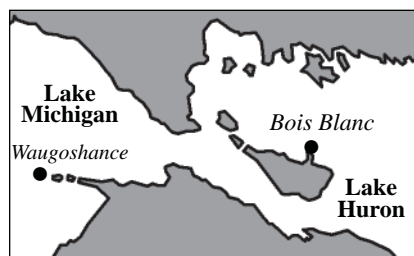


A Brief History of the McGulpin Point Lighthouse

By Terry Pepper

During the 1850's, vessel traffic through the Straits of Mackinac was increasing rapidly, and while the Waugoshance Light marked the western entry into the Straits, and the Bois Blanc Island light marked the eastern entry, the absence of a navigational aid within the shoal-ridden Straits themselves made passage during darkness and periods of low visibility extremely dangerous.

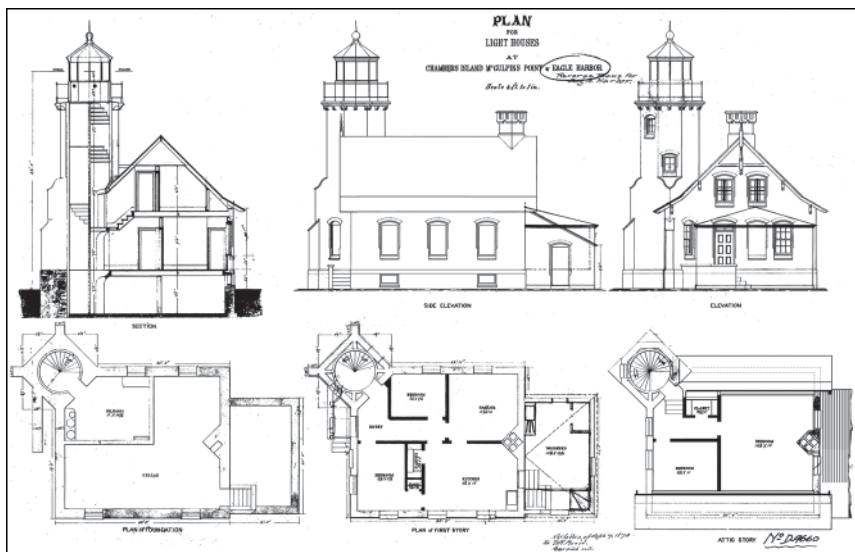
To answer that need, the Lighthouse Board petitioned Congress for the construction of a lighthouse and fog bell at McGulpin Point, approximately two miles west of Fort Michilimackinac. Congress responded favorably to the request on August 3, 1854 with the appropriation of \$6,000 for the station's construction.



Map showing the large expanse of water in the Straits which was unlighted prior to the establishment of the McGulpin Point light

However, for reasons that we have yet been unable to determine, no action was taken on the station's construction for more than a decade. With the original appropriation unspent and expired, the Board again petitioned Congress for the construction of a station at McGulpin Point in 1864, this time receiving \$20,000 for the project on July 26, 1866.

Work began at McGulpin Point early



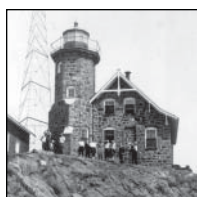
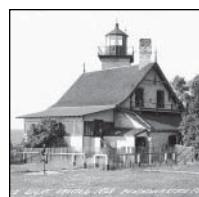
While the original plans for the lighthouses at McGulpin Point, Chambers Island and Eagle Harbor state that the latter was built in reverse to the other two, history shows that, in fact, McGulpin Point and Eagle Harbor were identical, with Chambers Island built in reverse

in 1869, and the station was built as a mirror image of the design used at Chambers Island and Eagle Bluff lights under construction in the Death's Door area that same year. This plan, which is sometimes referred to as the "Norman Gothic" style, was also later also used at Eagle Harbor in 1871, White River in 1875, and at Passage and Sand Islands in 1882.

The keepers dwelling and integrated tower were constructed of Cream City brick with the tower integrated diagonally into the northwest corner of the dwelling. The first and second stories of the tower were approximately ten feet square with buttressed corners, while the tower's upper portion consisted of a ten-foot octagon. Similar to other stations built on this plan, the tower is double-walled with a circular inner wall approximately four

inches thick and eight feet in diameter to house a set of cast iron spiral stairs. The tower was capped with a prefabricated decagonal cast-iron lantern, and outfitted with a fixed white Third-and-a-half Order Fresnel lens.

The building sat on a full basement, which contained two general-purpose areas and an oil storage room. For transport of supplies into the tower, the cast iron spiral stairs connected the oil room to the tower, and served as the only stairs between the living areas with landings and doors on the first and second floors. The first floor contained a parlor, kitchen and two bedrooms, and the second floor featured two additional bedrooms and a large closet. Almost as an afterthought, a combined wood shed & summer kitchen was built in the form of an addition to the rear of the building.



Between 1869 and 1882, five other lighthouses were built to virtually the same plan on lakes Michigan and Superior. In the order they were established from left to right above: Eagle Bluff, Chambers Island, Eagle Harbor, White River, Passage Island and Sand Island.



Walter P. Reuther Library - Wayne State University

Unfortunately, as of this writing, no historic photographs of McGulpin Point lighthouse with its lantern still in place have surfaced. From the condition of the shingle roof in this 1930 photograph, it is clear that the building was not being given a great deal of tender loving care in its earliest days of private ownership

Among the Station's most notable keepers was James Davenport, who after serving at Waugoshance and Little Point Sable, was transferred to McGulpin Point in September of 1879, a position he held for twenty-seven years, until the station was discontinued in 1906. The Davenport family lived the entire navigation season in the lighthouse, but after the close of the navigation season every year, moved into to their home in Mackinaw City so that the children could get to and from school, the snow making the trip from town to the lighthouse virtually impossible.

Correspondence files in the National Archives in Washington show that Davenport made weekly trips through the snow to the lighthouse to report on its condition to the District Inspector in Milwaukee. Perhaps more importantly, these letters also show that he may have played a critical role in the opening of navigation every spring by reporting weekly, and sometimes even more frequently, on ice conditions in the Straits. Knowledge of ice-out in the

Straits was critical to mariners, since it opened navigation to the immensely important ports of Chicago and Milwaukee, and since Davenport was the only Straits keeper to submit such frequent reports, it would appear that the Inspector used these reports to gain an understanding as to when navigation

would be open throughout the lakes. Most of Davenport's weekly winter reports consisted of terse commentary as exemplified by his letter of March 28, 1890 in which he reported "Sir, Ice in the Straits between here and Mackinac Island is broke up some so that it moved a little with the heavy E. wind last night. But no water to be seen west of this station as far as can be seen with a glass. The ice is good and solid. Teams crossed the Straits yesterday. Lake Huron is clear of ice up to Mackinac Island. This station is in good order."

Davenport was absolutely meticulous in filing these reports on a weekly basis with the exception of a single week in 1891, when he missed filing his report. His sad letter of March 23rd of that same year provided the reason for his missing the report, when he wrote "Sir, I just was up in the Lt House and found all in good order. You will see by this report that I did not report to you last week. My wife and child died last week and I could not go up to the light house to report to you as required."

December 5, 1893 was a particularly eventful one at McGulpin Point when the wooden propeller WALDO A. AVERY



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The parlor as it appeared in June, 2008 - a graphic tribute to the care that later owners of the lighthouse put into faithfully preserving the original 1869 architectural details



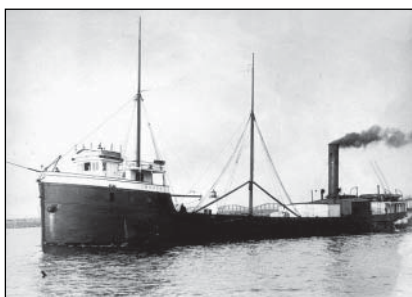
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Anyone who has visited either the Eagle Harbor or Eagle Bluff lighthouse will immediately recognize the layout of the main bedroom on the second floor of the lighthouse

caught fire while passing through the Straits. By the time the vessel was off McGulpin Point, the fire was raging so badly that in order to save his crew, the captain steered the vessel toward the lighthouse at full steam. Keeper Davenport had left the station for Mackinaw City earlier in the day, and with the aforementioned passing of his wife two years prior, had left his nine children alone at the station. Accustomed to lighthouse life, the children were a resourceful group, and made preparations for the care of the survivors. Imagine the fear in the children's hearts as they saw the crew members literally fighting for their lives on the approaching vessel.

Alerted to what was going on at the lighthouse, Davenport rushed back to the station with a number of Mackinaw City residents. With the vessel's lifeboat burned and unusable, numerous trips to the burning and beached vessel were made with the Station's small skiff, until all seventeen crew members had been brought to safety on the shore. The AVERY's insurance for the season had expired the previous day, and while the vessel was declared a complete loss at the time, the hull was recovered in 1894, and the vessel rebuilt, and continued to ply the lakes until she was abandoned in 1923.

With the construction of the Old Mackinac Point light and fog signal station in 1892, the Lighthouse Board decided that McGulpin point station no longer served its' once critical purpose, since the new light at Old Mackinac



Historical Collection of The Great Lakes

The WALDO A. AVERY before she burned to the waterline at McGulpin Point in 1893

Point was visible from throughout the Straits, whereas McGulpin Point was only effectively visible from the west.

The Lighthouse Board officially authorized the discontinuance of McGulpin point on November 12, 1906, and keeper Davenport climbed the stairs to exhibit his light for the last time on the closing of the navigation season on December 15 of that year. The station was boarded-up and the lantern and lens removed, with Davenport serving as caretaker for a few weeks until his transfer to Mission Point lighthouse where he continued to serve until his retirement in 1917. On retirement, he returned to Mackinaw City, where he lived-out the remainder of his life, passing away on March 18, 1932 at the age of eighty-five.

While records show that McGulpin Point's lens was temporarily stored at Old Mackinac Point lighthouse, the eventual disposition of both the station's lens and lantern remain undetermined. Approval was issued by the Board to sell the lighthouse at auction on May 22, 1907, and advertisements of the sale were published in the Cheboygan, Chicago, Detroit and Milwaukee newspapers with sealed bids received to be opened on July 17. The highest bid received was only for \$875, and with the District Inspector feeling that it was worth



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*This modern kitchen is located in the former summer kitchen at the rear of the dwelling
The Beacon, Winter 2008/2009*

at least twice that much, the bid was rejected, and the property sat unused.

Over the ensuing years, correspondence concerning the station included a possible transfer to Mackinac State Historic Parks and use of the station dock and dwelling during the construction of White Shoal lighthouse, but neither of these options reached fruition. The lighthouse finally passed into private ownership on July 30, 1913 when a Sam Smith purchased the entire property for \$1,425. The station was subsequently resold a couple of times, last being owned by the Peppler family, from whom the station was purchased by Emmet County in 2008.



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The view down of the flower bed & sidewalk at the rear of the summer kitchen is reminiscent of an old English country cottage



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These intricate cast iron spiral stairs within the tower still serve as the only means of access between the floors in the dwelling



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Although the light was first exhibited in 1869, the date was carved into this limestone block in 1868, the year construction started



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The stone and brick foundation walls in the cellar are all in excellent condition, with no signs of dampness or water infiltration
The Beacon, Winter 2008/2009



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The original cast iron scuttle door was likely removed at the same time as the lantern, and has been replaced by this wooden door