

Au Sable Light Station

Wild Beauty on the Lake Superior Shore

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior



What's In A Name?

The Au Sable Light Station was originally called the Big Sable Light Station. The name was changed in May 1910 to conform to its geographic location on Lake Superior. The term Au Sable is French for "with sand", presumably named by early European explorers.

Where Is Au Sable?

The Au Sable Light Station is located on Au Sable Point, originally called Point Aux Sables by the French, who named it for the nearby Grand Sable Dunes. The station is a 1.5 mile walk (one way) east of the lower Hurricane River Campground. The Hurricane River Campground is 12 miles west of Grand Marais, Michigan, on Alger County H-58.

A Bit of History

At least as early as 1622, when Pierre Esprit Radisson called it "most dangerous when there is any storms," Au Sable Point was recognized as a hazard to Lake Superior mariners. When lake traffic began to boom in the middle of the nineteenth century with the opening of the Soo Canal (1855), the reef at Au Sable Point was particularly dangerous. Unless warned off, vessels could become victim to this reef of Jacobsville Sandstone which, in some places, lies only a few feet below the surface.



Au Sable - 1920

Besides the offshore sandstone reef, the region was infamous for thick fog caused by the interaction of cool lake air with warmer currents rising from the Grand Sable Dunes. Mariners and their allies of the press began to urge that a station be built between Grand Island and Whitefish Point. The Marquette Mining Journal, for example, said on July 29, 1871, that "in all navigation of Lake Superior, there is none more dreaded by the mariner than that from Whitefish Point to Grand Island." The Eleventh Lighthouse District agreed with such local sentiment, noting in its 1871 annual report that a light was more of a necessity at Au Sable Point than at any other unprotected location in the district.

The habits of Lake Superior navigators made the problem more pressing. After leaving the St. Mary's River and rounding Whitefish Point, it was common for vessels to travel along the south shore of the lake within sight of land. This was especially common for ships heading for Marquette or Munising, but other captains also followed the route because it was the shortest available. Au Sable Point and the Pictured Rocks area proved to be a natural "ship trap" when vessels were blown onto the lee shore by a strong north wind or lost their way in snow or fog.

Congress took action in 1872, appropriating \$40,000 to build a lighthouse at Au Sable Point. The State of Michigan sold 326 acres of land to the federal government for the light station at a cost of \$407. Work began the follow-

ing year and on August 19, 1874, the light went into operation. As was common in the U.S. Light House Service, the station at Au Sable was not of a unique design; in fact, it is of the same plan as the Outer Island Light built in 1874 in the Apostle Islands of Wisconsin.

The light tower is 86 feet high measured from its base to the ventilator ball of the lantern. At the tower base, the walls are over 4 feet thick with the outer walls of 20 inches, inner walls of 12 inches, and an air space of 19 inches. The wall at the lower lantern room is over 3 feet thick. The tower foundation consists of rubble masonry 23 feet below the surface on bedrock.

The light originally burned lard oil, but later changed to kerosene, a more efficient fuel. The flickering kerosene flame of the Au Sable Station was augmented to 6,750 candlepower after being reflected by a 90 degree mirror through a 270 degree third order Fresnel (pronounced fray-nell) lens, manufactured by L. Sautter & Co. of Paris, France. The fixed white light was visible 17 miles out on the lake.

The first major improvement at the station was added in 1897 when the hand-cranked foghorn was replaced by a steam-powered fog signal. This required construction of a new crib and seawall and the installation of piping to carry lake water to operate the signal. However, the first one installed did not work, and it was another year before a replacement was obtained and put into operation, ending the duty of the lighthouse keeper to start cranking when the fog rolled in.

Extensive alterations and additions were made to the light station in 1909. Among these changes were additions to dwelling attached to the tower. It was originally designed as a single dwelling, but was converted to a double dwelling when an assistant keeper was assigned. The new head keepers dwelling, located just to the west of the light tower, was constructed in 1909 at the same time the old dwelling was remodeled.

The Life of a Keeper

It was a lonely life for the men and their families assigned to tend the light. The nearest village, Grand Marais, was 12 miles to the east, connected by a narrow path at the base of the dunes that was impassable during rough weather. Supplies and station personnel normally came by boat, landing at a small pier at the base of the foghorn building. In winter, snowshoes, sleds, and dog teams were frequently used.



Gus Gigandet

The light keepers kept journals recording daily events. Such diaries provide a fascinating glimpse into the history of this isolated station, which is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

On December 8, 1876, Napoleon Beedon, who had taken over the job that year from the first lighthouse keeper, Casper Kuhn, described the inclement weather. A "light breeze" from the south, he wrote, had been replaced at 5 p.m. by a "frightful storm" that "blew down 50 trees or more close by the lighthouse" and caused him to fear that "the lighthouse and tower would blow down as they shook like a leaf the wind was N.H. West snowing and feesint it was the worst storm I ever saw on Lake Superior."

Frederick Boesler, Sr., who took over from Beedon in

1879, noted on September 25, 1883, that the weather was "clear, blowing hard from the northwest," as the stranded steamer Mary Jarecki, which had been on the beach since July 4, was pounded to pieces before his eyes.

Gus Gigandet arrived on May 21, 1884, with his wife and an assistant and noted in the journal, "I feel contented and satisfied with the station." So he must have been, for he stuck it out at the lonely post for a dozen years, surmounting the worst weather Lake Superior had to offer. On November 5, 1886, for instance, he recorded "one of the heaviest gales from the northwest with a blinding snowstorm I have ever experienced" and the following July 7 the wind blew so violently that it caused "the tower to shake hard."

But life at the station was not all lonely monotony. Hunting and fishing were popular pastimes. The journal notes that on November 4, 1901, the lighthouse keeper's assistant killed a bear so large that it required two men to drag the animal back to the station. The previous summer, the keeper bragged in the journal, he had caught 144 brook trout. And at least one assistant, William Laviate, whiled away the dull days of winter by taking a job in a local lumber camp. In 1881, Keeper Boesler noted that he had "grafted 24 fruit trees, 12 of cherry and 12 of apples."

The journals provided a comprehensive record of life at the station, recording news of the keepers' families, the arrival of lighthouse tenders, the passage of lake vessels, daily chores, visitors, now and then the excitement that came when, despite the light and the foghorn, a vessel wound up on the reef.

A 1909 account of the station reads:

"The main point on which the light house stands has been cleared of timber for a quarter mile each way from the station to facilitate the visibility of the light to the E'd and W'd. This clearing has grown up to second growth -- small stuff... Access is by boat or by wagon road to within 3 miles of station, thence by foot trail; this trail is cleared out so that a team without load can get to the light station."



Sidewalk and landscape work

Over the years, numerous additions and improvements were made to the station. A brick oil house was added in 1895, the steam-powered fog whistle two years later, improved boat ways in 1901, a new seawall in 1906, a new residence for the keeper in 1909 and a new diaphone fog signal in 1928. In 1905, a rough road connecting the station to the Logslide was built, allowing eventual access to the public highway.

Life at the station gradually changed as the 20th Century progressed. In 1943, a good road was built to the station from the west, making it accessible by cars or trucks.

The quarters were modernized and in 1945, the U.S. Coast Guard took over, replacing the civilian keepers. In 1958 the Coast Guard converted the light station to an automatic, unattended light, and discontinued the fog signal. The third order lens was removed from the lantern in 1972 and replaced by a much smaller 300mm acrylic lens. The original lens was transferred to the National Park Service, and it is once again at the Au Sable Light Station. In January 1968, the Au Sable Light Station was transferred to the National Park Service. The Coast Guard continues to maintain the beacon and solar panel which charges the storage battery.



Summer guided lighthouse tours

Restoring Au Sable Light Station

Restoration efforts at the station began in earnest in 1988 with initial historic investigations of the double keeper's quarters and light tower. These activities included paint and plaster analysis, researching historic room sizes and uses, and shingle detail. Projects included fabrication and installation of missing interior wood trim, restoring the walnut balustrade and repairing the plaster walls and ceilings.

Since 1988, several of the structures have been painted, both inside and out, doors, windows and screens have been restored, and the front porch on the double keepers dwelling was reconstructed to the 1909-1910 period. In 1988 an Historic American Buildings Survey crew measured the buildings which led to detailed structural drawings.

During the summer of 1992, the upper light tower exterior was painted the historic black color and the lens room was restored. In 1993 the interior of the tower was painted and work in the lens room was completed. In 1996 the park celebrated the first annual Au Sable Day as the magnificent Fresnel lens was returned to the light station lens room after an absence of many years. In 1999 a large photovoltaic system was installed at the station to power the museum, information station and volunteer quarters.

In recent years volunteers and Lakeshore work crews have implemented recommendations prescribed in the Au Sable Cultural Landscape Plan. Brush and trees were removed from the area that would have been historically kept clear of vegetation to keep the light visible and to reduce the hazard of fire. Crews have rehabilitated dune blowouts and stairs to the beach as well as the extensive sidewalk system. Landscape work will continue to maintain the historic setting.

Current Work

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore has completed restoration of the 1910 single keepers quarters as a seasonal volunteer residence and information station and museum. The station is open Memorial Day to Labor Day for guided tours or for groups by appointment. The first floor of the assistant keepers quarters is being refurnished through donations and purchase, reflecting the time when Keeper John and his wife Martha Brooks lived at Au Sable. If you have a 1910 era piece that might be appropriate for a remote light station, please contact: Chief of Heritage Education Gregg Bruff at: gregg_bruff@nps.gov.