

White River Lighthouse

By Barbara Bedau Brow



Lighthouse with wooden channel walls in disrepair

While the White River Light Station now looks over a busy channel of pleasure boats, recreation was not the reason the Light Station or the channel came into being. The reason was due to economics.

The thriving lumber industry in the mid-1800s needed a better, more direct outlet from White Lake into Lake Michigan than the meandering water access north of the current channel. Mill owners such as Charles Mears and Giles Slocum were instrumental in requesting the building of a new channel. Finally in 1866, Congress appropriated \$67,000 for the project. The lands for the light station and channel were obtained by deeds from Charles and Carrie Mears and the William Ferry Estate. Nearly twenty years after the first efforts, the channel was finally completed, along with a new beacon light on the south pier.

In 1871, 635 vessels cleared the harbor at White River carrying over 61,000 tons of cargo, including 44,835,000 feet of lumber, 32,340,000 shingles, 61,600 railroad ties, and 450 bushels of potatoes. Lumber from the area's numerous sawmills was obviously the primary export, and would only increase as Chicago had to rebuild following its Great Fire of 1871.

In 1872, the beacon light was on a 27-foot wooden tower with a range of 11 miles. A local man and former seaman, William Robinson, was hired as the first lightkeeper.

After repeated requests for three years, the U.S. Government appropriated \$8,300 for a keeper's dwelling and a tower. Construction of the lighthouse at the White Lake Channel began on August 28, 1875. Using a "Norman Gothic" design that has been used on Chambers Island, Wisconsin, it would also be used later at several other Great Lakes locations, including Eagle Bluff, McGulpin Point, Eagle Harbor, St. Clair Flats Canal, Passage Island, Sand Island and Squaw Island. E. Rhodes, a construction foreman for

the Lighthouse Service, oversaw the work, but Keeper William Robinson pitched in and did some of the masonry work himself.



The lighthouse consists of a tower set in the northwest corner of a gabled-roof, one-and-one-half-story structure. Limestone was used for the foundation and yellow brick for the superstructure. Though square at the base, the tower's corners are beveled mid-way up to create an octagonal form. Work on the lighthouse wrapped up on December 28, 1875.

In April 1876, Mr. Crump, the district lampist, arrived to install a fourth-order Fresnel lens in the lantern room. On May 13, 1876, Keeper Robinson activated the new light whose characteristic was a fixed white light, varied every minute by a red flash. The period of the flash was reduced to forty seconds on December 12, 1892, and then in 1902 the light's characteristic was changed to alternate red and white flashes, with twenty seconds between each flash.

A brick oil house with a metal roof and door was added to the station in 1902, and in 1917, the color of the pierhead tower was changed from white to red.

While the pierhead light was electrified in 1917, the main light and dwelling did not have electricity until 1924, when electrical power finally made its way around the south side of the White Lake Channel.

In 1919, eighty-seven year old Keeper Robinson was told that he had to retire and let William Bush, his grandson who had been serving as his assistant since 1911, take charge of the light. But the feisty octogenarian wasn't going to leave the lighthouse he had called home for over forty years. As the

inevitable became clear, Keeper Robinson became terribly depressed, and it seemed he willed himself to die before he had to leave. He died on April 2, 1919. His wife Sarah had died October 20, 1891. They are both buried in the Mouth Cemetery.



Lighthouse keeper William Robinson and his wife Sarah

In February 1947, the light was automated and the U.S. Coast Guard, who had jurisdiction over both the Lighthouse and the Coast Guard Station, ordered the lighthouse closed.

William E. Bush had succeeded his grandfather as Lighthouse Keeper from 1919-1943. U.S. Coast Guardsman Leo Wuori (along with his wife Frances) took over from 1943-1948; U.S. Coast Guardsman Guy L. Gordon from 1945-1947; Civilian Frances Wuori Johnson from 1949-1954; U.S. Coast Guardsman Andrew Newald from 1954-1959.

The White River Lighthouse was deactivated in 1960 and turned over to the General Services Administration. Fruitland Township expressed an interest in the property in 1965, and the government agreed to sell it for \$6,250, half of its appraised value. The Sylvan Beach Association, comprised of nearby vacation property owners, raised the necessary funds.

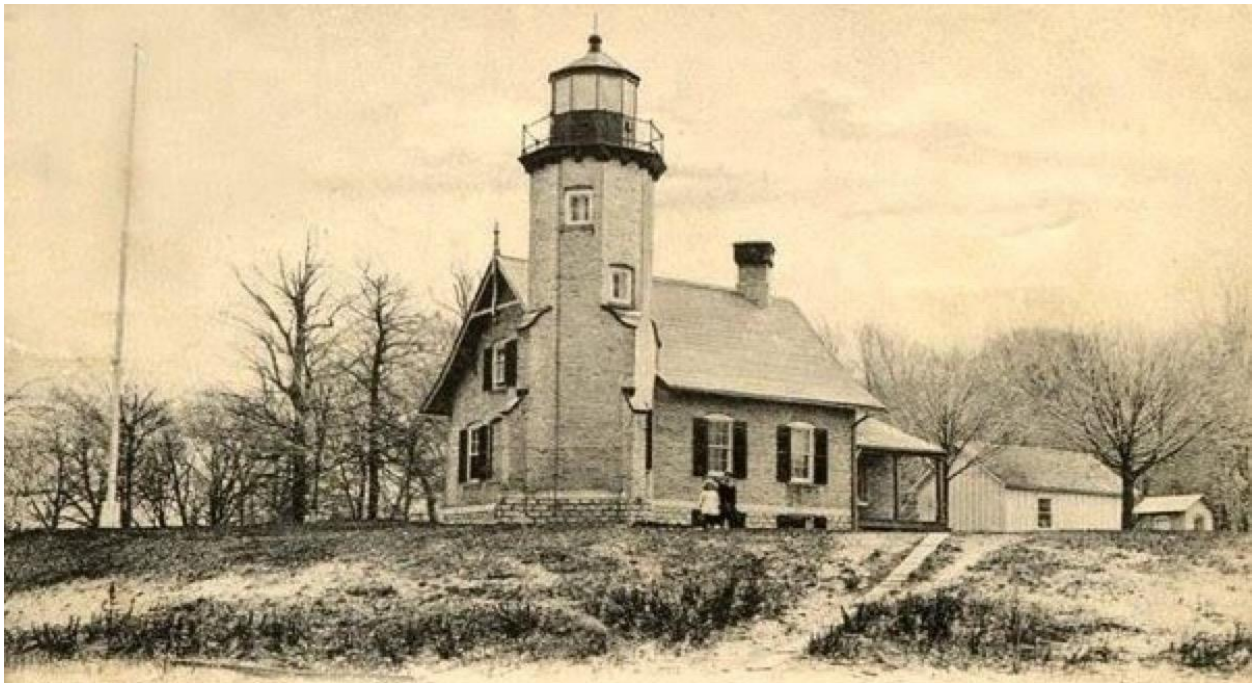
In 1970 the property was opened as a museum. A series of curators were hired over the years to see to the day-to-day operations of the museum and gift shop. Those curators included:

R. C. "Pete" Caesar from 1969-1975; Richard & Vicki Gebhart from 1976-1978; John & Ruth Klunder in 1979; Ken Dzieszinski and his wife Karen McDonnell came in 1983. Following their divorce, Karen continued as the Lighthouse Curator until 2012.

In 2012, the board of Sable Point Lighthouse Keepers Association signed an agreement with Fruitland Township to operate the gift shop and museum at the White River Light Station.



Capt Robinson and his son Thomas, standing on the right in the pic, with some visiting friends. Picture ca1925.



ca1906



Light House, White Lake, Mich., P. O. Montague, Mich.

ca1910 – Capsized boat is a Coast Guard training vessel



ca1928-1940



Sometime between 1936 & 1998







ca2019