

Traveling Lighthouse Libraries

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Children of lighthouse keepers contributed to the daily work of maintaining the light. All family members assisted with cleaning the windows and the lens, keeping the light supplied with oil and the wicks trimmed, ready to be lit before nightfall or if storm clouds blocked the sun. Since lighthouses fall under federal control, keepers and their families were subjected to quarterly military-style inspections of the tower, its equipment, and even their living quarters. The daily maintenance required of them to battle the whims of mother nature in these highly exposed locations was a continuous grind of routine yet essential chores.

Four times a year, on no predictable schedule, the lighthouse ship tender arrived stocked with food, needed supplies, and, most exciting, a new crate of books. Children of keepers describe the anticipation of this quarterly event as equal to Christmas morning. However, before the children could look at the latest books, they were required to wait quietly, out of the way, as the government inspector went over every aspect of the lighthouse. Inspections included a review of the Keepers' Log Book, a thorough appraisal of all equipment - particularly the Fresnel Lens, and a white glove checkup of their living quarters. The inspector even perused the condition of the books in the library box before reloading them onto the ship for delivery to the next lighthouse.

One can only imagine the growing excitement of the children as they gathered on the front porch and watched the sailors load the now-familiar box of books onto the block and tackle, carefully lower it into the boat, then row back to the ship. Their eyes may have then tracked the new crate as it was rowed back to the lighthouse and placed in the main room. Surely, the sailors were not yet ensconced in their skiff before the children gathered around the new arrival. The Head Keeper might have carefully fitted the key into the lock, allowing the heavy double doors to open, revealing the latest collection of books and periodicals to explore.

Beginning in 1876, the Lighthouse Service circulated traveling libraries to help relieve the tedious time spent on isolated lighthouses. The libraries, modeled after those provided to Naval ships since 1859, were housed in sturdy wood crates that served as both bookshelves and carrying cases. The keepers received a new collection of books quarterly in its own numbered box. Inside, the box was divided into four sections with room for about 50 books with narrower shelves on tops for periodicals. When opened, the left side door contained a list of the boxes contents. The door on the right listed the lighthouses the box had visited. A small journal required readers to record their names and the books they read.

In his book about GayHead Light House, William Waterway writes, "In the late 1800s, there were more lighthouses than libraries in America. By 1885, over 400 traveling libraries circulated between lighthouses as part of the quarterly distribution of supplies. Many of the books were donated by the Seamen's Friends Society, a religious group that promoted Christian values and placed great importance on combatting the coarse reputation of sailors. Bringing God to the sailors was seen as the ultimate good for a man out at sea, who might fall prey to wayward tendencies."

Perhaps an unexpected byproduct of the traveling libraries was the joy they brought to the keepers' children as it allowed them to explore new worlds and instilled in them a life-long love of reading.