

ORLANDO METCALFE POE

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The architect who designed Grosse Point Lighthouse, Orlando Metcalfe Poe, was a Civil War veteran, superintending engineer, and engineer secretary for the Lighthouse Board. Poe's importance to the history of the United States lay in his service during the Civil War and engineering work on the Great Lakes after the conflict. As General Sherman's Chief Engineer, Poe was instrumental in Union victories in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia. Through his work with the Lighthouse Service, he was responsible for improvements that resulted in the expansion of maritime transportation routes through the Great Lakes, developing commerce and industry there.

As an individual, Poe made significant contributions to a developing country in war and peace. Born on March 7, 1832, at Navarre, Ohio, Poe entered the U.S. Military Academy in 1852 and graduated sixth in his class in 1856. His first appointment was as assistant topographical engineer on the survey of the northern Great Lakes from 1856-1861 during which time he attained the rank of first lieutenant. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Poe helped organize the Ohio volunteers and later became a member of General McClellan's staff where he assisted in organizing the defenses of Washington D.C. against Confederate forces. Appointed colonel of the 2nd Michigan Volunteers on Sept. 16, 1861, he successfully commanded that regiment during the Peninsular campaign and during the Maryland campaign was commissioned brigadier general Nov. 29, 1862. He later served as chief engineer of the XXIII Army Corps in the capture of Confederate forces occupying Knoxville, Tennessee. Poe then became chief engineer of the Army of the Ohio, successfully directing the defense of Knoxville and repelling Confederate General James Longstreet's assaults on that city. In April, 1864, General W.T. Sherman selected Poe as his chief engineer. With Sherman, he was honored for gallant services in the capture of Atlanta and Savannah, and for gallant and meritorious service in the campaign ending with the surrender of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston.

Poe's brilliant military career was, however, overshadowed by his accomplishments after the war. First and foremost an engineer, Poe's work on the Great Lakes was instrumental in forging a transportation network that would benefit the development of maritime commerce and industry in the United States. From 1865-70, Poe served as engineer secretary of the Lighthouse Board charged with the supervision and management of building projects. In 1870, he became engineer of the Upper Lakes Lighthouse District and superintendent of all river and harbor work in the Great Lakes region. In 1883, Poe became superintending engineer of improvement of rivers and harbors on Lakes Superior and Huron, where one of his most important projects was the development of the St. Mary's Falls Canal (designated an NHL in 1966) and St. Mary's River between Lakes Superior and Huron. Poe's work here improved these important waterways so that they were navigable to the ever increasing size of ships traversing these waters. He also had charge of improvements made to the Detroit River and the ship channel between Chicago, Duluth, and Buffalo. He designed and superintended construction of the locks at Sault St. Marie, one of which is named "Poe Lock" in his honor. This project, more than any other, was instrumental in the development of the steel industry and commerce on the Great Lakes as it permitted the large iron hulled ore carrying vessels from mining regions bordering Lake Superior to access the lower Great Lakes and Atlantic seaboard. Eight hundred feet long and one-hundred feet wide, in its time, the Poe Lock was the largest in the world. Orlando Metcalfe Poe died in Detroit on Oct. 2, 1895.