

# Women Who Kept the Lights

Very often the wife or children of keepers served as unofficial assistants. Robert Ranson, husband of Frances Burnham's daughter, relates in his book *East Coast Florida Memoirs* how Frances served as assistant to her father Mills Burnham at Cape Canaveral in the early 1850s.

Hundreds of women were paid as official assistants or head keepers. Between 1845 and 1912, there were 144 women who were paid as head keepers at lighthouses across the United States. Twice that number served as assistant keepers. Many more have served since. Some received positions at lighthouses through applications, but most received assignments to replace husbands or fathers who had been the keepers but had died or become disabled. There were no pensions, so this was the lighthouse service's way of taking care of surviving families.

Many of these women served with distinction for decades. Below are some stories of women who were head keepers.



Ida Lewis  
Lime Rock Light, RI  
1857 - 1911

The most famous lighthouse keeper of her time, male or female. She took over from her disabled father at age 15 and was an expert rower. She was credited with saving at least 18 lives, received the Congressional gold medal and the highest award of the US Life Saving Service. In 1924, the Lighthouse Service changed the name of the light to Ida Lewis Rock Light Station, the only such honor ever paid to a Keeper.



Margaret Norvell  
Head of Passes Light, LA 1891 - 1896  
Port Pontchartrain Light, LA 1896 - 1924  
New Canal Light, LA 1924 - 1932  
Became keeper when her husband drowned. Served 42 years across three lighthouses. She received frequent citations for aiding sailors and others through major storms.



Michaela Ingraham  
Pensacola Light, FL  
1840 - 1855

Became keeper when she allegedly murdered her abusive husband but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. She also died in the lighthouse. Many believe her spirit remains to haunt the tower.



Elizabeth Whitney Williams  
Beaver Island Harbor Point Light, MI  
1872 - 1884  
Little Traverse Light, MI  
1884 - 1913

Became keeper when her husband died in a storm, trying to save lives. She remained head keeper after remarrying. She wrote a book *A Child of the Sea*, while tending Little Traverse Light. She won an award for the best-kept lighthouse on the great lakes.



Hannah Thomas  
Gurnet Point Light, MA  
1776 - 1786

First woman keeper in the US. She and her husband owned the land. He was keeper until leaving in 1775 as a general to fight in the Revolutionary War, dying in 1776. Hannah then became keeper.



Catherine Murdock  
Roundout Creek Light, NY  
1857 - 1907

Assumed keeper position on the death of her husband. Urged to flee an impending storm, Mrs. Murdock stated "I'm a woman, I know, but if the Lighthouse goes down tonight, I go with it." Oldest lighthouse keeper in continuous service in the US at the time of her retirement.



Barbara Mabry  
Key West Light, FL  
1832 - 1862

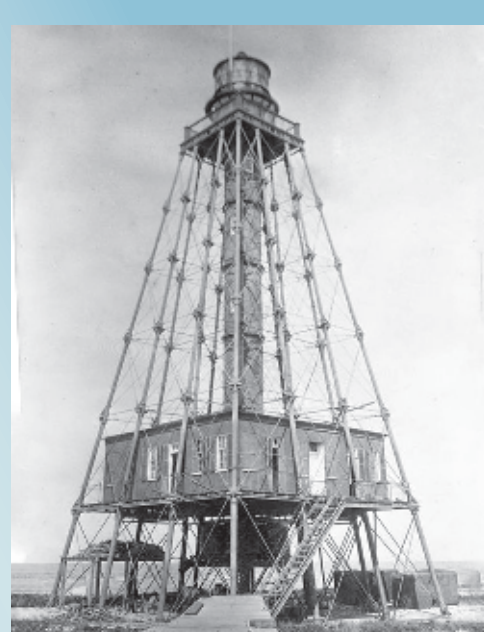
She maintained the light through hurricanes in 1835, 1841, 1842 and 1846 that destroyed the lighthouse which was later rebuilt on higher ground. She was replaced during the Civil War when she supported the South while the lighthouse remained under Union control. In 1999, the Coast Guard named a buoy tender after her.



Nancy Rose  
Stoney Point Light, NY  
1871 - 1904

Assumed keeper position when her husband died constructing a new bell tower. In the 1890s, she remained at her post for 56 straight hours, sounding the fog bell every 30 seconds when the automatic striking machinery failed during a thick fog.

## FLORIDA HEAD KEEPERS



**Sand Key Light**  
Rebecca Flaherty, 1830 - 1835  
Replaced husband (deceased)



**Key West Light**  
Barbara Mabry, 1832 - 1862  
Replaced husband (deceased)

Mary Bethel, 1908 - 1913  
Replaced husband (resigned)



**St. Augustine Light**  
Maria Andreu, 1859 - 1861  
Replaced husband (deceased)

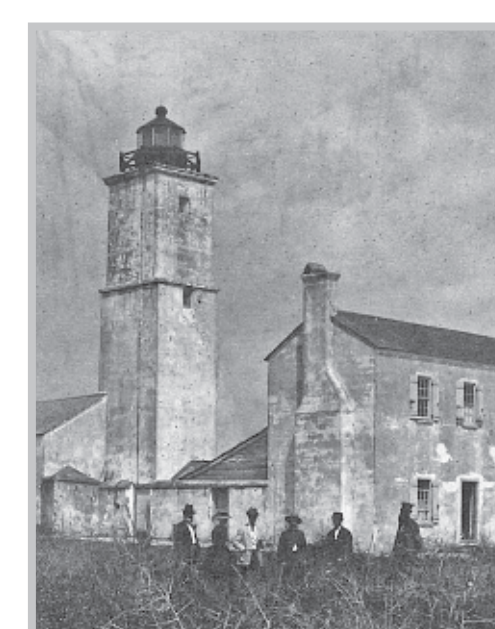


**St. Marks Light**  
Ann Dudley, 1850 - 1854  
Replaced husband

Sara Fine, 1904 - 1910  
Replaced husband (deceased)



**Pensacola Light**  
Michaela Ingraham, 1840 - 1855  
Replaced husband (deceased)



Maria Andreu  
St. Augustine Light, FL  
1859 - 1861

Became first female keeper in Florida when husband died after falling while painting the lighthouse. The Coast Guard recognizes her as the first Hispanic-American woman to serve in the Coast Guard's predecessor and command a federal shore installation. She left when the light was extinguished for the Civil War.



Emily Fish  
Point Pinos Light, CA  
1893 - 1914

She was keeper when the 1906 earthquake hit. The Fresnel lens was damaged and the tower had to be demolished and replaced with reinforced concrete for safety.



Katherine Walker  
Robbins Reef Light, NY  
1890 - 1919

Became keeper when her husband died. In spite of being only 4 ft. 10 in. tall & weighing just 100 lbs., she faithfully tended the light and rescued at least 50 people whose boats crashed on the reefs entering New York harbor. In 1996, the Coast Guard named a buoy tender in her honor.



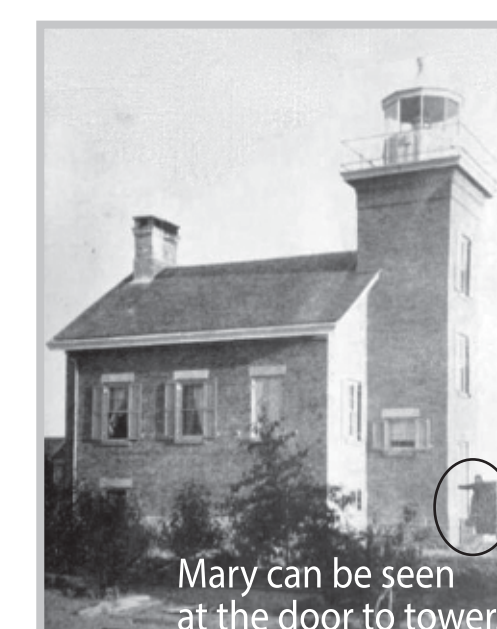
Fannie May Salter  
Turkey Point Light, MD  
1925 - 1947

Women kept the light at Turkey Point for 87 of the 103 years between 1844 and 1947 when the light was automated. Fannie Mae was appointed when her husband died. She was the last keeper at Turkey Point Light.



Laura J. Hecox  
Santa Cruz Light, CA  
1883 - 1917

Assisting her father while growing up, she became keeper when he died. An amateur scientist, she devoted time to her collection of marine life, minerals, Indian baskets, and other curios which she maintained as a private museum in the keeper's house for visitors to see. In 1904 she donated her collections to the City of Santa Cruz.



Mary L. Terry  
Sand Point Light, MI  
1868 - 1886

Appointed as first keeper when her husband died just before the light became operational. She died in a fire at the lighthouse in 1886, believed, but never proven, to be murder, robbery and arson.



Harriet Colfax  
Michigan City Light, IN  
1861 - 1904

Appointed through political influence, as cousin to US Vice President Schuyler Colfax. Served 43 years. Also tended the lights at the end of nearby piers, which required constant rebuilding due to storm damage.



Sally Snowman  
Boston Light, MA  
2003 - present

She first visited the light at the age of 10, telling her father she wanted to be the keeper when she grew up. She was married there in 1994. Appointed keeper in 2003 after 10 years in the Coast Guard Auxiliary.