

Tales From Keepers' Logs

by Robert Bachand

"January 1, 1931. New Years Day - All dressed up and no place to go." James Gallen, Keeper. The A-frame Gull Rocks Lighthouse was located just offshore, north of what is now the bridge connecting Newport and Jamestown, Rhode Island. The rocks frequently were awash during a storm, perhaps leaving the keeper with a sense of isolation. It had to be a special kind of person to subject himself/herself to the loneliness and difficulties posed by some light stations, particularly before the age of radio and telephone communications.

Struggling against an unbroken series of steep ocean swells, the small dory taking Lucius Chadwick to his new assignment repeatedly reached a wave's crest, only to plunge to the depth of its trough. He was headed for Sakonnet Point Light, Rhode Island, just 800 yards offshore, but it felt like an eternity as he clung tenaciously to the sides of the boat. On entering the station, the damp January cold seemed to be magnified by the iron tower's brick-lined walls. He inspected the two small rooms on the first deck and the two even smaller ones on the second level. He then climbed the lantern's wooden steps, looked out over the gray, frigid coastal Atlantic waters, and upon returning to the galley where the keeper was waiting, asked to be returned to the mainland. With his two feet firmly planted back on the ground, Chadwick resigned the appointment that he had received two days earlier.



Penfield Reef Light, Fairfield, CT

Nils Nelson had served with distinction at a Rhode Island lighthouse prior to being reassigned to New Haven's Southwest Ledge Light. After arriving at his new station, however, his personality began to change. Over a period of months, he became moody and prone to fits of uncontrolled anger. When a minor disagreement arose between the assistant and Head Keeper Jorgen Jonnesen, Nilson would pace the floor and scream at Jonnesen. During such an argument, in a scene resembling the plot from a low-budget Hollywood movie, the assistant reportedly picked up a fire axe and chased the head keeper until Jonnesen finally

was able to barricade himself in a storage room. Emerging some time later, the head keeper found that his attacker had gone to shore in the rowboat.

The small-framed Jonnesen was intimidated by the big, strapping fellow, and perhaps, as a result, he initially did not report the incident to the Light House Board. Instead he contacted his brother-in-law, asking him to stay aboard the light. A short time later, in mid-January, 1908, Nilson again was consumed with anger. He pinned the keeper against the wall and threatened to cut his throat with a butcher knife. Luckily, however, before harm could be done, the brother-in-law intervened. Shortly thereafter, Nilson went to shore, and as reported in the January 22, 1908, issue of the *New Haven Register*, the troubled assistant took his own life.

But there were happier times at these more isolated light stations. The cramped quarters at Stamford Harbor Light (Connecticut) probably accounted for its high turnover of keepers, but its cozy confinement didn't seem to be a problem for Keeper Robert M. Fitten; his wife gave birth at the lighthouse. "December 9, 1929, WOW! A son born, all is ok now," wrote Fitten in the log.

In the account of any group of lighthouses, there is always at least one that is said to be haunted. Of the remaining light stations from

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Rhode Island to Cape May, New Jersey, at least two have a history of haunting. Residents of New London, Connecticut, often speak of Ernie's ghost that haunts New London Ledge Light. After having received a letter from his wife informing him that she had left him for the captain of the Block Island ferry, the despondent Ernie reportedly climbed to the tower's balcony. Then, without hesitation, he slid under the railing, walked to the edge of the roof and gave up his life to the rocks and water below. From that moment on, some of the personnel assigned to the lighthouse occasionally were said to have felt Ernie's presence. However, no mention of a suicide having taken place at the lighthouse was ever found by this researcher in any of the station's logs held at the National Archives or in the Coast Guard Records.

Penfield Reef Light, of Fairfield, Connecticut, well may have been haunted - if you believe in ghosts. On December 22, 1916, Head Keeper Frederick A. Jordan boarded his small dory and headed home for Christmas in choppy seas. What happened next was recorded in the station's log by the assistant keeper:

Keeper left station at 12:20 PM and when about 150 yards NW of the light, his boat capsized, but he managed to cling to the overturned boat. He motioned to me to lower the sailboat, but on account of the heavy seas running from the NW, it was impossible to launch the boat alone. At 1:00

PM, the wind died down a bit and shifted to the south. I then lowered the boat safely and started out after the keeper, who had by this time drifted about one and a half miles to the SW. When about one and one half miles from the light, the wind shifted to the SW making a headwind and an outgoing tide which proved too much for me to pull with the heavy boat. I had to give up and returned to the station with the wind now blowing a gale from the WSW. Sent distress signals to several ships, but none answered. Lost track of the keeper at 3:00 PM. He is probably lost.
R.J. Iten, asst. keeper.

A short time after the incident, Keeper Iten (perhaps out of a sense of guilt) felt a chill in the air as an unearthly figure emerged from a room once occupied by the drowned keeper. Stopping a moment at the top of the stairs, the specter melted into the darkness below. Gathering his wits, the keeper went to investigate and found the logbook taken from the shelf and opened to the very day of the accident! He reported that this had occurred several other times.

Years later, following the light's automation, the beacon occasionally operated erratically. Whenever the Coast Guard personnel made their way out to the light, they found nothing wrong. The Guardsmen placed the blame on "atmospheric conditions," but old-timers blamed it on the "mischievous spirit" of Fred Jordan.

In 1989, this writer, with permission of the Coast Guard, visited Penfield Reef Lighthouse



Penfield Reef spiral staircase.

with two staff persons from the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk. The seas were a little rough, and since we had some difficulty with our anchor, we decided that I would go in first and they would follow after my return. It was dark and musty inside the lighthouse as I climbed the creaky, spiral stairway, lighting my way with my small flashlight. About halfway up, I found the largest of the sleeping quarters, where the head keeper may have kept his logbook. After reaching the lantern, I put down my flashlight to take some photographs, but in doing so, I inadvertently kicked my light and watched it bounce down the stairway to be swallowed by the dark. I suddenly felt a chill - the hair on back of my neck and arms seemed to stiffen, and I told myself - idiot, you don't believe in ghosts, or at least I was trying to convince myself of that.

I'm still trying.

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