Pride in Workmanship Forgotten

By Timothy Harrison



The Sabine Bank Lighthouse, minus its lantern, is shown here at the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company in Detroit, Michigan before it was shipped to its new home in the Gulf of Mexico. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

The history books are full of the men and women who built America. Sadly, many of these ingenious people such as Walter S. Russel, who owned the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company, of Detroit, Michigan, have been forgotten by most.

You would think that it must have taken some real hutzpah on Walter Russel's part when he decided to bid on the fabrication of a lighthouse in his Michigan facility that would eventually sit in the water 18 miles off the coast of the Texas and Louisiana border. But he was already familiar with fabricating steel and iron for lighthouses, such as his work in 1885 for the Detroit River Lighthouse. His bid of $37,115 for a caisson-style structure won out over another bidder who had submitted a slightly higher bid for a screw-pile lighthouse that would have sat on legs out in the exposed ocean.

It was a bold move on the part of Mr. Russel as well as for the officials of the Lighthouse Service who approved the bid. Although caisson-style lighthouses had been built in other places, such a number of them in New England, none had ever been built for installation in the Gulf of Mexico.

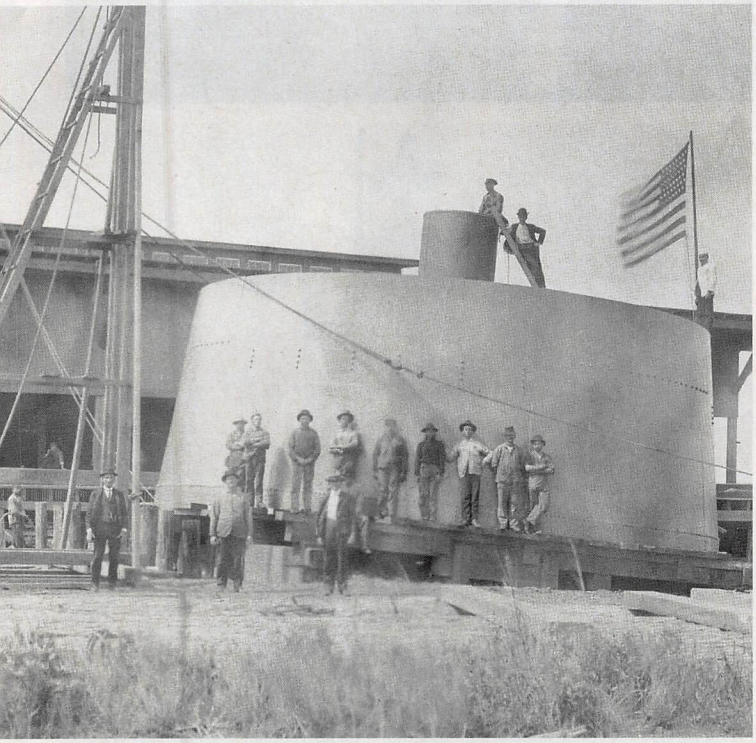
Not only did Walter Russel oversee all aspects of the fabrication work by his crew, he also oversaw its complete assembly at his Detroit factory where photographs were taken of the lighthouse to document his accomplishment. Russel boasted that the lighthouse, after installed in the Gulf, could withstand all that "the old man of the sea could throw at her."

The lighthouse was then disassembled and shipped by railroad to a location where the lower sections would be

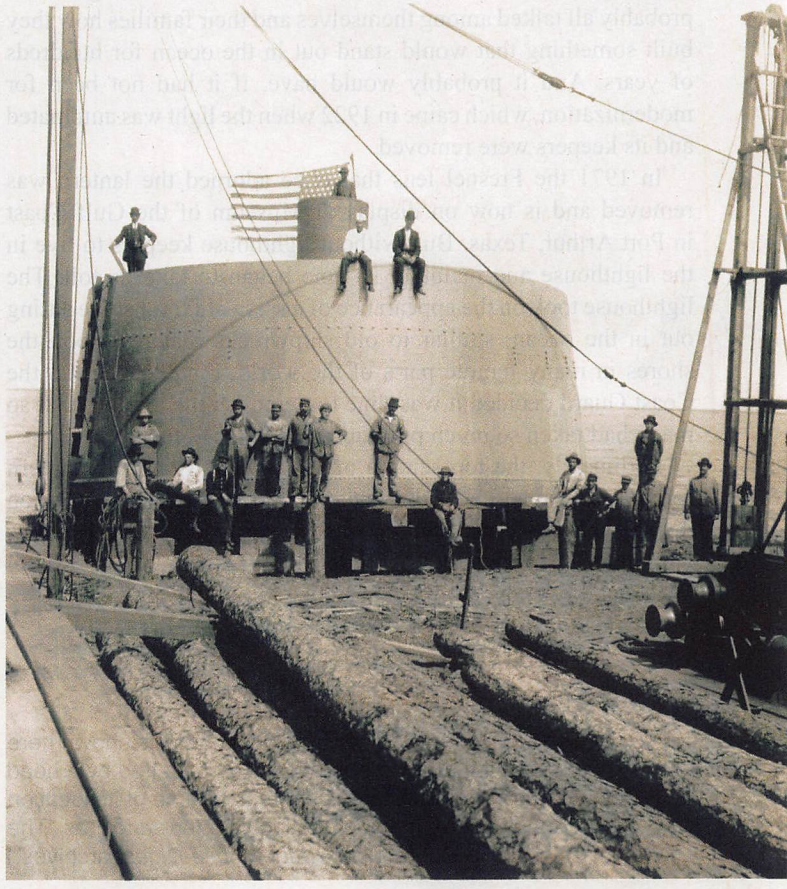
Continued on next page.



Walter S. Russel (1855-1935) of the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company that fabricated the iron for the Sabine Bank Lighthouse as well as for the lantern that would adorn the top of the tower. Walter S. Russel and his company were no strangers to lighthouse fabrication. They were involved with the Cheboygan Crib Lighthouse, Rock of Ages Lighthouse, Detroit River Lighthouse, Hillsboro Lighthouse, Waackaack Lighthouse and others. In 1916, the company changed its name to Russel Steel Construction. When the Great Depression hit, the company closed its doors and never reopened. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



The bottom part of the Sabine Bank Lighthouse on land in 1904, just prior to being launched, and subsequently being towed to its new location in the Gulf of Mexico. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



reassembled onshore and then brought out to its location offshore. Bids were asked for the actual installation of the lighthouse, and a man named W. R. Taylor submitted the winning bid of $33,890. However, he must have realized that his bid was much too low, and he refused to sign the contract. When the government couldn't find a local contractor willing to do the work for the price and conditions that they required, they decided to do the work themselves with a combination of hired laborers and the crew of a lighthouse tender.

The construction laborers also took pride in their work. This is obvious when they took the time to hoist a large United States flag and pose for a photo at the base of the lighthouse on land before it was hauled out to sea.

The actual placement of the lighthouse out in the water took a lot of hard work. Its foundation was dug by the laborers under water in a pressurized chamber on the seabed. The work chamber was the lighthouse base itself, which settled into the seabed as the laborers excavated sand from under it. Water was kept from seeping under the edges of the foundation by air pressure.

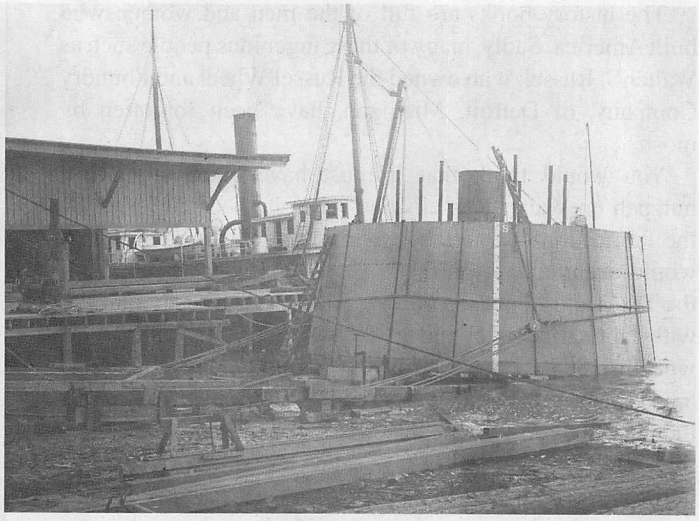
But the final phase of the installation of the Sabine Bank Lighthouse was much greater that the $33,980 that it cost to fabricate the steel tower, and it took much longer to accomplish. The final cost of installation, which was not fully completed until March of 1906, was slightly over $101,000, not including the cost of the 3rd order Fresnel lens that was installed in the lantern.

The quality of the workmanship was proven when the Sabine Bank Lighthouse withstood the ravages of The Hurricane of 1915 that heavily damaged the tower. It also withstood subsequent hurricanes and tropical depressions that would strike the area.

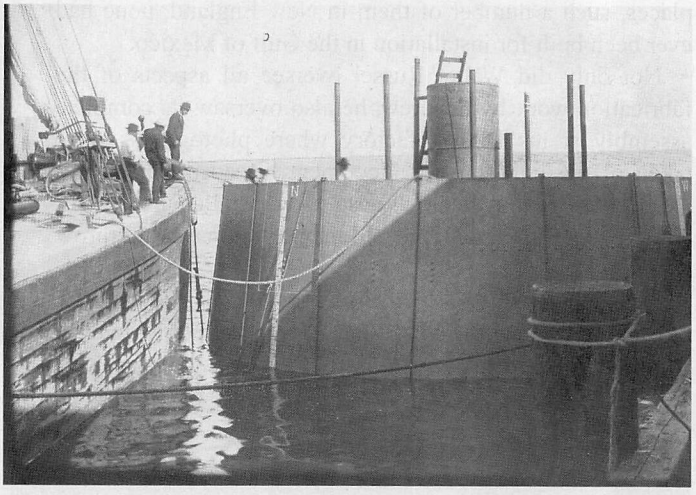
People like Walter S. Russel and his Detroit crew, and the laborers from Texas and Louisiana who worked on the lighthouse probably all talked among themselves and their families how they built something that would stand out in the ocean for hundreds of years. And it probably would have, if it had not been for modernization, which came in 1922 when the light was automated and its keepers were removed.

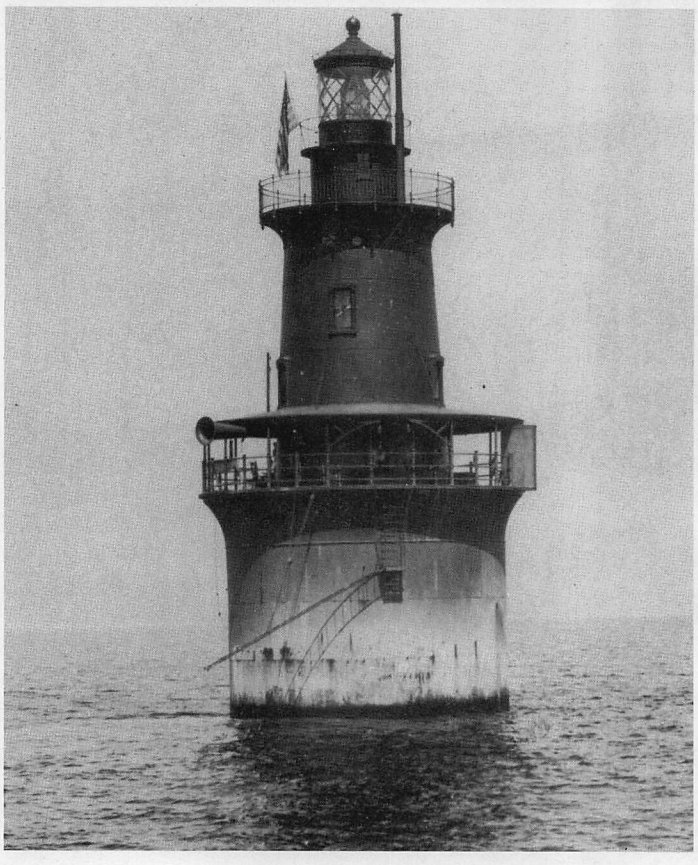
In 1971 the Fresnel lens that once adorned the lantern was removed and is now on display at Museum of the Gulf Coast in Port Arthur, Texas. But, without lighthouse keepers to live in the lighthouse and maintain it, time began to take its toll. The lighthouse took on the appearance of a rusty old tombstone sitting out in the ocean, similar to old shipwrecks that rest upon the shores in many remote parts of the world. Finally, in 2001 the Coast Guard decided it was time to demolish the eyesore that so many had taken so much pride in many years before.

Fortunately, the top section of the lighthouse and its lantern room were saved and subsequently restored, and it is now on display in Lions Park in Sabine Pass, Texas where the early 1900s workmanship of Walter S. Russel and the men of the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company can be seen to this day.



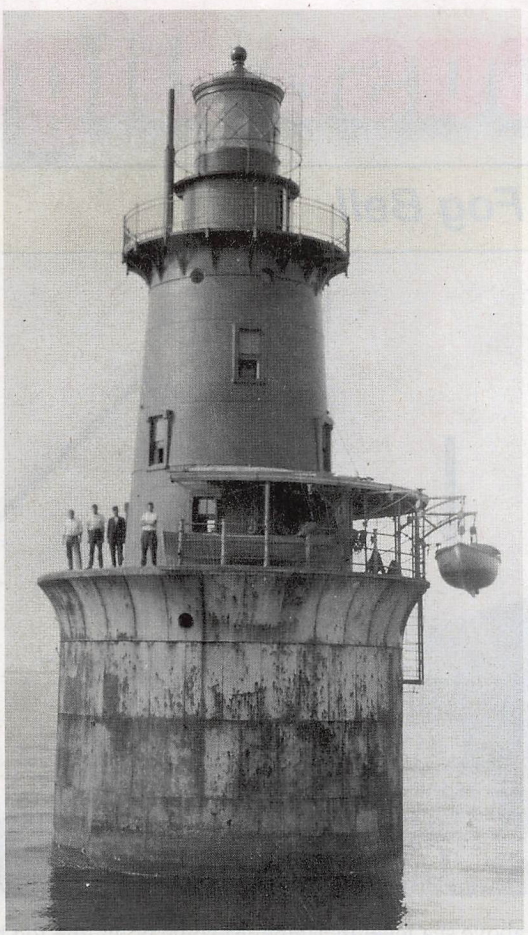
The towlines are being affixed to the base of the Sabine Bank Lighthouse to tow it out it into the Gulf of Mexico in 1904. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

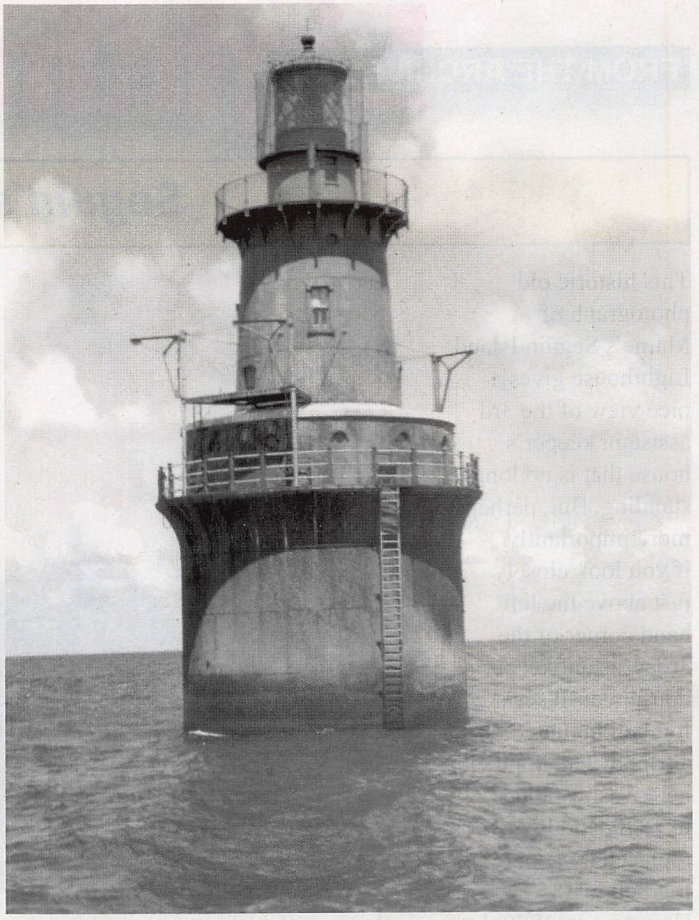




The completed Sabine Bank Lighthouse is shown here shortly after it started in operation. It was staffed by a head keeper and three assistant keepers. Because of its location 18 miles off shore, many of the locals referred to it as "The 18-Mile Lighthouse." (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

On August 16 and 17 of 1915, a hurricane tore away three quarters of the covered walkway that went around the lower section of the tower and caused other severe damage to the tower. The keepers reported that waves swept right over the top of the tower, and saltwater seeped into the cistern and ruined the fresh water supply. Reportedly, on August 19, when the keeper's ran out of water, they left the lighthouse, but eventually returned with help to start making repairs. The keepers and others are shown here standing on the part of the lower walkway that had been ripped off the lighthouse. The lighthouse was painted red at this time. (U.S. Coast Guard photo, *Lighthouse Digest* archives.)





After the 1915 hurricane, in an effort to better protect the keepers and their fresh water supply, the Lighthouse Service enclosed part of the lower walkway going around the Sabine Bank Lighthouse with iron plates and round port windows for fresh air, all of which was topped by a cement roof. (U.S. Coast Guard photo, *Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



The abandoned Sabine Bank Lighthouse as it appeared in the 1990s. In 2001 the tower was demolished. (Bob and Sandra Shanklin collection, *Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

When the Sabine Bank Lighthouse was demolished, the lantern and watch room were saved and restored for display on the mainland. The workmanship of Walter S. Russel and his the men of Russel Wheel and Foundry Company of Detroit, Michigan is still evident today. (2012 Ron Foster photo, *Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

