

LIGHTHOUSE Libraries

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As connected as we all are today, it is difficult to imagine the extreme unconnectedness of lighthouse keepers a little over a hundred years ago.

Of course, we realize those late nineteenth century keepers did not have cell phones, wifi, or Internet of any stripe, but there was also a time when they did not have telephones, television, or even radio. A keeper might be joined by assistant keepers or perhaps by a wife and children, but it could be a very lonely, relatively uneventful existence.

The solitude of the profession did not get past the United States Lighthouse Service (USLHS).

Yaquina Lighthouse
Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management, Oregon & Washington

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After observing the hunger and appreciation that lighthouse keepers had for reading materials such as books and magazines, the “Lighthouse Board, which had no funds under its control from which it could buy books, found that book-cases could be properly paid for as furniture ... [I]t being understood that the books to fill them were to be provided by private funds.”¹ The resulting “book-cases” were essentially wooden boxes designed to travel between lighthouses.



U.S. Lighthouse Library Bookcase 739, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Solidly made of varnished pine, 24” x 26” x 10”, the boxes had two shelves of different heights to accommodate books and bound magazines. Equipped with brass handles for ease of carry, the library boxes also had double doors that could open out. When the boxes were open and upright in the keeper’s residence, they made a neat little bookcase. Tacked to the inside of the left door was a list of all the books included in that particular box and on the right door was a sheet for recording the lighthouses the box had visited.

A small blank book was included with the box to record the individual book “check outs,” a means of tracking the books while at the lighthouse and recording circulation statistics.

Early boxes were filled with donations from whatever quarter they could get them: “All was fish which

came into the net, and the first twenty-five cases were filled with a mixture of theology, science, mathematics, novels, and odd magazines, and each case was sent to a lighthouse as soon as it was filled.”² Congress was eventually persuaded that reading material might make light keepers more content in their jobs, and so a line item was added to the Lighthouse Service’s budget for books, with the caveat of not exceeding \$1000.00 for book purchases.

This was still not a lot of money, considering there were 755 lighthouses and twenty-two lightships in service. The program started with the idea that the most isolated lighthouses, lightships and lighthouse tenders would have priority, but the boxes did make their way to most of the lighthouses on whatever body of water they might be—the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Gulf of Mexico, the Great Lakes, and the major rivers.

The program started in 1876 with fifty boxes, but by 1885, 402 libraries were in circulation and in 1893, approximately 700 were making the rounds.³ The boxes were intended to rotate every six months, but they soon settled into a three-month schedule. Each box held approximately forty books, with the directive that “except in the cases of unusually desirable works no more than one copy of a book should be purchased in a district in order to insure a new set of books when libraries are transferred.”⁴

The boxes and their contents were examined during the Lighthouse Inspector’s quarterly examinations and books that were lost or damaged had to be replaced by the offending reader. The Lighthouse Board kept records of the boxes, their contents and length of stays and the most popular books in the collections. Books were discarded (or gifted to a deserving keeper) when they became too worn out and were replaced by books kept in reserve.

The books included were mainly geared for men. The keepers and their assistants were primarily men, but there were also books for families and children, recognizing the importance and pleasure of reading for everyone.



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U.S. Lighthouse Library Bookcase 739, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

The North Point Lighthouse in Milwaukee has an almost intact library box.⁵ The listing tacked to the door records the books within, with titles including *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel DeFoe, *Popular Fairy Tales* by The Brothers Grimm, and *Stories from Homer* by Alfred John Church. The resulting list is a mix of fiction, poetry, history, science and technical books.

Arnold B. Johnson, chief clerk of the U.S. Lighthouse Board, wrote an article on the Lighthouse Libraries for January 29, 1885 *The Christian Union* (a version of this article also appeared in the February 1885 issue of *The Library Journal*) in which he said, “The average light-keeper is on a plane, as to taste, education, and culture, with the average mechanic. The books provided for him are not always the best for the purpose, but they are the best that could be had under the circumstances”⁶

The libraries continued in circulation at least through 1923, but perhaps longer. Today, the boxes can be seen on display at many lighthouses, including the Pensacola, St. Augustine and Tybee Island

lighthouses. Sadly, while many boxes have survived, they often no longer contain their original books.

[1] Arnold B. Johnson, “Lighthouse Libraries,” *The Christian Union*, January 29, 1885, 9.

[2] Johnson, 9.

[3] Treasury Department. Office of Light-House Board, *Annual Report of the Light-House Board to the Secretary of the Treasury for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 236-237.

[4] Department of Commerce. *Lighthouse Service, Regulation for the United States Lighthouse Service* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 131.

[5] Kevin Abing, E-mail to author, October 27 2021.

[6] Johnson, 9.

References

Abing, Kevin. Correspondent, email message to author, October 27, 2021.
 Department of Commerce. *Lighthouse Service, Regulation for the United States Lighthouse Service* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 131.

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