

Rededication of the 200-year-old Marblehead Lighthouse at the First United Church of Christ-Congregational in Marblehead, Ohio on November 21, 2021

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Welcome. Today we will rededicate the Marblehead Lighthouse which was built in 1821 and commissioned in 1822. It was originally called the Sandusky Bay Light Station but the name changed to Marblehead in 1870. Starting today, this peninsula will be honoring the light with a year-long celebration featuring many events.

There is something about a lighthouse that makes us compare it to God. Its leading light, its steadfastness, its help to those who are in trouble, so a church is a fitting place to begin this journey.

The Story of the Marblehead Lighthouse in Words and Music

After the War of 1812, the United States turned its attention to shipping on the Great Lakes and lighthouses were necessary to aid in navigation. In 1819 Congress budgeted \$5,000 for a light between the Grand River in Ohio and the Detroit River in Michigan. Another \$5000 was budgeted in 1820.

Because Sandusky Bay was the safest harbor in that stretch of Lake Erie, it was decided that a light would be erected at the entrance. So, the United States purchased 3 acres of land for \$277.45 on what was known then as Rocky Point, a small peninsula on the east end of the larger Marblehead peninsula.

Instructions on the size and shape of the lighthouse were given to the builder, William Kelly, from Sandusky. His workers quarried the native limestone and built the 50-foot tower that was to become the light. They started on September 14 and finished on November 10, 1821 at a cost of \$7,282. Two of Kelly's grandsons, John Jr. and Joab were founders of this church.

Over the rest of the winter and spring of 1822, the top of the light tower was fitted with the light source; 13 Argand whale oil lamps with reflectors and a set of windows, called a lantern, that the light shone through.

The lighthouse was the first permanent structure built on the peninsula. The second structure was a stone keeper's house next to the light. Then William Kelly also built a third stone dwelling for the man who would become the first keeper of the light, Benajah Wolcott, the first permanent settler of Danbury

Township. By June 22, 1822, the light was officially lit and Wolcott began 10 years of service at \$350 per year.

What was it like to be a lightkeeper back then? In a word “difficult”.

First, you had to stay up all night long to keep the light going. You had to haul heavy containers of oil up a series of wooden ladders to fuel the flame.

The wicks needed trimming, the lamps and window glass needed polishing, the tower needed maintenance and painting, the grounds and the keeper’s house had to be cleaned and kept in repair.

Remember, back then, the Marblehead Peninsula was a prairie. Settlers lived in log cabins with no towns, roads, stores, schools, churches or local government. Travel on land was by horse or on foot so you couldn’t run to a store if you needed something. Shopping required a rowboat trip across Sandusky Bay to the nearest town where you turned in your monthly lighthouse reports and picked up your pay.

All the early keepers grew their own food and kept livestock. All keepers kept a log where they wrote down the weather and what ships passed.

For the first 55 years of the light, the keepers were also required to aid any ship in distress. If they couldn’t mount a rescue of volunteers, they had to do the rescuing themselves.

There were 15 lightkeepers over the years, including two women. After Benajah Wolcott died of Cholera, his wife, Rachel, became the first female lightkeeper on the Great Lakes.

Then, in 1875, something happened that changed the keeper’s duty of mounting rescues. In May of that year, a gale swept over the lake. The schooner Consuelo began to sink about 3 miles from the Lighthouse. Lucien Clemons, whose father started the first quarry business on the peninsula, saw their plight and along with his brothers Hubbard and Ai mounted a rescue.

They rowed a 12-foot boat for nearly an hour in a raging storm, risking their own lives. They saved two of the crew, who were clinging to the ship.

The captain, three seamen and a female cook were lost.

For their heroic effort, the three were given the first Congressional gold lifesaving medals ever awarded.

Then, because of the number of shipwrecks in the area, the government built a lifesaving station here and it took over the rescues from the lightkeepers.

The Point Marblehead Lifesaving Station opened June 24, 1876 with Lucien Clemons as the first keeper. He served for 21 years.

His brothers, Hubbard and Ai were members of this church, which was built in 1900. The brothers served on the building committee. Because the lifesaving station was small, they made a deal with the church that people who were rescued could shelter here if needed. The sign of that covenant is on the top of our church steeple. Instead of a cross, we have a symbolic Astrolabe, a device that helped early sailors navigate.

The Lifesaving station became part of the Coast Guard and the station was rebuilt and enlarged twice. Today the Marblehead Coast Guard station is the one of the busiest on the Great Lakes.

A replica of the first lifesaving station is on display on the grounds of our lighthouse.

Because the Coast Guard was part of the Navy during World War II, they have their own verse in the next song, also known as the Navy Hymn. We will now sing *Eternal Father Strong to Save* with the Coast Guard verse

As the years went by, the lighthouse changed, always for the better, and always to make the light beam farther and brighter.

Around the turn of the 20th century, two additions to height, a bigger lantern and a bigger lens were added. The light fuel went from oil to kerosene to electricity and from a lantern with simple reflectors to a magnificent Fresnel lens, to several big LED bulbs.

In 1903 the Light gained a clockwork mechanism that only needed to be wound every few hours. Today it is automated. The color of the light has been white, red and now is green so as to distinguish it from other air beacons.

Two keepers oversaw most of these changes. Joanna McGee, our second female keeper, and Charles Hunter, who were both members of this church. The McGee's came to the lighthouse as a newly-weds when George was hired as the 12th keeper. They gave birth to 10 children while living there. Joanna became the keeper after her husband George passed away. Together, George and Johanna McGee served 30 years.

By 1881, The keeper's original stone house was in such poor condition that George built them a shed to live in. When the light house inspector saw that, it wasn't long before the old keepers house was torn down and a new two-story wooden home was built that serves as the lighthouse museum today.

Charles Hunter came as a single man but married at age 55. He served from 1903-1933, and was quite a character. He was a storyteller, taught a woodworking class at the local school. He built a boat that was too heavy to float and a house made of wood that had washed up on shore.

Before 1920, he owned a car, a Hupmobile, but didn't drive it. His wife drove while he sat in the back smoking his pipe! He also created pictures out of crewel embroidery like the one on display. And without knowing how to play the piano, he wrote a song about the lighthouse called *The Lighthouse by the Bay* that will be sung by soloist Bill Bird.

200 years after the lighthouse was built it is still beaming light every night. It has the honor of being the oldest continuously operating Lighthouse on the Great Lakes. Four other Great Lakes lighthouses were built prior to 1821, but all of them have been decommissioned.

Over the years, many old lighthouses have been torn down or rebuilt a few times, but the original Marblehead Light still stands because of several factors; it was built on solid bedrock, built of the finest limestone, a stone that is nearly waterproof, built by an excellent mason who mixed the right mortar consistency and let the building cure properly, and because it has been lovingly maintained over the years. It has withstood many Nor'Easter storms with waves that splash the windows 65 feet up. It has withstood the wrath of Lake Erie, known as the toughest, meanest and most unpredictable of the Great Lakes.

As playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote: "I can think of no other edifice constructed by man as altruistic as a lighthouse. They were built to serve. They weren't built for any other purpose." We will now sing the hymn *Brightly Beams our Father's Mercy*.