



Sandy Hook Lighthouse

The Facts, Mystery and History Surrounding America's Oldest Operating Lighthouse

Talk about "All in the Family": Keeper Charles W. Patterson was in charge of Sandy Hook Lighthouse for 24 years. He had four brothers who served in the union army during the Civil War. Charles also tried to enlist in the army but was turned down for medical reasons. He then applied for an appointment to become a lighthouse keeper and was appointed keeper of Sandy Hook Lighthouse in 1861. Charles probably helped his sister, Sarah Patterson Johnson, get the job of Assistant Keeper at Sandy Hook Lighthouse, who was appointed in 1867. Sarah later resigned her position to become a public school teacher at the Sandy Hook Proving Ground.

Sarah was replaced as assistant keeper by Samuel P. Jewell, who was married to Emma Patterson Megill, who was related to Charles W. Patterson. Another relative working at Sandy Hook related to Charles was Trevonian H. Patterson, who was described in an 1879 article as having "lived at Sandy Hook since he was one year old, knows every inch of the beach [at Sandy Hook], and is as familiar with [all the] treacherous shoals as he is with the plank walk leading from the [life-saving station which he is in charge of] to the Ordnance dock." Trevonian was keeper of the Sandy Hook Life-Saving Station for many years. In 1885, Charles Patterson and Samuel Jewell were the keepers in charge of both the Sandy Hook Lighthouse [main light] and the West Beacon. Charles annual salary was \$600.00, and Samuel's was \$450.00.

Like Charles W. Patterson, Samuel P. Jewell would witness many interesting things while living upon the sands of Sandy Hook. For one thing, Jewell would see the beginning of the electrification of American lighthouses. On April 16, 1889, the North Hook Beacon was connected to the Gedney Channel electric buoys' dynamo building on the Hook, making it America's



Sandy Hook Lighthouse & Keepers Quarters, located in the Fort Hancock area of the park.

second lighthouse, after the Statue of Liberty, to be lighted by electricity. Then, on May 9, 1896, Jewell would also witness both the West Beacon and the Sandy Hook main lighthouse lighted for the first time in history by incandescent electric lights powered from the electric buoy dynamo building. However, this would be short lived when, on September 17, 1903, the electric buoy station at Sandy Hook was permanently closed when the electrically lighted Gedney Channel buoys were converted over to gas lighted buoys, and the three lighthouses on Sandy Hook that used electricity were returned back to the old style oil lanterns. Just as Sarah Patterson assisted her brother in the lighthouse, Samuel Jewell's daughter, probably Grace Jewell, assisted her father.

Eventually, the many years of keeping the Sandy Hook Lighthouse would catch up to Samuel Parker Jewell. A banner headline

in the *New York Sun* newspaper, dated April 18, 1909, announced that Jewell "Quits Sandy Hook Light." The many years of going up and down the Sandy Hook Lighthouse Tower and the West Beacon to care for the oil burning lamps that lighted their Fresnel Lenses finally caught up with Jewell. The *Sun* reported that Jewell had kept these lights for "nearly forty years, but on account of disability he was obliged to apply for sick leave which has been granted him for one year, but his doctor says he will never get back to duty.." On June 25, 1913, the *New York Times* noted that Samuel P. Jewell had died at 64 years old.

Other dedicated keepers would follow in Samuel Jewell's footsteps to take care of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse, but eventually modern electronic technology automated all of America's lighthouses and the job of lighthouse keeper passed into history.

Sandy Hook Light & Its Lamps

1764 Forty Eight Oil Blazes

The *New York Mercury* newspaper reported that "On [June 11, 1764] the NEW-YORK LIGHTHOUSE, erected at Sandy Hook, was lighted for the first time...There are 48 (whale) Oil Blazes...The Building from the surface is Nine Stories: the whole from Bottom to top, 103 feet."

1776 Eight Copper Lamps

On March 12, 1776, Colonel George Taylor, reported from Middletown, N.J., that he "Received from William Malcolm, eight copper lamps, two tackle falls and blocks, and three casks, and a part of a cask of (whale) oil, being articles brought from the light-house on Sandy Hook." The lamps and oil were removed as part of a futile attempt to keep the British Navy from bringing a British Army to New York at the beginning of the American Revolution.

1827 Eighteen Lewis Lamps

In 1827, Sandy Hook Lighthouse was described in the *American Coast Pilot* as being lighted with 18 Winslow Lewis Patented lamps with eighteen-inch diameter reflectors. "The strength of light in this lantern is greater than any other on the coast, and if properly attended, may be seen at a distance of 10 leagues" [1 league equals about 3 miles].

1842 Eighteen Argand Lamps

In 1852 the Lighthouse Board reported "The illuminating apparatus is composed of 18 21 inch reflectors, and Argand lamps which were fitted new, according to the best information on the subject, in 1842."

1857 Finally a Fresnel!

"At Sandy Hook...the main light-house fitted with a new lantern and a 3rd order lens." Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the state of finances 1857

1896 – 1903 Electric Lights for a short time

May 9, 1896 the Sandy Hook main lighthouse lighted for the first time by incandescent electric lights, but discontinued in September 1903.

1903- 1925 Kerosene is king

Kerosene vapor lamp is used., similar to today's camp lantern with glowing balls. Kerosene provided a "brilliant light at a moderate cost" and was the preferred method of illumination in US lighthouses for most of the early twentieth century. [1917 George Rockwell Putnam]

1925-Present: Electric lamps return

The U.S. Army brings the the NJ Central Power and Light's electrical grid to Fort Hancock, wires to the light house, and power for today's 1000 watt bulb.

Lighthouse Legend & Folklore

In 1879 George Houghton, a writer living in New York City, visited Sandy Hook that summer and would write an interesting article about his visit in the September, 1879 issue of *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*. His article records for the first time the lighthouse legend, a story that over time grew to include the lighthouse, a secret room and skeletons. Houghton writes:

"During the Revolution it [the lighthouse] played an important role, being fortified and occupied for a time by the British and refugees [loyalists] Previous to recent repairs [probably the repairs done in 1863] the marks of cannon-shot were plainly visible on its walls.

When introducing the brick lining some years ago, the cellar was excavated, and fourteen feet below the flooring the workmen came upon a ponderous iron door, upon removing which they penetrated into a small room, where a fireplace was found, with ashes still upon it. What this prison-like chamber was intended for is by no means apparent."

In 1888, another writer, Gustave Kobbe, visited Sandy Hook, and in 1889 published his book *The New Jersey Coast and Pines*. Just like George Houghton 10 years before him, Gustave Kobbe tramped around Sandy Hook, noting that:

"The tower and the old house were known during the Revolution as the Lighthouse Fort, or Refugees' Town. The British fortified it, and from there the Tory refugees made their bloody raids [up and down the Sandy Hook bay shore and the coast of New Jersey].

Workmen, engaged about fifteen years ago in re-lining the light-house, discovered a cell beneath the stone floor of the cellar, and in it a rude fire-place and human remains. These latter are supposed to have been relics of Revolutionary tragedies."

Later, writers and authors used Houghton's and Kobbe's 19th Century accounts to expand upon and embellish this story until the tale took on legendary proportions. During the twentieth century, writers claimed that a human

skeleton was discovered sitting in a chair by a table in a "secret basement/cellar" in the keeper's house, and not in the lighthouse as previously claimed. When this story was last cited in a recent lighthouse history book, the author claimed that not one but fifteen skeletons had been found in the keeper's house basement, all sitting in chairs around a table. That sure is a lot of skeletons sitting around a table in a "secret basement/cellar" and a far cry from what Houghton and Kobbe originally wrote about!



Lighthouse and Keepers Quarters, ca. 1930.