



Marker Text

1966 Bureau Marker	1983 Michigan City Hist. Soc. Marker
Built on the water's edge, 1858 by the United States Government. One of the first lights on the Great Lakes. Harriet L. Colfax was the tender from 1855 to 1904. Remodeled 1904, electrified 1933, discontinued 1960.	This lighthouse built in 1858 replaced 1837 lighthouse built at water's edge. Remodeled in 1904. Light placed at end of pier. Seven keepers and fourteen assistant keepers served here 1837-1940.

Report

The original 1966 Bureau Marker is no longer standing and the marker that is in front of the lighthouse is not a Bureau marker. Therefore this report differs slightly from other marker reviews. Instead of finding primary resources to prove/disprove facts on a marker that is not posted or one that is not IHB's, secondary research has been gathered to help IHB decide what direction research should go if the bureau decides to proceed with a new marker.

The original IHB marker does not seem to be under the newer marker created by the Michigan City Historical Society as was suggested. The location of the IHB marker is not known. The replacement marker is much more correct than the IHB marker, which contains several errors. The society's marker has no specific factual errors. However, the wording is misleading and facts they chose to include are not the most historically significant. Neither marker stands up to the Bureau's improved standards.

Original IHB Marker:

The IHB marker does not mention the 1837 lighthouse. This implies that the 1858 lighthouse was the first or only in the area. John Tipton presented the idea for the lighthouse was to the Indiana Senate in 1834 at the request of Issac C. Elston.

¹ Elston deeded a tract of land to the government to build a lighthouse in 1835.² Starting in 1836 Congress appropriated money to construct a harbor for "the only truly established town on Indiana's southern shore of Lake Michigan" which the Indiana General Assembly declared "the Mediterranean of North America."³ Construction began on the lighthouse in 1837.⁴ The lighthouse was constructed opposite the Hoosier Slide, the largest sand dune in North America (which would be leveled over the next thirty years by man).⁵ The first lighthouse keeper began work in either September or December 1837 (sources conflict)⁶ and the first woman keeper began work in March 1844.⁷ In 1853 the U.S. Government formed a Lighthouse Board for the district and new lenses were installed to make the light brighter.⁸ In 1858, maritime traffic had increased greatly and the need for a more modern lighthouse became apparent.⁹

Clearly, there is a lot of important history relating to the development of Michigan City, the impact of man on the area, and a tidbit of women's history all happening before the new 1858 lighthouse was built. Therefore, it is essential to at least mention the 1837 lighthouse, so that this history is not overlooked.

The statement "built on the water's edge, 1858 by the United States Government" is valid. Several sources support the claim and the date appears on the side of the building.¹⁰ The 1858 lighthouse, now the Old Lighthouse Museum, appears to be well inland due to shifts in



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sand, both natural and manmade, therefore it is important to mention that it was on the water at the time of its construction.

The statement, “one of the first lights on the Great Lakes” would be correct for the 1837 lighthouse, but by 1858 there were many lighthouses on the Great Lakes. The lack of information about the 1837 lighthouse implies that the 1858 structure was one of the first, which is not true.¹¹

The IHB marker claimed that “Harriet L. Colfax was the tender from 1855 to 1904,” however, several sources agree that she began tending the lighthouse on March 19, 1861. The IHB could find no sources that substantiate the 1855 date. Sources agree that she retired forty-three years later on October 20, 1904.¹²

Of the remaining three statements on the original marker, “remodeled 1904, electrified 1933, discontinued 1960,” two are certain. Major remodeling took place in 1904.¹³ Government electrified the light December 19, 1933.¹⁴ Starting in 1939, the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for lighthouse. The dwelling was intermittently privately owned or functioned as a base of operations for the Michigan City Coast Guard Auxiliary. In 1960 the Coast Guard exceded the property.¹⁵ Therefore the marker should not state, “discontinued 1960,” because there is no way to know if the Coast Guard or the private owners kept the light functional during this period.

MCHS replacement marker:

The Michigan City Historical Society marker is much more correct. The first statement, “this lighthouse built in 1858 replaced 1837 lighthouse built at water’s edge,” is slightly confusing. It makes it seem that the now inland lighthouse, where the viewer is reading the marker, replaced an 1837 lighthouse that was right at the water’s edge. However, the current lighthouse was also right on the water at that time. It is the shifting sand caused by building and industry that has changed the area’s appearance.

The statement “remodeled in 1904” is absolutely correct as previously mentioned but the next one, “light placed at end of pier” is misleading. Sources state that after expanding the dwelling into a triplex dwelling, adding porches and shingles, constructing a coal shed and double privy, and concrete walks were poured – the Fifth Order lens was removed from the top of the dwelling and placed “in the lantern atop the new breakwater fog signal building.” The empty wooden tower and lantern atop the dwelling were then removed.¹⁶ Beacon lights were later installed on the east and west piers built in 1904.¹⁷ Photographs show that there was the main fog signal building which had a light and then two other piers which also had beacon lights placed in 1904.¹⁸

The claim that “seven keepers and fourteen assistant keepers served here 1837-1940” seems correct. However, the marker misses the opportunity to state that several of these keepers were women, one being Harriet Colfax, who served as keeper for forty-three years.¹⁹

¹ Terry Pepper, “Michigan City Old Lighthouse,” *Seeing the Light*.
<http://www.terrypepper.com/lights/michigancityold/index.htm> (accessed January 24, 2008).
Pepper is the executive director of the Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association. This award-winning website is hosted by Michigan State University and the Center for Great Lakes Culture.



² “The Old Lighthouse” Michigan City Historical Society , (Pamphlet, 1975); Pepper, 1. These two sources give two different dates both in 1835: the former June 14 and the latter June 23.

³ Donald Carmony, “Banking and Internal Improvements,” *Indiana, 1816-1850: The Pioneer Era* (Indianapolis, 1998) 184-185.

⁴ Pepper, 1-2; “The Old Lighthouse,” Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1975).

⁵ Frederick Karst, “Lighthouse Guided South Shore Travel,” *Outdoor Indiana*, Fall 2000, 26.

⁶ Pepper, 2; “The Old Lighthouse” Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1975).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*; “Collection Guide,” United States Lighthouse Board Collection, University of Delaware Library, <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/lighthou.htm>.

⁹ *Ibid.*; “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1975). “As the shipping of grain and lumber increased, a brighter light was needed to guide the ships.”

¹⁰ Steven D. Elve, *Michigan City Lighthouse: Guardians of Lake Michigan* (Chicago, 2001), 13.

¹¹ “Lighthouse History,” The Lighthouse Depot <http://www.lighthousedepot.com/article.asp?ai=111&bhcd2=1226676013> (accessed November 13, 2008). Two lighthouses were built on the Great Lakes as early as 1818.

¹² Elve, 9; *Indiana: A New Historical Guide*, 610; “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (pamphlet, 1965); Pepper, 3. Karst, 26.

¹³ Pepper, 4; “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (pamphlet, 1965); *Indiana: A New Historical Guide*, 610. “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1975).

¹⁴ “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1965).

¹⁵ Pepper, 4. Starting in 1939, the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for lighthouse. The dwelling was intermittently privately owned or a base of operations for the Michigan City Coast Guard Auxiliary. In 1960 the “decision was made to excess the property.”

¹⁶ Pepper, 4; “The Old Lighthouse,” The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1965). “It was remodeled in 1904, the tower removed from the top, a more modern tower built on the pier and the house enlarged...At the time the building was remodeled in 1904, a steam fog whistle was put in.”



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¹⁷ *Indiana: A New Historical Guide*, 610. "The Old Lighthouse," The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1975).

¹⁸ Elve, 30, 100-108

¹⁹ *Indiana: A New Historical Guide*, 610; "The Old Lighthouse," The Michigan City Historical Society (Pamphlet, 1965); Pepper, 3; Karst, 26.

Elve, 9. Elve states that there were three women keepers. More research is needed to confirm this.