

Señor Jose Anciola Garcia de Paredes (1836-1904), the author's great-great-grandfather. Photo courtesy of the author.

A Visit to the Lighthouses of Northern Spain Following the Footsteps of My Great-Great-Grandfather

By Henry Gonzalez

One of the questions I often get asked is how I became interested in lighthouses. I explain that I grew up near the ocean and have always had a love for things nautical. I add that my first job included traveling around the world on oceanographic ships. I have fond memories of the welcoming beam of a lighthouse as our vessel approached land after a long voyage. In recent years I learned that my love of lighthouses may also be "in my blood." My great-great-grandfather was a lighthouse keeper on the north coast of Spain from 1863 to 1904.

Although I learned of this lighthouse link several years ago, it wasn't until 1998 that I decided to trace his footsteps and visit the lighthouses at which he was stationed. In September of 1998, my wife Chris and I took a trip on a Spanish Lighthouse Trail.

My first challenge was to find where my great-great-grandfather, Jose Anciola Garcia de Paredes, was stationed. Our family historian in this country is my cousin, Carlos Garcia Anciola. He only knew that our ancestor was stationed at the Faro de Aviles, where he died in 1904 (the word for lighthouse in Spanish is "faro" and I will use it interchangeably

throughout this article). At Carlos's suggestion I contacted a cousin in Madrid, Ana Maria Muñoz Anciola. Her husband, Paco, is a genealogist and suggested I contact my 3rd cousin, Ramon Bermudez Ochoa, who is a lighthouse keeper!

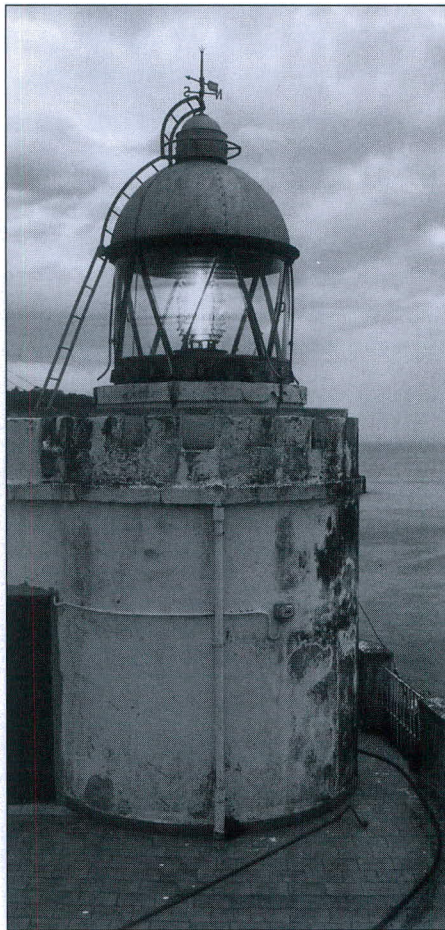
I was stunned to learn that I had a relative who was an active lighthouse keeper and I immediately wrote to him at his station, Faro de La Plata, on the Spanish northeast coast. His response contained a vast amount of information, including a document which brought tears to my eyes: the original, multi-page personal service log of our great-great-grandfather. The log was written in his impeccable and handsome style. It began in 1863 and traced his "destinations" as a keeper throughout the years. The last entry is dated December 31, 1899, and signed by Don Jose. I learned from this document that he had served at nine lighthouses along the north coast, also known as the Cantabrian coast. I should add that I am fluent in Spanish, which certainly helped with research, communication and our travels in Spain.

My ancestor entered the lighthouse service just after a major boom in Spanish lighthouse

expansion occurred. In 1847, Queen Isabel II's government studied the lighthouse systems of France and England and realized that Spain was far behind in providing ample and modern lighthouses for her mariners. Queen Isabel II had her government issue a "General Plan for the Maritime Lighting of the Coasts of Spain." The plan called for the establishment of a formal federal-level Lighthouse Service, an increase in the number of lighthouses from 20 to 125, and the installation of the latest lighthouse equipment, including more Fresnel lenses. The modernization undertaken by Spain in 1847 is analogous to the changes made by the United States Lighthouse Board in 1852. Don Jose benefited from this development and, at age 26, walked into the middle of the expansion.

Chris and I decided that our trip to Spain should include visits to all nine light stations where Don Jose was stationed. Not only did we plan on seeing the lighthouses, but we decided to attempt to gain access to the interiors to see where he had worked and lived. We also hoped to view some of the logs he kept. My next challenge was contacting the Spanish lighthouse authorities to make the necessary arrangements.

From 1847 until 1993 the Spanish Lighthouse Service was under the centralized jurisdiction of the federal-level Ministry of Public Works. In January of 1993 the responsibility was decentralized and transferred to Spain's 27 regional Port Authorities. At that time the proud and longstanding Lighthouse Service ceased to exist. Keepers were given the choice of becoming employees of the individual Port Authorities or remaining as federal civil servants in another line of work; many stayed with their vocation, but others remained federal employees as they were close to retirement. The various regional Port Authorities, although independent and autonomous, do have a centralized voice in Madrid at the Puertos del Estado (State Ports). I began contacting the various Port Authorities to request permission to visit the northern lighthouses, and ask if they might have information about my ancestor. After we received responses from most of the ports, my cousin Paco met with Mr. Juan Francisco Rebollo, the head of the Technical Center for Maritime Signals at the State Port headquarters, and arranged for me to visit him upon my arrival in Madrid. Mr. Rebollo's assistance was invaluable. He provided us with logistical information and smoothed the way for our visit to the stations.



The lantern room of the Faro de la Plata lighthouse rests on the keeper's dwelling.



Faro de la Plata lighthouse, resembling a castle. It is also listed in some Light Lists as the Port Pasajes Lighthouse. It was constructed in 1855 and still contains a 4th order Fresnel lens displaying a fixed white light. Photo by the author.

Our Lighthouse Trail started with a visit to the Faro de La Plata Light Station where my cousin Ramon Bermudez was stationed. We spent two nights at this 1855 lighthouse, which contains a 4th order Fresnel lens. This was the first time Chris and I had ever slept at an active lighthouse, and needless to say, it was like a dream come true.

The Faro de La Plata stands like a proud castle, perched on a rocky promontory some 450 feet above sea level. On the second day of our stay Cousin Ramon gave us a tour of four other lighthouses in the province of Guipuzcoa, one of the three provinces that make up the Basque region of Spain. Faro Higuier (1855) is the easternmost lighthouse on this coast (just west of the border with France); Faro Igueldo (1855) is located on the outskirts of the city of San Sebastian; Guetaria (1863) and Zumaya (1870) were the other two stations we visited that day. These four lighthouses are automated, but are still manned by resident keepers. We were given a warm welcome by all of them.

Bidding a heartfelt farewell to Cousin Ramon, we continued west along the coast into the province of Vizcaya and visited the Cabo (Cape) Machichaco Light Station (1852), where we were met by Cristina Bermudez, one of the two resident keepers. The current lighthouse, constructed in 1909, is located slightly uphill from the old tower, where Don Jose was stationed in 1879. Machichaco is a major sea coast light, containing a beautiful 1st order lens with a range of 24 miles.

Departing Cape Machichaco, we entered Cantabria Province and visited the unmanned lighthouse of Castro-Urdiales, built into the corner of a 14th century castle. The optic in this lighthouse is an unusual looking, modern Swedish design consisting of what appears to be vertical rows of automobile headlights. That day we also visited the Cabo Mayor Lighthouse (1839), located at the edge of the lovely cosmopolitan resort city of Santander. The Cabo Mayor tower is one of the tallest we visited on the coast, standing nearly 100 feet high and containing a 3rd order lens. We were given a tour by Enrique Luzuriaga Martin, one of the two resident keepers. He also gave me copies of several log entries made by my ancestor when he was stationed there between 1885 and 1888. The entries included a report of an

incident when the light was reported extinguished by a pair of naval vessels at a time when Don Jose was beginning his watch. It turned out that the light was actually extinguished during the principal keeper's watch, just before Don Jose relieved him. The head keeper had a history of disciplinary actions and was dismissed because of this infraction. My great-great-grandfather, as the assistant, was fined one month's pay for not reporting the incident to the district authorities in a timely manner. When we finished reviewing the logs, Enrique introduced us to his wife, Isabel, and 7-year-old daughter, Maria. We enjoyed a glass of wine in their house before they joined us for dinner in town.

The following morning Enrique arranged to take us by Port Authority boat out to the Santander Light Station (1860) on Isla Mouro. My ancestor was stationed on this barren rocky islet for five months in 1885, just before being transferred to Cabo Mayor. After visiting this isolated station I can understand why he didn't stay long. The lantern of this tower was removed in the 1980's, but it's still an active aid to navigation.

We said farewell to our newfound friends and continued west into the province of Asturias, stopping to tour the manned lighthouse of San Emeterio (1864), which is located on the edge of a 225-foot vertical cliff. We also visited the unmanned lighthouse of Tazones (1864), where Don Jose was stationed for one month in 1889. Tazones is a very well maintained station equipped with a 6th order lens. It has a unique and ornate stained glass window on one side of the tower. After a pleasant overnight jaunt to the interior to view the area's tallest peaks (and take a cable car ride to the top), we returned to the coast and toured the Cabo Peñas Lighthouse (1853). My ancestor was stationed here between 1888-1889. In the 1920's extensive repairs were made to the attached keeper's quarters, requiring the old tower to be replaced. The foundations of the old tower and dwelling are still visible. The resident keeper, Jose Luis Garcia, has researched his lighthouse's history. He recognized my great-great-grandfather's name and showed me several of his log entries and a photo of the original structure.

The next three light stations we visited were the closest to the inland village of Paredes, where my great-great-grandfather grew up and where his family lived while he



Above and below — the Cabo Mayor lighthouse which was constructed in 1839. A turn of the century light list calls it the Santander Lighthouse. The tower is 98 feet high and is located 298 feet above sea level. The original 2nd order lens has been replaced by a 3rd order lens. Photos courtesy of the author.





Above — The original (1853) Cape Peñas (Cabo de Peñas) lighthouse, some 340 feet above sea level. Note the horse and buggy at left. The 1st order lens can be seen in the lantern room.

Right — The “new” Cape Peñas Lighthouse constructed in the 1920’s. Both photos courtesy of the author.



tended lighthouses. My family still maintains the ancestral property in Paredes. We spent an enjoyable weekend at the house, constructed in 1904 by the lighthouse keeper's son, Jose Anciola. The Aviles Lighthouse (1863) is the easternmost of the three stations and was Don Jose's last station. He died there in 1904 at the age of 68, having served three years at this station. Overall he served 41 years in the Lighthouse Service.

After a day of rest at the ancestral home, my cousins, Mari Carmen and Gerardo Guisasa, and their son, Juan, joined us for a tour of the unmanned lighthouse of Luarca (1862), which is located on a cliff overlooking the town's scenic harbor. It is situated right next to a lovely white church and cemetery. Don Jose Anciola spent over seven years at this station between 1889 and 1897, the longest he was stationed at any light station. From Luarca we could see Cabo Busto (1858), which was the next stop on our itinerary. My ancestor was stationed here three times, totaling nearly six years (1863, 1873-77 and 1880-82). At Cabo Busto, our guide to the three lighthouses, Jose Manuel, turned on the light and rotating mechanism of the 3rd order lens, much to the delight of my relatives.

The following day we continued on to the westernmost lighthouse in Asturias, located in the town of Tapia de Casariego. The Faro de Tapia (1859) is located on a small island connected to the mainland by a bridge barely wide enough for a small car. We parked on the mainland, walked across the bridge and were met by lighthouse keeper Orlando Garcia Sanchez and his wife, Conchita. After we toured the lighthouse (3rd order lens) he demonstrated the computer system by which he monitors and controls all the lighthouses in western Asturias. We then were allowed to leaf through the log books of Aviles Lighthouse

which Orlando had relocated to Tapia a few years earlier. I found two key entries: the date when my great-great-grandfather took over as Principal Keeper and the date he died. The entry for April 25, 1904 was written by the Assistant Keeper and reads, "Acknowledging the death of the Principal Keeper at this lighthouse, Don Jose Anciola, and taking charge of servicing the same." These were the two dates I needed to complete my ancestor's service logs. Afterward, Orlando and Conchita graciously took us for a leisurely and delicious seafood lunch in a nearby fishing village. We had established another new friendship on the Lighthouse Trail.

Continuing westward, we entered the province of Galicia and headed for the lighthouse of Faro de Estaca de Bares (1850), where Don Jose was stationed between 1897 and 1901. Estaca is one of the principal lighthouses on the coast of Galicia. It is located on a very windy point, surrounded by an experimental field of wind generators. We arrived there just before sunset, in time for one of the two keepers, Eugenio, to give us a tour and show us the old log books. Eugenio's fellow keeper, Mercedes, had previously mailed me copies of several pages from the log written by my ancestor. We thanked Eugenio for his warm hospitality and continued on to the city of La Coruña for the night. The following morning we had an appointment to tour the last lighthouse on our journey and the oldest operating lighthouse in the world: the Tower of Hercules.

The original Tower of Hercules was constructed by the Romans in the second century. They realized the strategic importance of the port of La Coruña (Brigancia in those days) to maritime trade with northern Europe. Wood for the bonfires on top was hauled up a spiraling ramp by beasts of burden. The lighthouse was used by the Romans until their empire collapsed in the fifth century. It stood abandoned until the 18th century, when La Coruña again flourished as a maritime port.

Between 1788 and 1790, the tower was modified with the addition of an outer wall around the original Roman structure, as it still appears today. The public is allowed to tour and climb the 160-foot-high granite tower up to the balcony, just below the lantern, which is off-limits. Our tour began at some excavations at the base of the old Roman tower and wound up past ancient vaults where wood was stored. The Port Authority guide, Emilio, gave us a private tour of the lantern, where we enjoyed seeing the 3rd order Fresnel lens and spectacular 360 degree views, 350 feet above sea level.

The north coast of Spain is similar to our west coast, with rugged cliffs and promontories along the seashore, and a mountain range just inland. The vast majority of lighthouses we visited were situated 200 to 400 feet above the sea. Consequently, most of the towers were short. The exceptions were the tower of Cabo Mayor and the Tower of Hercules. All the lighthouses are automated, but each Port Authority handles the issue of



The Faro de Aviles, constructed in 1863, has a yellow tower and a 4th order lens. Photo by author.

manning differently. For example, all five of the stations in Guipuzcoa are the responsibility of the Pasajes Port Authority and are manned. On the other hand, only two of the seven lighthouses in western Asturias - the responsibility of the Aviles Port Authority - are manned. The same two keepers maintain the other five light stations in the region.

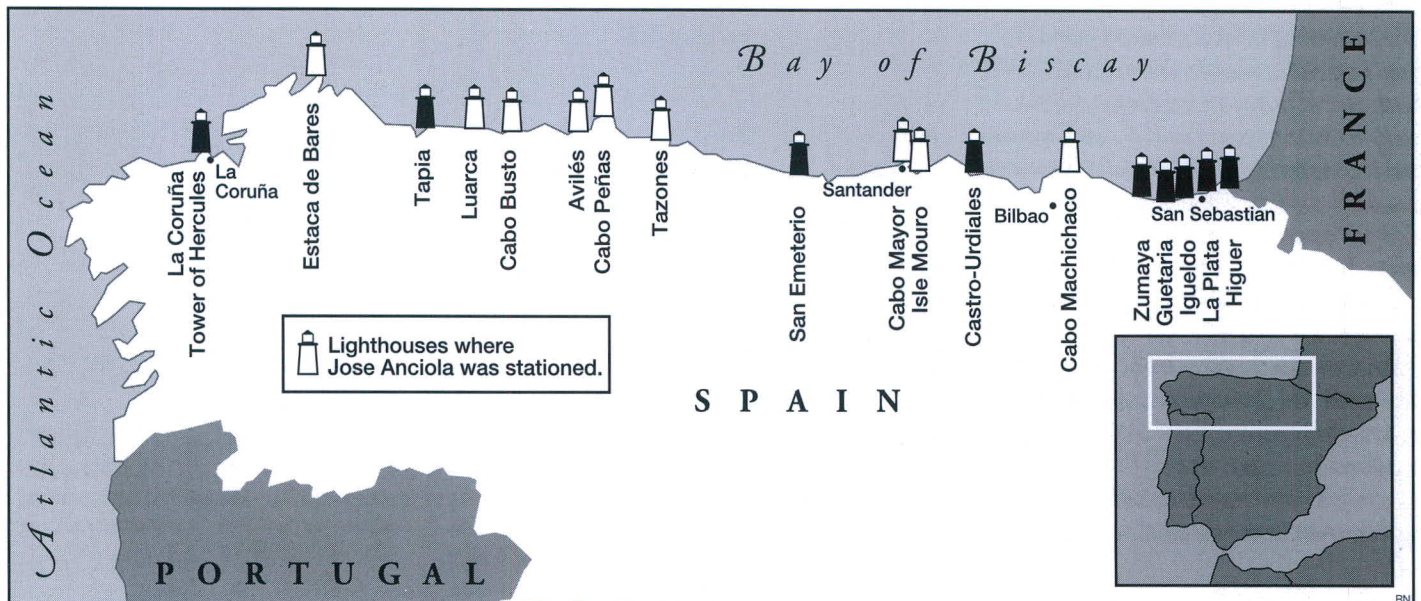
As my wife Chris said, the entire trip was like a dream. Visiting lighthouses at any time is a delight to us. Visiting foreign lighthouses is very special. But visiting the lighthouses where my great-great-grandfather was the keeper was a very emotional journey. Being able to enter the lanterns where he trimmed his wicks and read his entries in log books from the last century was an experience I will always treasure. Equally exhilarating was sharing this experience with my wife, my fam-

ily in Spain, and my parents and cousins in Miami. But I think what I will remember most are the lighthouse keepers we met on the Lighthouse Trail and their tremendous hospitality, friendship and warmth. They were the ones who brought the lighthouses to life and made us appreciate the rich history of these very special beacons and the sacrifices made by the keepers of the past, including my great-great-grandfather, Don Jose Anciola.

Henry Gonzalez also wrote of his Lighthouse Trail adventure in France in Vol. 13 #2 of the *Keeper's Log*. He is currently the President of the Chesapeake Chapter of the Society and was recently appointed to the Society's Board as Vice-President, East Coast Operations.

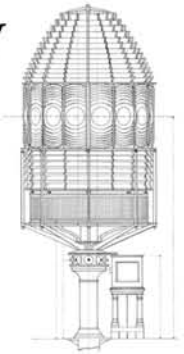


La Coruña, the oldest operational lighthouse in the world, constructed by the Romans. It's also known as the Tower of Hercules. The tower is 159 feet high and originally had an open fire on top as the illuminate. An 1899 Light List states that the tower was altered in 1847, 1861, 1872 and 1898. Author photo.





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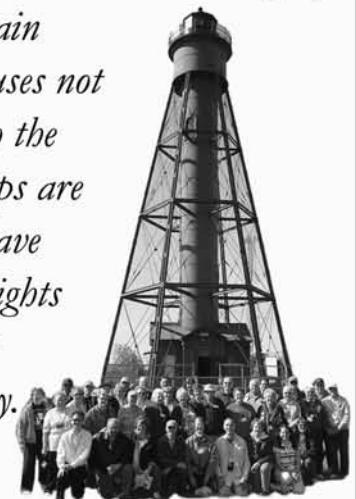
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