

By: Jeremy D'Entremont

Born “way Down East” in the coastal town of Addison, Maine in 1889, Roscoe Chandler – mariner, lighthouse keeper, and fisher, spent his entire life in close proximity to the ocean. Thankfully, his descendants have chronicled much of his life. Chandler first went to sea at a very young age. It seems his older brother planned to sign on to serve on the Revenue Cutter Woodbury but changed his mind.

“Roscoe, not much more than 12 at the time, asked if he could join instead,” according to his grandson, Joseph G. Kelley. “The captain agreed — if he could get his father’s permission. Roscoe biked home, got his father’s signature, and sailed. He didn’t return home for two or three years.”

Roscoe married Mary Manion (or Manning) in 1911, and they eventually had seven sons and four daughters. Chandler left the seafaring life and became a lighthouse keeper so that he could spend more time with his family. His first assignment was Franklin Island Light in Muscongus Bay, followed by a transfer to Blue Hill Bay Light.

The Blue Hill Bay Lighthouse on Green Island near the town of Brooklin, Maine may not be among the best known in the state, but it was vitally important to local trade in its time. In the mid-19th century, the town of Ellsworth on Blue Hill Bay was said to be the second busiest lumber port in the world, so the lighthouse was established on the

west side of small, low-lying Green Island in 1857. A relatively comfortable light station not too far offshore, Blue Hill Bay had a fairly short list of keepers in its 76 active years. Roscoe Chandler became the light's keeper in the 1920s.

The Chandlers also owned a farm in Monroe, Maine, just north of Belfast. Two of Roscoe and Mary's children, Catherine and Everett, lived at the farm while attending high school in Monroe. In their early teens, they obtained a cow and walked her from Monroe all the way to Blue Hill Bay Light. Along the way, they stopped at a farm each day and swapped the cow's milk for lodging and a meal.

Eventually, two cows were pastured on nearby Flye Island to provide milk for the Chandlers. According to Joseph Kelley (Catherine's son), the cows were particularly important because Keeper Chandler had ulcers and needed a good supply of milk.

In his booklet on the history of the light station, 44°15'N 68°30'W: The Blue Hill Bay Lighthouse, Mark Baldwin wrote that "catching and milking the cows, and rounding them up by dory when thunderstorms spooked them into the bay, was a chore for the children."

Baldwin also wrote that the children wintered on the mainland, where they attended school, with their mother Mary. The winters must have been long and cold for

Roscoe Chandler.

Like other keepers at the station before him, Roscoe Chandler augmented the family's food supply by fishing and hunting in the area. On a summer camping trip in the 1920s, Keeper Chandler and his family caught almost 300 pounds of cod, hake, and cusk nearby. Duck and lobster were also staples.

The Chandlers also kept a couple of sheep on the island. "Each spring," says Joseph Kelly, "the sheep would have little ones. Late in the year, a certain man would visit and the lambs would disappear. Then, they would have fresh meat for some days. My mother, Catherine, was well grown before her older brother told her what was happening. It was worse than learning about Santa Claus. She never ate lamb again."

Lacking a telephone, the families at Green Island devised unique modes of communication. In the 1920s, when Keeper Chandler was needed onshore, a woman across on the mainland would hang a black suit outside her house as a signal.

Living at offshore light stations bred ingenuity in the Chandler family. Once, the Chandlers were picnicking on a nearby island and one of the children failed to properly secure the boat, which was far from shore by the time anyone noticed. Rescue might be days away and the light positively had to be lit that night, so something had to be

done. Roscoe and the children quickly gathered driftwood while Mary tore her petticoat into strips. The strips served to bind the driftwood into a makeshift raft, and soon Roscoe was able to paddle out and recover the boat.

Another time Roscoe was away when fog moved in, leaving Mary to operate the fog bell. She started the automatic machinery to sound the fog bell, but suddenly the rope for the heavyweight that drove the mechanism broke. For the next 10 or 12 hours, Mary rang the bell by hand until the fog lifted and her husband returned.

In the 1930s Roscoe Chandler went on to become a keeper at Burnt Coat Harbor Light on Swans Island. Joseph Kelley recalls visiting the light station a few times in the early 1940s.

“The visit I remember most,” he says, “was with my mother and sister Mary. I was five and Mary was three. Mom got us to the Deer Isle-Sedgewick Bridge, which was new then, by bus and rides with friends. Money was tight and the toll was high, so we walked across the bridge and were picked up by another friend on the other side. That bridge looks steep today — it was really steep to a five-year-old. We stayed overnight in Stonington and caught the boat to Swans Island the next morning.”

One of the tales of the Chandlers’ years at Burnt Coat Harbor Light involves a visit by the dreaded Lighthouse

Inspector.

“He wore white gloves and checked over door lintels, behind pictures, and so forth,” explains Kelley. “In this particular instance, a dozen or more of the family were visiting, creating some disorder, when a ship that looked like the tender was spotted coming into the bay. The cry went up and the cleanup started. Roland, the oldest son, had just come in from fishing and removed a pair of hip boots. Anything questionable was quickly tossed into one of the boots. At that point, a rat, disturbed by the ‘to do,’ ran out and was spotted by the Irish setter, Jack. The rat ran into the boot for refuge, closely pursued by Jack, who wedged his head and neck into the boot. Jack ran around the house, wreaking havoc with the boot flopping ahead of him as he continued to try to catch the rat. Fortunately, it was a false alarm and no inspector arrived to survey the shambles.”

With the onset of World War II, the Coast Guard had Mary Chandler removed from the light station. They assigned four or five young Coast Guardsmen to support Roscoe.

“Without Mary to cook for him, and with four or five unruly teenagers to supervise,” says Kelley, “Roscoe’s ulcers forced him into retirement.”

The Chandlers moved to Portland where Roscoe worked at odd jobs in the winter. Summers were spent at Naskeag Point where he lobstered, fished, and clammed. Hurricane

Carol in 1954 caught him far offshore in his 12-foot peapod boat. The rain killed the outboard motor, and Roscoe rowed against the wind for the next 10 hours or so until the worst of the storm was over and he was finally able to return to shore.

Joseph Kelley recalls fishing many times with his grandfather Roscoe in the 1950s. “We went as far out as Isle au Haut, frequently in the fog,” he says. “I never saw Roscoe use a chart or compass. He guided us mostly by time and the set of the waves. An occasional glimpse of a buoy or a bit of shoreline provided fine-tuning. We usually caught 200 to 300 pounds of fish, mostly cod, on two tides. Roscoe dried most of the cod for later eating. Mary was an expert on canning most anything you can think of, including corn on the cob. Her knitting kept us all warm in the winter with mittens and so forth. She knit a special design that reached halfway to the elbow so snow didn’t leak in at the cuff.”

In 1933, the old lighthouse in Blue Hill Bay was discontinued. It was replaced two years later by an automatic light on a skeleton tower. The automatic light is now solar-powered and remains in use, while the lighthouse is privately owned and little-seen by the general public. [Burnt Coat Harbor Light](#) continues as an active aid to navigation, with the property now looked after by the Town of Swans Island.

The Chandlers were married for 65 years. Mary died in

Portland in 1976, and Roscoe Chandler in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1979. Both are buried in the National Cemetery in Augusta, Maine.

Neither Roscoe nor Mary completed grade school, but at least three of their 36 grandchildren, including Joseph Kelley, have Ph.D.'s. Several of their great-grandchildren have doctorates in various fields, and their great-great-grandchildren are about to start college. Their native intelligence and resourcefulness have obviously been passed down through the generations.

“Two important qualities in Roscoe and Mary were reliability and self-reliance,” says their grandson Joseph Kelley. “A duty had to be performed and they always found a way to do it.”

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