



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Split Rock Lighthouse Backgrounder

Shipwrecks from a mighty 1905 November gale prompted this rugged landmark's construction. In early 1907, the U.S. Congress appropriated \$75,000 for "a lighthouse and fog signal in the vicinity of Split Rock, Minnesota." Completed by the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1910, Split Rock Light Station soon became one of Minnesota's best-known landmarks. Restoration began in the 1970s, resulting in a lighthouse that now offers a historic picture of life in this remote and spectacular setting.

In the early years of the 20th-century, iron ore shipments on Lake Superior doubled and redoubled. United States Steel's bulk ore carriers became "the greatest exclusive freight-carrying fleet sailing under one ownership in the world," so the demand for a new lighthouse on the lake's inhospitable North Shore was hardly surprising. This rocky coastline has been called "the most dangerous piece of water in the world."

The U. S. Lighthouse Service operated the site until 1939, when the U.S. Coast Guard took command. By that time, Split Rock's picturesque setting near the North Shore highway, built in 1924, had made it "the most visited lighthouse in the United States." The station closed in 1969, when modern navigational equipment made it obsolete. The State of Minnesota obtained the scenic and historic landmark in 1971. The Minnesota Historical Society now administers the 25-acre historic site and continues to restore it to its pre-1924 appearance – a time when the isolated light station was accessible only by water.

A visit to Split Rock Lighthouse starts in the Visitor Center. Here visitors become familiar with the history of Split Rock Lighthouse and learn more about how the staff interprets the light station. Four of the historic buildings are open to visitors – the lighthouse, fog signal building, oil house and keeper's restored home – and are staffed by costumed interpreters portraying life at the light station during the mid-1920s.

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# Split Rock Lighthouse Background/2

The exhibit area features artifacts and presents information on the history of the light station, the history of the North Shore and facts about Lake Superior shipping. Interactive displays give both children and adults a fun, hands-on way to learn about how lighthouses work.

The 22-minute film, “Split Rock Light: Tribute to the Age of Steel,” shows every day in the Visitor Center theater. It is an excellent and entertaining way to learn the basics of the history of Split Rock Lighthouse and the iron ore shipping industry. The film is offered every half-hour.

The museum store focuses on items specific to lighthouses and the North Shore. Many items are unique and designed specifically for this store. After a visit to the lighthouse, visitors may stop in the museum store and view the wide selection of gifts, books, clothing and souvenirs designed to make the memories of Split Rock enduring and special.

The Minnesota Historical Society is a private, non-profit educational and cultural institution established in 1849 to preserve and share Minnesota history. The Society collects, preserves and tells the story of Minnesota’s past through engaging museum exhibits, extensive libraries and collections, 27 historic sites, educational programs and book publishing.

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## Split Rock Lighthouse Timeline

- 1905:** A November 28th gale damages 29 ships on Lake Superior.
- 1907:** Congress appropriates \$75,000 for a lighthouse and fog signal in vicinity of Split Rock.
- 1910:** Split Rock light station is commissioned and completed.
- 1910-1928:** Orren “Pete” Young serves as head keeper.
- 1916:** Elevated tramway replaces original hoisting engine and derrick.
- 1924:** Lake Superior International Highway is completed past Split Rock Lighthouse. First tourists visit site by car.
- 1928-1944:** Franklin J. Covell serves as head keeper.
- 1932:** Fog signal gas engines are replaced by diesels.
- 1933:** Lighthouse tenders make last visits to Split Rock Light Station.
- 1934:** Tramway is dismantled. The station receives a truck to haul supplies. A second assistant is hired as the designated laborer and truck driver.
- 1936:** Fog signal siren is converted to a diaphone (two-tone, rather than single tone).
- 1939:** Lighthouse Service is absorbed by the U.S. Coast Guard.
- 1940:** Split Rock receives electricity. Incandescent oil vapor lamp in lighthouse is replaced by 1,000-watt bulb. Lens rotates by electric motor, and fog signal operates by electric motor.
- 1942:** U.S. Coast Guard is taken over by U.S. Navy for balance of World War II. Lightkeepers become “commanding officers.”
- 1947-1961:** Robert E. Bennetts serves as the last civilian keeper.
- 1961:** Fog signal discontinued.
- 1969:** Split Rock Light Station is decommissioned. Site is placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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# Split Rock Lighthouse Timeline/2

- 1971:** Site becomes part of Split Rock Lighthouse State Park.
- 1976:** Minnesota Historical Society takes over administration of the Split Rock station site.
- 1980:** Historic site area is expanded from 7.6 acres to current 25-acre size. Restoration of the head keeper's dwelling is completed.
- 1986:** Visitor Center opens.
- Today:** The Minnesota Historical Society continues to carry out the dual goals of preservation and interpretation of Split Rock Light Station.

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## **Split Rock Lighthouse At-A-Glance**

**Location:**

Split Rock Lighthouse Historic Site  
3713 Split Rock Lighthouse Road  
Two Harbors, MN 55616  
(Minn. Hwy. 61, 20 miles northeast of Two Harbors)

**For General Information:**

**Phone:** 218-226-6372

**E-mail:** [splitrock@mnhs.org](mailto:splitrock@mnhs.org)

**Web site:** [www.mnhs.org/splitrock](http://www.mnhs.org/splitrock)

**Media contact name:** Lee Radzak

**Contact number:** 218-226-6372

### **Related Readings and Publications**

**“Split Rock Light: Tribute to the Age of Steel”** (videotape)

Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, Minn. (1986)

**“Split Rock Lighthouse”**

Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, Minn. (1993)

**“Fitzgerald’s Storm: The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald”**

Dr. Joseph MacInnis (Thunder Bay Press, Holt, Mich 1998)

**“Geology on Display: Geology and Scenery of Minnesota’s North Shore State Parks”**

John C.Green (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, St. Paul, Minn., 1996, 2000)

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# Split Rock Lighthouse At-A-Glance/2

## **“Guardians of the Lights: Stories of U.S. Lighthouse Keepers”**

by Elinor DeWire (Pineapple Press, Sarasota, Fla., 1995)

## **“Lighthouse: Living in a Great Lakes Lighthouse, 1910 – 1940”**

Megan O’Hara (Blue Earth Books, 1998) (children’s book)

## **“Lake Superior Shipwrecks”**

Dr. Julius Wolff Jr. (Lake Superior Port Cities Inc, Duluth, Minn., 1990)

## **“Nina’s North Shore Guide”**

Nina Simonowicz (University of Minnesota Press, Mpls, Minn.)

## **“The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald”**

Frederick Stonehouse (Avery Press, AuTrain, Michigan)

## **Web Sites**

### **Association for Great Lakes Maritime History**

[www.aglmh.org](http://www.aglmh.org)

### **Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association (GLLKA)**

[www.gllka.com](http://www.gllka.com)

### **Minnesota’s Historic Shipwrecks**

[www.mnhs.org/places/nationalregister/shipwrecks/index.html](http://www.mnhs.org/places/nationalregister/shipwrecks/index.html)

### **Minnesota Historical Society School Programs**

[www.mnhs.org/school/sites/northern.html](http://www.mnhs.org/school/sites/northern.html)

### **Minnesota Historical Society Press**

[www.mnhs.org/market/mhspress/index.html](http://www.mnhs.org/market/mhspress/index.html)

### **U.S. Coast Guard**

[www.uscg.mil](http://www.uscg.mil)

### **U.S. Lighthouse Society**

[www.lighthouseSoc@aol.com](mailto:www.lighthouseSoc@aol.com)

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# Split Rock Lighthouse

## At-A-Glance/3

### Historic Site Amenities

Guided tours  
Exhibits  
Walking trails  
Picnic areas  
Museum store

### Area Attractions and Travel Information

#### Black Bear Golf Course

[www.golfatthebear.com](http://www.golfatthebear.com)

#### Carnival Thrillz

[www.carnivalthrillz.com](http://www.carnivalthrillz.com)

#### Duluth Convention and Visitor Bureau

[www.visitduluth.com](http://www.visitduluth.com)

#### Duluth OMNIMAX Theater

[www.duluthomnimax.com](http://www.duluthomnimax.com)

#### Explore Minnesota - Minnesota Office of Tourism - Northeast area

[www.exploreminnesota.com/index.asp?Section=DESTINATIONS&id=1](http://www.exploreminnesota.com/index.asp?Section=DESTINATIONS&id=1)

#### Glensheen Historic Estate

[www.d.umn.edu/glen](http://www.d.umn.edu/glen)

#### Great Lakes Aquarium

[www.glaquarium.org](http://www.glaquarium.org)

#### Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society

[www.shipwreck.org](http://www.shipwreck.org)

#### Lake County (R.J. Houle) Visitor Information Center

[www.lakecnty.com](http://www.lakecnty.com)

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# **Split Rock Lighthouse**

## **At-A-Glance/4**

**Lake Superior Zoo**

[www.lszoo.org](http://www.lszoo.org)

**Lake Superior Visitor Center**

[www.lsmma.com](http://www.lsmma.com)

**Renegade Comedy Theatre**

[www.renegadecomedy.org](http://www.renegadecomedy.org)

**Spirit Mountain**

[www.spiritmt.com](http://www.spiritmt.com)

**Split Rock Lighthouse State Park**

[www.dnr.state.mn.us/state\\_parks/split\\_rock\\_lighthouse/index.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/split_rock_lighthouse/index.html)

**Superior Whitewater Raft Tours**

[www.minnesotawhitewater.com](http://www.minnesotawhitewater.com)

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## Split Rock Lighthouse Fun Facts

The name “Split Rock” may first have been used by the French voyageurs and Jesuit explorers to describe the appearance of the high cliffs from certain positions on the lake.

In Lake Superior’s western basin, magnetic attraction due to iron ore deposits on the lake bottom caused ships’ compasses to be extremely unreliable.

In spring of 1910, the first warning apparatus – a lantern and two steam-compressed air foghorns that had an official audio range of five miles – was installed. The tower houses a third-order, bivalve Fresnel lens, which stands six feet high. Due to the location of the apparatus – 168 feet about the lake level – the beacon had an official range of 22 miles, but the aura given off by the light could reportedly be seen from as far away as 85 miles. The original lens is still in place in the lighthouse and the clockwork mechanism, which rotates the lens, has been restored. Split Rock Lighthouse operated from 1910–1969.

Lake Superior is 602 feet above sea level. The Split Rock cliff is 130 feet tall, and the lighthouse tower is 54 feet tall.

Artist Loyal Chapman created a fictitious “Split Rock Golf Course” with a hole pictured on the sloping surface of the nearby island. Only birds and boats can get to the island!

“The Good Son,” a 1993 film starring MacCaulay Culkin and Elijah Wood, was partially filmed at Split Rock using cliff-top vantage points to simulate a New England Atlantic coast. The actors actually dangled off a fiberglass cliff built atop the real cliff!

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## **Split Rock Lighthouse Fun Facts/2**

Bear-proof garbage cans were installed in 1997 to discourage the pesky bears that were known to show up on busy afternoons crowded with visitors.

Visitors seeking recreation occasionally arrive at Split Rock Lighthouse with fishing poles and tackle boxes, perhaps expecting to cast off of the 130-foot cliff. They are kindly directed to the nearby State Park for their fishing adventures.

Peregrine falcons, bald eagles, herring gulls, snowshoe hares and white-tail deer are regular “non-paying” visitors to the historic site. Moose, wolves, coyotes, fox, pine marten and black bears also make occasional visits to the site.

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# Split Rock Lighthouse Additional Background

## **The Sinking of the “Edmund Fitzgerald”**

In November of 1975, the 729-foot-long freighter, the “Edmund Fitzgerald,” left Superior, Wis., headed for Detroit with 26,000 tons of taconite. On November 28, while still en route, the ship encountered a gale for which the lake is notorious. The resulting wreck is a tragic part of great lakes history.

Split Rock Lighthouse historic site commemorates the sinking of the great ship each year in November by lighting the beacon in the lighthouse. The lighthouse and fog-signal building are open for visitors to tour, and presentations on Lake Superior shipping, navigation and storms – including a video about the Fitzgerald – play throughout the afternoon. In mid-afternoon, tours stop while the names of the 29 lost sailors are read and the lighthouse bell rings 29 times. Then the beacon is lit. November 10th is the only day during the year that visitors may see the beacon lit from the inside of the structure.

The 1975 storm that doomed the “Edmund Fitzgerald” was matched by a series of misfortunes of radar and equipment failures and, perhaps, bad judgment. Although not far from his destination when the storm hit, Capt. Ernest McSorley headed north across Lake Superior, seeking what he thought would be the shelter of the Canadian shore and Whitefish Bay. The “Arthur M. Anderson,” within 10 miles of the Fitzgerald, soon received reports that the ship was listing, and at 7:10 p.m. the Anderson crew heard Capt. McSorley’s final message: “We’re holding our own.” The Anderson lost the Fitzgerald’s image on its radar screens at 7:25 p.m., and shortly thereafter, the Fitzgerald ship and crew were lost to the stormy waters.

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## **Split Rock Lighthouse Spokesperson**

**Lee Radzak, historic site manager**

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**E-mail: [lee.radzak@mnhs.org](mailto:lee.radzak@mnhs.org)**

Lee Radzak has been the historic site manager at Split Rock Lighthouse since 1982. Radzak was previously an archaeologist for the Minnesota Historical Society, working on Minnesota state parks projects. He was also an archaeologist for the Minnesota Statewide Archaeological Survey from 1976 to 1982. Radzak has a B.A. in anthropology and archaeology.

Radzak and his family live at Split Rock and enjoy the daily experience of life at a remote lighthouse and the moods of Lake Superior. They proudly describe their home's location as situated "on a 25-acre state historic site, and the centerpiece of the 2000-acre Split Rock Lighthouse State Park."

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