

Horse Island Lighthouse

By Larry & Patricia Wright

Horse Island, consisting of 28 acres (11.3 hectares), is located on the southwest entrance to Black River Bay, an arm of Lake Ontario which runs several miles inland providing a deep natural harbour. This, plus its close proximity to Canada, made the village of Sackets Harbor, located at the end of the bay, a natural choice for the United States Government to set up headquarters for the United States Navy on the Great Lakes during the War of 1812 when one third of the United States Army and one quarter of the Navy were stationed here. It was also the most important shipbuilding centre for the Americans, making it a prime target for the British. Although the Americans lost the war, Sackets Harbor did successfully fend off two British attempts to annihilate it.

One of these attacks is a most interesting tale. The British landed at Horse Island and from here fired cannon balls at Sacket's Harbor. Most of them hit the stone bluff but one shot over the bluff and furrowed into the ground. An American grabbed the cannon ball and put it into "the sow", a huge cannon of theirs. They packed it with whatever they found (petticoats, etc.) and shot it immediately back at

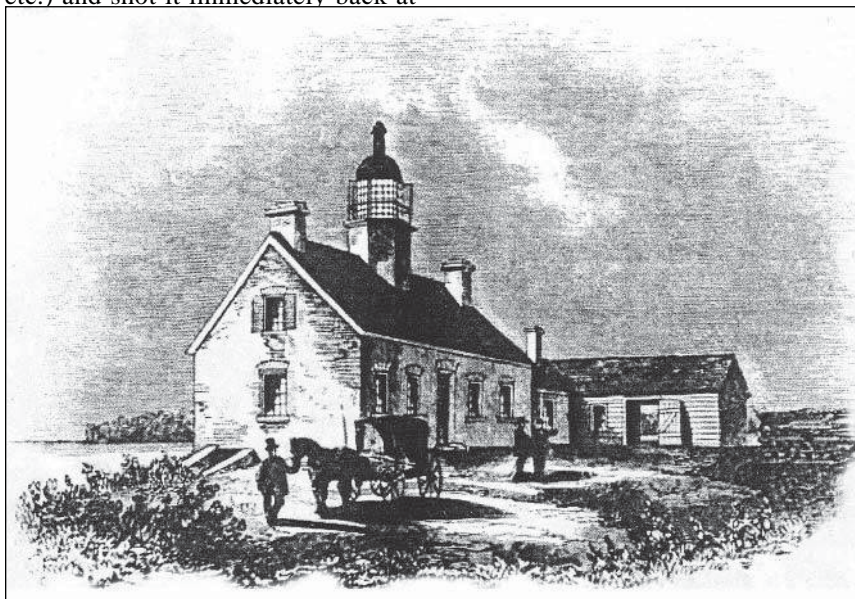


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The rear of the 1870 Horse Island dwelling as it appears today as a private dwelling

the British, where it hit the stern of the British ship killing fourteen and wounding eighteen. Thus defeated, the British high-tailed it for home, with not one single injury to the Americans.

After the war, Sacket's Harbor remained as an important military, shipbuilding and commercial centre well into the 1800's. The first American Great Lake's steamship ONTARIO was built here. Sacket's Harbor also became the main shipping point for exporting lumber, agriculture products and manufactured goods from the area. With this increased lake traffic it was apparent that lights were needed to mark the treacherous entrance to the safe bay.



Larry Wright collection

Woodcut of the original Horse Island lighthouse established in 1831

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In 1831 the first lighthouse was built on Horse Island. A short octagonal tower rose straight up out of the roof, about midway along the peak of the one and a half story keeper's house. The tower supported an octagonal gallery with a birdcage style lantern which was topped by a high-arched dome, capped with a tall ventilator pipe. Its lantern used eight oil lamps with 14 inch reflectors to provide its fixed light with a focal plane of 16 feet.



By 1854 the Lighthouse Board reported that the light was visible for 10 nautical miles (16 km) from a white tower 27 feet from the base to the centre of the lens and 34 feet above the lake level. But the report also stated that it had 8 lamps with 13 inch reflectors. In 1869 Thompson's Coast Pilot reported that the light was fixed and visible for 11 miles (17.8 km).

Reports state that the original lighthouse was destroyed by fire and the lighthouse was rebuilt in 1870. A square tower was attached to the front of a one and a half story brick keeper's house. Both were made of red brick and sat on a cut limestone foundation. The tower was entered from outside by stairs up to a side door with 1870 stamped into the concrete lintel. Two other doors provided entry into the tower from inside of the keeper's house, one from each of its upper and lower stories. Both were round brick archways with narrow, glass panelled, double doors that had a split-arched window over them.



The lens pedestal was removed from the lantern to serve as a garden ornament



The unique double glass doors which lead from the dwelling into the tower

The tower, about four stories high, arched out at the top to support a decagonal-windowed, circular-based lantern surrounded by a square gallery with iron railings. The lantern's dome, made of ten flat sections jointed with ribbing, was topped with a ventilator ball and a lightning rod. The lantern housed a 5th order Fresnel lens. Other buildings at the station included a barn, a privy and an oil house.

In 1878 it was recommended to the Lighthouse Board that a causeway be built from the island to the mainland. By 1879 the causeway was in place but was already in need of repair and by 1881 it was estimated that the repairs to the causeway would be \$2,000.

George Scott reported in 1886 that the tower was a square and of red brick, attached to the dwelling; the lantern was black but with a red dome and showed a white fixed light of 5th order; the light was visible for 13½ miles on a clear night and had a focal plane of 49 feet above the water.

In 1900 the tower was extended about 10 feet (3 m) to increase its visibility, an addition was added to the back of the house, and two dormers were added to the second story. The characteristic of the

light station changed in 1902. The tower and keeper's house which had been red brick were painted white and the lantern was painted black. In 1905 there must have been extensive repairs made to the keeper's dwelling because there was an appropriation of \$5,000 which, for that amount, probably could have rebuilt the whole dwelling.

While George Ward was keeper from 1909 to 1923 he kept a few farm animals on the island and had a large vegetable garden to help feed his family. In the winter the children only went to school if the water was frozen over and they had to walk or use the family's only horse. Whenever the children went outside they were required to wear a life jacket.

The logbooks show meticulous record keeping. Besides daily entries for weather and water conditions, work, trips, visitors and notable events were also recorded. The lighthouse was deactivated in 1957 and a new light was placed on a steel skeletal tower at the water's edge in the same year. In 1963 the lantern was painted red.

Today the island and lighthouse are privately owned and unless you receive a private invitation, you may only view the light from the water or the mainland.



*Corner supply cabinet in the watchroom
The Beacon, Fall 2009*

The island is accessible by boat or a walk through shallow waters to the mainland on its east side (as long as Lake Ontario waters are low). The owners keep well mown paths around the island and lighthouse. A concrete walkway from the flagpole heads to the tower. Five outside steps lead up to the tower's outside door, a wide three-panelled one which is painted red. Inside the bottom of the tower is a large window and red doors to the first floor of the house. The square tower contains a whitewashed red-bricked stair cylinder. Seven solid iron steps spiral up to an eighth of a circle landing which has a large window at the front of the tower to help light the stairs. Eight more steps take you to a one-quarter landing and the doorway to the upper story of the house.

From here, seven more stairs lead up to another quarter landing with another large window above the last one. Continuing up are eleven stairs, a one eighth landing, fourteen more stairs and a semicircular landing. This landing

is in the addition which was made to the tower. Two large windows, one on either side of the tower, light it. The front of this level is circular and the back of it is squared into the outside corners of the tower. This part is covered in tongue and groove yellow oak with two built in corner cupboards two-thirds of the way up the wall, providing space for the keeper to store needed supplies like sand, chimneys, polishing clothes, wick trimmers, etc. Twelve more stairs take you into the lantern. Its round iron base is lined with tongue and groove oak and has four vents in its walls. Below one of the windows is a half door providing access to the gallery.

From the lantern one can see water on three sides, as the lighthouse is built on a point, and looking directly out over Lake Ontario is Canada, a mere 30 miles (48.3 km) away. In front of the lighthouse, a short walk leads down to the water's edge. Here limestone steps and a remaining set of wooden steps lead down a short drop to the solid flat rock

beach. Beside a fire pit and picnic table on the grass above the beach, stands the Coast Guard's modern white skeletal tower with its red light showing from a 57 foot (17.5 m) focal plane.

Known Keepers: John McNitt (1832-1841), Jacob Kellogg Jr. (1841-1843), Lorenzo Root (1843-1844), Samuel McNitt (1844-1860), Oris Westcott (1860-1861), J. McFarlane (1861-1866), Nelson Weeks (1866-1883), Horace Holloway (1884-1909), George Ward (1909-1923).

What's In A Name?

This light has been referred to as the Horse Island Light, Horst Island Light, Sacket's Harbor Light, Sacketts Harbor Light and even once referred to as Horn Island Light. The Lighthouse Board officially referred to it as the Sacketts Harbor Light.



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