

## New Look for an Old Light Part One

By Wayne Sapulski

Grand Island is the largest island located along the southern shore of Lake Superior. Encompassing some 13,500 acres, the island is eight miles in length and nearly four miles wide at its widest point. The island lies about one-half mile from the mainland community of Munising, Michigan. Munising Harbor, in the lee of this huge island, is the only natural harbor of refuge for vessel traffic between the Soo and Marquette, which lies another 43 miles to the west. Grand Island has a very interesting history dating back to the days of the Native Americans, fur trappers, and the first permanent white settlers. By 1900 most of the island had been purchased by the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company. The Ohio-based company was one of the largest landowners in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and most of their holdings were eventually either mined for iron or harvested for lumber. Grand Island became a National Recreation Area in 1990 when the U.S. Forest Service purchased the island from Cleveland Cliffs. Today the island is managed by the Forest Service district office



Jack Deo - Superior View

**Grand Island East Channel Light c.1908. The kitchen/wood shed with the lean-to roof at the back of the building, as well as the chimney, have been gone for decades**

in Munising as part of the Hiawatha National Forest.

The need for lights to mark both

the eastern and western approaches to Munising Harbor, or Grand Island Harbor as it was then known, had been proposed as early as 1860. The funds appropriated by Congress in June of that year, a meager \$6,000, were insufficient for the work proposed. The need to fund the Civil War effort disrupted completion of many navigation projects around the country, so it was not until 1866 that another \$10,000 became available for the recommended lights. Construction on the Grand Island East Channel Light (GIECL), originally known as the Grand Island Harbor Light, began in 1867 and was completed the following summer. The light was situated on a low-lying, sandy point at the southeastern extremity of Grand Island as that was the narrowest point of the channel between the island and the mainland. The lighthouse consisted of a square wooden tower with an overall height of 45 feet attached to the front of a one-and-a-half story wood framed dwelling, both painted white.



Alger County Historical Society

**Grand Island East Channel Light c. 1905**

*The Beacon, Spring 2007*

The original optic consisted of a lens lantern from which was displayed a fixed white light at a focal plane of 49 feet above water level. This light was first exhibited on the evening of August 15, 1868 but proved to be of insufficient intensity. The lens lantern was subsequently replaced with a fifth order Fresnel lens the following year. Due to the structure's location on low ground close to the water's edge, a considerable amount of rock-filled timber cribbing was installed along the shoreline to hinder erosion and prevent foundation damage. Erosion, however, continued to be an incessant foe and extensive additional cribbing was installed in 1900 and reinforced periodically thereafter as needed.

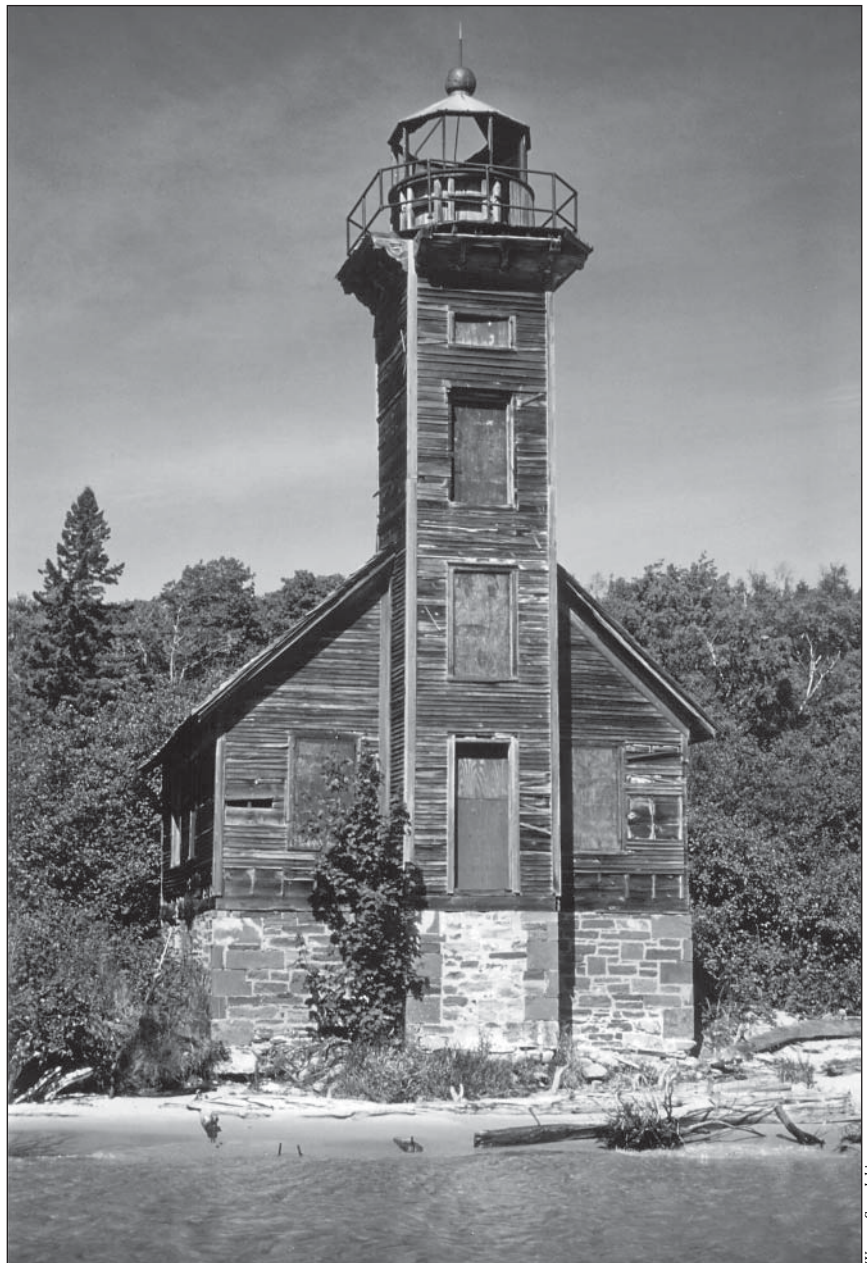
Unfortunately, the location of GIECL proved to be less than ideal and mariners complained that it was difficult to spot until they were almost abeam of it. The 1905 Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board stated that mariners coming into the harbor no longer used the lighthouse to guide them. Dangerous shoals and a shipwreck just offshore from the light constituted hazards that could be more easily avoided if range lights were established on the mainland in Munising. The Munising Range Lights were eventually established on October 30, 1908 and remain in service today. GIECL was officially decommissioned prior to the start of navigation in 1909. At the time it was discontinued it had acquired the moniker of "Pryor's Light", so called because of its last and one of its longest serving keepers, George Pryor.

In 1915, the 44 acre site of the former light station was sold to a club of 20 members who distributed the lots among themselves with each having part ownership in the structure itself. Over the years the lots were combined, traded, passed along and sold to the point where numerous owners possessed part interest in the lighthouse, including the Forest Service as part of the Grand Island National Recreation Area. Some

of those private owners continue to maintain summer homes and camps nearby, the only privately owned land within the National Recreation Area. Unfortunately, vacant structures that many people have an ownership interest in are usually those no one person is willing to take responsibility for. Such was the fate of the GIECL. Neglect, vandalism, and exposure to the harsh northern climate took their inevitable toll on the abandoned structure, over

time reducing it to an empty shell in serious need of internal support. What white paint there had been slowly fell away causing the weathered wooden siding to take on a dark gray appearance. Even in its semi-ruinous state, GIECL became an obligatory tourist stop on the Pictured Rock Cruises out of Munising, making it one of the most photographed lighthouses in Michigan.

As a privately owned structure,



Wayne Saputski

*The sad state of Grand Island East Channel Light before improvements, September 2000*



Wayne Szpilski

***Grand Island East Channel Light Rescue Project volunteers at work on the breakwater, September 2000***

GIECL remains ineligible for public grant money. From time to time, private interests did undertake minor stabilization work. The lighthouse was last roofed with cedar shake shingles in 1985. At the same time, wire cables and turnbuckles were installed across the interior of the dwelling to pull back into shape its outwardly bowing sides. By 1999, however, erosion was again threatening the severely deteriorated structure. Water was lapping within a few feet of the lighthouse's foundation even though Lake Superior was nearing a cyclical record low water level.

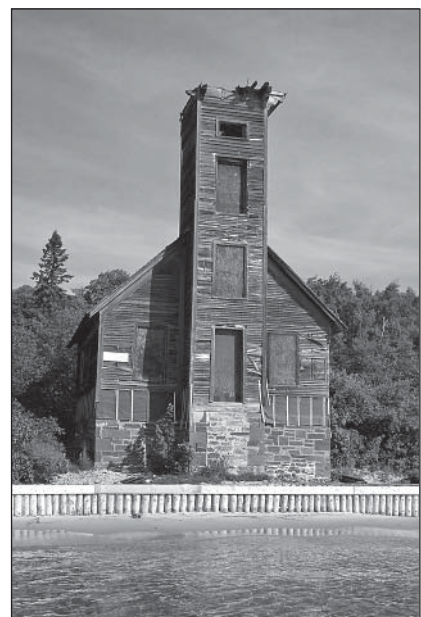
In order to save their beloved landmark, a community effort called the Grand Island East Channel Light Rescue Project (GIECLRP) formed in Munising under the aegis of the Alger County Historical Society. The GIECLRP works in cooperation with private property owners and the Forest Service who administers Grand Island National Recreation Area. The idea was not to restore the old lighthouse to its former glory, but instead to stop the erosion and stabilize the structure to prevent its complete collapse. The first meeting of the GIECLRP was held in September of 1999 with the goals to raise funds, garner donations, and *The Beacon*, Spring 2007

establish a volunteer workforce. Chris Case became the Project Coordinator, a position for which he was well qualified. As a long time employee of the National Park Service, Chris is based in Munising as the Facilities Manager for the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. He was very involved in the restoration of the Au Sable Lighthouse which lies within the National Lakeshore. The GIECLRP functions with a core work group of six to eight volunteers, but has been assisted by up to 200 additional volunteers since its formation.

The first order of business, which commenced in the summer of 2000, was the construction of a protective breakwater for several hundred feet along the shoreline in front of the lighthouse. Working in waste-deep cold water, donated cedar posts were sunk vertically into the shoreline by volunteers using a water jet to displace the sand. The tops of the posts were sawn off even and capped with bolted-on timbers. The back of the breakwater was stabilized with groins of wire mesh filled with rocks laboriously gathered from the lake bed along the shoreline. Wire cables anchored to stakes set back farther on shore provide additional vertical reinforcement. Most of this

work was completed by the end of 2001.

With shoreline protection in place, attention was directed to the building itself in 2002. GIECL rests upon a raised foundation, creating beneath it what is known as a Michigan basement. Closer inspection revealed that the sills atop the foundation upon which the lighthouse sat were completely rotten. Replacement necessitated jacking the building up. Prior to this task, however, it needed to be strengthened in order to take the strain. To this end, the structure was stabilized internally by rebuilding a significant portion of the first floor joists and flooring, second floor joists, and reinforcing the studding of the exterior side walls. Pulling the sides of the building back into alignment internally with new construction also permitted the removal of the wire cables and turnbuckles installed back in 1985. Exterior clapboard siding literally crumbled as it was removed from the building. That which could be saved and reused was placed on the north side of the lighthouse. New clapboards were milled to match the original profile and installed on the other three sides. New window blanks were fabricated and installed to keep out the weather.



Chris Case

***Not so sexy "topless" view of Grand Island East Channel Light in 2003***

Some were hinged internally to permit opening for ventilation and to admit light for interior work.

The top 12 inches of the tower, lantern deck, decorative wooden brackets, and lantern room were all beyond repair on site. These components were completely removed in the fall of 2002 and transported to Northern Michigan University in Marquette. There, students at the Jacobetti Vocational Training Center, part of the College of Technology and Applied Sciences, undertook a complete rebuild. The lower half or waist wall of the lantern room consisted of wood and had to be completely rebuilt as well. The original iron work of the upper half was reused. A new copper roof was installed on the lantern room by Pellow Roofing of Marquette. Missing for almost two years, the rebuilt top of the tower was bolted back into place late in August 2004. No window glass was installed in the lantern room in order to eliminate the worry of potential

breakage. Although the lantern room is wide open to the weather, a watertight hatch in the lantern deck keeps the elements out of the inside of the tower. The lantern deck was finished with a special polymer coating that sheds water.

Urgent work needed to complete the actual “rescue” portion of the project continued through 2005. The summer of 2006 finally provided a welcome respite from heavy labor for the volunteers of the GIECLRP. A steel door was installed to secure the ground level entrance into the basement. Steel grates were installed over the basement windows so they could be kept open to promote interior ventilation while keeping animals out. High on the wish list for 2007 is the procurement of “six over six” window mullions to be installed over the blocked off windows to provide a more natural appearance. And fundraising continues unabated as the eventual replacement of the roof will be a major expense. Continued

monitoring and preservation will be essential for the survival of the newly stabilized Grand Island East Channel Light.

Those readers wishing to get involved in the project and/or make a tax-deductible monetary contribution are encouraged to contact the Grand Island East Channel Light Rescue Project, c/o Alger County Historical Society, P.O. Box 201, Munising, MI 49862. For further information contact the Project Coordinator, Chris Case, at (906)-387-2607 or (906)-387-5149.

Status: Inactive. Stabilized semi-ruin. Not open to the public. Access: Boat. Departing from two different locations within Munising, both Pictured Rock Cruises and Lake Superior Shipwreck Tours operate tour boats that pause directly in front of the lighthouse for picture taking. As the lighthouse faces east, the best bet for lighting is a morning tour on a sunny day.



*Grand Island East Channel Light from the northeast, July 2005. Salvaged original siding was reused on the north side of the building, which accounts for the difference in appearance.*

Wayne Sopotnicki