

## Muskegon's First and Only Female Lighthouse Keeper

Jemima M. Atkinson was born in Ireland on 20 May 1834. She came to the United States at the age of 15 in 1849. She married William M. Monroe and had two children, a daughter, Emma, and a son, William F.

In 1851, a small lighthouse was erected at Port Sherman (Pere Marquette) at the end of Beach Street, a short distance from the opening of the channel. Port Sherman, at the time, was a small settlement of about 500 native Americans and half a dozen white settlers. The Lighthouse Keeper's dwelling was a one and a half story dwelling made of wood that stood not far from the tower. I found conflicting reports as to what the tower was made of but basically some parts wood and some brick or rubblestone.) The Keeper's dwelling was 36 feet by 18 feet. The tower reached 26 to 30 feet high (again, depending on which report you read). The tower had no fog horn or bell but did have a fixed light of 6 lamps with 14-inch reflectors, known as Lewis Lamps, in the eight-sided lantern room. By 1854, repairs already had to be made to the structures. Between the environment and the sometimes-cheap construction, something was always needing to be fixed. The "fixed light" in the Lighthouse was replaced in 1856 by a sixth-order Fresnel lens which was much better at capturing all the light coming from a lamp, then magnifying and steering it in one direction. It was said that the light could be seen for 10 miles.

According to an 1854 Senate document, the Keeper of a single lighthouse made \$350 per year. A typical Keeper's job meant going to the oil shed and filling one or two 5-gallon containers with oil for the lamps, each weighing approximately 37 pounds. Then they had to carry the containers up all the stairs to the lamp room. Sometimes, this had to be done more than once in a 24-hour period, depending on the weather (foggy, cloudy, rainy, snowy, etc.) which would necessitate the light also being lit during the day and not just at night. Some of the lights were large enough that a man could stand inside the lens. The lens had to be kept clean at all times so they had to make sure to polish the lens and fittings or they could be fired if they were found dirty. You see, a dirty lens doesn't reflect much light. The Keeper had to light the wicks each evening or when conditions warranted it and make sure they stayed lit. The inside and outside windows had to be kept clean in all kinds of weather too. Cleaning the windows could be extremely dangerous during high winds. They were also responsible for ordering supplies and possibly caring for a garden and animals for food for their families (if they had one). Keepers with families, usually taught their older children or their wife how to perform the duties in the event the Keeper was too ill to do them for any period of time. Such was the case with William and Jemima.

William M. Monroe became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lighthouse Keeper at Port Sherman on 23 September 1859. He, Jemima, and their two children made their home at the Lighthouse. William died three years later leaving Jemima to carry on the duties of the Keeper until she received an official appointment. On 20 November 1862, Jemima M. Monroe became the first and only woman Lighthouse Keeper for Muskegon. In 1865, she was making \$520 per year, considered very

good wages for a woman. It didn't matter if the Keeper was male or female, the pay and duties were the same. The only difference being that a woman did not have to wear a uniform. In 1867, Congress allocated money to build a new lighthouse because the old one was said to be "no longer repairable". The new Lighthouse was a wooden dwelling topped by a square tower. It was finished in 1871, complete with a fog bell. (See attached photo from 1883)

Jemima did the Keeper's job for almost 10 years while raising her children alone. After resigning from the Keepers job on 5 May 1871, Jemima married James C. Brittain. He was a vessel captain on the Great Lakes and lived near Jemima (according to the 1870 Census). James struggled with asthma so they moved to Seattle, Washington, where he was very successful in the vessel business, as he had been in Muskegon. Jemima out-lived both her children. Emma married Louis C. Anderson on 24 March 1886 and died on 19 November of that year, 13 days after giving birth to a daughter, Genevieve. Jemima and James adopted Genevieve and after James died, Jemima raised her by herself. Jemima's son William became a ship's captain and died in 1888 at the age of 33. James died in 1892 while he and Jemima were spending the winter in California, hoping to improve his health. Jemima died 31 October 1910 in Seattle and is buried with her family in Lakeview Cemetery. To this day, she holds the distinction of being the first and only woman Lighthouse Keeper for Muskegon.

*Note: Since no known picture of Muskegon's very first lighthouse has been found and each article I found about it has a slightly different description and time-line, I have tried to combine what I found to give an overall picture.*

Sources: National Park Service (Cape Lookout), Muskegonlights.org, Genealogybank.com, Ancestry.com, US Coast Guard website, photo from the National Archives, lighthouse friends.com, Beyond The Windswept Dunes by Elizabeth B. Sherman.



New Lighthouse built 1871