Lighthouses evoke images of fog-bound ships sounding their horns, searching desperately for port. Yet most ships today use sophisticated navigational systems; only smaller boats continue to rely on shore lights to help them navigate. One distinguishes which lighthouse is which by its assigned signature light pattern, each blinking a certain color light for an assigned length of time. Technically, some of the structures pictured here are not lighthouses since they lack attached residences, but three of the four continue to send their guiding beacons toward Lake Erie.

Early lighthouse keepers were slaves to their beams, which before electricity needed to be refueled every four hours. Between adding the oil and tending the light, it was a busy and often lonely life. It could also be dangerous as turbulent weather destroyed several early lighthouses.

Pennsylvania, despite its limited coastline, has a proud nautical history. When the United States declared war on England in June of 1812, men and munitions from Western Pennsylvania and shipbuilders from New York and Philadelphia gathered at the Erie harbor to build a fleet. This came as a complete surprise to the vaunted Royal Navy, which was soundly defeated at Put-in-Bay (1813) by U.S. naval forces under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry.
From these beginnings, a permanent settlement evolved at Erie that included commercial fishing and shipping throughout the Great Lakes. During the 19th century, lighthouses were an important part of this industry. In some cases, the attendant’s family lived in the lighthouse itself, requiring a residence in addition to the light tower.

Built in 1818 east of Erie’s public docks, the first lighthouse on the Great Lakes and its successor fell victim to a stream of quicksand below the surface. The present Erie Land Lighthouse [opposite] built in 1867, located 200 feet away from the quicksand, is a 40-foot high tower of Berea sandstone—essentially a six-foot diameter brick-lined tube on the interior with cast iron stairs leading to the light. Although operational for 32 years, it has not functioned as a lighthouse since 1901. The dignified tawny stone tower with Romanesque detailing has been used strictly as an educational tool during the 20th century.

Presque Isle translated from the French means “almost an island” and the seven-mile long recurving sand spit has been separated from Erie four times since 1819 by washouts of its narrow land connection. Native Americans saw it as the arm of the Great Spirit reaching out to create a protected harbor for them. It became a State Park in 1921, and has always been a naturalists’ paradise, with six different ecological zones and more than 320 species of birds visiting during their migrations along the Atlantic flyway. Eleven miles of hiking trails link the two lighthouses remaining on Presque Isle, the navigational tower called the North Pier Head Light and the Presque Isle Lighthouse. The first North Pier Head Light was built in 1828, but a cast iron tower replaced it in 1858. Moved farther along the shore twice, it is now encased in a 34-foot black and white square steel tower of 1940 [right]. While not technically a lighthouse, it has aided navigation at the mouth of Presque Isle Bay since before the Civil War. Today’s red optic light, placed there in 1995, flashes every 2.5 seconds.

The Presque Isle Lighthouse [page 10] was built between 1872 and 1873 to the specifications of G. L. Gillespie, a manager of engineers. Since the peninsula was not connected to the mainland by a road until 1888, a 10-room brick residence was included as part of the facility to house the light keeper and his family who were required to row across the bay to reach the mainland. In 1896, the light tower was raised another 17 feet to make it more visible from the water. At the base of

North Pier Head Light.
the 57-foot tower, the oil room held one night's worth of oil, which the keeper carried up 72 steps with six landings to keep the beacon continuously flashing. The building is five brick courses thick in order to withstand Lake Erie winters. In 1939, the coast guard took over the operation of the white light that blinks three seconds on and three seconds off. The park manager now lives in the house.

A fourth lighthouse or navigational light has been located at the Erie Yacht Club breakwater since 1983 [opposite]. The 36-foot metal cylinder painted white with a black lantern top flashes white light every two seconds at night from April through October. It carries on a 140-year tradition of aiding ships at Erie, Pa.

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Erie Yacht Club.