

# **James Auld McCobb**

**Burnt Island Lighthouse Keeper**

**1868-1880**

Tammy Fereshetain  
TAH, Cohort 1  
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### Burnt Island Light

The wind had been blowing since morning;  
The blue waves were tossed with foam;  
The clouds grew darker, and darker;  
And all things betokened a storm.

Daylight was fast disappearing;  
The sable curtain of night  
Fell silently, darkly, around us,  
Hiding the bay from our sight.

Down came the snow, thicker and faster,  
Loud blew the blast, fiercely cold;  
And the roar of the hungry breakers  
And a tale of suffering told.

When lo! In the distance, a glimmer  
Shines forth 'mid the darkness and gloom;  
'Tis the Harbor Light, Sailor, take courage,  
It tells you of safety and home.

Long life to its brave, faithful keeper!  
May his pathway on earth be as bright  
As the rays that fall from his beacon,  
Flooding the shore with light.

H.F.Y.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boothbay Historical Society. Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Collection #6 Newspapers. *Boothbay Register*. Vol.1 Boothbay, Maine. February 3, 1877. No.7.

## Introduction

Some letters, a lighthouse keeper's log book, and beautiful Burnt Island, one mile out from Boothbay Harbor, provide the keys to unlocking the story of the life of one man: lighthouse keeper, James McCobb. Today Burnt Island is a living history and education center owned by the State of Maine. The lighthouse has been restored to reflect the 1950's era and visitors can experience interpretations of that time. However, many keepers have manned the light for decades prior to the 1950's, thirty in all from 1821 through 1988.<sup>2</sup> James Auld McCobb, a keeper during the 1870's, lived most of his life near or on the Atlantic Ocean where he bore witness to many changes, many conflicts, and many discoveries. How he viewed his ever-changing world can, to some degree, be recovered through his writings. McCobb kept a lighthouse log during his tenure at Burnt Island Lighthouse from 1868 to 1880, and wrote letters to friends and family members. Some of these have survived the 140-year journey into the present. This brief biographical sketch is a snapshot of McCobb's life, put in the context of his time, and captures his travels on the sea as a sailor and captain of shipping vessels from his youth into middle age. The primary focus, however, is his transition into his most meaningful life's work as a lighthouse keeper that began at the age of 51. It was during this period that most of McCobb's writings transpired and were preserved so the reader is best able to unravel his thoughts and beliefs. In an 1872 letter to his 19-year-old son, Willie, who was working in Boston, McCobb wrote: "Be industrious, be prudent, be steady for now is the time in which you establish a character that is to last you through life, and character is all a poor man has to rely on. Unless a man can be well spoken of- what is he good for?"<sup>3</sup>

The hope that one will be well spoken of during and after life is a fundamental goal for most humans. A continual chain of transitions: family, career, technology and society bring constant change

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine P. Jones. "Burnt Island Light Station," *The Keeper's Log* 22, no.3(Spring 2006):2.

<sup>3</sup> James McCobb to Willard McCobb. December 9, 1871. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection. Department of Marine Resources, West Boothbay, Maine.

to life. How an individual navigates these challenges McCobb wrote about speaks to who they become over their lifetime. In this essay, evidence that will determine whether the words of wisdom written to a son were lived out by the father is pieced together and examined. McCobb spent about two thirds of his career at sea and the final third of his life at the lighthouse. In his writings, we learn about how he valued faithful service to work, to family, and the development of praiseworthy character. This is James McCobb's story.

### **Family History and Early Life**

McCobb was born on July 19, 1817, in Boothbay, Maine, a fourth generation McCobb and the fourth out of eight children. Of his great grandfather, Samuel McCobb, it was said, "His family in both male and female descent has been one of sterling worth to the community, many of whom have lived long and valuable lives on Boothbay soil."<sup>4</sup> James' Great Grandfather Samuel was Irish and came to settle Townsend, now the area known as Boothbay. Around 1730, at the age of twenty-three, he led the Scotch-Irish settlers to the Townsend plantation under Colonel Dunbar as a lieutenant. He was one of the founders of Boothbay. On October 23, 1772 at the age of 64 he wrote a deposition that chronicled settlement of the plantation, a story in itself. The purpose of the deposition was to protect the town for future descendants because so much had been invested to found it.<sup>5</sup> He met and married Mary, last name unknown, sometime between 1738 or 1739. She was from the surrounding area. They had eight children together.

John McCobb, born in 1744, was Samuel's second child and James McCobb's grandfather. He married Mary Beath and was a merchant in town. Together they had nine children. James' father, Paul, born in 1790, was their youngest. He married Jane Auld and lived on his father's homestead in Boothbay. Many aunts, uncles and cousins populated the Boothbay area.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Francis B. Greene. *History of Boothbay, Southport and Boothbay Harbor, Maine*. (Portland: Loring, Short & Harmon, 1906.), 570.

<sup>5</sup> Greene, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Greene, 570-573.

At the time of James McCobb's birth in 1817, Maine was not yet a state nor had the lighthouse at Burnt Island been constructed. He grew up on the family farm and was taught to read and write, as his log keeping and letter writing attests. Where and how he acquired these skills are not known. According to the municipal history of Boothbay, there were sixteen school districts, (meaning one room schoolhouses), in the area which most likely provided his education.<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing years, James became a master of ships and lighthouse keeper. Possessing proficient literacy skills allowed him to attain these career choices and carve out independence and leadership skills. For twenty years or more he spent his days sailing the big schooners up and down the Atlantic seaboard as the ship's master.

## **Life at Sea**

On the thirteenth of November 1839, a certificate as an *American Seaman* was awarded to James McCobb. It certified his birth, gave his physical description, and proved American citizenship. These certificates were a sailor's passport and protection.<sup>8</sup> He was twenty-two years old, five feet and eight inches tall, and according to the certificate, had a dark complexion, hair, and eyes, and was born in Boothbay, Lincoln County, Maine.<sup>9</sup> He got his early sailing experience aboard a topsail schooner named the *Texas*. The schooner was used during the 1840's to transport hay, lime and lumber from Maine to ports in Georgia, New Orleans and Texas. According to George Wharton Rice, "Numerous Boothbay lads received their maritime training on board" the *Texas*.<sup>10</sup> It would be fair to conclude that James was one of those young lads.

Primary documents provide clues to the names of other vessels he sailed on as captain and dates as to when. They included the *John Adams* in 1849, the *Orient* in 1850-1852, the *Westport* 1853-

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<sup>7</sup>Greene, 153.

<sup>8</sup> "Certificate of American Seaman." Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea. <http://library.mysticseaport.org/initiative/ImText.cfm?BibID=6405&ChapterId=41> (accessed July 5, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> James McCobb's Certification of American Seaman. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

<sup>10</sup> George Wharton Rice. *The Shipping Days of Old Boothbay*. (Portland, Maine: The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1938), 79.

1855, the *Nebraska* in 1855, and the *Denmark* in 1856.<sup>11</sup>

James lived during what has been called Maine's economic golden age, when sailing schooners peaked, from 1820-1860. This was an explosive period of shipbuilding, shipping, and flourishing industries such as timber, ice, lime and granite. Many sea captains became wealthy as evidenced in the mansions found along coastal communities. Nathan Lipreader, the Library Director at the Maine Maritime Museum said, "In the mid 1800's Maine was an industrial center and Maine was an incredibly cosmopolitan place. People from Maine traveled all over the world on business, essentially. They sailed ships all over the world. They were engaged in trade to all the major ports of the world."<sup>12</sup>

James McCobb either worked for a larger shipping company in Bath or may have owned his own vessel. This meant long separations from his wife and children who lived on the family farm in Boothbay. At the age of 26, and after about four years at sea, James married Martha J. Hilton on November 20, 1843, just two days before her twenty-first birthday. She was from Boothbay Center. Her father was Israel Holton, a sea captain and Veteran of the War of 1812. She grew up accustomed to having her father away at sea, which prepared her for her own married life.<sup>13</sup> She and James would not live together without long separations until 1868 when he took over the lighthouse twenty-five years into their marriage. Together they had four children.<sup>14</sup> There is no evidence that he ever took any of his family with him to sea, which was a relatively common practice for some captains during this time. The letters that were saved from his shipping days were addressed to his oldest child, Eliza, but none to his wife. Interestingly, he sometimes inserted directives to Martha through his narratives. He described his experiences and stated his expectations to Eliza. Parenting came through the letters often hundreds,

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<sup>11</sup> Provision receipts, bills of lading, pierage and harbor fee documents identify ships and dates sailed by Captain McCobb. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection. John Adams (Receipt from Miller and Hatch) Boston, May 10, 1849, Orient 1850-1852(Bill of Lading), Westport 1853-1855 (Receipts of pierage and harbor fees), Nebraska 1855 (provisions list), Denmark 1856(provisions receipt purchased in Boston).

<sup>12</sup> Maine Public Broadcasting Network. "They Came by Sea [Program 3]." Home: The Story of Maine. <http://www.mpbn.net/homestom/transcript3.htm> (accessed July 5, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Greene, 548.

<sup>14</sup> Greene, 573. Eliza J. born July 11, 1846; Clara F. May 8, 1850; Willard H. Sept. 8, 1852; Laura E. Oct. 4, 1854.

sometimes thousands, of miles away. The following letter illustrates this.

My Dear little daughter Eliza Jane,

I thought this time I would write you a few lines. You will not be able to read it all but must get your mother to assist you in reading it. It is Sunday morning and I feel rather lonesome here and am thinking, O, if I could only be at home this morning with little Eliza, and Clarry, and Will, how pleasant it would be. But that cannot be for I am good ways from you, over seven hundred miles.

A plenty of little folks with their black hands and faces come down to the wharf to see us. A large vessel is quite a sight for them here I pity them and you would too if you could see them, so dirty and ragged, nobody to look out for them to mend their clothes and take care of them. And they are wicked, too. Will steal from each other and from stranger, too, everything they can get hold of.

Now, Eliza, I want you to be a good little girl and help your mother all you can and do all you can to please her. Wait upon her and do every little thing she wants you to. And then take good care of little Willard by rocking him in his cradle and playing to him. I am in hopes to be at home again next week. Shall be ready to leave here about Tuesday night or Wednesday morning if it should be good weather and if I can have a good northwest wind. can be out to sea in about two days.<sup>15</sup>

His sailing voyages were mostly on the east coast and began in the late 1830's through the early 1850's, and perhaps extending into the 1860's on the west coast. Toward the latter part of his sailing career there is an interesting story of shipwreck. He was master of an eighty-five foot schooner named the *Westport*. In March of 1855, headed to North Carolina to pick up lumber, the ship lost a mast. Repairs were made in Virginia; Captain McCobb got the lumber, however, the ship did not make the return trip. It sprang a leak that could not be pumped. Everyone on the ship was saved and taken to New York by another schooner. This meant financial loss to James, especially if he was master and owner of the ship.<sup>16</sup> He did continue sailing for at least two more years or so before heading off to California. Not only did he lose a ship, the end of big sailing ships' days was also coming to a close. "The impact of the Civil War combined with the advent of the steamship began to bring the Golden Age to an end. Although wooden sailing ships remained a vital component of Maine's coastal economy through World War I and even experienced a brief revival during World War II, the grand day of shipbuilding began a long, slow decline."<sup>17</sup> James witnessed this decline, and perhaps its impact led him west for a while. Maine's economy was changing and suffering. There is evidence that his wife and children stayed in Boothbay on the family homestead during his California years. A property tax

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<sup>15</sup> James McCobb to Eliza from Port Conway, Virginia, May 8, 1853. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

<sup>16</sup> Rice, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Maine Public Broadcasting Network. "They Came by Sea [Program 3]."

receipt paid by Mrs. McCobb is on record. It was for the amount of \$7.22, dated January of 1863, for Captain James McCobb's Boothbay balance for 1861.<sup>18</sup> They were about one year behind in paying taxes which indicated there may have been financial struggles. In a letter written later, while at Burnt Island, he expresses gratitude and relief that his new position as lighthouse keeper allowed the ability to make a decent living.

### **Life as the Keeper at Burnt Island Lighthouse 1868-1880**

The Burnt Island Lighthouse was established in 1821 by an act of Congress during James Monroe's presidency. Ten thousand, five hundred dollars was approved for three Maine lighthouse projects.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the five-acre island was purchased from James McCobb's uncle for one hundred fifty dollars. Farmers had been burning the island and using it for grazing sheep, explaining the name, Burnt Island.<sup>20</sup> The thirty-foot granite tower and house were built on the highest elevation on the southeastern point. The lighthouse was located about one mile from the mainland and was visible for about thirteen nautical miles.<sup>21</sup> It was there that James McCobb dedicated twelve years of his life in service to the mariners of Boothbay Harbor. In a report written by I.W.P. Lewis, an engineer to the Light-house Survey, from Washington wrote: "The best keepers are found to be old sailors, who are accustomed to watch at night, who are more likely to turn out in a driving snow storm and find their way to the light-house to trim their lamps, because in such weather they know by experience the value of a light, while on similar occasions the landsman keeper would be apt to consider such weather as the best excuse for remaining snug in bed."<sup>22</sup> If this be true, then James McCobb was a perfect candidate to

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<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Blood's narrative on her great grandfather, James McCobb, cites this detail. Blood family collection.

<sup>19</sup> Rice, 253.

<sup>20</sup> Lighthouse Friends.com <http://www.lighthousefriends.com/light.asp?ID=503> (accessed on July 22, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Greene, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Maritime Heritage Program: Lighthouse Keepers in the Nineteenth Century <http://www.npa.gov/maritime/keep/keep19th.htm> *Excerpted with the author's permission from Nineteenth-Century Lights: Historic Images of American Lighthouses by Candace and Mary Louise Clifford (Alexandria, VA: Cypress Communications, 2000)* Report of I.W.P. Lewis reproduced in *Public Documents and Extracts from Reports and Papers Relating to Light-Houses, Light-Vessels, and Illumination Apparatus, and to Beacons, Buoys, and Fog Signals 1789-1871* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), p. 370. (accessed July 21, 2010).

tend the Burnt Island Light. He had spent years at sea and knew firsthand the necessity and comfort of the light guiding vessels to safe harbor. McCobb was fifty-one years old, well into middle age, yet healthy enough to carry out the required duties competently. He was appointed on April 24, 1868, by the Treasury Department, Light-House District #1 of Portland to be the sole keeper of Burnt Island Lighthouse. He received a salary of \$540.00.<sup>23</sup> This position meant steady work, solid pay, and an isolated life with mainly just his family. The children were now well into their teens or young adulthood; only the two youngest, Willard and Laura, were living at home. The transition between years at sea and being away in California must have caused an interesting period of adjustment for the McCobb family.

James McCobb welcomed this new lifestyle and work assignment. During February of 1869, in a letter to his oldest daughter, Eliza, who was in Boston he wrote; “We are all well here at home and getting about as usual. It is a little lonesome sometimes here on the island in stormy weather, though when we get a good heavy storm I don't mind it too much.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, for him there would be much to tend to and watch for during foul weather. Winter weather and fog required his constant attention.

He went on to write, “Your mother and Willard seems to be well contented but Laura at times is rather uneasy. She does not like too much confinement to take the time right through. I was never more contented in my life. 'Tis so much better than anything else I could do, and I should dread so much having to go to sea again.”<sup>25</sup> Back in Boothbay on Burnt Island he was finally able to stay at home and make a good living. The letter expresses that he had found his true vocation. It echoes of that timeless quest of coming home. All that he had experienced as a mariner was integrated and used as a lighthouse keeper.

“Here we can realize a little more than a bare living. Last year we sold sixty dollars’ worth of butter and milk, twenty dollars of eggs. (Clear of feed for the hens) am now are renting the old place

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<sup>23</sup> Portland Light-House District Ledger page. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

<sup>24</sup> James McCobb to Eliza. February 1869. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

<sup>25</sup> James McCobb to Eliza. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

for about seventy-five dollars aside from the hay. These things all help along and if I can only have the light to tend for the next four years shall feel pleased and probably will have it- unless some strong prejudice is got up in favor of the soldiers.”<sup>26</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, governor of Maine, was doing much politically to support returning soldiers. Keepers were appointed positions and James knew he was most fortunate to have his job. He goes on say that “so far I have given good satisfaction to the Lighthouse board in Portland or at least they have told me so.”<sup>27</sup> He was near the end of his first year as a keeper and had determined his goal to stay for five. He ended up serving for twelve. The Lighthouse board certainly approved of James McCobb.

His position was coveted by others, however, almost a year later, in January of 1870, another correspondence to Boothbay friend, George Beath, who moved to California, reveals conflict around retaining his assignment.

How long I shall remain on Burnt Island is a matter of doubt. There has already been an effort made to have me removed. Tom Boyd (you know Tom is always poking his nose in everybody's business) has been trying to get me out of this to make room for his brother Alex, but as you see has not yet succeeded and from appearances I think he will hardly make the raffle. He commenced last March by getting a petition signed by a large number of his friends and representing that I had been here seven or eight years, which at the time I had only been here about ten months. As soon as I knew of what he was doing, I made a statement of the facts signed by every man around the harbor except for Fisher and Allen Levi, also many from the Mills, and other parts of the town, also a letter signed by all the owners and masters of Vessels at home at the time, asking that I be retained and sent them on. That seemed to set things at rest and they still remain so.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Boyd was well known in the community because he was a business man, sheriff and active leader in the Republican party of Lincoln county.<sup>29</sup> Whatever details unfolded at this time, one outcome is clear, James retained the position. This again is a testimony to his qualifications, his character, and reputation as a lighthouse keeper and a respected community member.

As a keeper, James McCobb had to meet standards issued by the lighthouse board located in

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<sup>26</sup> James McCobb to Eliza.

<sup>27</sup> James McCobb to Eliza.

<sup>28</sup> McCobb to George Beath. January 3, 1870. Burnt Island Lighthouse Collection.

<sup>29</sup> Greene, 506

Portland. The ability to read, write, record keep, perform manual labor, make repairs, keep order, and pull and sail a boat, along with tending the light were expected.<sup>30</sup> In his own words, McCobb explained some of his duties to his friend George:

Light-Keepers are not allowed to go about as much as they used to go and so I stay home pretty close. I still like the business of keeping the light and taking care of things around me very much. It takes up about one half of my time doing the work about the light and the balance of it in summer work in my garden, catch a few fish, lobsters or something of that sort and so I pass the time off very well. But in the winter, I can do nothing else but tend the light. It is more work in winter than in summer. I have to keep a fire in the lantern every night to keep the oil soft and that adds very much to the work for the stove will smoke more or less, and then I have to keep the work all clean and coal smoke is hard stuff, you know, to get off the paint. The lighthouse board requires everything to be kept as clean as a hounds tooth.<sup>31</sup>

The business of keeping light was one that James McCobb was well suited for and liked “very much.” He kept a logbook that frequently explained his daily duties and some of the unexpected events that he was called upon to respond.

November 12, 1873

Trimmed the light as usual, work attended to, fresh breeze from the south. Sailboat upset near the light, no one lost, went to her assistance.

April 2, 1874

Received a copy of general orders from the lighthouse board in which keepers are required to report monthly to district engineer the condition of buildings, grounds, apparatus, and under his charge stating distinctly the repairs and improvements required.....Lighthouse keepers will be required to replace broken window glass and to keep their cisterns, pumps, and drains in repair at their own expense unless otherwise recommended in each case by the engineer.

August 4, 1875

Through the daylight showers and calm weather. At night a perfect dungeon of fog. Many sailboats being out and getting lost in the fog have to stay out all night. One boat with two men in her landed at the station and stopped until morning then started again for Squirrel Island<sup>32</sup>

Sailors needing assistance could rely on McCobb's help. He knew how to maneuver a boat with confidence, a welcomed relief for destitute sailors. Filling out reports on a monthly basis required

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<sup>30</sup> Maritime Heritage Program: Lighthouse Keepers in the Nineteenth Century <http://www.npa.gov/maritime/keep/keep19th.htm> (accessed July 21,2010).

<sup>31</sup> McCobb to George Beath

<sup>32</sup> Jones, Elaine [transcriber] and James McCobb. Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbooks. Located in the National Archives. Record Group 26. Records of the United States Coast Guard. Entry 80(NC-31) Lighthouse Station Logs 1879-1941. National Archives.

attention to detail and an accurate assessment of his small island kingdom. Knowing what his responsibilities were and then carrying them out reflected his competency and exemplified his observant nature. He kept a good eye on the numerous aspects of maintaining the light he was entrusted with. He was industrious and attentive to record keeping details. All these skills added even more reasons to why he was able to retain his position until *he* was ready to retire. His log also reflects more than just the facts. You can almost hear his voice in some of the expressions and word pictures he used. “A perfect dungeon of fog” causes the reader to feel claustrophobic and fearful for the sailors staying out all night not daring to move, and thankful for the two men who landed safely on the island. Imagine all the stories McCobb could have told!

Weather along the coast directed the daily drama of lighthouse life. Long durations of fog, rain, and strong winds were constant threats. James McCobb's log shows the risks of tending the light.

December 29, 1876

Heavy snowstorm set in about sunset. Wind from the northeast blowing quite fresh at eight in the evening it had increased to gale and still increasing until midnight when it blew a perfect hurricane from the east. Dumped snow, some rain accompanied it making it necessary to be often on the outside of the lantern to wipe off the damp snow from the plate glass and though dangerous for one to be on such a night as that still it was done and the glass kept bright and clear.<sup>33</sup>

At the age of fifty-nine, Keeper McCobb was thirty feet up on the outside of the lighthouse lantern room clearing the glass so the light could to be seen. He recorded this dangerous event with heroic pride. It was snowing, raining, perhaps freezing onto the glass, the wind was blowing wildly, the waves must have been crashing, and he was holding on for dear life. He survived and so did the vessels at sea the night. The poem “Burnt Island Light”, published February 3, 1877, may have been written in gratitude by a mariner, whose initials were HFY, who survived that dreadful stormy night.

When lo! In the distance, a glimmer  
Shines forth 'mid the darkness and gloom;  
'Tis the HarborLight, Sailor, take courage,  
It tells you of safety and home.

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<sup>33</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

Long life to its brave, faithful keeper!  
 May his pathway on earth be as bright  
 As the rays that fall from his beacon,  
 Flooding the shore with light.<sup>34</sup>

What McCobb's response was to the poem is unknown. However, it was true that he understood the value lighthouses were for a guiding a vessel safely to port when sailors were at the mercy of the weather. This poem must have validated his sense of purpose as a keeper if he read it. It not only explained the peril of the crew, but attributes their safety to the keeper, describing him as brave and faithful. The excerpt from the December 29<sup>th</sup> log entry illustrates his faithful commitment. The poem also cheers and blesses the work of the keeper. There were other poems written and published in the *Boothbay Register* during his career about the Burnt Island Lighthouse and its symbolic presence. In March of 1877, another poem described the light in a beautiful Biblical sense. In September of 1878, another one appeared in the *Squirrel Island Squid*. The heroic elements of keeping a lighthouse were emphasized both throughout McCobb's log and what was written about him and his position.

Though the log was intended for lighthouse business, occasionally accounts of a more personal nature found their way in. During the months of February and March of 1877 McCobb wrote only a few entries and they were about his wife, Martha. The winter was filled with ailing health concerns.

February 22, 1877

Sent off to the harbor for Dr. Blossom. Came to the island to see Mrs. McCobb who is much troubled with nervous disease.

March 16, 1877

Sent off again for doctor for wife. She being threatened with congestion of the lung.

March 22, 1877

Wife died this morning about 2o'clock of congestion of the lungs and cankers in the throat, stomach and bowels. She had been in feeble health all winter but able to be about the house attending to her work until about two weeks before her death when a cold brought on congestion and then canker which caused her death as above stated. She was carried off to the harbor and buried at the center burying ground in Boothbay on the following Sunday. Her age

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<sup>34</sup> Boothbay Historical Society. *Boothbay Register*, February 3, 1877.

was fifty three years and four months.<sup>35</sup>

Not much is known about Martha McCobb. She is only mentioned during this section of the log. She had “been in feeble health all winter” and “much troubled with nervous disease.” The last month of her life she was diagnosed with congestion of the lung and cankers. This amounted to fluids and infection of some sort in her body.<sup>36</sup> She spent the final eight, almost nine years with her husband on the island. They had been married for over thirty- three years. She must have been independent and capable, because she was left in charge of the home in his absence. Hers was not a pretty or easy death. There are stories that her ghost has been encountered by later keepers who came to Burnt Island.

An interesting change in tone emerges in McCobb's log after Martha's death that leads the reader to draw other conclusions about her role in his life and work. He tends to inject more emotion, and especially complains around the topic of visitors to the island. The tourism industry was booming in Maine at this time and Boothbay was one of the most desired destinations. The train and steamship made travel easier for people to take vacations. Consequently, people came to see the lighthouse on Burnt Island. There are close to a dozen references in the log about these “strangers”. Most were after Martha's death.

July 23, 1874

Many strangers visiting the station to see the light. It being something new to most of them. Three boats a day from Bath to Squirrel Island making their trips with passengers from six to eight steamer boats per day are passing this station showing increasing importance of a light station as this place and also that some fog signal should be established here.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

<sup>36</sup> Nineteenth Century Diseases <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~memigrat/diseases.html#C> (accessed on July 27, 2010.)

Congestion. An excessive or abnormal accumulation of blood or other fluid in a body part or blood vessel. In congestive fever (see text), the internal organs become gorged with blood.

Canker. An ulcerous sore of the mouth and lips, not considered fatal today. Synonym: aphthous stomatitis. See cancrum otis.

Cancrum otis. A severe, destructive, eroding ulcer of the cheek and lip, rapidly proceeding to sloughing. In the last century it was seen in delicate, ill-fed, ill-tended children between the ages of two and five. The disease was the result of poor hygiene acting upon a debilitated system. It commonly followed one of the eruptive fevers and was often fatal. The destructive disease could, in a few days, lead to gangrene of the lips, cheeks, tonsils, palate, tongue, and even half the face; teeth would fall from their sockets, and a horribly fetid saliva flowed from the parts. Synonyms: canker, water canker, noma, gangrenous stomatitis, gangrenous ulceration of the mouth.

<sup>37</sup> Burnt Island Keeper's Logbook.

Visitors in this sample entry were not a problem but a way to underscore the station's importance and plug a request for a fog signal. His manner of writing reflects no negative emotions toward the strangers visiting the island. That changed the year following Martha's death and continued afterward. They are referred to as company, unwelcomed company now that he would be the one expected to spend time talking with them.

September 8, 1877

Summer company just leaving for their homes for which we feel truly thankful that the Almighty sends the cool weather to stir them up a little and remind them of home. For indeed, they do sometimes make me a good deal of trouble about the station.

August 29, 1878

Much company here today to see the lighthouse and to make themselves troublesome generally as they could. Wish the board would issue one more regulation and that would be that no more strangers could be admitted to the lantern room under no circumstances.

August 15, 1879

This morning quite cool and looking fallish. Hope it will start off some of the company from the island. For they are just a nuisance anyway or at least many of them appear so to me when they are here visiting this place. I like company but too much is such a burden.<sup>38</sup>

Martha's presence allowed James McCobb the freedom to go about his work while she entertained the "company and strangers" who visited the island. Her contribution of keeping company supported his priority of keeping to the lighthouse duties he was hired to complete. He was happiest when unencumbered by distractions. Her role was a valuable buffer to him, and he must have missed it a great deal, adding another layer to his loss.

The years of 1878-80 accounted for more changes and challenges for McCobb. His log is filled with many side comments that were not pervasive earlier about the cow, his birthday, elections, and straight out opinions about his changing world. Its focus highlights his personal thoughts to a greater degree.

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<sup>38</sup> Burnt Island Keeper's Logbook.

July 12, 1878

`Lampist Mr. Johnson came to the station and fitted up lamp for burning kerosene. Also put in on plate of glass in the lantern.

July 13, 1878

Lighted up with kerosene last night for the first time. Had a nice bright light, although am in hopes the kerosene will work well but cannot see why a good kerosene can't be made to enable night without having to change the lights at midnight.<sup>39</sup>

Though the fuel being burned had changed, the need for the lighthouse keeper to get up and check the lamps at midnight remained. The comment he stated indicated a longing for reprieve. Now ten years into the job, one can sense McCobb's weariness. Life was different. He was over sixty years old, but the demands of tending the lighthouse continued on with increased and growing government involvement.

October 11, 1879

Cool, damp day, appearance of heavy easterly storm. Storm signal flying at the harbor first of the day at noon pulled down. Still threatening weather although. Am of the opinion that the storm weather signal is of but little benefit to navigation after all said and done. An old sailor with any gumption at all about him knows more about weather now than all the weather wise prophets sitting in their offices at home.<sup>40</sup>

The changes that occurred during McCobb's twelve years as a keeper were many. The National Weather Service formed in 1870 and weather continued to grow into a science.<sup>41</sup> James McCobb had developed a keen sense of weather watching and prediction born from experience sailing and keeping the light. He did not hold "weather wise prophets" in high esteem or some of the new systems coming into place.

His youngest daughter, Laura, was living at home during the winter of 1879; however, she was not well. Along with dealing with changes in tending the light, the impact from the loss of his wife, his older children gone, and his own aging, the weariness increased. He had to do more with less. Even the

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<sup>39</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

<sup>40</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

<sup>41</sup> The Beginning of the National Weather Service: the Signal Years (1870-1891) as Viewed by the Early Pioneers. <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/pa/history/signal.php> (Accessed on July 27, 2010).

dependable help of a youthful daughter was not available.

November 16, 1879

Daughter has been quite sick for a few days with bad cold and threatened with a fever but am in hope now to keep the fever off, am doing all that can be done for it. These lone islands is a hard place to be sick.

January 10, 1880

Sick daughter came out of room and took dinner with the family for the first time in eight weeks. Hope now she will soon be able to go about the house.<sup>42</sup>

His log reveals that Laura was sick for many weeks and for much of the winter. Her illness, coupled with the demands of the winter season, must have been exhausting. Later that same year, in April, James McCobb left the island to go to Boston to visit another sick daughter, probably Eliza. While away, his son, Willard had returned to the island at some point and was left in charge of the station.<sup>43</sup> This was a common practice. Family members would step in if relief was needed and sometimes even took over permanently in some situations.<sup>44</sup> That was not the case in the McCobb family. Later that year, Keeper McCobb resigned from his position.

October 7, 1880

Keeper resigned his position and sent his resignation to the Superintendent in this lighthouse district to the effect soon as his successor can be appointed owing to poor health. The keeper does not feel able to do the duties required of him at the station. He feels the importance of a good light in all kinds of weather.

October 22, 1880

Keeper's resignation is accepted and Freeman Grover Jr. of Southport, Maine appointed to take his place. He will take charge of the station first of the coming week or as soon as the weather is such that we can leave the island and he can move on.

October 26, 1880

Freeman Grover Jr. takes charge of the station today and James A. McCobb retires.<sup>45</sup>

The five years that James McCobb set as his goal initially had extended to twelve and a half.

Lighthouse keeping was physically demanding, required stamina and was emotionally taxing. Caring

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<sup>42</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

<sup>43</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

<sup>44</sup> Maritime Heritage Program: Lighthouse Keepers in the Nineteenth Century  
<http://www.nps.gov/maritime/keep/keep19th.htm> (accessed July 21 ,2010).

<sup>45</sup> Burnt Island Lightkeeper's Logbook.

for the light in all kinds of weather had taken its toll on him. Admirably, to best serve the sailors' interests he knew it was time to pass the torch by retiring from the work he loved. He received a letter accepting his resignation from the First District Light-House Inspector dated October 7, 1880. The closing lines stated: "I regret that you feel that it is best for your health to resign. The Light-House Establishment will lose a faithful and capable keeper when you leave."<sup>46</sup> He recorded those final days and the changing of keepers in his log. Keeper McCobb closed the book and moved off Burnt Island at the age of sixty-three on October 26, 1880.

### **Conclusion**

To read James McCobb's letters and logbook is to open a treasure chest to the past. They provide a key to unlocking the life of a man living at a lighthouse in Maine during the 1870's. Using McCobb's writings sharpens the image of his life on the island. Researching and collaborating sources from the nineteenth century also allow the reader details and images of his past. His logbook was required writing for his vocation and also permitted his work to be understood. The letters were relational and private in nature but tell his thoughts and feelings. Both are a gift to those who wish to remember this keeper's history. Weaving McCobb's story together using the tangible evidence of his logbook and letters and then drawing conclusions from that evidence, has been a challenging attempt to fill in the blanks for the reader. Providing this biography for the interpretive history program at Burnt Island is one motive for a written narrative about James McCobb.

My second motive for selecting James McCobb is of a more personal nature. Insight into the present world can be gained by penetrating McCobb's time. By puzzling out the pieces of his life, an idea of who he was takes shape. His story plays out in a pattern that is common today with its predictable life seasons, yet there is a special highlight; that of a discovered life's calling. That is why his story needs telling. Perhaps a parallel for today would be in likeness to an airplane pilot becoming

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<sup>46</sup> Lighthouse inspector to James McCobb. October 7, 1880. Burnt Island Collection.

an air traffic controller. McCobb's passage from a mariner to lighthouse keeper integrated all he had become by his mid-life. Earlier life experiences and lessons from James McCobb's past contributed to his final and most satisfying career attainment.

All those years spent at sea trained and prepared him for his years at Burnt Island Lighthouse, where he wrote: "I was never more contented in my life. 'Tis so much better than anything else I could do,"<sup>47</sup> He remained surrounded by the ocean, but now he had come home. He had been apart from family; now they were part of his daily life. The journey had been lengthy and at times over rough seas, now he afforded safe harbor for those who were still on their own journey. He understood the value of the service he rendered. It was an occasion for celebration. McCobb's story is an account that folks in the last quarter of their career hope will be their narrative; that they finished admirably.

Finally, McCobb's overall ambition and legacy can be found by turning again to his own words that illuminate and substantiate his memory. "Be industrious, be prudent, be steady for now is the time in which you establish a character that is to last you through life, and character is all a poor man has to rely on. Unless a man can be well spoken of- what is he good for?"<sup>48</sup> A father poured into his letter what he hoped to pour into his son. Determining the impact of McCobb on his children can be drawn from his own written words to them. Letters saved by his children indicate they valued their father's role in their lives. McCobb modeled these traits in his own existence. Industry was demonstrated through the diligent and conscientious care of tending the light every day for a dozen years. Prudence was exercised through the discrete decisions that needed to be made for the safety of the mariners and his response to their plights. Steadiness was the resolve to hold firm and to stay the course of his assignment. He was described as faithful in both a poem and in response from the lighthouse inspector's letter. Loyal, true, constant, and trustworthy expand upon this definition of a faithful person. Yes, James McCobb was well spoken of. Specific words may be few, but the record of his

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<sup>47</sup> McCobb to daughter, Eliza.

<sup>48</sup> McCobb to son, Willard.

actions tells us the story. James McCobb's life and contributions to the Burnt Island Lighthouse can now be known, remembered and applauded.

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