

The history of lighthouses in the region of Western New York extends far back into colonial days when the French maintained beacons around Fort Niagara. In those days, Buffalo was only a fledgling village still contained within Native American territory. The first modern beacon lights on the Great Lakes were of Canadian make, but tides of immigration and commerce soon necessitated towers on the American side of the border. In 1805, the young United States Congress made the village of Buffalo a port of entry, recognizing the importance of the merging point of Lake Erie with the Niagara River. In 1811, the New York legislature followed up this declaration with a proposal to acquire land for a lighthouse in the village. This ambition was temporarily thwarted by the War of 1812, and the village was torched by the British in 1813. Four years later, one Oliver Forward, collector of the port of Buffalo, paid \$351.50 for a piece of land near the Buffalo Creek mouth.

There is some dispute over whether the first Great Lakes, American lighthouse can be attributed to Buffalo, NY or Erie, PA. Local Buffalo lore contends that their tower was first (1818), but it seems more likely that the 30 foot stone structure was erected sometime in 1820. An 1819 New York Legislature grant allocated \$12,000 to fashion a harbor in Buffalo, and it is possible that some of this money went towards the lighthouse. What is known is that the 20,000 strong town tried to raise harbor money via public pledges- but they only collected a scant \$110 on over \$1000 promised.

A local Judge Wilkeson was obliged to take over the project when

the engineer hired to rework the harbor was found to be incompetent. The judge presided over an epic struggle to both raise the lighthouse tower and fashion a safe haven for ships inbound to Buffalo. While the tower was erected in a swift 221 days, the stone imported from the Canadian side for the construction was often intercepted by British ships. For the new harbor, Judge Wilkeson's crews decided to relocate the Buffalo Creek mouth by redirecting the path of the spring floods with a brushwork dam. This was done in conjunction with building a stone breakwater out into the lake so that ship traffic would have more abundant and calmer waters in which to maneuver. Mother nature opposed these ambitious plans with severe storms, and Buffalonians were often obliged to leave their beds in the middle of the night to repair the damage.

Buffalo's first lighthouse received its first test as a rescue station when on October 31, 1821, a steamboat was caught in a storm and "beached about 100 rods above the lighthouse." This was not just any steamboat, but the *only* steamboat on the entire Great Lakes at that time. Its importance to the local community can be appreciated in that it still retained the rather mystical moniker given it by Native Americans, *Walk in the Water*. A survivor of the accident recollected how the crew and passengers of the ship gathered around "the warm fireside...at the lighthouse...comforting to our chilled limbs, and our hearts warmed with gratitude to God for deliverance from our peril."

The lighthouse was soon to become outdated, as in 1825 the Erie

Canal opened operations with its Western ending point emptying directly into Buffalo. This greatly increased both ship traffic and population in the now thriving community, which quadrupled its population from 1825 to 1832. In this era Buffalo was a dangerous and bustling frontier town of 10,000 residents, half of whom were born in foreign countries. The influx of immigration and instability contributed to high crime; between 1830 and 1835 an astounding 70% of crimes reported in the entire United States happened in or around Lake Erie or the Erie Canal. Amidst this growing hodgepodge of people the government decided that the old lighthouse could scarcely be seen with all of "the smoke of the village." In 1826 the Treasury Department allocated \$2,500 "to erect and build a pier, and lighthouse and ice breaker." While it was originally intended that all this work be done by 1828, the lighthouse is today still commemorated by an 1833 inscription that marks the beginning of its operations.

The tower consists of hewn limestone and is octagonal in shape, becoming more narrow as it ascends to the decorative lantern with a weather vane. A local newspaper proudly gushed that the structure was the "most perfect work of its kind on this side of the ocean and perhaps in the world." Initially the glow from oil lamps reflected off of parabolic mirrors to provide the signal, and an early lens was even used that was a green circle of convex glass placed in front of the lamps. It was soon determined, on the basis of mariner complaints, that the lens actually impeded the signals brightness,

and it was removed from the tower.

Already in 1837 there were some complaints about the light's appropriateness for the growing harbor. A Lieutenant in the Navy remarked that while it served as "a good stationary light on a stone tower," the harbor had become too heavily trafficked for it to operate alone. An 1838 Lighthouse Board report contradicts these sentiments, however. While the report does note that "the chimneys are too short...the smoke consequently partially destroys the brilliancy of the reflectors," it also asserts that "the materials furnished by the contractors are faultless." The Board relates how the keeper's quarters for the station were "repaired and rendered comfortable," and concludes that the lighthouse is "fully adequate to the increasing commerce of this lake." The Board did take issue with the lack of a second harbor entrance, however, and recommended that one to be built soon to alleviate "the crowd of vessels."

While the government pondered remedial actions, a severe storm struck the region in October of 1844 and caused great damage to the lighthouse pier. Lasting for three days, the storm concluded with a dramatic reversal of wind direction that caused a wall of water to bombard the city, washing a number of vessels ashore. Buffalo's infrastructure was unprepared for such a catastrophe, and the city hall and courthouse buildings had to be used as a temporary morgues for the dozens of fatalities.

Improvements began to be made to the lighthouse in the 1850's; early in that decade a federal allocation of \$2,500 was set aside to

install a fog bell in the tower. This project was however delayed due to the "unsatisfactory performance" of the same type of fog bells on the coast of Maine. In 1852 the Lighthouse Board nominated the Buffalo station as one of twenty lake lighthouses to receive a third order Fresnel lens. Before that could happen, the tower was given a new chandelier system of reflectors that both circumscribed the arc of illumination and ramped up the intensity of the beacon. In 1856 the updates recommended earlier finally came through, and Buffalo station was outfitted with both a fog bell and a third order, fixed white Fresnel lens. Installing this new equipment required that the old lantern be taken down, and a double level metal top be put in its place. This top contained a service room and the new lantern, and along with a row of stone sash windows it raised the lens's height above the water to 76 feet.

The 1868 construction of a breakwater 2,500 feet out into the harbor fated Buffalo's main station for eventual obsolescence, but many improvements were still made. In 1869 the keeper's quarters were re shingled and a drain was added to the property. It was also proposed at the same time that the tower's base be strengthened, as the stones were noticed to be vibrating when hit by heavy waves. In 1870 the Board report recommended that "the pier on the creek side of the lighthouse lot...be entirely removed." Pressure from beneath the ground was breaking down the brush filling of the pier, and casting it out into the creek, so that the stone on top of the brush was sinking. This meant that a shoal was being created along the pier,

with hardly 18 inches of water depth available for vessels to dock. The Board suggested that the pier be dredged to four feet deep and replaced with a new pier with "grillage bottom" and rows of piles for protection, all at a cost of ten thousand dollars.

In 1885 a kerosene oil vapor lamp took the place of the tower's old lard oil apparatus. In 1902, the station's light characteristic was altered from a fixed glow to white flashes at intervals to help it stand out from the electrified city lights of the Buffalo skyline. In 1905 an expensive Fresnel lens consisting of four panels was ordered from England at a cost of \$3,386.74, which was over six times the lighthouse keeper's yearly pay. This new lens was made to flash a white light every six seconds. A number of physical improvements were made to the station around this time as well, including a rebuilt keeper's quarters in 1899. At the turn of the century the tower was painted white, and in 1905 an oil house made of iron was constructed. A two ton coal bin was built into the tower's lower level in 1906, at the behest of the keeper who complained that the stove failed to properly heat the watchroom.

It was initially proposed to give the old stone tower the job of a life saving station, but this important function was instead placed with a pagoda-shaped lookout tower dubbed "Chinaman's light." This small structure both resembled a Chinese coolie's headgear, and was also used to keep an eye on illegal Chinese immigrants crossing the border over the Niagara River. When this structure was torn down, the main Buffalo tower took over the nickname of Chinaman's light,

and it continued to be used as a watchtower during Prohibition times, to observe 'rum running' from Canada into America. Aside from these duties, the presence of the new breakwater light increasingly relegated Buffalo's old tower to a mere pierhead light, and the tower was darkened during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1955 the station was used to contain explosives, as part of a base for the U.S. Coast Guard. The Army Corps of Engineers planned during this time to destroy the light as part of a river widening project, but a public outcry and campaign saved the beacon and led to its 1962 restoration. Also during this year, the last of the three Coast Guard lighthouse keepers for the Port of Buffalo were relieved of duty with the automation of the station located at the city's southern harbor.

The tower was briefly relit with floodlights for America's 1976 bicentennial celebration, and also for Buffalo's Sesquicentennial party. 1979 saw the old station attain a listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The tower is still under Coast Guard ownership, but is licensed to the Buffalo Lighthouse Association in an effort to stem the tide of neglect at the property. The lantern room's original third order Fresnel Lens is currently on display at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. At present, the tower possesses a fourth order bivalve Fresnel lens that was originally used in the lighthouse at the South Buffalo Harbor. This lens is lit up at night, though weakly, so as not to mislead maritime traffic. A 1400 foot promenade on the Niagara River boasts

impressive historical signage that recounts the history of the region. This parkland is part of a \$300,000 effort on the part of the BLA and the city to preserve the 1833 lighthouse as Buffalo's oldest building still standing on its original foundation.

#### Resources

Vogel, Mike. "Beacon to the Heartland." Keeper's Log, Fall, 1987.