

LIGHTHOUSE BUTTONS: Part II

by Gil Biggie

As long as men have sailed the seas, there has existed the need to protect ships from bumping into menacing rocks and the shore during heavy fogs or those infamous "dark and stormy nights."

The early Celtic women lit fires along the shore to guide the men home safely from the sea. Circa 292 BC, the Colossus of Rhodes, a whopping big hundred-foot high statue of the god Helios, stood in (or straddled across—there is debate on the position) the harbor of the Greek island of Rhodes. To guide the sailors to the harbor, fires were lit in the statue's top to shine through the eyes and from the torch it held. Colossus is the ancient ancestor to the Statue of Liberty that stands in Manhattan's Harbor. Lazarus' famous poem on the plaque at the base of Lady Liberty starts by comparing Liberty to this wonder of this ancient world.

And while we are cruising near the Hudson River, let me point out that lighthouses are not only for the oceans. There are lighthouses on the shores of large lakes and all the navigable rivers have beacons. The Hudson River from New York City to the Erie Canal was a veritable super



**Two
Ceramic
China
5-button
sets.
Birchcroft
China.**

**Made In
Stoke on
Kent,
London.**

**Div III.
1"
NBS
medlum.
[http://
www.
thimble.
net/
buttons.
htm](http://www.thimble.net/buttons.htm)**

On this page are some of the more than 30 Russian-made papler-mâché lighthouse buttons from the webpage of Connie & Bud Welser www.cbwelser.com



South East Block Lighthouse RI. NBS medium.



St. Simeon's In California. NBS medium.



Pemaquid Point In Maine. NBS medlum.



Great Point Light, Massachusetts. NBS large.



Battery Point Lighthouse. NBS large. 1-7/16



Portland Head Light In Maine. NBS large



Little Sable Lighthouse. NBS Large

highway for commercial and wartime vessels. Even in today's age of instant air travel, barges and tankers still travel the rivers. All of this activity and industrial momentum would not have been possible but for the lighted sentinels warning of hazards. Each lighthouse had a distinctive exterior color scheme for daytime recognition and a unique light sequence for night and day recognition.

Only eight of the once many lighthouses still stand on the Hudson River. The most famous is Jeffrey's Hook, a little cutie that sits directly under the George Washington Bridge. It became the most famous lighthouse in America, after Hildegard H. Swift wrote her delightful children's book "The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Grey Bridge".



Since there was no electric company or nuclear power plant providing illumination until the 20th century, how—one may wonder—did these structures sport a brilliant beacon? My curiosity lead me to the library, and I read two books about lighthouse keepers. When I finished my reading each night, I was sure I could taste the salty spray as I thankfully snuggled under my electric blanket.

I learned that every country in the world had lighthouses before the 1950s, when automation or progressing technology began to eliminate the need for lighthouses as they had operated for over 2000 years. Japan had over 3,300 lighthouses. The unspoken language of lighthouse use and care was universal. They functioned in the same way the world over. Lighthouses were permanently occupied and diligently kept functional by people—a very unique, special breed of people.

Allow me to give background to support the uniqueness of these folks. Many lighthouses are on land jetties, or else on little islands close to shore,



Wood studio buttons by Kim Hillersheim. Pyrography and hand painted designs. Square (unsigned) is an NBS large 1-5/8" Oval button (NBS medium 1-3/16") signed on reverse "KCH '99" Both have "C: shaped wooden shanks.



Abalone set in brass with a brass escutcheon. Studio by Margaret Olson (CA). Medium



Painted uranium glass. Modern. Hand painted.



One-piece Japanned and chased brass. Small.



Casein. Painted studio by Alice Wilson of Maine. Med.



Russian painted wood. Chicago Harbor Light. Large.

and the keepers had free housing, either in a home separate from the light tower or sometimes housing quarters attached to the light tower. Although short on the creature comforts, they could garden and have small livestock. Apart from the solitude, interruption of sleep every few hours, and lack of take-out restaurants, it seemed a pretty nice life. Some may not have had much land, but at least there was usually a small bit of grass or beach—some bit of terra firma—around them. I find the notion of this lifestyle romantic and exciting.

But many other beacons, such as the world's oldest "sea washed" lighthouse, still standing off the coast of Scotland, represent the other extreme of living conditions. Bell Rock Lighthouse perches on the most treacherous rock in the North Sea. The base of the Inchcape lighthouse known also as "The Bell Rock" is the rock itself, submerged in the sea for twenty two hours a day—thus the need for a lighthouse. This was the first of sixty lighthouses built in Scotland by the grandfather of poet Robert Louis Stevenson. The construction of a lighthouse on this submerged rock is a fascinating story and took years in perilous seas relying upon what little technology they had in 1811. But, I digress.



Uniform button for the BOOTLE POLICE (in Manchester England)



Modern stylized lighthouse, rays, ship and sail. 13/16" NBS medium.



Pewter. Modern. Depicting the Statue of Liberty. 1" NBS medium.



Polymer Statue of Liberty. 9/16"

Now, this perched-on-a-submerged-rock lifestyle kindles a latent phobia in me, and I get lightheaded thinking about living one hundred and fifteen feet above the North Sea smashing around me during a storm. I would have lasted about eight minutes, but one keeper lived there for eight years. (There is a quantum decibel foghorn on this light.) The chronically wet Orkney regions of Scotland are similar to the Bell Rock, but have more of a happy medium with regard to landscaping. However, the extreme weather in Orkney negates any solace found in having a few morsels of sand about it, methinks!

Ye old lighthouse keeper, as he existed for centuries, is no more. The last civilian keeper in the US died in 2003; and the last officially manned American lighthouse was the Boston Light. In recognition of the role in maritime safety that these keepers played, the present Coast Guard fleet used to tend the houses is named after keepers (some of whom are women—the most famous being Ida Lewis). With regard to the decline in keepers, Britain's Trinity House, the 500-year-old organization that documents for the Lighthouse Service, now has a phrase, "Would the last man to leave, please leave on the light."

Today, we find lighthouses automated and the keepers now almost always live off premises and act as tour guides. I have listed below a few of the many books about these heroic people and,



Pierced brass. Copper OME. Back stamped "KK" and signed HG 200?

Oregon Lighthouses – drawn and then laser cut into Myrtlewood by studio artist Kay Ferguson, www.viser.net/~kathrynf/



Yaquina Bay.
In service from
1871 to 1874.
40' tower

Cape Arago.
Built in 1866,
rebuilt in 1908
and 1934

Yaquina Head.
92' tower
162" above sea
level (highest in
Oregon)

Cape Blanco
1870 commissioned
to aid navigation for
gold miners &
lumbermen

**Umpqua
Lighthouse**
165' tower.
Lasered on casein

Tillamook Rock
"Terrible Tilly"
62' tower built on
a basalt rock

Cape Mears,
operated from
1890 to 1963

Heceta Head
56' tower. 205'
above sea level



most interestingly, their lifestyle in lighthouses around the world, from the early 18th Century until 1978.

Over the centuries, lighthouses and keepers sent safety beacons and sounds out to sea. Lighthouses are no longer as important for this purpose in navigation. Many houses disappeared by fire, flood, storm, accident, and abandonment, yet some lighthouses still stand to symbolize the passage of a magnificent maritime past, and the adventurous people that dedicated their lives to maintaining the lights. Today, many lighthouses are open to tours and some have opened as B&B's, including the Sauguerties Lighthouse on the Hudson River. Fall colors on the Hudson River are breathtaking. Maybe after your night in the lighthouse, you could jaunt eighty miles south to the Fort Washington Park on 178th street and pop into that adorable Little Red Lighthouse.

Some of the 60 books about lighthouses on www.half.com follow:

Stargazing: Memoirs of a Young Lighthouse Keeper: Peter Hill- A Scottish hippie takes a 1978 summer job with the lighthouse service.

Ghostly Lighthouses from Maine to Florida: Sheryl Monks

(THESE TWO BOOKS will be on Auction with a lighthouse button at the WRBA 2008 show.)

LIGHTHOUSES Part II (continued)

Guardians of the Lights: Stories of U.S. Lighthouse Keepers: Elinor De Wire
Lighthouse in My Life: Story of a Maine Light Keeper's Family: Philmore
Wass

Keepers & Cutters: Heroic Lighthouse Keepers & the Cutters Named After
Them (A U.S. Coast Guard book)

Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter: Ariele North Olson. A children's book.

Northern Lights: Tales of Alaska's Lighthouses and Their Keepers: Shannon
Lowry

The Keeper of Lime Rock: The Remarkable True Story of Ida Lewis.

America's Most Celebrated Lighthouse Keeper: Lenore Skomal

Lighthouses of France: The Monuments & Their Keepers: Jean Guichard,
Rene Gast

Living at a Lighthouse: Oral Histories From the Great Lakes: L. Kozma

Lights of the Inside Passage: A History of British Columbia's Lighthouses
and Their Keepers: Donald Graham

Day in the Life of a Colonial Lighthouse Keeper: Laurie Krebs

The Lure of Lighthouses: The Inspiring Journey of the Lights, Keepers,

Ghosts, Sea & Sentiment of Our Timeless Lands-end Sentinels: Alan Ross
Keepers of Florida Lighthouses, 1820-1939: Neil Hurley