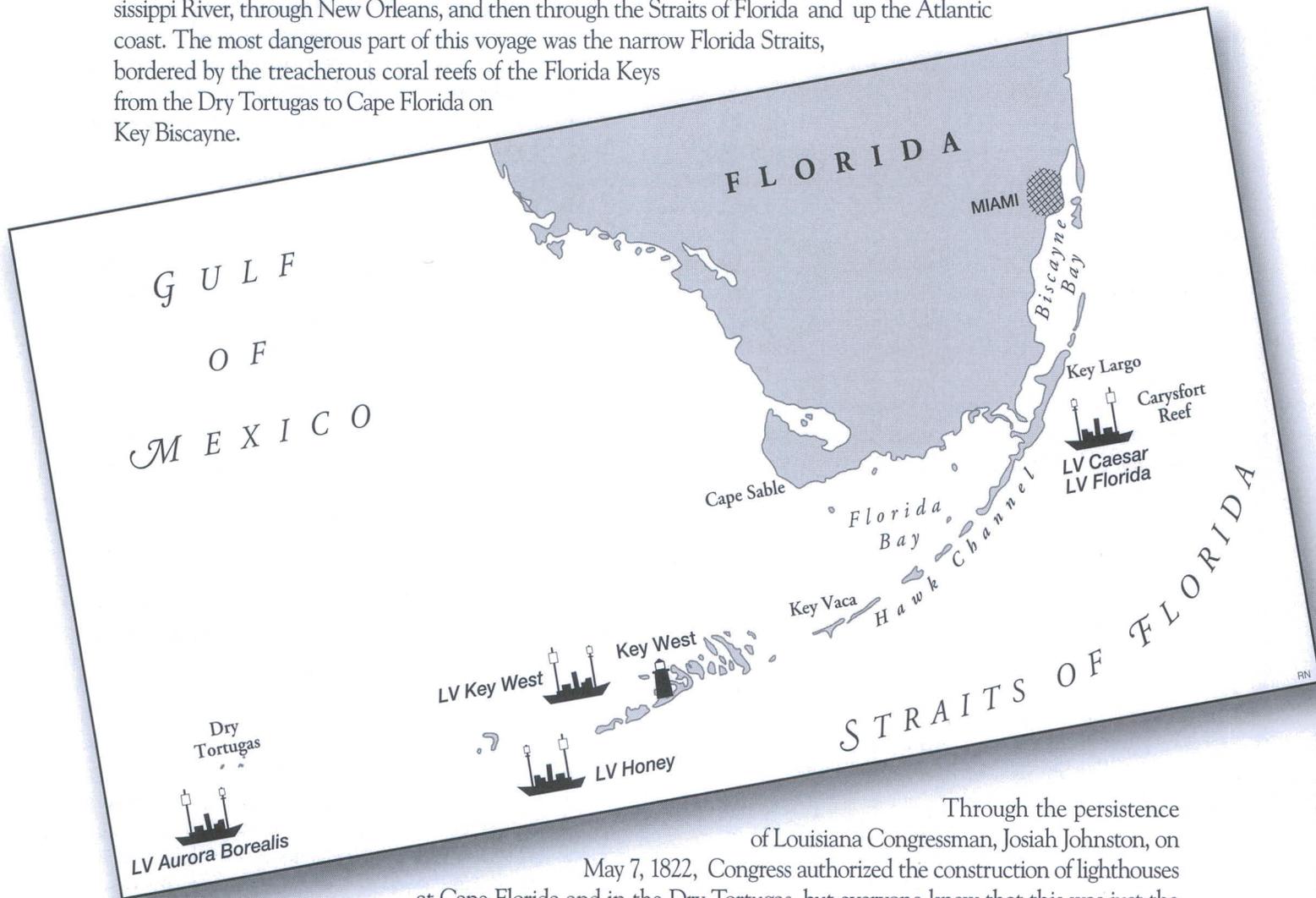


LIGHTSHIPS OF THE FLORIDA KEYS

By Tom Taylor

Soon after Florida became a territory of the United States in 1821, commercial interests in Louisiana and New York began pressuring Congress for navigational aids in Florida. Ever since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, much of the water borne commerce between the central part of the nation and eastern ports traveled down the Mississippi River, through New Orleans, and then through the Straits of Florida and up the Atlantic coast. The most dangerous part of this voyage was the narrow Florida Straits, bordered by the treacherous coral reefs of the Florida Keys from the Dry Tortugas to Cape Florida on Key Biscayne.



Through the persistence of Louisiana Congressman, Josiah Johnston, on May 7, 1822, Congress authorized the construction of lighthouses at Cape Florida and in the Dry Tortugas, but everyone knew that this was just the beginning of lighting the dangerous Florida Keys and that other lights were desperately needed in between these two points. In April, 1824, James Ramage submitted a report to the Secretary of the Navy, informing the Secretary about "the extensive Reef of Carysfort which here commences and extends to a great distance from the shore." Carysfort Reef, which was named for the British frigate *HMS Carysfort*, a twenty-eight-gun frigate that ran aground on the reef on October 23, 1770. The reef extended out so far that Ramage felt that "the erection of a Beacon on the shore [is] but of little use." He suggested that a lighthouse be constructed directly on the reef or that a light vessel be stationed there.

For a number of places in the Florida Keys, lightships were initially believed to be more cost-effective than lighthouses. There were four lightship stations established along the reefs, and five different vessels served on the reef stations served to, more or less, protect mariners until the technology for building iron-pile lighthouses was developed and permitted the lightships to be replaced by this unique and special type of lighthouse.

The Dry Tortugas Lightship, (1825-1826): *Aurora Borealis* (LV “ZZ”)

In 1825-1826, while the early Dry Tortugas Lighthouse on Garden Key was under construction, it was deemed necessary to mark the dangerous shoals of that area. A light vessel was stationed there. The only documentation found so far for this vessel, which also indicates that it had more than just lights aboard, is found in an account in the *East Florida Herald* of St. Augustine for June 6, 1826. In this issue, Captain Josiah Doane of the United States Revenue Cutter *Marion* at Key West, reported that he was “gratified to learn that the Light vessel on the Dry Tortugas has been of the most essential service in warning vessels of approaching danger. Four ships lately have been entirely indebted to the warnings of the bells of the light vessel.” Although government documents positively identifying this vessel have not been located, it is almost certain that it was the *Aurora Borealis*, one of the first lightships constructed in the United States.

In January, 1818, the federal government signed a contract with Winslow Lewis for building the first lighthouse at the mouth of the Mississippi River, on Frank’s Island, Louisiana. Lewis’ first attempt did not succeed due to the soft delta ground which swallowed the foundation. The structure was scheduled to be completed by April 1st, 1820, but by the end of January it was apparent that the lighthouse would never be ready in time for the busy summer shipping season. Stephen Pleasonton, in charge of America’s lighthouses, per-

suaded Congress to authorize the construction of a “vessel to serve as a floating light,” to be moored off the mouth of the Mississippi until such time as the new lighthouse could finally be completed.

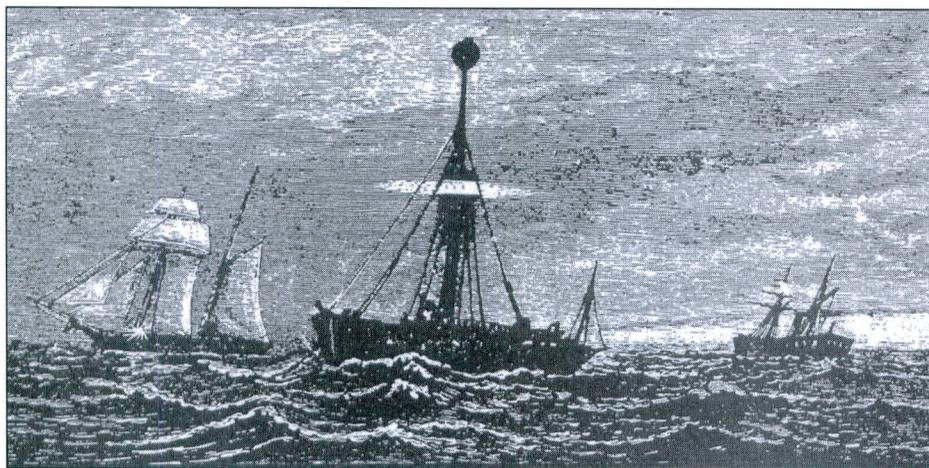
Pleasanton succeeded in getting an appropriation for a lightship, but it was not until August 10, 1820, that a contract was signed with Christian Bergh to build the new lightship for \$6,900. Measuring less than 60 feet long, the new fifty-ton vessel had a single fifty-foot mast amidships. Lamps were hauled up the mast with block and tackle to about 30 feet. The vessel was launched and christened *Aurora Borealis* that winter. She took up her station at the mouth of the Mississippi River soon afterwards. During the two years it took to construct the Frank’s Island lighthouse, the sturdy little vessel remained at anchor nearby, her lights beaming out at night to guide mariners safely past. When Lewis finally completed the Frank’s Island Lighthouse in 1823, the *Aurora Borealis* was no longer needed. Almost immediately, Pleasanton had a new duty station in mind.

On April 30, 1823, Pleasanton wrote to Alexander Scott, Jr., the deputy Collector of Customs at Pensacola, Florida, that Beverly Chew, “the Collector of Customs at New Orleans had been directed to send the Floating Light Vessel, which for some time has been stationed at the mouth of the Mississippi River, to Pensacola.” Captain William Cranston sailed the vessel to Pensacola. She arrived and took her new station off Santa Rosa Island in Pensacola Bay on June 13, 1823 (see *The Keeper’s Log* Vol. XVI, #1). Because Captain Cranston put in for retirement soon after arrival, Pleasanton authorized Scott to appoint a new cap-

tain for the vessel on her arrival in Pensacola. On May 20th, John Gates was appointed captain of the *Aurora Borealis*. Life on the lightship was very tough, and the captains did not last very long. When John Gates resigned on December 1st of that year, Collector Scott appointed John McGregor as Gates successor. McGregor resigned after only twenty days. On January 20, 1824, John Campbell was appointed to replace McGregor. On September 4, Captain Campbell was removed from his position for “aiding and abetting vessels to avoid the revenue laws,” and Henry de Grand-Pre succeeded him.

When the new Pensacola Lighthouse was finally completed and lighted on December 20, 1824, the *Aurora Borealis* was available to be moved to another location. The new Pensacola Collector of Customs, Archibald Hamilton, requested instructions from Stephen Pleasanton for the light vessel. Pleasanton replied that Hamilton should lay up the vessel at Pensacola until the following spring when orders for the *Aurora Borealis* would be sent. No documents have surfaced to confirm it, but it is believed that in the spring of 1825, the *Aurora Borealis* moved south to maintain a station off Dry Tortugas. The vessel was much needed in the Dry Tortugas as Captain Doane’s report indicated that her presence had saved at least four vessels from grief on the reefs. Captain Henry de Grand-Pre would have been still in charge of the *Aurora Borealis* at the Dry Tortugas. Records indicate that he remained as captain until December 21, 1826. A few months after the new Dry Tortugas Lighthouse was lighted the lightship was withdrawn.

Where the *Aurora Borealis* went after serving at the Dry Tortugas is unknown, but after so many years of service in the Gulf of Mexico, she may have been near the end of her useful life. Later lightships were issued numbers to designate them. Although the *Aurora Borealis* was never issued a number (as was the custom for later lightships) she has been designated “Light Vessel (LV) ZZ” by lightship historian Willard Flint in his work on American lightships. None of Florida’s early lightships were assigned a number. Flint’s numbering system is used for all of the light vessels in this article.



This sketch is typical of an early lightship resembling the tiny 55-ton, single-masted *Aurora Borealis* vessel which served off the mouth of the Mississippi River, at Pensacola, and at Dry Tortugas between 1821 and 1825.

The Carysfort Reef Lightships (1825-1852):

Caesar (LV "AA") and Florida (LV "BB")

In May 1824, before construction could begin on the two lighthouses already authorized by Congress at Cape Florida and the Dry Tortugas, for a third lighthouse to be constructed on "one of the Sambo Keys" and for a "vessel for a floating light" to be stationed on the very dangerous Carysfort Reef, off the northern end of Key Largo. Twenty thousand dollars was appropriated for the building of the new light vessel.

In September 1824, the contract for the new lightship was awarded to Messrs. Isaac Webb, John Allen, and William P. Rathbone of New York. The contract was signed on the 28th. The new lightship was a relatively large vessel of 220 tons, constructed in frame of white oak. The contract price \$18,500, payable when the vessel was delivered at her station.

In May 1825, as the vessel was nearing completion, Stephen Pleasonton wrote William Pinkney, Collector of Customs for Key West, that the new light vessel would be under Pinkney's superintendence and that it would arrive at Key West in the near future. The prior year, John Rodman, Collector of Customs for St. Augustine, proposed Captain John Whalton of that city as captain of the new lightship at a salary of \$700 per year. At the end of May, 1825, Whalton was appointed by President John Quincy Adams. Whalton was directed to go to Key West to await the arrival there of his new vessel. Pinkney was to "employ a sufficient number of seamen, not exceeding six, to be stationed on board the vessel, to whom you will allow the wages usually given to seamen in the merchant service. If the hands who go with the vessel from New York are willing to remain on board, it may be well to engage them, unless you can procure others more suitable, and at a cheaper rate."

Finally, on June 4, 1825, Jonathan Thompson, Collector of Customs for New York sent to Stephen Pleasonton the certification that the vessel had been completed. A supply of oil "sufficient to last three or four months" was put on board the vessel, and it was prepared for sea. In July, the new lightship set sail for Key West. Her appointed captain, John Whalton sailed from St. Augustine for Charleston, where he would rendezvous with

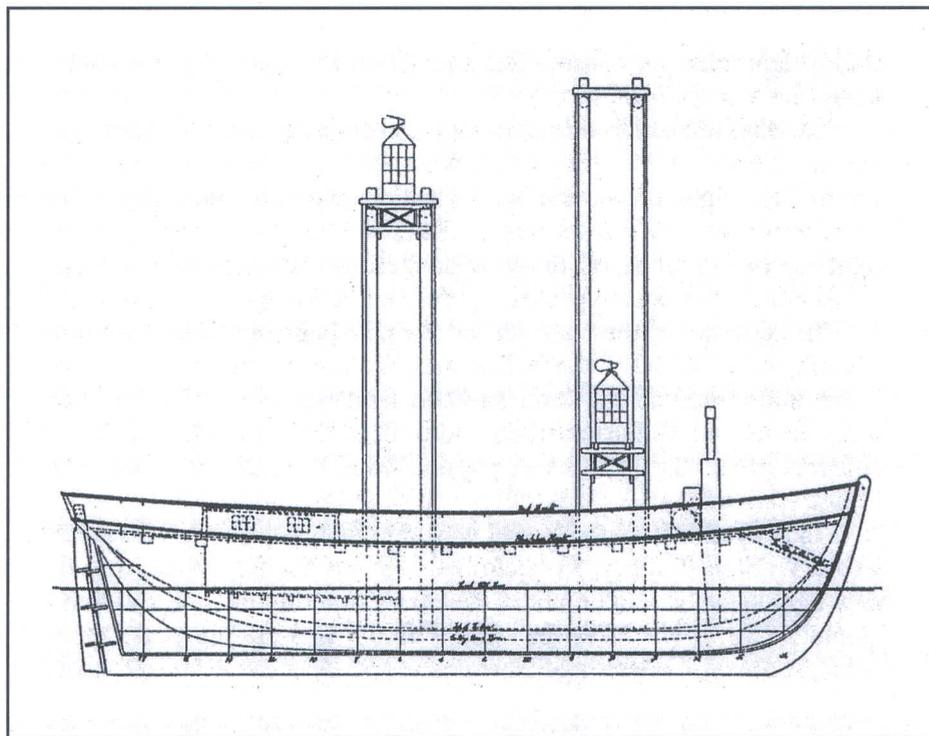
the ship and sail to Key West. However, while in Charleston, Whalton heard a report that the lightship had been lost on the Florida coast. Not being able to confirm the report, Whalton sailed to Key West. When he arrived in Key West he learned that the report of the loss of the vessel was true!

On August 21st, Fielding A. Browne, owner of a wrecking firm in Key West, sent a letter to Pleasonton in which he said that the lightship had run ashore fifty-eight miles north of Cape Florida and had been abandoned by her captain. Pleasonton wrote to Jonathan Thompson in New York to remind Messrs Isaac Webb and Company that the ship had to be delivered "in Complete order . . . before payment could be made."

The wreckers salvaged the damaged hull of the lightship, re-floated her, and towed her to Key West. There she fell under control of the wrecking court. The vessel was re-purchased by the contractors for \$10,000. By the end of December, the vessel was being repaired and Captain Whalton prepared to take command. However, there was a delay as the vessel coming arriving from Havana with lumber for the repairs was lost. It was not until mid-March, 1826, that Pinkney could certify that the lightship had been sufficiently repaired to take up her station on Carysfort Reef.

In early April, 1826, the lightship finally arrived at Carysfort Reef, six miles from Key Largo off the Basin Hill Bank. Pinkney ordered her lamps to be lighted on the 15th of that month, after a notice to that effect had had time to circulate in New York and Havana. The vessel would show "two fixed lights at 50 and 60 feet above the sea, visible 4 leagues off [12 nautical miles]." Soon, Captain Whalton was calling his lightship, the Caesar, possibly naming it after the legendary pirate, Black Caesar, who had had a base nearby in Black Caesar's Creek.

The lamps were lighted as advertised. At the end of the first month on station, Pinkney wrote to Pleasonton requesting awnings for the vessel and grass bagging for her sides to protect the wood of the vessel from drying and shrinking in the heat of the sun, which caused the seams to open and leak. As the crew had to row forty-five miles to obtain drinking water, Pinkney decided to allow Captain Whalton one extra crew member. In mid-May, Pinkney reported the vessel's bearings as seven miles southeast of the north end of Key Largo, three to four miles north one half degree east from the elbow of Carysfort Reef. Captain Josiah Doane, of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Marion* soon reported that he could see the lights of the light vessel from sixteen miles away.



Plans for the lightship to be constructed, by Henry Eckford, similar to those used for the first lightship at Carysfort Reef in the Keys. This two-masted, 220-ton lightship was named *Caesar*, and served at Carysfort Reef from 1825 to 1828.

Life on the *Carysfort Reef* lightship was not easy. Captain Whalton complained constantly of the great inconveniences, particularly that of obtaining provisions and water at such great distances (48 miles to the Miami River for fresh water, 140 miles to Key West for provisions!). Supplies for his men were so expensive in Key West that Captain Whalton had to supplement the government allowance from his own pocket. Whalton also needed a good small boat to procure supplies. He was eventually provided with a 20-foot boat, but it proved inadequate. On June 5, 1827, during one voyage to get fresh water, the boat was lost along with two crewmen, Hans Hansen and Thomas Van Pelt. The boat was found several days later, sunk in twelve feet of water with her sails set and no sign of the two men. They were presumed drowned.

On the night of May 4, 1826, a ship wrecked on Carysfort Reef very close to the lightship. The next morning, Whalton rowed out to it and learned that the captain had ventured close to the reef because he thought the two mast lights of the lightship was another vessel sailing in open water. Whalton felt sure that the captain had been drunk, but he gathered up the gear and provisions of the wrecked vessel and housed the crew on the lightship until the wreckers could arrive.

Due to the close quarters aboard the vessel and the difficult, tedious life, tensions sometimes broke out between the crew members on the light vessel. The *Savannah Georgian* for February 5 1827, indicates a serious affair which occurred on the lightship after a crew member had had an argument with the captain: "Key West Captain Johnson spoke [with] the light ship *Caesar* on Carysfort Reef, the captain of which requested him to state that part of his crew had been in a state of mutiny and had broken his lantern, etc. but were then in irons [shackles]." Johnson alerted the United States Revenue Cutter Service (forerunner of the Coast Guard) about the problem. On April 13, 1827, Key West Collector of Customs William Pinkney reported to Stephen Pleasonton that the insubordinate man had "been Sent to St. Augustine to be tried." However, the court there must have felt that the court in Key West should have jurisdiction, as the May 14, 1827, issue of the *Savannah Georgian* reports: "Key West – The [U. S. Revenue Cutter] *Marion*, [Captain] Doane, looked into this harbor last week, and landed a seaman from the light ship as a prisoner under a charge of mutiny;

he having refused, as is said, to obey the order of the keeper, and also during his absence broke the lamp and the bell."

Pinkney reported to Stephenson that during the month of March, 1827, the lightship was undergoing extensive caulking and repair; however, in a storm that fall the lightship was blown onto the reef, damaging the copper sheathing of her hull. By July, 1828, damage to the lightship from its exposure to the elements was becoming apparent. Captain Whalton wrote a letter to Pinkney, from the "*Light Ship Caesar*," describing the problems he found with the vessel. Whalton wrote: "Her Plank Sheer is entirely rotten, there are three planks on the starboard bow, two on the larboard bow, and seven bad places under each tuck which cannot be caulked." Because the copper sheathing on the bottom had been damaged when the vessel was blown onto the reef, teredo worms got into the wooden hull, and it was badly damaged.

In August, 1828, Pleasonton authorized Pinkney to have the lightship taken into port and repaired. Notice of the vessel's removal from her station had to be advertised, "and also [advertised] when she shall be repaired and replaced." In October, when the light vessel was brought into Key West for repairs it was learned that the damage was much more severe than originally thought and the vessel was sent to Charleston for a major overhaul. After a complete survey, it was discovered that the main timbers of the ship were already so rotten that repair of the vessel was not deemed economical. The final fate of the *Caesar*, the first *Carysfort Reef* lightship, is unknown, but she was probably broken up.

By the middle of 1828, it was obvious that the lightship at Carysfort Reef would have to be replaced. As Stephen Pleasonton reported: "The decay of the first light vessel built for Carysfort Reef was very extraordinary and unaccountable. She was built in New York by Henry Eckford, under the superintendence of an experienced shipbuilder, and examined by the collector . . . I saw the vessel myself after her timbers were up, but before she was planked; and every other person who saw her, pronounced her a very superior vessel in every respect . . . [yet] in five years she was examined and found so entirely dry-rotten, in every timber, that a new vessel was found to be necessary to take her place."

In the spring of 1830, Congress authorized the construction of a new "vessel for a floating light" for Carysfort Reef. The contract was

completed on June 3rd with Isaac Webb and John Allen of New York for \$19,730. The new 225-ton vessel, a near twin to the old *Caesar*, was christened *Florida*, and she reached her station the following summer, with Captain Whalton again in command. However, conditions were not much improved over what they had been on board the old *Caesar*. On September 15-17, 1835, the new light vessel was damaged in a hurricane.

A new problem arose: Indian hostilities! The Second Seminole Indian War began with the Indian raid on New Smyrna, Florida, and the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet on Christmas Day, 1835. Three days later Major Dade and his command were massacred by the Indians north of Tampa. The January 6, 1836, massacre of the Cooley family at New River, at today's Fort Lauderdale, brought the war closer to home for those in the Florida Keys. Twelve year old Edmund Kirby-Smith, later a famous Confederate general, traveling from St. Augustine to Key West, wrote to his mother that the sailors on the lightship were "alarmed for their safety." On July 23, 1836, the Indians attacked the Cape Florida Lighthouse, killing one keeper, wounding the other, and setting fire to the wooden stairway of the tower. The entire south Florida area was evacuated. This left the men on the Carysfort Reef lightship the closest American outpost to the territory which had been overrun by the Indians.

However, during the next year things in the immediate area seemed to have quieted down so much that Captain Whalton invited his family from Key West to come up to the light vessel for a visit. To provide a special treat for them, on June 26, 1837, Whalton decided to go ashore on Key Largo at Garden Cove. Here the men had cultivated a vegetable garden to supplement their meager provisions from Key West. Four crewmen from the lightship went ashore with the captain.. The men anticipated no trouble, but the Indians had been waiting for the men to land. What happened was reported from Indian Key in the *Pensacola Gazette*:

Captain Whalton and one of his men were shot dead – the other three made their escape, two of which were wounded, one on the left side, the other in the arm. The Indians after taking scalps, stripped the bodies entirely naked and stabbing them in several places, even cutting off Captain Whalton's finger to get his ring, retreated to the bush. The wreckers, or several of them, deserve much credit. In the afternoon of the same day they resolved to go on



The new lightship for the Carysfort Reef station was named *Florida*. She was a 220-ton vessel and served from 1831 to 1852.

shore to the risk of their own lives and get the bodies, and Capt. Cold of the Schooner *Pee Dee*, Capt. English on board the sloop *Brilliant* with their crews, ventured and got the remains, which were brought to this place [Indian Key] the next day, and as decently interred as circumstances would permit. The distressed family also came down and remained one night and took the Mail Packet for Key West.

The attack on the men from the lightship *Florida* and the death of the popular Captain Whalton shocked everyone, and the entire Florida Keys were panicked. Extra troops were stationed near Indian Key, but on August 7, 1840, even the large settlement on Indian Key was attacked and destroyed. Eventually, the Seminole War ended.

Francis Wattlington was appointed captain of the *Florida* after the death of John Whalton, and somehow the vessel was kept in order and maintained station despite the difficulties of the times. After only two months Wattlington resigned, and was succeeded by William Neve. He resigned after a period and a Captain Kimmer took his place. In 1841, Kimmer was removed and William Sistaire became captain. The following year, Joseph Ximenez (written

"Himmenez" in some accounts), a former keeper at the Dry Tortugas Lighthouse took over, and on October 22, 1846, Charles M. Johnson became captain.

After the war was over people began to look objectively at the lightship. Many ship's captains, including M. D. Ricker, W. Rollins, and David Dixon Porter, complained that although the lightship was supposed to be displaying two flashing white lights thirty and forty feet above the sea, visible for twelve miles, the lights were "scarcely discernible from the outer ridge of Carysfort reef, which is four to five miles distant." The captain of the mail-passenger steamer *Isabel*, making twice-monthly voyages between Charleston and Key West, called the Carysfort Reef lightship "a poor thing... cannot depend on it at all."

As early as 1837, Congress had authorized the construction of a lighthouse on Carysfort Reef, and appropriated \$20,000 for the project. However, the sum was too not adequate for the project and the hostile Indians made work in the Keys too dangerous at that time. On July 7, 1838, Congress added \$40,000 to the appropriation, and Isaiah W. P. Lewis, a nephew of Winslow Lewis, drew the plans of a granite lighthouse

designed by his uncle. But again, the Indian scare prevented work from being started.

In 1848, the effort was renewed, and this time, Isaiah W. P. Lewis designed an iron-pile lighthouse for the reef. The lightship *Florida* remained on station until the new lighthouse was completed. The lighthouse was assembled at the factory in Philadelphia, then disassembled and shipped to Carysfort Reef. When the engineer in charge of construction died, Lt. George Gordon Meade, who eleven years later would win the famous Battle of Gettysburg, was selected to complete the tower. However, the erection of the tower on the reef proved to be more difficult than anticipated, and it was not until March 10, 1852, that the light was finally lighted for first time. Charles M. Johnson, captain of the *Florida*, was appointed the first keeper of the new lighthouse. A Captain Wellington arrived to sail the old light vessel away. The final disposition of this lightship is not known, but considering that the *Florida* manned the Carysfort Reef station for twenty-one years, the vessel was probably scrapped.

The Northwest Passage Lightship (1838-1855): Key West (LV “NN”)

As the City of Key West grew more and more vessel commerce began arriving, it was discovered that the quickest way for ships with drafts of less than 12 feet to go from the Gulf of Mexico to Key West was by the way of the Northwest Passage. This seven mile long route saved a vessel the dangerous and more circuitous course around the Dry Tortugas. On January 1, 1834, the “Residents of Key West” sent a petition to Congress requesting that a lighthouse be erected at the outer entrance of the Northwest Passage. Realizing that the construction of a lighthouse at the Northwest Passage might be sometime away, Lt. Napoleon L. Coste, commanding the Revenue Marine Cutter *Campbell*, suggested an alternative. He felt that when a new lighthouse was built at Carysfort Reef, “the light-boat [at Carys-

fort] may, if deemed practicable, be removed to the northwest bar of Key West.”

However, even before the new lighthouse on Carysfort Reef was constructed, Congress, on March 3, 1837, appropriated \$10,000 for the construction of a “light boat” to be placed at the outer end of the Northwest Passage. In November, Stephen Pleasonton reported that advertisements for building the new lightship had been issued and that the vessel should be completed before June 1, 1838. On November 28th, William Easby received the contract for building the “vessel for a floating light.”

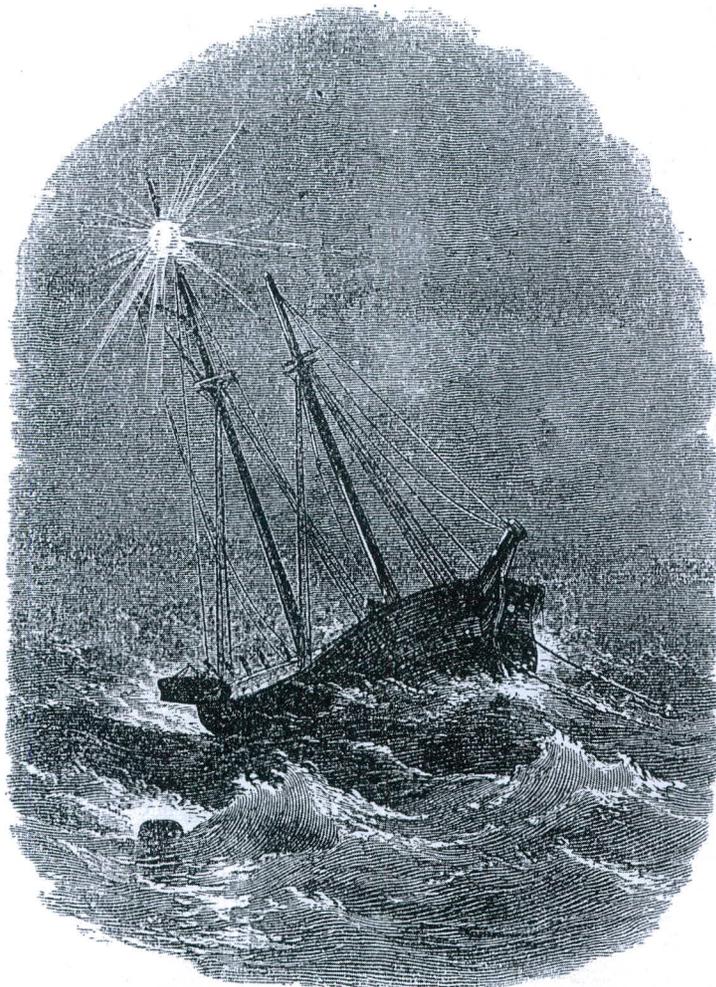
The 145-ton light vessel for the station at the Northwest Passage was completed in the summer of 1838 and sent to her station early that fall with three crew members under Jeremiah Cottrell, her first captain. The vessel displayed a single, small “fixed, white” light at its masthead, and it was claimed that it could be seen at a distance of twelve nautical miles. Although mariners seemed satisfied that this important entrance to Key West was finally

marked, the Collector of Customs for Keys West did have one complaint. In a letter of October 9, 1838, Adam Gordon reported to Captain Lawrence Rousseau that “The lightship *Key West*, at the bar of the northwest channel leading to the gulf of Mexico, is a useful but feeble light, owing to the construction of its lamp. I have recommended to the Department to substitute a larger lamp with reflectors, showing more lights, &c. and have hopes it will soon be improved.”

Captain Lawrence Rousseau, Naval lighthouse inspector for the Sixth District (Key West to the Sabine River, Texas) wrote Stephen Pleasonton agreeing with Gordon’s recommendation. Although, “the light-boat *Key West*, at the bar of the northwest channel, is well placed and very useful,” after new lamps would be installed, “nothing more will be required for the protection of navigation.” However, the light was not improved, and over the years there were many more complaints about its ineffectiveness. In December 1838, although the vessel was only a few months old, Navy Lt. George N. Hollins, the lighthouse inspector for the Fifth Lighthouse District (Norfolk through Key West), reported that the “Northwest Passage Light-boat” was “not in very good order.”

In addition to the complains about the light and maintenance, the captain became the source of a new complaint. With the new light vessel marking the channel, more and more ships began using the Northwest Passage and they needed pilots. Captain Cottrell of the *Key West* found himself at a location from which to take advantage of this new business and began taking “every vessel that comes that way,” to the detriment of the other pilots. It was assumed that by being so employed, Cottrell was probably neglecting the care of the lightship. In early 1840, Stephen Pleasonton ordered Cottrell to mind his duty and not to act again as a pilot. Although it appears that Cottrell followed his orders, he got into trouble again that year when it was learned that he had employed an under-aged youth on the vessel, 15-year-old John O’Brien. The lad was sent home.

Perhaps because of his troubles on the lightship, but probably also as to escape the severe hot summer weather Captain Cottrell requested and received a leave of absence in March 1840, so that he could return to the north and attend to business matters. William Malcolm took over as skipper of the lightship from April to May, when Peter Slout relieved him. Cottrell returned to the vessel in early December.



This small 145-ton vessel, provided one light, and served at the Northwest Passage station, seven miles north of Key West. She was named *Key West* and survived numerous hurricanes, including one which blew her sixty miles off station.

Jeremiah Cottrell resigned as Captain of the lightship *Key West* on July 14, 1841, and Alexander L. Patterson succeeded him. Captain Patterson may have wondered if he had made a mistake in taking the job when gale force winds, swinging up from the south for several days built up tremendously heavy seas. For two days the storm raged. It was hard work as the men struggled to keep the vessel on its station and man the pumps. Shortly afterwards, Captain Patterson resigned. In March, 1842, Henry Benners became the new captain. That following September, a hurricane swept through the area, lasting for four days and doing considerable damage to the vessel Captain Benners was on shore leave at the time. Customs Collector Adam Gordon soon reported that "The light-ship at the northwest bar has been brought in for repairs; and, on examining her copper, it was found so defective as to require new, which has been supplied; and she is moored to day -- having been thoroughly recaulked, recoppered, and repaired where needed."

In the fall of 1844, Captain Benners finally rode out his first hurricane on board the lightship *Key West*. The storm came up from Cuba and lashed the vessel during October 4th and 5th. Although half of Sand Key, near *Key West*, was blown away, the sturdy little vessel *Key West* maintained her station without damage. However, on October 11th and 12th, 1846, one of the most devastating storms to hit the *Key West* area swept through with terrible fury. Both the *Key West* and Sand Key lighthouses were completely swept away. As for the *Key West*, as Stephen Mallory, the Collector of Customs, reported, "during the storm, the lightship at Northwest Passage broke adrift from her moorings, but as her heavy chains kept her head into the wind and sea, she backed astern and drifted sixty miles to sea, safely. . . . The light ship is now [October 21st] being moored at her station."

The old *Key West* proved to be a sturdy and intrepid vessel, but complaints continued about the inadequacy of the light. Although a report in *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* acknowledged that the lightship was well kept, it again stressed the fact that the light on the ship was "by no means what it ought to be . . . the lightship is old and the light they attempt to show is miserable."

After the Hurricane of 1846 destroyed the Sand Key Lighthouse, a small, emergency light vessel was stationed off the remains of Sand Key until a new lighthouse could be built. During

the summer of 1852, this vessel was removed from her station and sold. The new Lighthouse Board, which had just been instituted to replace Stephen Pleasonton and administer the nation's lighthouses, made plans to move the *Key West* from the Northwest Passage to the now-vacant position at Sand Key. However, they received a report that the *Key West* was in critical condition herself and needed to be replaced. With the Sand Key Lighthouse already under construction, the Light House Board finally decided that perhaps a lightship was not necessary at Sand Key and that the *Key West* should remain at the Northwest Passage. It was finally established that, in the long-run, a lighthouse at Northwest Passage would be much more cost-effective than maintaining a light vessel at the station.

In March, 1853, Congress appropriated \$12,000 for the construction of an iron-pile, "house-style" lighthouse for Northwest Passage. In the meantime, the *Key West* was repaired and "restored to her position in an unusually short space of time, and at a mere nominal expense compared with what . . . it was supposed would be required."

In May, 1854, the pre-fabricated iron-pile foundation and the lighthouse dwelling arrived

at the site. However, because of the onset of the summer "sickly season" work could not resume until October. The new lighthouse was not completed until March 5, 1855. Now the old light vessel *Key West* was no longer needed. For seventeen years this small vessel had braved the waves and storms of the Gulf of Mexico, guiding thousands of ships and vessels of all sizes into the port of *Key West*. After 1855, the old light vessel *Key West* fades away into the mists of history, its disposition unknown.

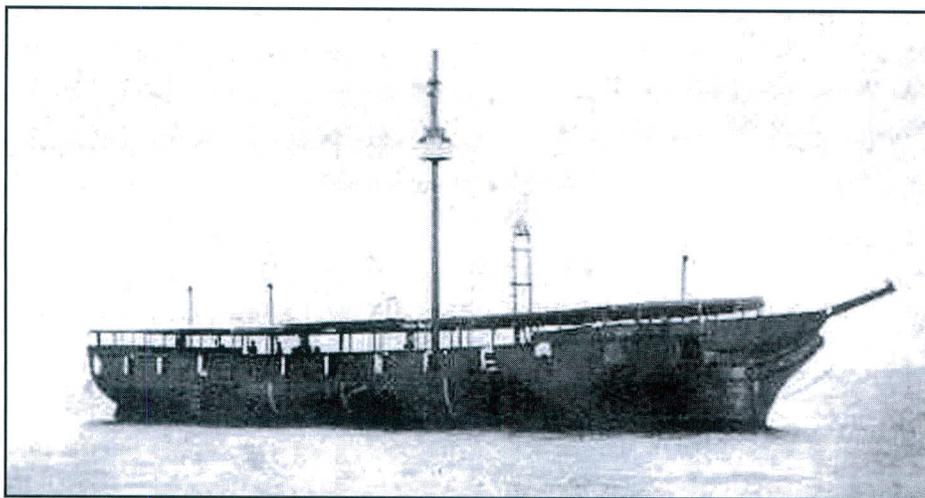
The Sand Key Lightship (1847-1852):

Honey (LV "PP")

On October 11, 1846, one of the most terrible hurricanes to hit the Florida Keys slammed into *Key West*. The lighthouses at both *Key West* and Sand Key were destroyed, and the lightship at the Northwest Passage had been blown sixty-miles from its station. With no lighthouse now at the critical location of Sand Key, something had to be done very quickly to provide an aid to navigation.



Northwest Passage Lighthouse, drawing by Paul Bradley.



An early photograph of a lightship in the 1850s and configured precisely as was the 140-ton *Honey*. The *Honey* was purchased in New York to serve as a temporary lightship at Sand Key from 1847 to 1852.

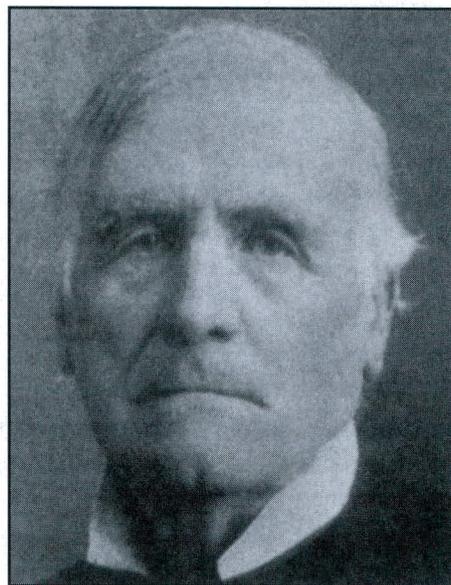
To remedy the situation, Stephen Pleasonton purchased a vessel of 140 tons in New York. This vessel was the *Honey*, and she was quickly converted into an emergency lightship. To man the vessel, Pleasonton authorized a captain (at \$700 per year), a mate (at \$30 per month), a cook/steward (at \$18 per month), six able-bodied seamen (at \$15 per month), and an ordinary seaman (at \$12 per month). The captain he chose was Samuel Saunderson, but, for some reason, Saunderson declined. Pleasonton next turned to Joseph Ximenez, who had just retired from serving as the captain of the lightship *Florida* in October. Ximenez received his appointment on December 16, 1846.

The *Honey* sailed south to her station, carrying with her construction supplies and even a pre-fabricated, frame dwelling house for rebuilding the new Key West Light Station on the Island of Key West. After off-loading this material in Key West, the new lightship took up her station four-tenths of a mile, 213° southwest from the remains of Sand Key, where the new lighthouse was to be constructed. This was a strategic location for the lightship as navigators could use it as a reference mark for entering the Rock Key Channel, the Southwest Channel, and the Main Ship Channel, all of which provided access to the harbor of Key West.

After five months as captain of the *Honey*, Ximenez stepped down, and on May 15, 1847, John Walker, formerly of Rhode Island, took over as captain. He served for two and a half years, and had some special adventures.

The Lighthouse Board encouraged its lightship keepers to assist mariners in distress as far as they were able. When George Gordon Meade completed the Carysfort Reef Light-

house in 1852, he instructed the keepers to "succor them [distressed mariners] as far as it is in [the keepers'] power – whether by piloting or the supplying of sustenance or materials of any kind on hand." However, the wrecking judge in Key West, Judge William Marvin, saw this work by lighthouse men as a form of competition to the regularly licensed wreckers in Key West, and he worked to discredit their actions and discourage their participation in what he saw as the wrecking business and not the lightship business.



William Marvin, judge of the wrecking court at Key West.

At midnight on a night in 1849, Captain John Walker sighted the light of a vessel in distress on the reef near the lightship. With four of his crew, he rowed out to offer assistance to the captain of the vessel which was a schooner. Under the directions of the schooner's captain,

Walker and his men used the schooner's boat to carry the vessel's kedge anchor out into the ocean to try to haul the schooner off the reef. When this smaller anchor failed to hold with enough force to pull the schooner off, Walker and his men rowed back to the vessel to get its much larger bower anchor out. However, in rowing this larger anchor out, its weight capsized the small boat. Walker and his men clung to the overturned hull of the boat, and then Walker swam back to the schooner, got another boat, and rowed back out to rescue his men. After towing the capsized boat and anchoring it off Sand Key, Walker and his men returned to the schooner and succeeded in heaving her free. Judge William Marvin was not amused when the lighthouse men came to the court in Key West to get their just dues for assisting the schooner. Marvin awarded the lighthouse men only \$50 apiece for risking their lives.

In September, 1850, the *Honey* was brought into the port of Key West for an inspection. It was thought that she was in bad condition, but the inspection found that her hull was sound enough to remain on station for another five years. On November 19, 1850, William P. Courtland succeeded John Walker as captain of the lightship.

Many mariners complained of the ineffectiveness of the lightship. In 1850, John C. Hoyt, an insurance underwriter in Key West, complained that "the light-ship stationed near Sand Key is old and the light is miserable. Several vessels and much valuable cargo have been lost by the neglect of the government to build a lighthouse on Sand Key." Hoyt had figures to back up his assertions, for between May, 1850, and August, 1851, eight ships had run ashore near Sand Key with a loss of cargo valued at \$425,000. He continued, "The three light-ships on this coast are faithfully kept, but the power of their lights is by no means what it should be." In August of 1851, the *Honey* was in danger of running ashore when a major hurricane struck the area. As the waves increased in size the vessel was threatened with destruction. Captain Courtland made the decision to slip his chains and run down into the harbor of Key West for safety.

In 1850, Isaiah Lewis, the architect of the Sand Key Lighthouse managed to install the foundation pilings and some stabilizing cross braces before the Congressional appropriation for the project ran out. It was nearly two years before a new appropriation was passed. George Gordon Meade was assigned the task

to complete the lighthouse, but the funds would not be available for resuming the work until December. During the summer of 1852, while the lighthouse construction was on hold, Sand Key had some unusual visitors, and the crew of the lightship had a ring-side seat to observe the situation. Jones Perry Fyffe, a gentleman who was returning home to Ohio from California and 170 fellow travelers spent a week on desolate Sand Key. Cholera had broken out on the ship on which Fyffe was sailing. When she sailed into Key West, port authorities made her disembark her passengers on Sand Key until they could clear quarantine. Fyffe described the island as "a small, barren island devoid of vegetation about one acre and a half in its extent. There is a lone frame house used by the government people [those who had been building the lighthouse]. A portion of our folks occupy it. The balance are scattered about, some under an awning stretched over the base of the new light house just commenced. The party to which I am attached are under a covered causeway used for landing the material for the light house."

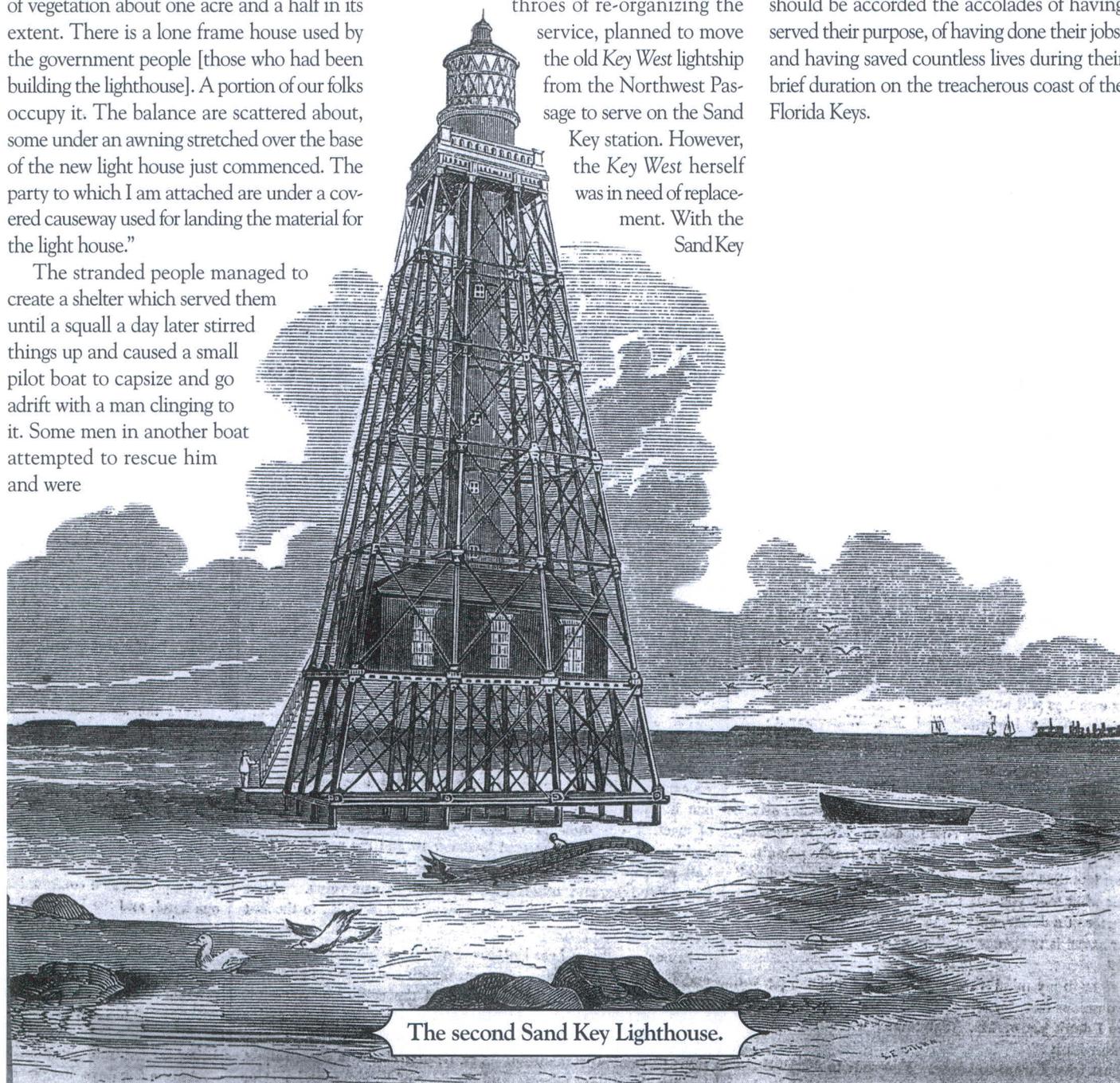
The stranded people managed to create a shelter which served them until a squall a day later stirred things up and caused a small pilot boat to capsize and go adrift with a man clinging to it. Some men in another boat attempted to rescue him and were

themselves blown towards Key West. The man was finally rescued. After several more days, twenty of the passengers chartered a small pilot boat and headed off for Mobile. Finally, after a week on Sand Key, Jones Fyffe and his fellow passengers were ferried back into Key West where they once again boarded their sanitized and completely repainted vessel to continue their voyage. It was an unpleasant stay on Sand Key for Jones Fyffe and his comrades, but it is an interesting episode that occurred during the early construction of Sand Key Lighthouse.

In September, 1852, the *Honey* was deemed not seaworthy and was removed from her station. The new Lighthouse Board, still in the throes of re-organizing the service, planned to move the old Key West lightship from the Northwest Passage to serve on the Sand Key station. However, the Key West herself was in need of replacement. With the Sand Key

Lighthouse now under construction and due to be completed in the next year, the Lighthouse Board finally decided that a lightship was no longer necessary at Sand Key. The Key West would remain at the Northwest Passage. The lightship *Honey* was sold and vanishes from the pages of history.

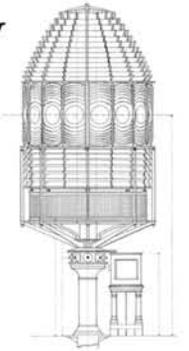
The history of these five tiny lightships and the brave crews who manned them is a testament to the tenacity of the men who served the early United States Lighthouse Establishment. Despite inferior equipment and technology, storms and Indian attacks, and despite the continuation of wrecks along the shores of the Florida Keys, these vessels and their crews should be accorded the accolades of having served their purpose, of having done their jobs, and having saved countless lives during their brief duration on the treacherous coast of the Florida Keys.



The second Sand Key Lighthouse.



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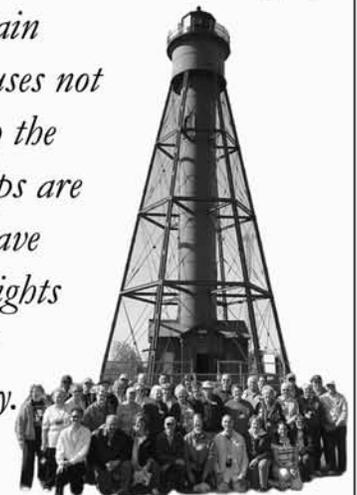
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