

OZAUKEE COUNTY TOURISM

Resident lighthouse keepers preserve a waning tradition

PORT WASHINGTON — Lighthouses evoke a sense of romance and nostalgia, from their rich histories to the roles they play in adventure and exploration. Whether it is their often remote locations, their symbolism as a beacon in the dark night, or as prominent landmarks, lighthouses have attracted and fascinated people for centuries.

Today lighthouses still play a role in guiding ships and warning them of potential danger. With the advanced technology of GPS and other navigational aids, and with most lighthouses around the world being automated, the profession and tradition of “keeping the light” has changed dramatically over the years.

But the stories of these lighthouses and their keepers are still ingrained in our histories, and for the first time this year, Port Washington offered the chance for volunteers to experience life as a live-in lighthouse keeper at the historic 1860 Light Station.

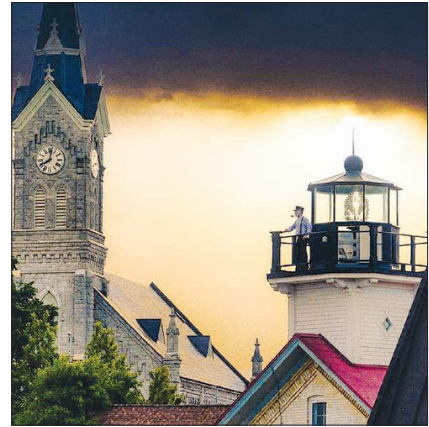
“It certainly wasn’t easy back then,” said Sandy Miresse of Hot Springs Village, Ark., who volunteered as an official resident lighthouse keeper at the 1860 Light Station with her family in July. “And it certainly wasn’t glamorous. Lighthouse keeping was a hard and difficult job ... keepers and often their families worked 365 days a year keeping their lighthouse and lantern in good condition, keeping records of ships passing by waking up in the middle of the night to make sure the lantern was lit, and always being ready to respond to emergencies, including shipwrecks.”

Resident Lighthouse Keeper Program

Miresse was one of two dozen volunteer resident lighthouse keepers who lived in the 1860 Light Station this summer. It was part of the national Resident Lighthouse Keeper Program, which allows volunteers to live in a lighthouse in exchange for performing a variety of tasks, including cleaning, maintaining the property and providing on-site tours. Keepers live in a private two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the Light Station, with ample amenities and beautiful views of Lake Michigan and Port Washington. The first floor is preserved as a



Left, Allan and Marie Blunt are pictured at the top of the 1860 Light Station. Right, the lighthouse was first lit in 1849.



Photos courtesy of Allan W. Blunt

museum showing what the Light Station was like in the early 1900s, and a series of ladders lead from the second floor to the tower, or “lantern.”

“Being a keeper is a wonderful volunteer opportunity to stay in the actual lighthouse, enjoy Port Washington in the off hours and share your time and talents for a week or more,” said Dawn St. George, executive director of the Port Washington Historical Society. “Our keepers play a key role in helping to keep this restored, treasured piece of Wisconsin’s maritime history alive for future generations.”

Prior to the adoption of this program, the 1860 Light Station relied on local volunteers to staff and give tours, which meant it was open only a few hours a week, and sometimes inconsistently. The Resident Lightkeepers Program offered a new team of available and enthusiastic volunteers each week, and guaranteed the Light Station could be open to the public from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

“We are so grateful to the groups who stepped up to help make this program a reality,” said St. George. “It would not have happened without our board, our very active local group of volunteer tour guides who jumped in to help out, and of course our Resident Keepers.”

Volunteers come from around Wisconsin

Marie and Allan Blunt of Granger, Ind., have visited more than 400 lighthouses around the US and Canada, and heard about the opportunity through the United States Lighthouse Society.

“It felt like a great way to help and have an adventure at the same time,” Marie Blunt said.

Prior to their volunteer shift as resident lightkeepers in July, they participated in a remote training session and began researching Port Washington’s lighthouses. They even plan on releasing a book on Port Washington’s lighthouses next year. Their experience as Resident Lighthouse Keepers was, in a word, delightful.

“I told my husband I secretly thought the water in this community was tainted with ‘friendly juice,’” Marie said, “as everyone we met was kind, welcoming and pleased to have us here in the community.”

“It wasn’t a stretch to feel like I was channeling some of the keepers from the 1800s as I was climbing the tower each morning,” Allan Blunt said. “Marie and I are pretty hardcore pharologists (lighthouse enthusiasts) so it was inspiring to be hanging the curtains in the lantern room each morning, and ducking out onto the gallery to remove the cobwebs and clean the glass in preparation for the day.”

The Blunts were keepers the weekend of Port Washington Fish Days, and as busy as they were during the day, still had time to enjoy

many of the events going on that weekend, including listening to live music, seeing antique/classic cars on display, sampling local fare and enjoying the Edelweiss boat tour.

Childhood friends Kris Koenen and Sue Schramm came back to Port Washington and teamed up for a week to “learn about Port’s maritime history, about a lake we can now fully appreciate and about the 1860 Light Station...we had no clue about its significant history,” Koenen said.

“It was an enlightening week, thanks to the PWHs and many visitors. And in our off hours we walked all the places we played as kids, including the breakwater, which is much safer to walk on now, and the routes we took from St. Mary’s School to our homes.”

Tom and Holly Spaeth of Cedarburg tapped into their love of history and experience as docents for other organizations to make the most of their time as resident lightkeepers.

“We took the job seriously and studied the informational booklets provided by the Port Washington Historical Society,” Holly Spaeth said. “We did Google searches and read up on various topics related to lighthouses, and came away with a deep respect for this difficult but important job in our nautical past.”

Like several of the groups, the Spaeths voluntarily toured the lighthouse before their actual scheduled time slot. “We were amazed at the information we learned from Tobi and Jack Graham who were our tour guides for the day,” she said. “They were a tough act to follow.”

When told this, Cori Kaminsky, daughter of Sandy Miresse, laughed. She said she and her family had toured with the Spaeths before their volunteer week and thought the same thing of them, and hosted another upcoming volunteer pair on their last day as resident keepers.

“The idea of giving tours was definitely intimidating, but after a late-night cram session, an early morning walk-through and a tour or two under our belts, we felt fully prepared, and like pros by the end of the week,” she said.

Nicole Sova and Dave Garacci of Port Washington read an article about the Keeper program in the Port Washington Historical Society newsletter and saw it as a great opportunity “to experience

a little living history, enjoy time in a historic building, and help preserve the story of the 1860 Light House,” Garacci said.

They embraced their roles as lighthouse keepers and even dressed in period clothing to increase the authenticity of the experience for guests.

“Many of our guests were visiting the Light Station for the first time, and for some of them it was their first time in a lighthouse,” said Sova. “We wanted to give them as authentic an experience as we could...immerse them as much into the lives, work experience and technical aspects of the station as possible.”

Longest serving lightkeeper family

They took on the persona of Charles and Maria Lewis, two members of Port Washington’s longest serving lightkeeper family. Charles Lewis Sr. began serving as keeper of the Port Washington Lighthouse in 1874. Upon his death in 1880, his wife served as interim keeper until their son Charles Jr. returned to take over.

The Lewis family operated the 1860 Light Station until it was decommissioned in 1903 (when a pierhead light was built). The pierhead light was electrified in 1924, eliminating the need for a keeper, but Lewis, now retired, continued to live in the Light Station with his family until 1934, when it was turned over to the Coast Guard.

“It’s surreal walking around the spaces where more than 150 years ago, the families of the lighthouse keepers lived and worked,” Miresse said. “We’re pampered with AC, cable TV and an automated light in the tower over our heads, but you can’t help but wonder what it was like in the 1800s when the first of Port Washington’s lightkeepers lived on this property.”

Lighthouse’s history

Port Washington’s first lighthouse was built in 1849 on the same property as the current light station. The light was in a poorly constructed tower that was separate from the home, and needed to be rebuilt in 1860, when the existing building was constructed with the light tower attached to the home.

The first keeper to take up residence in the 1860 Light Station was Margarethe Schommer, the widowed

wife of the previous keeper who was expecting her eighth child.

“Think about that,” Miresse said. “It’s 1860, and you’re the widowed mother of seven children. Margarethe likely saw this very challenging and unpleasant job as the only way she could support her family. But as difficult as her life was, I’m sure having the light contained in the same building as her family had to be a blessing.”

Lightkeepers’ lessons

The resident keepers delighted in sharing what they had learned about the Light Station, but most admitted they were humbled by some of the guests they greeted throughout their stay. Along with visitors from as far away as Rhode Island, Colorado, Tennessee, Florida, Oklahoma, California and even Switzerland, guests included a former Coast Guardsman who used to maintain lighthouses off the East Coast, adults who had lived in or visited the house as children and an employee of NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) who is in Port Washington on a hydrographic survey/verification team, working to remap the bottom of all five Great Lakes and preserve shipwrecks.

“I felt we learned as much from the visitors who came through as they learned from us,” Miresse said.

“The Lighthouse Keeper program is a brilliant idea and makes all the hard work of the PWHs and the individual volunteer keepers terrifically worthwhile,” said Holly Spaeth. “It’s a shining example of what can be done with cooperation and dedication to our community.”

The 1860 Light Station will be open for visitors through Sunday, Sept. 1 and again next year from Memorial Day to Labor Day. If you would like to become a Resident Keeper in 2025 and want to learn more, the FAQ sheet and application are on the PWHs website at pwhs.org. For more information on all Ozaukee has to offer, visit ozaukeetourism.com and follow Ozaukee County Tourism on Facebook.

(The Ozaukee County Tourism Council is a group of businesses and organizations that support and promote tourism in Ozaukee County.)



Photo courtesy of Kate Zander

Nicole Sova and Dave Garacci are in period clothing inside the lighthouse.