

Where is Bush Island?

11/23/22

How many of you know where Bush Island is? I found this answer while researching this story. Bush Island is the piece of rock that holds Sunken Rock Lighthouse. According to the locals, an island must have a tree on it. I don't recall ever seeing a tree on Bush Island, but I suppose a large lighthouse would suffice as a substitute tree.

Sunken Rock Light house was constructed in 1847 to mark the beginning of The Narrows, a particularly narrow section of the St Lawrence River, to warn ships they were approaching this section of the river. Congress purchased Bush Island from Chester Pearson. The deed listed the area of the rock as 10.890 square feet, though only a fraction of this was above water.

The 1847 construction consisted of a brick beacon atop the rock on a protective pier. The tower stood twenty-seven feet tall from its base to the middle of the lantern room, where five lamps, set in fourteen-inch reflectors produced a fixed white light. In 1855 a sixth Fresnel lens replaced the array of lamps and reflector.

The 1878 *Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board* noted that the brick tower was sheathed with wood and shingled, but was by that time, "an old and rough structure, in bad repair." The lantern was deficient, being of an old design with large sashes and small panes, and at that time, the keeper, not being provided a dwelling, was forced to rent a house in Alexandria Bay, a half mile from the light. This involved at least one trip to the lighthouse and back for the keeper by boat. Rowing may have been the only option for some, and at least one trip against the current. Given the condition of the tower, the Lighthouse Board petitioned Congress for \$5,000 for a new tower.

In 1882 the old light house was torn down and replaced with a new round iron tower, built on a concrete base over the original foundation. The tower was painted brown. An interior circular staircase led to a landing and an eight-step ladder allowed access to the lantern room. This design was duplicated at Crossover Island and Rock Island that same year.

In 1883 a new boathouse was built to replace the old one which was too decayed for repair. The new boathouse measured twenty-one feet by twelve feet. This boathouse had an additional convenience for the keeper in that part of the boathouse was partitioned off and setup with a bunk to serve as a watchroom. This was a simple room with a cot, and not much more.

When the navigation season opened in 1899 the color of the tower was changed from brown to white, and the color of the light was changed from white to red.

In December 1904, the Secretary of Commerce and Labor sent the following letter to the Secretary of the Treasury:

The light-station at Sunken Rock, St. Lawrence River, New York, consists of a tower and boathouse located on a rock about half a mile below Alexandria Bay. There is no keeper's dwelling there nor land owned by the United States upon which one can be built.

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The keeper and his family live in a small house on the bank of a creek about half a mile from the light. Except that, there is no place for the keeper to haul up his boat when he leaves the light. It is inconveniently located, there being no road open to it. When the keeper moved into this hired house it was the only one vacant near the river. He is now looking for some more suitable dwelling, for which he expects he will have to pay at the rate of about \$120 a year, and this from his salary which is \$580 a year, thus leaving \$460 a year for his services.

The Light-House Board is of [the] opinion that good men will not long remain in positions under such conditions. It thinks that the interests of the service and efficiency of the station would be promoted by building a dwelling, with a boathouse, for its keeper upon United States land, on the riverbank, as near the light-house as is found practicable.

It is estimated that for \$5,000 a site could be purchased on the shore in the vicinity of the light, and that a dwelling and boathouse could be built thereon."

This letter was included in the Lighthouse Board's annual report for both 1905 and 1906, but it is not believed that a dwelling was ever built for the keeper of Sunken Rock Lighthouse.

In 1912, Horace Walts was given the job of head lighthouse keeper, this after three years in lighthouse service in Oswego. Keeper Walts' son Max recalls rowing to the lighthouse with his father to maintain the light. Every morning after extinguishing the light, Walts would cover the Fresnel lens with a white linen shroud to protect the valuable collection of prisms set in brass. This was a daily task for the keeper, row out and back to the lighthouse. Each lighthouse is inspected every quarter and if it were found in excellent order, the keeper was given a letter of commendation. The lighthouse service established a system of efficiency stars to promote friendly competition between light keepers. Each year, a booklet, *Instructions to Lightkeepers* was given out to inform about this program. "Light keepers who have been commended for efficiency at each quarterly in section for a fiscal year, shall be entitled to wear the inspector's efficiency star for the succeeding fiscal year. Light keepers who have been authorized to wear the inspector's efficiency star may do so for three successive years ". Keeper Walts was awarded the Inspectors Efficiency Star for an amazing string of 9 consecutive years, and he was also commended for the rescue of the night of August 6, 1916, of a man in a skiff that was nearly run down by a steamer.

In 1931, a main characteristic of Sunken Rock Lighthouse was changed. The light was changed from fixed red, to fixed green, and on November 21, 1934, the light was electrified, increasing its intensity to 1500 candle power. When Keeper Walts retired in July 1937 due to poor health, he was the last of the true keepers of the light. Solarization and electricity changed the job of the keepers and the management of the lighthouses fell to the Coast Guard from that point on. Edward Sweet, Jr. was then made responsible for Sunken Rock Lighthouse and several other automated lights in the area. Mr. Sweet was the last keeper of the light as Sunken rock was solarized in 1988 by the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation.

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Head Keepers: James Merrill (1848), Ralph Lasall (1848 – 1849), Peter Dillenback (1849 – 1853), David Walton (1853 – 1854), Jacob P. Waggoner (1854 – 1857), John Bolton (1857 – 1861), Henry Campbell (1861 – 1869), Isaac Leonard (1869 – 1871), E.H. Smith (1871 – 1881), Anson A. Leonard (1881 – 1903), Horace N. Curd (1903 – 1908), John C. Belden (1908 – 1912), Frederick Lawson (1912), Horace E. Walts (1912 – 1937), Edward J. Sweet, Jr. (1937 – 1958)

The Cornwall Brothers Store Museum has received a donation of the Lighthouse Keeper Log from March 1914 – to October 1924. The log is eleven by seventeen size pages, and the binding of the log has much disrepair, but the calligraphy of Keeper Walts is intact and legible. Each page represents one month, with the dates running down the left side. The first column Notes visibility and weather events at Crossover Island, then Sunken Rock, then Gas Buoy A. Empire Shoal Gas buoy #4 was also noted. Keepers monitored the gas buoys also. The remainder of the row details any significant events or notes the keeper felt to detail. The winter months detail snow and ice and temperatures. Gaps in data are noted with *“Keeper left on Shore Leave”* and there is a summary of a line or two at the end of each month wrapping up the detail. *“Painted dwelling two coats this month & started to wash and paint boathouse’ (April 1916).*

Assistant keepers’ arrival and departures are noted and changes in penmanship are an indication of change in recording keeper. Each change is detailed why it happened and when. *“Keeper Dodge retired. R.H.B. Scobie transferred from Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio. Working on rowboat”* Steamer arrivals and departures are included in the log and occasional passings. *“Sunday. Steamer Crocus passed 11:30 am, bound down.”* The S.S. Crocus also brought supplies and cord wood, with each arrival and departure noted. Occasionally, news of the world made the log, *“Ex Keeper Dodge died on Grenadier Island (June 6, 1923), and “President Harding died 7:30pm, Palace Hotel, San Francisco California”.*

Low and high-water events are included *“hauled Scout out. Low Water”* October 31, 1923. The final two pages in the log are dedicated to attendance and absence at the lighthouse, one line per month detailing any absences and supply runs with departure and return times noted.

When we received the log at the museum, I was fascinated with the script style and penmanship. I had no idea what kind of information I would find inside and what a wealth of information is recorded in the keepers’ log. If this interests you, stop down in 2023 and ask to see it. We love to share our history. Have more information about Sunken Rock Lighthouse? Email info@alexandriahistorical.com, or give us a call 315-482-4586.

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THE THOUSAND ISLANDS. Lighthouse near Alexandria Bay.