

Lost Lights of the Great Lakes – Part 3

By Wayne S. Sapulski

Poverty Island Light, MI, Lake Michigan

There are four main passages through the gauntlet of islands and shoals that separate the waters of Green Bay from Lake Michigan. The southern two lie within the waters of Wisconsin. The northern two, lying within Michigan waters, are at St. Martin Island and Poverty Island. Poverty Island Passage is the northernmost of the four and passes to the south of Poverty Island. Poverty Island Light was established on the southern edge of the island to mark the passage, which continues to be heavily used by ships bound for the ore docks at Escanaba.

Construction commenced in August 1873, but continued in spurts over the next two years due to insufficient funding. Enough progress had been made by August 1 of the following year such that a temporary light was able to be displayed for the first time from the roof of the keeper's dwelling. As completed, Poverty Island Light consisted of a conical, red-brick tower with an overall height of 70 feet. An enclosed passageway connected the tower to a one and a half story red-brick keeper's dwelling. Both structures were painted white. Topped by a decagonal cast-iron lantern room, the original optic was a fourth order Fresnel lens from which was displayed a flashing red light at a focal plane of 80 feet above lake level. The light was exhibited for the first time, and the station formally established, on August 10, 1875. A fog signal building was constructed in 1885 to house the equipment for duplicate 10" steam whistles, which went into operation on October 1 of that year. A cylindrical, cast-iron oil house was added to the site in September 1894, and a newer assistant keeper's dwelling was built just to the west of the tower around 1930.

The Beacon, Spring 2011

The design of Poverty Island Light was repeated at three other locations on the Great Lakes. Within a few years of each other, nearly identical structures were built at St. Helena Island in northern Lake Michigan, and on Lake Huron at Sturgeon Point and Tawas Point.

Around 1950, the Coast Guard removed the Fresnel lens from the tower and replaced it with a then more modern aeronautical style beacon. The

lighthouse was automated in 1957 and the station vacated. With no one in residence at this remote location, the buildings soon deteriorated from exposure to the elements, lack of maintenance, and damage by vandals.

In 1976 the light was changed to a solar-powered, 300mm acrylic optic and moved to a skeletal steel tower erected on a high point near the middle of the island. At the same time, the



Poverty Island lighthouse in July, 1913. Note the children sitting on the woodpile.



Wayne S. Sapulski, Maritime Photographic Company

The sadly deteriorating condition of the Poverty Island lighthouse is evident in this photograph taken by the author in July 2000.

cast-iron lantern room was removed from the tower, but stored on site. The lantern room was donated to the Delta County Historical Society in 1978 and eventually used in their very successful restoration of Sand Point Light in Escanaba. Due to encroaching vegetation at the location of the newer steel tower, the acrylic optic was mounted on a metal pole and transferred back to the top of the lanternless, brick tower in May 1984. Continued advances in the electronic aids to navigation used on modern freighters made Poverty Island Light obsolete, and it was finally extinguished for good in 1995.

The scene that presents itself today at the old light station is one of the most pitiful on the Great Lakes. The rocky site is wildly overgrown. The decapitated lighthouse is in an advanced

state of decay. Paint is peeling, bricks are spalling, and the interior is unsafe to enter. A quilt-work of rotting plywood patches placed by concerned individuals over the years covers some of the many holes in the roof that have allowed water seepage to compromise the structural integrity of the building. The assistant keeper's dwelling next door has already collapsed in on itself. The dock, boathouse, and fog signal building are all gone. The only other structure remaining at the site, the cast-iron oil house, is severely corroded.

The rocky shoreline at the base of the light station is a beauty. Unfortunately, those rocks severely limit access to the site in all but the calmest weather. With immediate attention, the lighthouse itself could still be saved, but this outcome is very unlikely. Poverty Island is presently owned and managed by the

U.S Fish and Wildlife Service through their office at the Seney National Wildlife Refuge in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. To date, Poverty Island Light Station has not been excused under the provisions of the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. Recent remarks coming out of the USFWS seem to indicate that there is no interest on the part of the agency to apply for the property or to partner with any other concerned group to help save this lighthouse.

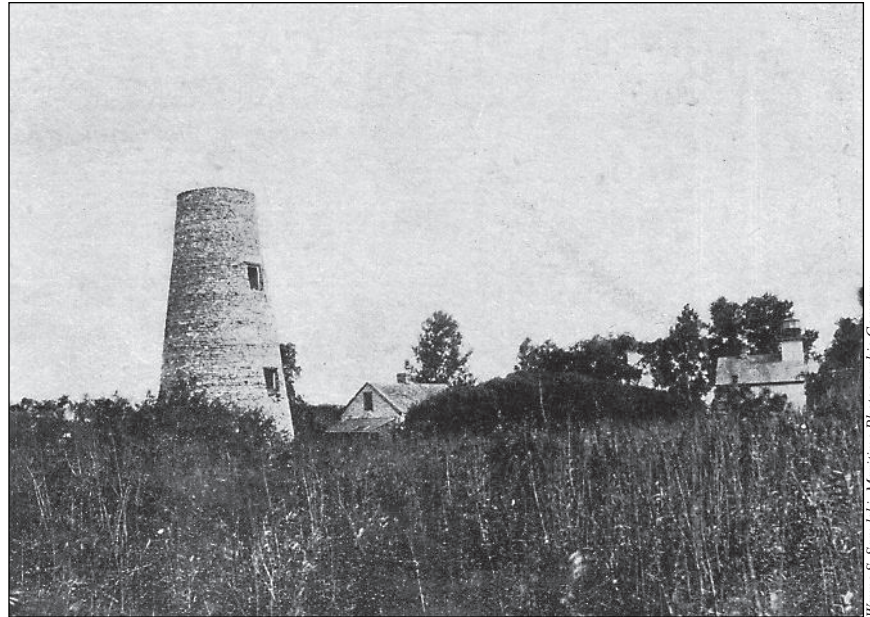
A Tale of Three Tail Point Lights, Green Bay, WI

Green Bay Harbor is located at the mouth of the Fox River at the south end of Green Bay, about 40 miles southwest from Sturgeon Bay and 75 miles from Porte des Morte Passage. The harbor serves the Wisconsin cities

The Beacon, Spring 2011

of Green Bay and De Pere. Green Bay is one of the oldest historical points on Lake Michigan. French missionaries touched there as early as 1639 and the first permanent settlement was made in 1745. An American trading post was founded in 1815. In 1816 the Federal government erected Fort Howard. Green Bay has numerous docks and wharves on both sides of the Fox River. The harbor remains one of the most important on Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes. The major commodities handled include coal, limestone, wood pulp, cement, aggregates, and agricultural products.

In its natural state, direct access to the mouth of the Fox River was blocked by areas of shoal water and low-lying islands at the south end of the bay. The natural channel around these obstructions was convoluted and prone to shifting. A straighter channel to the mouth of the river was the goal of harbor improvements begun in



Wayne S. Szupalski, Maritime Photographic Company

A 1905 postcard view of the first Tail Point Light with the 1859 structure to the right

1867. The project was an evolutionary one, with many changes in direction, dimensions, and lighting made to the channel as the ships using it grew larger in size. The present dredged entrance

channel leads generally southwest through the shallow water in the south end of Green Bay for about 11.5 miles to the mouth of the Fox River. Since 1935, the northern entrance to the channel has been marked by the Green Bay Harbor Entrance Light.



Wisconsin Historical Society

The first Tail Point lighthouse tower and dwelling as they appeared around 1905

The Beacon, Spring 2011

Three very different lighthouses in the vicinity of Long Tail Point have marked the approach to the harbor at Green Bay. Long Tail Point lies four and a half miles north of the Fox River mouth along the western shore of Green Bay. The point is a low ridge of sand and gravel, submerged in places, that extends southeast about three miles from the shoreline starting just south of the mouth of the Suamico River.

The first Tail Point Light was established in 1848 on the southeast end of the point. It consisted of a conical rubble-stone tower with a detached, story and a half stone keepers dwelling of five rooms that measured 20 feet by 30 feet. Both structures were whitewashed. The tower itself had an overall height of 51 feet and six inches. It measured 14 feet, seven inches in diameter at the base and seven feet, nine inches in diameter at the parapet. The walls of the tower were four feet, eight inches

thick at the base, tapering to a thickness of two feet, six inches at the parapet. Wooden steps wound upward through the tower to a lantern deck of soapstone. Topped by an octagonal bird-cage style lantern room, an array of Lewis patent lamps and 14" reflectors produced a fixed white light at a focal plane of 56 feet above water level. The tower was refitted with a sixth order Fresnel lens in 1856. No photographs of this first Tail Point Light while it was still in operation have ever been found.

By the mid-1850s, water was lapping at the base of the tower and it was feared that erosion would soon undermine the structure. For that reason the Lighthouse Board discontinued use of the tower in 1859, transferring the light to a new wooden lighthouse constructed on higher ground to the northwest a couple of hundred feet away. The old tower soon fell into disrepair and by the 1870s it was considered an eyesore. A contractor assigned to demolish the tower, either lacking the proper tools or motivation, failed at the task. The hollow shell of the old stone tower remains standing today and the ruins are considered nostalgic. Followed by two later lighthouses, ironically it remains the only one to survive.

Locally, the ruins of this first Tail Point Light are often referred to as the Old Long Tail Point Light. However, that name (as correctly explained by Terry Pepper in the last issue of *The Beacon*) is technically incorrect. All three lighthouses at this location were always officially referred to simply as "Tail Point."

The second Tail Point Light was established in 1859 on higher ground a couple of hundred feet to the northwest of the old stone tower. It consisted of a two-story, wood-framed dwelling with a square wooden light tower emerging from the roof peak that was topped by a nine-sided cast-iron lantern room. The optic employed was now a fourth order Fresnel lens from which was displayed



Front view of the timber-frame second Tail Point Light taken in July of 1913

a fixed white light at a focal plane of 56 feet above water level. Some of the difficulty the keepers encountered in working at this location is hinted at in old rear view photographs of the station. Those photographs always show a long, rickety access walkway consisting of wooden planks raised just above the level of the surrounding marsh.

The design of this lighthouse was repeated with minor variations at several locations around the lakes and especially on Lake Michigan. Within a couple of years, nearly identical structures were built at Cheboygan Point on Lake Huron and on Lake Michigan at Sheboygan, St. Joseph, and the Kalamazoo River (Saugatuck).

By 1898, it was felt a light closer to the newly dredged entrance channel would better serve shipping. On August 1, 1899, the light was transferred to a new Tail Point Light constructed offshore on a timber crib. Keepers who maintained the new light via boat continued to use the old wooden lighthouse as their quarters. Once the crib light was automated in the early 1930s, the wooden lighthouse was no longer needed. It was eventually sold to a private individual with the

stipulation that it be removed from the area, which had been designated a National Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. The new owner attempted to move it in winter over the ice. Unfortunately, the wheels of the trailer used broke through the ice up to its axles and became stuck. The lighthouse was dismantled then and there before it could break through the ice completely. Much of the salvaged lumber was used nearby on a mainland farm.



Rear view of second Tail Point light ca. 1910



National Archives

The third and final lighthouse to grace Tail Point as it appeared on September 1, 1914

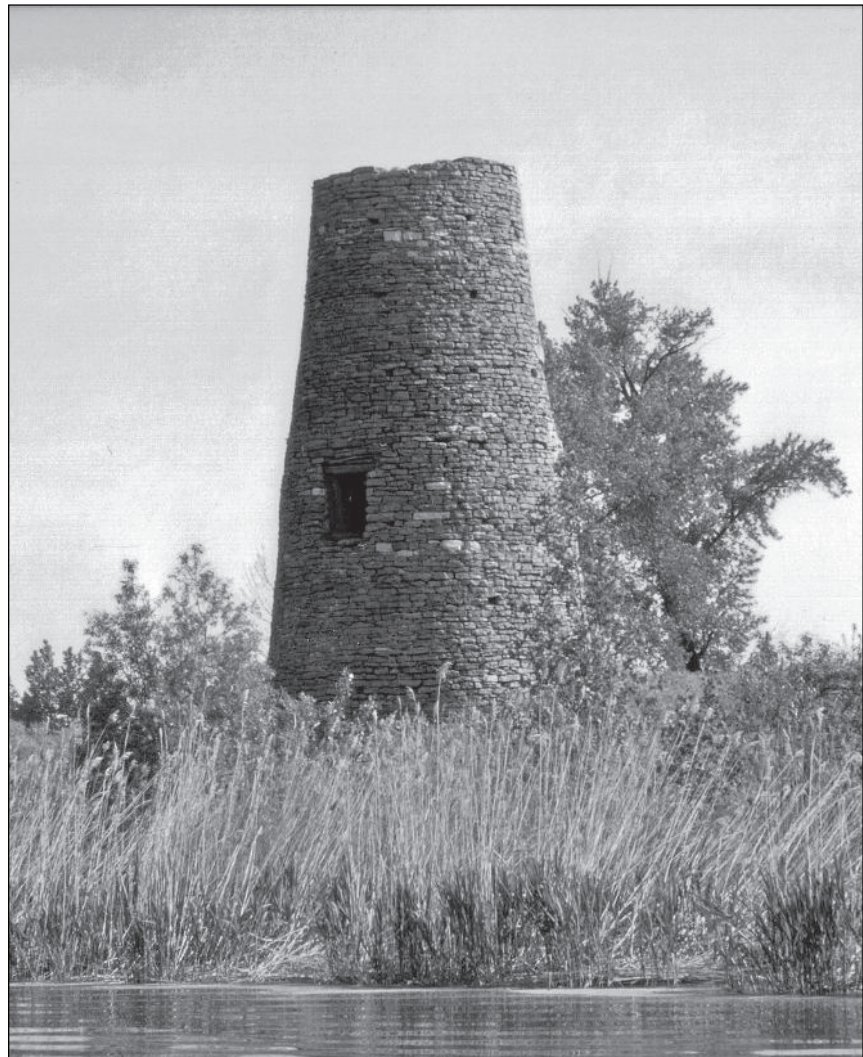
A Congressional appropriation of \$7,500 approved on July 1, 1898 set preparations in motion to move Tail Point Light Station once again. The building plans used were largely identical to those drawn up three years earlier for the construction of Little Rapids Cut North Entry Light No. 27 on the St. Marys River. (See following story). The work commenced on April 15, 1899. The third and final Tail Point Light was established just over three months later on August 1, 1899. It was located off the southeast tip of Long Tail Point in 10 feet of water adjacent to the western edge of the dredged entrance channel. This lighthouse consisted of a one and a half story, wood-framed dwelling with a hipped roof surmounted by a round lantern room with storm panes mounted in helical astragals.

All four sides of the hipped roof were pierced by dormer windows. The optic was the fourth order Fresnel lens from the previous tower from which was displayed a fixed white light at a focal plane of 38 feet above water level. The original color scheme was buff in color with white trim and a red roof. The dwelling was just under 25 feet square in plan and was centered on a stone-filled, timber crib foundation that was 35 feet square in plan. The building

The Beacon, Spring 2011

contained emergency quarters should one of the keepers become stranded there during bad weather, but the keepers continued to live in the second lighthouse on the point. A fog signal consisting of a five inch compressed air whistle powered by gasoline engines was established in 1911.

This Tail Point Light was automated to acetylene gas in 1936 and subsequently upgraded over the following decades as lighting technology improved. Sitting vacant, it remained in service until it was washed off its foundation during a severe storm in April 1973. Thereafter a modern pole light was mounted on the same crib.



Hayne S. Saputski, Maritime Photographic Company

As shown by the author's photograph taken in 1998, the original tower still stands proud

Little Rapids Cut North Entrance Light No. 27, St. Marys River, MI

Little Rapids Cut North Entrance Light No. 27 was established in 1895 to mark the turn from the Bayfield Channel southward into the recently completed Little Rapids Cut about two miles east of the Soo locks. The light was located 1,500 feet offshore in 20 feet of water, 5/8 of a mile northwest of Mission Point. This lighthouse consisted of a one and a half story, wood-framed dwelling of five rooms and a pantry with a hipped roof surmounted by an octagonal lantern room. All four sides of the hipped roof were pierced by dormer windows. The original color scheme was buff in color with white trim and a red roof. The dwelling was just under 25 feet square in plan and was centered on a stone-filled, timber crib foundation that was 35 feet square in plan. The crib deck rose six and a half feet above the river. The optic was a fifth order Fresnel lens that displayed a white, occulting light at a focal plane 37 feet above the water. As part of the original plan, an unlit oil room was roughly formed under the deck of the crib by removing a portion of the stone fill. Due to water seepage, oil butts stored in the crib over the winter were found frozen into the ice in the spring. For this reason, a new brick oil house was quickly built next to the residence of the head keeper on shore at Mission Point. The North Entrance Light was actually home to the assistant keeper and his family. Together, the keeper and his assistant were also responsible for tending the Bayfield Rock Range Lights (established 1892; automated to acetylene on December 1, 1913) located across the channel on Sugar Island and the minor lights of the Little Rapids Cut.

As an aside, less than four years after the North Entrance Light was built, the same plans were used for the construction of the third Tail Point Light near the mouth of the Fox River just north of Green Bay, Wisconsin. There were



National Archives

The Little Rapids Cut North Entry Light No.27 in the St. Marys River circa 1895

subtle differences however. The crib foundation at Tail Point was tall enough to allow for a basement storage area and oil room with windows under the dwelling. In addition, the lantern room at Tail Point was circular in plan with storm panes mounted in helical astragals. (Yes, Wayne spends too much time looking at these old photographs.)

The North Entrance Light was automated to an acetylene gas lamp on December 18, 1911. It was finally removed from

service at the end of the 1929 shipping season and razed as part of a dredging project to widen the turn between channels it marked. Over the following decades, the head keeper's house at Mission Point served various functions and remained in federal ownership until 2002 when it was finally sold private. The new owners have completely refurbished, added to, and upgraded the property, affording themselves one of the best locations for boat watching on the entire river.



Wayne S. Sapulski, Maritime Photographic Company

The former head keeper's quarters at Mission Point on the St. Marys, now a private home

The Beacon, Spring 2011

Au Sable Pierhead Light, MI, Lake Huron

Au Sable Harbor is located at the mouth of the Au Sable River, along the western shore of Lake Huron about midway between Tawas City to the south and Harrisville to the north. The area was first settled in 1848, giving rise to the neighboring towns of Oscoda to the north of the river and Au Sable to the south. Au Sable was incorporated as a city in 1889. Oscoda remains an unincorporated community to this day.

Commercial fishing formed the base of economic activity in the area when it was first settled. Near the end of the Civil War, lumber barons were attracted to the area by vast stands of virgin pine all in close proximity to the Au Sable River. With more than adequate depths of water and wide unobstructed curves, the river became an excellent avenue for moving logs down to the shores of Lake Huron. Over the next thirty years, lumbering became the predominant industry with eight saw mills operating between the two sister towns, and a population of up to 10,000 people in Au Sable alone.

Au Sable Pierhead Light was established in 1873 on the north side of the river. Typical of the period, it consisted of a square, wooden, pyramidal tower with an open lower framework. A fixed red light was displayed from a sixth order Fresnel lens at a focal plane 32 feet above lake level. The Federal project for improvement of this harbor was adopted in 1879 and consisted of obtaining a channel of not less than 10 feet deep for a width of 100 feet from Lake Huron up river to the public road bridge at Au Sable. Although very large amounts of fish and timber moved through this port, most shipments were made from private piers built into the lake that were entirely outside the harbor. It was for this reason that after 1892, General Orlando M. Poe, who was in charge of the Federal work,

The Beacon, Spring 2011



Wayne S. Sepulski, Maritime Photographic Company

A typical Great Lakes pierhead beacon, the Au Sable north Pierhead Light circa 1905

recommended no further appropriations for additional improvements at the harbor.

By 1900 the Au Sable-Oscoda area was on the decline. Commercial fishermen had over-fished the nearby waters of Lake Huron and lumbermen had clear cut virtually all of the easily accessible trees. The final blow came on July 7, 1911. The previous weeks had been especially hot and dry in the area. Late in the afternoon on July 11, a west wind sprang up and fanned several minor brush fires well west of the sister towns. Quickly growing in size, the flames spread eastward and swept across the logged out areas with a vengeance. The severity of the situation was not realized by local residents until it was too late. They had little choice but to flee to the steamship docks and Lake Huron shoreline to watch as their towns were devastated by the fire. While there were

only five recorded deaths as a result of the fire, both Au Sable and Oscoda were virtually gone. The rebuilding of both towns took many years.

Contrary to what has appeared in other texts, the fire did not reach the lighthouse. After the fire, however, it was no longer really needed as commerce practically ceased. On December 10, 1912, the pierhead light was automated to an acetylene gas lamp at a focal plane of 34 feet above lake level and moved to a new tower. The replacement tower consisted of white, pyramidal, steel skeleton surmounting a white tank house on a square concrete base rising eight feet above the water. It was located on the north pierhead in front of the former wooden tower, which was then removed. The acetylene light was electrified in 1940. A series of modern minor lights have marked the harbor entrance since that time.

Scotch Bonnet Light, Lake Ontario, Ontario, Canada

Scotch Bonnet Island, which has also been known as Egg Island due to its abundance of nesting birds, is a two acre sliver of rock located just over three miles off Huyck Point along the southwestern shore of Ontario's Prince Edward County. Rising barely seven feet above lake level, the island was usually awash in storms of any severity. As such, the island and the detached Scotch Bonnet Shoal nearby presented hazards to coasting vessels.

Scotch Bonnet Light entered service in September of 1856. Limestone from the mainland was used to construct

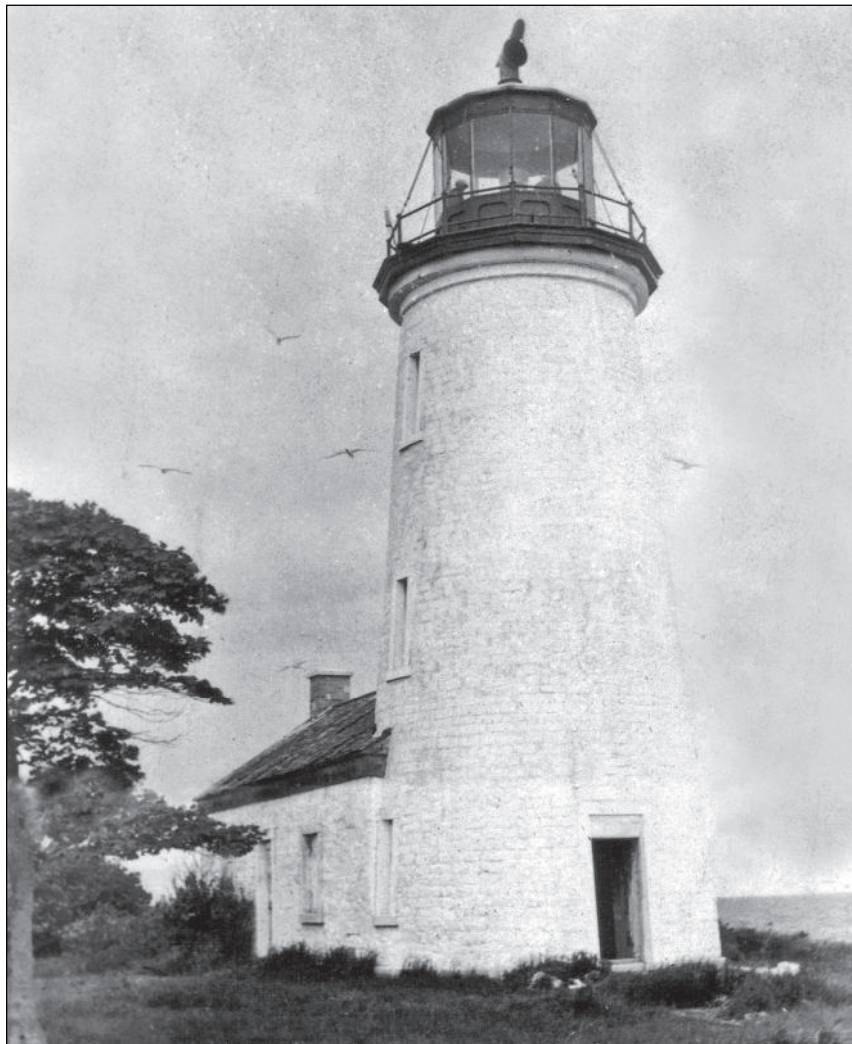


Wayne S. Szpanski, Maritime Photographic Company

Today, virtually all of the dwelling and much of the tower have crumbled to the ground

the 54 foot conical tower and attached keeper's dwelling. The optic consisted of a catoptric array of 10 lamps and 15"

reflectors that produced a fixed white light at a focal plane of 51 feet above lake level, generally visible for 13 miles. The keeper was also responsible for answering the fog signals from passing vessels with a hand horn. Once established, Scotch Bonnet Light helped to fill a serious gap in coastal lighting that then existed between Presqu'île Point some 9.5 miles to the northwest and Point Petre nearly 20 miles to the southeast.



National Archives of Canada

The 1856 Scotch Bonnet Lighthouse as it appeared in a photograph taken June 21, 1939

In an effort to prevent continued storm damage, a concrete retaining wall was built around the station prior to 1905. In 1909, the optic was changed to a fourth order dioptric (i.e. drum lens) and the illuminant converted to acetylene gas on a trial basis. The change was made permanent in 1912 at which time the light was automated and the last keeper moved away. The final change came in 1959, at which time the light was moved to the top of a 62 foot, white, steel skeleton tower erected nearby. Currently a flashing white light is displayed from this tower at a focal plane of 75 feet above lake level.

Abandoned to the elements in 1959, Scotch Bonnet Light has been allowed to slowly crumble into ruins. Every square inch of the island has been whitewashed by bird droppings, making it a truly vile place to visit. Photographers are best advised to take their pictures from a boat offshore.