

## The Lighthouse and Its Keepers

*"Its gallant beam throughout the night  
Has kept great ships upon their course."*

The lighthouse on South Manitou Island is, or was while it was still in operation, perhaps the most beautiful on the Great Lakes. With its round base gracefully tapering toward the summit, it rises some 100 feet above the surface of the water. An attractive iron-wrought lookout surrounds the glass-enclosed tower.

The lighthouse one sees today replaces an earlier lighthouse begun in 1839 and completed early in 1840. On July 7, 1838, Congress appropriated \$5,000 for the construction of a lighthouse on South Manitou Island. On June 15, 1839, the Treasury Department gave instructions to the Surveyor General in Cincinnati to reserve public lands for the lighthouse site. Work on the lighthouse started the same year. By the end of spring 1840 it was completed and ready for a keeper. A letter from the Superintendent of Lights at Michilimackinac, dated June 16, 1840, stated that the lighthouse needed a keeper and proposed that William N. Burton be given the position. The superintendent stated that Mr. Burton was a "sober, industrious and good man." On September 28, 1840, the Lighthouse Bureau, Treasury Department, replied confirming the appointment. It set the salary at \$350 per annum and instructed the Superintendent, one Abraham Wendell, to "admonish Mr. Burton of the necessity of residing in and being himself steadily in the house provided for the Keeper."

Although no drawing or sketch of the original lighthouse exists, it was precisely that — a house with a light on top of it. Apparently many of the early lighthouses were of this type. The original lighthouse on South Manitou consisted of a one-and-one-half story house of yellow brick with seven rooms including a "sitting room, chamber, and kitchen." Above the house on a round, white, wooden tower measuring six feet in diameter, stood the light or lantern — a stationary beacon of the fourth order. It was reached by means of a wooden staircase. Because of the rise on which the lighthouse was located, its lantern gleamed in the night some seventy feet above sea level. The lighthouse also had a lifeboat and a fog signal. The signal was a bell weighing 1000 pounds and was struck "by means of machinery."

Mr. Burton took charge of the lighthouse and functioned as its keeper for something less than three years. It is quite likely that because of his "industriousness," the keeper's job hindered him from managing his wharf and from superintending the cutting and sale of cordwood for the woodburning steamers that were now stopping regularly at the island. A letter, dated July 20, 1842, from the Treasury Department to the District Superintendent states:

"The light is complained of as being badly kept. You will inform the Keeper if he does not keep a better light he will have to give place to some person who will. If it should be caused by want of ventilation in the lantern, you will apply the proper remedy. Two of the lamps here throw their light upon the shore, and of course are useless. You will direct the keeper to discontinue them. This keeper it seems, lives a mile from the Lighthouse and does his duty by deputy. You will direct him to remove into the keeper's house and execute the duties himself, in default of which he will be removed without hesitation. It is alleged that this light is obscured in one direction by trees

which may be removed at an expense of about twenty dollars. You will cause the trees to be removed if you shall find the expense will not exceed twenty or thirty dollars."

From the correspondence of the Lighthouse Bureau, it appears that there was growing difficulty in administering from Washington such a far flung operation. Disbursements and appointments were made and approved in Washington. Instructions, such as the one to the superintendent at Michilimackinac for cutting the trees on South Manitou, are a case in point. After writing that the cost of cutting the trees should not exceed thirty dollars, a letter followed on September 24, 1842, raising the limit of the expenditure to fifty dollars. It must have been irritating to a Federal official to note that over a year later, after having increased the offer, the offending trees were still standing. There is no indication as to when or by whom the trees were finally cut.

On May 30, 1843, a letter was dispatched from Washington appointing Bael Ward as Keeper of South Manitou Light "vice Mr. Burton, removed." The superintendent was again instructed to "admonish the new keeper that he should reside in the lighthouse." Apparently Mr. Burton, without disappointment on his part, took up residence once more in his house near the wharf and turned his attention to his expanding business with the visiting steamers.

The lighthouse keeper's dwelling erected in 1858 was fashioned after the earlier lighthouse. The light or lantern rose above it on a wooden tower. A separate structure was built to house the fog signal.

Recommendations made in 1869 for the construction of a lighthouse tower in front of the dwelling give a good picture of developments that had taken place during the relatively short span of thirty years following the construction of the first lighthouse. The importance of South Manitou harbor for shipping was reemphasized. The report states:

"Through the channel between South Manitou Island and the mainland, the principal commerce of the Lake passes, guided by this light which should have a lense of a higher order, with greater elevation and a characteristic distinction not readily mistaken. It is also a guide to a harbor of refuge which is probably more used than any other on the entire chain of lakes, and it is frequently impossible to distinguish the present light from those on board of vessels at anchor."

Appropriations were made, over a three-year period, to complete a tower with a third-order lens. A lighthouse inspector's report of 1871 gives an interesting description of work on the tower one sees today:

"The work of improving this station is in progress, though the working party has been temporarily withdrawn for service elsewhere. All the materials are on the ground and by the 29th of July the entire working force will be again at the station, when it is expected the work will go on uninterruptedly until its completion before the close of the season. The improvements will consist of a third-order tower founded on piles, having its focal plane one hundred feet above the surface of the lake, and a covered passage-way connecting the tower and keeper's dwelling. The improvement will be of great value to the commerce between Lake Michigan and the other lakes."

The construction of the tower in 1871 gave South Manitou one of the highest lighthouse towers on the Great Lakes. The great glass lens was placed on an iron platform which revolved by means of clockwork weights. It is said that on one