

The north flowing Genesee River was a critical means of transportation to the Seneca Nation in the 1500's. This tribe of the Iroquois confederacy had war parties which held sway over territories from New England down to North Carolina. In the late 1600's Jesuit missionaries and French adventurers found their way to the region, and in 1788 the land around the future Port of Genesee was bought from the Seneca Indians. Soon thereafter, trader William Hinchey, along with his wife Mehitabel and their eight kids, made their way to the future site of the lighthouse via a sled pulled by an ox.

The region was already well on its way to having a bustling commerce; settlers anxious to clear their land of trees simply burned them, and the ashes were refined into tradeable potash. Other sought-after goods included pork, whiskey and salt. In 1804, President Thomas Jefferson decreed that the 70 mile stretch extending along the southern shore of Lake Ontario would be an official port district. The territory extended from Oak Orchard to Sodus Bay in New York state. The center of the district was at the juncture of the Genesee River with the lake, a meeting which created a bay of marshlands with two sandbars. Jefferson's first appointed Customs Collector, Samuel Latta, managed collections in his first year of just \$22.50 while incurring \$24 in expenses. The port was destined to grow in importance, however, as the Genesee River became home to five boat construction facilities, three railroads, three grain elevators, a dry dock and numerous ferries. Just six miles to the

south of the port stood the city of Rochester, which became a vital flour milling center on the strength of hydro-electric power from three waterfalls.

Ships entering the Port were originally guided by either a torch on a large pilot tree or a lamp atop one of the region's early hotels. In 1822, Congress authorized the purchase of Hinchey's four acre plot of ground for \$400. Ashbel Symons was awarded the contract, which included the lighthouse, a 20 by 34 foot keeper's cottage consisting of two rooms, and a 52 foot well, all at a cost of \$3,301. The construction was completed in seven months.

The lighthouse tower was 40 feet high, and was made from sandstone native to the area. An eight sided iron lantern was adorned with 144 panes of glass, and was supported by 2 ½ foot square posts extending six feet into the tower's masonry. The top of the lantern was finished in copper. Stephen Pleasonton of the Treasury Department, then in charge of the nation's lighthouses, ordered that the Genesee tower should possess "patent lamps and reflectors...and all the necessary apparatus" to ensure that it was up to the same lighting standards set around the country by Winslow Lewis.

There was quite a competition for the position of keeper of the light, despite the paltry yearly salary of \$350. Giles Holden, a candidate whose resume included a stint as Assistant Customs Collector, enjoyed the strong backing of many influential Charlotte citizens but was nevertheless passed over in favor of a much older man. When this elder died shortly into his term, Holden did in fact

get the job. Locals cited both his extensive expertise with the port, and his strong constitution: Charlotte was an area vulnerable to fevers and diseases, but Holden had lived there for 5 years and had remained unaffected. The lighthouse's second keeper served a term of 12 years and fathered ten children, moving his family just across the way after his retirement.

Even with the lighthouse, the marshy bay entrance still proved troublesome to ship traffic. To remedy this, a pair of 2,500 foot piers were built, spaced about 360 feet from one another. The area behind the piers was filled in, converting the bay to boat basins. With the piers in place, it was not long before other lighting options for the port were being considered. An 1838 report to the Secretary of the Treasury made it clear that the Genesee station was not in ideal condition. The ten lamps comprising the Lewis system were worn out, and fourteen of the glass panes in the lantern were broken. In addition, the lighthouse deck was leaky. The report did praise the keeper and contractor supplies as being "without fault," but concluded that the light could be decommissioned with the impending construction of a beacon on one of the piers.

A wooden beacon was indeed erected on the west pier in 1838, and it still used Lewis's method of lighting via lamps and reflectors. This initial pier light was badly damaged by storms, and had to be replaced in 1854. The new beacon used a 6<sup>th</sup> order Fresnel lens, which lit up a 270 degree arc. The keeper of the tower was also responsible for the pier beacon, which he reached by a sturdy foot

bridge that could hold up under stormy (or icy) conditions. The beacon was situated quite a distance away from the keeper's quarters, so one light steward employed a horse and cart contraption to make the journey.

In 1853 the Genesee tower was upgraded from the Lewis lamp and reflector system to a fixed, fourth order Fresnel lens, visible for 20 miles. As part of the conversion, a cast iron deck was affixed to the top of the masonry to support a new iron lantern with ten sides. A circular, iron staircase was installed in the interior, and a cylindrical masonry wall was also added to support this feature. The 144 original storm panes were replaced with ten sizeable plates of French glass, and the wooden window frames were upgraded to iron sashes. A decorative, gold plated weather vane was affixed to the top of the lantern. A local newspaper reporter thought that the \$2,000 improvement was a great bargain, remarking that "with an occasional coat of paint or whitewash, it (the tower) can hardly need repairs for one or two hundred years to come."

This prognosis proved overly optimistic, when in 1881 the wooden beacon on the western pier was supplanted by a cast iron structure. This new installation required a lens, but the 6<sup>th</sup> order Fresnel from its predecessor had been sent to Buffalo. Instead, the larger 4<sup>th</sup> order lens from the lighthouse was taken down and placed in the beacon. Mariners were furious with the decision, but the Genesee tower would remain dark from this point on, until its restoration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The pier beacon was equipped with a fog bell and

striking mechanism, and brass screens were used to cover the window and lantern ventilator openings.

The cast iron beacon only lasted for three years at the Genesee port; in 1884, it was taken apart and shipped to Cleveland. A wooden structure in the shape of a pyramid took its place. Once again, another piece of the old lighthouse was taken down and reused on the pier beacon; this time, it was the cast iron lantern. The shore end of the west pier received a taller tower structure to complement the pyramid; together, these two formed a range light that could be lined up by captains to navigate their ships into the harbor. Many mariners complained that these range lights were deficient, and longed for the days of an active and highly recognizable Genesee lighthouse. The old tower was visible to ships even before they got beyond Genesee's nearest neighbor on Lake Ontario, Braddock Point light, so the decommissioning was an especially tough pill to swallow.

In 1902 the east pier received its own beacon, which was a square and pyramidal structure, painted white. Its cast iron lantern was much like that of the west pier station (which had 'borrowed' it from the old tower), but the east beacon's fixed red light shone through a 6<sup>th</sup> order lens. With this addition to the harbor, the west pier's shore end tower was no longer needed, and was taken apart.

In 1931 the west pier beacon was again replaced with another iron structure, and a shore-stationed control house was hooked up via radio to the east pier light. Keeper George Coddling, a veteran

assigned for 26 years at the Genesee port, had been accustomed to braving the long and occasionally icy pier or using a rowboat to get to the beacon. It must certainly have been a much shorter and more pleasant walk to the control room to fulfill his keeper's duties.

The fate of the old lighthouse was uncertain after it was darkened, and for 100 years it acquired vines and birds' nests. The windows were filled with cement, and a simple wooden deck was placed across the top to cover the gaping hole left after the lantern's removal. At one point it was suggested that the tower should be torn down, so that a local railroad would have more room to maneuver its trains. Students at nearby Charlotte high school were aghast at this plan, however, as the lighthouse was a prominent symbol for their school.

A restoration effort of Genesee lighthouse was kicked off just in time for Rochester's sesquicentennial celebration in 1984. An Historical Society dedicated to the station's care wished to have a restored tower with a replica lantern and lens in place to greet the tall-masted, commemorative ships visiting at Rochester. Originally, the group wished to restore the tower to its 1822 condition, but was unable to find any lamps of the Winslow Lewis type. Instead, they focused on 1863 as their target era, which was in keeping with the replacement keeper's house built that year. Still standing, the eight room house had been serving as the quarters of a Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard until 1982, when it was donated to the Society for conversion to a museum.

Students at Edison Technical High School committed to building a lantern room frame, and the replica ventilator ball was cast in small parts that fit into the school's furnace. The Ninth Coast Guard loaned a 4<sup>th</sup> order rotating Fresnel lens to the effort, and an Army Reserve unit volunteered their crane to lift the lantern when the regularly scheduled crane operators went on strike. The concrete was removed from the lighthouse's windows, and new iron frames were installed. The tower grounds were landscaped, and archeology students from St. John Fisher college discovered the ruins of the first keeper's cottage and the old lightning rod from the tower.

After its extensive restoration efforts, the Historical Society dedicated its time to producing educational slide shows for use by schools and community centers. They also conduct tours via boat, bus or foot. In 1994 for the lighthouse's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Society initiated an Adopt A Stone charity program. More than 700 stones in the tower were adopted by local individuals or businesses for \$10, and some generous folks even adopted doors, windows or the lantern for even more money.

#### Resources

Davis, Bill. 1998. "Restoration of the Charlotte Genesee Lighthouse." The Keeper's Log.

Davis, Bill. 1997. "Lighting the Port of Gensee." The Keeper's Log.

