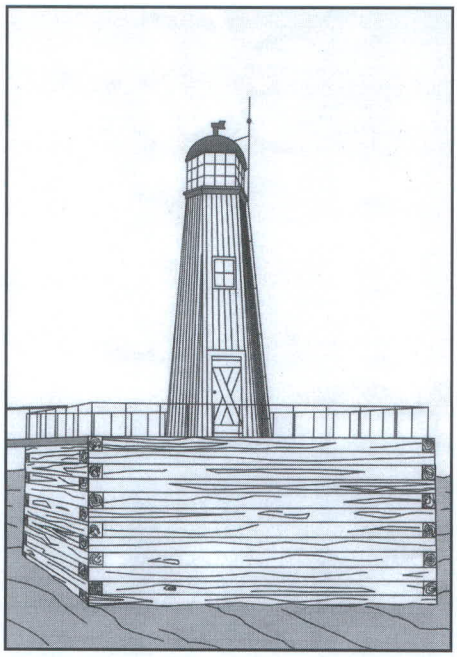
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By Thomas A. Tag

Cunningham Creek, Ohio



The author's rendition of what the Port Clinton tower probably looked like.

I thought I was starting to know something about lighthouses. After all, I have been researching and writing about lighthouses for over five years now. Then one day I was looking for some keeper's information in one of the microfilms produced by the National Archives, and on the oldest reel, I suddenly came to a lighthouse I never heard of before. "Cunningham Creek Ohio, J. R. Cunningham keeper starting 24 April 1843, at $350, Henry Richardson keeper starting 5 February 1846," and then, "this light abandoned." I was intrigued. I continued to the next set of data, looking for a Cunningham Creek entry for the year 1849 or later and found nothing. Hum, now this was interesting, the light apparently was abandoned. But, where was it located? I live in Ohio, so I should know. I pulled out an Ohio map looking for Cunningham Creek somewhere on Lake Erie. Nothing. I looked in Hyde's book "The Northern Lights." Nothing.

I have an old Light List for 1839 and in it I found, "number 185 Cunningham Creek Beacon, on Lake Erie, number of lamps 3, size of reflectors 15 inch, bacon on pier." I also have a Light List for the year 1849 and it contained nothing on Cunningham Creek. Well, it really must have been abandoned before 1849, but where was it?

Then, almost by accident, I noticed the inside cover of Hyde's book. He used an old, 1848, map of the Great Lakes showing the location of each lighthouse with a red star. I got out a magnifying glass and there it was, right in the fold of the book, Cunningham Creek, fixed light. It was located between Ashtabula light station on the east and Fairport Harbor light station on the west. Now I knew where to look. Cunningham Creek should be easy to find on a map. Well, hum, no. It just wasn't there. Maybe its just too small I thought. I need a better map. So down to the library, but again, no Cunningham Creek. Later, I finally found a reference in a Lake County, Ohio history to the fact that Cunningham Creek was renamed Arcola Creek. I looked for Arcola Creek, and there it was on the map just inside the eastern county line of Lake County. I had a starting place so I decided I would try to put together the story of Cunningham Creek light, and over the next nine months, I was able to find quite a lot about this elusive beacon light.

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Our story starts in 1811. Ohio had received statehood in 1803, but the northeastern part of Ohio, was owned by Connecticut and called the Western Reserve. Revolutionary War Captain John Cunningham owned some land in Plainfield, Massachusetts and was able to trade this land for a tract of almost 2700 acres located in the Western Reserve. The land started on the shore of Lake Erie and extended several miles inland. It was heavily forested and included a waterway which was later to become known as Cunningham Creek. Captain Cunningham built a log cabin and began to clear the forest with the assistance of two of his sons. Later, as the land was still being cleared and surveyed for one of the first roads through the area, bog iron ore deposits were found in several locations on his property.

In about the year 1825, a local man named Mr. Fuller built a small steamboat on Cunningham Creek not far from its opening into Lake Erie. This was the first steamboat built west of Buffalo and was the third steamboat to operate on Lake Erie. The boat was remarkable because it was built almost entirely out of wood, even the main engine cylinder was made of wood, heavily banded with iron. Little is known about this boat after it was launched. However, it was the beginning of what was to become a major ship building industry at the mouth of Cunningham Creek.

In 1826, 52 acres of John Cunningham's land, including some of the iron ore deposits, were sold to the Erie Furnace Company. The Erie Furnace Co. built a small blast furnace on the land, and began to produce pig iron. This first major industry in the area caused the local businessmen to begin requesting government assistance to turn the mouth of Cunningham Creek into a harbor. The requests were made to the War Department to have the Corps of Engineers construct a large pier and breakwater. The War Department sent E. Whittley to the site and began planning the harbor improvements. In 1828, $1517 was provided for removing obstructions at the mouth of Cunningham Creek, and a Mr. Charles Hoyt established a small 'Pocket' iron furnace where iron plows were forged, on what was to become Dock Road near Cunningham Creek. These were the first iron plows made in the area. An additional $2,956 was provided for removing obstructions in 1829 but it would be several years before Congress provided the funding for the harbor construction.

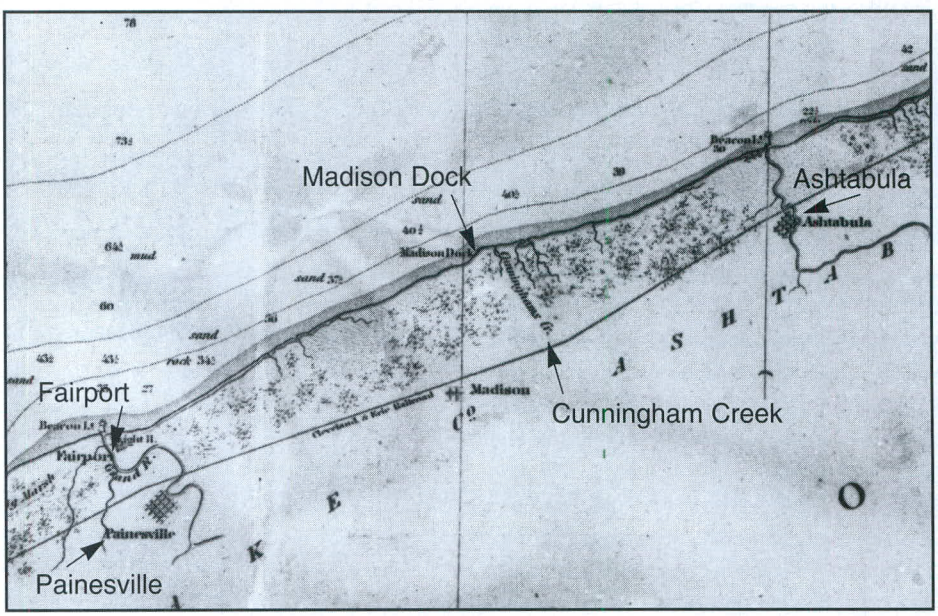
The small town of Madison located about six miles south of the mouth of Cunningham Creek was prospering by 1830, and had a carding mill, woolen mill, doth dressing mill, chair factory, six distilleries and four tanneries. At this time, the Erie Furnace Co. was bought by Judge Samuel Wilkeson of Buffalo, New York and renamed the Arcole Furnace Co. The company began to produce pig iron which was used in the manufacture of potash kettles, cooking kettles, hollow ware, farm implements and the very popular "Buckeye" iron stove. Shortly after the purchase of the company a second blast furnace was added and production increased significantly over the next few years.

At the same time, a smaller town was developing near the mouth of Cunningham Creek named Ellensburgh. Harlow and Alanson Bailey moved to the area and began the first major ship building industry in Ellensburgh. In 1830, they launched a small schooner the Caroline S. Bailey with the help of Joel R. Norton and his son who assisted in the building and outfitting of the schooner. Joel's son, Joel T. Norton, later became an expert sail maker and owned a cabinet shop that supplied other items to the ship building industry. Within a short time, Erastus and Edmund Lockwood began a second shipyard in direct competition with the Bailey brothers.

By 1831, the Arcole Company reported that it was able to produce 30 tons of finished iron castings per week over the approximate eight-month production cycle each year. The efforts of Judge Wilkeson, local Attorney Colonel Robert Harper and the Corps of Engineers led to the first major funding of harbor improvements by Congress in 1832.

In January 1833, progress was being made on the harbor improvements. E. Whittley of the Corps of Engineers wrote a letter to the Secretary of War stating, "As the piers at Conneaut and Cunningham's creek are about to be completed, I wish to call your attention to the necessity of having beacon lights constructed on them. The expense of constructing the necessary foundations, when the boats, and machinery are in a state of preparation, will be much less, than when they shall be sold, or laid up. It is of importance, that the end of one of the piers should be lighted, that the mariner may know, where the entrance into the harbor, is, in the darkest night."

The plan for the harbor at Cunningham Creek is best described by the report of Lt. Colonel Joseph G. Totten of the Corps of Engineers in November 1833. "The object of the improvements at this place was to obtain shelter for vessels, independent of all access to the creek; and for this purpose Major Maurice designed two parallel piers to run into the lake at the distance of 475 feet from each other. This wide space to be nearly covered in front by an isolated pier, or break-



Cunningham Creek shown as Madison Dock on the map. Army Corps of Engineers Map dated 1849.

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water, lying still further in the lake, and running parallel with the shore. The parallel piers were to be formed of cribs, or small piers, separated from each other, for waterway, about 30 feet, and connected at top by bridging. The breakwater be solid from end to end. In execution of this project, the works for the western pier have been carried out the intended distance, and are represented as having already rendered very great service to the navigation of the lake, although as yet inadequate to the demands of business." However, when the eastern pier was actually built it was not placed parallel with the western pier as shown in the following drawing:

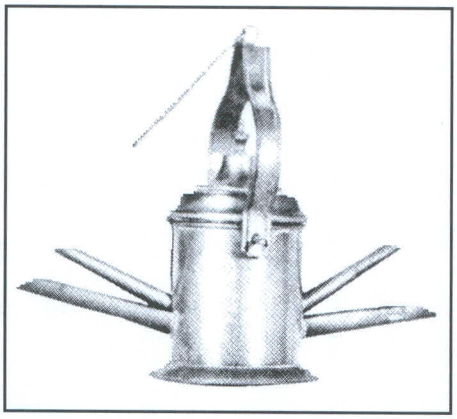
The beacon light requested in January of 1833 was finally funded with $2,000 in a Congressional appropriation dated June 30, 1834. On July 26, 1834, Steven Pleasonton, Fifth Auditor of the Treasury and Superintendent of Lighthouses, in Washington, transferred the $2000 appropriation for the Beacon at Cunningham Creek to the War Department. The War Department took immediate steps to construct the beacon. Colonel Robert Harper, a local attorney and politician, was given the job of Superintendent of Public Works at the pier, and construction of the beacon was accomplished between August 1 and December 31, 1834.

Colonel Harper reported that an additional appropriation and additional work were needed to, ". . . finish and secure the foundation by stone, without which the Beacon must soon be injured and go to ruin." He also described the ongoing work at the harbor as follows, ". . . and I would here remark that the rapid increase of business at this place, and particularly the continued extension of those great iron works, in the immediate neighborhood of this place, calls loudly for an extension of the public pier. It is confidently believed that an extension of those works according to plan No.2, submitted to the department last year by Col. Toiten, as well as yourself, will afford ample accommodation for vessels and boats at all times, and perfectly secure from storm or danger. The average depth of water on each side of the present pier, for the distance of 400 feet, is, this season, 16 feet, and no bar to obstruct."

Over the years various names were used to describe the Beacon and pier at Cunningham Creek. It was sometimes called Cunningham Harbor or the Madison Dock, as it was located near the town of Madison. It was also known as Harper's Landing because this was the spot where Alexander Harper (Robert's father) and 22 others first landed in the year 1798 and also because Colonel Robert Harper was the local Superintendent of Public Works at the dock.



Colonel Robert Harper. Attorney and member of the Ohio Legislature. Circa 1840. Photograph courtesy of the Lake County, Ohio Historical Society.



This is a two wick Bucket Lamp also known as a Spider Lamp. Photograph from Author's collection.

By 1834, the Arcole Furnace Co. was described as the largest industry in Ohio, producing approximately 1,500 tons of iron castings per year and employing nearly two thousand workers. At this time, the town of Madison located near the Arcole Co. was larger than Cleveland, 19 and the town of Ellensburgh, at the mouth of the creek, had grown to a total of 55 houses, with a three story hotel called the Allen House and two large shipyards. The dock had become a point for loading ironware for shipment around Lake Erie and an unloading point for settlers, sailors passing through, limestone from Kelly's Island for the furnaces, and goods of all kinds for the inhabitants and industries in the area.

When the beacon light was built, the Engineer Department did not use the standard Winslow Lewis patent lamps and reflectors for its illumination. This was of great concern to Samuel Starkweather, Superintendent of Lighthouses in Cleveland. He wrote a letter August 25, 1835 to Stephen Pleasonton in Washington expressing his concern. Several excerpts from his letter follow:

"In my last letter I submitted to you the question, whether any lamps except Winslow Lewis' patent lamps, would answer for the Beacons built under the Engineer Department. I communicated your reply in the negative, to the several agents (in this District) of the Engineer Department, under whose directions Beacons had been recently built. I have received no answer from any of them except R. Harper, agent at Cunningham-creek. I herewith enclose to you his letter from which you will discover the state of the Beacons, in one respect, at that place.

"The Beacon at Cunningham-creek has, I am told, the peculiar contrivance of raising a little chandelier of lamps by means of a rope and pulley, from the bottom to the top of the Beacon, there being no deck. Under such circumstances would you direct me to have the Beacons altered if necessary, and Lewis' lamps, and reflectors provided, the expense to be chargeable in my quarterly account.

"The Beacons might answer without

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reflectors and perhaps might do best without them, as the lanterns are small and contracted.

"It is said in favor of the common Spider Lamps that they do not consume so much oil as Lewis', and give as good a light."

The letter referred to, from Colonel Robert Harper dated August 18, 1835, reads as follows:

"I have received yours of the 12th inst. Inclosing a copy of the 5th Auditor's letter in relation to the Beacon at Cunningham's-creek and in answer I can only say that the Beacon is ready to be lighted whenever oil is furnished and a keeper appointed, and that it is much wanted.

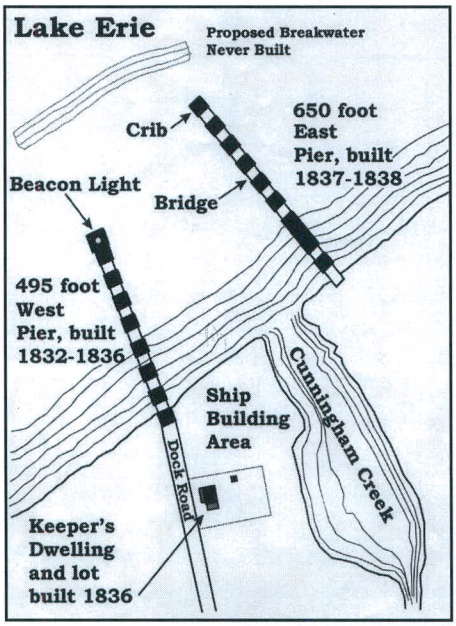
"In relation to lamps I shall only say the lamps are such as was {sic} directed by Mr. Selden the agent for the department, and are such as are in use at Fairport and Erie, and are found to be much better than those referred to. They make a better light with less oil than those with reflectors and require but three instead of 6, and I know them to be decidedly better and much cheaper and a saving to the government on there oil contract, of about one half in oil. These are the considerations that induced their adoption, &c.

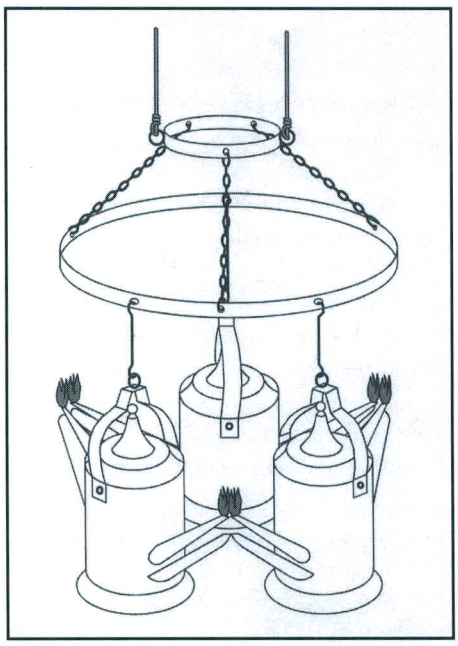
"At this time there is {sic} no funds to purchase other lamps and none-other will be furnished. I have to state as supposition that when the Engineer Department reported a light finished the Treasury Department furnished the oil to light it, this beacon is ready for use and has been for four months. It only wants for oil and a tender." [ed Keeper]

No action was taken by either Pleasonton or Starkweather to replace the lamps at Cunningham Creek, and the bucket lamps supplied by the Corps of Engineers continued in use.

On September 3, 1835, Samuel Starkweather again wrote to Stephen Pleasonton and offered the following comments about the beacon.

"The Beacon at Cunningham Harbor being a fixed light, is of doubtful utility, because there is no inlet there, there being a wharf only, parallel with the shore affording no refuge or shelter to vessels in a blow, and because the shore there is subject to all the incidents and perils of a sea shore, and because the Cunningham light, being a fixed light might easily be mistaken for the Ashtabula light or the Conneaut light, and the consequences of such a mistake would be dangerous in the extreme. If the Beacon at Cunningham Harbor, were a revolving light, it might be useful."





Cunningham Creek chandelier with 3 bucket lamps, raised by ropes and windlass.

In the annual report written on October 1, 1835, by Lieutenant T. S. Brown of the Corps of Engineers, the current status at Cunningham Creek was described as follows:

"Nothing has been done at this place this year. The Light-house is completed, but it still remains isolated from the rest of the work, and further expenditures are necessary to properly secure its base. The piers are greatly in need of repairs, which should be immediately applied, unless it is the intention of the Government to abandon this improvement altogether. As a landing place, it has proved valuable to the neighboring country."

Stephen Pleasonton appointed former ship Captain Ephraim Shaler to be the keeper at Cunningham Creek beacon light, to start on October 3, 1835, which was the first time the light was officially displayed. A week later on October 10,1835, Samuel Starkweather wrote the following letter to Pleasonton:

"I have received your letter enclosing the appointment of Capt. Ephraim Shaler of Tallmadge, Portage County, Ohio, to be Keeper of the Beacon at Cunningham Harbor in this District.

"You directed me to inform Capt Shaler, of the necessity of his residing and being himself, steadily in the house provided for the Keeper.

"You were not aware, that no dwelling house has as yet been provided for the Keepers, of Beacons, at Cunningham Harbor, Conneaut River, and Huron River.

"If a Beacon Light is to be continued at Cunningham Harbor, it will become necessary also to include there a dwelling house for the use of the Keeper, because, otherwise, the Keeper might not find accommodations there, for his family. The place having but few, and scattered settlements around it."

The blast furnaces, in the area, required large amounts of limestone in the iron making process. The limestone was quarried on Cunningham's Island (now named Kelley's Island), loaded on schooners and sailed to the Cunningham Creek pier-head. The crushed

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stone was then unloaded onto the pier for initial storage and eventually hauled by mule drawn cart to the furnaces some three miles to the south.

There were immediate problems with maintaining the lighthouse and Ephraim Shaler quickly wrote a letter on October 31,1835, to Stephen Pleasonton, complaining of the way the pier was being maintained:

"I deem it my duty respectfully, to lay before you the state, and condition of the pier in this harbor. The pier, on the end of which stands the Beacon light, extends into the lake about 400 feet, and is in a state of decay, caused principally by heavy teams going. almost constantly on it with furnace ware, which is manufactured in great abundance about 3 miles from this place, and shipped to Buffalo. Almost all the plank on the pier, are torn in pieces, by driving on heavy loads in wagons, and large pot-ash kettles on plank, in consequence of which there are many large holes, some of which, are covered by throwing down pieces of boards & staves, or anything they can get hold of.

"Besides loading the pier with all kinds of furnace ware, the Company have, I should judge, a hundred tons of lime-stone and gravel, which they use in their furnaces, lying two-thirds of the way out on the pier and which obstruct the passage in going to and from the light. From the end of the pier, to the Beacon light, there is a space of thirty feet without any covering, and nothing but a string-piece to walk on, and where the water is from 12 to 15 feet deep. I know not by what authority the furnace company, and others, make use of the pier, but it would seem to me but reasonable and right, that if they are permitted to use the pier, that they should keep it in good repair at least as I understand they pay no dockage to the government.

"There might be an excellent harbor made at this place by extending out another pier, with a breakwater, and clearing away the sand bar at the mouth of the creek.

"I will attend to any instructions you may be pleased to give me, in relation to the pier, or other property belonging to the United States. There is a warehouse, and boat, the property of the United States but no dwelling house. I have with some difficulty rented a small room for my family, in the nearest house to the Beacon light, and is distant from it, about 375 yards."

During the last three months of 1835, when the light was first lit, only 9 gallons of whale oil was consumed by the bucket lamps installed in the tower.

Captain Shaler could not continue to house his family in a rented room, and the government finally decided that a proper keeper's dwelling should be provided. On March 11, 1836, one-acre of land about 200 feet inland from the pier was sold to the government by Colonel Robert Harper and Ethan A. Judson for $200. On March 17, 1836, a contract was approved providing $840 to Samuel D. Rounds and Hubbard A. Smith for constructing the keeper's house on the land. The Lighthouse Service used a standard design for keeper's dwellings described as follows:

"The dwelling-houses of the keepers are made uniformly alike, viz: thirty-four by twenty feet: one story of eight feet divided into two rooms, with lodging rooms above; to which is added a kitchen, to the south, a piazza [ed: porch] is allowed in addition."

On May 9, 1836, Congress appropriated an additional $225.50 "for finishing and securing the foundation of the beacon light."

Colonel Robert Harper wrote the following in his annual report for the year 1836:

"The work from the shore has been connected with the crib foundation of the Beacon-light, so that the latter is accessible. The foundation of the Light-house has also been repaired, strengthened, and secured. It is doubtless known to the department that the present work is entirely incomplete, being but a small portion of the originally-planned work."

"I would here remark that the rapid increase of business in the immediate vicinity of these works calls loudly for their completion, they being in the immediate vicinity of several of the most important iron-works in the north part of the State of Ohio, and demand such facilities as will enable them to do their business at that place, and no doubts remain as to the utility of the harbor and of the perfect practicability of its construction on the plan alluded to. Therefore, the above appropriations are advised to and asked for the coming year at Cunningham's-creek, Ohio."

During the year of 1836 the three bucket lamps in the Cunningham Creek beacon consumed a total of 49 gallons of whale oil. But, the condition of the beacon itself was deteriorating rapidly. Keeper Shaler was forced to write a letter of complaint to Samuel Starkweather, Superintendent of Lighthouses, in Cleveland, on May26, 1837:

"I would inform you that more oil will be wanted for the Beacon at this place by the latter part of June. Congress appropriated $225.00 more than a year ago, for the repairing the Beacon at Cunningham-creek, but nothing has yet been done to prevent its leaking, and wetting the lamps every time it rains. There was {sic} two or three men pretending to work on the Beacon several days last summer, but very little was done, and nothing to prevent its leaking. A thin coat of paint was put on the outside, the seams corked and sanded, from the bottom up about eight feet.."

In 1837, a Board of Navy Commissioners was established to review many of the lighthouses on the Great Lakes and report on their condition and usefulness. A Lieutenant Pendergrast was assigned the task of reviewing the lights on Lake Erie and others. His report dated August 18, 1837, on Cunningham Creek reads as follows:

"Madison dock, or Cunningham-creek — I have not landed at this place, but, from what I saw of it in passing by, and from all I could learn from the navigators of the lake, I do not hesitate to say that a light is entirely useless, and ought to be discontinued. There is at this place nothing but a simple pier running out into the lake, without the semblance of a harbor, or anything else, to make it necessary to support a light."

Henry Smith, the General Superintendent of Public Works for Lake Erie wrote about Cunningham Creek in his annual report dated September 30, 1837, as follows:

"This work differs materially from all the foregoing in its character. Although being formed at the mouth of a stream, yet that stream is so inconsiderable, that not the slightest benefit is derived from its action in forming or continuing a harbor. The shore of the lake, however, is more declivitous at this point than at any other within my knowledge. The water, as is shown by the accompanying map of a survey, attains depth sufficient for any vessel

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on the lake, at about 150 feet from the shore. In forming this harbor, after creating a shelter for vessels, the object has been, not as in other works to interrupt the currents of the lake and arrest the sand suspended therein, but to create a structure which should be a protection against the winds, and, at the same time, allow the currents of the lake, produced by those winds, to pass uninterruptedly, and thus maintain the original depth of water, without depositing the sand against the piers. Two piers running into the lake, the outer ends approaching each other, with a breakwater (solid) protecting their front, and running nearly parallel with the shore, were designed; the piers running from the shore, composed of separate cribs or blocks of timber loaded with stone, and secured at distances from each other about equaling their length, and connected with each other by bridges; thus allowing, as before stated, the water to flow uninterruptedly betwixt these blocks or piers.

"This season, the eastern pier has been commenced at the shore, and at a distance from the western pier of 608 feet, and has been carried out (so far as to sink and secure the separate blocks or piers) to the length of 590 feet, leaving a vacancy necessary to be filled by one more crib. Each block or crib is 32 feet in length, built of strong timbers, and secured by posts, iron bolts, and three4inch treenails, and loaded with stone. The bottom being rock, (and, of course, it being impossible to secure by piles,) sills of timber 18 inches square and 40 feet long are sunk under the piers, with posts on the outside of the cribs, strongly braced to the sills, and connected over the cribs by caps. The appropriation of last Congress was not sufficient to allow of the completion of this portion of the work, or of the commencement of the breakwater. The connecting bridgework remains to be constructed the coming year. Some repairs have been found necessary on the western pier, and made accordingly. These consist in replacing decayed planking, and some slight replacing of the timber work.

"To finish the east pier and to construct the breakwater, without which the work already done is nearly useless, I submit estimate marked A No.6. A sketch exhibiting the present condition of the work is also herewith forwarded by the local agent, Colonel R. Harper. The appropriation, if made, should be made without delay; and it is believed the work may be completed the coming season. Of the original necessity for this work I was not the judge; but, as the department is aware, found it commenced already when I assumed my present duties. Being fairly begun, I respectfully recommend its Speedy completion. Some important iron-works are situated in the neighborhood of this harbor. Which is the place of embarkation and shipment of persons and manufactures connected with those works. The region abounds with iron ore, of an excellent quality, and the district is a highly cultivated agricultural one. The great Ohio railroad (along the whole border of Lake Erie) passes within a few yards of this harbor.

"Some repairs have been made on the Light-house, from the balance of the appropriation for that work, remaining unexpended. These consist principally in strengthening the foundation of the work, in painting the building, &c., and in repairing the roof and sides, so as to render them impervious to the water."

Keeper Shaler's letter of complaint of May 26, 1837, to Samuel Starkweather, Superintendent of Lighthouses in Cleveland, had still not been acted upon by the following year and finally Superintendent Starkweather wrote to Stephen Pleasonton on July 26, 1838, as follows:

"The Beacon at Cunningham Harbor is in a very bad condition. A special appropriation of $225 was made by Congress in the year 1836, for the repair of the Beacon at Cunningham Harbor, by the agent of the Engineer Department at that place, under which department the Beacon was built. Capt. Henry Smith is the superintendent of the works, and Robert Harper is the agent who was charged with the particular duty of repairing the Beacon. It seems that, Capt. Smith, directed Mr. Harper to apply $100 of the appropriation, for the repairs, which he has neglected to do. I refer you to the letter of Mr. Shaler, Keeper of that Beacon, which is herewith enclosed. So long as there is any part of the special appropriation remaining, applicable to the repair of the Beacon at Cunningham Harbor, I have considered it improper to include it in my estimate of contingent expenses, and you will be pleased to advise me on this subject."

During the winter of 1837-1838 the water level of Lake Erie was recorded at its highest level up to that time. In September 1838, Henry Smith, the General Superintendent of Lake Erie reported on conditions at Cunningham Creek during the winter of 1837-1838 and actions taken during the early part of 1838 as follows:

"The west pier, which had been considerably injured by the ice, operated on by the very high water and severe storms, has been repaired about ninety feet in length of the work. The residue of the operations on this work has been confined to finishing the eastern (or new) pier, and to the construction of some necessary machinery. ...I should have mentioned that one very good large double crane-scow has been constructed this season; it was found nearly impossible to advance the work without it."

"It is proposed to prosecute the erection of the breakwater with as much diligence as is possible the coming year. Without it, the works already constructed are of but little comparative utility. By reference to the original plan of Major Maurice, and to that last year forwarded, it will be seen that that structure is indispensable. I herewith submit an estimate, marked A. No.6, for the completion of the east pier, and for the sum necessary to construct the breakwater."

In 1838, a second review' of the lights was conducted by the Navy and the report of Lieutenant C. T. Platt to the Secretary of Treasury, dated November 26, 1838, about Cunningham Creek reads as follows:

"Cunningham-creek Beacon is situated on the outer end of a single pier, extending about four hundred and fifty feet into the lake. It is lighted with three lamps, and is built on a new' plan, having no stairs. The lamps are raised and lowered by pulleys. It is kept in excellent order, and the plan is a commendable one for temporary purposes. The public works are fast progressing, and the time is not far distant when a partial protection will be afforded to commerce at this point.

"The dwelling is in a state of dilapidation, but an appropriation of three hundred and fifty dollars will be requisite to render it comfortable."

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No appropriation was provided for the construction of the breakwater in 1839, and the Army Corps of Engineers began to doubt the need for the harbor at Cunningham Creek. In their annual report for that year, they reported that the works there should be abandoned to their fate. No additional appropriations were requested in 1840 or 1841 to maintain the piers or beacon light.

In 1841, Anson Hotchkiss replaced Ephraim Shaler as keeper at Cunningham Creek, and on January 19, 1842, the new Superintendent of Lighthouses in Cleveland, George B. Merwin, wrote the following letter about Cunningham Creek to Stephen Pleasonton:

"The Keeper when he made his report to me, here, about 1st inst., informed me that the deck of the light has sprung up and leaked a little, and that the lightning rod had been broken oft. I gave him orders to have the deck repaired and the lightning rod replaced. Having determined the repairs were necessary, and would be but trifling expense, I did not, deem it of sufficient importance to put the amount in my estimate; which I had the honor to transmit to you on the 11th instant.

"I have informed the Agent of Superintendent of Public Works, here as to the condition of the Pier at Cunningham Creek; and shall take the necessary measures to have the work repaired by the Engineer Department, if possible.

"I have this day instructed the Keeper of said Light-house, to abstain from further addressing members of Congress on Light-house subjects."

The government was always overly concerned about the usage of the whale oil by the keepers. An interesting incident occurred early in 1842 that was reported by George Merwin in his quarterly report dated April 23,1842, as follows:

"Herewith I have the honor to transmit to you my quarterly returns for the Light-house District Cuyahoga, for 1st quarter 1842, with my estimate of expenses for the 2nd quarter of 1842.

"You will please observe on the credit side of my account an item of sale of oil drippings made by Anson Hotchkiss, Keeper of the Beacon at Cunningham Harbor, amounting to $3.75.

"Mr. Hotchkiss in end of last quarter 1841 informed me that there was saved 5 to 6 gallons drippings and wished to know what disposition should be made of them. Not knowing myself any better way than to have them saved and as the quantity was too small to bear the expense of transportation here, I directed him to dispose of them the best he could and apply the proceeds to repair the Beacon.

"He rectified or clarified the drippings and sold them and applied the proceeds as directed. His disposing of these drippings caused charges to be preferred against him for selling government oil, by some persons enemical to his holding the office.

"I have investigated the matter fully, and cannot find that he has sold any other description of oil than the drippings.

"I have made many inquires as to the character and standing of Mr. Hotchkiss, and am assured by persons in whom I can place reliance that his standing for honesty and integrity is good and unimpeachable.

"I beg to be informed in relation to the drippings, and to whom they belong. Some of the Keepers, tell me that the contractor told them that they belonged to them and gave them to them for transporting the oil from vessel to Light-house. Other keepers, inform me that they use the drippings in and about the Beacons for preserving the works."

Anson Hotchkiss resigned and was replaced as keeper by John R. Cunningham on April 24, 1843. It is not known whether John R. Cunningham was a descendent of the original John Cunningham, the namesake of the creek. The lamps in the beacon were also changed from three to four and apparently a simple deck was added around the lantern, at about this time. With the additional lamp, the annual consumption of whale oil increased to 67 gallons in 1843, 44 and to 94 gallons by 1844.

On September 18,1843, W. Duane Wilson, General Inspector of Lights on the Northwestern Lakes reported on Cunningham Creek as follows:

"The keeper (Mr. Cunningham) has but recently taken possession of this light. The duties (so far as I could learn and see) are well attended to. The lighting apparatus, which is very simple, is in good order. The condition of the keeper's house, and the repairs required, have been reported upon."

He continued his report on December 30, 1943, as follows:

"Commencing at the lower end of Lake Erie, the first light I have to notice is the one established at the mouth of Cunningham-creek, Ohio, generally termed on the lakes "Madison dock." This light is on the end of a pier, about 150 yards from the shore, at an equal distance (12 miles) from the Ashtabula and Grand River lights. Standing on the end of this pier, both the neighboring lights can be seen very distinctly. As this place is never resorted to as a refuge for vessels, nor affords any business to justify the maintenance of a light here, it is universally esteemed as useless."

Mr. W. Duane Wilson had considerable influence in Washington and his comments led to the first serious discussions about abandoning the light at Cunningham Creek. In March of 1844, Mr. Wilson was asked to confirm his opinion that Cunningham Creek should be discontinued. No immediate action was taken to discontinue the light. However, fuel was added to the fire, by the new Superintendent of Lights in Cleveland, John Mc Reynolds, in his Quarterly Report for the second quarter of 1845, when he wrote as follows:

"Cunningham Harbor Beacon May 23, 1845 — This light is produced by means of bucket lamps raised by a windlass, everything about it which is very plain is in good order, the keeper discharges his duties faithfully. I must however add that this light is of but little importance, scarce equal to the expenses attending it The keeper's house requiring considerable repairs probably to the amount of $50.00 which I beg leave to call your attention."

John Mc Reynolds continued to try to improve the conditions at the light although he still considered it an unnecessary light, as shown by the following statement from his Quarterly Report for the third quarter of 1845:

"Cunningham Harbor Beacon — I would respectfully recommend a further appropriation of $30.00 as necessary to complete the fence around the premises and make some slight repairs to the dwelling. I found, matters, here, in a fair condition."

The light was being used significantly less by the year 1845 when only 22 gallons of whale oil were reported as used for the entire year, which was less than one fourth of the normal

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usage. Stephen Pleasonton and others began to make requests of Congress that the light at Cunningham Creek should be discontinued.

John Cunningham resigned as keeper on February 5, 1846, and Henry Richardson became the fourth and last keeper of the Cunningham Creek Light Station.

Congress finally agreed that the light could be discontinued and enacted legislation on March 3, 1847, to that effect. Pleasonton reacted quickly and the light was officially discontinued on March 31, 1847, ending its less that 12 year existence. Only 4 gallons of whale oil were used in its lamps for the three months it was in operation during 1847.

Stephen Pleasonton reported on the discontinuing of the Cunningham Creek light on December 15, 1847, as follows:

> "It is proper to observe, however, that of the Light-houses directed by that law to be discontinued, in certain contingencies, the one at Cunningham-creek, in Ohio, has been discontinued, the materials ordered to be sold and removed. The superintendent was directed, in relation to this last, to have the lamps, reflectors, &c., conveyed to Cleveland, and there to be taken care of." Note: Mr. Pleasonton seems to have forgotten that this light had no reflectors.

The closing of the light generated immediate interest in the potential of purchasing the government properly at the site, and several letters were written to determine the details of the discontinuance as follows:

> Mr. McEdey of the U.S. Congress wrote on January 27, 1848, asking: "Will Mr. Pleasonton, please say whether the light-house buildings at Cunningham-creek are to be sold at public or private sale. For if at public sale when it is to be. These particulars are not given in your report of yesterday."
>
> The Secretary of the Treasury wrote on January 28, 1848, asking: "I understand the government are about to abandon the public works at the mouth of Cunningham-creek, Ohio, and to sell the grounds now owned there by the U.S., will you inform me whether such land is for sale and at what price? William L Perkins Esq. of that county desires to purchase it, if for sale."
>
> Stephen Pleasonton replied: "The light-house on the pier at Cunningham-creek having been discontinued by the law of the 3rd March last, relative to Light-houses, that building with the keepers house on shore, has been advertised for sale by the Collector at Cleveland. The land (1-acre) on which the keeper's house stands is not to be sold there being no law for it"

In the early 1850's, the Arcole Furnace Co. was sold to the Geauga Furnace Co. and by about 1852 the supplies of bog iron ore were exhausted and the furnace companies dosed in the area around Cunningham Creek. The pier had been abandoned, by the Government, in the early 1840's and left to its fate, and, as stated above, the beacon light was extinguished in 1847. The Government wanted a caretaker for the former keeper's dwelling and allowed Joel R. Norton Jr. to live in, and maintain, the house at no cost.

The Government may have abandoned the pier and beacon, but they were not abandoned by the people living in the vicinity. The shipbuilders asked Joel R. Norton Jr. to maintain the old beacon light. The Government had removed the bucket lamps, but had left the other parts of the chandelier, so Joel found some glass globes and a mold for making long candles and used these to furnish a light. This arrangement lasted for the next 16 years while shipbuilding continued at the dock.

Both the pier and the remains of the beacon building lasted for quite a number of years after that. Lake Erie had reached one of its lowest recorded levels in the 1849, and the mouth of Cunningham Creek was slowly dosed by the encroachment of a sandbar during the 1850's. The last ship was built and launched at the dock in 1863. After 1863 the beacon was no longer maintained and the little town of Ellensburgh quickly began to disappear. The pier and former beacon building were finally reclaimed by the waves of Lake Erie in the late 1890's.

The 1 acre of land and keeper's dwelling continued in the possession of Joel R. Norton Jr. as shown by the following letter written by Cary R. Album in 1912:

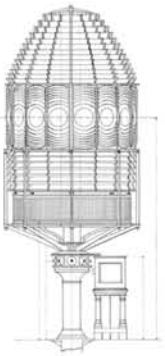
> "In 1912, after my appointment as Assistant United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, a letter arrived from Attorney General George H. Wickersham, at Washington, instructing our office to investigate and report on the Madison Dock properly at the foot of Dock Road, owned by the United States Government, and I was delegated to do the job.
>
> "Boarding the Suburban Electric Tramway then operating between Cleveland and Ashtabula, my wife and I alighted at Madison, hired a horse and buggy at the livery stable and proceeded to the lake end of Dock Road. There we found projecting above the water along the shore a number of wooden piles, which apparently were all that remained of the old Government shipbuilding dock.
>
> "Also, on the properly we found an old dilapidated house occupied by an aged blind man. Upon conversing with him I learned that he had been employed by the Federal Government at the ship yards until they dosed about the end of the Civil War; that he then occupied the house as caretaker, and had continued to live rent-free since, meanwhile becoming blind.
>
> "Upon returning to Cleveland I prepared a report to the Attorney General describing the situation, and recommending that under the circumstances the blind old shipbuilder be permitted to live in the old house for the remainder of his days. Within a few days I was pleased to receive a reply commending the report and approving my recommendation."

Mr. Album's letter immediately prompted investigation of who the blind caretaker was at the dock. Mrs. Gertrude Joiner of Dock Road, granddaughter of Joel R. Norton, shipbuilder, revealed that this man was her father, Joel R. Norton Jr. born May 5, 1834. Mrs. Joiner recalled that after her father passed away at the age of 83, on September 21, 1917, her late brother, Frank Norton lived in the house many years. Some 20 to 30 years ago the house was moved. [ed: The house was moved about a half-mile west on Lake Shore Blvd. and still exists today]. After Frank Norton began living in the house, the Government decided to get rid of the property. The "official" Government transfer was not made until May 22, 1926, to the heirs of Joel Norton.

The Cunningham Creek Beacon no longer exists, but those current inhabitants of the area, interested in history, remember that long ago, a proud light was shown from the end of Madison Dock, and it seems like Only Yesterday!

Author Thomas A. Tag is a frequent contributor to the *Log*.

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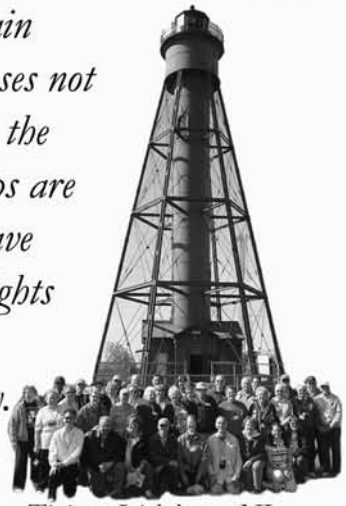
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