



*“Mr. Lighthouse” Wayne Wheeler, founder and president of the United States Lighthouse Society, stands in front of northern California’s Pigeon Point Lighthouse.*



FEATURE

BY ANDREA C. MARSH

# KEEPING THE LIGHTS

*Wayne Wheeler is helping preserve a piece of our national maritime history.*



**Y**ou're on a ship. It's dark. It's foggy. You're tired from an ocean crossing—several days of sailing through rough weather.

Suddenly you see it. Through the fog, a tiny light peeks out, welcoming you back to land.

For centuries lighthouses have safely guided mariners into harbors, around reefs, and out to sea. But their importance as navigational aids is only one facet of the lore of the lighthouse.

Lighthouses conjure up all sorts of images. Set high on cliffs or along a channel, they create a romantic scene, with the sweep of beach and the lapping of waves.

"Lighthouses were the last symbol of humanity for sailors before they left to go out to what was a dark and dangerous sea," says Wayne Wheeler, president and founder of the United States Lighthouse Society. "It's the end of terra firma. It's the symbol of your ship coming in."

The mysterious aura surrounding lighthouses beguiles us. We envision the lighthouse keeper, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, in peaceful solitude (though it isn't *always* so peaceful,) selflessly beaming rays of light into the darkness.

As playwright George Bernard Shaw once said: "I can think of no other structure created by man as altruistic as a lighthouse."

**K**eeping the lights has been a way of life for some 2,000 years. Lighthouses have been shining since the days of ancient Egypt. Their existence dates back to 300 B.C., when the 450-foot Pharos in Alexandria—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—became the world's first lighthouse.

The first American lighthouse wasn't built until 1716, on Little Brewster Island in Boston Harbor. Although the original tower was destroyed in the conflict between British and Colonial forces during the Revolutionary War, it was reconstructed in 1784 and still stands today.

Over the years about 2,000 lighthouses were built in America, though they didn't all operate at the same time. The heyday was in the early 20th century, when approximately 850 were in operation. More than 800 still stand (though many in varying states of disrepair).

*Andrea C. Marsh is assistant editor of this magazine.*



*Pigeon Point Lighthouse, today used as a youth hostel, was named after the clipper Carrier Pigeon, which broke up on its shoals in 1853.*

There were also lightships—floating lighthouses anchored and manned in areas that were impractical for the building of a lighthouse. In all, 176 lightships, with their trademark red hulls, were built. There are only 13 left today, though none are in use.

Early Americans depended heavily on shipping to carry both goods and

loved ones. Vessels sailed up the Hudson River, through the Erie Canal, and into the Great Lakes, linking the East Coast with the Midwest. Lighthouses played an important role, helping captains guide ships safely in and out of port.

As new technology and other modes of transportation were developed, the use of lighthouses as nautical navigation aids decreased. Some of the buildings were torn down, others vacated. By the late 1920s and 1930s, many lighthouses were automated. In 1964 the federal government instituted LAMP (the Lighthouse Automation and Modernization Project), leading to the demise of manned lightstations.

According to the Coast Guard, some 450 lighthouses still function as federal navigational aids in this country. They are all fully automated and are maintained by the Coast Guard with the exception of the Boston Lighthouse—the only remaining manned lighthouse in the United States.

Uninhabited and unattended, lighthouses became frequent victims to decay and vandalism.

“No matter what measures were taken—boarding up windows, putting up fences, whatever—the vandals would strip them off or climb the fences and do damage,” says Wheeler.

Feeling the loss of lighthouses would be tragic, Wheeler, then assistant chief in the Coast Guard’s Aids to Navigation Unit in northern California, began to act. “We got the idea to do something creative with them.

“Lighthouses have got some terrific, very unusual architectural styles,” he says. “They’re concrete and brick, cast iron, redwood. They come in all shapes and sizes. And, of course, they’re in very unique and romantic settings.”

With Wheeler’s involvement, the Coast Guard instituted a program whereby the federal government awards licenses to nonprofit organizations that renovate lighthouses for creative use. The ultimate goal is to return them, somehow, to the public domain.

The first such group took over northern California’s East Brother Island Light Station and turned it into a not-for-profit bed and breakfast. Using volunteer fund-raising efforts,

historical and architectural research, and labor, the station was restored to its original appearance and opened for business in 1980. It is now so popular that reservations for weekends must be made a year in advance.

Other uses for lighthouses include youth hostels, museums, bird observatories, and outing posts for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

**W**heeler remembers his first lighthouse visit clearly. He was 11 years old and his family was summering on Martha's Vineyard. His father took him to the southwest point of the island to show him Gayhead Lighthouse.

"I wasn't particularly impressed with the lighthouse at first," recalls Wheeler. "But what really impressed me was going up into the lantern room and seeing the lens."

"I remember a young Coast Guardsman helping me up into the lantern room and this thing just dazzled and twinkled and sparkled in the sunlight."

After graduating from Syracuse University with a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1962, Wheeler opted to serve a tour of military service, joining the United States Coast Guard. He stayed for 23 years, serving mostly in the Aids to Navigation Unit, where he encountered lighthouses on a regular basis.

In the late seventies, Wheeler—who with his white beard and burly physique looks like a fisherman, sea captain, or perhaps lighthouse keeper—started answering lighthouse inquiries for the Coast Guard's public affairs office. "I started researching to answer these letters and the more I researched, the more I got into it. It's like eating peanuts," says Wheeler. "You can't stop. You learn a little more and pretty soon people think you're an expert and pretty soon I guess you are."

As a result of the inquiries, he created a slide show on the history of lighthouses. During these presentations he was known to recite lighthouse poetry, sing sea chanteys, and tell lighthouse legends.

The slide shows were so popular that eventually he couldn't keep up with all the requests. Then it dawned on him. The foghorn was calling his name.

In 1983, while still working for the

## LIGHTHOUSE LORE

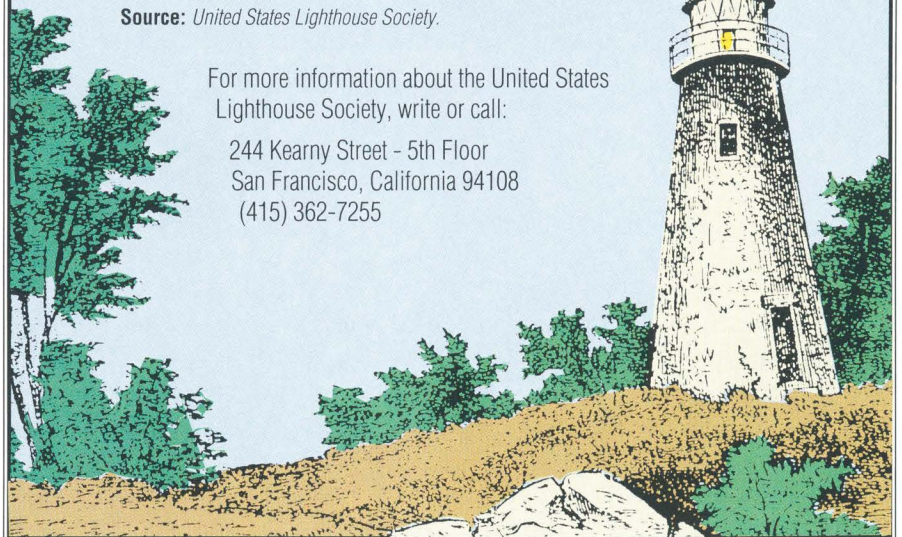
*A few fast facts about lighthouses . . .*

- The oldest existing lighthouse is at La Coruna in Spain, built around 20 BC.
- The oldest existing original lighthouse in America is at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Built in 1764, it still operates today.
- The tallest lighthouse in America is on Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. It stands 200 feet high.
- The American lighthouse with the largest lens is on Makapuu Point, Oahu, Hawaii.
- The most expensive lighthouse to build was at St. George Reef, off Crescent City, California. It took ten years to construct (1882-1892) and cost \$715,000. It was abandoned in 1972 by the Coast Guard.
- The first fog signal in America was at the Boston Lighthouse. That fog signal was a cannon. Other fog signals include whistles, sirens, reed trumpets, bells, diaphone horns, and diaphragm horns.
- The most powerful optic can produce a light seen from 25 miles at sea. Aircraft, however, have reported "picking up" a light at 40 or 50 miles.
- Two hundred twenty lighthouses were constructed on the American shores of the Great Lakes.
- The oldest lighthouse on the Great Lakes is in Buffalo, New York.
- Michigan has had the most lighthouses of any state built on its shores, with about 90. Maine is second with about 80.

Source: *United States Lighthouse Society.*

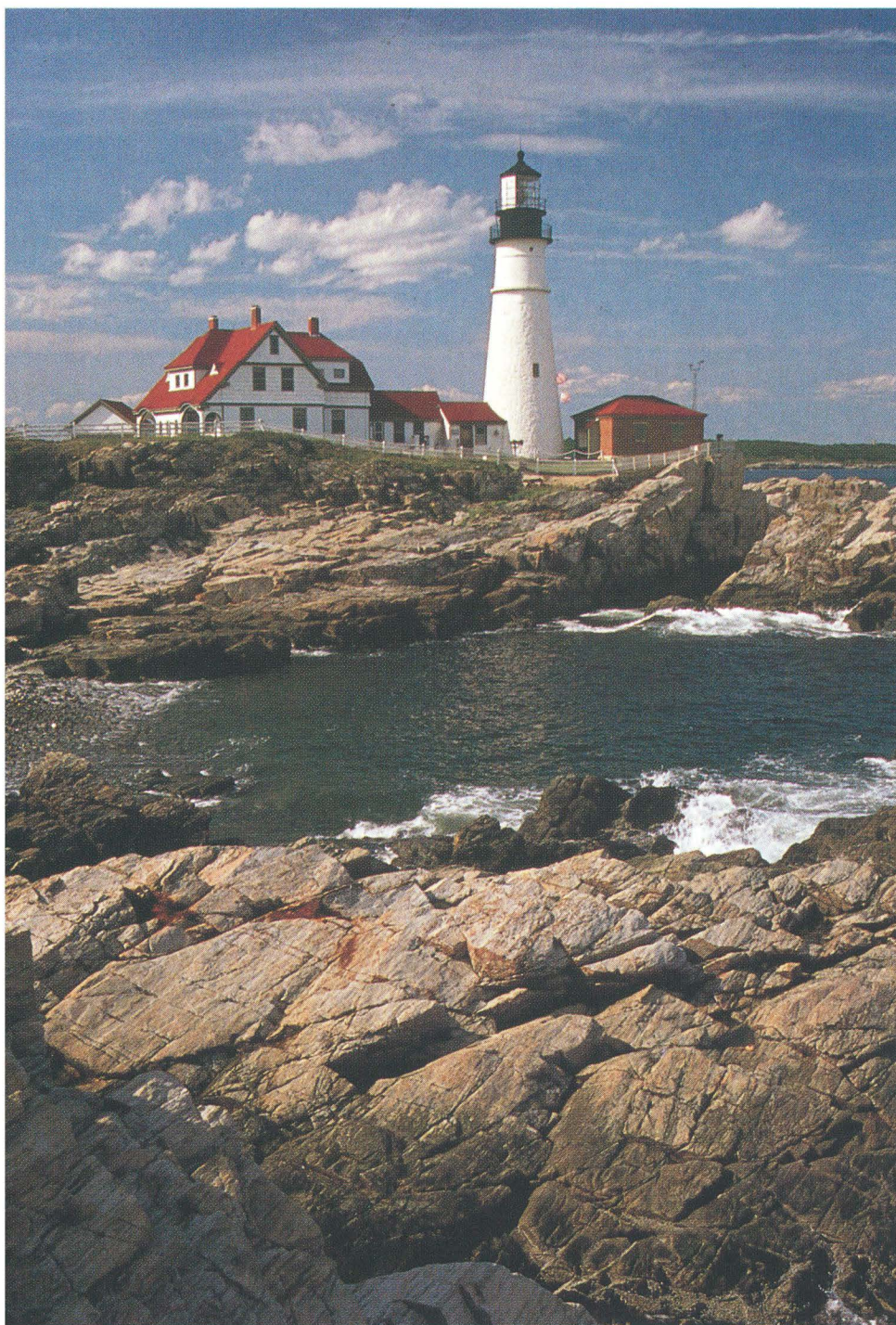
For more information about the United States Lighthouse Society, write or call:

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Coast Guard, Wheeler created the United States Lighthouse Society, a membership organization to educate, inform, and entertain lighthouse and lightship buffs. In just a few years, the Society, which was operating out of Wheeler's dining room, had grown to 1,300 members.

Today, the "bridge" of the Society



*Built in 1790, the lighthouse at Portland Head, Maine, is said to be the most frequently painted and photographed lighthouse in the country.*

is located in San Francisco's financial district. In an office filled with lighthouse artifacts, pictures, plaques, miniatures, and various nautical knick-knacks, Head Keep' Wheeler, no longer with the Coast Guard, and his office "mates" keep the Lighthouse Society sailing smoothly.

With more than 6,000 current mem-

bers, the Society is forging full steam ahead. There are members from every state and several states have opened up local chapters.

The Lighthouse Society provides free research to nonprofit groups interested in specific lighthouses, collects both artifacts and lore of lighthouse and lightship service, and publishes a quarterly glossy magazine, *The Keeper's Log*.

It also offers educational materials to schools. Last year, a fourth-grade class on Long Island spent a whole semester studying lighthouses. The students incorporated lighthouses in their study of math, science, English, and art.

In 1986, the Lighthouse Society received the United States Department of Transportation award for outstanding contribution to historic preservation.

That was a stellar year as the lightship *Relief* was donated to the Society. The 120-foot, 600-ton vessel was renovated and restored by Society members.

"Our members have spent 10,000 hours, about \$80,000, and just a lot of love," says Wheeler of the restoration project. *Relief* is a national historical landmark and ready to be opened to the public, though the Society can't find a public berth on the whole West Coast for it to rest.

The Lighthouse Society also offers tours, organized and led by Mr. Lighthouse himself. "All of a sudden our Lighthouse Society is becoming a travel society," says Wheeler.

The Lighthouse and Lobster tour in Maine is one of the most popular, and in the heart of Rip Van Winkle country Society members can cruise down the Hudson River before visiting several Long Island lighthouses. Wheeler has also led trips to the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence Seaway, and Russia, among many areas laden with lighthouses. Wheeler also hopes to organize tours to Australia, Greece, and Ireland.

Anyone who's been to San Francisco knows that fog from the Bay is an integral part of the city's charm. Both San Franciscans and visitors alike have been enchanted for years by the regular sounding of the foghorn.

Wheeler and his staff recently took on the cause of the foghorns in the San Francisco Bay. On November 2, the



Coast Guard shut down the last fog signal that cautioned seafarers about Alcatraz and its rocky cliffs. It was the last of three that had been in use since 1903. They replaced it with a gadget that produces a high-pitched electronic beep—hardly the melancholy and romantic sound of the old foghorns.

According to Wheeler, 51 foghorns sounded in the bay in 1936, creating their own symphony.

“There were bells, whistles, reed trumpets, sirens. It was incredible,” he says. “You could just imagine Sam Spade sliding down Kearny Street hill to look for that crook.”

The Society is collecting funds and helping to organize a movement to bring the horns back. They are also setting up a subsidiary called Friends of the Foghorn. Their actions have garnered an enormous amount of local and national media coverage including stories in publications as diverse as *The*

*Wall Street Journal* and *People* magazine, and an appearance for Wheeler on ABC’s *Good Morning, America*.

It is likely the Coast Guard will allow the Lighthouse Society to turn two signals back on and maintain these well-loved foghorns, according to Wheeler. The Society also hopes eventually to install another under the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge.

As Sam Weller said in Charles Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*: “Anythin’ for a quiet life, as the man said wen he took the sitivation at the lighthouse.”

The life of Wayne Wheeler and the United States Lighthouse Society is anything but quiet. Preserving a bit of our nautical history, however, is worth the effort. To keep the lights shining. To keep the beautiful structures on our shores. To keep the foghorns sounding in the bay. To keep the lore alive. ■



*The sun setting over Washington’s Point Robinson Lighthouse is a familiar sight to seafarers traveling through the Strait of Juan de Fuca and other sounds leading to the bays and harbors of Seattle, Tacoma, and Everett.*