

The Lonely Life of a Lighthouse Keeper

A missing light at a dangerous point along the shore could mean a shipwreck and the death of many sailors and passengers. The role of lighthouse keepers was to make sure the warning beacon kept shining brightly through dark, stormy hours.

The journals of lighthouse keepers reveal how the keepers spent their days. Keeping the light lit was only one of many important jobs. Keepers also had to keep the lenses and other parts of the light meticulously clean. Every day they polished metal and cleaned the lighthouse windows inside—and sometimes even outside!

Keepers followed directions in their instruction books to the letter and kept thorough notes. Journal entries show that many lighthouse keepers were lonely in their work, although not all of them lived alone. Some lighthouse keepers were married and had children living with them. Others had assistants to help them keep the light burning through the dark nights.

Though lighthouse keeping was sometimes lonely and often tedious work, it was a good job. Those who kept the lights were provided with a place to live and wholesome food. Most keepers stayed on the job for many years. Some transferred to other lighthouses or received promotions.

Today most U. S. lighthouses are no longer in use to keep sailors safe. Still, they are a beautiful addition to the coastal landscape. Many are open to the public. If you are lucky enough to visit one, imagine what it would have been like to live there, keeping the light burning.



Keepers used tools like these in their daily chores. The apron was worn to protect the keeper's clothing from oil or soot.

Fresnel Lens

Ancient lighthouses used fires to signal distant seafarers. Colonial lighthouses used oil lamps. In 1822, a Frenchman named Augustin Fresnel (FRAY NEL) invented a lens that could be seen 18 to 20 miles out at sea. The lens focused the light from an oil lamp to shine as brightly as 80,000 candles! The United States began using the Fresnel lens in the 1850s.

Web Link

To learn more about how a Fresnel lens works, visit www.lanternroom.com
To learn more about the life and duties of a lighthouse keeper, visit www.nightbeacon.com/lighthouseinformation

Courtesy Michigan Lighthouse Conservancy