

# South Manitou Island Lighthouse

## Volunteer at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore



**The South Manitou Island lighthouse** is one of the most distinctive architectural features of the island. It is located less than 0.5 miles from the dock. Walk through the village and past the visitor center to the boardwalk that will take you over the dunes to the lighthouse. Along the way, you will enjoy the cool breeze off Lake Michigan and learn about the shipwreck of the Three Brothers which lies just off the shore at Sandy Point.

With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1826, the development of commercial navigation on the Great Lakes increased rapidly. The Manitou Passage was the most important route for schooners and steamers traveling the 300 mile length of Lake Michigan. South Manitou Island provided a wood fueling stop for steamers. The island had the only deep natural harbor between the Manitou Passage and Chicago, 220 miles to the south, providing a safe and well protected haven from storms.

To guide storm-driven ships, Congress appropriated \$5,000 in 1838 for the construction of a lighthouse. Construction began in 1839, but very little is known about this first lighthouse on South Manitou Island. The specifications were the same as for the Old Presque Isle lighthouse, which included a 30-foot circular tower and a stone keeper's dwelling, but written accounts describe a 1.5 story house with a light tower on one gable end. No sketches or photos exist to determine what was actually built. The location of the light was on a 30-foot sandy knoll near the shore close to the location of the present lighthouse, but the exact location is not known.

In 1858, the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment recognized the need for greater safety and replaced this house with a two-story brick residence with a 35 foot tower on top. The tower housed a Fourth Order Fresnel lens. A fog signal building was added and both structures still stand today.

The increased shipping traffic brought changes and in 1871, a 100-foot tower was built. The tower is 18 feet in diameter at the base. The walls are hollow and 5 feet thick at the base tapering to 3 feet thick at the top. A passageway was added connecting the tower to the keeper's dwelling. A Third Order Fresnel lens from Paris was installed with a 3-wick lamp that had a range of 18 miles. In 1875, the first steam fog signal on Lake Michigan was installed.

During the operation of the lighthouse, 17 Keepers and 32 Assistant Keepers maintained the light. Aaron Sheridan was one of the Lighthouse Keepers and the first one to be in charge of the current lighthouse. Learn about [Aaron](#), his family, and his tragic death while he was the Keeper. For more information on the lighthouse, browse [Terry Pepper's web site](#). The U.S. Coast Guard abandoned the light station in 1958.

Take a tour of the lighthouse and climb the 117 steps of the circular staircase to the light station 104 feet above the ground and enjoy the beautiful view of the Manitou Passage and the island. You can walk all the way around the light at the top on the observation deck.

**Volunteers** in this position greet visitors and conduct interpretive guided tours of the lighthouse and surrounding structures; hike island trails and perform light trail work; notify supervisor when hazardous conditions exist or submit work orders for routine maintenance needs; administer first aid to self and visitors; provide on-site presence to prevent vandalism of historic structures; perform light housekeeping including sweeping, washing windows, etc.; assist Historic Structures Preservation maintenance workers with planned maintenance projects; maintain visitation records. A minimum of 6 weeks availability is required to apply for this position.

Lighthouse volunteers are stationed on SMI and will be scheduled for a minimum of 32 hours of volunteer work per week in exchange for transportation and housing. They are housed at no cost in park housing (fully furnished, minus bedding). Electricity and water are available, but no other services like grocery or restaurants are on the islands (i.e. all food must be transported to the island). Transportation to the islands is via Manitou Island Transit ferry service, from Leland, at no cost – but make own reservations with ferry service.

**To apply for this opportunity**, email resume and contact info for two personal references to the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore volunteer coordinator: [matthew\\_mohrman@nps.gov](mailto:matthew_mohrman@nps.gov). Include available dates, minimum of 6 weeks availability is required, schedule is flexible and can be set on case by case basis.