



KEEPERS OF THE LIGHTS

Michigan is home to more lighthouses than any other state, at nearly 120. Dating back to the early 1800s, these towering beacons protected the often dangerous shorelines and aided ships of all shapes and sizes as they made their way through the freshwaters of the Great Lakes. Those who were charged with staffing these lights played a pivotal role in the state's maritime history and their stories linger on for generations interested in the romance of life by the inland seas.

Captain James S. Donahue

Following his years of service in the Civil War, where he lost his leg in the Battle of the Wilderness, 32-year-old Captain James S. Donahue was appointed keeper of the South Haven Light. The year was 1874 when he took his post as the second of only six keepers at this active port. While the wooden light stood at the end of wooden pier, the residence was located a couple blocks away on a bluff overlooking the Black River (where it remains today).

During his 35 years of service, Donahue is credited with saving 15 lives, including two of his own children who had fallen off the pier into the waters of Lake Michigan. Harrowing accounts of his years of service add to the keeper's story, including many treacherous times when he had to crawl on his hands and one knee out along the 75-foot elevated wooden catwalk—with his lantern firmly clenched in his teeth—to tend to the light.

On October 6, 1903, the tender Hyacinth delivered a prefabricated steel tower to South Haven and work soon began on erecting it on the pier. On November 13 of that year, Captain Donahue carefully climbed the spiral staircase to light the fifth-order Fresnel lens for the first time. He would remain the keeper for another 7 years, retiring in 1910.

Captain William Robinson

Captain William Robinson and his wife, Sarah (Cooper), arrived in Michigan from North Cumberland County, England in 1867, drawn by the thriving lumber industry in the region. Although the White River was an active water route for transport ships traveling the Great Lakes, no lighthouse was in place at the time to aid in their safe passage.

As the Robinsons established themselves in the community, William took it upon himself to walk along the banks of the river each night and hang a lantern on a pole at the end of the channel during the shipping season, helping boats navigate in and out of the harbor. At the same time, he began an extensive campaign to secure the building of a lighthouse along the Lake Michigan shore.

While industry leaders recognized the value of the lighthouse, their early efforts and funds were directed toward the development of a new channel. After that project was complete, attention was directed toward the construction of a pier light in 1872. Captain Robinson was appointed the town's first keeper, manning the light and also overseeing the eventual building of an elevated wooden catwalk and a shore-based brick lighthouse. It was also he who lit the new light for the first time on May 31, 1874.

Sarah and Bill found peace and love at their lighthouse, raising a large family of nearly a dozen children. In 1891, Sarah died from a stroke at the age of 58, leaving a grief stricken Bill to not only service the light but raise the children still at home. Their son, Thomas, was later named assistant keeper (as was grandson, William Bush). Bill himself served another 28 years until he died in 1919, at the age of 88.



Aaron & Julia Sheridan

Civil War veteran Aaron Sheridan and his new bride, Julia Moore, moved to South Manitou Island in northern Lake Michigan, where his family had recently settled a 120-acre farm along the north end of Florence Lake. It was the summer of 1866 when they moved in and took charge of the lighthouse.

Just five years later, a new 100-foot tower was constructed, and with it came an official appointment for Julia of First Assistant Keeper. This meant not only that the U.S. Lighthouse Service recognized her position, but she would collect a small salary to supplement what her husband made as the Head Keeper. She was also responsible for the upkeep of the home and raising the six sons the couple had during their 12 years of service.

Tragedy struck the Sheridan family and the close-knit community on March 15, 1878. Aaron and Julia were returning from a trip to the mainland with their 10-month-old son, Robert, in a small boat owned by and manned by another island resident. Just off the ice-locked shoreline, a sudden squall blew in and capsized the boat. Aaron, who had lost the use of one arm during his military service, was unable to save himself, his wife or his son, and they all three perished that day.

George Sheridan

The second-oldest son of Aaron and Julia Sheridan, George Sheridan was just 10 years old when his parents died tragically in 1878. Raised with his four other brothers by their maternal grandparents, Henry and Julia Moore, in Illinois, George found his calling and became the tenth member of the Sheridan family to serve as a Great Lakes lighthouse keeper.

He was first stationed at the Chicago Harbor Lighthouse as an assistant keeper from 1896 until 1899. From there, it was on to the Michigan City Light (1905-1909) and the Kalamazoo River Light in Saugatuck from 1909 (until the station was decommissioned in 1914) where he lived with his wife, Sarah, and their three children. Although he was transferred to another Lake Michigan light at that time, George never took the post as years of mental depression finally consumed him. Descendants of the George Sheridan family still remain in the Allegan County communities of Saugatuck and Douglas.

Elizabeth Whitney Van Riper Williams

A self-proclaimed “Child of the Sea,” Elizabeth Whitney had family ties to many of Michigan’s northern islands. She was born on Mackinac Island in 1844, moved as an infant to St. Helena Island and then Beaver Island. She

was 25 years old in 1869 when her husband of seven years, Clement Van Riper, was appointed the head lighthouse keeper at the St. James Harbor Light at Whiskey Point on Beaver Island—the largest inhabited island in the contiguous United States.

Soon after his appointment, Clement took ill and Elizabeth stepped in to assist with the daily responsibilities, something she was deeply passionate about. On November 7, 1872, the distressed schooner *Thomas Howland* made its way to Paradise Bay, where it would eventually sink. In his efforts to assist in rescuing the crew, Clement died, and his body was never recovered. A heartbroken Elizabeth then and there dedicated herself to the light in an effort to prevent future tragedies. Within a short period of time she was named the replacement keeper.

In 1875, Elizabeth married Daniel Williams, and they continued their lives at the St. James light for nine years. From there, they transferred to a mainland light station in Harbor Springs when the Little Traverse Light was completed in 1884. It was almost 30 years later (1913) before the two would retire to Charlevoix, where they lived until January, 1938—dying within 28 hours of each other after 63 years of marriage.

Dianna Stampfer, *Promote Michigan*

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