

In the 1820's, Dunkirk, NY nearly received the honor of serving as the western terminus of the Erie Canal. Buffalo was chosen instead, but Dunkirk was compensated by being named the primary port of the Southern Tier of New York State. Situated on a twenty foot bluff overlooking Lake Erie, the current squared-off tower is the second structure to serve Dunkirk. Land for the preceding project was donated by a wealthy and popular citizen of the town, Walter Smith. Mr. Smith had the woods around Point Gratiot (or, Lighthouse Point) cleared, and planted hickory nut trees that quickly came to dominate the area. The trees were very sturdy and wind resistant, and provided a scenic backdrop for the Hickoryhurst Inn just south of the Point.

Contractor Jesse Peck was selected to build the 1820's era structure; he used bricks fashioned out of clay from the lagoon by Sampson Alton. Blacksmith Adam Fink, whose Dunkirk shop was located at Central Avenue and Third Street, contributed the lantern. Walter Smith entered into a ten year deal with the Federal Government to provide a keeper and supplies for the station, and attempted to have the beacon lit with natural gas. While this worked for a time at nearby Barcelona lighthouse, it is believed that no other navigational aid in the world ever successfully employed natural gas energy. The problem was that the source of the fuel was two miles away at Fredonia, necessitating a two mile pipeline made of logs to transport the gas. As the lighthouse was at an elevation 150 feet lower than the well, the lighter-than-air hydrogen would not descend

more than halfway through the pipes.

The station was later upgraded to a lamp and reflector system, powered by whale oil. A \$10,000 Fresnel lens, made by the French manufacturer Henry Le Paute, was added in 1857. It featured a 15,000 candlepower flash every minute and a half. This lens was later transferred to the new tower in 1876. The station was temporarily discontinued in 1838, probably because it was thought that a beacon light placed at the harbor's entrance would be sufficient to serve traffic. However, this attitude did not take into account the esteem in which Dunkirk Lighthouse was held. It is the most visible lighthouse on Lake Erie's south shore (able to be seen from 17 miles away), and along with the beacon, is "directly in range for running a most difficult part of the channel." Also working in Dunkirk's favor was its 'spacious' harbor. Shielded from north winds by breakwaters, it was much more roomy than the other south shore harbors. A Treasury Department document speculated in 1838 that the harbor would be "very safe and convenient" upon completion, and that large, commercial vessels would be well served by it. The station was re-opened shortly thereafter.

In 1869, the tower's exterior stones were whitewashed and pointed, and the keeper's quarters were "refloored, reshingled, replastered, and painted..." By 1874, however, the old tower was "in a very precarious condition; large sections of the outer shell may fall off at any moment." Already by 1850 the structure had acquired a sizable crack that permitted rainwater to damage the interior. The

immediate danger in 1874 was that the cliffs near the lighthouse were quickly eroding. \$15,000 was appropriated to build a new structure, and a temporary beacon was put up until the replacement could be erected. The new stone building still stands to this day, and is 61 feet tall. The tower's cylindrical shape was 'squared off' with an exterior square tower "to be more compatible with the keeper's house."

The present keeper's house is a beautiful, High Victorian Gothic specimen fashioned from red brick. The exterior is symmetrical with three large windows, each with its vintage wooden braces. The roof is adorned with gable ends, boarding and brackets. The tower contains a spiral, cast iron staircase that is also very ornamental.

A number of noteworthy shipwrecks have taken place in the vicinity of Dunkirk over the years. Perhaps none is more famous than the 1818 Walk in the Water disaster; this ship was renowned at the time for being the only steamship on the lakes, and its loss sparked a competition between Black Rock and Buffalo to see which city would enjoy the right to rebuild it. In 1841 the most tragic wreck happened, when the Chicago bound Erie burned and claimed 141 lives, most of them German and Swiss immigrants. The cause of this fire was determined to be careless painters, who left their combustible turpentine above the boiler room of the ship. The Dean Richmond sank in 1893; it is believed that this wooden cargo steamer attempted to reach Dunkirk before its demise. This ship was carrying goods that included \$141,000 in precious metal bullion and \$50,000 in pig zinc.

There were also copper sheets fastened to the deck, which became unstable when severe winds battered the ship. Just four years later the Idaho went under near the lighthouse, though it bequeathed to area children large slabs of chocolate intended to be carved up into Christmas candy.

The keeper's log for the station reveals a number of other interesting incidents. In 1873 the Bank Yosemite lost track of the channel and struck a shoal. The captain claimed that the Dunkirk lighthouse was not lit at 5 am the morning of the accident; keeper B.F. Averill, however, vehemently insisted that four witnesses would testify to the contrary. In 1874, a 'four masted steamship *Persian*, from Chicago to Bflo., burned with 50,000 b.u. Of corn...probably a total loss."

A number of pier lights were used to mark the outskirts of Dunkirk's Harbor, though the first two of these were destroyed by ice floes. A stone foundation with an iron beacon was constructed in 1887. The beacon was lined in wood, its exterior steps were made longer, and guard chains were set up so that one could meander from the elevated walk to the beacon in safety. Misfortune struck this setup during a winter gale on December 31, 1895, when the beacon was wrenched from its foundation. Previous to that storm, the light at the pier had been altered from white to red. In 1900 the pier beacon was rebuilt, this time as an "inclosed (sic) frame" structure. In 1896, a wooden bridge fronting the lake by the keeper's house was upgraded to an earth foundation "retained by a substantial stone

wall." At the same time, the light station was hooked up to Dunkirk's city water with nearly a thousand feet of 2 ½ inch iron pipe. Other turn of the century improvements included a 40 gallon hot water tank for the kitchen, and an "iron oil house."

Electricity arrived at the small beacon light in 1935, though it is unclear when the primary tower was hooked up to the power grid. There was no longer any necessity for assistant keepers to brave the walk to the lakeside beacon, so they were dispensed with. The house dedicated to assistant keepers was leased to successive families by the federal government. During WWII men from the Buffalo Coast Guard were stationed at the lighthouse. After the war a Coast Guard technician, Basil K. Overton, moved his family into the house. Ultimately the dwelling was demolished.

The light station fell into disrepair after the prominence of Dunkirk harbor began to wane around 1962. General maintenance was still performed by the Coast Guard, and soon a group of veterans and citizens turned the property into a memorial park and lighthouse museum. With a 25 year lease from the Coast Guard, the group has agreed to make no alterations to the property to preserve its historical authenticity. The various branches of the armed forces have donated exhibits, pictures and artifacts for the museum; tours are available of the grounds for groups or single individuals. There is also a souvenir shop, whose proceeds go towards the continued maintenance and upgrades to the lighthouse grounds.

Resources

Burdette-Watkins, Mary and Tinney, James. 2000. Seaway Trail Lighthouses.

Jones, Ray and Roberts, Bruce. 1996. Eastern Great Lakes Lighthouses.

Lawson, Dick. n.d. "History of the Dunkirk Lighthouse." Retrieved October 5, 2007 from: <http://www.dunkirkighthouse.com/history.htm>.

Penberthy, Bryan. 2002. "Dunkirk Lighthouse." Retrieved October 5, 2007 from: <http://www.uslighthouses.com/displaypage.php?LightID=100>.

Russ, Jean Madigan. 1989. Point Gratiot's Guiding Light: The Dunkirk Light Station.