

Mind The Light - The Story of Kate Walker



While the Statue of Liberty towered above the waters as the symbol of freedom, a diminutive, single mother quietly reigned as first lady of New York harbor at the turn of the last century.

Kate Walker was born in Germany in 1848 and immigrated to the U.S. among the "working class poor." Why she left her native land is unknown, but as a single parent she no doubt shared the hopes of many women who came here with dreams of a better life in America. It is unlikely, however, that she ever thought she would spend that new life on a tiny, rock islet in New York harbor.

In the early 1880s, waiting tables in a New Jersey boarding house, she met and married John Walker, assistant keeper of the Sandy Hook lighthouse. Theirs was a working class union and, in 1883, the couple moved when he was transferred

to Robbins Reef an island light about two miles southwest of the Statue of Liberty. In her early 30s, a halcyon social period for many people, Kate was deposited on an reef inhabited solely by harbor seals. (Robbins Reef comes from the early Dutch name, "Robyns Rift," or Seal Rocks.) She was devastated. From a modest home where she had a small garden and a few chickens, she moved into a five-story, cast iron cylinder 20 feet across. The lighthouse covered the entire island.

"When I first arrived I refused to unpack my bags. Everywhere I looked there was water. No grass, no land, just water. It depressed and frightened me," she told a reporter years later.

In 1886 John Walker died from pneumonia, leaving Kate, now 38 and a widow with two teenaged children. His last words to her were not romantic but they were prophetic: "Mind the light, Kate." And she did -- from that day on, every single day, for more than three decades.

**"Mind the
light, Kate..."**

At first the Light-House Establishment, merged into the Coast Guard years later, refused Kate's application to be the keeper. While officially John's assistant for three years (at \$30 per month, paid annually) she knew the job and how to maintain the light. But she was a woman, and a petite 4'10" at that, and the government men believed she could not withstand the rigors of the job. After offering the post to two men, who both refused, Kate was hired at \$600 per year.

"I grew to love it here," she told The New York Times in 1909, noting the satisfaction of doing important work, the comfort of routine and isolation mixed with a few social visits. "Someone could offer me a millionaire's mansion and I'd feel like I was in prison." Yet she bristled when told she had nothing in common with women in more conventional

roles. She thoroughly enjoyed her domestic duties and entertaining the occasional fair weather visitors on her 'veranda.' But, she pointed out firmly, "Maintaining this light is more work than running any household or any child," she said.

Her life on Robbins Reef was focussed: the light was everything. She did not neglect her children, however, and every school day rowed them a mile each way, weather permitting, to Staten Island. In fact, in addition to helping with his academic studies, she trained her son Jacob to be her assistant, a form of on-the-job career training. (He later became keeper of the light when his mother retired.)

But the light was her reason for being and vital for shipping. Many vessels had been gutted on the dangerous rocks, laying close alongside the deep water channels leading up the Hudson and into the Staten Island/New Jersey docks. In her tenure, Kate was credited with some 50 rescues. The most rewarding, she recalled, came one winter night when a schooner crashed onto the reef. Five men were cast into the cold seas. Launching the small boat she used to ferry her children to school, Kate bravely rowed through the surging wreckage and rescued all five. All safely aboard, one of them asked "Where's Scottie?" Searching in the dark she caught a glimpse of a small dog and hauled him aboard, too. Back at the light she wrapped Scottie in a towel and forced him to drink warm coffee. The men left the next day and the skipper returned three days later to claim the dog. As the captain climbed down into his waiting boat, Scottie looked up into Kate's eyes and whined. "That's when I learned dog's could weep," she said, "there were tears in his eyes."

Kate kept the light until 1919, when she retired at age 71. She left behind two enduring legacies. For years afterwards, harbor pilots referred to Robbin's Reef as "Kate's Light." And, a testimony to her fortitude and spirit, when the Coast Guard last manned the light in 1966, they had replaced this diminutive woman with a four man crew.

Recommended reading: "Women who kept the lights" by Candance Clifford.

T. Patrick Harris

From james j westgate on Friday, January 27, 2006 at 20:53:43

Herman Westgate was my farther and i spend most of my younger years at robins reef lighthouse

From KEN BARNES on Wednesday, December 22, 2004 at 15:15:26

HE WAS NO "KATE WALKER" BUT HERMAN WESTGATE MANNED THAT VERY SAME LIGHTHOUSE FOR A GOOD 35 YEARS.....hE WAS MY GRANDFATHER

From William Curtis Abernathy Jr. on Thursday, June 27, 2002 at 17:45:54

As a child growing up in Bayonne NJ
My father would take me fishing around Robbins reef lighthouse ,
(kate's Lighthouse)

I was always curious as to what was in that round building across from it ?
We use to wave to the people who lived there and that was back in the forties
I enjoyed the story.

From [Sid Crawford](#) on Wednesday, September 13, 2000 at 18:28:56

If a light minder failed to mind the light was there a penalty for their dereliction of duty?
I am going to be giving a talk about dedication to service and I want to use lighthouses
and their keepers as an example.
Any help or stories you can share with me would be very welcome.

From [John Bennett](#) on Saturday, April 17, 1999 at 19:10:20

Dave thanks for the note I'll try again. I liked Sail Northeast particularly the story on Kate.
I'd like to get an opportunity to sit down and chat with you about marketing my site
sometime soon. thanks again JEB

From [Paul Shegan](#) on Tuesday, March 9, 1999 at 20:22:26

This is a most enjoyable sight for local boaters.....Thank You

From [the editor](#) on Saturday, November 28, 1998 at 09:52:56

The US Coast Guard launched the 'Kathrine Walker', named for Kate on September 14th,
1996. For photos of the ship and additional information please see
<http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g%2Da/awl/bclass/katwalk.htm>

From [Dave Murphy](#) on Monday, November 9, 1998 at 03:58:09

T. Patrick Harris captains 'Ventura', an historic sailing yacht built by the Herreshoff
family in the 1930's, and hosts charters on her out of a marina near the World Trade
Center in Lower Manhattan. He is a sponsor of SailNorthEast.

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