

Frederic W. Morong

Honored With Historical Marker



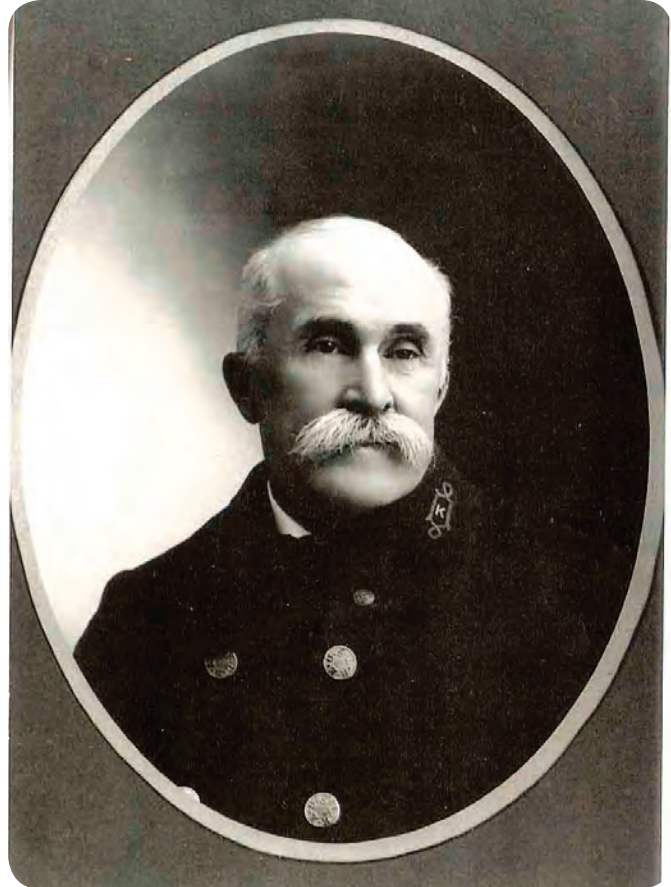
The unveiling of the new U.S. Lighthouse Service keeper's Marker when the Lighthouse Service Inspector's flag was taken off the marker to honor lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong. Holding the flag (l-r) are Sally Morong, Lorraine Morong and Mike Duff Morong. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)

By Timothy Harrison

A larger than expected crowd of hearty people showed up on a cold blustery Saturday afternoon for a *Lighthouse Digest* organized and sponsored ceremony to place a U.S. Lighthouse Service historical lighthouse keeper marker at the gravesite of noted Maine lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong (1842-1920) in Lubec, Maine.

The event was attended by numerous descendants of Frederic W. Morong who travelled from New Hampshire, Vermont, and California, as well as other areas of Maine. Also attending the ceremony were descendants of other lighthouse keepers, numerous *Lighthouse Digest* subscribers, historians, preservationists, historical societies, and lighthouse groups, including the West Quoddy Head Light Keepers Association whose members participated in the ceremony that also featured an Honor Guard from the American Legion Post 65 where Frederic W. Morong was once a member. Also in attendance were a number of Coast Guard veterans, including former lighthouse keepers Terry Rowden who was stationed at Little River Lighthouse, John Appleby who was stationed at Boon Island Lighthouse and Burnt Island Lighthouse, and George "Bubba" Eaton who was keeper at West Quoddy Head Light from 1978 to 1982. There were also a number of World War II veterans in attendance, including Pearl Harbor survivor Bob Coles.

The ceremony took place exactly 125 years to the day when, in 1890, Frederic W. Morong made his first visit to the newly completed Lubec Channel Lighthouse where he would become the first lighthouse keeper of the spark plug style lighthouse in



Lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong.
(Oct. 15, 1842 – May 23, 1920)

Lubec Channel. In 1895 Morong became the head keeper of Libby Island Lighthouse in Machias Bay where he served until 1898 when he became the keeper of Little River Lighthouse in Cutler where he served until his retirement in 1913.

Tim Harrison, editor of *Lighthouse Digest*, who acted as Master of Ceremonies, gave a brief history on the life of Frederic W. Morong whose two sons and one grandson and one great grandson also became lighthouse keepers. Harrison said that this ceremony is a start of a movement that he hopes will see historical markers placed at the gravesites of all lighthouse keepers to honor and respect the memory of those who came before us to build our nation into the great country that it is today.

United States Congressman Bruce Poliquin, in written remarks read by Dave Corbett, a grandson of Little River Lighthouse keeper Willie W. Corbett, stated in part, "I would like to extend our nation's great gratitude to the Morong family for their dedication over the generations to Maine's iconic lighthouses and those who were guided to shore and safety by them." Later in his remarks he personally thanked Tim Harrison, of *Lighthouse Digest* and the Lubec Historical Society for making the event possible. Letters were also read from Maine's Gov. Paul LePage, U.S. Senator Angus King, and Col. Robert A. Williams, Chief of the Maine State Police.

Remarks were also given by Maine State Senator David Burns and Chief Brian Hawkins, the Officer in Charge of the U.S. Coast Guard Aids to Navigation in Southwest Harbor. The famous lighthouse poem "It's Brasswork", which was written by Frederic W. Morong, Jr. at the kitchen table of Little River Lighthouse was sung by Sally Morong Chetwynd from music composed by Gordon Bok, with the audience cheerfully joining in the end of each stanza. This was followed by a wreath laying by Wreaths Across America. Music was provided by From Away Downeast members Jim Sherman and Stephen Sanfilippo who had opened up the ceremony by leading the audience in the singing of "Legend of the Lighthouse," written by Judi Kearney. About halfway into the ceremony, they sang "Let the Light from the Lighthouse Shine on Me." After the U.S. Lighthouse Service lighthouse keeper plaque was unveiled they closed the ceremony with the hymn "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," followed by the withdrawal of the colors, a gun firing salute, and the emotional playing of the taps by members of the American Legion Post 65.

After the event, the Lubec Historical Society graciously hosted the attendees for a place to warm up in their museum where they provided coffee, tea, cookies, and a large sheet cake that featured photos of Frederic W. Morong and his son Frederic Morong, Jr.

A Life of Service

Frederic W. Morong began his service to our country on April 14, 1862 when he joined the 6th Maine Regiment and served in Company A, 3rd Brigade, 1st Division in the Civil War. In 1864 when the government issued a call for experienced seamen, he transferred to the U.S. Navy and served on various ships and earned the rank of Chief Petty Officer and served gallantly on the U.S. Navy Gunboat Dale out of Fort Henry, until he was discharged after the conclusion of the Civil War.

Returning to Lubec, he sailed on coastal schooners as a seaman, mate, and finally as a master. On November 5, 1865 he married Mary Jane Brawn of Lubec and they had four children: Mary Ellen, who drowned at age one; John Campbell; Jennie, who died at age two; and Jennie M. On May 12, 1876, his wife Mary Jane passed away.

On June 11, 1878 he married Sarah Jane Cooke and the couple had six children: Alonzo; William, who died at age two; Frederic Jr.; William Henry; Myra Lincoln; and John Campbell. During

this time he continued to run steamers and ferry boats along the Maine and New Brunswick Coast before he decided to apply for a job as a lighthouse keeper.

At the age of 47 when Frederic W. Morong applied for a job with the U.S. Lighthouse Service, he wondered if he was too old to apply, and he wondered if his bout with yellow fever, that he had contracted while serving in the Army, would affect his application. However, he also knew that his experience as an experienced sea captain should warrant him getting a position as a lighthouse keeper.

In 1890 when he received an appointment as a 2nd Assistant keeper at Petit Manan lighthouse, he was somewhat disappointed that he had not been able to secure the higher commission of Chief or Head Keeper of a lighthouse, so he wrote about his concerns to the Superintendent of Lighthouses. He received the following reply from Charles W. Roberts, Superintendent of Lighthouses, who wrote "Since 1880 the Light House Service has been strictly under the Civil Service Rules, for instance when there is a vacancy in Chief Lighthouse Keeper, the 1st assistant of some other light or possibly the same light is promoted to the position and the 2nd assistant keeper light keeper to 1st assistant keeper and so on. This rule is invariably followed except possibly when some sudden emergency arises which is not probable – I can assure you there is no other way of procuring the Chief positions. Since I have been Superintendent of Lights for this district two of my appointees of the lowest grade have jumped up to the higher by promotion; all you have to do is to do your duty without grumbling and if possible keep on the right side of the Chief Light Keeper and promotion in its natural course will surely follow."

Apparently Frederic Morong's letter had been quite strong and Fred may have dropped some important names of influential people he knew, because the letter to him ended with the following, "The Chairman of the Light House Board is Vice Admiral S. C. Roman and the Secretary is Commander George C. Coffin, but should you write them, your letter would be forwarded to me as the letter would be from this district."

But, after serving for only three months at Petit Manan, he was appointed to the position that he really wanted, that of Head Keeper, but it would be at the newly completed Lubec Channel

Lighthouse and not at a family station that he had hoped for. Lubec Channel was a stag station and there was no room for a family. In fact, there was only 628 square feet of living space in the lower two levels of the five level tower that had to be shared with his assistant keeper, Loring Myers. The bottom floor was a combination living room and kitchen, and the bedroom was on the floor above that. But, he was close to his family.

In 1895 he was able to secure the position as head keeper of Libby Island Lighthouse where his family could live with him, and there were the families of the 1st assistant and 2nd assistant keepers to share responsibilities and family time and camaraderie together. But access to and from Libby Island was often dangerous, and they had to travel twelve miles



Tim Harrison, Editor of *Lighthouse Digest*, who served as the MC of the event, spoke on the general history of lighthouses and of the Morong family. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)

from the island to Machias for supplies, something that was not easy in those days. Also, the fog signal at Libby was needed more than it was not. But the pay was good - \$600 per year.

While stationed at Libby Island, Fred Morong became good friends with his assistant keeper Roscoe Johnson. However, in 1896 Roscoe Johnson secured the position of keeper at Little River Lighthouse in Cutler.

But, because of a lack of a good education for his children, Frederic Morong was not totally happy with life at Libby Island Lighthouse. In conversations with his friend Roscoe Johnson, the two of them eventually agreed to switch lighthouses, and in 1898 they received government approval to the switch.

This worked out well for Roscoe Johnson because Libby Island, being a larger light station, meant \$60 more per year in pay, which was a substantial amount of money in those days. And, although Fred Morong would make less money per year because Little River was a smaller light station, his children would be able to get the education from the Cutler school, which he and his wife desired. And, because Little River's boat launch ramp faced a protected harbor, access to and from the mainland was much safer. It was also easy for the family to attend church and get supplies in Cutler, which was just a short boat ride to the mainland. He liked life so much at Little River Lighthouse that he stayed there until his retirement in 1913. On his last day, he wrote the following simple statement in the Little River Lighthouse log book, "May 31, 1913 - I have this day been relieved as keeper of this station by Charles A. Kenney the newly arrived Keeper." The following day, June 1, 1913, the new keeper of Little River Lighthouse wrote the following in the log book, "Mr. F.W. Morong left station this PM."

One story that needs to be told about Frederic Morong's years of service is from a somewhat humorous incident that took place when he was stationed at Little River Lighthouse. One of the suitors of his daughter Myra had been invited for evening supper, and naturally he rowed a small boat out to the island. At the conclusion of dinner, the weather changed and the water became quite choppy, so in the interest of safety, Mr. and Mrs. Morong invited the young man to spend the night. As the evening progressed, the young man excused himself. After a while they missed him and started to worry about what happened to him. He was finally located walking up from the boat house with a bundle under his arms. He had rowed back to the mainland for his pajamas.

When Frederic Morong retired to his old family home in Lubec, he and his wife joined the First Christian Church. Local newspapers of the time said that he was a good neighbor and always had a wealth of stories to share that tell of his seafaring and lighthouse keeping days. He was also the commander of the local American Legion Post, and he had a deep sincere interest in the well-being of the post. At his funeral in 1920, a detail from the American Legion Post provided the Honor Guard for the ceremony, which is the same post that was there when the historical marker was placed at his gravesite.

The Dynasty

When Frederic W. Morong started his lighthouse career on April 15, 1890, little could he have imagined that he would start a lighthouse keeping dynasty that would span four generations.

Frederic W. Morong's son, Alonzo Morong, followed in his father's footsteps, and in 1906 he joined the U.S. Lighthouse



Vintage image of the Lubec Channel Lighthouse in Lubec, Maine where Frederic W. Morong became the first lighthouse keeper of the spark plug style tower in November of 1890. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Chief Brian Hawkins, the U.S. Coast Guard Officer in Charge of Aids to Navigation in Southwest Harbor, Maine, speaking on the Coast Guard's role in providing safe passage for the mariner of yesteryear as well as today. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)

Service and went on to serve at Browns Head Lighthouse, Cape Elizabeth Lighthouse, Goose Rocks Lighthouse, Petit Manan Lighthouse, and Fort Popham Lighthouse. While stationed at Fort Popham Lighthouse during a winter storm in 1935, in wet clothes he was forced to spend the night in the lighthouse to keep the light lit. The lighthouse had no heat and he caught pneumonia. He was subsequently sent to the hospital where he died. For a brief period during that time, Alonzo's son, George Morong, filled in as an unofficial lighthouse keeper at the Fort Popham Lighthouse.

In 1922, another son of Frederic W. Moring, Frederic W. Morong, Jr. (1883-1947), also joined the U.S. Lighthouse Service and served as 2nd assistant keeper at Saddleback Ledge Lighthouse and then at Crabtree Ledge Lighthouse until he secured the position of District Machinist of the Lighthouse Service and later became the Lighthouse Inspector. At the kitchen table at Little River Lighthouse in nearby Cutler, he wrote the famous lighthouse poem "It's Brasswork" which he read for the first time to the family of Little River Lighthouse keeper Willie W. Corbett. After the poem was recited on a Boston radio station, it was soon posted at every lighthouse in the United States. When the U. S. Lighthouse Service was dissolved in 1939 and its duties were taken over by the Coast Guard, Fred Jr. stayed on as a Coast Guard employee out of the South Portland Coast Guard Station.

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Lorraine Morong spoke of the important role that the two wives of lighthouse keeper Frederic Morong had in his life, saying "I might remind this gathering that Frederic W. Morong was helped in his career, as well as in his personal life, by the two women, Mary Jane Braun and Sarah Jane Cook, who were his wives and bore his eleven children." (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)



Kimberly Ashby, Manager of the West Quoddy Head Light Visitors Center, read a letter from Gov. Paul LePage. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



Musicians Stephen Sanfilippo and Jim Sherman from the group, From Away Downeast. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)



Sally Morong Chetwynd sang the poem "It's Brasswork." (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



Dennis Drews, a Trustee of West Quoddy Head Light Keepers Association, read a letter from United States Senator Angus King. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



Two of the members of the Honor Guard from American Legion Post 65 at the tombstone of lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)



Dave Corbett, grandson of Little River Lighthouse keeper Willie W. Corbett, read a letter from United States Congressman Bruce Poliquin. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



When the fog bell was removed from the Lubec Channel Lighthouse, the Coast Guard brought it to Rockland. After the Lubec Historical Society complained that the fog bell should never have left the local community, the Coast Guard returned it to Lubec and it is now on display next to the museum of the Lubec Historical Society. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Maine State Senator David Burns talked about the importance of honoring and remembering the role that lighthouse keepers had in the growth of Maine. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)



The American Legion Post 65 Honor Guard provided a three-volley salute at the end of the *Lighthouse Digest* ceremony honoring lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



Before the lighthouse keeper plaque was unveiled, Lil Cherron of Wreaths Across America took a moment to pray after placing a wreath at the tombstone of Frederic W. Morong. (Photo by Kathleen Finnegan.)



Some of the descendants of lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong who attended the ceremony gathered around the sheet cake that was provided by the Lubec Historical Society. The cake featured photos of Frederic W. Morong Jr. on the left and Frederic W. Morong on the right. (Photo by Bill Kitchen.)

When he retired from the Coast Guard, he lived in Portland where he was active in many civic organizations. He died in 1947 and is buried in the Carver Cemetery on Vinalhaven Island.

Alonzo's son, Clifton S. Morong, joined the Coast Guard in 1935 and first served at Maine's Kennebec River Life Boat Station. In 1939 he became a Coast Guard lighthouse keeper and he served at Race Point Lighthouse in Massachusetts, followed by Cape Elizabeth Lighthouse in Maine. He also saw duty at Perkins Island Lighthouse, Fort Popham Lighthouse, Portland Head Lighthouse, Squirrel Point Lighthouse, Doubling Point Lighthouse, and Ram Island Lighthouse. Clifton Morong retired from the Coast Guard in 1956 and passed away in 2003.

In 1953 Clifton Morong's son, Robert E. Morong, followed in the family tradition and joined the United States Coast Guard and served as a substitute keeper at Fort Popham Lighthouse and the

Cape Elizabeth Light Station. He also served on a number of Coast Guard vessels including the U.S. Coast Guard weather ship *Cook Inlet*, the USCG Cutter *Acuschnet*, and the USCG Cutter *Schackle*. From 1969 to 1970, he was the Commanding Officer of the *Nantucket Lightship* LV 112 WAL 534, which is basically a floating lighthouse stationed where it was either too dangerous or too expensive to build a lighthouse. Because a lightship was not allowed to leave its post, regardless of weather conditions, lightship duty was considered by many as the most dangerous duty in the Coast Guard.

In 1973, after serving at the Southwest Harbor Coast Guard Station, Robert E. Morong became the Commanding Officer of the Rockland Coast Guard station, taking over from the retiring Ken Black, who later became known as "Mr. Lighthouse," and founder of the Maine Lighthouse Museum. In 1977, Robert E. Morong was transferred from Rockland and became the Commanding Officer of the Newcastle Coast Guard Station in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. CWO Robert Morong retired from the Coast Guard on July 27, 1979 and moved to Bath, Maine where he passed away on August 18, 1995.

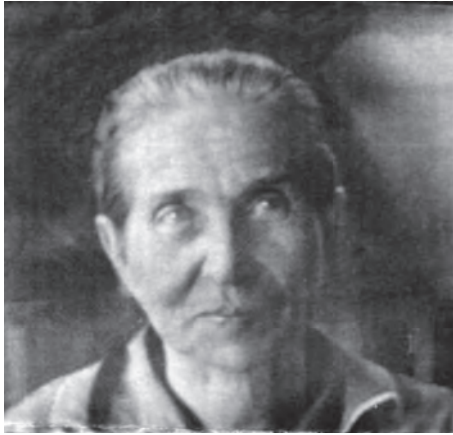
Additionally, other descendants of Frederic W. Morong, although they were not lighthouse keepers, also served their nation by joining the United States Coast Guard. It would be impossible to ever calculate how many lives were saved over the years by Frederic W. Morong and his descendants.

Lighthouse Digest is proud and honored to have sponsored such an historic event and we wish to thank all those contributed to it and attended. In the near future, we hope to place additional markers at other gravesites of lighthouse keepers and hope that many lighthouse groups will follow our lead. We believe that it is vital to honor those who came before us and we must never be allowed to forget them.

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Maine's Petit Manan Lighthouse where Frederic W. Morong served as a 2nd assistant keeper from April 15, 1890 to November 7, 1890. The 1854 tower stands 119 feet tall and replaced an earlier tower that had been built in 1817. Many of the buildings shown in this vintage photograph no longer stand. The island is now part of the Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Sarah Jane Cook Morong (1856-1930), the 2nd wife of lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong. She was the mother of Alonzo, William, Frederic W. Jr., William Henry, Myra Lincoln, and John Campbell. Two of her sons became lighthouse keepers following in their father's footsteps. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Alonzo Morong (1879-1935)



Robert E. Morong (1934-1995)



Maine's Libby Island Lighthouse in Machias Bay where Frederic W. Morong and his family lived September 6, 1895 to June 1, 1898. The only things left on the island today is the tower and fog signal building; everything else was demolished by the Coast Guard. Today the island is part of the Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Frederick W. Morong, Jr. (1883-1947)



This old photo may not be in good shape but it clearly shows lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong on the far right. The young man to the far left has been identified as William Henry Morong, son of Sarah Jane and Frederic W. Morong. The others in the photo are unknown. The photo appears to have been taken on the stern of a lighthouse tender, perhaps the *Zizania*. (Courtesy Morong family.)



Clifton S. Morong (1915-2003)

Lighthouse keeper Frederic W. Morong is shown on the walkway at Maine's Little River Lighthouse where he was the lighthouse keeper from 1898 to 1913. In July of 2002, under the leadership of Timothy Harrison, who was at the time president of the American Lighthouse Foundation, the Little River Lighthouse became the first lighthouse in New England and the third lighthouse in the nation to have its ownership transferred to a nonprofit under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act. Harrison led a 13-year long effort to totally restore the light station that is located on a 15-acre island off the coast of Cutler. The restored light station is now available for overnight stays through the America Lighthouse Foundation. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

