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Abbie Burgess Grant



1839 - 1892

**Assistant Keeper Matinicus Rock Light 1854 - 1875
Keeper at Whitehead Light 1875 - 1890**

By CWO Al Primm

Matinicus Rock sits six miles offshore from Matinicus Island, one of the many rocky, desolate islands that dot the coast of Maine. Matinicus is all the more desolate because it is 15 miles to the nearest landfall, and 26 miles to the nearest significant human habitation, Rockland Maine.

It takes someone with a special kind of strength to endure the lonely life of tending lamps in a lighthouse, and Abbie Burgess was that special kind of person. There is not much material available concerning Abbie and the rest of the Burgess family, but what there is tells us that Abbie in particular, and her family, were very special. In the mid 1800's, appointments to light keeper were a part of the political process, and with the election of a Democratic president, Captain Burgess was tendered the position at Matinicus Rock Light.

With Captain Burgess' appointment in 1853, his wife thankful, Abbie, her brother Benjy and three younger sisters, Esther, Lydia and Mahala, moved out to the isolated and rocky island known as Matinicus Rock. Having grown up in nearby Rockland, the move presented a major change in their lives.

Her brother Benjy was frequently off on fishing trips, so it fell to Abbie to learn how to tend and operate the lights. Soon she became proficient enough to act as her father's assistant keeper.

Once a month, Captain Burgess had to go to Matinicus Island for supplies -- medicines for his sick wife, food for the family, consumable stores for the lights and feed for the chickens, an important part of their diet. Captain Burgess was comfortable leaving Abbie behind to handle the lights during the night or two while he was gone. She was a big strong girl, and as capable as any man at filling -- the lanterns, trimming the wicks, and cleaning the lenses of the lights in the two separate towers. And she didn't mind the responsibility.

In 1856, the first of two of the largest storms of the 19th century hit Matinicus Rock Light. About January 19, Captain Burgess had to make a trip for supplies. Soon after her father set sail in the small boat, the wind picked up. With each passing hour, it gained force, and soon huge waves, the tallest she had seen in her two years at Matinicus Light, were thundering against the towers and buildings. The days stretched into a week and still the storm raged - Hurricane force winds drove sleet, rain and snow before them. For Abbie, the one long work week became two ... three ... then four weeks. And every day of that terrible month, the wind and waves battered the wooden structures without relief. In addition to attending to her three sisters, and her sick mother, Abbie made the long climb up the steep tower stairs to light the lights. She stood her watches through the night from dusk, the hardships and discomforts of the lights for 37 of her 52 years.

In one of her final letters, Abbie expressed a desire to a friend:

"I think the time is not far distant when I shall climb these lighthouse stairs no more . . . I wonder if the care of the lighthouse will follow my soul after it has left this worn out body! If I ever have a gravestone, I would like it in the form of a lighthouse or beacon."

Half a century later, in 1945, New Englanders, who keep bright the memories of old lights and their keepers, made Abbie's wish come true. Over her grave in Spruce Head Cemetery, they placed a memorial in the form of an aluminum scale replica lighthouse.

It is said that Abbie had a fondness for this passage from Tennyson:

CROSSING THE BAR

Sunset and Evening- Star,
And one clear call for me,
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea

Twilight and Evening bell,
and after that the dark.
And may there be no sadness of farewell
when I embark.