

# The old foghorn, Kewaunee, Wisconsin--Recorded by James A. Lipsky (1972)

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Essay by Erika Janik (guest post)\*



The Kewaunee foghorn guided ships through the thick fog of Lake Michigan for 72 years. First installed in 1909, the diaphone horn was retired from Kewaunee Pierhead Light in 1981 before finding a second life in the harbor of Duluth, Minnesota.

Kewaunee, Wisconsin, is located on the western shore of Lake Michigan, 116 miles north of Milwaukee. The area was home to a substantial Potawatomi village in the 17th century before white settlement in the 1830s.

Rumors of gold brought the first permanent European settlers to Kewaunee in 1836. Buoyed by the possibility, the “Milwaukee Advertiser” proclaimed that, “Kewaunee will soon send forth her full quota of valuable minerals so essential to the growth and splendor of the more southern towns.” Among those drawn to Kewaunee’s gold potential were businessman and fur trader John Jacob Astor and later Supreme Court judge Salmon P. Chase, both of whom secured land in the area in hopes of cashing in. Gold even made rivals of Kewaunee and a then three-year old town named Chicago to become the preeminent harbor town on Lake Michigan.

The gold rush didn’t pan out but Kewaunee’s potential as a harbor on the western shore proved to be an attractive draw. Kewaunee’s proximity to the forests of northern Wisconsin made it ripe for sawmills and its harbor essential to the transport of lumber and other forest products. By 1852, the settlement had grown large enough to become the seat of Kewaunee County.

The town continued to grow through the 19th century, becoming a hub for commercial and passenger travel on Lake Michigan. The completion of the Kewaunee, Green Bay, and Western

Railroad brought train service to Kewaunee in 1891. The next year, a ferry service connected Kewaunee to Frankfort, Michigan, increasing traffic and the importance of the Kewaunee harbor.

But Kewaunee was a thriving town without a lighthouse on a lake well known for its dangers. More than 1,000 ships have wrecked in Lake Michigan, including one of the first schooners to regularly visit Kewaunee, the *Rochester* in 1848. Another, the schooner *Octavia*, wrecked soon after when leaving the Kewaunee pier in 1874. The name “Kewaunee” was even said to have come from a Potawatomi phrase for “we are lost,” a likely common call on a lake known for its fog.

Requests for a lighthouse and improved harbor for the safety of steamships had begun in the 1850s. In 1854, the Wisconsin legislature issued a call for a lighthouse at or near Kewaunee to “remedy the evil, and remove the danger, so as to make the landing and navigation practicable at all seasons, and at all times.” Even so, a full plan to improve the harbor was not put into place and enacted until the 1880s.

Over the next two decades, the river was dredged and a variety of structures and piers were constructed, including the fitting of a pair of range lights. Frequent thick fog led to the installation of a diaphone fog horn in 1909, and the construction of a signal house to hold the steam power plant. The signal house also contained quarters for lighthouse keepers when bad weather kept them at their post. Before the signal, the Kewaunee Historical Society reported that lighthouse keepers walked to the end of the pier and banged boards to warn sailors.

The call of the foghorn became a regular part of life in Kewaunee. In 1959, the Kewaunee foghorn logged more than 300 hours in a particularly foggy May, averaging more than six and a half hours of sound per day.

The automation of lighthouses in the 1960s and 1970s led to the retirement of many Great Lakes foghorns. Anticipating this loss, university professor James Lipsky recorded 31 minutes of the Kewaunee foghorn in 1972 on a visit to his hometown. His recording captured the foghorn as well as the diesel train and the car ferry horn--all things that no longer exist in Kewaunee.

Kewaunee’s original foghorn was removed in 1981, and was on its way to the Smithsonian when it was acquired by reTurn Our Old Tone, or TOOT, an organization in Duluth, Minnesota, who wanted the familiar fog horn sound returned to their harbor. Kewaunee’s foghorn was installed in the South Breakwater Light where it remained until 2006.

As of this writing, the horn remains in storage in Duluth.

*Erika Janik is a historian, writer, and the executive producer of podcasts at New Hampshire Public Radio. She's the author of six books, including “Pistols and Petticoats: 175 Years of Lady Detectives in Fact and Fiction” and “A Short History of Wisconsin.” Her work has appeared in “Midwest Living,” “Smithsonian,” and the “Atlantic,” among others.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.