

Cape Lookout

National Seashore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Lightkeepers

Can you imagine living and working at a lighthouse? To many people, that would seem to be an ideal job. But with the conveniences we have today such as microwaves, cellular phones, and computers that would not be a rough life. Now, imagine working at a lighthouse about one hundred years ago - with no microwaves, no phones and no electricity. This is how the lighthouse keepers worked and lived at their duty stations.



The Keeper's Duties



The most important part of the Keeper's duties was to keep the light operating according to the daily schedule. At Cape Lookout Lighthouse it operated from about 4 p.m. until a little after dawn. But during a storm like a hurricane or a nor'easter, the light had to be kept in operation 24 hours a day until the storm was over.

The Keeper began his day by dressing in the official uniform of the Lighthouse Service. The uniform consisted of blue pants, vest, suit jacket, and hat. The uniform had to be worn at all times on duty. If a keeper was found wearing the uniform improperly, he could be fined or even fired!

Once the Keeper was dressed, he headed out to the oil shed which might be attached to the lighthouse or nearby. Once in the shed, he filled one or two five-gallon containers of oil and then started the climb to the light. Climbing a small lighthouse was easy and just a few steps to the top. But in a lighthouse like Cape Lookout, he had to climb 201 steps to the top!

Lens and Lighting



(First order fresnel lens)

On reaching the top of the lighthouse, the lamp inside the fresnel lens had to be filled with oil. The fresnel lens (pictured at left) was designed by Auguste' Fresnel, a French scientist. His breakthrough design used many lenses to direct the beam to the center or eye of the lens. There were "seven orders" of lenses. At Cape Lookout Lighthouse, a first order lens was used. The first order was large enough for a person to stand inside the lens. The Cape Lookout Light could be seen about 19 miles out to the sea.

Once the lamp was filled with oil, the Keeper lit the wick.

There was a clock-like mechanism that was wound and this turned the lamp (s). Now the Keeper turned to the other duties of the shift. It was important that the lens be kept as clean as possible. If the lens became dirty, the beam could not be seen by the passing ships and this could be a disaster. Keepers could be fired for not keeping the lens cleaned. The keeper polished and cleaned the lens and brass fittings of the lamp during the shift. One container of oil may not last the entire shift. The Keeper then had to go down to the oil house and return to the top with more oil.

Storm Duties



(Keepers cleaning ice off windows)

The Keepers's job involved more than keeping the light clean and lit. It also involved keeping the outside windows clear in all weather: rain, snow, sleet and ice. That meant going outside on the walk in high winds and clearing off the the windows. Captains and pilots of ships depended on the light being visible to help pilot them along in all weather, particularly during storms.

At Cape Lookout, the light had to be kept operating 24 hours a day in a hurricane. Imagine having to work in a lighthouse with winds of 100 mph or more blowing all around you.

Life at a Lighthouse



Many Keepers were able to have their families with them at the lighthouse. They lived in the quarters that were connected to a lighthouse or a house nearby. The Keeper's Quarters that are located near the base of Cape Lookout Lighthouse was a duplex (a house where two families lived) and the first and second assistant keepers and their families lived there. The Chief Keeper's House is no longer at the site. In some light stations, there may have only been one Keeper and his family.

Living at an isolated duty post meant that you could not jump into the car and run to the local mall. You might have to rely on a boat to bring your supplies. You had to place orders from catalogs for things like books, clothes, and other daily items.

Food was often grown in gardens and animals were kept to provide eggs, milk, and meat. Some lighthouses were on rocky shores and could not have gardens so they would have all their food delivered to them.

What did the Keeper and his family do at the lighthouse? Their life was a lot different than ours. There was no television, no radio, no computers, and lots of other conveniences were not there. Think of living without electricity or maybe on a small island.

Who kept the lights going?



(Charlotte Mason)

Keeping the light operating was the most important part of the Keeper's job and sometimes all family members worked at the job. There were many women Keepers that worked at the lighthouses. They did the same job, but did not have to wear the uniform. At Cape Lookout, there were two female Keepers: Charlotte Mason and Emily Julia Mason. In many cases, women took over from their husbands and/or fathers. One of the most famous women Keeper's was Abbie Burgess.

Abbie grew up at a lighthouse and during a period of time when her father was back on the mainland and her mother was ill and unable to work in the lighthouse, Abbie operated the light. She went on to work in lighthouses for the rest of her life. She spent 38 years of her life at White Head Station in Maine. She and her husband raised four children at the light. After her husband passed away, Abbie took over his job as the Keeper and continued to work until her death in 1892.

The End of an Era

As more modern conveniences were invented and put into use and automation of lights increased, Keepers were not needed. Slowly there were fewer and fewer Keepers. In 1950, the Cape Lookout Lighthouse was automated, and the Keeper and his family were no longer needed to keep a watchful eye on the lighthouse. If you visit a lighthouse, try to imagine what it was like to work there one hundred years ago.

It was a unique and special time and Lighthouse Keepers are an important part of our maritime history.

