Lighthouse District reported: "Useless lights – The lights at Portland Harbor and at Silver Creek - no harbors or shelter existing at either of these localities - are deemed useless."

During 1855 the same assessment was made: "The light at Silver Creek is deemed useless, there being no harbor, nor is it necessary as a lake coast light."



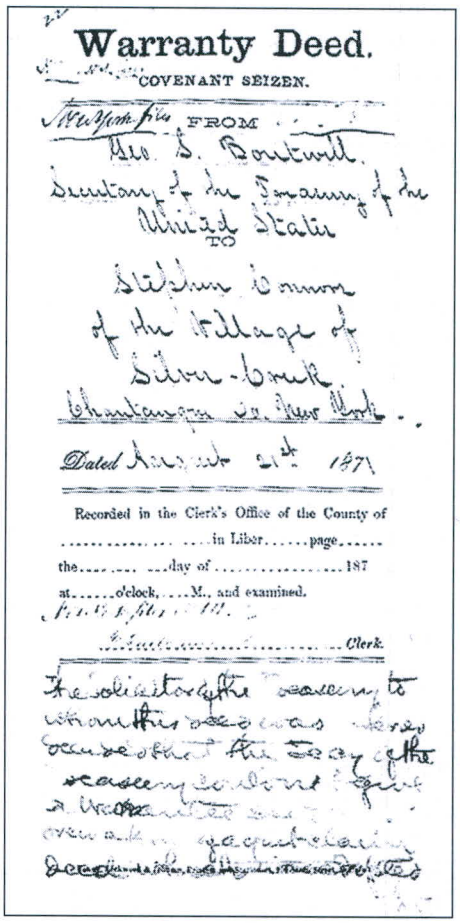
**Mill driven by a steam engine located near Silver Creek. Drawing from the author's collection.**

Silver Creek developed a large business, beginning in 1856, manufacturing and selling the Eureka grain smut separating machines. However, all shipments from the business were made by railroad and not from the harbor. The harbor was left to further decay and neither the local businessmen nor the government repaired the piers or cribs. By the fall of 1856 the Lighthouse Board requested permission to discontinue the light. Finally on November 25, 1856, the Secretary of the Treasury ordered that the light be discontinued.

Early in 1857, a number of local ship captains and businessmen petitioned Senator Seward, of New York, to have the light continued, but its continuance could not be justified and on March 19, 1857, final instructions were given to suppress the light and place all of its illuminating equipment and other movable items into storage at the Buffalo, New York, Lighthouse Depot.

In early 1858, the Inspector of the 10th Lighthouse District recommended to the Lighthouse Board that the keeper's dwelling in Silver Creek should be sold. However, no action was taken to sell the property at that time. In July of 1867, Mr. Roy Andrus of Silver Creek wrote a letter to the Inspector of the 10th Lighthouse District, requesting to purchase the former keeper's dwelling and lot. The Lighthouse Board was informed of the request and sent George W. Abell, Collector of Customs at Dunkirk, to Silver Creek to assess the condition of the property. Still no action was taken to sell the property. A year later in early 1869, Mr. Abell wrote to the Lighthouse Board suggesting that the property be sold. The Lighthouse Board requested Congress' approval of the sale, which was granted on March 3, 1869. Finally in 1871, the Lighthouse Board had the property advertised for sale and on August 21, 1871, the property was sold to Stephen Connors, of Silver Creek, for $250.

This was the final 'official' act ending the era of the lighthouse at Silver Creek. By that time, Silver Creek had a population of just 666 residents.



Warranty Deed.

COVENANT SEIZEN.

FROM

Geo. S. Boutwell

Secretary of the Treasury of the

United States

TO

Stephen Connors

of the Village of

Silver Creek

Chautauqua Co. New York

Dated August 21st 1871

Recorded in the Clerk's Office of the County of

.....in Liber.....page.....

the.....day of.....187

at.....o'clock.....M., and examined.

.....Clerk

**The deed for the sale of the keeper's dwelling. Photo from the National Archives.**

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## History of the Cattaraugus Creek Area

The first settlement in Chautauqua County was made at the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek in 1797, by Amos Sottle.

Mr. Ellicott, in his field notes of the Holland Land Company's survey of Hanover Township, mentions Ezekiel Lane's shanty and Amos Sottle's clearing of a lot in Cattaraugus village. A part of the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation formed the northeast boundary of the Village.

During the war of 1812 a British war vessel chased an American schooner into Cattaraugus Creek. The schooner ran as far up as it could to escape, and the crew quickly gathered the few settlers and Indians in the area to protect the schooner. The British fired a few shots and gave up the chase.

After 1827, the area began to see increasing numbers of settlers. Improvements were begun by John Thorn and Hiram Sackett, who, in 1830, had purchased many acres in the area. The mouth of Cattaraugus Creek was a natural harbor admitting the entrance of vessels. In the mid 1830s, the U. S. government began improving the harbor and expended large sums of money in building piers, to protect and keep the channel open. Cattaraugus Village, now known as Irving, was situated in the north part of Hanover Township near the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek. Shops and storehouses were built there. The harbor gave an outlet to the Buffalo market for lumber, and soon five or six lumber mills were built within about a mile and a half of the harbor.

The Irving Company was formed August 17, 1836, and purchased lands nearer the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek with the idea of founding a large village there due to the availability of the harbor and a presumption that the area would become the western terminus of the New York and Erie Railroad. After their purchase the name of the village was changed to Irving. Even after the official name change, the place was generally known as Cattaraugus and letters were frequently, especially by sailors, directed to Cattaraugus not Irving.

After the railroads came in 1851 and 1852, the whole character of Cattaraugus was changed. The business at Cattaraugus was much reduced through the cutting off of the trade with the southern towns, who now used the railroad. By 1860, the village had 2 churches, a gristmill, and 2 sawmills with a population of just 404.

## The Cattaraugus Beacon

The story of the Cattaraugus Beacon begins in 1837 when a harbor was being built at Cattaraugus by the Federal Government. The first report was made by Lieutenant Pendergrast to the Board of Naval Commissioners on August 18, 1837 as follows:

"Cattaraugus Creek is thirty miles west of Buffalo. At this place there is a harbor now being constructed by the United States. When finished, I would recommend that a beacon with a red light be placed on the pierhead. I have never landed at this place, but have understood that a tolerable harbor can be formed. At the distance of three miles west of Cattaraugus is Silver Creek."

In the following year harbor construction continued and Lieutenant Charles Platt reported as follows: "My attention was next directed to Cattaraugus. At this point the public improvements for a harbor are advancing as rapidly as circumstances will admit; and it may be with justness presumed, that the present year will deepen the channel sufficiently to admit vessels into the harbor, although the piers are not yet in a situation to furnish a convenient or a proper spot for the structure of a beacon light, nor, indeed, to offer protection to vessels. The piers constituting the sides of the channel are in part laid down; and it is quite probable that the depth of the entrance will be sufficient to enable vessels to avail themselves of this port as a place of shelter during the ensuing winter."

"The rapid increase of shipping on this lake would seem to require all that the genius of human invention can devise in the formation of artificial ports. Although nature has not fully adapted this point to our wants, it has effected much; so that it only remains necessary for us to force a channel to the entrance of the creek, where we find ourselves completely sheltered from the tempests."

"Cattaraugus, in this respect, is one of the many valuable points on the shores of the lake, and will become a great resort for vessels in tempestuous weather, in consequence of the capacity and accessibility of the harbor."

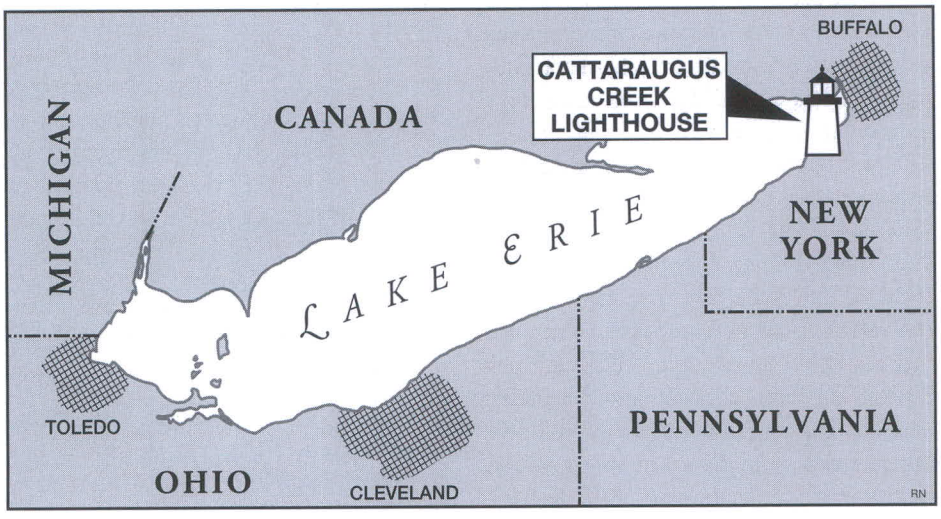
"I therefore recommend the erection of a temporary beacon, until the works are in a situation to admit of the building a permanent lighthouse, or beacon, as circumstances may require."

"The following is an estimate for a temporary beacon:

| | |
|---|---|
| Lantern, fixtures, ironwork, &c. (these articles may be used afterwards in the permanent building) | $500.00 |
| Frame, planking, weather boarding, and crib work | $500.00 |
| Total: | $1,000.00 |

"This frame may be so built as to be converted to use in a second building. It is merely to be rough planked and weather boarded, and the lights to be raised and lowered by pulleys. A dwelling for the tender, a story and a half in height, built of brick, with out houses, well of water, fences, &c., may be built, under contract, of $1,400.00. A lot may be purchased for $150.00, making a total of $1,550.00. This is allowing the dwelling to be 30 by 25 feet."

The harbor construction continued over the next few years and it was not until February of 1844 that Senator Holmes petitioned Stephen Pleasonton to place a beacon at Cattaraugus Creek harbor. The result of the Congressional action was reported by Pleasonton as follows: "Agreeably to your verbal request,



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made a few days ago, I have the honor to enclose a printed Bill, No. 335, reported by the Committee of Commerce of the House of Representatives, at its last session, with a report, in relation to the lighthouse establishment, and a copy of a letter addressed by me to the Chairman of that Committee, on the 10 instant, referring to other objects for which provision ought to be made."

"I have also the honor to enclose explanatory remarks in relation to each item of the printed bill, to enable you and the Committee of the Senate to judge how far the several appropriations are necessary, as requested by you."

"Remarks in relation to the lighthouse bill of the House of Representatives No 335

New York – For a light at the entrance of Cattaraugus Creek - $3000. I have no information of the subject of this proposed light."

No action was taken and in early 1846 Mr. Pleasonton reported to Congressman, Robert Mc Clelland that: "I have also recently learnt from a gentleman from Buffalo that the pier at Cattaraugus is unfinished, and I would therefore respectfully recommend that a similar sum of $500 dollars be appropriated for a similar temporary beacon light at that place until a permanent beacon can be erected."

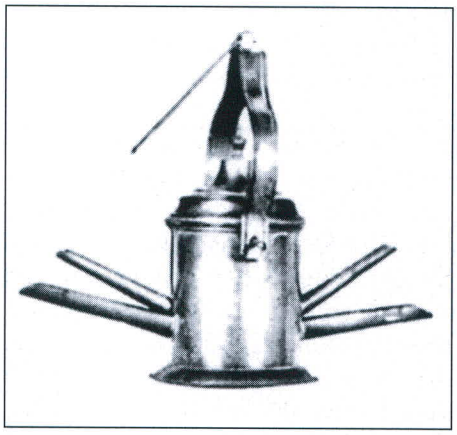
Congress failed to act on this request and no money was appropriated in 1846. Congress finally appropriated money for the construction of a small pierhead beacon light at Cattaraugus, in March 1847. Stephen Pleasonton decided to build only a simple temporary beacon and to have Moses Fuller, the keeper at Silver Creek, take on the additional responsibility of keeping the Cattaraugus beacon for an additional $15.00 dollars a month added to his current keeper's salary of $350.00 per year.

Mr. Pleasonton wanted a simple and especially a 'cheep' beacon. He was greatly annoyed when the Superintendent of Lights at Buffalo proposed a better quality beacon. Pleasonton wrote to Henry Rogers as follows: "I received this morning your letter of the 18th instant containing your estimates of lighthouse expenses for the 2nd quarter of the present year."

"In the estimate I find the sum of $2150 dollars for the expense of erecting a temporary beacon at Cattaraugus. This is entirely too high. No part of the pier can be repaired or added to, as I informed you in a late letter. The expense must be confined simply to a beacon made after the drawing I sent you and wheels or railways, on which it is to stand, and such a beacon ought not to cost more than 5 or $600 dollars including lantern and lamp."

"The money for the beacon being from an especial appropriation will be remitted to you separately after the actual cost of the beacon is known here. The rest of your estimate will be remitted forthwith."

Rogers was at a loss to determine exactly what Mr. Pleasonton wanted and asked for a further description of the proposed beacon. Pleasonton responded as follows: "Your letter of the 22nd instant was received this morning."



**A bucket lamp. Photo from the author's collection.**

"Such a lantern as you will require for the beacon at Cattaraugus may be described as follows – to be made of iron or composition metal, to be covered on the top with sheet copper through which there is to be a ventilator turned by a vane – to be two feet square and two and a half high – with a lamp made of tin or copper to hold two quarts of oil and in which there may be 4 burners made of round wicks. The glass in each square of the lantern may be divided into two panes – The square being rather large 2 ½ by 2 for one pane. A lantern and lamp like this was made for Vermilion River and answers I believe very well, and I am very sure if properly attended to will afford a good light at Cattaraugus."

"If you could get glass at a reasonable rate ¼ of an inch thick of the size of each square it would be preferred, as there would be no obstruction to the light by sash. I leave you to manage this in the best way you can."

The Cattaraugus Beacon was reported ready for lighting on November 22, 1847 and Moses Fuller started as keeper there on November 25, 1847. The final cost of the beacon and illuminating equipment was reported as $950. It was 20 feet in height from its base to the focal plane of the lantern and the focal plane was a total of 25 feet above the water when the pier height is included.

The lamp at Cattaraugus Creek Beacon was known as a 'Bucket Lamp' which used simple round-rope wicks to draw the Whale oil from a tin bucket which held about two quarts of oil.

In 1852, when the light at Silver Creek was moved from the pier to the end of the western bluff, it became difficult for the keeper, Moses Fuller, to continue to also keep the light at Cattaraugus. In April of 1852, Mr. Josiah Haight was appointed the keeper at Cattaraugus Beacon. However, as he was a lamplighter (a position that only required him to check on the aid once or twice a week) he was paid just $180 per year and not the full keeper's salary of $350 per year.

In late 1856, there was another terrible storm on Lake Erie which destroyed the Cattaraugus light. In March of 1857, a new beacon was proposed by Captain A. Whipple of the Army Corps of Engineers, as follows:

"Your letter of the 19th instant with accompanying estimates and sketch of Cattaraugus Creek, and adjacent coast, has been received."

"The point B indicated on the sketch near the site of the present beacon light seems to be the proper one, and I have to request that a structure of the kind recommended with an elevation above the mean level of the lake, for the focal plane of the light, of 35 or 40 feet, be constructed and fitted with one of the lens lanterns of 7 elements illuminating an arc of 225° of the horizon, which is now in store at Buffalo, or if more convenient, one of those at Detroit of the same character."

"It was, hoped that a structure might be erected upon a wooden pile foundation, instead of a crib work one at a cost of about $500."

"The light at Cattaraugus is not a very important one, and if the piers at that place should ever be restored, a new lighthouse tower would necessarily have to be erected at the end of one of them, thereby rendering it advisable that as small an amount as possible, should be expended at the point indicated for fulfilling the purpose."

"With these views the subject is left to your judgment."

"The funds requested will be remitted to you as desired, on receipt of the appropriation for repairs &c of lighthouses."

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The new beacon was reported rebuilt in the fall of 1857.

The harbor at Cattaraugus was never completely rebuilt and by late 1858 there were proposals to eliminate the Cattaraugus Beacon. Congress approved an Act on March 3, 1859, allowing the removal of lighthouses and beacons thought to be unnecessary. The Lighthouse Board met on June 6, 1859, and reported as follows: "The report of the secretaries upon the discontinuance of lights with a view to the execution of the 3rd section of the Act of Congress approved March 3rd 1859, making appropriations for lighthouses, light-boats, buoys etc etc, was read, and a vote taken seriatim upon its several recommendations, with the following result, viz: "The light at Cattaraugus Beacon, in the 10th Lighthouse District recommended to be discontinued. Recommendation adopted"

A 'Notice to Mariners' was published on June 10, 1859, stating that the Cattaraugus Beacon would be discontinued as of August 1, 1859.

Josiah Haight, who had been the keeper of the light, lost his position. In 1868, Josiah was appointed as Postmaster of the town of Irving, New York, but only held the position for a few months.

The lights at Silver Creek and Cattaraugus lasted for only a few years and the harbors they lit were mostly there because of the wishful thinking of the local businessmen. Yet, these harbors supplied a need at that time, contributed to the overall development of the area and especially the commerce on Lake Erie. Buffalo, Dunkirk and other nearby ports grew because of their trade with Silver Creek and Cattaraugus. Their contributions will not be forgotten.

Silver Creek Light House, May 29th 1852.

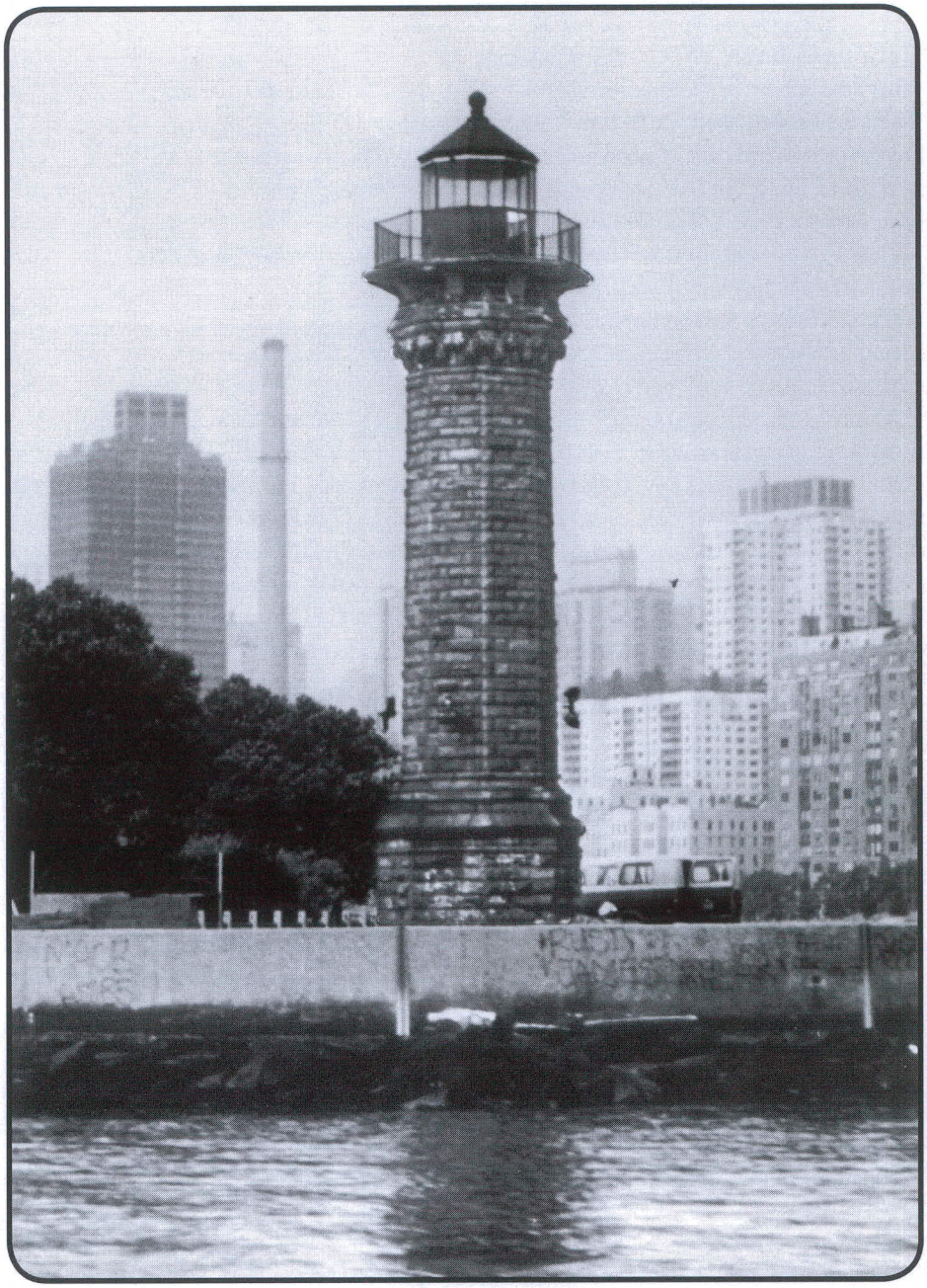
Received from HENRY B. MILLER, Agent for the United States Government in the delivery of supplies to the Light Houses on the north-western Lakes, the following articles for the use of the House under my charge, viz:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 86½ gallons Winter Oil. | 1 Buff Skin. | 1 gall. Turpentine. |
| 63 gallons Spring Oil, | 21 Yards Cotton Cloth, | 1 do. Linseed Oil, |
| 42 Tube Glasses, | 51 pounds Oil of Soap. | 1 Corn Broom, |
| 3 Gross Wicks. | 25 pounds White Lead, | 2 paint & 1 whit-wash br. |
| 12 papers Tripoli, | Globe Lantern, | 1 pair of snuffers. |

1 new Lamp and Reflector

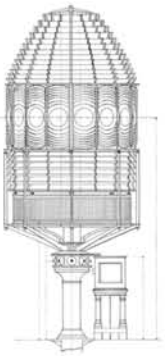
Josiah Haight Keeper.

**A receipt for supplies signed for by Josiah Haight, keeper at Cattaraugus Creek. Photo from the author's collection.**



**Blackwell Island Lighthouse off Roosevelt Island, East River, New York City. This is a Private Aid to Navigation maintained by New York City. It was established in 1872 and originally had a 4th order fixed Fresnel lens. See the following article on Private Aids to Navigation. Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis, date unknown.**

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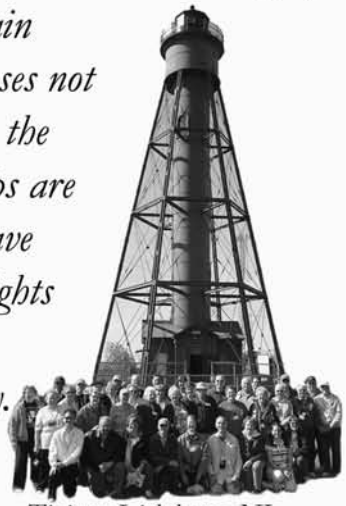
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