



## A Visit to the Saugerties Lighthouse

*Elinor De Wire  
Mystic Seaport Museum*

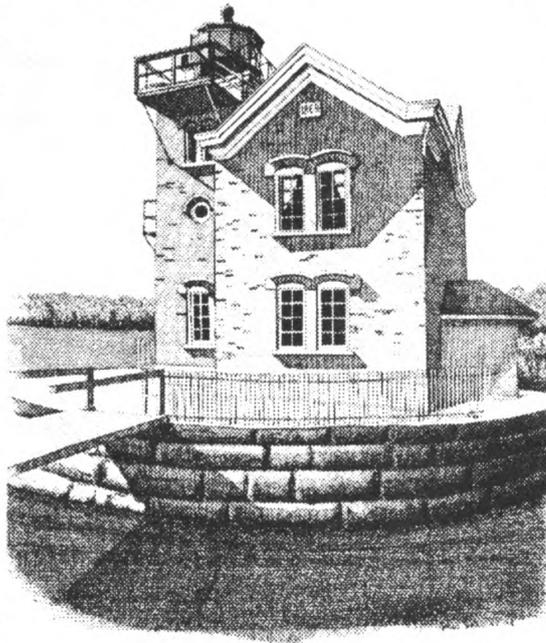
The wind blows briskly out of the southeast as I follow the wet, sandy trail to the old sentinel at Saugerties, New York. Sea oats wave and water bubbles up around the soles of my sneakers, reminding me that the Hudson River is still a tidal estuary here, some 100 miles north of the sea.

There's seldom a day when the wind doesn't buffet the narrow point where the lighthouse sits perched on its round stone pier. Curator Steve Thomas has grown accustomed to the high-pitched squeals coming through the cracks in the walls, the muffled thump of the bell rope against the house, and the rattle of window panes.

At least once a day, he goes up to the lantern gallery to untangle *Old Glory*. Rarely does he hang his wash outside, for the wind would spirit it away, the same way it steals his cap when he escorts me up to the gallery high above the river.

"I'm not a lighthouse

keeper in the traditional sense," says Thomas. Yet his life isn't really much different from the keepers who lived here in the 1940s. Though the modern beacon in the lantern runs automatically, and the extra bedrooms upstairs hold displays and overnight accommodations, Thomas still keeps the place in good order. I suspect he's more "keeper" than he thinks.



There's no TV, but a radio quietly plays as we enter the chilly kitchen. Thomas says heat is a luxury. Electricity is meager too — supplied by a small generator.

"I can't keep ice cream in this fridge," he laughs. "Not enough power. Of course, I could store it outside in winter, but it's always hot weather when I want it most!"

He's alert for trouble on the river, though it comes less often than in the past and usually involves recreational boaters rather than commercial vessels.

In summer when the lighthouse opens to the public, Thomas shows visitors around the restored station and enthusiastically recalls the days when sloops, barge tows, ferries, steamboats, and little periaugers passed the lighthouse. In those days there was no electricity, no plumbing and no telephones.

The earliest Saugerties lightkeepers were, like their forebears, river valley folk who loved the water and earned their livelihood from it. Some fished or cut ice;



*This solar-powered beacon was installed in the lantern in 1990. Photo by author. The beautiful sketch of Saugerties Light was done by Paul Bradley Jr.*

others ran ferries or lightered cargo. They knew every twist and turn, shoal and sandbar of this deep and vital waterway; some even boasted the ability to pilot it blindfolded. As commerce increased on the Hudson River in the early 19th century, lights were needed to guide those less familiar with the 140 mile navigable northward reach into Appalachia. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the Delaware and Hudson Canal in 1828 made the river a critical link between the rich importers and manufacturers of New York and the burgeoning agricultural communities of the midwest.

Saugerties Lighthouse was the first sentinel established on the Hudson River. In the early 1830s Congress appropriated \$5000 for its construction on the north bank of the mouth of Esopus Creek. By 1835 the station was operating. A stone crib served as the foundation for a square house with a lantern on its roof, 12.8 meters (42 feet)

above water. Five whale oil lamps, fitted with parabolic reflectors, produced enough light to guide vessels into or past Ulster, as the town of Saugerties was then called.

Abraham Persons, the light's first keeper, served only 2 years before being dismissed. The government discovered that he lived several miles from the lighthouse and had hired someone to tend the light for him. This sort of subcontract was strictly forbidden by the Lighthouse Service. Persons' replacement, George Keys, was reminded to reside on site and to tend the beacon himself.

With the decline of whaling in the 1850s, the lamps were switched to mineral oil. A short time later the station got its first prism lens, a sixth-order Fresnel made in France and fitted with hollow-wicked Argand lamps. Thomas says Saugerties' lightkeepers spent much of their time cleaning and polishing the prisms and brass of the lens.

Saugerties Light was rebuilt in 1867 on a larger stone pier next to the original beacon. The Fresnel lens was moved to the new lighthouse, and for a few years, the two sentinels sat side-by-side—one dark, the other lighted. The older structure was sold and dismantled in 1872.

The second and present Saugerties Light saw 85 years of continuous service before it was automated in 1954 and its keepers removed. Twenty-two keepers, two of them women, had served at the station since 1835. But with no one to maintain it, the lighthouse rapidly deteriorated into a fire hazard. The Coast Guard removed the lens, set up a post beacon to replace it, and announced plans to demolish the historic lighthouse.

Local residents, the retired

Saugerties keeper Chester Glunt and his wife Ruth Reynolds Glunt, a local historian and author, mounted a campaign to save their cherished sentinel. For 20 years, the lighthouse languished while the Coast Guard and the public debated options.

In 1976 the Saugerties Arts Council managed to transfer the property into state hands. The Saugerties Lighthouse Conservancy then formed and acquired the lighthouse from the state in 1987. The group has labored to restore Saugerties Light, preserve its history, and make it accessible to the public.

Steve Thomas did much of the carpentry work on the interior, but he's quick to give credit to a long list of other talented contributors. "It was practically a shell. We've truly rebuilt the place," he says.

The beacon was returned to the lantern in 1990, though it is a modern, solar-powered, aero-marine type that doesn't quite match the old-time ambience of the station. But the 1909 fogbell does. As I stand on the gallery looking downriver, Steve Thomas indulges my request to hear the fogbell's lilting bong.

A worn spot hollows the bell lip where the striker has pounded year after year. The bong is low and mellifluous and quickly snatched up by the wind, but its hum lingers a few seconds.

With a wide grin, Thomas asks: "Wanna hear it again?"

**For information on visits and Bread & Breakfast accommodations, contact the Saugerties Lighthouse Conservancy, P.O. Box 654, Saugerties, New York 12477, (914) 246-9170.**