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Family Tradition – The Morong Keepers

by Shirley Morong



Fort Popham on the left bank of the Kennebec River and the Fort Popham Light Station which consists of a small structure at right connected to shore by a bridge. The structure houses an automatic bell striking machine, a large fog bell and small lens lantern with a range of seven miles. The small structure to the right of the fort is probably the oil house. Old post card circa 1910.

On January 1, 1935 Fort Popham Light at the mouth of the Kennebec River bordering Popham Beach, Maine was buffeted by a snowstorm with gale force wind that was sending waves across the beach and against the rocky shore.

As dusk descended, Lighthouse Keeper Alonzo Morong donned heavy clothing and walked from his house, across a wooden bridge to the lighthouse tower to light the lamp that would shine through the storm and darkness. Ascending the short flight of stairs leading to the lantern room, he lit the kerosene Aladdin lamp, replaced the chimney, adjusted the wick so the flame would not stream up against the mantle, and pushed the lamp on its cradle out into the glass enclosed tower where its green light would shine through the darkness. Making sure that everything was all right, he descended the stairs to the entry. There he gave the cable a few windings to keep the clockworks moving. They powered the hammer that struck the fog bell on the outside of the tower every few seconds … BOING … BOING.

It was cold out there and he was thankful to get back into his warm house. But he had to go out again later to check the light. Upon his return, as he walked across the bridge, a large wave dashed against the rocks and underpinning, sending a sheet of spray over him. Hastening to the shelter of the tower, he was dismayed to see a black spot on the mantle of the Aladdin lamp. He turned the wick down a bit but there seemed to be a draft coming in around the tower and he knew there would be trouble. The light must be watched, so he resigned himself to remaining in the tower the rest of the night. He was thankful when daylight dawned and he could extinguish the light and return to the warmth of the house, discard his wet clothes and have a hot drink. He could return later to clean the lamp in preparation of light-up time that night.

As a result of his faithful service, Keeper Morong got a bad cold that, in spite of home remedies, turned into pneumonia. On January 3 he was taken by ambulance to the hospital in Bath, sixteen miles away. He never came back to Fort Popham Light Station, as he died several weeks later.

Alonzo Morong spent nearly thirty years in the Lighthouse Service, entering on January 1, 1905, and planned to retire within a few months. The plans that he and his wife, Pauline, made were never to be. He had served as keeper on Goose Rock at Vinalhaven, Brown's Head, Petit Manan, Two Lights at Cape Elizabeth and Fort Popham.

Members of the Morong family have been connected to the sea since the last part of the 18th century. John C. Morong, born in Calais, Maine in 1835, went to sea on sailing ships out of Lubec and Eastport, then joined the U. S. Navy, from which he retired on June 29, 1906 with the rank of Captain. For a while he served as a Lighthouse Inspector in [the Thirteenth District, comprising Washington, Oregon and Alaska] from May 21 – October 24, 1898. He was living in San Francisco at the time of the earthquake in [April 18] 1906, then went to Hawaii, where he died.

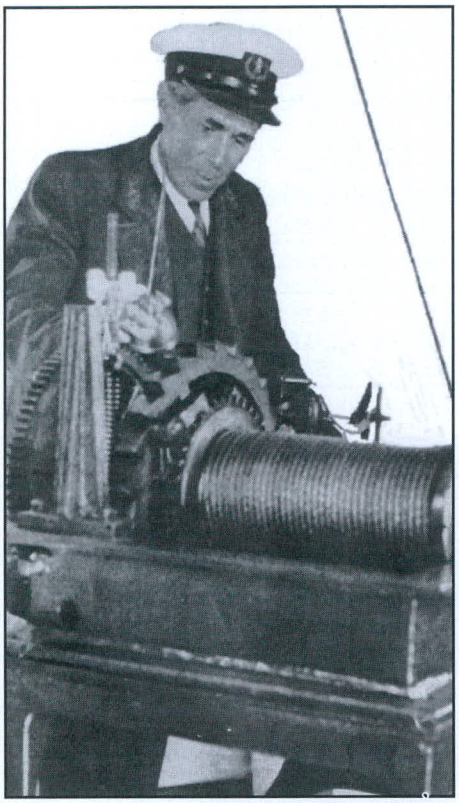
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John Morong's brother, Fred, also saw sea duty on board vessels Down East. At the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted in Company A of the Sixth Maine and remained in the service for two years, when, at his own request, he transferred to the Navy as a Chief Petty Officer on the gunboat *Dale,* then doing blockade work on the Mississippi River. He remained in the Navy until the war ended, then returned to Lubec, and for some time ran the sailing craft, which functioned as the ferry between Lubec and Eastport.

In 1889 Fred entered the Lighthouse Service and was stationed at Petit Manan, Lubec Channel Light, where he was its first keeper, Libby Island and Little River Light in Cutler, all in Maine. He retired while still at Little River Light and returned to Lubec where he later died from a heart attack.

Participation in the Lighthouse Service did not end here. Four of Fred's sons became involved. Two of them, John and William, served only on temporary duty at various stations, but Alonzo, who I have already mentioned, and Fred joined as regular, full-time civil servants.

Fred became a machinist and visited many lighthouses to work on the [various] apparatus that wound the bell, blew the foghorn and rotated the light. He often listened to the complaints of the keepers concerning the job of polishing the brass, only to have the fog roll in and have to do it all over again, which inspired Fred to write the well-known poem – *Brasswork.* It seemed that almost everything was made of brass: tools, parts of the lens, bell, dust pan, oil cans – all had to shine so that when the inspector came he would give them a good report.



Alonzo Morong attending the Fort Popham fog bell striking machine. Photo courtesy of the author.

In the early years, lighthouse keepers not only had to meet the challenge of storms and rough seas, they had to keep their stations in tip-top shape at all times. Winter meant getting the coal up from the dock where the lighthouse tender would leave it, into the coal bin in the basement. Both the furnace and the kitchen stove burned coal, which meant [there were] ashes to take care of and a stove to polish. Spring meant outside painting, not only to the house, but also the shed, oil and boat houses, and any other buildings on the property. The outhouse was generally located in one end of the shed. A cistern in the basement was filled with rainwater that came from the gutters along the roof of the house and these had to be kept clean. Most families had gardens and would put up vegetables and fruit in jars and store them on shelves in the basement for winter consumption. Trips to stores were few and far between.

Keepers on the mainland or nearby island lights could go ashore [and go to town] for a few hours in the daytime if it wasn't foggy. Sometimes the husband would go while his wife remained at the lighthouse, in case the weather changed quickly, and the foghorn or bell would have to be put in operation.

Lighthouse keepers were always faithful to their duties and had many experiences, some pleasant and others dangerous. Most of them had families and some of the children followed in their footsteps.

Alonzo Morong had three sons and a daughter. Two of the sons, Ralph and George, substituted on lighthouses occasionally, but the youngest, Clifton (my husband) joined the U.S. Coast Guard in January 1935 and reported to his first station at Popham Beach on the day that his father was taken to the Bath hospital. In the early years that Clif served in the Coast Guard, we substituted on quite a few lighthouses. These included: Doubling Point Range Lights, Perkins Island, Squirrel Point on the Kennebec River, Ram Island, Burnt Island, the Cuckolds and Two Bush [all] near Boothbay Harbor.



The Goose Rocks Lighthouse located in the Deer Island Thorofare between Vinalhaven and North Haven Islands in Penobscot Bay, Maine. Photograph by Sandra Shanklin.

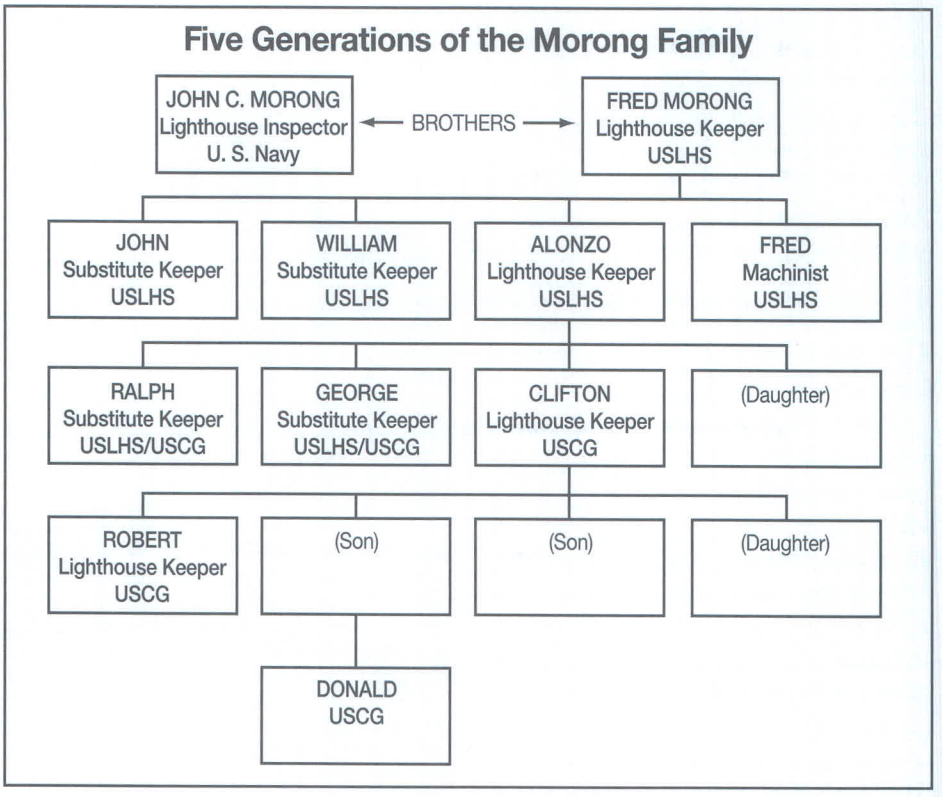
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After the Coast Guard absorbed the Lighthouse Service we were assigned a permanent station. On September 1, 1945 our desire for lighthouse duty was granted and we were transferred from Popham Beach to Race Point Light at the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. This light had its disadvantages. Located out in the sand dunes, we had to use a wide-tired jeep for transportation, and had no electricity. We lived in one side of a double house with another Coast Guardsman. The head keeper, who had been there for a while and was still a civilian, lived in a single house nearby. Getting our two boys back and forth to school in Provincetown was a chore. When we found out that there was a vacancy at Two Lights, Cape Elizabeth, Clif applied for it. Much to our joy, a transfer came through and we left Race Point the first of January 1946. At first we lived in the house that Clif was born in – next to the tower that was no longer in use. However, we later moved to what used to be called the head keeper's house that was connected to the tower that was in operation. Just before retirement we were stationed at Portland Head Light for a month.

As in the case of Alonzo Morong, we had three sons and a daughter. However, our oldest son, Robert, was the only one who followed the Morong tradition by going to sea. He joined the U.S. Coast Guard in 1953 and, like his father, was stationed at Popham Beach and Two Lights. He also substituted on Perkins Island and Doubling Point (as we did) and later saw duty on the Nantucket Lightship and various other Coast Guard vessels and stations. He retired as a Chief Warrant Officer in 1979 after 26 years of service. His two sons did not follow in his footsteps.

One of our grandsons, Donald, enlisted in the Coast Guard, but only stayed a short time. Thus ended the immediate Morong family tradition of five consecutive generations going to sea.

Author Shirley Morong is the wife of Keeper Clifton Morong.





The east tower and dwelling of the twin tower Cape Elizabeth Light Station. The keeper's house was altered drastically in recent years. Photo by Sandra Shanklin 1987.



Herb Kynor photo.

Brasswork or The Lighthouse Keeper's Lament

by Fred Morong

Oh what is the bane of a lightkeeper's life
That causes him worry, struggle and strife,
That makes him use cuss words, and beat at his wife?
It's Brasswork.

What makes him look ghastly consumptive and thin,
What robs him of health, of vigor and vim,
And cause despair and drives him to sin?
It's Brasswork.

The devil himself could never invent,
A material causing more world wide lament,
And in Uncle Sam's service about ninety per cent,
Is Brasswork.

The lamp in the tower, reflector and shade,
The tools and accessories pass in parade
As a matter of fact the whole outfit is made
Of Brasswork.

The oil containers I polish until,
My poor back is broken, aching; and still
Each gallon and quart, each pint and each gill
Is Brasswork.

I lay down to slumber all weary and sore,
I walk in my sleep, I awake with a snore
And I'm shining the knob on my bedchamber door.
That's Brasswork.

From pillar to post, rags and polish I tote
I'm never without them, for you will please note
That even the buttons I wear on my coat
Are Brasswork.

The machinery clockwork, and fog-signal bell
The coal hods, the dustpans, the pump in the well
Now I'll leave it to you mates, if this isn't—well
Brasswork.

I dig, scrub and polish, and work with a might,
And just when I get it all shining and bright,
In comes the fog like a thief in the night:
Good-by Brasswork.

I start the next day and when noontime draws near
A boatload of Summer visitors appear,
For no other purpose, than to smooch and besmear
My Brasswork.

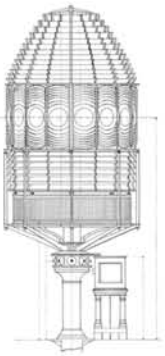
So it goes all the Summer, and along in the Fall,
Comes the district machinist to overhaul
And rub dirty and greasy paws over all
My Brasswork.

And again in the Spring, if perchance it may be,
An efficiency star is awarded to me
I open the package and what do I see?
More Brasswork.

Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud,
In the short span of life that he is allowed
If all the lining in every dark cloud
Is Brasswork?

And when I have polished until I am cold
And I'm taken aloft to the Heavenly fold
Will my harp and my crown be made of pure gold?
No, Brasswork.

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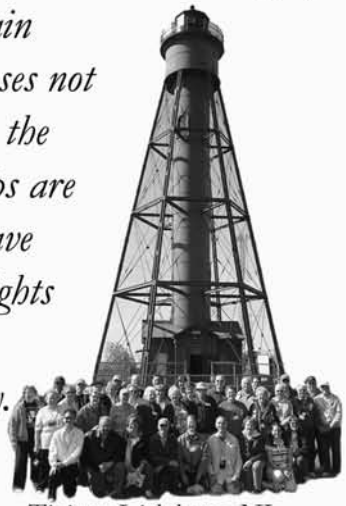
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