

Abbie Burgess, Light Keeper Heroine

Abbie Burgess was born in Rockland, Maine, in 1839. She had eight brothers and sisters, and the family lived in Rockland until Abbie was fourteen years old. Then they experienced a huge change: they went to live on a rock in the Atlantic Ocean!

Living and Working on “The Rock”

Abbie's father, Captain Burgess, had been selected to be the keeper of the lighthouse on Matinicus Rock. “The Rock,” as it is called, is a small island of boulders about twenty miles off the Maine coast. Trees and bushes don't grow there—only a bit of grass. For a rock with almost nothing on it, however, Matinicus Rock served a very important purpose. The island's two lighthouses and fog bell helped ships to navigate through the difficult waters of Penobscot Bay. The area has numerous islands and hidden reefs. At times, it also has heavy fogs and violent storms. Without the guiding lights of the lighthouses there, ships would have faced great danger.

Abbie and her family lived an interesting life on the empty island. Their home was a stone building between the two lighthouse towers. The sounds of squawking seabirds, rushing winds, and crashing waves filled the air. To help her father, Abbie acted as the assistant lighthouse keeper. She learned how to fill the whale oil lamps. She polished the lamps and cleaned the lighthouse windows. At sunset, she lit the lamps in both towers and kept them burning throughout the night. At sunrise, she put out the lamps to save fuel.

Usually, a wife or a son would help the keeper. But Mrs. Burgess was not able to, and Abbie's five older siblings didn't live on the island anymore. Officially, her brother Benjamin was the assistant keeper. However, he was often away working as a fisherman.

Captain Burgess had confidence in his daughter. Sometimes he had to be away, and he trusted her to maintain the lighthouses while he was gone. He didn't know then, however, that one of the worst storms of the 19th century was on its way.

Abbie's Courage

In January of 1856, Abbie was 16 years old. Her father was sailing toward the mainland to stock up on monthly supplies. Abbie wasn't worried about operating the lighthouse while he was gone. She knew the duties of a light keeper. But on that winter day, the winds turned into gales. Rain and snow pelted the island. Waves slammed into the two lighthouse towers and the house. Abbie shuttered the windows to keep them from breaking.

Suddenly, Abbie remembered her pet chickens. The chicken coop was built into the rocks on the leeward side of the island, away from normal winds. The chickens would not survive a severe storm with enormous waves, though. Abbie grabbed a basket. She waited for the current wave to pass. Then, with her long skirts plastered against her legs, she waded through knee-deep water to the coop. After scooping up the chickens, she hurried back to the house before the next wave swept across the island.

The sea rose higher when the tide came. Waves covered the island, and seawater flooded the house. Abbie ushered her mother, her sisters, and the chickens into the tallest lighthouse tower. They hoped that the tower would withstand the storm.

For weeks, the storm raged. Even after it began to ease up, rough conditions still prevented Captain Burgess from coming home. Abbie worried about her father's safety, but she didn't worry about her situation. For nearly a month, she made daily trips between the two towers. She carried oil up the winding stairs to the lantern rooms at the top. Though she was exhausted, the lights of the lighthouse never went out.

Abbie faced another major storm when her father and brother were away from the island. Supplies were scarcer than during the first storm. Abbie, her mother, and her sisters each ate only one egg and one cup of cornmeal per day. For three weeks, Abbie performed all the keeper's duties on her own. She kept the lighthouses' lamps burning.

Continuing a Tradition

In 1861, a new lighthouse keeper was assigned to Matinicus Rock. His name was Captain Grant, and he asked Abbie to stay on the island. He wanted her to teach him about the new lighting system. The system included special lenses that, through reflection, increased the amount of light from the oil lamps.

Abbie trained Captain Grant. Later, she married his son Isaac. At the age of 22, Abbie Burgess became Abbie Burgess Grant. Abbie and Isaac stayed on Matinicus Rock as assistant keepers. They raised four children, one of whom grew up to be a keeper like his parents.

New Beginnings

In 1875, Isaac Grant transferred to Whitehead Island, also in Penobscot Bay. After more than 20 years of isolation on a barren rock, Abbie had a new home. Trees and plants grew on Whitehead Island. Unlike at "The Rock," waves didn't wash away garden soil. Abbie was able to garden. She wrote in her journals and, as assistant keeper, managed the lighthouse. Her chickens lived in safer coops, and the family had a milk cow.

Perhaps the biggest change for Abbie, though, was living among other people again. The Grants and their children made friends with families of other keepers on the island. They educated their children together, and they regularly visited the mainland.

Honoring Abbie Burgess

Fifteen years later, Abbie became ill. Her husband resigned as keeper, and they moved to the mainland. Abbie missed being a light keeper. She wrote about having dreams of racing back and forth between Matinicus Rock and Whitehead Island. In her sleep, she worried that the lights would go out.

Abbie Burgess Grant died in 1892. The United States Coast Guard recognized her great courage and named a ship after her. Just as its namesake did during all her years on Matinicus Rock, the *Abbie Burgess* keeps the waters safe for other vessels.

53. Why is the information under the heading "Living and Working on 'The Rock' " included in the passage?
- (A) to show how families were able to survive living in rocky areas
 - (B) to explain why Abbie loved living by the ocean
 - (C) to show how the conditions could be challenging for daily life
 - (D) to explain why Captain Burgess wanted to take a trip
54. Which sentence from the passage **best** explains why Abbie became a light keeper?
- (A) "Usually, a wife or son would help the keeper."
 - (B) "But Mrs. Burgess was not able to, and Abbie's five older siblings didn't live on the island anymore."
 - (C) "Officially, her brother Benjamin was the assistant keeper."
 - (D) "Abbie worried about her father's safety, but she didn't worry about her situation."

55. Read the details from the passage.

“Sometimes he had to be away, and he trusted her to maintain the lighthouses while he was gone.”

“For three weeks, Abbie performed all the keeper’s duties on her own.”

Which main ideas of the passage are supported by the details?

- (A) Abbie knew how to operate the lighthouses independently, and she did so for long periods of time.
- (B) Abbie wanted to take care of the lighthouses, and she showed others how well she did with her skills.
- (C) Abbie was interested in ships and the sea, and she wished to help by learning to care for the lighthouses.
- (D) Abbie enjoyed being on the island by herself, and she enjoyed helping her family care for the lighthouses.

56. The following question has two parts. Answer Part One and then answer Part Two.

Part One

Based on details in the passage, how did the storm influence Abbie’s actions?

- (A) Abbie cared for the lighthouse and her family until her father returned.
- (B) Abbie tried but was unable to do all of the light keeper duties while her father was away.
- (C) Abbie made daily trips to the top of the lighthouse to watch for her father.
- (D) Abbie moved her family to the mainland to be closer to her father.

Part Two

What evidence from the passage supports the answer in Part One? Choose **one** answer.

- (A) “Abbie wasn’t worried about operating the lighthouse while he was gone.”
- (B) “For nearly a month, she made daily trips between the two towers.”
- (C) “Perhaps the biggest change for Abbie, though, was living among other people again.”
- (D) “In her sleep, she worried that the lights would go out.”

57. Read the sentence from the passage.

“Abbie ushered her mother, her sisters, and the chickens into the tallest lighthouse tower.”

What is the meaning of the word ushered?

- (A) disguised
- (B) ignored
- (C) escorted
- (D) admired

58. Based on information in the passage, how did Abbie help Captain Grant?

- (A) by teaching him how to polish the lamps
- (B) by showing him how to care for the pet chickens
- (C) by teaching him how to maintain the island garden
- (D) by showing him how to use the new lighting system

59. In the passage, the author states that “Abbie and her family lived an interesting life on the empty island.” Write an essay analyzing how the author uses examples to support the point that their life was interesting. Use evidence from the passage to support your response.