

South Manitou Island Light Station

A Collection of Diverse and Inter-related Cultural Resources

Many historic property types are recognized for only one of their elements, usually a built structure. One such example is the light station; it is often thought of as a single structure—a lighthouse. Light stations, however, often consisted of several interrelated elements, both natural and built, such as a dwelling (which, in some cases, could house up to three families), a light tower, an enclosed passageway connecting the tower to the dwelling, a fog signal building to warn ships of hazards when fog was too thick for the light to be seen, a brick oil house to store the highly flammable kerosene that was the light's fuel, a metal oil house (and paint locker), at least one privy, a boathouse, a stable (often later converted to a garage), a barn, and other multi-functional secondary buildings. In addition to these built features, gardens and extensive circulation systems were almost always an integral part of the station.

The South Manitou Light Station, located in Lake Michigan, 15 miles southwest of Leland, Michigan, within the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, is nationally recognized for its diverse collection of historically-significant built

and natural features. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and serves as a tangible reminder of early commercial navigation and the important role that light stations once played in navigating ships through the Great Lakes. Constructed between 1839 and 1840, the station guided ships through the Manitou Passage, one of the busiest shipping channels on the western Great Lakes. It was not until 1958

that technological advances rendered the station obsolete, and the U.S. Coast Guard discontinued its service.

The remnants of the functional landscape are as important to the station's history as is the extensive amount of remaining historic architectural fabric. Both the natural and built features of the station should be considered together in order to truly appreciate not only its history and evolution, but also its role in the history of the island on which it is located, its role in Great Lakes shipping, and its role in terms of the U.S. Lighthouse Service as a whole.

The National Park Service recognizes the diverse nature of the South Manitou Island Light Station and its many historic roles. As a result, the project team was challenged—one of the first such challenges in the Park Service's history—to combine a Historic Structure Report (HSR) and a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) into a single document that thoroughly investigates the South Manitou Island Light Station. Typically, an HSR and a CLR are prepared and used independently of one another. An HSR focuses on the historic integrity of a structure or structures, as well as on the cultural and social influences that have affected it or them, while a CLR evaluates the history and integrity of a historic landscape, including any changes to its geographical context, features, materials, and use. At the same time, both types of reports seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of the property's history and evolution and, subsequently, to determine a treatment strategy that preserves and accentuates the historic integrity of the property while frequently accommodating a contemporary use.

Because the station changed continuously throughout its operation, the project team preparing the HSR/CLR for the National Park Service determined that interpretation should focus on the interrelationship between the buildings and the natural environment during its entire period of operation (1840-1958). Subsequently, rehabilitation, with its respect for the evolution of the station and its leniency toward introducing new elements necessary for barrier-free accessibility and other visitor amenities, was determined to be the most appropriate treatment.

Aerial view of the South Manitou Island Light Station, 1930. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.



