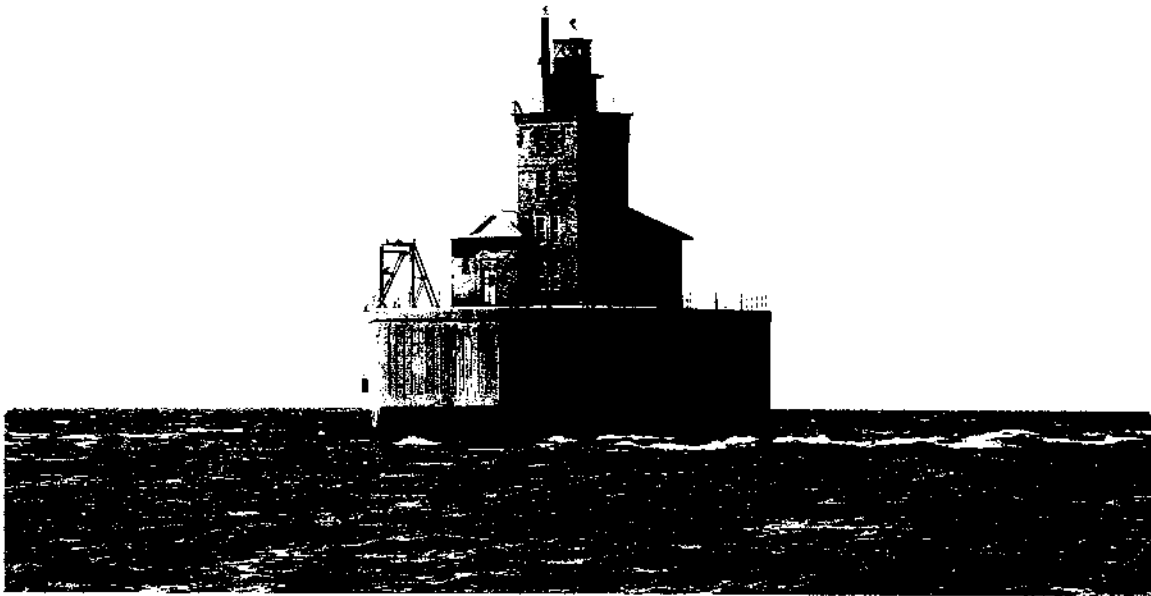


# Port Austin Reef Lighthouse



At the tip of Michigan's thumb, a few miles east of Port Austin, kayakers can view Turnip Rock , a picturesque sea stack, and Thumbnail Rock , a finger-like projection from a sandstone cliff on the mainland. While interesting to view on a calm day, these rock formations are part of a network of dangerous ledges and detached rocky spots that extend up to two-and-half-miles offshore between Pointe aux Barques Lighthouse and Port Austin Reef Lighthouse and have snagged numerous vessels.

The first settler of what is now known as Port Austin was Jonathan Bird, who arrived in 1837 and built a water-powered sawmill on a creek the following year. The area was called Bird's Creek for some time until Bird sold his mill to the lumber firm of Smith, Austin, and Dwight. In 1854, the village was renamed Dwightville, but then P.C. Austin, a partner in the number firm built a boat dock and put up a pole with a light to serve as a lighthouse the village was soon called Austin's dock followed by Austin's Port, and finally Port Austin

On March 3, 1873, Congress appropriated \$10,000 for a lighthouse at Port Austin and steps were taken that year to find an appropriate site for the structure. After difficulties were encountered in obtaining the preferred site on a point two miles northeast of Port Austin, an equally good site, 200 feet east of the first one, was selected in 1875 and a clear title was purchased. Plans for a brick lighthouse with an integrated tower were drawn



Open-frame lighthouse and fog signal buildings in 1891

up, and ground for it was about to be broken when Congress passed an act on July 31, 1876, with the following clause:

And the appropriation heretofore made for a light-house at Port Austin, Michigan, may be expended in commencing the construction of the proposed light house on the reef instead of on the shore, provided the total estimate for its completion shall not exceed eighty-five thousand dollars.

The Lighthouse Board had successfully convinced Congress that an offshore lighthouse would be better, and an additional \$75,000 for its construction was appropriated on March 3, 1877. An octagonal foundation crib was built at Tawas, where lumber was readily available, and on August 12, 1877, it was towed out to a prepared spot on Port Austin Reef, 1.3 miles

from the nearest point of land. Once in place, additional courses were added to the top of the crib, and its interior was filled with concrete.

A two-story, redbrick duplex was built for the lighthouse keepers at the site acquired in 1875 for a land-based lighthouse. The dwelling was finished in July 1878, along with the offshore crib. The impressive crib foundation was topped by a simple, square, pyramidal, open-framework tower whose light was situated fifty-seven feet above the pier and eighty feet above the lake. A fourth-order Henry-Lepaute lens was used to produce a fixed white light for one minute followed by five red flashes, spaced by twelve seconds. The lens was made up of five panels: two clear panels that each covered ninety degrees, and five flash panels on the opposite side of the lens, each covering thirty-six degrees. The light was displayed for the first time on the night of September 15, 1878, by Keeper Charles Kimball, who had been serving as first assistant at Pointe aux Barques Lighthouse. Assisting Kimball were his brother Alonzo and Aron G. Peer. The total cost for the lighthouse was \$80,923.

Two wood-frame buildings were erected on the pier in 1882 to house duplicate first-class steam sirens. Water to run the steam fog signals had to be pumped up from Lake Huron, and in 1887 a new force-pump was put in place for this purpose. In 1888, the method of supplying water to the fog signals was improved by installing a large wooden tank in each signal house and using a steam injector to pump water into it. Ten-inch steam whistles took the place of the sirens on June 30, 1894.

In 1899, the foundation pier was rebuilt and work commenced on a new combination lighthouse and fog signal for which the following description appeared in the *Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board*.

The structure consists of a square, buff-brick tower, four stories high, with a living room and kitchen. The focal plane of the light from the base of the tower is 54 feet.

The tower is connected to the fog-signal building. The first story of the tower and all of the fog-signal house show an inside finish of brick, and the second and third stories of the tower are plastered. The circular watch



Notice steam whistles and quoining on brick-faced crib

room of the tower is iron and is lined with oak ceiling. The trimmings, floors, and stairs of the tower are of oak. The main deck, circular watch room, lantern deck and lantern are all of cast iron.

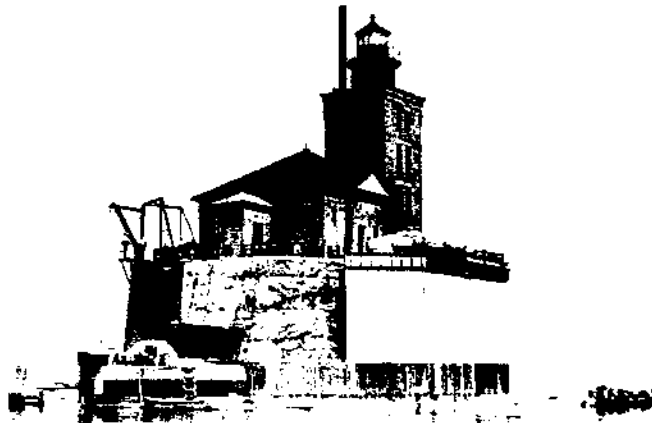
The sixteen-foot-square tower also contained three bedrooms for the keepers and was topped by a cylindrical lantern room with helical astragals. The light was established in the new tower on April 12, 1900, and the structure was finished later that summer.

Port Austin Reef Lighthouse was only in operation during the shipping season, which typically ran from April to December. In 1906, the keepers closed up the lighthouse on December 7 and signaled the lifesaving crew to retrieve them. The crew set off for the lighthouse but was unable to land on account of ice. While returning to the lifesaving station, ice punched a hole in the surfboat, and it was only with great difficulty that the crew safely reached shore. When conditions finally allowed the lifesaving crew to reach the lighthouse on December 11, the keepers were near starvation. The only food they had had for each of the previous three days was a single potato divided amongst them.

The Great Lakes Storm of 1913 washed numerous boats ashore and sank eight ships on Lake Huron, killing 199 people. Winds reached 90 mph and stirred up mountainous thirty-five-foot waves. One of the lucky freighters that survived the storm was the 500-foot *Howard M. Hannah, Jr.* up bound on Lake Huron with a load of coal. When roughly mid-lake on November 9, the freighter's helmsman noted that the forward motion of the ship had stopped. Without sufficient power to drive itself against the storm, the ship was at the mercy of the waves and was forced toward Saginaw Bay, where it grounded near Port Austin Reef Lighthouse and broke in two amidships. The ship's crew was rescued two days later by a lifesaving crew.

At the opening of navigation in 1915, the characteristic of Port Austin Reef Lighthouse was changed to a red flash every twelve seconds, and the intensity of the light was increased to 4,000 candlepower. The fog signal was converted to a "Type F" air diaphone in 1933, and that year it was noted that corners of the pier were up along with the metal plates at the base of the pier that were backed by the original timbers. The following year, the brick and timber facing of the octagonal pier was replaced with concrete attached to the original concrete interior with cinch anchors.

**Getting to the lighthouse could be problematic for its keepers. On July 30, 1896, Keeper Herbert Burrows was headed to the lighthouse in high seas when his boat, loaded with provisions, capsized, about a half mile from its destination, and sank. Through much exertion, Keeper Burrows managed to reach the lighthouse. The Pointe aux Barques Lifesaving Station was signaled and succeeded in salvaging the boat and took Keeper Burrows ashore**



**Replacement of brick facing with concrete in 1934**

**where he could receive proper care. In November 1941, Assistant Keeper Lauchling J. McDonald was en route to the lighthouse when his boat's engine failed. McDonald was helplessly tossed about by waves for about five hours before he finally managed to get the engine started and return to shore.**

**The tower's Fresnel lens was removed in 1941, two years after an electric submarine cable had been run to the lighthouse. In 1953, the lighthouse was fully automated and its last keepers withdrawn. A modern LED light was placed in the lantern room in 2011.**

**No longer needed, the keeper's duplex was put up for sale by the General Services Administration sold in June 1962 to Norman J. Dahm of Detroit for \$17,010. The dwelling remains standing and is located in the private Pointe aux Barques community.**

**Hearing of the Coast Guard's plan to demolish the lighthouse, Louis Shillinger formed the Port Austin Reef Light Association and obtained a five-year lease to the property in 1988.**

**In June of 2011, Port Austin Reef Lighthouse was declared excess to the needs of the United States Coast Guard and made available to eligible organizations under the provisions of the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. Qualified entities were given sixty days to submit a letter of interest and were required to obtain a conveyance from the State of Michigan for the bottomlands on which the lighthouse stands.**

**In July 2012, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced the lighthouse would be transferred to Port Austin Reef Light Association. The**

deed to the lighthouse passed from the Coast Guard to the association in February 2013, and a celebratory transfer ceremony was held on June 30, 2013 to honor all those who had worked so hard to preserve the "Castle in the Lake." If you can't make it out to the lighthouse, there is an informational display on its history at the Port Austin History Center, which opened in 2012.

**Head Keepers: Charles Kimball (1878 – 1883), Peter Knudsen (1883), Frank E. Kimball (1883 – 1894), Herbert N. Burrows (1894 – 1900), Daniel Carrigan (1900 – 1905), Arthur M. Carter (1905 – 1907), Otto Bufe (1907 – 1910), James Pottinger (1910 - 1921), Frank W. Marshall (1921 – at least 1940).**

## **References**

- 1. Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board, various years.**
- 2. Annual Report of the Commissioner of Lighthouses, various years.**
- 3. Annual Report of the Lake Carriers' Association, various years.**

**[www.lighthousefriends.com](http://www.lighthousefriends.com)**