

The Construction of Split Rock Lighthouse

MANY MINNESOTANS are familiar with the iconic image of Split Rock Lighthouse perched stoically atop a 130-foot cliff. Less familiar, however, are photos from the construction of the station. This photo, taken on October 6, 1909, is one of a series documenting the progress of the construction.

Split Rock Lighthouse was built in response to an intense storm named the Mataafa Blow, which battered Lake Superior in November 1905. Ships caught out on the lake fought 60- to 70-mile-per-hour winds, temperatures well below zero, and 30-foot waves. Snow squalls made it extremely difficult to see the shoreline. A total of 29 ships were damaged or destroyed in the storm. Ultimately, this led to the construction of Split Rock Lighthouse in 1909.

In 1907, Congress approved a budget of \$75,000 to build a lighthouse on the cliffs above Lake Superior. Construction began in the spring of 1909 with local workmen hired by the L. D. Campbell Company based out of Duluth. The size of the construction crew varied from 30 to 50 men, depending on the stage of construction. They put in 10-hour days, earned \$0.35 an hour for their labor, and ate meals prepared by a French cook.

To ready the site for construction, loggers cleared the property of trees and shrubs, with the exception of a few on the cliff's edge. Next, the dynamite team blasted into the anorthosite rock to clear space for basements under the three houses and for footings to support the

fog signal and the lighthouse. The rubble seen in the photo in between the houses is evidence of the dynamite blasting. With the major prep work completed, workers then poured the concrete for the basements and began setting the footings and foundations. Multiple projects were tackled simultaneously. While brick masons worked on the keepers' homes, other workers started on the base of the lighthouse. The first buildings to be completed for the station were the three storage barns (the roof of one can be seen in the bottom-left corner of the photo). The barns also provided housing for the supervisors, including site engineer Ralph Russell Tinkham, who oversaw the station's construction.

Construction continued until November 1909, when the workers left the site for the winter. The lighthouse was the last building that still needed to be finished when crews returned the following spring. In all, Split Rock Light Station was completed in about 13 months (including the winter months when the crew was absent) thanks to the hard work of the L. D. Campbell Company crew. The light was put into commission on July 31, 1910, by head keeper Orren P. Young. For 59 years, Split Rock Lighthouse transmitted its white flash over Lake Superior, providing a navigational beacon to many commercial ships. The US Coast Guard decommissioned the light in 1969.

— Jeri L. Bohac, program manager, Split Rock Lighthouse

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