

History of the Baileys Harbor Range Lights

The Range Lights were built in 1869, at a cost of \$6,000. Six similar range lights were built on the Great Lakes at the time, although today the buildings in Baileys Harbor are the only ones of their style and class still standing in their original positions. The Range Lights, along with the Cana Island Light, replaced the first beacon of safety, the Baileys Harbor Light, which was built in 1852.

At the time they were built, the Range Lights were considered a more effective way to keep ships off the treacherous reefs and shallows at the entrance to Baileys Harbor. From the water, a sailor got “on range” by lining up vertically the white light in the Upper Range Light, which shone at a height of 39 feet above the water, with the Lower Range Light’s red beacon, fixed at 22 feet above the water.

The Upper Range Light is a one-and-a-half story, seven-room home with a rectangular tower on the south gable, directly above the front door. The tower, or lantern room, which houses the lens, gives the building its schoolhouse appearance.

The south side of the lantern room was simply a large thick window with a curved top. A fifth-order Fresnel lens illuminated a fixed white light toward Lake Michigan and above the Lower Range Light. The fifth order of light was a relatively small but common-sized light used in Great Lakes harbors.

Nearly 1,000 feet to the south, a small wooden structure housed a steamer lens and a fixed red light. The Lower Range Light rises from a fieldstone foundation. Its first floor is about 8 feet square. The second story, however, is octagonal with a rectangular light window that faces south to Lake Michigan. A much smaller window was located directly opposite the light window. Through this window the keeper could monitor the light from the Upper Range Light.

At the time the lights were constructed, the town of Baileys Harbor was the county seat and a busy logging center, shipping cordwood, cedar posts, poles, and hemlock bark (for tanning leather) to other Great Lakes ports. A safe harbor also was essential to the peninsula, especially on the Lake Michigan side, because the road between Baileys Harbor and Sturgeon Bay - today’s State Highway 57 — wasn’t built until 1870.

Fabien Truedell was the first keeper of the Range Lights. He took his post on December 1, 1869, about a month before the lights actually went into operation. Although Truedell was in his seventies when he became the light keeper, he was the first to walk the long boardwalk between the buildings, carrying fuel for the lamps.

On September 3, 1872, Marcus Shaler became the lighthouse keeper. His tenure was cut short by an outbreak of typhoid fever in the winter of 1874-75. One of the victims of this deadly season was Shaler’s wife, Lucy, and so great was his grief that he resigned his post in April of 1875.

Shaler was replaced by Joseph Harris, Jr., the son of the editor of The Door County Advocate. Harris kept the lights burning from 1875 to 1881 and his wife, Rosalie, gave birth to the first baby born at the Range Lights, a daughter they named Mabel.

On October 15, 1880, Baileys Harbor was struck by the disastrous Alpena Blow, a freak weather event that occurred when the prevailing northeast winds suddenly and unexpectedly switched to south winds. Harris stood helplessly by as nine schooners were damaged in Baileys Harbor. One of those schooners, the Lettie May, which was "loaded with sundries," eventually washed up near the Range Lights.

Henry Gattie was stationed at the Range Lights for 27 years. Gattie came to the Range Lights an eligible, rather handsome bachelor, and his name and social doings appeared often in the newspaper's society column. Many girlish hearts were broken when he married a local woman, Eva Hendrick.

Gattie was keeper when the lights were converted to an unmanned acetylene gas system in 1923. The Lighthouse Service transferred Gattie to Cana Island, but he periodically checked on the now locked and silent Range Lights.

The buildings remained empty for several years before a new use for them was found. In 1930 the Range Light buildings were converted to electricity, and the town's Lutheran minister and his family moved into the Upper Range Light, which gained new life as a parsonage.

A new threat to the Range Lights emerged in 1934, when the Bureau of Lighthouses deeded the land, which comprised about 30 acres, and the buildings on it to the Door County Park Commission (DCPC). The DCPC considered the area a fine place for a trailer park, and began hauling in rock to fill the swales along the trail between the Range Light structures. This was a pivotal act in the history of the Range Lights, one that changed the course of their future.

Many people were outraged at the DCPC's decision, especially those who had come to know the fragrant arbutus and beautiful and rare orchids growing there. The "Baileys Harbor Bog," with its more than 25 orchid species, was too precious to be turned into a trailer park. Action was needed.

Since the land was county property, these residents could take steps to prevent the development. The course they chose was to form The Ridges Sanctuary which, in 1937, secured a lease of the land from the county. The plans for a trailer park went no further and the Range Lights land was protected.

The private, non-profit organization called The Ridges Sanctuary continued to protect the land, and the town's Lutheran ministers continued to live in the Range Light Residence through the 1950's. In 1964 the Sanctuary hired its first full-time employee and the Upper Range Light was offered as summer housing. It later became the home of the resident naturalist for many years. Today it provides housing for seasonal naturalists, although its primary function is as an office for the staff of the Sanctuary.

In 1969, 100 years after the Range Lights were built, the lanterns were removed from both buildings and a directional light was installed near the beach. Despite The Ridges' best efforts to find them, the whereabouts of the beautiful Fresnel lamps remains a mystery. Shortly after the lights disappeared, the electricity was disconnected from the two lantern rooms and the electric poles removed from the range line.

By 1990, the two Range Lights, the oil house and the two-hole privy were on the National Register of Historic Places. A new 99-year lease between the county and The Ridges Sanctuary included those buildings and the original 30 acres of land.

The buildings were in sore need of repair. Dry rot had taken a mighty toll on the sill plates of the Lower Range Light, making the little building's existence precarious. The roof and exterior paint of the Upper Range Light needed attention too, and cosmetic repairs on the buildings' interiors were also necessary.

Although The Ridges Sanctuary did not own the buildings outright, it began a fund-raising campaign to restore the Range Lights. More than \$70,000 was raised, almost all of it private money, and the restoration and repair work was completed. In 1993, with the lighthouses standing strong again, the time was right to focus attention on the boardwalk that once stretched along what is now the Range Light Trail. This last phase of restoration included not only constructing 2,400 square feet of boardwalk, but also the widening of the trail corridor itself.

In 1996 the Upper Range Light was rewired and a new line was brought in underground to the Lower Range Light. Both lantern rooms were now ready to act as beacons again. Two replacement lights (unfortunately not Fresnel lenses), on loan from the U.S. Coast Guard, were placed in the lantern rooms and are lighted occasionally.

The Ridges Sanctuary staff and volunteers have become the new keepers of the lights. This was a logical step, given the location of the Range Lights and the dedication of those who saved and preserved them.

With a full restoration of the Lower Range Light completed in 2012, it was time to remove the light and day board. In late April 2015, The Ridges received approval to "relight the ranges as private aids to navigation." The Ridges then worked to obtain a replacement red lens lantern for the Lower Range Light. Upon its installation, the Lights sprang to life on June 11, 2015 and will remain lit permanently.

In 2016, The Ridges retained preservation architect Laura Davis of Isthmus Architecture in Madison to prepare a Historic Structures Report for the Upper Range Light. This report defines the structural scope of the restoration and help to establish the expense of full restoration of the Upper Range Light.