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Sea Grant forms a unique partnership with public and private sectors to combine research, education, and technology transfer for service to the public. Sea Grant provides a national network for universities to meet changing environmental and economic needs in our coastal, oceans and Great Lakes regions.

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# South Bass Island Lighthouse

## Site History

South Bass Island is located in the Bass Island region in the western basin of Lake Erie. Lake Erie was the last of the Great Lakes to be explored by Europeans during the 1600s. French explorer, René de la Salle, landed on Middle Bass Island in 1679 and Louis Jolliet, the French-Canadian trader and explorer, traversed the area in 1699. At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the area became part of the Connecticut Reserve. By 1795, the Bass Islands were transferred to the Connecticut Land Company and parcels were offered for sale.

Pierpont Edwards purchased South Bass, Middle Bass, Green, Sugar, Ballast, Gibraltar, and Starve Islands for \$26,087 in 1807. After the War of 1812 Edwards' representatives quickly settled and began developing South Bass Island. Timber, limestone, and cordwood proved valuable resources and were transported to the mainland to be sold. Known as the South Passage, this navigational route (between Marblehead, Kelleys, and South Bass) quickly became crowded with commercial boat traffic.

On August 22, 1854, the Edwards family sold the land to José de Rivera Saint Jurgo for \$44,000. He cultivated the land for wine production. As the reputation of the local wines grew, so did the number of visitors. An estimated 15,000 people visited South Bass Island in 1859. The height of the island's popularity was reached in the 1890s and was marked by the opening of the Hotel Victory in 1892. Following that event, the South Passage became increasingly congested with public passenger and private leisure vessels.

Soon thereafter, problems associated with increased boat traffic in the South Passage were brought to the attention of the U.S. Lighthouse Board. Consequently, on February 15, 1893 the board approved construction of a lighthouse and appropriated \$8,000 for the project. The federal government purchased the lighthouse site (on the extreme southwest shore of the island) from Mary and Alfred Parker on May 18, 1895.



South Bass Island Lighthouse, circa 1904.

Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, Perry's Victory Collection

## Lighthouse History

**1679**

French explorer René de la Salle lands on Middle Bass Island

**1776**

Revolutionary War Ends

**1807**

Pierpont Edwards purchases South Bass Island and several other islands

**1854**

The Edwards family sells South Bass Island to José de Rivera Saint Jurgó; land cultivated for wine production

**1892**

Hotel Victory built on South Bass Island; local waters become congested with boat traffic

**1893**

Lighthouse board approves construction of lighthouse

**1895**

Federal government purchases land for lighthouse site

**1897**

Lighthouse completed; Harry Riley appointed as first lighthouse keeper

**1925**

South Bass Island keeper put in charge of Green Island & Ballast Island lighthouses

**1947**

Paul Prochnow appointed as the last lighthouse keeper

**1962**

Prochnow retires; automated steel tower installed

**1967**

Lighthouse property deeded to The Ohio State University

**1997**

100 Year Anniversary and The Ohio State University ownership is finalized

## Construction

Lighthouse construction was under the direction of the U.S. Engineering Department and was supervised by J.P. Bumpus of Albton, N.Y., the superintendent of the Tenth Lighthouse District. (Historical documents list various individual contractors involved in the construction project. The brick contract was awarded to J.E. Lonkey; doors and windows to the Geo R. Butler and Company; plumbing to Brohl and Appell; and a furnace was provided by the Howard Furnace Company.) The lime kiln dock, located a short distance from the construction site, was reconstructed to facilitate the arrival of materials. The lighthouse was completed in 1897.

In contrast to the stereotypical lighthouse with a huge tower and small detached keepers quarters, South Bass Island Lighthouse contained two and one half stories of living space, a full basement, and an attached tower. The Queen Anne style home had many modern amenities including a laundry room, kitchen range, hot water reservoir, furnace, cistern, and hydraulic force pump. The 60-foot tower was fitted with a fourth-order \$1,500 Fresnel lens (pronounced "fray-nel"). The lighthouse which contained no fog signal operated daily from early March through late December.

## Automation and Obsolescence

During the years the South Bass Island lighthouse operated, the technology associated with navigational systems advanced greatly. In 1962, as lighthouse keeper Prochnow neared retirement (see "Keepers" section on page 3), the U.S. Coast Guard decided to automate the lighthouse. A steel tower with an electronic light was built on the property. With the need for a keeper eliminated, the house was put up for rent. A winning bid of \$66.50 per month by Harry R. Johnson of Williston, Ohio enabled him, his wife, and their seven children to rent the lighthouse for a five-year period.

## The Ohio State University Acquires the Lighthouse

Lighthouse ownership was transferred from the Coast Guard to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Division of Surplus Property in 1967. Noting the many research advantages of the site and its close proximity to The Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory (on Gibraltar Island), Lab Director L.S. Putnam prepared a proposal to Ohio State's Board of Trustees. The Trustees agreed that Ohio State would accept care of the property and a formal application to obtain the property was submitted on June 23, 1967 to the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. In October 1967, the property was transferred to Ohio State by a 30-year Quit Claim Deed. The deed ended in 1997 when permanent ownership was transferred to the University (the Coast Guard maintains ownership of the tower).

In 1983 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration installed a \$50,000 meteorological station enabling satellite transmission of weather statistics to the National Weather Service.

## Public Access And Preservation

Although the lighthouse grounds are not open to the public, it is visible while approaching the island on either the Miller Ferry, which travels from Catawba Point to South Bass Island (for the Miller Ferry schedule call 800.500.2421), or the Jet Express ferry, which travels from Port Clinton to South Bass Island (for the Jet Express schedule call 800.245.1538).

Staff members and friends of The Ohio State University, Stone Laboratory, and Ohio Sea Grant host an annual open house with tours of the grounds and tower. For more information contact the Ohio Sea Grant and Stone Lab office (number and address are listed on the back).

The National Register of Historic Places recognized the lighthouse as an Historic Property on April 5, 1990. (Light Stations of Ohio MPS 90000473.)



Automated light tower.

Nancy Cruickshank



South Bass Island Lighthouse located on southwest end of the island, circa 1904.

Photo courtesy of the National Archives, Still Picture Branch

# Keepers of the Light

*The accuracy and completeness of records, about the individuals who operated lighthouses, vary greatly. Official U.S. Coast Guard keepers logs are indexed and housed by the National Archives in Washington, DC. Recorded by individual lighthouse keepers, the log contents depended on the keepers' writing or record-keeping abilities. For example, keepers without an interest in recording the details of their day-to-day activities may have only recorded required weather related data and no other anecdotal information. Unfortunately, many of the South Bass logs were burned while stored in the old Commerce Building in Washington. Newspaper articles also provided some biographical information included here.*



**Harry H. Riley** was the first light keeper. A native of New York and a past resident of Detroit, Michigan, Riley and his wife were transferred to the lighthouse on July 10, 1897. He earned a yearly salary of \$560. Riley's earlier experience included a three-year enlistment with the Navy, three years as wheelman on the *U.S. Haze* (a lighthouse tender), and an unknown number of years as Second Mate also on the *U.S. Haze*. (A lighthouse "tender" was a boat or ship that brought supplies to lighthouse keepers.)

During Riley's term Samuel Anderson was hired as a lighthouse laborer on August 9, 1898. Just 22 days later Anderson committed suicide according to the Lighthouse Board. Anderson's earnings of \$17.25 for that brief period of employment were claimed for his burial expenses by the Put-in-Bay Justice of the Peace and Coroner William H. King. Local cemetery records do not include Anderson's name and it is unknown where he is buried. According to Lydia J. Ryall's 1907 *Ohio Magazine* article, Samuel Anderson may have fallen rather than jumped from the lighthouse property cliff. Ryall speculated that Anderson went crazy from fear of contracting smallpox during an 1898 South Bass Island smallpox quarantine. Anderson may be the ghost that allegedly resides at the South Bass Island Lighthouse.

Ryall further speculated that lighthouse keeper Riley was so distraught over the Anderson's death that he became mentally ill. Whatever the case may be, lighthouse correspondence notes that just two days after Anderson's demise Riley was arrested on September 2, 1898 at Sandusky, Ohio and charged "as an insane person." Subsequently, Riley was committed to an asylum in Toledo.

The Lighthouse Board placed both Mrs. Riley and an Otto Richey temporarily in charge of the lighthouse until her husband's condition could be properly evaluated. Riley was officially terminated on February 23, 1899 with a note from lighthouse inspector Hanford stating "Keeper Riley hopelessly insane." Ryall's conclusions about the possible connection between Riley's mental condition and Anderson's suicide likely will never be verified because Ohio law requires that only a direct descendent may request psychiatric facility records. Riley reportedly died in an asylum.

**Enoch W. Scribner** kept the lighthouse from April 1899 to August 1900. Unfortunately, only incomplete records of his watch exist.

**Colonel J. (Orlo) Mason** is believed to have served from September 1900 through April 1908. Afterwards he may have been transferred to the Ashtabula Lighthouse. During this period of time, the lighthouse tender, *U.S. Haze*, served the lighthouse.

**Charles B. Duggan** began service at South Bass in 1908. Born March 14, 1866 at Sackets Harbor, New York, Duggan had five years of experience as keeper at West Sister Island Lighthouse. Unfortunately, Duggan met an untimely death on April 29, 1925, when he fell 30 feet from a cliff on the west end of the island (death certificate #24762 Ottawa Co.). Duggan was buried at Maple Leaf Cemetery on South Bass Island. His son Lyle filled the keeper's post on a temporary basis from May to December of 1925 and earned between \$1200 and \$1440.

**Captain William L. Gordon**, a World War I veteran, became the next keeper of the South Bass Island Lighthouse. Correspondence from the Office of Superintendent of Lighthouses indicates that as an economy measure, Gordon was also placed in charge of the Green Island and Ballast Island Lighthouses and all area buoys. Gordon remained as keeper until his retirement in 1939. His salary range was between \$1320 and \$1560. The lighthouse tender, *U.S. Crocus*, served the lighthouse during Gordon's term.

**Frank LaRose** or LaRosie (as spelled on his gravestone) was keeper from the end of Gordon's service until 1941. Buried in Maple Leaf Cemetery on South Bass, his marker is inscribed, "1874-1957 U.S. Coast Guard."

**Robert Jones'** term followed LaRose, serving during World War II from 1941 to 1944. Jones is thought to have been a long-time member of the Lighthouse Service and may have served at other lighthouses including the one at Marblehead, Ohio.

**Kenneth Nester**, a Coast Guardsman served as the next keeper from 1944-1947.

**Paul F. Prochnow** was the final keeper of the South Bass Island Lighthouse, and served from 1947-1962. Prochnow, a German immigrant, had been a civilian Coast Guard employee since 1930. His experience included 17 years as First Assistant at the Sandusky Bay Light Rescue Station at the Cedar Point Lighthouse.

When Prochnow came to South Bass Island the light was powered by the huge iron weight on steel cables. However, during his watch it was converted to electricity. In addition to his regular job as keeper he was placed in charge of the two navigational aides on top of Perry's monument. On his retirement date of October 31, 1962, he had 32 years of combined service at light stations. In his off-season he and his family resided in Sandusky, Ohio.

Prochnow had an excellent reputation and was one of a very few civilian keepers to be given a "Distinguished Service" award by the U.S. Coast Guard. His citation "for noteworthy initiative and skill beyond normal job expectancy" was accompanied by a \$200 check.

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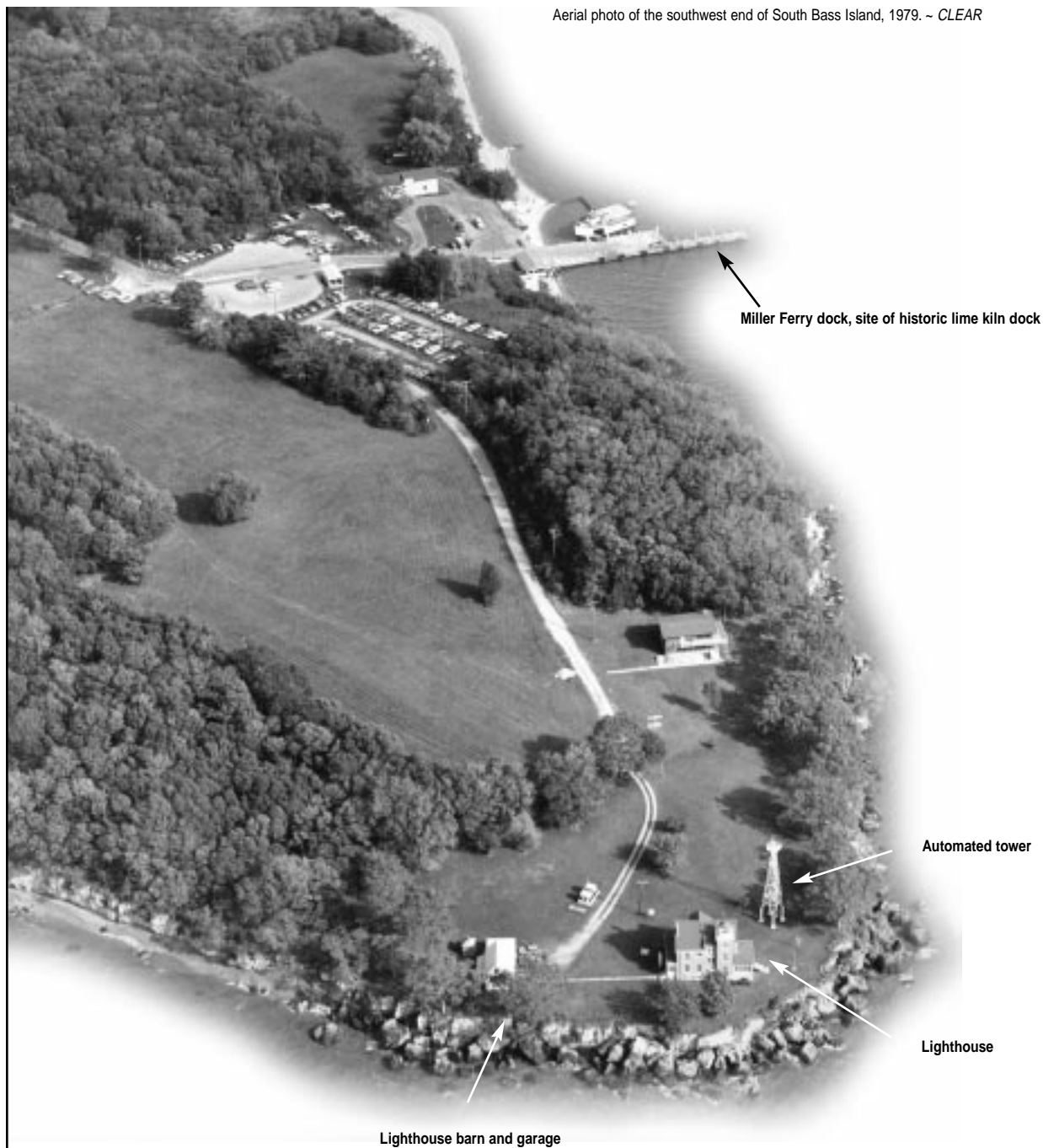
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Aerial photo of the southwest end of South Bass Island, 1979. ~ CLEAR



Prochnow and his wife in the only known historic interior photograph of the lighthouse.  
*U.S. Coast Guard*

## Your Help Is Needed

1. Do you have additional information about the South Bass Island Lighthouse?
2. Do you know anything more about individuals noted in this article?
3. Do you know the whereabouts of lighthouse artifacts that would be useful and interesting (such as keeper's logs, letters, uniforms, or badges)?
4. Do you have anything related that could be photocopied or photographed such as pictures or renderings of the grounds, interiors, or the keepers and their families?

If you have items to share please contact Nancy Cruickshank at [cruickshank.3@osu.edu](mailto:cruickshank.3@osu.edu) or at the address listed below.

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