



The 1861 DeTour Lighthouse no longer stands, having been replaced by the DeTour Reef Lighthouse. A light station was first established at this site in 1848.

Saving the DeTour Reef Lighthouse *It Takes a Village*

By Cynthia Johnson

Hillary Clinton made that comment, "It takes a village," but it is her backing of a more recent project that may end up helping to save the Detour Reef Light near DeTour Village, Michigan. Mrs. Clinton joined the National Trust for Historic Preservation to recently announce the list of America's Most Endangered Places. On that list was Michigan's historic lighthouses. Along with Michigan's 116 lighthouse sites and with mention of the DeTour Reef Light, the endangered list was recently featured on a documentary on the History Channel

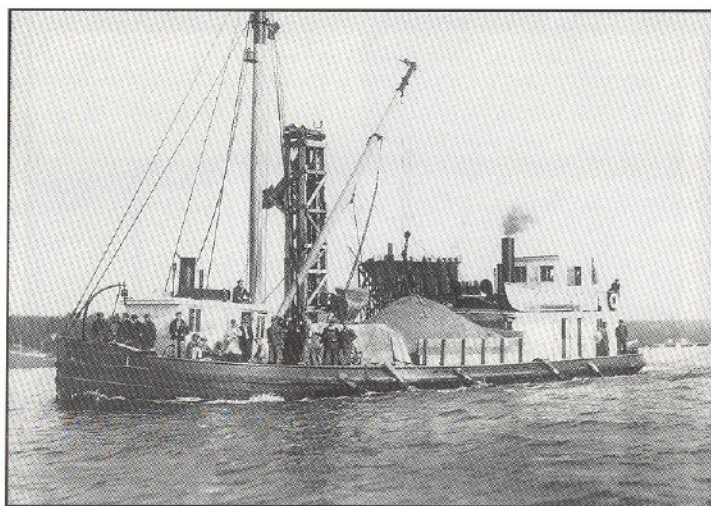


It appears that a small fleet of boats was used to bring out supplies and the base of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse. Photograph courtesy of the Dockside Cafe, DeTour, MI.

this past June. While placement on the list guarantees no financial support from the government or other sources, it does garner attention and support worldwide and brings hope for financial support for dedicated lighthouse proponents.

For it does take a village and a whole bunch of other people, too. Once you sort out the pile of people saving lighthouses in Michigan these days, you usually find Richard Moehl, president of the Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association (GLLKA). For those in lighthouse circles that are aware of him, they all know that the sun never sets on Richard Moehl's lighthouse saving efforts.

While Dick was fiercely fighting to bring the National Lighthouse Center and Museum to Mackinaw City, he also had his eye on DeTour Reef Light. Moehl joined Bob Jones, now president of the DeTour Reef Light Preservation Society (DRLPS) to visit the site after he found the DeTour Passage Museum had requested the historic Fresnel lens from the light. Moehl was sent to check out the request and recommended that the museum acquire the lens, which had been stored in an unlocked garage in Mackinaw City. (This, by the way, is a perfect example of what can happen to pieces of lighthouse history that must be saved.)

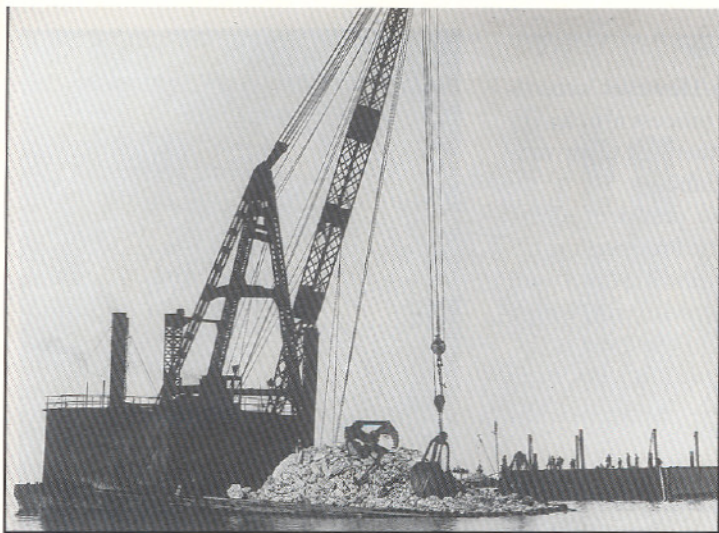


Construction boat bringing materials out to the site of where the lighthouse was being built. Photograph courtesy of the Dockside Cafe, DeTour, MI.

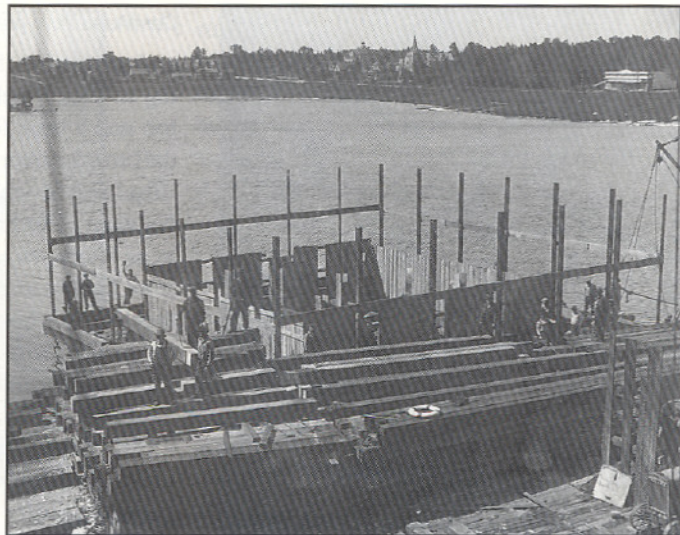
In this case, the lens was retrieved in 13 boxes and a crew from the Sault Ste. Marie Coast Guard station reassembled it. It was during this project in 1997, that Moehl was informed about the excessing of 15 off-shore lighthouses, one of them being the DeTour Reef Light.

Moehl then joined Bob Jones and Coast Guard Petty Officer Trish Tupa on a visit to the lighthouse. They found the structure to be sound, although it does need restoration, there were no leaks. The concrete, inside and out, is in excellent shape, and the skylights intact. Surprisingly enough, this is true of many lighthouses currently being excessed by the Coast Guard. They still stand, after decades of service and countless seasons of harsh Michigan weather, ready to light the way for those who would traverse Michigan's waters.

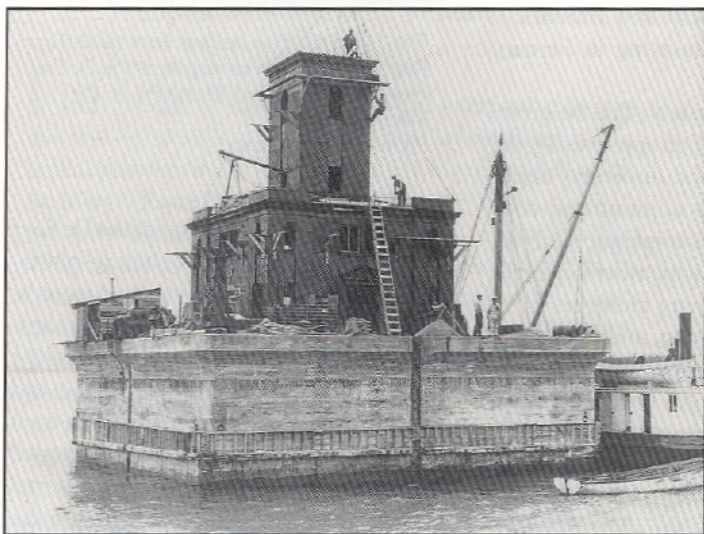
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Building of the crib of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse. Alfred Lemieux, the last surviving construction crew member, recalled that they mixed 600 sacks of concrete every day. 1930 photograph courtesy of Curtis Anderson.



Building of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse, MI, 1929. Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.



The DeTour Reef Light, MI appears to be about two thirds completed in this 1930 photograph, courtesy of the Dockside Cafe in DeTour Village, MI.

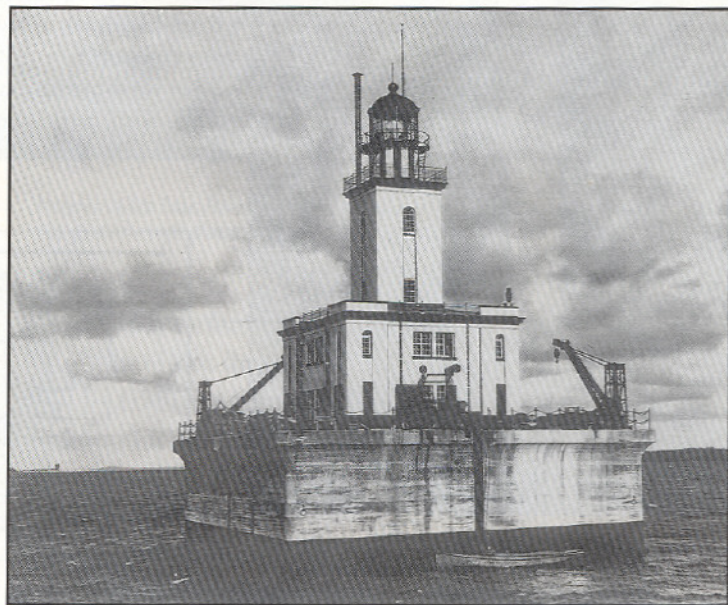


The DeTour Reef Lighthouse is almost finished in this 1931 photograph.

While navigational technology has been a boon to the Coast Guard, the shipping industry and pleasure boaters, it has become the enemy of historic lighthouses. To date, the Coast Guard has disposed of nearly 40 Michigan lighthouses and there are about 40 more headed for eventual disposal.

These surplus properties are simply declared obsolete as navigational aids, no longer necessary, and the Coast Guard just stops taking care of them, due to costs.

This is one time when we can be thankful for the slowness of the Government's mechanism. The lengthy process helps make non-profit, "friends groups" the most likely candidates for acquiring



The completed DeTour Reef Lighthouse, MI. Notice the small dory in the water at the base of the lighthouse. This would have been used by the keeper for trips to and from the mainland.



Alfred Lemieux, 88, the last living person who worked on the construction of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse. Construction began in 1929, and was completed in 1931. Lemieux recalled that the "lighthouse was built on the old Watson Coal Dock and then towed out." He recalled that one of the 35 man crew was killed during the dangerous construction work. Photo by Anne Sadler, courtesy of the Drummond Island Digest Newspaper.



Interior of DeTour Reef Light shows that lots of restoration work will be needed. Photo by Richard Moehl.

The blueprints for the DeTour Reef Lighthouse, showing just how difficult it was to build this lighthouse. Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

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and preserving the sites. However, according to Dick Moehl, this process also leaves too much time for weather and other vandals to take over the lighthouse.

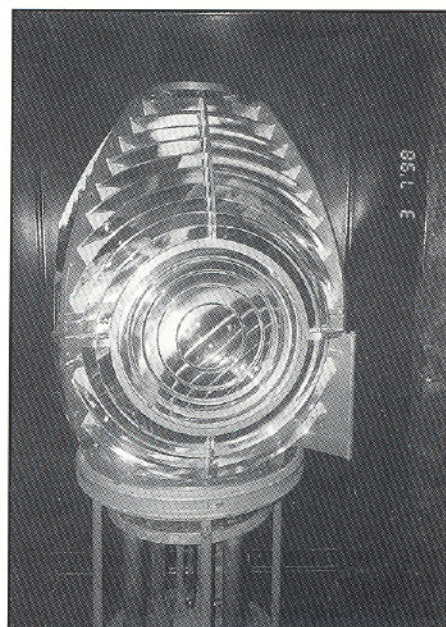
Richard Moehl is also president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, but as he said when receiving the Kaplan Award from Great Lakes Cruiser Magazine earlier this year for his efforts to bring the Lighthouse Center to Michigan, "it takes more than one person to make things like this happen."

This is where the village comes in. A group of people quickly formed from DeTour Village and nearby Drummond Island to form DRLPS to preserve the DeTour Reef Light. The five founding members, James M. Charles, Jeri Baron-Feltner, Robert N. Jones, Richard L. Moehl and Barbara J. Snider held their first meeting in January 1998.

Since then, they have established the group as a non-profit organization approved by the IRS, elected officers and directors, established seven operating committees, conducted a promotional campaign, sent out press releases, went on a membership drive that generated dues paying members in 11 states, Canada and Europe, and conducted their first serious fund raiser.

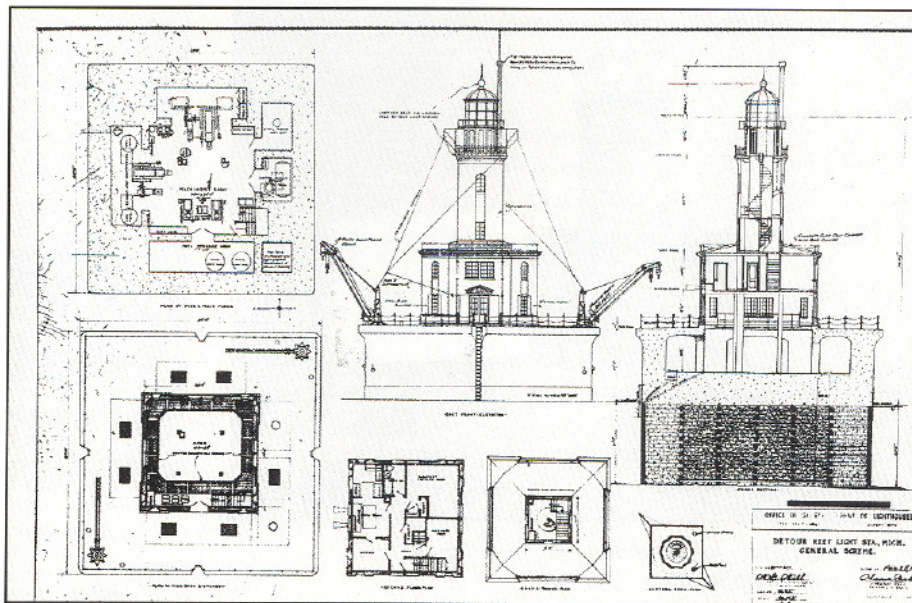
This is a serious village. Their objective; to develop a museum-quality travelling exhibit depicting the history of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse and the associated commercial development of the Lake Superior basin via ship traffic up the St. Mary's River.

The work to be performed in developing this display will include the research and



The 3 1/2 order Fresnel lens from the DeTour Reef Lighthouse is on display at the DeTour Passage Historical Museum in DeTour Village, Michigan. Photo by Bob Jones.

collection of documentation of the DeTour Reef's Light's history, including photographs, Coast Guard drawings and records, records from the National Archives, artifacts from the lighthouse and some of the famous vessels that made her passage, and personal collections and memorabilia from the heirs of those who served and supported the duties of the lighthouse. This material will be assimilated and interpreted in the process of developing the travelling display. The material collected will also support the writing and publication of a booklet about the lighthouse. The results of this





The crew that built the DeTour Reef Lighthouse stopped their work long enough to pose for this group photograph. Alfred Lemieux, the last surviving member of the work crew described them as "Men of Steel." Photograph courtesy of Curtis Anderson.

project will also be housed in a physical interpretive display that will be housed permanently in the DeTour Passage Historical Museum in DeTour Village, Michigan, located on the St. Mary's River in sight of the existing lighthouse.

A lofty aspiration indeed, but it helps if a couple of the villagers are as skilled as Jeri Baron-Feltner and her mate, Charles Feltner who are authors of *Shipwrecks of the Straits of Mackinac* and *Great Lakes Maritime History, Bibliography and sources of Information*, two valuable sources of Great Lakes history. Throw in a few other villagers like Barb Snider, owner of the Fogcutter Restaurant, where meetings and fundraisers have been held, and Denny Bailey, owner of the Drummond Island Yacht Club and head of the Drummond Island Tourist Association; Jim Charles, head of the DeTour Village Chamber of Commerce; and Bob Jones, Assistant Director of the Eastern Upper Peninsula Transportation Authority, and you can see why this village has what it takes.

The group, now with well over 300 members, has continued with its aggressive fund raising efforts to bring even more

support to the lighthouse. In addition to distributing brochures to increase membership, the group organized an auction and dinner buffet. They have also opened a gift shop next to the DeTour Ferry Dock, and the Fogcutter Restaurant is offering merchandise imprinted with an image of the DeTour Reef Light.

While the society has been extremely active in pursuing acquisition of the lighthouse and continuing fundraisers, the battle is still in progress. Actually acquiring ownership of a lighthouse requires several steps. The lighthouse must now go through layers of federal, state, and local governments and homeless agencies that have first dibs. One complication was the ground under the lighthouse was owned by the State of Michigan. The State finally agreed to let the group take ownership of the land.

Once ownership has been officially established, the real hard work will begin; the restoration of the lighthouse.



Interior of DeTour Reef Light shows what happens to a lighthouse after the government stops using it. Photograph by Richard Moehl.



The DeTour Reef Lighthouse, MI in Northern Lake Huron in Michigan's Upper Peninsula as it appears today. Photograph by Richard Moehl.

For further information on the DeTour Reef Light, or to join the group, you can contact them at DeTour Reef Light Preservation Society
115 S. Huron, P.O. Box 519,
DeTour Village, MI 49725-0519.
Ph # 906-297-8888 Fax # 906-297-8970
Internet address - www.merchantfind.com/reef/preservation.htm

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