



National Lighthouse Museum

Kate Walker's Story

Keeper of Robbins Reef Light, 1894 - 1919



Kate Gortler Walker was born in Germany about 1846, and as an adult migrated to the U.S. with her young son Jacob. She worked in Sandy Hook, New Jersey as a waitress in a boarding house, where she met and married John Walker, Assistant Keeper of the Sandy Hook Light. In 1883 they moved to Robbins Reef Light where John was appointed Keeper (at \$600 a year) and she was appointed Assistant Keeper (at \$350 a year).

Robbins Reef is a submerged ledge a mile from Staten Island on the west side of the main channel into the Inner Harbor of New York City, a hidden ridge of rocks that caused numerous shipwrecks.

The first lighthouse there was built in 1839. When Kate arrived a new lighthouse had just been built, a four-tier conical iron structure, with a 56 foot tower and a fourth order Fresnel Lens. The lighthouse was built on a man-made island and had no land around it, and no mooring. The Keeper's skiff hung from the platform. The quarters fit around the base of the tower and had a terrace where Kate served tea in the summer, when friends could row out to visit.

In 1886 John Walker died of pneumonia, saying "Mind the light, Kate." Kate did mind the light from then on until 1919, although she wasn't officially appointed Lighthouse Keeper until 1894. Her son Jacob served as her assistant.

During her time there Kate raised two children (Jacob and a daughter Mamie) and kept the light burning. She rescued as many as 50 people by her own count, and at least one dog (a Scottie). She once rescued a young man and his sweetheart from a sinking rowboat and then helped to arrange a wedding for them on Staten Island, so that their reputations would not be ruined by their night out.

Kate retired in 1919, at age 73. She lived quietly on Staten Island after that, until her death in 1931.

Robbins Reef Light still stands in New York Harbor, although no longer used. It stands between the Statue of Liberty and the new National Lighthouse Museum site on Staten Island. It is easily visible to the thousands of Staten Island Ferry passengers who pass right by it each day.

Source: [Women Who Kept the Lights](#) by Mary Louise Clifford & J. Candace Clifford

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