

## Destination

By Mary K. Witkowski

# Kate Moore, Keeper of the Fayerweather Lighthouse

Kathleen A. Moore (1812-1899) was a bit of a mystery. For one thing, various documents list her name as Catherine Moore, Kathleen Moore, Kathleen Andre Moore, Kate Moore, Catherine A. Moore, and “Miss Kate Moore.” Though her life’s work was only officially recognized late in her life, she kept the lamps burning at the Fayerweather Lighthouse of Black Rock in Bridgeport from the remarkable age of 12 in 1824 until she retired in late 1878.



Kathleen Moore in an undated photograph. Bridgeport Public Library Historical Collection

In 1817, Captain Stephen Moore was injured while unloading goods from a ship. Stephen then applied for a job through the United States Lighthouse service as a lighthouse keeper. He was given the position as the Keeper of the Fayerweather Lighthouse. The Fayerweather Lighthouse, originally built in 1808, was located on an island in Long Island Sound at the mouth of Black Rock Harbor, just west of Bridgeport Harbor, which was then part of Fairfield. The lighthouse was an important beacon on the busy seaway of Long Island Sound as it was the only light between Eaton Neck, New York and New Haven, Connecticut.

When Stephen accepted the post, he and his wife Amelia moved with their children, Kathleen, 4, Mary, 3, and Alexander, 2, to Fayerweather Island. The new job provided a keeper’s house, a shed, a dock, and land to cultivate.

The family adjusted well to its new life, despite its many challenges. Climbing the lighthouse’s narrow steps carrying oil to keep the lanterns filled and making sure the beacon was lit was treacherous, especially for Stephen, whose health remained poor. As Kate grew older, and because she was the eldest, she assumed much of the work her father had previously performed. While her family assisted with some tasks, Kathleen took on most of the duties. In an interview with a *New York World* reporter in her later years, Kate talked about the rigorous job and the dangers of Black Rock Harbor: “Sometimes there were more than two hundred sailing vessels at night, and some nights there were as many as three or four wrecks.”

“On windy nights,” Kate reported, “the light would go out.” She would stay in the keeper’s house just “forty rods” away and spend a sleepless night watching to make sure the light was shining. At times storms were so bad she would have to sleep alone right in the lighthouse to keep the flame going. Kate said “she had to walk on two planks which on stormy nights were under four feet of water, and try not to slip.”

One dark night Kathleen heard cries of distress coming from the harbor. She went out in the boat with her brother Alexander and their cousin. After an hour’s search they found two men clinging to a capsized boat. The two men stayed at the house with the Moore family, but one died early the next morning. This was just one of the many horrific incidents that Kathleen experienced. In all, she was credited with saving 21 lives.

In the 1870 census, Stephen, age 96, is still listed as the lighthouse keeper, with his wife Amelia, 88. Daughter Kathleen was listed as “at home” and single at age 58. One Joseph Eddy, 40, is listed at the same residence as lighthouse keeper; however, he was actually Kathleen’s assistant, according to Cornelia Penfield Lathrop, who wrote *Black Rock, Seaport of Old Fairfield*, published in 1930.

In 1871, at age 59, Kathleen was officially appointed by the United States government as the Keeper of the Fayerweather Lighthouse, a task she had already performed for 47 years. She continued taking care of her parents, the gardens and farm animals, and two Newfoundland dogs. Her sister had moved to Brooklyn; her brother Alexander died of consumption in 1853. Kate’s mother and father lived into their 90s. Kate had her nephew to assist her with the lighthouse duties.

It was a lonely existence. But often the people that were saved from drowning stayed at the keeper’s house, where Kathleen nursed them back to health. Kate’s lighthouse journal, which she kept in her neat handwriting, records that she traveled monthly to Bridgeport to buy goods. She sometimes had visitors who came out to the lighthouse to call. In February 1875, Long Island Sound froze solid. Kate was amazed when a Dr. George F. Lewis and his wife drove their sleigh across the ice from the Bridgeport Lighthouse near Seaside Park to the sea wall

on Fayerweather Island. A reporter from the *Bridgeport Standard* wrote “Miss Kate Moore, the keeper of the Black Rock Light, informed them that during her residence of fifty-eight years at the ‘light,’ no one had ever driven there on the ice.”

Visitors from the beautiful George Hotel in Black Rock regularly came to call on Kate Moore, who greeted them with a wrinkled face and bright eyes. In an 1878 interview a *New York Sun* reporter described Moore, then 66, as a genteel woman whose walls were lined with book-filled shelves and whose house featured wooden duck decoys she’d carved herself. A painting by Reubens that Kate inherited from her mother’s family hung on her wall.

Kate retired in December 1878 and bought a house on Main Street (now Brewster Street) in Black Rock near the harbor. She is listed in the 1898 Bridgeport City Directory as “Miss Kate Moore.” Her age remained mysterious till the end: She has been reported as having lived until the age of 85, 93, and even 105. The burial records of Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport where Kate is interred say that she died 1899 but gave her age as 85. She lies in an unmarked grave.



Black Rock Harbor, Bridgeport, 1899, by an unidentified artist “E.P.O.” The scene was painted from the vantage point of the George Hotel, now the site of the Black Rock Yacht Club. The 1823 lighthouse and the dwelling built to replace the house that keeper Kate Moore lived in can be seen on Fayerweather Island.

Painting courtesy of Jack and Lu Morris

The Fayerweather Lighthouse was restored in 1998 with funds from the Black Rock Community Council and the City of Bridgeport. photo: Jeremy D’Entremont