

Lighting the Way

The story of Egmont Key Light

Despite its isolated location on Egmont Key, seen by mariners and occasional visitors, Egmont Key Light has been vital to the safety of commerce on the west coast of Florida for over 150 years. The first lighthouse was built in 1848 as commerce began to grow along the Gulf Coast of the rapidly growing United States. When it was built, this was the only lighthouse between St. Marks and Key West, and its primary purpose was to guide ships along the coast, as well as mark the entrance to the increasingly important port at Tampa.

The first lighthouse was built of brick and cost \$10,000. It was located about 100 feet northeast of the existing structure. The keeper's house, also brick, was built just north of the lighthouse. In April of 1848, the first keeper, Sherrod Edwards, and his family moved in and the light was lit. At that time, lard oil was used as a fuel for the light. In September of that same year, there was a hurricane which damaged the lighthouse seriously. The story is that keeper Edwards and his family took refuge in a rowboat tied to a palm tree as the water rose over the island.

The first lighthouse had been damaged beyond repair, and a new, taller one was built in 1858 for \$16,000. This is the structure that still stands. Other buildings were built over the years. The little brick building near the lighthouse was built in 1895 and used for oil storage, and the larger brick building was built in the 1920's for the radio transmitter. There were other buildings that have since been torn down. There were two large sheds at the land end of the dock which served the buoy depot that was set up in the late 1800's. For many years all buoys used between St. Marks and Key West were stored and maintained here on Egmont Key. The assistant lighthouse keeper finally got his own house in 1898, just south of the lighthouse. All that remains of that house is the cistern, which is still used today.

Over the years, the light station was maintained and improved. The dock was rebuilt several times. Almost every recorded annual report to the Lighthouse Board includes some reference to repairing, improving, or rebuilding the dock, mostly as a result of damage due to storms.

The keeper's life was not an easy one. For the most part over the years, the keeper and his assistant and their families were the only people on the island. Bulk supplies like oil for the light were brought in once a year, and the keeper and his family raised much of their own food and frequently went by small boat to Bradenton or Tampa for other supplies. Maintaining a lighthouse with an oil lamp required constant attention to trimming and adjusting the wicks, cleaning the chimneys and lenses, and washing the windows of the lantern room. While the light was bright and well focused as oil lamps go, it was not nearly as bright as an electric light and scrupulous attention to the cleanliness of every part of the system was necessary or the light would be obscured. It took from dawn until about 10:00 A.M. to finish cleaning up and preparing the light for the next night's work. Curtains were taken down at dusk and hung up at dawn when the light was extinguished to prevent discoloration of the glass in the lenses.

In 1939, the Coast Guard took over the Lighthouse Service and, rather than lighthouse keepers and their families, the island was occupied by a group of Coast Guardsmen, typically about 3 or 4 at any one time. They converted the assistant keeper's house into a barracks and demolished the original keeper's house. In the mid 40's, they renovated the lighthouse. Since the upper portion of the brick in the tower was deteriorated, it was shortened by several feet and an aircraft style rotating beacon was installed, replacing the acetylene lamp. The light was increased from 3,000 candlepower to 175,000 candlepower.

In 1957 the second keeper's house was demolished and the modern building now used as the Park Manager's residence and Park Office was built. Finally, in the late 1980's, the light was fully automated and the Coast Guard personnel were reassigned. Shortly after that the Florida State Park Service joined with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to care for the resources of the island.

It has been over 150 years since Sherrod Edwards first carried cans of whale oil up the spiral staircase of the first lighthouse here on Egmont Key. Through the years of the Lighthouse Board, Bureau of Lighthouses, and the Coast Guard, a series of keepers, whom we know almost nothing about worked through heat and hurricane, mosquitoes and winter gales, to keep the Egmont Key Light working and the station in good order. Even with all the advances in navigation available today, the light remains an important part of the system of aids to navigation which guides mariners and aviators safely to their destinations in Tampa Bay.