

Beacon of change: Minnesota Point Lighthouse

Imagine the task of climbing the inside of a narrow 40-foot tower, it's cramped interior diameter no wider than six feet. It might be fun to try it, at least once, just to say you've done it. Now, imagine climbing every day, winding your way up a narrow wooden staircase, the air stifling on a hot summer day, your breath vaporizing on a cold winter afternoon.

The only reward is what waits at the top, where you climb through a small opening leading to a platform where you can stand and look out over a long, crescent-shaped expanse of beach and dune forested with pine and aspen and beyond

that, as far as your eyes can see, the sparkling blue water of Lake Superior. This was the view

that awaited R. H. Barrett of West Superior in 1858

when he became the first station keeper at new Minnesota Point Lighthouse.

From the east and west coasts, to the Great Lakes, lighthouses have stood as literal beacons entrusted to keep ships from straying too close.

Today, anything to do with lighthouses is big in the world of art — pen and pencil sketches and dreamy pastel watercolors hanging in galleries compete against a 21st century explosion of vivid digital color images proliferating on the Internet and filling glossy coffee-table books. Detailed replicas of lighthouses are wildly popular, but as any true lighthouse enthusiast will tell you, not all of the lights on the Great Lakes fit neatly in the dreamy repository of the romantic imagination.

"Abandoned" and "neglected" are just

two words that describe the remains of the 145-year-old Minnesota Point Lighthouse. Its existence, in fact, would have long ago been completely obliterated from Minnesota Point had it not been for its geodetic significance as the starting point

laying claim to land at the head of Lake Superior. Within a year Superior was officially established and plans for the city were laid out, designed to coincide with the completion of the canal in 1855.

The waterborne connection to the Lake Superior region soon brought the desired results as the arrival of ships to the head of the lake became more frequent. Not surprisingly, the inhabitants of Superior became increasingly dependent upon the ships for food, supplies and much needed contact with the outside world. Safeguarding the arrival of these ships now took on a new importance, and the establishment of a

lighthouse at the harbor entrance increased in significance.

In March 1855, the U.S. Congress appropriated \$15,000 to construct a lighthouse on the end of Minnesota Point. Actual work on the lighthouse commenced the following year, continuing off and on as weather permitted for two years until the light tower and keeper's dwellings were completed in the spring of 1858.

The contract for the construction of the lighthouse, as well as wooden piers along the natural Superior entry, was awarded to Captain R. G. Coburn, of Superior, although stonemason Adam Dopp, a German immigrant, is credited with the actual building of the light tower and the light keeper's dwelling. The foundation for the tower was built of blue rubble stone, while the exterior walls of the tower and the keeper's dwelling were built with common red brick, brought by ship



View from inside the tower.

for the regional land surveys conducted by Lt. Harry Wolsey Bayfield in the early 1800s. Because of this status, the U. S. Department of Interior prohibited the total removal of the brick light tower, while the keeper's house and other outbuildings were removed long ago. In an everchanging harbor, the ruins of the Minnesota Point light, now a lonely prisoner to the drifting sand, stands as the oldest artifact of significance to the port's origins and past.

The need for a light at the mouth of the St. Louis River, like the origins and development of the City of Superior itself, was tied directly to the construction of a canal to bypass the falls on the St. Marys River, some 350 miles away. In June 1853, within weeks of the start of construction on the canal at the Sault, speculators, foreseeing the opening of Lake Superior and the potential growth, began



The Port's Past

By Patrick Lapinski

the first station keeper at new Minnesota Point Lighthouse.

From the east and west coasts, to the Great Lakes, lighthouses have stood as literal beacons entrusted to keep ships from straying too close.

Today, anything to do with lighthouses is big in the world of art — pen and pencil sketches and dreamy pastel watercolors hanging in galleries compete against a 21st century explosion of vivid digital color images proliferating on the Internet and filling glossy coffee-table books. Detailed replicas of lighthouses are wildly popular, but as any true lighthouse enthusiast will tell you, not all of the lights on the Great Lakes fit neatly in the dreamy repository of the romantic imagination.

"Abandoned" and "neglected" are just

from Cleveland. There were two windows in the tower, one at ground level, and the second just below the light room, near the top. White Bedford stone was used for the lintels and sills on the windows. The tower's interior and exterior walls were plaster-coated with a lime and cement mortar mixture. Today, large portions of the red brick walls are visible, while remnants of the white mortar can be seen clinging sporadically to the exterior of the old tower.

The light room itself was a 10-foot high cupola built of wood, consisting of four paneled windows and a glass-paneled door, facing Lake Superior. The bay side, or north elevation, of the light room was a solid, shingled wall. The diameter of the cupola was wide enough to support the light room, as well as provide a narrow catwalk around the circumference of the light, safely enclosed with an iron pipe railing.

The beacon was a fixed red light emanating from a fifth-order Fresnel lens illuminated with a kerosene lamp. In order of magnitude, a fifth order lens had a capability of being seen approximately 10 miles at sea on a clear night and was generally used to mark harbor and breakwall entrances.

The Fresnel lens (pronounced Fruhnell), invented by Augustine Fresnel around 1822, became widely popular for use in lighthouses throughout the world by 1827. Using a barrel-shaped lens, with a combination of dipodic lenses and catoptric prisms, Fresnel's lenses produced



The Minnesota Point Lighthouse stands in ruins.

Photos by Patrick D. Lapinski

a nearly 80 percent increase in light output over the parabolic reflector lamps in use at the time. Rotating the optical array could also produce a variety of flash patterns, and, with the use of colored glass panels placed in front of the light, could also render a variety of colored signals, such as red, or green.

Locating the Minnesota Point lighthouse close to the mouth of the river sometimes led to the light tower itself being surrounded by water. During storms, the natural entrance would shift slightly as winds and waves altered the shape of the beach and dunes at the end of the point, obscuring the real entrance into the harbor and placing sailing masters at the mercy of Lake Superior. The lack of a protective breakwall at the Superior entry became more apparent when a large number of vessels began using the new ship canal built at Duluth in 1871. To sustain its

growth, while protecting the shipping it depended upon, a permanent infrastructure of some kind would need to be built along the entry. Ironically, the construction of a new breakwall would also bring an end to the useful existence of the lighthouse.

In 1879, the first stage of a major stabilization of the Superior entry began with the construction of wooden piers on either side of the entry by the Army Corps of Engineers. Later that year the Fresnel lens from the lighthouse was transferred to a temporary pier light that was established on the north side of the channel. For the first time since it was activated in 1858, the Minnesota Point light tower was dark. The following summer, however, the lens was placed back in the tower and Minnesota Point light was reactivated, continuing to shine for five more seasons while the dredging and pier work progressed along the Superior entry. In 1885, after the completion of the work on the entry, the Minnesota Point light was again deactivated, this time for good when a new lighthouse, with a fifth-order Fresnel lens, was established on the south side of the entry. What ever became of the old Minnesota Point lens remains a mystery.

Pat Lapinski, a native of Superior, Wisconsin, is a writer and photographer who concentrates on the Great Lakes maritime industry. Visit: www.inlandmariners.com.