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Heroes

The world's best Coast Guard

ABBIE BURGESS

Abbie Burgess was assistant light keeper at Matinicus Rock Light from 1854 to 1872, and at Whitehead Light Station until 1890. She stood watch through the hardships and discomforts at the desolate Maine islands for 37 of her 52 years.

Her career began with her father's appointment as keeper of Matinicus Rock Light in 1853. Abbie, her parents, her brother Benjy and three younger sisters 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.

Abbie's brother Benjy was frequently off on fish-

ing 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.

Occasionally Capt. Burgess had to go to Matinicus Island, the nearest human habitation, for supplies, such as medicine for his sick wife, food for the family, consumable stores for the lights and feed for the chickens. 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, 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, just after Captain Burgess had begun a trip, one of the largest storms of the 19th Century hit Matinicus Rock Light. Abbie moved her mother and sisters into one of the towers as the island was flooded by gigantic waves. Once, she rushed out into the flood to rescue the family's hens, then hurried back to the tower only moments before an enormous wave swept over the island, destroying the keeper's quarters.

For nearly a month, the weather kept Abbie's father away. For Abbie, the time dragged on as the wind and waves battered the wooden structures without relief. Nevertheless, 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 every day.

The storm eventually subsided, and Abbie continued to help her father with the light until he lost his position in 1860. She stayed on to help the new keeper, and fell in love with his son, Isaac Grant.

When Grant became keeper, Abbie was officially listed as his assistant, and received \$440 a year for her services.

In 1872, they were transferred to Whitehead Light Station. They served together as keepers until their retirement in 1890. Story and image courtesy of the Historian's Office

