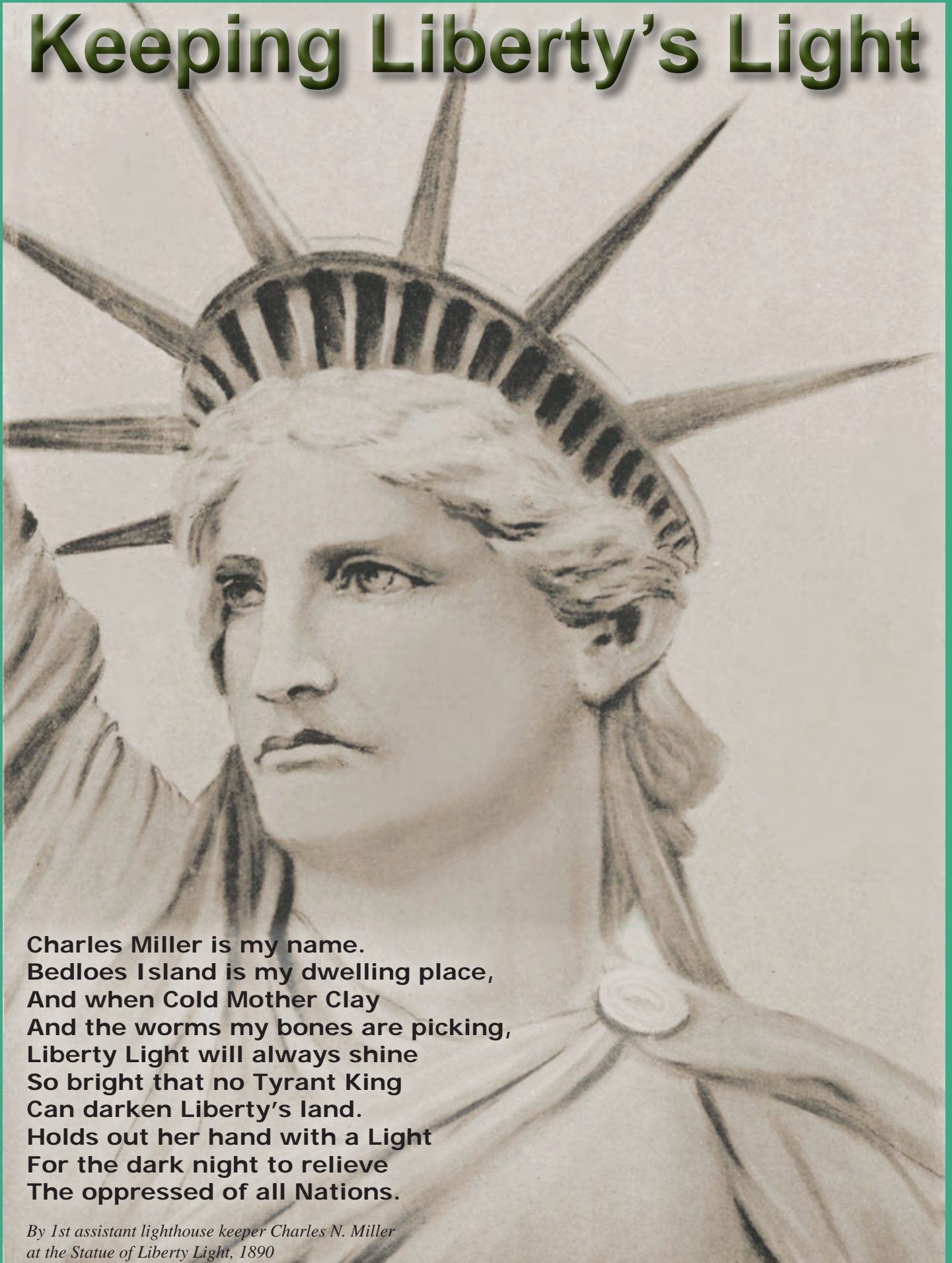


Keeping Liberty's Light



Charles Miller is my name.
Bedloes Island is my dwelling place,
And when Cold Mother Clay
And the worms my bones are picking,
Liberty Light will always shine
So bright that no Tyrant King
Can darken Liberty's land.
Holds out her hand with a Light
For the dark night to relieve
The oppressed of all Nations.

*By 1st assistant lighthouse keeper Charles N. Miller
at the Statue of Liberty Light, 1890*

By Debra Baldwin

The Statue of Liberty. If you say that to any American, it would certainly evoke a mental image of the famous Lady Liberty holding her torch proudly aloft as the quintessential symbol of “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” But how many of those people would also recognize the Statue’s role as one of the tallest and first electrified lighthouses in American history?

Its full name, The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World, is indicative of that function as well as the great import with which it was regarded upon its completion in 1886. It was considered an engineering marvel and a colossal monument of fine art as well as the symbolic embodiment of American Independence and Spirit.

Much has been published about the history of the Statue of Liberty: its plans, construction, neoclassical design, political associations, meanings, and historic celebrations, but only a small percentage of those writings mention the fact that, during the first 16 years of its existence, its jurisdiction and operations were overseen by the United States Lighthouse Board as a legitimate aid to navigation with a regular complement of lighthouse keepers assigned to operate it.

Furthermore, it is somewhat of a national travesty that absolutely nothing has been documented about the lives of the men who kept Liberty’s Light shining brightly during its first two decades other than a listing of names and a paragraph of biographical information as an aside to stories focusing on the history of the structure. After 132 years, *Lighthouse Digest* has now remedied that travesty.

Albert E. Littlefield (1886 - 1902)

During the entire 16 years that the Statue of Liberty was listed as a lighthouse on the official government lights list, there was only one head keeper: Albert Emmons Littlefield. Born on May 18, 1844 in Kennebunk, Maine, Albert Littlefield chose a career as a machinist while he was in his 20s. He married Lucy E. Murch in 1873, and the couple moved up the coast to Yarmouth, Maine by 1880 where Albert continued his machinist profession.

At some point, he expanded his vocational interest to become acquainted with the greatest technological innovation of the age: electricity. Albert E. Littlefield then moved his family to New York where, according to family history, he was involved in installing the electrical plant at the Statue of Liberty during the final construction phase in 1886.

Because Albert was so well-acquainted with the system and understood the principles of electricity and power distribution, he was asked to remain in charge of the plant and hire on with the United States Lighthouse Establishment as the official Head Keeper of the Statue of Liberty Lighthouse. He purportedly was already working in this capacity prior to the inauguration ceremonies at the end of October that year, but it became a matter of record on December 27, 1886.

Albert and Lucy Littlefield had four children, three of whom were born while the family was living on Bedloe’s Island where the Statue of Liberty is located. Lighthouse keeper housing during the early years at the Statue of Liberty reservation was problematic. New quarters were eventually erected by 1890, but during the first four years, the old hospital building was used as the sole accommodation. It had 16 rooms and the Littlefields took up a good portion of them.



The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World, erected on Bedloe’s Island in New York Harbor in 1886, was a gift from France, designed by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi and built by Gustave Eiffel. Its care was transferred to the United States Lighthouse Establishment by President Grover Cleveland on November 16, 1886, some three weeks after the dedication ceremony. It remained an official aid to navigation until March 1, 1902 when it was turned over to the War Department to administer until 1933 when it became part of the National Park Service. (National Archives.)

The assistant lighthouse keepers, who appear to be mostly single or without their families on the island due to the lack of housing, either shared accommodations in the hospital building or roomed with the Fort Wood soldiers in the barracks close by. Apparently, it was a difficult situation because 12 of the first 14 assistant keepers who served at the Statue of Liberty during the first four years of operation didn’t make it past the one-year mark. The average length of service was only six months.

In addition to being unable to stay the course, a couple of these early transient lighthouse keepers proved to be rather nefarious. Michael Coady, who was one of the first four assistants from December of 1886 until he died unexpectedly in April of 1888, was identified as being a part of the notorious “Masked Burglar Gang” who committed a large number of robberies a decade earlier in Queens. Henry C. Fanning, who only served at the Statue for two months in 1889, spent more than 20 years in prison for murdering his mistress in cold blood a few years later. These were certainly not the type of men who were well-suited for responsible lighthouse duty.

When the new keeper dwelling was built in 1890, keepers then found conditions more tenable and they stayed an increasing amount of time, though even Ole N.A. Anderson, a 30-year lighthouse service veteran, only lasted a year at the Statue of Liberty before transferring on to other, more desirable assignments. Apparently, not just any man could keep Liberty's torch lit.

Charles N. Miller (1889-1898)

Perhaps the most notable of all the assistant light keepers was Charles Nicholas Miller. Born in France on October 12, 1862 to Swiss parents, Charles and his family immigrated to America a few years later at the close of the Civil War and settled in New York City. Charles served in the U.S. Navy prior to becoming an assistant light keeper in December of 1889, so he was accustomed to a regimented schedule and repetitious duty. This might have been a reason why he was the third longest-serving light keeper of record, making it to nine years before moving on to other pursuits.

It is through Charles N. Miller's unpublished personal diaries that he kept for almost three years, from January 1, 1890 through October 1, 1892, that daily lighthouse life at Bedloe's Island emerges - the routine chores, boredom with the job, personalities of other keepers and his relationships with them, challenges with the machinery, leisure activities, and even romance.

It was the lack of the latter in his life that caused Charles the most problems during his early years of service. He met his future wife, Dorothea (Dora) Tiedgens, when she came out to the island as one in the many throngs of daily visitors. A courtship ensued, but their 10-year age difference and Dora's family's resistance to the thought of their marriage created difficult obstacles. They finally eloped in 1892, and Dora came out to live with Charles on Bedloe's Island where four out of their five children were born during the rest of his tenure there.

Working for Liberty

Regarding his work relationships, Charles N. Miller was not very complimentary toward head keeper Albert E. Littlefield in his diaries. During his first year, Charles lived in the main residence with the Littlefield family. He wrote of



Because the torch was never designed to hold a Fresnel lens or have clear windows through which the light could shine, the illumination was considered inadequate by lighthouse standards. However, after circular windows were cut into the base of the flame, and incandescent lighting added, the light could be seen 25 miles out to sea. This extremely rare photo from 1890 shows how the light appeared on a relatively bright night. (S.R. Stoddard, photographer. Library of Congress.)

the difficulties in trying to sleep when the Littlefield children were also in the house making an abundance of noise slamming doors and crying. No effort was made by Albert or his wife to keep them quiet for Charles' sake. This was particularly trying during the extended period of time that Charles was standing double shifts of up to 18 hours at a time due to the electrical plant being operated both day and night.

However, Charles also mentioned several times that Mrs. Littlefield invited him for dinner or often brought him "something good" to eat which was a welcomed respite from his normal daily diet of dandelion greens he collected. And when the light keepers came across a rowboat washed up on the beach, Charles wrote of many days he went sailing with Albert Littlefield out in the bay for diversion. He would not have spent his leisure hours with Albert had he really disliked him.

Beyond the long shifts, the workload could sometimes be physically exhausting. Aside from the normal maintenance tasks of daily cleaning the machinery and torch, there were several projects that required a lot of manual labor. Charles wrote of all hands scrubbing the engine house down about every two weeks, building a new gravel walkway, painting the inside of the Statue of Liberty and boilers, and

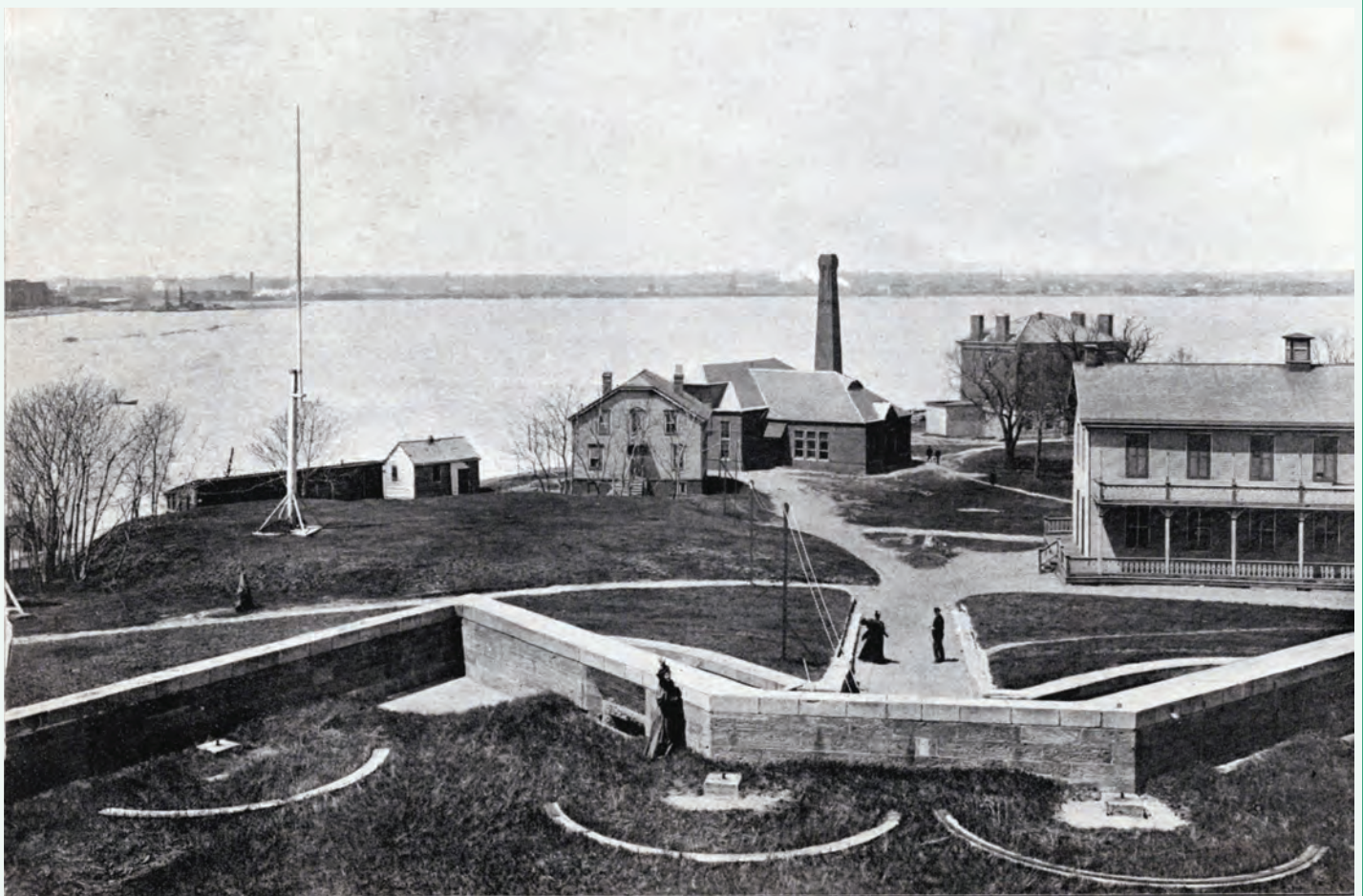
periodically having to help off-load more than two hundred tons of coal from the lighthouse tender a couple of times a year.

It was also no easy task to have watch duty that included the torch. During the winter months, Charles continually wrote of how cold it was up there saying that "it almost blows the coat off my back." It was so cold in March of 1890 that "All the pipes from the tank were frozen and busted. Had to take them apart to get all the ice out of them."

The engine room could also be "as cold as a barn" which actually was an area of concern in keeping the dynamo running properly as noted in reports by the district engineers; and having to spend many hours there caused both Charles and Albert to come down with bad colds at different times during the winter months that made their work miserable.

The care of the dynamos was probably the most important job the keepers had. Those early generators were either being worn out and replaced or upgraded continually along the way. As was customary in lighthouses at the time, there were double sets of engines and machinery so there could be a backup in case of trouble.

One of the first entries Charles Miller wrote concerning the equipment was in starting up the spare engine. "It works



In this 1896 photo taken from behind the Statue of Liberty, the high chimney stack of the electrical plant building is clearly seen. The three-story former hospital building that was used as the only accommodation for keepers in the early years is to the right of the plant behind the trees. The assistant keepers' dwelling, constructed by 1890, is directly in front of the plant to the left. The two-level long building on the right of the photo is part of the Fort Wood soldiers' barracks where single keepers also stayed prior to 1890. (Rand McNally.)

good. It has a new belt and the electricity that comes from it is so strong that you can't stand near. Even if you come near it with your clothes on, sparks of green fire will shoot from it and sting." When it rained hard, the dynamo would run badly because the brushes in the commutator would spark.

Six months later, in June of 1890, an incandescent lighting system was put in which required new dynamos to run it. By then, Charles' knowledge of the mechanical workings was quite proficient. But that did not hold true for other assistants.

Martin F. Cody, who was the second longest-serving keeper at the Statue of Liberty, started his 12-year service on August 6, 1890. Charles wrote that Cody understood nothing about dynamos and that he had to stand 12-hour watches until Cody was able to be left alone with it. Even months later, Cody still had to ask for assistance from Charles to keep it running and repair it when necessary.

Assistant Bernard Monahan also had troubles with the equipment. On one occasion, Charles wrote that Monahan "got the boiler so full of water that it stopped the engine. It blew the water through the safety valve. He thought there was no water in the boiler so he started the pump still faster. The water was above the glass. He is not a fit man around the boiler."

But Charles himself was not exactly impervious to errors. On March 4, 1890 he wrote, "I was siphoning water down from the tank and forgot to watch it and lost 2000 gallons." Considering that fresh

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Albert Emmons Littlefield (b. 1844) was the only head keeper who ever served at the Statue of Liberty Lighthouse. A family friend, Sarah Thorresou, stands beside him. Prior to his lighthouse service, he worked as a machinist in Maine where he was born. (Courtesy of Brent Dubach and Judy Sheckler.)



water was a scarce commodity on the island, that was a serious mishap on his part.

But overall, the task of keeping the dynamo, boilers, engines, and lights running was very routine. Charles was oftentimes bored with the watch where he could do nothing but read. When Dora started making regular visits, Charles wanted to spend time with her rather than being cooped up in the engine house, but Littlefield gave him “hell about leaving the engine room when I am on watch, going out to speak to Dora, sweet angel.”

Taking Leave from Liberty

When Charles Miller finally came off watch, he could spend time with his visiting friends and family. He and the other keepers would often take their visitors on special tours all the way up to the top of the torch. Charles’ father made a rare visit, and even though he appeared “shaky,” he still managed to climb the 403 stairs to the top where “he thinks the place is grand.”

Other than entertaining, the keepers spent their leisure hours swimming, boating, playing cards with the soldiers, and taking the ferry back to New York City to visit, do errands, go to Coney Island, or go out to the theater. They could return later in the same day in time for their shifts, although mention was made of several times that the keepers, including even Littlefield, missed the return boat. In those instances, the other keepers would have to take the station boat over to fetch them or the tardy keeper could talk a fisherman or boatman into taking him back out to the island.

It could sometimes be a dangerous journey. Twice within a short time, Charles thought he might not make it. On December 22, 1891 he recorded, “I missed the last boat so I had to go to Jersey and row over. There was a terrible fog and I got lost. Rowed around 2.5 hours before I found the island.”

Two months later he wrote, “Got to the battery 4:45. Had quite a time before I could get a boatman to row me over as the bay was full of ice and it was very cold. We got about a half mile off the battery when we got out of it. Was drifting to Robbins Reef Light and it was getting dark. We thought our days were numbered when at last a tow boat, the *Storm King*, picked us up and landed me on the island.”

Even taking their own boat out could cause concern. On April 18, 1890, assistant Robert Hunter “went out for a sail this morning and the boat upset about a half mile from the island. He would have drowned if we had not seen him. Lucky enough we had another boat and went out for him.”

Two months later, “Littlefield went out for a sail this evening. He could not get back. The wind was against him and the waves too strong to row, so he waited until 12 o’clock for the tide to change. His wife was afraid something happened to him. He came back at 1 AM. Bill [Sturtevant] and [Robert] Hunter went to New Jersey to look for him.”

The keepers also performed rescues to save boaters in distress. Charles mentions two such incidents – saving a man named James A. Gallagher from drowning, and on June 21, 1891 he and assistant Martin F. Cody were out at the dock when they noticed a sailboat overturned with six men in it. The two keepers went out to get them noting, “If we had been a minute later, two of them would have drowned.”



Albert E. Littlefield’s wife, Lucy Murch Littlefield, sits surrounded by three of their four children: (l-r) John, Ida, and Carl. Elsie, the youngest, is not pictured. (Courtesy of Brent Dubach and Judy Sheckler.)



Albert E. Littlefield and his dog are shown, probably sometime between 1910 and 1920 when he was living in Tompkinsville working at the Lighthouse Depot. Albert served in the United States Lighthouse Service for at least 34 years – 16 as keeper at the Statue of Liberty and then 18 more as a machinist for the third district. He was 75 when he finally retired. (Courtesy of Brent Dubach and Judy Sheckler)

The Wild Side of Liberty

Another notable activity the keepers participated in, along with the soldiers stationed at Fort Wood, was in disposing of unwanted wildlife. Charles Miller borrowed a rifle “to shoot rats. There are thousands of them here. All the soldiers got vaccinated so I got the doctor to vaccinate me.” All through the month of October 1890, the rats kept coming. Charles shot 10 one day and Littlefield shot two on another. It then became so routine that Charles wrote, “After supper I generally have a smoke and shoot a few rats and then go to bed.”

At the end of that month, there was a big storm that produced waves reaching over the seawall. The dock was underwater and the tide was so high that it drove the rats and mice out of hiding and caused the island to swarm with them.

Then there were the birds. Several thousand perished each year, especially during the fall migration season, when flocks would be attracted to the light under the right conditions and strike it or purportedly be burned by the generated heat of the lamps afterwards.

Charles mentioned seeing thousands of them flying around the light at 2 AM one morning and on another day found 102 dead in the morning. Sometimes he even found them flying inside the torch. On January 29, 1891, he recorded, “The first bird killed this year at the torch was a duck. I skinned it and had it cooked for supper. It was good, only not enough of it.”

But the most humorous animal dealings were with the steers that occasionally managed to jump ship from cattle barges leaving from the New Jersey slaughterhouses for England. Charles N. Miller was amazed one morning to find a white steer grazing out in front of the soldier’s canteen, and, as the newspaper comically noted, steers were not indigenous to Bedloe’s Island. The steer did not approve of the chance meeting and charged at Charles, which caused him to back up to the point of falling over the rip rap into the bay. It took a whole posse of soldiers and a make-shift lariat to contain the beast until the owners could be summoned to fetch it.

Dorothea (Dora) Tiedgens gave Charles Miller this photo of herself as a Christmas present in 1891 when they were engaged. They eloped in 1892, and Dora came out to live on Bedloe’s Island with Charles thereafter. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)

A few years after that, Albert Littlefield had a similar encounter. A steer being loaded onto the cattleboat *Golden* jumped the railing and swam to the island. It was furious when it landed and almost reduced Fort Wood to an “evacuated fort” before being caught by one of the soldiers and was tied to a tree. Feeling sorry for it, Littlefield took a pail of water out to it whereupon both Littlefield and the pail were tossed into the air. The cattleboat eventually came by and, after some difficulty, collected the steer to send it on its way.

Rogue cattle weren’t the only things that the keepers and soldiers found had come ashore in the night. Both Littlefield and Miller reported that there were dead bodies found occasionally during their morning checks. The unidentified bodies were fully clothed, suggesting bridge-jumpers or, in the case of a 12-year old girl, murder, since her throat was slit.

It seemed that lighthouse life at the Statue of Liberty was never a lonely, isolated affair. Between the endless streams of visitors, the stationed soldiers, the keepers, the wildlife, and the occasional surprises, there was always plenty of activity going on throughout the year.

Retirement and Beyond

In 1898, Charles N. Miller decided to resign from the United States Lighthouse Service, and he tried his luck hunting for gold in the Klondike for 14 months. He did find some gold, but not enough to retire on, so upon returning, he first worked at a foundry for a couple of years and then as an electrician for Metropolitan Life until he retired in 1929. It was only a few years later, on April 5, 1933, that Charles N. Miller died in Yonkers, New York at the age of 70. He is buried next to his beloved Dorothea in Mount Hope Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York.

Albert E. Littlefield continued on as head keeper until the Statue of Liberty was discontinued as a formal navigational aid in 1902. Upon finishing the post, he still remained employed by the United States Lighthouse Service as a mechanic and machinist, working at the Tompkinsville Depot at least part time until 1919 or 1920 until he finally retired around age 75.

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Albert Littlefield and his son Carl, circa 1917. (Courtesy of Brent Dubach and Judy Sheckler.)



A portrait of 1st assistant Charles Nicholas Miller (b. 1862) during his final year of service in 1898. Charles kept a personal daily diary from 1889 to 1892 which gives a first-hand account of life at the Statue of Liberty Lighthouse. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



In 1930, Albert, who was a widower by then, went on a trip to Battle Creek, Michigan to visit his eldest son, Carl. He had a sudden heart attack and passed away there on July 17th at the age of 86. Albert was cremated, and according to the family, President Herbert Hoover wrote to Carl and offered to have Albert's remains interred near the cornerstone at the Statue of Liberty out of respect for Albert's many years of sterling service given in maintaining our nation's most symbolic beacon. But Carl did not want Albert to be so far away, so the family kept his ashes in an ornate box in the attic for many years with the intention of doing a later burial. Family members today still recall visiting Carl's house as children and hearing that "grandpa is in the attic." Being too young to understand what that meant, they truly thought that Albert was still alive and living upstairs.

After both Carl and his wife had died by 1981, the family met to clean out the house, but the ash box could not be found. About two weeks after that, they returned again to the empty house and found the basement door ajar and the ash box sitting on the steps. The only logical explanation was that the home health care workers who had attended Carl and his wife during their last days thought that the box had contained something valuable because of the ornateness of it and had stolen it, but upon finding out the real contents, had returned it.

After 51 long years, Albert was finally given a proper burial next to his son Carl and Carl's wife, Charlotte, in Bluffton, Indiana. No one who passes by his grave today would ever know that for 16 years, Albert E. Littlefield had made certain that the Statue of Liberty could indeed Enlighten the World.

Hopefully in the future, a United States Lighthouse Service grave marker can be placed at the graves of both Albert E. Littlefield and Charles N. Miller to honor them and recognize their great service to our nation in keeping Liberty's beacon shining bright.



On September 1, 1891, Charles wrote, "Went up to the torch with my darling and gave her a good kissing. Had the children as far up as the head. Had the children and our picture in group." Dora often came to the island to visit Charles with her brother Henry and sister Angelica in tow as shown in this photo. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



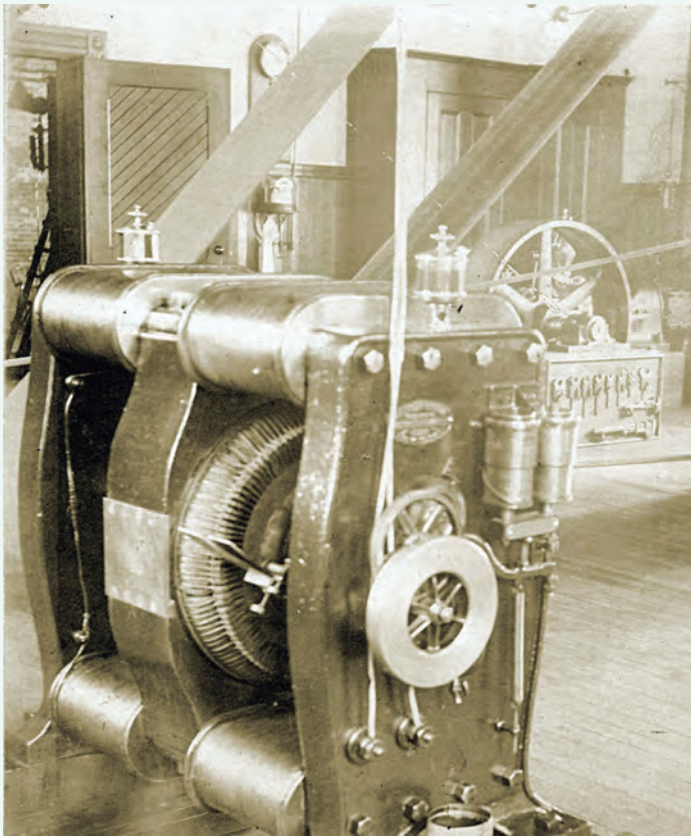
Dora, wearing the big hat, stands next to Charles on the left in this August, 1890 photo. Charles' sister Ella is in the front row on the far left. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



This circa 1879 photo shows a very young Charles N. Miller in Navy uniform. He served for about three years. He then worked as a dresser and baggage handler for a Shakespearean Touring Company before entering lighthouse service in 1889. He always enjoyed seeing theater productions during his off-duty hours when he was a keeper. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



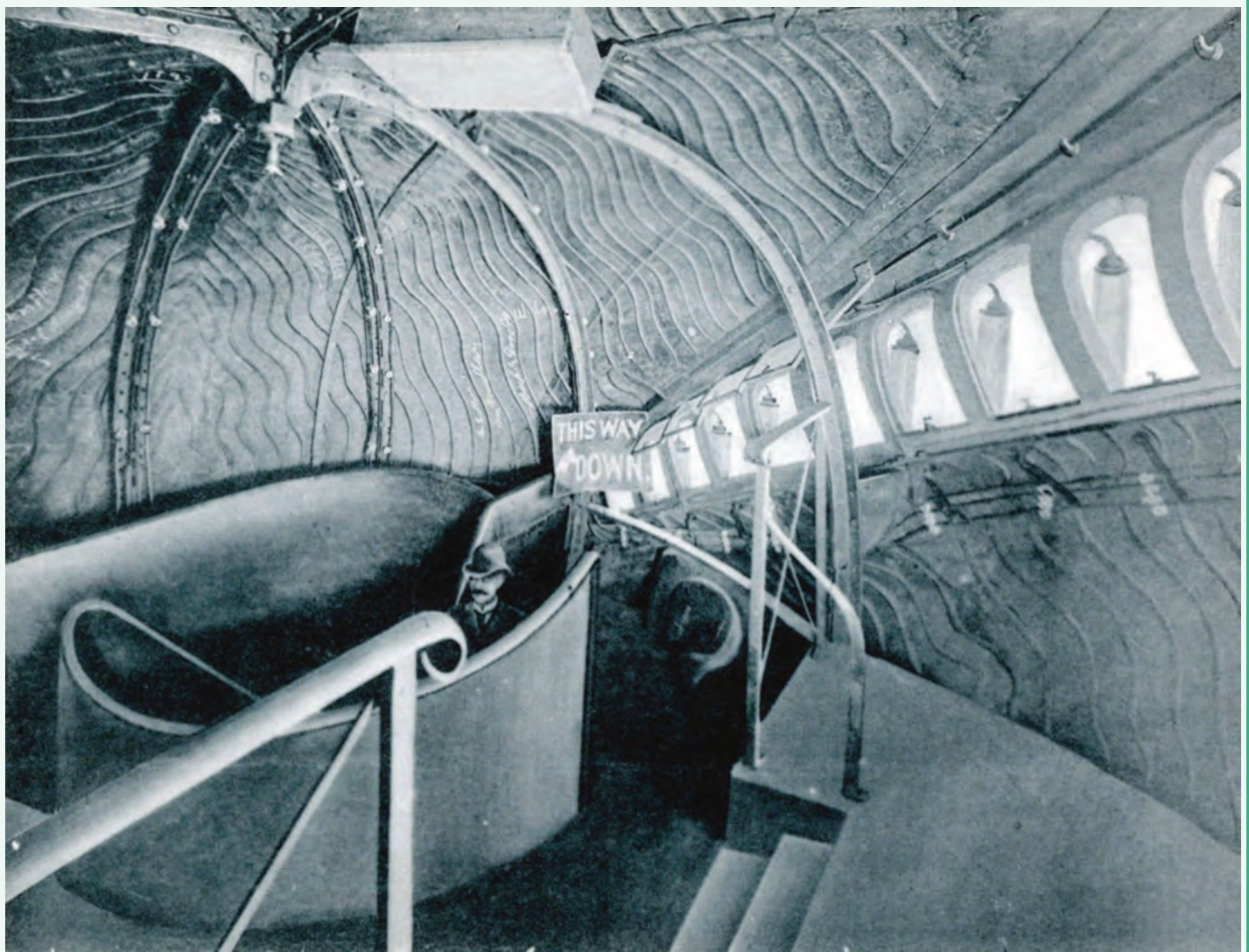
These two rare photos show the interior of the electrical plant at Bedloe's Island, circa 1890. The early Wood Dynamo Electric Machine used to generate the electricity to light the Statue and island's buildings is seen at the far left of the photos. Charles wrote of getting burned by flying sparks if he got too close. (Courtesy Lehman College, CUNY. Charles Miller Collection.)



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The Statue of Liberty stands 305' tall from the foundation to the top of the torch. During Charles N. Miller's time, there were 403 stairs from the main entry all the way to the top. All the keepers would take their family and friends on special tours to the very top whenever they visited. (A. Wittemann, New York.)





This 1895 interior view of the head clearly shows the windows of the diadem. One of the original plans was to light the Statue from these, but it proved impractical for many reasons. Red, white, and blue lights were later added to create a jeweled effect shining from the diadem for decorative purposes only. (A. Wittemann, New York.)



Star-shaped Fort Wood on Bedloe's Island was originally constructed in 1811. The Statue of Liberty was erected on top of it, using it as a foundation for the pedestal base. It was garrisoned at different times over the years as a coastal defense. The guns of the outer battery were removed sometime after it was turned over to the National Park Service in 1933. (A. Wittemann, New York.)



It was a common occurrence for birds to be drawn toward the light and strike it or be burnt by the heat produced. The newspapers recorded up to 1375 killed in one night as reported in this 1887 newspaper.



After Charles finished his nine years of service at the Statue of Liberty Light in 1898, he went to the Klondike for 14 months in search of gold. He is shown there, front row, 2nd from left, in 1899. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



One of the more pleasant diversions for the keepers on their off-duty hours was to go for a swim, though it was doubtful that they used this bathing pavilion that was built for the tourists. (Rand McNally.)



Charles N. Miller and his wife Dora are pictured in late 1897 with three of their five children: (l-r) Libbie, Charles and Harold, all of whom were born on Bedloe's Island while Charles was a keeper. (Courtesy of Dana Kenn.)



Albert E. Littlefield died in 1930 while visiting his son Carl Littlefield. He was cremated but his remains were not interred until 51 years later upon the deaths of Carl and his wife Charlotte. He is buried with them in Bluffton, Indiana.

Ole N.A. Anderson only served one year at the Statue of Liberty in 1898 before moving on to be a lighthouse keeper at Orient Point, New York (1899-1901), Bridgeport Harbor, Connecticut (1901-1903), and Navesink, New Jersey (1903-1928). (Courtesy of Alfred S. Anderson.)

