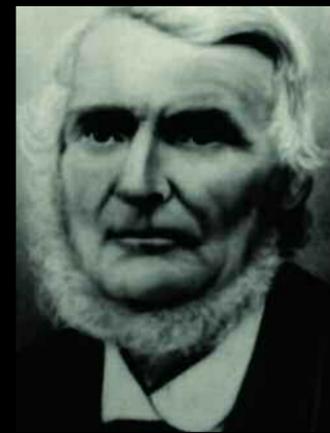




Ghost

AT THE

Light



Some say Captain Peter Nelson, Danish sailor and keeper of the Grand Traverse Lighthouse, still roams the light 113 years after his death. I'm spending the night alone with my great-great-great-grandpa to find out why his soul is restless.

TEXT BY **EMILY BETZ TYRA**
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I take the fork in the road that leads to the northernmost tip of the Leelanau Peninsula. It winds past gnarled, bare cherry trees, lonely barns and the dark, autumnal forest. Just before I reach the Grand Traverse Lighthouse, a buck runs across the road, burly and ominous. I cross the desolate grounds and knock on the lighthouse door. Stef Staley, the no-nonsense executive director of the lighthouse museum, is waiting inside.

In the fall when it's quiet Staley hears the most from the ghost that haunts the light. When she's here alone and everything is all buttoned up she hears someone with hard-soled shoes crossing the hardwood floors. "In the bathroom, I hear voices, in the hall going toward the tower. Then someone walking up the tower. I hear it, I walk out, and there's not a soul anywhere," she says. She stares into my eyes.

She's not the only one who senses the ghost. She tells of a docent volunteer here in April who, anxious and almost embarrassed, reported to her that the night before he felt someone brush past him and then felt a warm flow of air three times in a row. Another volunteer at the admissions desk for the museum sensed a presence, then glanced over to the threshold of the original exterior door and saw a man with his face down, kicking off his boots.

Recently an ordinary looking woman came into the lighthouse and asked if it was haunted. Staley told her that it may be, and the woman, a self-proclaimed clairvoyant, told her with certainty that it is Captain Peter Nelson. "It's him," she said. "He just spoke to me."

My great-great-great-grandfather, Danish ship captain Peter Nelson, was the lighthouse keeper at the Grand Traverse Lighthouse from October 12, 1874 to July 11, 1890. He died two years later.

I'm going to sleep here tonight, alone in the lighthouse, to see if he'll speak to me.

Captain Peter Nelson's ghost talked to me before—though not in words. When I was in my young teens, it was my job to dust the three framed rubbings of his gravestone that my grandparents have hanging in their farmhouse near Northport. My parents, newlyweds, came up to Northport the summer of 1971 and took a bar of hard black wax and some long scrolls of paper to the cemetery where Captain Nelson is buried to preserve what was left of his inscription. The tombstone rubbings hung near the black leather chaise lounge in frames on the barnwood wall. It was always dark in the room, even when the shades were up. I sensed his presence, and sometimes I felt as though he could see me while I dusted. He seemed larger than life, this bearded patriarch of my family, who I'd heard had sailed the seven seas, saw San Francisco when it was a mere trading port and wore a gold hoop earring.

Before we were married, my husband and I rode our bikes to the cemetery in Northport. We parked at the edge and were careful to walk only down the rows, rather than crisscross over the remains of the dead. We saw the anchor on the north side of his stone, plain as rain. Two baby graves are next to him—his grandchildren he never

knew, one who died, supposedly, from eating too many pickles. You can just barely read the inscription on the gray stone:

CAPT. PETER NELSON
BORN IN COPENHAGEN DENMARK
DIED FEBRUARY 1892
AGED 81 YEARS 7 DAYS, HOME WITH GOD
HIDE ME, O MY SAVIOR, HIDE
TIL THE STORM OF LIFE IS PAST
SAFE INTO THE HARBOR GUIDE
O, RECEIVE MY SOUL AT LAST.

Walking over the stony path from the lighthouse to the beach I cross the browned quack grass and pass curled up Queen Anne's lace blossoms bending over to the force of the wind. Off shore the whitecaps are waist high, and they smack the rocky shore. November, with its bare branches and sterling air, makes me feel vulnerable and acutely alive. It's a biblical sky—the clouds are moving in fast-forward, and I've never seen a sunset like this. Peach, orange and cranberry-red tinge the bottoms of the clouds.

I stand at this exposed point of land, watching the sunset over the Manitou Islands. Directly in front of me is Fox Island and to the northeast I can make out the smokestacks of Charlevoix. I can see why the lighthouse is here—the wind-whipped water looks like it could toss a ship. I think of the sailors' mantra: *Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailor's warning.* I hope that's a good omen for me tonight.

Staley leaves for the night. She tells me that my great-great-great-grandfather may have some ghostly company in the light. In 1967 lighthouse keeper John Marken and his wife Bernice died when coming home on Christmas Eve—they hit a tree near the lighthouse as they rounded a bend in the road. A Coast Guardman died here of a heart attack. A woman dropped dead at the kitchen sink, the cause of death of unknown. Staley told me about the night she stayed here with a relative of hers. They slept in the twin beds in the apartment I'll be staying in. In the middle of the night the relative had a dream about a woman peeling an apple with an old-fashioned apple peeler. The relative had never seen one before, but she could describe it perfectly. Then she felt a presence in the covers, almost as though something was entering her body. "Which bed?" I ask Staley. "Yours," she replies. It's going to be a fun night.

Peter Neilson Broder was just 9 years old when he left the maze of cobblestone streets and red-roofed houses of his seafaring hometown of Dragør, Denmark. The town sits eight miles from Copenhagen on the Oresund, the strait that separates Denmark from Sweden and that connects the North Sea with the Baltic Sea. The young Peter was sent to be a cabin boy on a ship. He came by boat three times to the United States as he grew up a sailor. Each time, before the ship got to port in New York, the shipmaster locked him up so they could keep him to work on the return voyage. This happened twice. The third time he jumped overboard as the boat approached New York and swam for shore as fast as he could. In his 20's he shortened

his name to Peter Nelson and became the captain on his own whaling boat that plied the waters of Iceland and Greenland. He wore a gold hoop earring, as was tradition for seamen.

Nelson went to Buffalo, New York, by canal at 31 years old and sailed the Great Lakes. Eventually he captained his own vessel, the schooner *Venus*. Captain Nelson sailed the *Venus* with Captain Harry Boardman and Perry Hannah to the site of a little sawmill on the banks of West Bay that became what we know today as Traverse City. Captain Boardman had furnished his son Horace Boardman with the money to build the mill and the elder Boardman was ready to sell it to Hannah. Perry Hannah recalled his first voyage to the base of Grand Traverse Bay, which he took with Captain Peter Nelson at the helm.

In the first days of May, 1851, I left Chicago on the little schooner *Venus*, in company with Captain Harry Boardman, a rich old farmer who lived in DuPage county, about five miles southeast of Naperville. Captain Peter Nelson, one of the finest Dane sailors that ever walked the deck of a ship, was master of the little schooner *Venus*. We had left Chicago on our journey north but two or three days when we met one of those terrible northeast gales, which were always sure to last three full days. We were well down Lake Michigan, and our brave old seaman decided that we must weather out the storm instead of returning, and never a more terrific time did I see in my life than those three days, pounding backward and forward across Lake Michigan.

As soon as the gale subsided ... we rounded into the Old Mission harbor just as the sun was going down behind the tops of the tall maples. And on the banks of the western side sat perhaps forty or fifty old Indian hunters. I could see with my glass that each one had his pipe in his mouth and they were sitting on the bank watching the movement of our ship, chatting and talking. About the middle of the afternoon we reached our moorings alongside of the little slab dock that was built in the western part of the bay. We soon made our way up to the mill. There we met the captain's son, but all hands were taking a rest. The good natured son had stopped the mill, allowing the hands to go in and have a game of euchre. This made ... Captain Boardman more willing than ever to sell.

—*The Morning Record*, Sunday, December 10, 1899

Perry Hannah, partner Albert Tracy Lay and James Morgan purchased Boardman Mill and 200 acres of land. Perry Hannah and Albert Lay built a large, new mill, and began to map out Traverse City.

Captain Peter Nelson liked what he saw here and decided not to go back to Chicago; instead he bought 160 acres near Northport in 1855. Only then did the old sailor put down roots. He married my great-great-great-grandmother, Alice Clough Bigelow, when he was 55 years old. She was the widow of a Civil War deserter who never made it home. She already had two children. And then three more, which great-great-great-grandpa Nelson fathered when he was 59, 61 and 62

Haunted Lighthouse

FALL OUTING

You may not get a glimpse of the ghost of Captain Peter Nelson, but you will be properly spooked if you head to Northport the weekend of October 22 and 23, when the historic Grand Traverse Lighthouse is transformed into a haunted house. The main floor of the lighthouse is just creepy enough for all ages, but those who step into the stone basement will be accosted by hands popping out of nooks in the wall, and specters lurching out of coffins. There will be an outside treasure hunt and a treasure chest challenge with prizes. Admission is \$2, all ages. Grand Traverse Lighthouse, Northport, noon to 4 p.m. 231-386-7195 or www.grandtraverselighthouse.com





Be a Lighthouse Keeper

HISTORICAL TRAVEL

Here's your chance to stay at the light. Grand Traverse Lighthouse Museum is accepting applications for volunteer lighthouse keepers for the 2006 season (April through December). You'll work hard during the day greeting visitors, spouting historical information and helping with maintenance of the buildings and grounds, but, hey, it can't be as grueling as the work of the 1880's keepers, who spent their days filling lights with sperm oil, trimming wicks, polishing lenses. You can watch panoramic sunsets in the lighthouse tower at day's end, and tuck up in your own bed in the northern apartment of the lighthouse. Volunteer keepers live at the light for one or two weeks. There is a fee for the program, and you must be comfortable speaking with the public and climbing lots of stairs. For more information and to download an application and handbook visit www.grandtraverselighthouse.com

years old. The youngest, my great-great-grandfather Walter, arrived in 1873. The following October Nelson was appointed lighthouse keeper at the Grand Traverse Lighthouse and he moved his young family to live at the light.

I'm in my pajamas, in bed in the lighthouse. The gales of November are at it—the wind is an intense whistle, and the lake is at a roar. The modern lighthouse light, now automated and a few yards down the shore, creates a strobe light effect in my room—every few seconds its glaring brightness illuminates the lace curtains, the sink, the large painting of a ship at sea and the rosary on the doorknob. The heat radiators are clinking. Staley said Captain Nelson's bedroom was most likely above where I'm sleeping, a thought that sends a panicked wave of heat up from my stomach into the tips of my ears. My skin tingles, and my eyes start to water. I cannot sleep.

At 10 o'clock the phone rings. I get out of bed to answer it, and no one is there. This has to be a joke—the lighthouse apartment has a private, unlisted number. It rings again—this time it's fuzzy on the line, and I rationalize that it's probably my husband, with bad cell phone reception, calling to say goodnight. My heart is pounding, and something is compelling me to walk up the stairs.

The mannequin from the museum, dressed in a lighthouse keeper's uniform, stares stonily out from a small room, his head cocked. I don't like how you're looking at me, Bub, I tell him. I enter the bathroom, which was the hallway in Nelson's day and the place where Staley hears the most ghostly activity. I put my ear to the wall. All I hear is a hollow dullness.

Now I'm climbing the metal spiral stairs up to the tower. The handles are icy cold. This is what my great-great-great-grandfather did, carrying a lantern. I think of the circa 1880 lighthouse keepers handbook I read earlier in the day: *During stormy and thick weather those keepers who have no assistants must attend in the lanterns during the entire night and omit no proper efforts to keep the lights burning at their greatest effective power.*

The same book warned that women were not allowed in the tower. What would my great-great-great-grandfather think of me now, in his tower, in my pajamas?

Outside is pitch black. All I can hear is the shriek of the wind, and see the whitecaps as the modern lighthouse light sweeps over Lake Michigan.

I'm keeping my light on. I scrounge for something to read. In the kitchen I find the *Northport Michigan Heritage Edition Cookbook* the villagers made for their sesquicentennial. I read by flashlight recipes for Corn Casserole, Northern Fluff, Medicine Meatballs, Swedish Pickled Beets, Applekuchen—recipes from women whose names I know. I start to nod off, with the wind and spray against my window. I feel peaceful and safe.

The Captain is quiet tonight.

In the archives at the lighthouse I find correspondence from Nelson relatives in Ohio, Arizona, Florida, Kingsley, Grosse Ile. One in Clinton Township catches my eye. Her name is Verna Nelson Burns, and her father lived in the lighthouse from 4 years old. I talk to her in her assisted living home in Clinton Township. She tells me her grandfather was Captain Peter Nelson. He died 22 years before she was born, but Burns grew up in his house, on his farm, which her parents inherited. My great-grandfather Wilbur was her first cousin. She remembers growing up with all of Wilbur's sisters. I called them my flower aunts: Violet, Daisy, Myrtle and Jeanne Rose.

Burns's father, William, being a quiet and gentle man, didn't tell her much about Captain Peter Nelson or even his own boyhood growing up in the lighthouse. What she did learn of our family's maritime history she learned over Sunday dinner with company. Her mother Grace made a roast, mashed potatoes, relishes and pickles, and Verna would listen to her dad talk to the other men. "He'd talk about meeting bears when he went to school," she says. "And when the lighthouse tenders came by boat to Cathead Bay with supplies, my dad would get to hop a ride to Chicago and back." Her father, William, a farmer, grew potatoes, peas and later cherries. His brother, Walter, my great-great-grandfather, first was a lighthouse keeper on Beaver and Squaw Islands, then became a carpenter. I tell her that my great-grandfather Wilbur used to tell about coming back to Northport from Beaver Island after the Great Lakes were deemed unsafe for shipping traffic. Walter would sail them home in the rough November waters, demanding his children stay down in the bottom of the boat, as the sails almost skimmed the water.

None of these details explains why Captain Peter Nelson's soul might be restless. Why I felt his presence when I dusted his grave rubbings. Why he's clapping around the lighthouse in his hard-soled boots. Then my first-cousin-thrice-removed tells me something that gives me a glimmer of an answer. Captain Peter Nelson is buried on land. This man, she says, a sailor in his soul, was the only one of seven brothers who didn't die at sea. ■

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Verna Nelson Burns passed away as this story went to press.