

Seul Choix Pointe Light Station

By Jenifer Fischer



Seul Choix Pointe Light Station. Photo by the author.



sixty miles west of the Mackinac Bridge in Michigan's scenic Upper Peninsula is one of the most beautiful stretches of lakeshore in the state. Centered on a rocky point of that shore is the Seul Choix Light Station (pronounced "sishawah").

Almost four hundred years ago, French fur traders frequently traveled in canoes across the waters of the Great Lakes. On one occasion, a group of French sailors were caught in a storm at the north end of Lake Michigan and sought shelter. They landed on the rocky shore of a small bay on the southern shore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Here they waited out the storm in the protected bay and when they departed they named the bay or harbor – Seul Choix – which translates as "only choice."

As the maritime trades increased it was apparent that there was a need for aids to navigation.

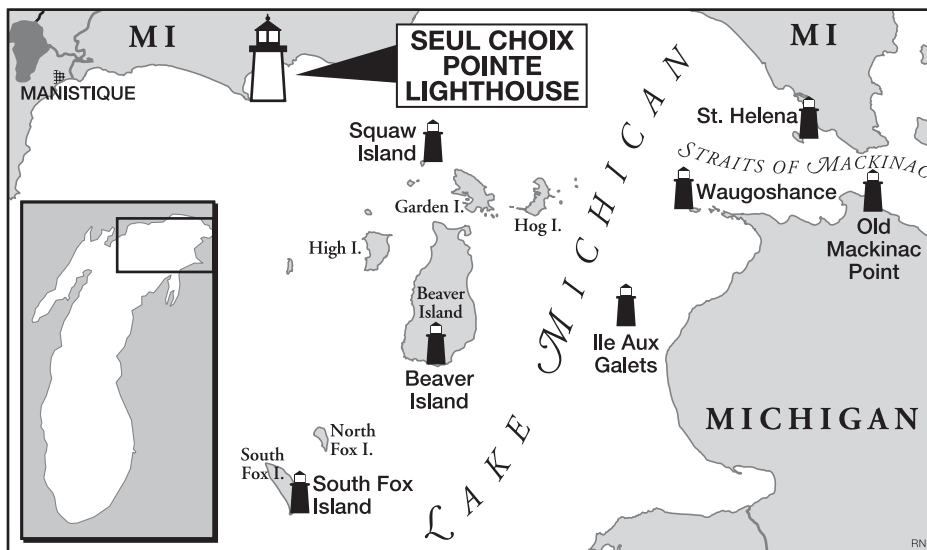
In the Lighthouse Board's Annual Report to Congress of 1886, the board noted, "There is no light on the north shore of Lake Michigan between Poverty Island and St. Helena [lighthouses], a distance of about 100 miles. As this is a matter of importance, owing to the increase of the iron-ore trade of Escanaba, the Board has recommended that an appropriation be made for establishing a light at Seul Choix Point. Note – the sum of \$15,000 was appropriated for this purpose by the Act approved August 4, 1886, and plans are being prepared for doing the work."

The following year's Annual Report states, "An appropriation of \$15,000 was made by an Act of Congress approved August 4, 1886, for establishing a light at this place. The site for the station was selected and surveyed in

made." The Board also mentions for the first time that a steam-powered fog signal will be required, at an additional expense. The following year the Board laments, ". . . Proposals have been asked twice by public advertisement for doing this work, and in each case the lowest bid has been in excess of the amount of the appropriation. The Board therefore recommends that an additional appropriation of \$3,500 be made for the establishment of this light. It has now become evident that the interests of navigation require the establishment of a steam fog-signal here. It will cost not exceeding \$5,500."

Congress apparently didn't feel the increased amount was justified. The Board wrote in 1891, "In the absence of any additional appropriation for this station, a revised estimate of cost for its construction was made and directions were given for the purchase of the material in open market and for doing the work by hired labor. The work will be commenced soon, and it is hoped that the station will be completed this fall. A 4-ton hoisting winch was purchased in connection with the keeper's boat. The following recommendation, which was made in the Board's last annual report, is renewed: It has now become evident that the interests of navigation require the establishment of a steam fog signal here. It will cost not exceeding \$5,500. The Board recommends that an appropriation be made therefore."

In the 1893 Annual Report the Board stated, ". . . All the light stations, fog signal and light vessels in the district are in good order except Seul Choix Point. . . Last year an appropriation of \$3,500 was asked to complete the structures at this station. Since the estimate was made the conditions have somewhat changed. There has been deterioration in the unfinished work, and the eight-hour law has made a difference in the cost of labor. It is now estimated that \$5,000 is needed to complete the structures. It is recommended that the \$5,000 appropriated for moving the St. Mary's River upper range lights . . . and which it is stated under that head, is no longer needed for that purpose, be made available for completing these structures." The report also mentioned that in February Congress authorized a fog signal, but made no appropriation. In March an appropriation of \$3,300 was made to complete the fog signal, but as no money was earlier authorized work on the signal had not begun. Since



From the time of the French fur traders to the early 1800s, the harbor became a popular wayside for the traders transiting the area. In the early 1800s, the discovery of an abundance of whitefish and laketrout brought fishing fleets to the area. Settlements quickly sprang up and this led to the establishment of fish packing companies that packed salted fish in wooden barrels and shipped the product to Chicago and as far away as New York City.

As the area developed logging became another industry. Ancillary industries and necessities (general stores, schools, etc) were established. Before long the railroad came to the area, which allowed the fish to be shipped in box cars refrigerated by ice.

August and steps were taken to purchase the land, but thus far without success."

In 1888 the Board reported that the plans and specifications were nearly completed, ". . . but further action has been prevented by the impossibility of obtaining the land required for the site. Recently, however, an offer was received from the owner to sell the land as soon as a certain forfeited contract for its sale, given by him several years ago, can be legally annulled, and it is now expected that the title will soon be acquired."

The 1889 report mentions that the title papers were finally approved and ". . . Plans, specifications and an estimate of cost for a brick tower, keeper's dwelling, etc., were

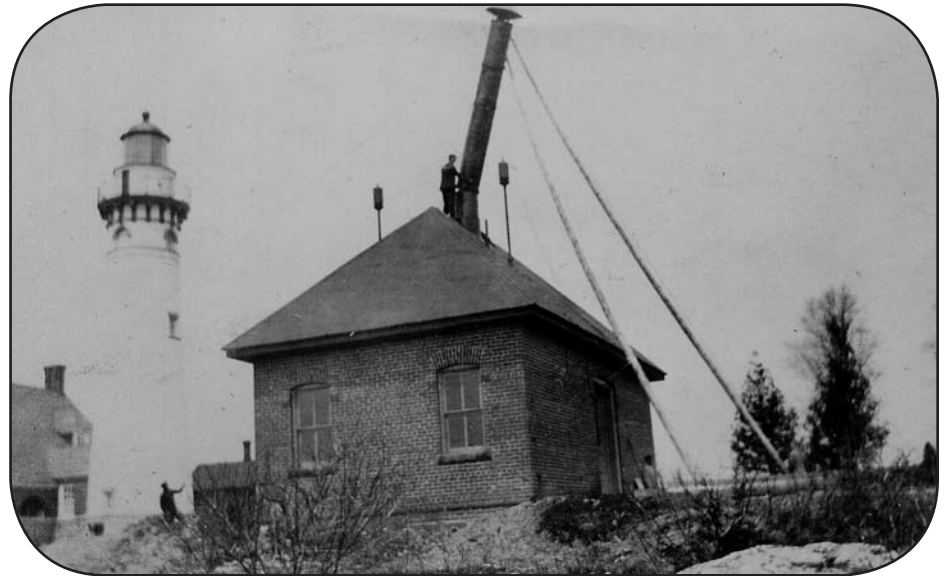
they mentioned that the total cost would be \$5,500, they were now requesting again that the additional \$2,200 be provided. In 1894, the district received funding and was given the go ahead for completing the station and constructing the fog signal building.

The Report to Congress from the U.S. Lighthouse Board, 1895 states, "... An estimate of cost for completing the tower and dwelling was made, and bids were invited and opened on March 9, 1895, for the materials, which were purchased, with supplies for the working party, and loaded on the tender *Amaranth*, and the working party was organized and transported to the light-house site, and operations were begun. The interior of the dwelling was largely re-plastered; the elevator and hoisting engine for handling material for the tower were placed; the boat house was nearly finished; the oil house was completed; the tower was built up from 20 feet 8 inches above grade to 56 feet 4 inches; stone for the circular windows was cut and set in place, and the circular stairs and landings to the third platform were completed." The Board continued to complain about lack of necessary funds to finish the fog signal but that, "... material required for this work was ordered and delivered by the *Amaranth* ... contracts were made for furnishing two fog-signal boilers, concrete footings were put in, walls were built up to the roof plates, and the exterior of the foundation walls was plastered to grade with mortar ... " Basically, the fog signal building was completed, but funds were still required for the equipment.

Originally a 4th order lens was slated for the lighthouse, but at the last minute the Lighthouse Service decided that a 3rd order lens was needed. It went into service on August 15, 1895. The fog signal began operation on September 10, 1895. The station was now complete.

As Seul Choix was only eight miles from the nearest town, the keepers and their families were not as isolated as those stationed on islands and more remote areas.

The first keeper appointed to the light station was Joseph Fountain. Assisting him was 1st Assistant Eugene Kimball and 2nd Assistant Patrick McCauley. Because the Great Lakes freeze over – close to shore, and sometimes the entire lake – in the winter, most Great Lakes light stations closed for several months each winter. The keepers closed their stations in December and reopened them when the ice broke up in the spring (March or April). Thus, Great Lakes keepers were paid less than those in other areas of the



Above – Working on the chimney of the Seul Choix fog signal building. Note the two whistle fog signals on either side of the chimney. Photo courtesy of the author. Below – Workers install a boiler for a steam-powered fog signal. Lighthouse Society photo.



country.

The Seul Choix station was apparently not a desired station as the record of keepers indicates a constant changing of the guard; some were promoted but the majority were transferred or resigned.

Some of the correspondence of the station is interesting. On October 10, 1907 Keeper Townshend wrote,

Sir:

"In my requisition last year I asked for three gallons of turpentine, and on my opening it the other day found that it was not turpentine, it looked like it but smells something like tar oil. It may be a new kind of dryer but would not like to use it, until I found out about it. Will you please let me know and oblige.

Yours respectfully,
Joseph Townshend

The District Inspector replied:

Dear Sir:

"If the can was marked #4 it should have contained three gals. of turpentine and I think it is by far the best we have ever had. As a rule the turpentine is mostly adulteration, made up of enough turp [turpentine] to give it the right odor and the rest is by-product from John Rockefeller's mineral oil and is more injury to paint than anything else. As a matter of fact turp. is injury to paint and paint is better without it if you can wait for the oil to dry. Even dryer should be little used. Pure linseed and pigment makes the best paint but we do not get the best oil either. The smell like tar oil is al right as this turp. Is made in South Carolina from the pine trees . . . It does scent the whole house, but as you can see it is the pine smell."

Very truly yours,
Lloyd Clark

cable; also state the additional quantity of fuel expended by reason of such extra trip.

"You are directed to furnish the following information to this office as soon as practicable. [the keeper's response appear in brackets]

"Average quantity of gasoline required to make each official trip. [61/2 gals.]

"Approximate distance of each official trip. [34 miles]

"Approximate time of each official trip. [6 hours]

"The information submitted will form the basis for computing the yearly allowance of gasoline for use in your motor boat and you will be held accountable for any extra gasoline used.

W. Joyce,
Inspector

[ed. There was clearly no fishing or water skiing for this keeper!]

Son Charles worked first as a local fisherman and then at the nearby Inland Lime and Stone Company as a boatman and electrician. He met Frances, his future wife, in the local community of Gulliver and they were married in the parlor of the dwelling in 1931. Although Charles didn't work for the Lighthouse Service, he and his wife lived in the dwelling, upstairs left rear bedroom. Their two daughters were born in that room.

In 1994, Frances Blanchard provided an oral history of her time living at the light station. She stated,

"Everybody always had their rooms spotless and shining. All the walls inside the lighthouse were painted gray, but not really a bad shade. The linoleum in the kitchen was also a gray marble color. The downstairs hardwood floors were all varnished and the upstairs floors painted gray. An oriental rug was in the parlor and the furniture was dark oak with black upholstery. In the kitchen was a black, wood-burning stove. A wooden shoe box sat just below the stove. Everyone removed their shoes when they walked inside and the shoes went inside the box, boy did that box ever smell!

"We never had electric power, we had a generator. In the pantry was an old wooden cabinet . . . with a zinc top. Amanda [the keeper's wife] always did her baking in there. I remember one time there were two freshly baked blueberry pies cooling on the opened party window sill. The [neighbor] Monosso's dog came up and ate both pies, was grandma ever mad."

Frances remembered the fog signal, "It was ear splitting when it went off, but we got use to it. A brick out house was just east of the brick oil house. I don't know why they ever tore the outhouses down. You'd never seen such clean and beautiful houses. There was a wooden coal shed that housed soft and hard coal . . . the rear addition to the lighthouse [dwelling] was three bedrooms and a bath, completed in 1924. The Blanchards maintained a garden and raised chickens and turkeys. Much of the diet was fresh fish, caught locally."

Another keeper at the station during Frances's time was Thomas Nelson who served as 2nd Assistant from 1910 to 1916 when he was transferred to the Manistique Breakwater Light Station. In 1917, he was transferred back to Seul Choix Point where he continued to serve as 1st Assistant until 1925.



Typical turn of the 20th century, powered launch for a Great Lakes light station. Lighthouse Society photo.

Sometime after the turn of the 20th century the station was provided a motor boat. The following letter clearly illustrates the niggardliness of the Lighthouse Service. On August 1, 1912, the Inspector wrote,

Keeper, Seul Choix Pointe:

"You are authorized to make one official trip with the station motor boat each week. In case of an emergency requiring more than the authorized trip you are directed to submit a full report to this office stating the necessity for making the extra trip, as soon as practi-

One of the early keepers was William Blanchard. Moving to Michigan's Upper Peninsula from Muskegon, MI, he arrived at Seul Choix Pointe in 1902. As 2nd Assistant Keeper he was paid \$425 a year. Two years later he was promoted to 1st Assistant and in 1910 became keeper. He remained at Seul Choix Pointe until he retired in 1942. His 40 years of service was the longest of any keeper at Seul Choix Pointe.

While living at the station he and his wife had two sons, Charles and Calvin. Both were born in the dwelling.

On August 29, 1910, Keeper William Blanchard received a letter from the District Office stating,

“You are advised that Mr. Thomas W. Nelson, of Kewaunee, WI, has been directed to report to you as Second Assistant Keeper at the earliest practicable date. Advise this office promptly as to the date he goes on duty.”

D.W. Blamer LCDR USN
Inspector
12th Lighthouse District

In recent years, Keeper Nelson’s daughter – René Nelson Evers – provided an oral history of her time at Seul Choix Pointe.

“I was only 9 months old when I came to Seul Choix, and I lived at the lighthouse until I was a sophomore . . . in high school . . . both of my brothers were born in the lighthouse and Mrs. Blanchard was mid-wife at both births. I remember that she put the baby in a coal scuttle and placed it next to the Home Peninsular stove for warmth.

“Dad helped build the Manistique break wall and the light and keeper’s dwelling in Manistique, MI. He often traveled from the Point to town every day (approximately 22 miles on very bad roads). The government only allowed the Keepers one trip to town per week using the station boat.

“I remember once when I was very young and dad was working on the Manistique Harbor, that mother took me all dressed up in my finest for a visit to see him. They had a makeshift outside toilet with rough wood on top of a deep pit. I put my feet on the ledge and accidentally fell down into the hole. When mother finally pulled me out, my beautiful little white dress was ruined . . . not to mention how upset mother was cleaning me off.

“The atmosphere at Seul Choix was just what I needed to make me into a ‘tomboy.’ We loved to snare rabbits in the winter. On the way to school . . . we could see tracks in the freshly fallen snow . . . Every night we’d collect the rabbits caught and bring them home for supper. We lived on fresh rabbit, venison and fish while we lived on the point and (later) had to cultivate a taste for beef and pork.

“I received a shot gun on my 13th birthday from my parents. It was originally owned by Con Rainbow of Gulliver. Con told dad that he was sorry about the teeth marks on the gun stock, but his dogs put them in whenever they went and fetched the gun for him.



Seul Choix Pointe Keeper and Mrs. William Blanchard. Photo courtesy of Francis Blanchard.

“We children walked daily to the Seul Choix School, one mile away.

“We had no refrigeration at the light station. The keepers stored ice from Lake Michigan in the ice house. Sometimes we would store a whole deer in the ice house. I remember that one time my mother was cooking some “out of season” venison. The local game warden came to visit and we invited him to stay for supper. He said the dinner smelled so good, what were we having? Mother said veal. When he was leaving he said that was the most delicious veal dinner he had ever had, and thanked us.

“Each family had a garden, a horse and raised chickens for meat and fresh eggs. We also had a steady diet of freshly caught fish.

“Entertainment at the Pointe was occasionally when Mr. and Mrs. Blanchard played their Edison Reel Phonograph and furniture was cleared from the front parlor and we square danced.”

“The Lighthouse Tenders *Hyacinth* and *Sumac* came regularly for inspections and to deliver supplies. They usually brought Inspector Hubbard or Ass’t. Butler.

The following log entries convey some of the work done by a tender’s crew:

June 29, 1919 – Tender *Sumac* delivered supplies to the station and brought 21 tons of hard coal.

May 4, 1921 – Tender *Sumac* delivered 20 tons of soft coal and 65 cases of mineral oil.



Seul Choix Pointe Light Station shortly after construction, prior to the tower being painted. Photo courtesy of the Gulliver Historical Society.

October 24, 1922 – An accident was sustained in connection with the launch of the Lighthouse Tender *Hyacinth*. As a result First Officer George K. Brown was drowned and to date there has not been a body recovered. Please post a copy of this communication in your Post Office and notify all fishermen should the body surface or be washed ashore. Should any of the keepers meet with success in finding the body of Mr. Brown, notify this office at once.

“The majority of my father’s duties involved hauling coal, cutting wood, shining the lens, polishing the brass in the lantern room and fog signal building. The fog signal was tested daily and the machinery was constantly being cleaned, oiled and maintained.

“In July 1917, my dad was promoted to 1st Assistant and had his salary raised to

been authorized to wear the Inspectors Efficiency Star for the year beginning January 1, 1918, and commended for having your station and personnel up to a high standard of general efficiency.

“In January 1925 dad was selected for transfer to the position of Assistant Keeper at Kewaunee, WI. The letter remarked that while his salary would be \$5 a month less than what he made at Seul Choix Pointe, [advantages are] ‘ . . . good quarters for family and all school facilities are available for children.’”

After the Coast Guard absorbed the Lighthouse Service, enlisted Coast Guardsmen began to be assigned to lights stations. At first they served under civilian keepers, men with years of experience at light stations. Eventually light station crews were all enlisted.

In 1987, the Gulliver Historical Society was formed and obtained the right to establish a museum in the old fog signal building. Over the next year the new historical society did an outstanding job of raising funds through grants, donations and other creative means. The held a grand opening of the museum on August 5, 1989 in conjunction with the celebration of the Bicentennial of our country’s Lighthouse Service.

The Gulliver Historical Society has done an amazing job since their inception. This small and impoverished community received their first grant of \$19,000 from the state the year they were established. They used this money along with an additional \$4,500 they raised to restore the fog signal building and establish the museum. In 1994, they were awarded a \$27,000 matching grant, again from the state. The \$54,000 was used to paint the tower and dwelling and install new furnaces in the living quarters. Subsequently the society discovered dry rot in window frames and that the roof and chimneys needed repairs. They managed to include this work in the funds on hand. Being creative, they have used local prison inmates to accomplish restoration work on the interior and exterior of the buildings.

Seul Choix Point Light Station is a registered Michigan Historic Site. The light station is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

For more information, write the Gulliver Historical Society, RR 1, Box 79, Gulliver, MI 49840. Seul Choix Point Lighthouse is open from Memorial Day Weekend until about October 15. Hours are 10am to 6pm seven days a week. Phone number at the lighthouse and museum is 906-283-3183.

For more information check out Terry Pepper’s excellent website at: www.terrypepper.com/lights/michigan/seulchoix/seulchoix.htm.



The Seul Choix Pointe station showing the 1st Assistant Keeper’s dwelling at right. The dwelling was modified from the original stable. Eventually the structure was sold and relocated to another property. The white structure next to the dwelling is the boathouse. Photo courtesy of the author.

\$540 a year, and he was given 30 cents a day for rations.

“Scrubbing, polishing, hauling and painting were the major words of a lighthouse keeper’s vocabulary. If they weren’t painting outside they were most certainly painting inside.”

The following log entries convey some of her dad’s daily chores:

July 8, 1921 – Have painted motor boat, scrubbing walls and varnishing floors, doors and moldings, cutting weeds and general duties attended to.

December 31, 1917 – Your keeper has

Jay Stoddard, a young enlisted Coast Guardsman was assigned to Seul Choix Pointe in 1960, under civilian keeper Ronald Rosie, Sr. He served two years and while at the Pointe helped removed the Fresnel lens and install a modern aero-beacon. In 1972 the light was automated and the keepers removed.

The local population feared that the boarded up station, very much a part of their maritime history, would fall prey to vandals. In the 1980’s, local citizens convinced the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to purchase the property and lease it to the local township.

Today the fog signal building is home to the Gulliver Historical Museum. The restored boathouse contains maritime memorabilia. The entire complex is open free to the public from mid-May through mid-October, seven days a week, 10:00am – 6:00pm. A donation of \$2.00 per person is suggested to climb the lighthouse tower.