

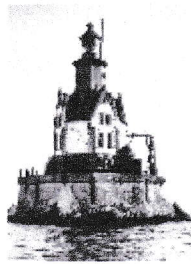
https://journaltimes.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/shipwrecks-of-racine-reef-topic-of-next-rlamps-educational-night/article_82551fff-0790-5a55-9e65-0dfcaf149b2a.html

COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

Shipwrecks of Racine Reef topic of next RLAMPS Educational Night

May 4, 2019

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The Reef Lighthouse

Photo courtesy of Racine Heritage Museum

RACINE — The majestic octagonal brick lighthouse exists now only in photographs and paintings, but for 55 years Racine's Reef Lighthouse warned ships away from the jagged limestone reef hidden just beneath Lake Michigan's surface.

Diver and amateur historian Bob Jaeck will discuss "Shipwrecks of the Racine Reef" at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 16, at the next educational night next presented by Racine Lighthouse and Maritime Preservation Society (RLAMPS). It will be held at Dewey's Restaurant and Sports Bar, 600 Main St.

Jaeck has done about 150 dives to the reef, which extends from just beyond the harbor to about two miles offshore from Downtown Racine.

Hidden hazard

The reef was formed 430 million years ago when an ocean covered what is now Wisconsin and bits of shells and other organic material slowly built up to form a limestone reef. The ocean receded, and then about 14,000 years later the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age carved out the Great Lakes. Today, the reef lurks anywhere from 5 to 40 feet beneath the water's surface with the shallowest area two miles offshore.

Because the lake level has fluctuated over the centuries, the reef wasn't always an unseen hazard, however, Jaeck explained.

"Native people told the early settlers that the Racine Reef was once an island with trees," said Jaeck. "We know this was most likely correct."

The first recorded shipwreck was the schooner Harrison which foundered on the reef on Dec. 3, 1841. In the decades that followed, many other ships became ensnared on the reef, including the iron-hulled steamer Merchant, which became trapped on the reef Oct 6, 1875, and the last ship to get caught on the reef, the Penobscot, in 1904.

Fortunately, because the ships didn't sink, no lives were lost in the wrecks. In most cases, the captain jettisoned cargo and the ship was pulled by a tugboat into the harbor.

"It's amazing that no lives were lost," commented Jaeck.

On his dives, he's found odds and ends of cargo, pieces of coal, and bits of the Merchant's iron hull.

"Every time I dive, I learn something new," said Jaeck. "I like taking photographs and recording information for historical purposes."

Lighthouse opened in 1906

After decades of wrecks, the U.S. Lighthouse Board decided to build a lighthouse to warn ships away from the danger. The octagonal brown and white brick lighthouse went into service in 1906. The striking building caught the imagination of many photographers and painters over the years.

"It was a very iconic structure. It looked like a Victorian castle," said Jaeck.

The lighthouse was a lonely outpost two miles offshore, and the lighthouse keepers had to brave the pounding waves and roaring wind during thunderstorms and snowstorms. The lighthouse keepers had to row back to shore for supplies, and a lighthouse keeper became the reef's only fatality when his boat was swamped during a storm in 1918.

The light was automated in 1954, and the lighthouse was demolished in 1961 because it was falling apart and needed extensive repairs, said Jaeck. The concrete crib remained and a 50-foot-high a steel structure housing a light and foghorn was built on top of it. The light stopped working in 2017 and the U.S. Coast Guard has not yet repaired it. The concrete base is also crumbling, said Jaeck.

Navigational improvements such as GPS have lessened the need for a warning light, he said.

“It’s completely different now and far more accurate,” he said.

RSVP

The cost is \$5 to attend the presentation. Reservations are required by emailing **bkw@gowisconsinlighthouses.com** or calling 414-228-8947. Discounted Wind Point logo merchandise will be available for purchase.

If You Go

WHAT: RLAMPS Educational Night

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 16

WHERE: Dewey’s Restaurant and Sports Bar, 600 Main St.

COST: \$5; free for RLAMPS members