

An Illuminating Lady

Elizabeth Whitney Williams

BY DIANNA HIGGS STAMPFLER

A Child of the Sea was more than just the title of Elizabeth Whitney Williams' 1905 autobiography—it was an accurate moniker for the Michigan-born woman who became one of the longest-serving lighthouse keepers in the Great Lakes region. One of her earliest recollections was of wandering down to the coastline to gaze upon the vastness of the freshwater before her. It entranced her then just as it did for the 90-plus years she lived in Michigan.



A MICHIGAN CHILDHOOD

Born on Mackinac Island on June 24, 1844, Elizabeth Whitney Williams was the only child of Elizabeth Cross Dousman Gebeau and Walter Whitney. Her mother was the orphan child of Angelica, noted as a local Native woman, and John Cross, French by some accounts and British by others—both of whom died when she was an infant.

Prominent Mackinac businessman Michael Dousman and his wife, Catherine Jane Aiken McDonald, adopted Elizabeth Cross and raised her alongside their ten biological children. Cross' first marriage to Louis Gebeau, from which four sons were born, ended tragically when he drowned in an 1841 boating accident on Lake Michigan.

Her second husband, New York-born Walter Whitney, enlisted in, served in, and was honorably discharged from the Blackhawk and Florida War, going next to Fort Brady in Sault Ste. Marie before relocating to Mackinac Island—where he met the newly widowed Elizabeth Gebeau. The two wed in 1843 and, the following year, welcomed their first and only child, Elizabeth.

As a child, Elizabeth Whitney learned the importance of Michigan's inland seas. "I remember standing with my arms outstretched as if to welcome and catch the white topped waves as they

Left: This portrait of Elizabeth Whitney Williams appeared in her autobiography, A Child of the Sea, published in 1905. (All photos courtesy of the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society, unless otherwise noted. Background image courtesy of Pixabay.)

came rolling in upon the white, pebbly shore at my feet," she recalled of her toddler years. Elizabeth recognized what a gift it was to live so close to the shore, but she also knew firsthand the dangers that lingered.

Walter Whitney, a builder by trade, soon moved his family of six to St. Helena Island, where brothers Archibald "Archie" and Wilson Newton were establishing a commercial fishing operation. The Newton brothers "needed a good vessel for their trading purposes and concluded to have one built for

themselves. My father being a ship carpenter, signed a contract to build their ship.... The building of the ship brought our family to the dear little island of St. Helena," Elizabeth wrote in her autobiography.

Although the 1850 census noted that the Whitneys—including six-year-old Elizabeth—lived on St. Helena Island, they soon headed to Manistique after Walter was offered a job: "A Mr. Frankle had settled there and put in a mill. He was an old friend of my father's," Elizabeth described. "Offering good pay, father concluded to accept, and we prepared to move at once.... One still, cold morning in November our boat was prepared and we started to Manistique, ten miles distant."

The Whitneys' time in the Upper Peninsula was short-lived but full of adventures that Elizabeth later recounted in her book. But it was their next destination that really shaped her life.

STRANG'S REIGN

In the 1850s, Beaver Island was home to a growing congregation of Mormons led by a self-proclaimed king named James Jesse Strang. It was there that the Whitneys landed and Walter subsequently found work building a "cottage" for Strang and his increasing number of wives. "The King came to our house asking my father to go to the harbor and help build his house. He wanted him to do the framing, and father, not being very busy, and not liking to refuse the King, went," Elizabeth recalled.

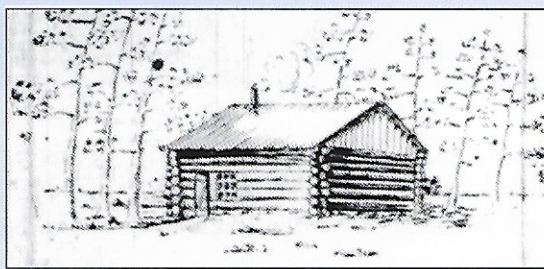
The years under Strang's reign were tumultuous for the Whitneys and many others on Beaver Island. Given the growing volatility, Elizabeth and her brothers were often sent to live with others for their own safety. At about age eight or nine, Elizabeth temporarily lived with the Milton A. Shephard family of Painesville, Ohio.

SCHOOL DAYS IN TRAVERSE CITY

In *A Child of the Sea*, Elizabeth Whitney Williams fondly recalled her time spent as a young girl at the Traverse City schoolhouse:

The school house was near the river bank, just about opposite to the river's mouth....It was in the midst of a pretty grove of small oak trees that reached their branches far out, giving cool shade where we could sit and eat our lunch. The evergreens and maple trees were mixed about, giving it a variety of change. Wild roses grew everywhere. It was truly an ideal spot that we never tired of.

Our teacher was Miss Helen Goodale....The next year more people came and more scholars. Our little school house was filled. We were a happy lot, seeming almost like one family. We drank from the same cup, swung in the same swing, sharing our lunches together, and no matter where we have roamed through the wide world can we forget that little old log school house. I have seen it many times in my dreams, and the happy faces of each as we tried to excel to please the teacher. We all loved her, though trying her patience often. Yet we knew and felt she loved us. Oh, happy school days and pleasant school companions!



The December 5, 1907, edition of the Grand Traverse Herald included the obituary of Helen Goodale Hitchcock and featured photos of her and the Traverse City log schoolhouse at which she had previously taught. (Photos courtesy of the Digital Michigan Newspapers Collection, Central Michigan University.)

For a brief period, the Whitneys relocated to Traverse City, where Elizabeth was excited to continue her education. The first school there—believed to be the first in the Lower Peninsula north of Manistee not to be connected with a mission—operated in 1853 in a converted stable on the 400 block of East Front Street.

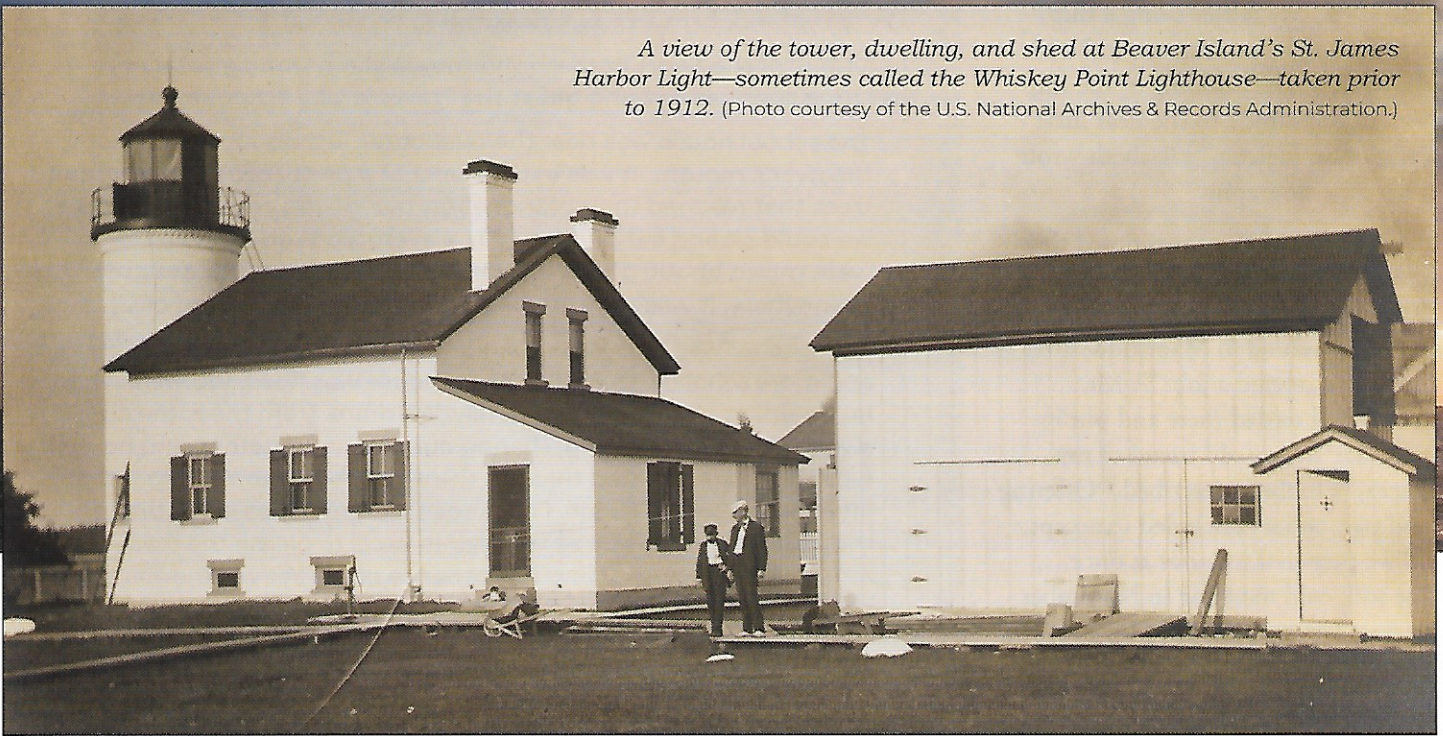
During the family's time in Traverse City, Walter Whitney adopted a seven-year-old boy named Frank Churchill, whose mother had passed away and whose father could not care for him and his siblings. Having a younger brother pleased Elizabeth, especially since her older half-brothers were soon grown and living on their own.

MARRIAGE TO CLEMENT

When news came in June 1856 of Strang's assassination, the Whitneys felt it was finally safe to return to Beaver Island, and Elizabeth quickly settled into a life of friends and school. In 1860, at the age of 16, Elizabeth Whitney married Clement VanRiper, who was 12 years her senior.

"I was now married to Mr. Van Riper [*sic*] and living very near the light-house," she wrote. "My husband had come from Detroit for his health. After we were married he started a large cooper shop at the Point, employing several men in the summer season."

A view of the tower, dwelling, and shed at Beaver Island's St. James Harbor Light—sometimes called the Whiskey Point Lighthouse—taken prior to 1912. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Archives & Records Administration.)



After spending the winter of 1861 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Clement and Elizabeth returned to Garden Island in the Beaver Island archipelago. At the time, the island had about 200 Anishinaabek inhabitants, who fished and grew corn and potatoes. Clement had been appointed by the government as a schoolteacher in July 1862. Elizabeth noted, “Our school continued for two years, then was discontinued for several years before another teacher was sent among them. That two years was a busy life for us both.”

The next noteworthy profession for the VanRipers would be one that would last each of them a lifetime. Following the August 1869 resignation of Peter McKinley, Clement was named the head keeper of the St. James Harbor Light at Whiskey Point for a salary of \$540 a year. As Clement suffered from health issues and was often unable to fulfill his duties, Elizabeth willingly served in his stead. She wrote, “From the first the work had a fascination for me. I loved the water, having always

been near it, and I loved to stand in the tower and watch the great rolling waves chasing and tumbling in upon the shore. It was hard to tell when it was loveliest. Whether in its quiet moods or in a raging foam.”

Just a little over three years after his appointment, Clement’s service came to an abrupt end. On the evening of November 7, 1872, the schooner *Thomas H. Howland* was caught in a storm and took on water, causing it to sink. Clement had rowed out in his boat, attempting to help the crew, but both he and the first mate died. Their bodies were never recovered.

Twenty-eight-year-old Elizabeth was left widowed, heartbroken, and distraught about how she would move forward in life. “Life to me then seemed darker than the midnight storm that raged for three days upon the deep, dark waters. I was weak from sorrow, but realized that though the life that was dearest to me had gone, yet there were others out on the dark and treacherous waters who needed to catch the rays of the shining light from my light-house

tower,” she lamented. “Nothing could rouse me but that thought, then all my life and energy was given to the work which now seemed was given me to do. The light-house was the only home I had and I was glad and willing to do my best in the service.”

RELOCATING TO HARBOR SPRINGS

Elizabeth Whitney VanRiper was soon appointed as the head keeper of the Whiskey Point Lighthouse—a common practice for the wives of keepers who died in the line of duty. Although she “felt almost afraid to assume so great a responsibility,” she also “felt a deeper interest in our sailors’ lives than ever before, and I longed to do something for humanity’s sake, as well as earn my own living.”

In 1875, she married a local cooper named Daniel Williams, who had also been born on Mackinac Island seven years after Elizabeth. The Williamses maintained their lighthouse for nearly a decade on “Michigan’s Emerald Isle,” but in

1884, Elizabeth desired to move to the mainland and petitioned for a transfer from the U.S. Lighthouse Service.

Some 31 miles southeast of Beaver Island, a lighthouse was being constructed on a 3½-acre parcel at the end of a 50-acre peninsula in Little Traverse—now Harbor Springs. Workmen and materials arrived on the point on May 14, 1884, and just 96 days later, the lighthouse was put into service. Elizabeth Whitney Williams became the first of seven keepers there, with an annual salary of \$540-\$560.

“We drove through the resort grounds to ‘Harbor Point Light House,’ as it is known by the land people, but to the mariner it is ‘Little Traverse Light House,’” she remembered of her arrival. “We were soon at work putting our house in order, and the beautiful lens in the tower seemed to be appealing to me for care and polishing, which I could not resist, and since that time I have given my best efforts to keep my light shining from the light-house tower.”

For nearly three decades, the Williamses called the two-story brick lighthouse at Harbor Point their home. And, while Elizabeth kept the light burning, Daniel ran a successful photography studio in town. Elizabeth had no children, but she and Daniel



The graves of Elizabeth and Daniel Williams in Charlevoix’s Brookside Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

had a great number of friends and often hosted musical gatherings at their home. Both were well-tuned musicians who played a variety of instruments.

A LIFE REMEMBERED

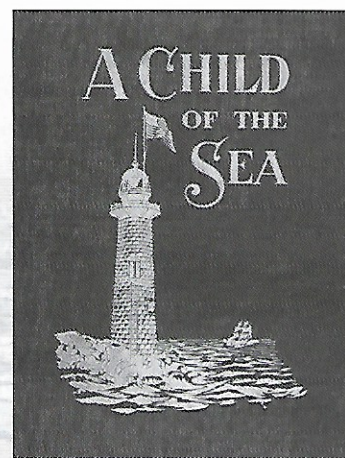
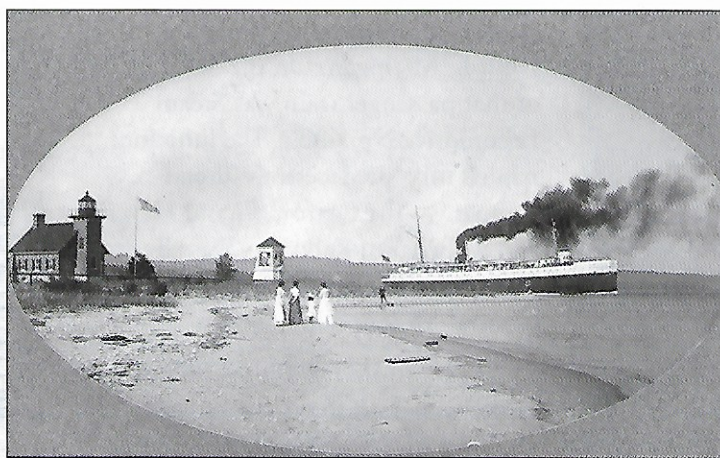
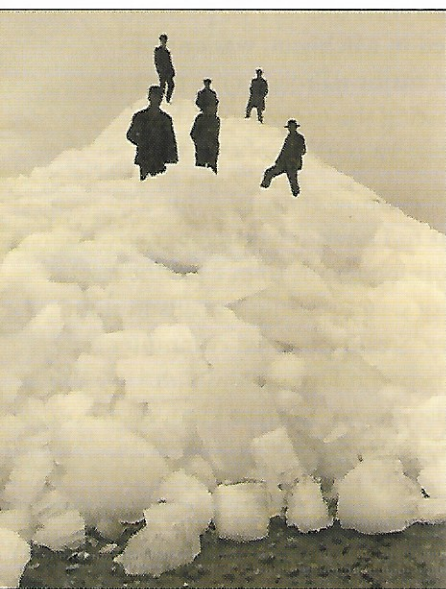
On November 1, 1913, Elizabeth officially retired after serving 44 years between the Beaver Island and Harbor Springs lighthouses. She and Daniel then moved down the coast to Charlevoix, where Elizabeth had purchased a house a few years prior at 405 Michigan Avenue. In 1925, the Williamses moved once again to 303 Mason Street, where they lived until they passed away on January 23, 1938—within 24 hours of each other. They had been married for 63 years.

Brookside Cemetery, at the intersection of US-31 and M-66 south of downtown Charlevoix, is the final

resting place for Elizabeth and Daniel Williams. Their headstones, reading “Aunt” and “Uncle,” were chosen by Harry Gebeau—grandson of Elizabeth’s half-brother Louis.

In Michigan’s nearly 200 years of lighthouse history, some 50 or so women have served as keepers or assistant keepers, yet it was Elizabeth Whitney Williams who boasted the longest career. She was also the only female keeper in the state to pen and publish such a detailed autobiography, which not only shares stories of her professional life but also details a colorful history of growing up in the mid-nineteenth century. ■

DIANNA HIGGS STAMPFLER is the president of Promote Michigan and the author of Michigan’s Haunted Lighthouses (2019) and Death & Lighthouses on the Great Lakes (2022), both from The History Press.



Left to right: Ice at the end of Harbor Point, as captured by Elizabeth’s husband. Daniel Williams also took this photo of the steamer Manitou near the Little Traverse Light. The front cover of Elizabeth Whitney Williams’ book. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)