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Emma Tabberrah at Cumberland Head [1904-19]

By Mary Louise Clifford





Emma Dominy Tabberrah about 1923. Photo courtesy of her grandson, Arthur Hillegas.

Lighthouse Memories

This chapter is based on material generously supplied by Arthur Burdette Hillegas, son of Emma Tabberrah's daughter Rose. Dr. Hillegas, born in 1907 while his grandmother was keeper at Cumberland Head Light, now lives in New Baltimore, Michigan.

In 1867 Emma Dominy of Beekmantown, New York, married William Tabberrah from a farm near Beekmantown. Because William was a disabled veteran of the Civil War, he was advised to apply for the position of keeper of the light at Cumberland Head on Lake Champlain. He received that appointment in 1871, moving Emma and her two babies into the new limestone block lighthouse beside the much older conical tower.

In spite of his disability, William kept the light for 33 years. He purchased an 89-acre farm adjoining the lighthouse property, which enabled him to indulge his love of horses. The town of Plattsburgh was seven miles away, requiring horse and buggy transportation to reach it.

Six more Tabberrah children were born in the lighthouse. In 1903 surgery to remove a lead bullet, residue of the Civil War, still lodged in William's hip led to an infection which killed him. Emma applied for his job and was appointed keeper in 1904 at a salary of $480 a year, serving until her retirement in 1919 (when she received a pension of $190.17 per year). Two of her daughters kept her company and assisted her with her keeper's duties.

The tower was fifty feet high, putting the focal beam from the Fresnel lens seventy-five feet above the lake level and making it visible for eleven miles. An oil room connected the tower to the keeper's house and served to store kerosene and lamps as well as a workbench and tools. The daily cleaning and maintenance of the lamps was done there.

The first floor of the keeper's house had a parlor, a dining-sitting room, and a pantry. The kitchen was in a one-story addition at the back of the house. Upstairs were two large and two small bedrooms, above them an unfinished attic. Wood stoves in the kitchen and the sitting room heated the house. An outbuilding contained a carriage house, a stable for two horses, a woodshed, and an outhouse. In the 19th century the

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family did without plumbing, electricity, or a telephone.

Had Emma Tabberrah recorded her memories, she doubtless would have discussed cleaning and polishing the lamps in the oil room, as well as the daily routine of climbing the stairs at sunset to place the lamps in the lantern, replacing them with fresh lamps at midnight, and extinguishing them at sunrise. Then she carried them back to the oil room and polished them again. She would have climbed the stairs frequently to polish the many prisms of the 4th order Fresnel lens that magnified the light.

But what her children remembered and passed on to their children were the charming details of family life in a rural lighthouse in the late 19th century. Rainwater for household washing and bathing was collected in a basement cistern and pumped by hand into the kitchen sink. The well on the property had a heavy concentration of sulphur, giving it a strong taste. Emma was the only one who liked it well enough to drink it. The others brought drinking water in pails from Lake Champlain.

Fortunately the local school was only a mile away so the children could walk, ski, or snowshoe up through the woods behind their home to the main road. As they grew older, three of the girls went to board in Plattsburgh while taking teacher training and later taught in the area and downstate. As for playmates, there were very few neighbors except for summer residents in the cottages on Lake Champlain. The children were always overjoyed when cousins arrived to spend long summer holidays at the lighthouse.

The family provided its own entertainment. The children were encouraged to learn to identify birds and the habits of the woodland animals. They often cared for injured birds. They played croquet on the lawn and tennis on their homemade court. They tended the garden and went on excursions to collect flowers and gather berries. In the summer they could fish and sail on the lake, take picnics to the beach, in winter go ice-boating. The girls learned sewing and embroidery as well as cooking. The boys helped their father operate the farm.

They had a piano and their father played the flute. Sunday afternoons were special because that was when Emma dressed in her best gown and received callers in the parlor. Guests must be offered refreshments, and the children loved nothing better than bringing ice (cut from the lake in the winter and stored in an ice house in the woods) to pack into a hand-cranked ice cream freezer. They took turns at the crank and licking the paddles when it was done.

In 1894 an open air chapel was constructed in the woods south of the ferry slip. Sunday services were conducted there by ministers of the area, as well as by some summer residents. The building was also used for occasional community picnics or a dramatic presentation by the young people.



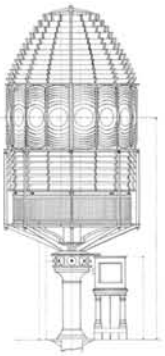
William and Emma Tabberrah and their children on the lawn of the Cumberland Head Light Station, circa 1880. Photo courtesy of grandson Arthur Hillegas.

In 1904 Rose Tabberrah married Milo Hillegas under the walnut tree on the lighthouse lawn. This happy occasion was followed only three months later by her father's death. He had been bedridden for two years, requiring Emma to be both constant nurse and keeper of the light.

After her 15 years keeping the Cumberland Head Light, Emma retired and spent another 14 years with her daughter Maud in Beekmantown, devoting her days to her children and grandchildren. She was buried beside her husband in Plattsburgh, New York.

In 1934 a skeleton tower was built by the lake shore to hold an automated acetylene light. Since the old lighthouse was no longer needed, it was sold to private owners, who in 1948 began restoration of the keeper's house as a private dwelling. In 1984 the Town of Plattsburgh adopted on its official seal a drawing of the old Cumberland Head Lighthouse.

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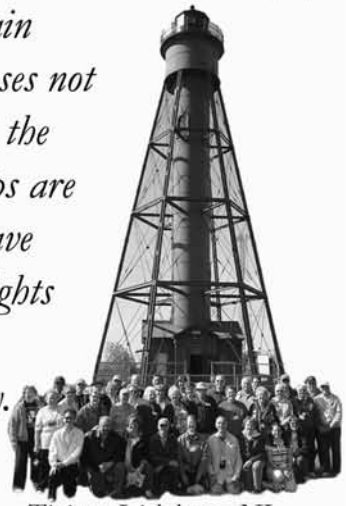
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