

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Lady of the Lighthouse

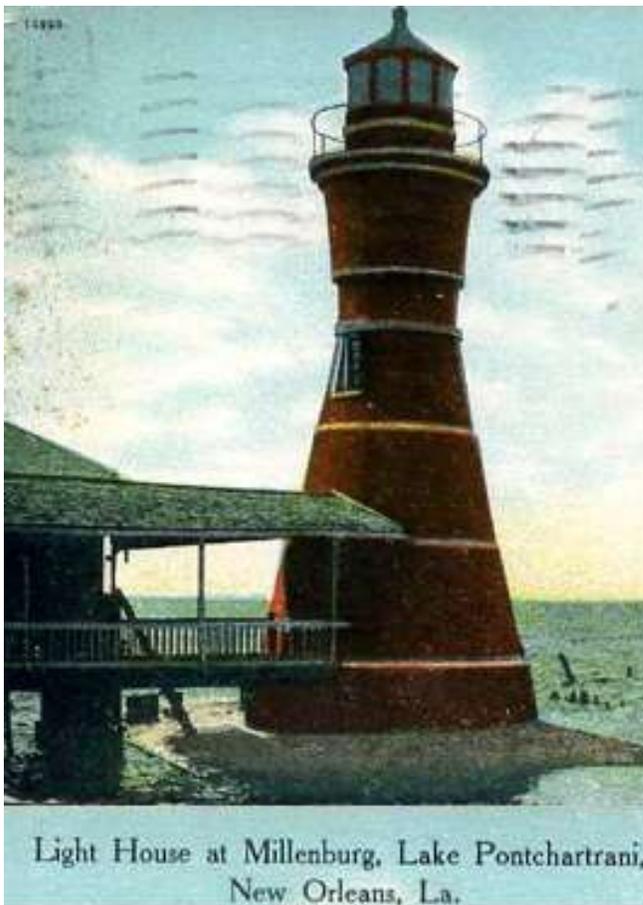


*Milneburg Lighthouse (Port Pontchartrain Light Station)
in the days before "Pontchartrain Beach"*

This is the story of Margaret R. Norvell, an intrepid lady undaunted by the challenging career that was suddenly thrust upon her. This generous and courageous woman was employed as a lighthouse keeper by the United States Lighthouse Service, a precursor agency to the U.S. Coast Guard, and remained in that position for 41 years. Her husband Louis Norvell, a St. Louis-born cotton broker whose fortunes took a downward path, became the lighthouse keeper of the "Head of Passes" lighthouse (located in Louisiana at the point where the

Mississippi River branches off into its bird's-foot delta). He drowned in 1891, leaving Margaret with two small children and a lighthouse to take care of. In those days, widows were allowed to take over as lighthouse keepers upon the death of their husbands. Margaret Norvell carried on her husband's duties at the "Head of Passes" Light (1891-1896), after which she was appointed official keeper of the Port Pontchartrain Light Station at Milneburg (1896-1924). It was there that she endured the 1903 and 1915 hurricanes.

Milneburg, the port town and recreational complex on the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain (later absorbed into the City of New Orleans), was named for the Scottish American entrepreneur and philanthropist Alexander Milne. Important to the early development of jazz, the area's name came to be pronounced "Mil-en-burg" or "Mil-lan-bug," and has often been seen in print misspelled as "Millenberg," along with other variations.

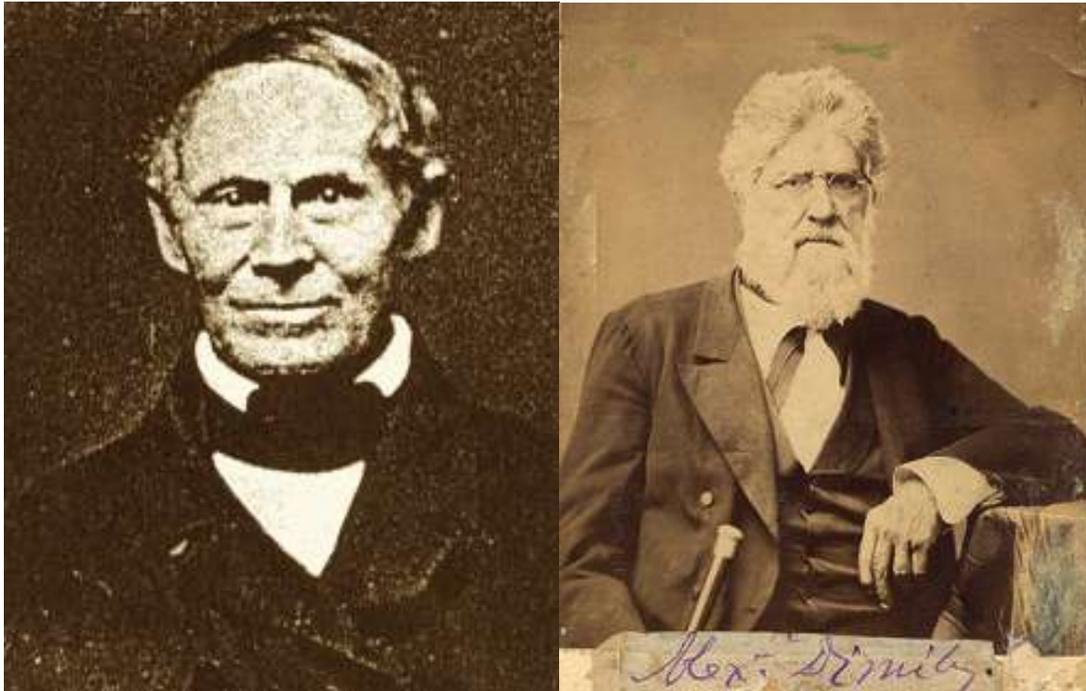


Colorful postcard view of "Millenberg" Lighthouse – and her keeper

The lighthouse was located off the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain near the eastern terminus of the Pontchartrain Railroad, with its archaic steam engine known as "Smoky Mary." A large area of the lake, however, was filled in over the years, and the lighthouse is now on dry land. The surrounding area was the site of Pontchartrain Beach

Amusement Park from 1939 to 1983, but it is now the University of New Orleans' Research and Technology Park.

A native of Washington, D.C. (and the great granddaughter of the architect of the Washington Monument, Robert Mills), Margaret Dimitry Ruth Norvell (February 11, 1860 - July 17, 1934) came to New Orleans as a young girl. Her grandfather, Alexander Dimitry, was a New Orleans-born American diplomat who was appointed United States Minister to the Republic of Costa Rica and Nicaragua by President James Buchanan. Margaret's distinguished pedigree in no way deterred her from accepting her various demanding postings as lighthouse keeper.



Architect Robert Mills and Diplomat Alexander Dimitry

Despite "all of the bad weather," the "Head of Passes" Light Station, which Mrs. Norvell called "lonely, and trying at times," had a cottage that was nonetheless "cozy and attractive" for herself and her children, Thomas and Lillian. According to an August 27, 1922, article in the New Orleans *Item Magazine*, "The hero of Manila Bay, Admiral Dewey, then a commodore in the lighthouse service, was one of a number of famous men to visit the little light station." He struck up a keen friendship with young Tom.

At Port Pontchartrain, additional company was provided to Mrs. Norvell by a beautiful prize-winning glossy-haired collie named "Lady Rose." Through all kinds of bad weather, "Lady Rose" had "never shown the white feather," and all the children of Milneburg loved her. She let the kids "use her as a pillow" and played with them whenever dignity permitted.

In addition to children, Mrs. Norvell hosted numerous outings at the lighthouse for the poor, the Sisters of Charity and the blind. "Pleasure and ambition, joy and pride, smiles and eagerness were the companions of thirty-five blind" visitors at their annual July 4th picnic at the Milneburg lighthouse. "Acting as a mother and guide, she took them in bathing and looked after all their wants." As their hostess on these annual visits, she "made the lighthouse a real pleasure spot for them," a place to feel the lake breezes, to dip toes in the water and to enjoy a totally different experience.

ORLEANS BLIND GUESTS AT LAKE



*Sightless Folk
Have Jolly Day
at Lighthouse*

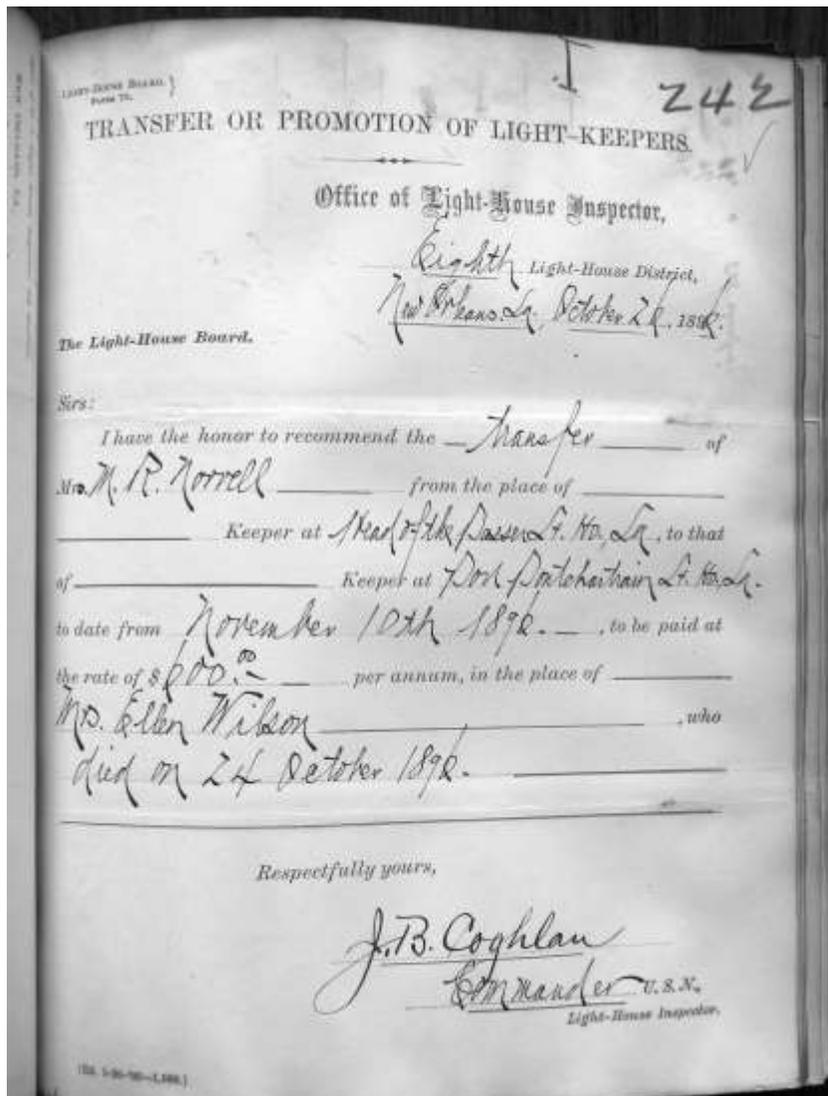
1922 Times-Picayune headline

It was no surprise that the new home for "The Lighthouse for the Blind" at 743 Camp Street, dedicated May 14, 1924, was modelled after Mrs. Norvell's Milneburg Lighthouse.



Lighthouse on Camp Street

The Lighthouse is still on Camp Street, available for event rentals, but "The Lighthouse for the Blind" sold the building back in 1948. The organization eventually moved to a new home Uptown and greatly expanded. In 2010 it was renamed "Lighthouse Louisiana" to be more inclusive, since it provides not just the blind, but countless people with disabilities, an opportunity to succeed.



In 1896, Margaret Norvell replaces another lady lighthouse keeper, Ellen Wilson, for a salary of \$600 per year.

When Margaret Norvell left the Milneburg lighthouse in 1924, she became the new lighthouse keeper for the New Canal Light off West End. By then, there was a new cast of characters. "Lucky Boy," a Spitz, took over the duties of "Lady Rose." The loyal pet dutifully refused entrance to any visitor until his mistress assured him it was alright. The familiar lighthouse, by 1931, according to an article in the *Times-Picayune*, had "chickens in the yard" and a living room "lined with books." Also inside was a "businesslike desk" where she kept "her accounts for Uncle Sam, and a piano." Upstairs, Margaret had a sewing room and another pet: a vocal parrot named Lorita that learned to sing Irving Berlin's "I'll Be Seeing You" when Margaret played the song on her Victrola.

Mrs. Norvell endured many storms and hurricanes, but "the most horrible experience" of her career was the Chenière Caminada Hurricane of 1893 which "took 2,000 lives." She described the storm slowly, "The pitiless rain came down ceaselessly, the wind howled

about my lighthouse at Head of Passes, and the water rose and lashed the fastness of my home." Looking out at the "swirling water," she felt "powerless to aid them." Still, she threw open the doors of her lighthouse and by morning 200 people had made their way to her stronghold. In addition to providing food and shelter, Mrs. Norvell raised funds she distributed among the refugees and labored to help them rebuild their homes.

Margaret Norvell's tenure as lighthouse keeper spanned over four decades of history, including the Spanish-American War and World War I. In the early years, she climbed the lighthouse steps again and again to light the oil in the lamps and kept an accurate accounting of the oil used for Uncle Sam.

At the New Canal Light, Mrs. Norvell had electricity. There she operated "a 500-watt light with a fifth order power" Fresnel lens. The historic lighthouse, first erected in 1838, was damaged by numerous hurricanes, including Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The U.S. Coast Guard operated there from the 1960s through 2001. Reconstruction of the lighthouse, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, began in February 2012 and was completed in 2013. It is now operated by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation as the New Canal Lighthouse Museum and Education Center.

Norvell was credited with saving a great many lives, which involved venturing out into terrifying storms in a rowboat to valiantly rescue stranded mariners. Some years ago, when the yacht Katie L. foundered off Milneburg, Margaret stood out in the lashing rain to throw out the rope that saved the lives of the yachtsmen. Three days later, she threw out the life-saving rope to the schooner Victory. In 1925, she helped evacuate all 200 passengers from the ferryboat Southland that sank after catching fire on her initial lake trip near the lighthouse. In 1926, she bravely rowed two hours in the raging waters to save a Navy pilot, who had crashed his biplane into Lake Pontchartrain. In 1929, she aided Albert Huber, whose disabled sailboat was guided to safety by her light. "I have often rung my fog bell," she said, "to get help for overturned boats or to signal directions to yachts."



View of the New Canal Light over a century ago

The New Canal Lighthouse might also hold the record for having the most female keepers (at least five). Like Margaret Norvell, most of them took over the duties from their deceased husbands. Elizabeth Beattie succeeded her husband Thomas as keeper in 1847 after he died. And Caroline Riddle received commendations as keeper for securing the lens and hanging a lantern in the lighthouse tower during the Hurricane of 1915.

When Dorothy Dix, forerunner of today's popular advice columnists, was only a cub reporter on the *Picayune*, she approached Margaret for a good story. "And I will tell you what I told her," said Mrs. Norvell: "that there isn't anything unusual in a woman keeping a light in her window to guide men folks home. I just happen to keep a bigger light than most women because I have got to see that so many men get safely home."

***Woman Lighthouse Keeper
Thinks Job of 'Guiding Men
Home' Natural One for Sex***

Her words, of course, provided this poorly worded headline (above).

Margaret Norvell retired in 1932 to what she called a "landlubber house" and died in 1934. She stopped by the West End lighthouse

frequently during her brief retirement years and would ask her successor to let her in "for just a moment." Her death, reported the *Times-Picayune*, "was mourned by thousands of hardy mariners."

In 2010 the U.S. Coast Guard decided that all the new Sentinel-class high speed cutters would be named after Coast Guard personnel who had been recognized for their heroism. It was only natural that Margaret Norvell was one of those to be honored.



The U.S. Coast Guard's Sentinel-class cutter, the Margaret Norvell

On June 1, 2013, over fifty of Margaret Norvell's descendants were on hand in New Orleans to witness the commissioning of the new USCG Sentinel-class Fast Response Cutter (FRC) *Margaret Norvell* (WPC 1105) delivered by Bollinger Shipyards. Also present that day was Margaret's great granddaughter, Barbara Norvell Perrone, sponsor of the new cutter. The crew of the cutter presented her with a stuffed toy parrot, also named Lorita.

Mrs. Norvell once said, "After all, it seems a natural and womanly thing, doesn't it, to keep a bright light burning to guide someone home? That's what we are all doing: but mine is to shine far out at sea and be so true, steady and unflinching that sailors may dare to steer by it." The motto of the cutter *Margaret Norvell*, "True Steady Unflinching," comes from that quote.

The *Margaret Norvell* is only the fifth FRC named for a Coast Guard enlisted hero distinguished by his or her acts of valor. Margaret Norvell's devotion to duty saved the lives of countless sailors as she vigilantly stood watch from her lighthouse.

It is worth noting that twenty-five percent of the crew of the *Margaret Norvell* are women.

NED HÉMARD

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