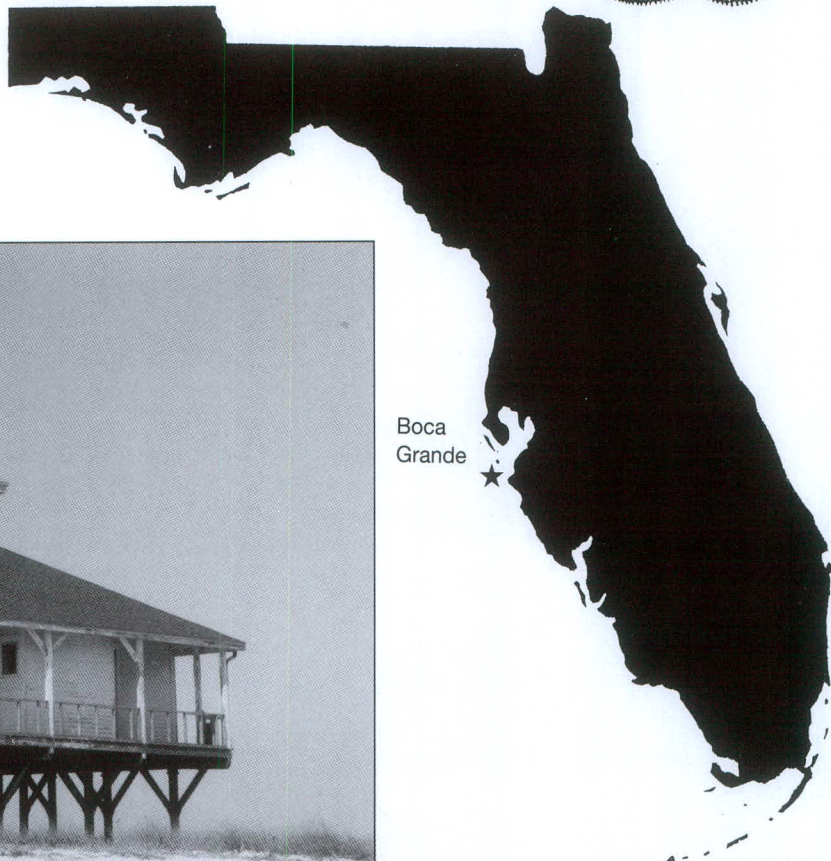


Boca Grande Centennial

By Fran Schroeder



Boca Grande

The Boca Grande keeper's quarters in 1985, prior to being restored. Photo by John J. Hilton.

In the Gulf of Mexico, about halfway between the Florida coastal cities of Sarasota and Fort Myers, is a small island named Gasparilla, one of that state's better kept secrets. A segment of the world's wealthy, however, know it well as it is where they come, year in and year out, to enjoy winter in the sun. In spring, when the "social season" ends, another group of visitors arrives. These are a more rowdy bunch, albeit still of means, who come to try their luck in waters known as "the world's best tarpon fishing" and to enter the annual tarpon tournament.

The island, less than ten square miles, offers beauty and charm, and to lovers of lighthouses a special reward. This barrier island is the home of two lighthouses — the Boca Grande Lighthouse and the Gasparilla Island Rear Range Light.

The most visited and photographed landmark on the island, the Boca Grande Lighthouse, celebrated its 100th birthday on December 31, 1990. Additionally, the village of Boca Grande also entertains and services its visitors with about a dozen eating establishments, a few gift shops, a book store, library, one gas station, a live theatre, a video store, a few boutiques, an art gallery or two, a grocery, four churches, and a limited number of hotel accommodations. These include the historic Gasparilla Inn which has been a winter-only gathering place since 1913. Certainly a prime hallmark are Gasparilla's lovely white sand beaches which offer some of the best shelling to be found anywhere.

Of greater importance than being a haven for the good life is the historical significance of this tiny speck of land at

the entrance to Charlotte Harbor. In the 1820's commerce flourished after the United States acquired Florida. Shipwrecks and piracy were a consequence of active trading. Gasparilla Island is named for the infamous Jose Gaspar though current historians profess there is no real proof that pirates were ever sequestered there. A great deal of historical data printed about the Gasparilla lighthouses dwells on legends and lore about pirates which, perhaps, are simply untrue.

Very true, however, was the need for lights on Florida's dark gulf coast. In 1822 the authorization came for lighthouses to be built on the east end of Sanibel Island — the Charlotte Harbor Light Station (as the Boca Grande lighthouse was called originally), and a lighthouse at Cedar Keys (which was discon-

tinued in 1916).

It was not until the late 1880's that construction began on the Charlotte Harbor Light Station. Congress appropriated the \$35,000 needed to build the lighthouse and metal advertisement, directed toward builders and metal manufacturers, requested bids for construction of "a tower, keeper's dwelling, assistant keeper's dwelling, four cisterns, and two privies."

Two wood frame house-style structures on steel pilings to protect them from erosion (one with tower and cupola) were built on the southernmost tip of the island. A 3½ order Fresnel lens with a red flash every twenty seconds. On December 31, 1890 the sentinel was first lit and one stretch of the southern coast of Florida became less perilous.

Because it is a harbor beacon and not directed at ships in the gulf, the structure is low — only forty-one feet above the beach. For the first few years it kept a lonely vigil.

The first keepers, said to be the island's only inhabitants, were William Lester and Charles Johnson. They had families who lived with them only in the summer. The rest of the year the wives and children lived in Punta Gorda so the children could go to school. The keepers visited them when they had time off by sailing across the harbor in a small boat.

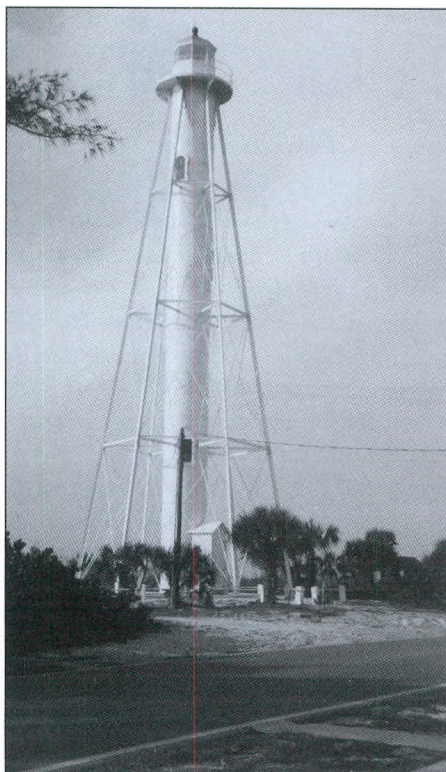
Phosphate, a material used together with other minerals to make fertilizers, had been discovered up the Peace River, markedly increasing shipping at Port Boca Grande. Barges brought huge quantities of phosphate to the Boca Grande docks where it was transferred to oceangoing vessels which were able to safely navigate the area due to the new light. A lighthouse survey of the time indicated the Boca Grande station was 200 feet from the shore.

In 1910 the railroad came to deliver greater amounts of phosphate more quickly to the docks, eliminating some of the waiting for the barges. A pier and phosphate terminal were built in 1911, and the new village of Boca Grande was laid out and began to grow. The depth of the Port Boca Grande Channel was dredged from eighteen to twenty-four feet.

The population increased again in 1913 when the Gasparilla Inn was completed. The island hideaway, accessible only by boat or the railroad, began its slow conversion to a place where the emphasis of its prosperity changed from commerce to tourism.

But in 1927 the shipping lanes were predominant and as an additional aid, the Gasparilla Island Rear Range Lighthouse was constructed to the north of the Boca Grande Light. The term "rear range" refers to the twin lights, the rear above the front, contained in the iron pile structure. A ship is in mid-channel when one light appears to be directly above the other.

A ferry service was added to the island's conveniences in 1929 and was active until 1958 when the Boca Grande Causeway was completed. A "boom town" atmosphere existed; lighthouse keepers, pilots, terminal employees, railroad personnel, merchants, wealthy winter residents, tarpon fishing guides, commercial fishermen, bankers, hotel employees, and a variety of laborers kept



This tower was added to the Boca Grande station in 1927 to form a set of range lights (with the front light). Photo by Fran Schroeder.

the flourishing island humming with activity. Schools, churches, stores, and homes were built. Electricity became available. But slowly the euphoria began to wane.

The Coast Guard took over the operation of both lighthouses in 1939, and Boca Grande residents who remembered "the early days" felt that nothing, after that, was quite the same. The Lighthouse Service Keepers seemed to have a dedication and purpose the Coast Guard personnel seemed to lack.

Phosphate shipping dropped considerably with the onset of World War II. Gasparilla's fishery moved to Placida. The previously budding town of Gasparilla at the north end of the island dissolved. And, perhaps worst of all, in the fifties and sixties the entire island suffered heavy erosion.

The 200 foot beach surrounding the once proud structure at the mouth of Charlotte Harbor was carved away by nature. The encroaching surf came less than 20 feet from its pilings. In the 1960's, it was determined by the Coast Guard that the lighthouse was surplus; it was turned over to the General Services Administration for disposal. Its lens was removed and placed in the Rear Range Light. By the latter part of the decade, the Boca Grande Lighthouse sat abandoned, and vagrants lived and partied in the unsecured building. After a few years, the federally-owned property was turned over to Lee County for use as a park but by then the lighthouse, at high tide, was standing in the water. The seaward side started sinking; before it stopped, the lighthouse was leaning nearly 45 degrees. Seemingly it was only a matter of time before it would be claimed by gulf waters.

A group of islanders formed the Boca Grande Conservation Council to stop the erosion and save the lighthouse. They were assisted by the Boca Grande Pilots Association and shipowners who feared the erosion would fill the pass and endanger the freighters using the port. Gradual improvements were made. The channel under the old phosphate shipping dock, now used as an oil shipping dock, was dredged by the Florida Power Company. 35,000 cubic yards of fill were

pumped around the lighthouse. Contractors hired by Lee County corrected the tilt. The structures were painted and some minor restoration was begun.

Then, in 1980, the Boca Grande Lighthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which enabled the Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association greater access to state grants available from the Bureau of Historic Preservation, the Florida Department of State and the Historic Preservation Advisory Council. The properties to both of Gasparilla Island's lighthouses were turned over to the Florida Park Service in 1985. The original plans for the lighthouse were found hanging as a wall decoration in the Lee County Courthouse. Based on these plans, restoration began in earnest. At a cost of nearly \$100,000 the lighthouse which originally cost \$35,000 to build was returned to its original appearance and to similar service. Today the lighthouse is the office of the park ranger who lives in the assistant keeper's dwelling.

In 1986 the restoration was joyously culminated. The Coast Guard reinstalled the original third order Fresnel lens and on the 21st of November, the lighthouse was relit at a rededication ceremony, officially re-establishing the light.

In 1990 as Boca Grande's oldest building celebrated its centennial year, many of its friends celebrated too. Great pride is shared by a great many people who feel themselves a part of this small community that saved their lighthouse from nature, neglect, and the sea.

"Happy Birthday, Dear Lighthouse . . ."

Today, a new organization, the Barrier Islands Parks Society, has begun raising money in hopes of establishing a Boca Grande History and Maritime Museum in the lighthouse. These volunteer citizens have Open House on the last Saturday of every month and group tours can be arranged by calling (813) 964-0375.

Perhaps the BIPS' most exciting and newsworthy event in their short history occurred on the weekend of the 29-30



Above – The newly restored Boca Grande light station. The keeper's house has the lantern room on the roof, the building at left is the assistant keeper's dwelling. Water cisterns are in front of the structure.

Right – The Boca Grande station all dressed up for the celebration. Photo by the author.



December 1990 when its members conducted a gala 100th birthday party for the Boca Grande Lighthouse.

The event was a two day Open House. Cloudless skies and temperatures in the 80's encouraged several hundred visitors to the southern tip of Gasparilla. Dozens of curious and happy locals and tourists alike enjoyed climbing the lighthouse steps for a look inside the structure, which is usually closed and fenced. The society members answered questions, in addition to selling T-shirts and other memorabilia. Walls were adorned with historic photographs, locally produced lighthouse art done by professionals, hobbyists, and delightful works by the Boca Grande schoolchildren. Copies of the original blueprints for the structures were also displayed.

Outside in the park picnic area, the local band *Live Bait* entertained. The

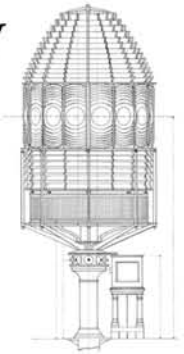
hungry were fed with BIPS mullet fryers at a \$5.00/plate dinner. A flotilla from the Rotunda Coast Guard Auxiliary paraded in Boca Grande Pass. A lighthouse birthday cake was cut and shared while the band played and the crowd sang *Happy Birthday*.

Speakers were featured on Sunday afternoon. The park service rangers introduced Chief James Evans of the 7th Coast Guard district and other local historians. The final speaker was Dian Miller who now lives in Sarasota.

Dian grew up in the Boca Grande Lighthouse from 1941 to 1951 when her father cody McKeithen was keeper. She told nostalgic stories of life in those years _ of the house and introduced, she smiled at the gathering and opened her address with, "Welcome to my home . . ."



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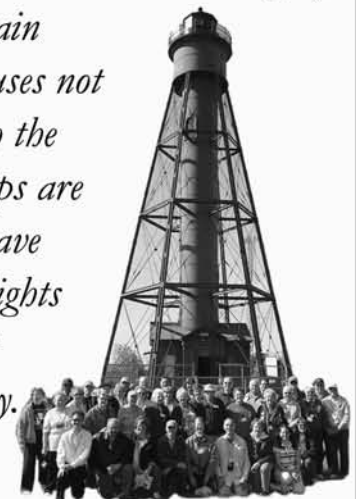
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