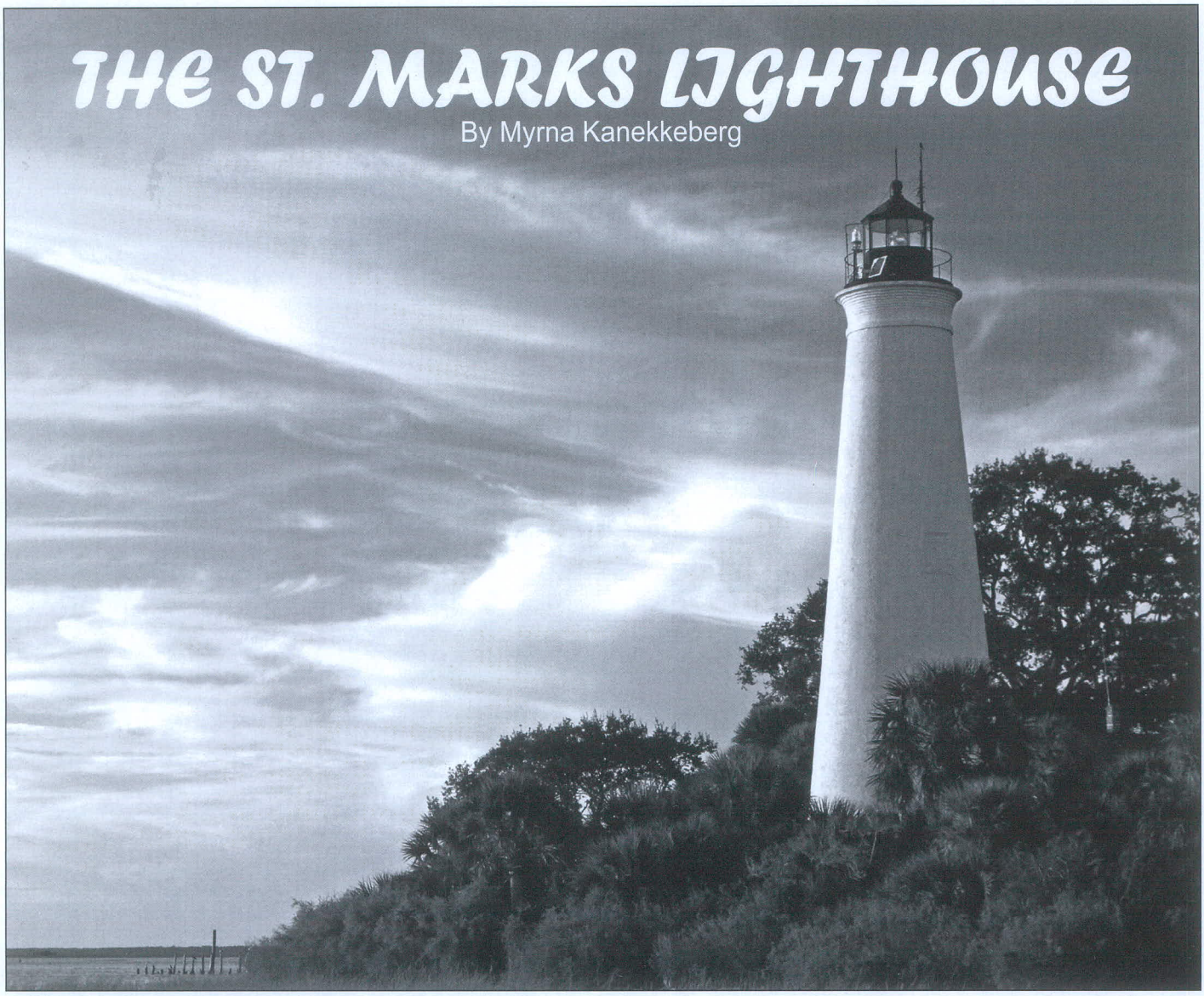
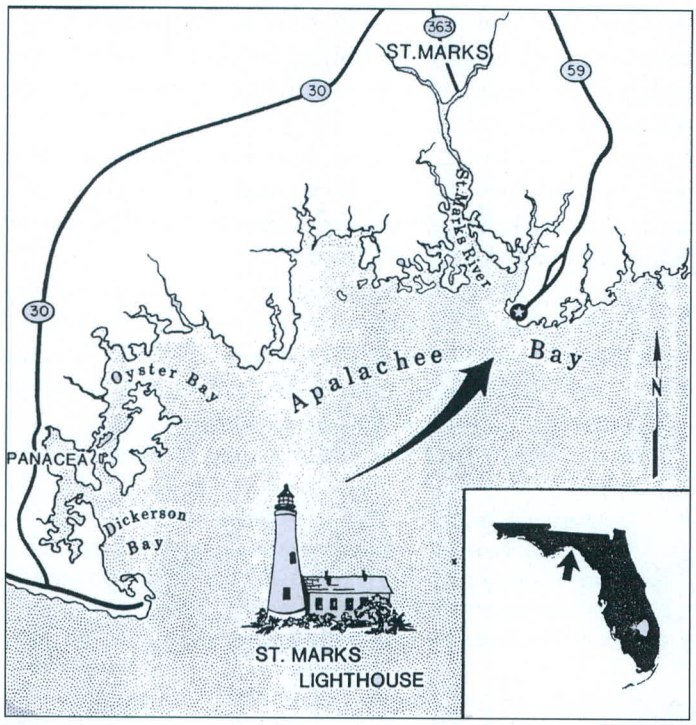
THE ST. MARKS LIGHTHOUSE

By Myrna Kanekkeberg



St. Mark's Lighthouse, date unknown. USLHS archive photo by Lou Kellenberger.

Visible for 15 miles across the Gulf of Mexico, the St. Marks Lighthouse is located at the mouth of the St. Marks River, in Wakulla County, an area rich with history. The lighthouse is located approximately 20 miles south of Florida's state capital, Tallahassee, and has been in operation since 1829. It is the second oldest lighthouse in Florida, and one of the most photographed landmarks on Florida's "Big Bend" coast. It is also a part of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1931, which encompasses 68,000 acres and includes three counties. It is home to alligators, bald eagles, herons, osprey, deer, bear, wild boar, and the elusive Florida panther, to name only a few of its exotic wildlife. It is a bird watchers' paradise, especially in the winter months when migratory birds flood the marshy ponds and waterways.



Map showing Apalachee Bay Area and the location of the St. Marks Lighthouse.

The St. Marks River originates from an underground river that surfaces at Natural Bridge near Woodville in Leon County approximately 10 miles north of the Gulf. This river merges with the Wakulla River at a promontory just above the village of St. Marks. The Wakulla flows from Wakulla Springs, one of the world's largest springs. The promontory where the two rivers merge forms a natural lookout toward the Gulf, and it was here that the Spaniards built Fort San Marcos de Apalachee, known locally as "The Old Fort."

It was at the fort that an early settlement was established by the Spanish. The year is unknown, though it probably occurred on the feast day of San Marcos, as that name was applied to both the town and the river—later Anglicized. The fort was crucial for protecting the power first of Spain, and then England, the United States, and the Confederacy. The fort was especially important during the Spanish reign to protect the string of Spanish missions which stretched from St. Augustine towards Pensacola.

Before the lighthouse was built, legend has it that the Spaniards would hang big streamers or banners in the trees near where the lighthouse is now so that their ships could easily locate the mouth of the St. Marks River. How they maneuvered their ships up the river is testament to their seamanship. By the early 19th century, St. Marks was considered one of the most dangerous ports in Florida. Shallow water and dangerous shoals caused numerous shipwrecks. There is an area near the mouth of the river called "Spanish Hole," which is deep enough for the anchorage of deep draft ships and was probably used by the Spanish. During the 19th century so-called "lighters," or shallow draft vessels, would take cargo from the big ships at anchor in Spanish Hole and transport the cargo to settlements upriver, such as St. Marks, New Port, Port Leon, and Magnolia.

In 1828 William P. Duval, who succeeded Andrew Jackson as governor of the Florida Territory, encouraged Joseph M. White, a territorial delegate to Congress, to petition for the construction of a lighthouse at St. Marks. White contacted the chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce with the plea, and on May 23, 1828, an act appropriating $6,000 for the construction of the St. Marks Lighthouse was passed.

The contract for the lighthouse was awarded to Winslow Lewis. Under his direction, Benjamin Beal and Jairus Thayer constructed a tower at a cost of $11,765. However, the Collector of Customs for St. Marks refused to accept the lighthouse, as it was built with hollow walls, a practice that was not yet widely accepted. Calvin Knowlton, Lewis' partner, supervised the construction of a solid replacement tower, which was accepted in January of 1830. Erosion forced the tower to be rebuilt again with double walls in its present location in 1842. The structure consists of the lighthouse keeper's house, which is attached to the tower, both resting on a 12-foot limestone base. According to local legend, the limestone blocks were taken from the ruins of "The Old Fort." Both the tower and the house are whitewashed brick, and its conical tower is topped with a black lantern. The tower stands 82 feet above sea level, and 85 steps spiral up the tower to the lantern room. The first 72 are wood and the last 13 are iron. The tower walls are 4 feet thick at the base, tapering to 18 inches at the top. Fifteen Lewis-Argand lamps with 14-inch reflectors were installed in 1831. The lantern room, or housing, still contains the fourth-order fixed Fresnel lens installed in 1867. The electric flasher displays an occulting white light every four seconds.

The first lighthouse keeper was Samuel Crosby, who held the position from 1830 to 1839.

Under the 1832 Treaty of Payne's Landing, Florida's Seminole Indians were to relocate west of the Mississippi River by 1835. However, when 1835 arrived, the Indians refused to leave, and the Second Seminole Indian War, which would last for seven years, erupted. During the first two years of the war, the lighthouses at Mosquito Inlet and Cape Florida were attacked. Fearing for the safety of his family, Keeper Crosby requested that a detachment of soldiers be stationed near the St. Marks Lighthouse. His request was denied. Crosby then asked for an escape boat that he could use in case of an attack, but again his petition was not granted. Fortunately, no attack was made on the St. Marks Lighthouse during Crosby's tenure.



The St. Marks Lighthouse circa 1918.

Benjamin Metcalf followed Crosby as keeper from 1839 to 1841. Captain J.P. Hungerford was keeper between 1841 and 1844.

In 1837 the Tallahassee-St. Marks Railroad was completed. The 20-mile line, Florida's first, was conceived and financed by plantation owners to aid in transporting their cotton crops to the port of St. Marks. There were several large storage areas along the railroad in St. Marks in those days where cotton and other items from the plantations of southern Georgia and north Florida were stored awaiting shipment to western destinations along the Gulf.

By 1843 the railroad had been extended across the river a short distance east of the fort. The reason for this was that the St. Marks port was busy and narrow, so that it was decided that the little outpost community of Port Leon, settled around 1838 and located approximately one mile south of St. Marks, would better serve as a distribution center. It was also conceived to be profitable from leases and the sale of lots in the new development.

In less than five years Port Leon had reached the small-town class in resident population. The business interests were largely maritime. Dockage and warehouses were built, as well as homes, general stores, and two taverns. There was even a small weekly paper. The buildings were of frame construction and the highest elevation in town was only a few feet.

On September 13, 1843, the wind commenced blowing from the southeast bringing up a high tide. Late in the afternoon the wind lulled and the tide fell. Around 11 p.m. the wind again strengthened and by midnight the gale had increased alarmingly, approaching hurricane force. As the wind increased, it drove a tidal wave ashore to a depth of seven to ten feet. The wind continued unabated until 2 a.m. on the morning of September 14, when the wind suddenly abated as the eye of the hurricane passed over.



View from boardwalk at Fort San Marcos de Apalache at the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla Rivers.

Then, in a few minutes, the winds began blowing from the southwest with renewed violence. Every dwelling house and store that was not demolished was left in a shattered and filthy condition. Miraculously, there was only one death in Port Leon, a boy who drowned.

The citizens of Port Leon decided to abandon the area and move to another location. They chose what is now New Port, located about three miles upriver from St. Marks. New Port became, for a time, a thriving community. Its greatest usefulness, however, is its sanctuary during storms. To this day, boat owners take their boats there when hurricanes are threatening. Port Leon was never rebuilt.

The hurricane took down the bridge that crossed the river at St. Marks and also inflicted substantial damage to that town.

Captain Hungerford and his family survived the storm surge by climbing up the tower to the landing just below the housing. Fourteen others in the dwelling drowned.

The *Port Leon Gazette* of September 15, 1843 reported "...but our losses (Port Leon and St. Marks) are nothing compared with those at the Lighthouse. Every building but the lighthouse is gone, and dreadful to relate, fourteen lives were lost. Some of them were our most valued citizens..."

Needham Dudley was the keeper when Florida became a state in 1845. He served from 1844 to 1850, followed by his wife, Ann, upon his death. Mrs. Dudley, who was keeper from 1850 to 1854, was the first of two women keepers at St. Marks.

During Mrs. Dudley's tenure, three large hurricanes hit the lighthouse in the 1850s. One destroyed the 160-foot-long sea wall, which was 6 feet thick and 10 feet high. It had been built in 1844. In the 1851 storm, Mrs. Dudley lost almost all of her worldly possessions. Her petition to Congress for compensation went unheeded.

The *Tallahassee Florida Sentinel* reported in its edition of October 12, 1852:

> Destructive Storm – St. Marks and Newport
>
> The lighthouse is badly damaged, though not destroyed. The breakwater is in good part gone. The iron door is carried away, and the building strained, contents gone, will need immediate attention. The keeper's house is nearly all destroyed, and all her furniture, clothing, bedding, provisions, etc., lost.

The house was eventually replaced in 1854, along with a new seawall.

David Kennedy was the keeper from 1855 to 1880.

On June 15, 1862, the USS *Tahoma* and the USS *Somerset* crossed the bar of the St. Marks River and shelled the Confederate fort near the lighthouse for 40 minutes. The artillery company stationed there withdrew, and sailors landed and destroyed the battery and burned the buildings used as barracks. This is believed to be Fort Williams, which was located just west of the lighthouse. It was later leveled and replaced by a canal leading to the keeper's boathouse.

By 1844 Pensacola to the west and St. Marks to the east were shipping rivals and prime targets for the federal Navy. In February and March 1865, the federal blockading force was increased off Apalachicola, and most of these units were sent to St. Marks with the intent to take Natural Bridge. The plan was to move by land and water against St. Marks from the lighthouse on Apalachee Bay. In a combined effort, ships would ascend the St. Marks River while soldiers would proceed overland to New Port, seize the bridge, and take St. Marks from the rear. They would then cut the railroad to Tallahassee. Although the plan was sound, it failed because the ships were unable to reach their destination upriver. Thus, the troops on foot were forced into battle north of New Port at Natural Bridge where they were defeated.

After the war the tower and keeper's house were repaired and received a new fourth-order Fresnel lens, which was lit by Kennedy on January 7, 1867.

In 1873 yet another hurricane forced the family into the tower where they survived the night. Later repairs were undertaken to the house and tower.

In 1880 James H. Breen took over as keeper, followed by George N. Gibson who served from 1881 to 1892. The lighthouse log entry by Gibson on September 30, 1882, noted that "...Assistant J. Dent relieved from duty by the abolishing of the grade of assistant keeper at the station..." Prior to this date, the keeper and his family shared the four-room house with the assistant keeper and his family.

Towards 1892 George Gibson's wife, who was from Key West, Florida, became homesick, and Gibson wrote to Charles Fine, who was at that time the keeper of the lighthouse at Dry Tortugas, near Key West. They agreed to exchange lighthouses. Thus, Charles Oliver Fine became keeper of the St. Marks Lighthouse from 1892 until his death in 1905.

Fine died suddenly of what was then called "dropsy of the heart" on August 26, 1905. The next day his wife, Sarah, continued keeping the logs and took over as the lighthouse keeper from 1905 to 1916. In the August 26 log, she did not mention his death, but simply gave an account of the weather. Mrs. Fine was replaced by a temporary keeper, U. M. Gunn, in 1916.

John Young Gresham replaced Gunn as keeper of the St. Marks Lighthouse from 1918 to 1949, serving a total of 31 years. He had been assistant keeper of the lighthouse at Cape San Blas near the town of Port St. Joe, Florida, from approximately 1915 to 1917.



John Young Gresham, Keeper from 1918 to 1949, in United States lighthouse keepers' uniform.

The Cape San Blas Lighthouse was located on a spit that jutted out into deep waters of the Gulf, so that during storms the surf could be formidable. At the St. Marks Lighthouse on the Apalachee Bay, there was only the gentle lapping of the tiny waves upon the shore where the shore birds pecked away for their food and little fiddler crabs scurried about. In 1918 their new home was paradise for the Gresham's four children. At low tide sand bars were visible, some a half-mile wide. These were usually covered with oysters and were sometimes called oyster bars. Many fishermen in the old days could haul their skiffs onto the sand and enjoy oysters on the half shell for lunch. Wading miles from the shore the children could find flounder just beneath the sand and could pluck scallops off the bottom. There were also plenty of crabs, and the fiddler crabs on the shore were often used as bait.

At that time, however, this shallow bay and crooked channel made it difficult for large vessels to navigate. Not until 1933 did Stanbury's dredge arrive to start work on the channel. According to the logs, Gresham assisted and worked with the crew.

The House

In the early years before the road was built, the Greshams had to rely on the keeper's 20-foot launch for transportation to St. Marks. The lighthouse faced southwest and the boathouse was down a road between the bay and one of the many saltwater ponds. Fort Williams, used by the Confederacy during the Civil War, was just beyond. A hurricane destroyed the dock to the first boathouse, and the area where the fort had been was excavated, creating a canal north where a new boathouse was built in a more protected area. The launch not only served to rescue boats in distress but also was used to make many trips to St. Marks for supplies, to ferry people back and forth, to meet the live-in teachers at the train station, and to go for Sunday outings to church and dinner with relatives in St. Marks.

The lighthouse and tower during the many years when the Gresham family was there was surrounded by grounds kept meticulously neat. It was enclosed by a white picket fence complete with palms,



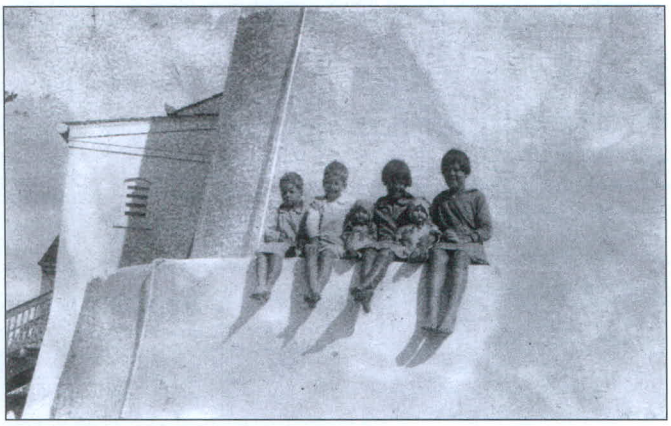
Gresham family circa 1919 shortly after assuming duties.

cedars, fig trees which lined the front porch, and peach trees planted behind the house. The palms were encircled with large conch shells, and in the middle of the yard was a stately oak tree which had been there for many years and is still there today. It has survived numerous hurricanes.

Across the sand flats behind the lighthouse there are a mass of low-lying trees. These are actually two islands—Whale Island and Mini Island. Whale Island got its name from a whale that had washed up there and died sometime in the 1800s. During the time when Charles Fine was keeper, men from St. Marks went out there and boiled very fine oil from the whale. They were able to boil off such a quantity that they used the oil for the lamps in the lighthouse, including the tower, until the early 20th century. Later the lamp was fueled by kerosene and, finally, electricity.

During Gresham's tenure, four more children would be added to the household, consisting of two boys and six girls. With a family of 10 residing in four rooms, space dynamics certainly would have posed a problem, considering that many evenings also included visitors, people rescued from stormy weather, and live-in teachers. Hunters, friends of Gresham, were also regular visitors to the lighthouse.

A porch ran the length of the house. The walls were four feet thick and two heavy doors covered the entrance to the living room on one end of the porch and the kitchen at the other end. During hurricanes the heavy shutters at all the windows were closed. The living room and kitchen/dining area were connected by a hallway adjacent to the porch. On one side were windows overlooking the porch and the Gulf beyond. On the other side were two bedrooms. The one next



The four younger Gresham children sitting on the base of the tower.

to the kitchen was the bedroom where the girls slept, while the larger room next to the living room was the parents' bedroom. This room included a fireplace at one end. There were 12 windows in the house with window seats, and there were two chimneys.

In time a bathroom would be added in the middle of the porch, which would cut the porch in half. (In recent years the bathroom has been removed, restoring the original porch.)

Across the porch from the kitchen was a room used for storage. It was also in this room that the two boys slept at times. At other times it was used for the live-in teachers and visitors. At the end of the hall was the living room, and adjacent to it was the tower room. Spiraling from the center, the staircase was attached at the wall, with a handrail made of rope. Windows were placed at intervals as the staircase wound around toward the landing. Outside the housing for the light was a narrow ledge with a railing. It could be reached by stooping down beneath the windows where doors led out onto the ledge for a panoramic view. Beneath the bottom of the stairs was a space large enough for a bed and dresser with a mirror. It was here that some of the teachers slept and, at times, the boys. A black curtain could be pulled across the opening under the tower for privacy and to shut out the light from the tower. Every wall was covered with battleship gray paint, which gave off an acrid odor, probably from the lead in the paint. Along the walls Gresham kept his spyglass, binoculars, charts, and log books. He kept meticulous notes on the barometer readings and rainfall measurements. At the north end of the front porch, there was what was called a "run," or a continuation of the porch running north. At the end of this extension was the outhouse. After the addition of the bathroom, the "run" was taken away. Just off the "run" and the end of the porch was a water cistern.

Batteries were used to light the beacons that marked the channel. Changing the batteries on the beacons was a difficult and even dangerous job. They had to be charged frequently and repairs were constant. The front beacon, and the most important, was especially problematic. It would flash erratically, burn steady, or go out. The beacons had timers on them to regulate the on and off blinking intervals. Quite often the problem was bird droppings or salt intrusion into the workings of the flasher. Gresham, or one of the children, would check that light each night from the tower, as it was a critical one to begin to guide vessels into the river channel after dark.

During hurricanes the family would always stay at the lighthouse. When the Greshams were there, the hurricanes were frequent, but not as fierce as earlier ones. Gresham had to rely on barometer readings and watch the sponge boats to determine the approach of a storm. He knew when those boats started into the St. Marks River heading for New Port that a hurricane was approaching. They were quite reliable.

After a storm, there would be debris floating around the yard from the destruction of the outbuildings. Snakes would be curled on some of the planks floating in the yard. All outdoor creatures and gardens would drown or be destroyed. Sometimes chickens would be brought into the house. Afterwards, the clean-up and repairs were added to the constant daily rounds of upkeep.

The skies offered a panorama of tropical, fiery sunsets, and much more. The Fine family recalled seeing Halley's Comet pass over the lighthouse in the spring of 1910, a very impressive sight.

The Dirigible

"Flying things" were rare sights back in the early 20s, especially in Wakulla County. One day in late August or early September 1925, the family at the lighthouse looked up at the sky to discover a huge dirigible silently gliding overhead. It was the Navy dirigible *Shenandoah* with 43 aboard, which was later ripped apart during a thunderstorm on September 3, 1925, splitting into three sections near Caldwell in the southeastern part of Ohio. The storm winds of 70 miles per hour tore loose the airship's control cabin. Lieutenant Commander Zachary Lansdowne and seven crew members were killed, along with passengers in the tail section. Fourteen men were killed; 29 survived.

Symphonia

The Ringling family yacht, the *Symphonia*, anchored off the lighthouse in Spanish Hole on more than one occasion. The children were excited and spent hours looking at it through the telescope. They were later invited to come aboard and were served ice cream and cookies. They described the yacht as "rich and beautiful." The Ringlings became friendly with the Gresham family, and Gresham would often take them hunting.



Mrs. Ringling with crew of the *Symphonia*.

Greek sponge boats operated out of ports like Apalachicola and Tarpon Springs. There were many commercial grade sponges out on the grass flats in the vicinity of the St. Marks Lighthouse. Because the water on the flats are fairly shallow, maybe 10-15 feet, on average, many of the Tarpon Springs sponge boats would gather on the flats near the lighthouse in the summer months.

These Greek boats were built in the "old world" style, about 40 feet long with high bows and sterns. They were rigged for sail, but also had small gasoline engines for running when becalmed.

Airplanes were all the rage in the 20s. Ivan Munroe, who visited the lighthouse on more than one occasion, was an aviation pioneer,

known as the "Father of Aviation" in Tallahassee. The *Tallahassee Democrat* asserted in 1961 that "Tallahassee's airport and aviation history more or less began with Ivan Munroe." Ivan's "OLD HON" was the first privately owned airplane in the area.



Greek sponge boat off the St. Marks Lighthouse circa 1930s.

Eskimos

Eskimos came down to the lighthouse and stayed for a brief time, camping at the end of the dock. They wore their hoods and heavy clothing and had their dogs with them. According to family members, they were so unused to the intense summer heat, that some of them became ill. Unfortunately, we have no information about these people. We know nothing about exactly where they came from or their intended destination. It remains a mystery as to why they would choose to visit the Florida Gulf.

Seawalls and Roads

Erosion on the beach was an on-going problem. Finally, a small seawall was completed in October 1935. The seawall was supplemented with large boulders that were placed all along the waterfront from the lighthouse all the way down to the canal. There were times, however, when the sea wall was breached, according to the keeper's log: Feb. 13, 1936, "Gale from SW, tide 6 feet above sea level. Ten feet of west end of sea wall undermined and considerable damage done to beach."

There was a small walkway from the seawall down to the water which was used for swimming and launching small boats. During World War II, the Coast Guard crew had a small flag house there which was used for watching the coast.

In 1931 the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge was established. It was also in 1931 that a road was finally built to the lighthouse. It was built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a government agency of President Roosevelt's New Deal. These people also did some work around the lighthouse, and Gresham also helped with the road.

There were obvious conveniences associated with the building of the road. For one, there was no longer a need for the live-in teachers that would come out each summer, and the children could attend public school. However, it also brought headaches—namely, visitors. Where once the keepers' home was private and secluded with the occasional visitor by boat, it was now a public domain.

This was especially daunting, as noted in the log entry dated Feb. 6, 1938:

> Regular station duties and waited on visitors half the day. Conditions created by so great a number of visitors is beyond my control. Have asked the office for relief and tried to explain several times. Men can't be shooed off like birds. I am behind with my work and have been for more than a year. There seems to be no way out. I am forced to let everything drift.

The visitor problem was finally alleviated when entering the lighthouse was restricted to Sundays. There was a limit to the number of people going into the tower; they were invited to sign a registry, and they had to wear white gloves to preserve the integrity of the structure.

World War II/the Coast Guard

There were U-boats in the Gulf of Mexico during World War II, but apparently they were not a serious threat in the St. Marks vicinity. The light in the tower was never extinquished during the war. However, a Coast Guard station was established at the lighthouse. Conversion from the United States Lighthouse Service to the United States Coast Guard was established in 1939. Keeper Gresham was compelled to join the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard crew kept watch from the flag house and took turns watching from the tower. Gresham also helped with watching the coast, taking his turn in the tower.

It was during this time that telephone lines and electricity would be installed at the lighthouse. Prior to this time, a generator provided electricity. During the 1930s a gas refrigerator kept the perishables cool, but before that time, even during Gresham's tenure, there was no refrigeration, and all foods besides fresh vegetables and fruit from the garden, were canned or boxed. For instance, canned milk, diluted with water, was used for drinking.

After Gresham retired, the Coast Guard took over the lighthouse, rotating the keepers every two years. In 1960 the lighthouse ceased being manned and has been automatic ever since. In recent years the Coast Guard Auxiliary used the house to operate radio equipment, but they have since departed.

Today

There are yearly open house ceremonies at the St. Marks Lighthouse when visitors are taken on tours of the interior. The last one was in April 2011. There is a visitors' center at the entrance to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge with displays of the local fauna and flora, books, and maps with directions to all the many trails and lookout areas. There is an area close by called "the Mounds" where the wildlife refuge manager once had his office and home. The area was once a burial ground for the Indians, believed to be the Creek Indians who were indigenous throughout the Southeast.

The St. Marks Lighthouse today is in disrepair. There is hope that funds may in time be appropriated for its restoration. There is no doubt, however, that it will be restored at some future time. After all, it has become a symbol for Wakulla County.

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