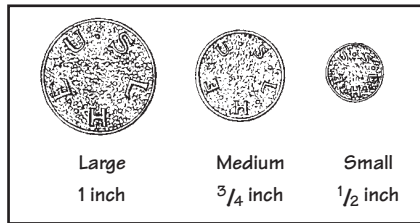




# The Keeper's New Clothes



By George Worthylake

**I**n 1883, the Lighthouse Board prescribed dress and fatigue uniforms for keepers and personnel assigned to Service tenders and lightships. Until this requirement, there was no uniform. From 1789, when the federal government established the Lighthouse Service, until the period 1884-85, keepers at light stations wore just about what they pleased. The Board stated, "It is believed that uniforming the personnel of the service, some 1,600 in number, will aid in maintaining its discipline, increase its efficiency, raise its tone, and add to the esprit de corps."

## Lighthouse Keepers and Persons Assigned to Vessels

On May 1, 1884 the following regulation went into effect:

"The uniform for male keepers and assistant keepers of light stations, and the masters, mates and engineers, and assistant engineers of light vessels and tenders, will consist of coat, vest and trousers and a cap or helmet. The coat will be double-breasted sack with five large buttons on each side – the top ones placed close to the collar and the bottoms ones six inches from the bottom hem, the others equal distance between them. the length of the coat to be the extended arm and hand; the coat to be provided with two inside breast pockets and two outside hip pockets;

the latter to have flaps so arranged to be worn inside the pockets if desired. Each sleeve to have two small buttons on the cuff seam, 1/2 inch apart, the lower button one inch from bottom of cuff.

"The vest to be of navy-blue cloth in winter, or navy-blue serge or flannel in summer, and cut single-breasted, with five small regulation buttons and a small rolling collar, so as to show about 6 inches of the shirt bosom; to have a watch pocket in the left side and a lower pocket on each side.

"The trousers to be of navy-blue cloth in winter, or navy-blue serge or flannel in summer, cut in the prevailing styles, with pockets in hip seams.

"Cap to be of the navy pattern, with adjustable chin strap of gold lace 1/2-inch wide, fastened to the sides by small regulation buttons; in the middle of the front of the cap a gold embroidered wreath 1 1/4-inches high by 2 inch spread, enclosing a silver embroidered light-house 3/4-inch high; a black mohair braid 1 1/2-inches wide to be worn around the cap."

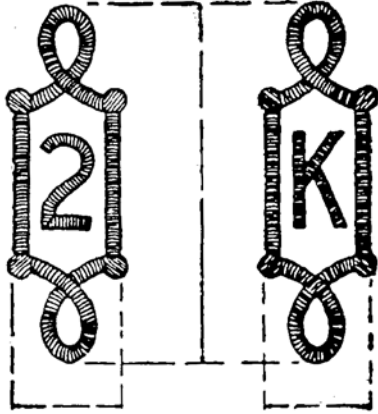
The regulation went on to describe the sleeve ornaments and overcoat. The regulations further described the uniform requirements of individuals assigned to lighthouse tenders (mates, engineers, clerks, etc.), personnel on lightships (similar to tender personnel). The instruction delineated the differences between the uniforms assigned to keepers from those of the vessel personnel.

"Keepers of Lighthouses to wear the same uniform as the masters of tenders, except the ornaments on the sleeves of coat. They will wear on each lapel of sack coat a loop embroidered in gold, 2 1/2-inches long by 3/4-inch wide, the border of the loop to be 1/10-inch broad. If principal keeper – the letter 'K' will be worn within the loop. The first assistant keeper – the figure '1' will be worn embroidered within the loop. The second assistant keeper – the figure '2' will be worn embroidered within the loop ..." etc.

## Lighthouse and Buoy Depot Personnel

The regulation next directed the keepers of the Light-house and buoy depots to wear the same uniform as principal keepers of light-houses, but described a completely different uniform. "...to wear a single breasted sack coat of navy-blue cloth in winter, or of navy-blue flannel in summer, cut after the pattern of the army blouse, with a turn-over collar 1 1/2-to-2 inches deep, buttoned up to the throat, with five large regulation buttons on the right side, the top button just below the collar seam, the other buttons equally spaced between the top button and the bottom button. The letter 'W,' 3/4-inch high, worked in gold, enclosed in a gold embroidered loop of same dimensions as worn by light-house keepers, to be worn on each of the collars, 1 inch from bottom." The vest was the same

**Keepers and assistant keepers**



**K for keeper**  
**1 for first assistant keeper**      **3 for third assistant keeper**  
**2 for second assistant keeper**      **4 for fourth assistant keeper**

**Regulation Buttons for General Service**  
 To be triple gilt on brass



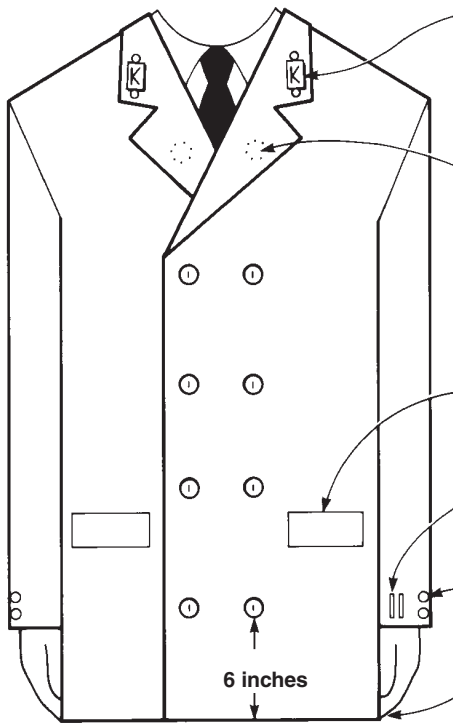
One inch



Three-fourths inch



One half inch



Insignia in rectangle with loops denoted rank

Top two buttons under the collar

Two flap pockets

Small vertical slash for every five years of service – gold star for 25 years

Two small buttons on the seam of sleeve

Jacket length to tips of fingers

6 inches

as described-for the keepers as was the pants, although called pantaloons.

“The captain of the watch to wear the light-house in gold embroidered wreath. Belts to be of adjustable black leather, 2 inches wide, with gilt clasps, on which in raised letters to have the word ‘Police.’ When over-coats are worn the belt will be outside, with a leather stall to carry the club.

“The shield shall be the same as that worn by the police of Richmond County, NY [Staten Island] To be worn on the left breast of the [coat].

“Hats to be of the helmet pattern, of blue in winter or light brown linen in summer. The helmet to have a black glazed, 1/2-inch leather strap in front secured on each side by small regulation buttons and have one gilt buckle on each front quarter. To have a gilt metal light-house 1 inch above the chin strap in the middle of the front, with a whistling and spar buoy crossed.” This cap emblem description is often mistaken for a lighthouse keeper emblem. It could be that a depot watchman was later assigned to a light station and retained the unauthorized emblem, rather than purchasing the emblem required for keepers; a wreath surrounding a lighthouse.

**Buttons**

Regulation buttons for all personnel were described as, “Buttons to be triple gilt on brass. The outer rim to be slightly raised, inside of which, arranged circularly, are to be the letters U.S.L.H.E. [E standing for establishment]. There will be three sizes of buttons: Large, 1-inch in diameter; Medium, 3/4-inch in diameter; Small, 1/2-inch in diameter. The medium button to be worn on serge or flannel suits.”

**When to Wear Them**

The regulations stated that all males employed on ships or stations, “...shall wear the uniform prescribed at all times on duty, and when visiting the Light-House Board’s office or the inspector’s or engineer’s office, they will always appear in proper uniform. Laborers employed to care for river or post lights are not required to wear the uniform. All keepers and other employees, when cleaning lamps or lenses, will wear aprons provided and issued. Engineers, in repairing or cleaning machinery of vessels, may wear the overall suit prescribed to save the uniform. The measures

for uniforms of the Light-House employees are subjoined, and employees are authorized to have the uniform made wherever they may prefer; but all uniforms must conform to the regulations herewith established.

Officers are forbidden to wear any part of their uniform with citizen clothes, except the cap and overcoat. In foul weather officers and crews will be permitted to wear rain clothes."

Signed, Jas. A. Greer, Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy, Chairman

The 1885 *Report of the Lighthouse Board to Congress* noted, "... The Board has succeeded in clothing all the male light-house keepers, and the officers and crews of light-ships and light-house tenders, in a neat, appropriate, and economical uniform, which the laborers employed as acting light-house keepers are not allowed to wear..."

The Service paid for the initial outfitting of all 1,600 keepers at the 673 lighthouses existing in 1885. After this period the keepers were to pay for their own uniforms. The Service advised keepers through circulars where the keepers could obtain uniforms. The Twelfth District (California) Inspector issued Circular No. 12 in 1888, "You are informed that the regulation uniform for light keepers can be obtained from C.S. Fechheimer Plaza Stores - 706 to 720 Kearny Street. The following is a comparison of the prices charged in Philadelphia and San Francisco, expressage (freight) not included. When ordering, keepers are directed to state on the blank form whether they wish their clothing to be made in Philadelphia or San Francisco. Signed Nicoll Ludlow, Cdr, U.S.N."

The circular listed prices of uniform items in both cities. A coat was \$9.75 in Philadelphia and \$11.50 in San Francisco – trousers \$5.50 versus \$7.50. A uniform consisting of hat, jacket, vest, pants, buttons and collar devices cost \$22.25 in Philadelphia versus \$26.25 in San Francisco. In today's money that uniform would cost \$488 in Philadelphia and \$576 in San Francisco. A 3rd assistant keeper in 1888 made \$500 a year. A uniform purchased in San Francisco equaled over two-and-a-half weeks salary, and those prices didn't include black shoes, shirt, or tie. Percentage wise a complete uniform equaled about three weeks pay, and they also had to purchase a work uniform.

One can imagine that some keepers may

## SMITH-GRAY, NEW YORK



Above – A romanticized version of a keeper in his uniform from the Smith-Gray Company catalog of New York City, "Outfitters to every Branch of Public and Private Service."

A forward in the brochure proclaims, "Experienced Lighthouse men prefer Smith-Gray custom-made uniforms for three good reasons:

- (1) The quality of cloth and trimmings.
- (2) The correctness of fit and style.
- (3) The low prices—quality and good tailoring considered.

To these we have now added a fourth good reason: FREE DELIVERY.

Therefore, all cash orders for \$25.00 or more....will be delivered FREE to any point in the United States (but not Alaska)."

have taken slowly to wearing their new clothes and that some confusion must have initially existed about when and where to wear the uniform.

In 1887 a Circular was distributed to light stations, "Sir: *Your* attention is again called to the regulations of the Light House Service in regard to wearing the uniform: Under penalty of dismissal, keepers are required to wear uniform at all times on the reservations.

"Citizen's clothing may be worn by keepers while off the reservation on private business. The wearing of part citizen's clothing and part uniform is strictly prohibited at all times, either the fatigue uniform or the dress uniform must be worn – the wearing of part fatigue and part dress is also prohibited. Fatigue uniform must be kept clean and no keeper will be allowed to wear dirty clothing at any time [must have been hard to do carrying coal sacks from the dock up to the fog signal building!].

"The quarters are to be kept in good order, the paint work and floors free from dirt, and the walls free from cobwebs, soot, etc.

"The regulations of the Board as to the color of paints used in quarters must be strictly adhered to and no deviation therefrom will be permitted.

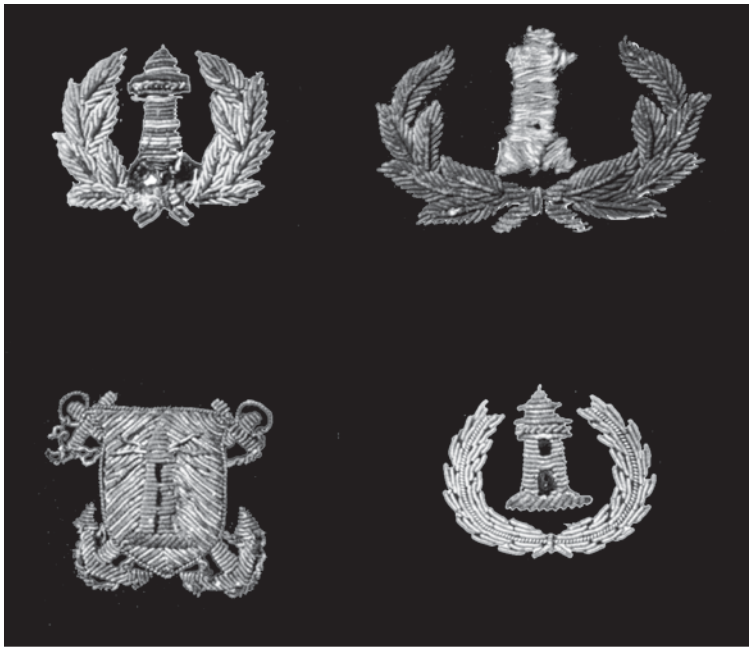
"Principal keepers are required to see these orders enforced, and to promptly report to the Inspector any violation of them. Nicoll Ludlow, Cdr, U.S.N., Inspector."

It is interesting to note the words "male keepers" in the early uniform regulations. No uniform was ever designed for female keepers, and there were numerous female lighthouse keepers. Emily Fish, keeper of the Point Piños, Calif. lighthouse, designed her own uniform.

Circular No. 2 of 1894 stated, "... The effect of this amendment is to do away with the gold band on [the] cap now worn by light house keepers." After this date the chin strip on a keeper's hat was black leather, but remained gold on the hat worn by ship's officers.

The Uniform regulations issued in 1907 paralleled earlier regulations, except they furnished more details about a warm weather uniform which consisted of a white, single breasted coat, with a high stiff collar and five, white flat buttons, blue trousers and a hat with a white cover.

*The Annual Report of the Commissioner of the (new) Bureau of Lighthouses* in 1912 stat-



Just a few of the many variations of the cap emblem on display at the Shore Village Museum, Rockland, Maine. Photo courtesy of Herb Kynor.



A Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World Light Station Keeper with a rather formal shirt and tie. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



When it comes to creative uniforms, this Maine keeper wins hands down. The coat is single-breasted (in lieu of double), the enclosure around the lapel "K"s is rather elaborate and without the prescribed loops, the middle button of the jacket is non-standard and the cravat is certainly one of a kind with an unauthorized tie pin. The medal on his chest appears to be a Civil War award, possibly Army due to the crossed cannons below the eagle.



Three Great Lakes keepers – the flanking keepers have their rank insignia on the upper part of the lapel. The seated keeper, on the lower half. The keeper on the right has only six buttons showing, there should be eight. The lapels of the keeper on the left are too large. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



**One adaptation of a Keeper's hat after the Coast Guard took over.**

ed, "To promote efficiency and friendly rivalry among lighthouse keepers, a system of efficiency stars and pennants has been established. Keepers who have been commended for efficiency at each quarterly inspection during the year are entitled to wear the inspector's star for the next year, and for those who receive the inspector's star for three successive years will be entitled to wear the Commissioner's star. The efficiency pennant, being the regular lighthouse pennant, is awarded to the station in each district showing the highest efficiency for a year, and may be flown during the succeeding year."

In 1913, a circular stated, "... New buttons have been designed and Keepers, when next ordering, should see that they obtain the proper buttons for their uniform." We believe this was the year that the originally-designed buttons with the initials "U.S.L.H.E." were replaced with the buttons showing a lighthouse in the water – similar to Minots Ledge.

New regulations were issued in 1920. The basic uniform remained unchanged but service stars and bars were added, "Gold service stars and bars, to indicate length of service, may be worn on left sleeve, the proper number of bars and stars being worn to represent length of service (one star to represent 25 years' service, and one bar to represent five years' service), the bars to be placed vertically in a row, bottom of bars to be 2 inches from edge of sleeve, and star to be directly above bars. Bars to be 3/16-inch wide by 7/8-inch long, 1/2-inch center to center; stars to be 7/8-inch in diameter. Efficiency stars shall be worn on the left hand lapel of the coat or vest, as preferred."



**Keeper Samuel Amalu of the Kilauea Lighthouse, Hawaii. The star on his sleeve denotes 25 years of service, the stripe five (30 years service). Photo courtesy of Ross Aikin.**

The 1928 regulations only concerned the keepers in that, "Working uniforms, similar to those prescribed for seamen on vessels, may be worn when required by the nature of the work [i.e., dirty]." Also, the collar was eliminated from the vest.

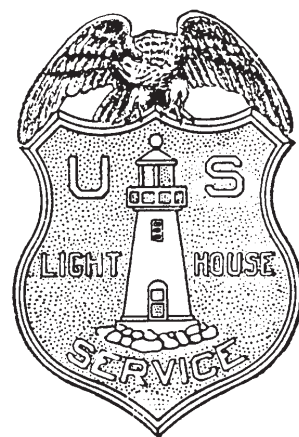
In 1939 the Lighthouse Service became part of the Coast Guard. The civilian keepers had several options. If they had enough time in grade they could retire, they could resign, they could remain a civiliankeeper or they could lateral into an applicable Coast Guard rate. A head keeper entered as an enlisted 1st class or Chief Petty Officer (depending on his length of service and qualifications). In 1941 the Coast Guard issued regulations for Uniforms for

Civilian Employees. Except for the new cover the regulations were a duplicate of the most recent Lighthouse Service regulations.

Initially, braces or suspenders held up the Keeper's uniform pants. In fact, belts were never worn for most of the 19th century. Craig Nannos, of the *Sentry Post* and a uniform expert, states that belt loops began to appear on the uniforms of a few officers during the Spanish American War, but did not become official until 1902. From that year on, for many years, most trousers were furnished with buttons for braces as well as loops for belts. The next time you watch a Civil War or 19th century western see if the actors are wearing belts. If so, they are not historically accurate. And, of course, zippers didn't appear until after WWII, so our keepers always had button flies.

For most of our history either the Army Quartermaster Corps or a similar Navy department approved all government uniforms. Usually companies authorized to manufacture military or government uniforms were periodically inspected to ensure they conformed to the regulations.

However, with all the regulations and quality control checks, uniforms were anything but uniform. Photographs in our files show various designs for the cap emblem, as well as some keepers with a four-in-hand tie and some with bow ties. We have a photo of three keepers where two have their rank emblem on the lower half of the lapel and one has it on the upper half – and these irregularities add to the rich and colorful history of our nation's lighthouse keepers.



**Hat badge for Lighthouse Service Depot watchmen. There was a similar badge for the breast of the uniform. Lighthouse Keepers did NOT wear this badge, or any badge.**



Although there were numerous female lighthouse keepers over the years, no official uniform was ever designed or issued. Emily Fish, above, keeper of the Point Loma Light Station in California, designed her own uniform.



A fairly good looking uniform, but what are those stripes all about?



A portland Head Lighthouse Keeper looking very sharp.



James Rankin, keeper of the Fort Point Lighthouse in San Francisco Bay, with non-standard lapel insignias and a hat device indicating he was a Depot Keeper, when in fact he was a lighthouse keeper. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.