

An 1828 decree from the U.S. Congress officially made Lake Erie's Portland Harbor a port of entry, and appropriated a sum of five thousand dollars for the construction of a lighthouse and keeper's quarters. Portland Harbor, which would later have its name changed to Barcelona, was a small town located twenty miles to the west of Dunkirk, New York. Already at that time, warehouses and wharfs had been established to serve the small vessels transporting lumber, salt, flour and fish. The harbor provided a safe haven for sail and steam cargo vessels, and gave passengers moving between Erie and Buffalo a rest stop. Other destinations available from Barcelona included Chautauqua Lake, which was a launching point for ships bound to Pittsburgh's Fort Duquesne.

The lighthouse was built on a bluff, and \$50 was paid for the property to Wilhelm Willink, his son, and Cornelius Vallenhoven. The structure was composed of native, rough split, natural fieldstone, and was 40 feet tall and 22 feet in diameter at its base. At the center was a massive, 40 foot timber supporting the interior staircase; the stair treads were sunk into the masonry of the lighthouse's inner walls. A keeper's quarters and outhouse were fashioned out of the same local materials; like the lighthouse, they were given a double coat of whitewash. The original contract specified "11 patent lamps; eleven 14" reflectors and 2 spare lamps; double tin oil butts for 500 gals. Of oil; 1 lantern canister and iron trivet, etc."

William Peacock was chosen to superintend the work, and Judge

Thomas Campbell was granted the contract for building the structure. Out of the original \$5,000, only \$3,506.78 was spent, including the cost of the land. The first keeper was a deaf clergyman by the name of Joshua Lane; he was uniquely suited to the \$350 per annum salary on the basis of his "numerous female dependents." Lane enjoyed a 32 by 20 foot keeper's cottage with two rooms, each containing a fireplace. The house's walls were 20 inches thick, and a wing on the east end contained the kitchen. The interior was finished in wood of a "plain, decent style, with good seasoned stuff."

The lighthouse attained a degree of fame when in 1831 a "burning spring" was put to use at the station. This natural phenomenon was known to the first settlers in and around Portland, who perceived that fissures of rock in a brook near the lake were emitting flammable gas. Some enterprising souls dug into the rocks with the most gas, forming a three foot deep well of about 40 to 50 feet in diameter. A masonry cap was erected over this well, and natural gas was moved via hollowed-out wooden pipes three quarters of a mile to the Barcelona station. At this point a Mr. W.A. Hart, a brilliant gunsmith from Fredonia, proved instrumental in lighting the station. Previously Hart had found a similar spring in Canadaway creek, and had dug a reservoir and directed the gas to the stores and shops of that village. For Barcelona's lantern room, Hart built a unique apparatus that resembled a semicircle of brass arms. At the end of each arm was a gas burner, and the quantity of gas emitted was controlled by stopcocks. Reflectors were placed behind each of the

burners, which were arranged in two tiers. The tiers were interspaced and produced a very intense flame. One observer remarked that it "exceeds both in quantity and brilliancy, anything of the kind I ever saw." It was also stated that when viewed from Lake Erie at night, it looked as if the whole tower was "one complete, constant and unwavering blaze."

Barcelona was both the first public building in the U.S. And probably the only lighthouse in the world to be lit with natural gas. Judge Campbell, the original building contractor, was given another contract to furnish natural gas "at all times and seasons" and "to keep apparatus and fixtures in repair" for \$213 a year. By 1838, however, the gas well began to run dry, and Barcelona was compelled to revert back to oil lamps. At the time, an inspector believed that the well was running dry on account of the summer's drought. He insisted that fall rains would cause the stream supplying the well to run stronger, thus bringing the gas to the surface. This did not prove to be the case, although as late as 1851 references were still made to the active gas pipes, with oil and lamps always on reserve.

Joshua Lane kept the light until his death in 1846, when Joshua La Due took over the duties. La Due received the same salary of \$350 as his predecessor, meaning that there had been no pay raise in nearly two decades. In 1855, a report to the Treasury Department noted that Barcelona did not in fact possess a harbor, and that its lighthouse was not even necessary to maintain as a lake coast light. This strange remark may have been referencing the Great Gale of 1844,

which destroyed a number of the warehouses and wharfs on the lake. Also damaging to the harbor's business was the 1852 opening of a railroad to the town of Westfield, New York. Weakened both by competition and natural disaster, the harbor's lighthouse was in 1859 deemed eligible for decommissioning by the Treasury department. The Fifth Auditor's office recommended the move "by reason of mutations of commerce and changes of channels or harbors."

The property remained vacant for 13 years, and a wooden framework, suggestive of a lantern, replaced the actual lantern at the top. It is unclear what the original lantern room looked like, though the 'bird cage' type with a tall copper dome was used extensively before 1852. It is also not known whether the oil lamp system was ever updated to a Fresnel lens before the station was dark.

In 1872 the property was bought from the original owners, to whose care the lighthouse grounds reverted after the station was deemed inactive. The Patterson family took possession of the lighthouse and kept it for over a century. In the 1880's an addition was put on the original keeper's house, and dormers were added as well. In 1962, the lighthouse was re-supplied with natural gas as a sentimental nod to its past significance. The Iroquois Gas Company supplied the pipes, and National fuel keeps the apparatus in good repair. The town of Westfield pays the actual gas bill. A light is thus maintained at the tower, though it is no longer used to guide ships.

In 1998 Bruce and Ann Mulkin from Fredonia, New York bought the property, with the intention of making the lighthouse grounds open to the public (the Pattersons had kept it as a private residence.) Today the Barcelona Harbor sports a pair of concrete and steel breakwaters, and a publicly accessible pier. The lighthouse, which has received minor repairs over the years, was given National Landmark status in 1972. It maintains the distinction of being the sole lighthouse still standing on its original foundation on Lake Erie.

#### Resources

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