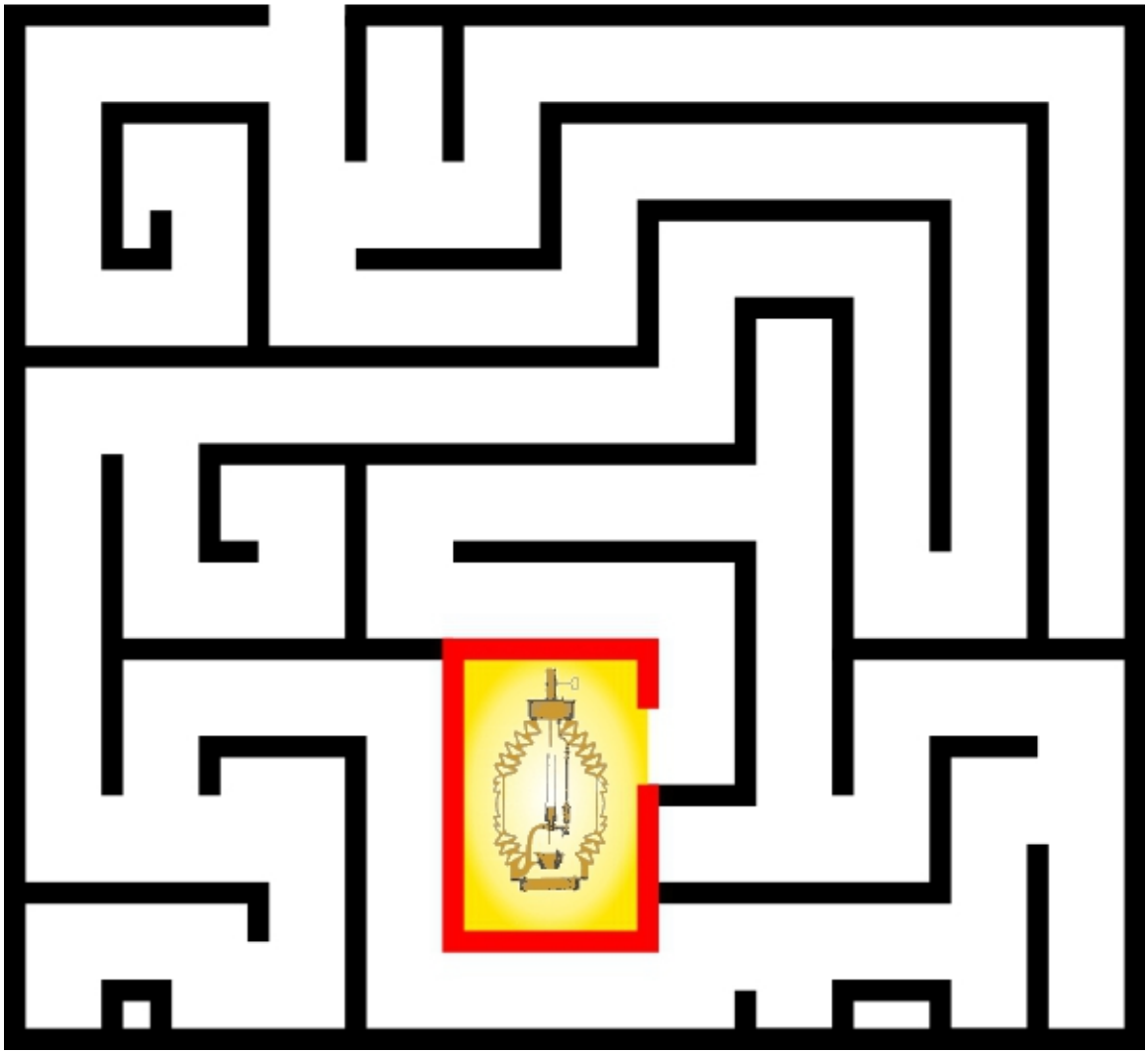
Help our keeper get
the fuel to the lamp



Teacher Page

Whale Oil flammable, smelled, used for lamps, soap, margarine, lubricants. Became too expensive when their numbers went down, eventually putting them into protected status to prevent their extinction.

Lard like whale oil, mainly triglycerides, used in cooking and food, but if liquefied ahead of time, it can be burned in a lighthouse lamp. Much cheaper than whale oil, but very annoying to use for the keeper because of the melting required to use.

Kerosene sometimes called mineral oil. Flammable, smelled, used for lamps, cook stoves, aircraft fuel (and early automobiles). Like the above whale and lard oil, produce a lot of soot, which must be cleaned from the lens daily. Storage outside of living areas important. Mixed with air, it is as explosive as gun powder. Adding a mantle increased the light intensity significantly. Higher risks of cancer, asthma, tuberculosis (common at the time), cataracts, and harm to pregnancy.

STORAGE: at first, the flammable fuel was stored in the basement, which meant three flights of stairs carrying at least a gallon at a time to the lamp each day before being lit for the night. Once the Eclipser was in place, in 1913-1940, the keepers also had to wind the clockwork mechanism every four hours.

In 1919, electricity came to the lighthouse, fuel use hazards went down (kerosene lamps still in use for room illumination), but being shocked by a lethal voltage in wet weather and salt air was still a hazard, especially for a culture not accustomed to this ‘new’ electricity tech.

Of Course, maintaining the lamp was not the only hazard or duty of a keeper. All the walls, inside and out, needed to be painted and repaired. In 1855 there were regular encounters with mountain lions, wolves, bears and coyotes. No toilet paper for the first keepers, though not a hazard, was not one most of us would choose.