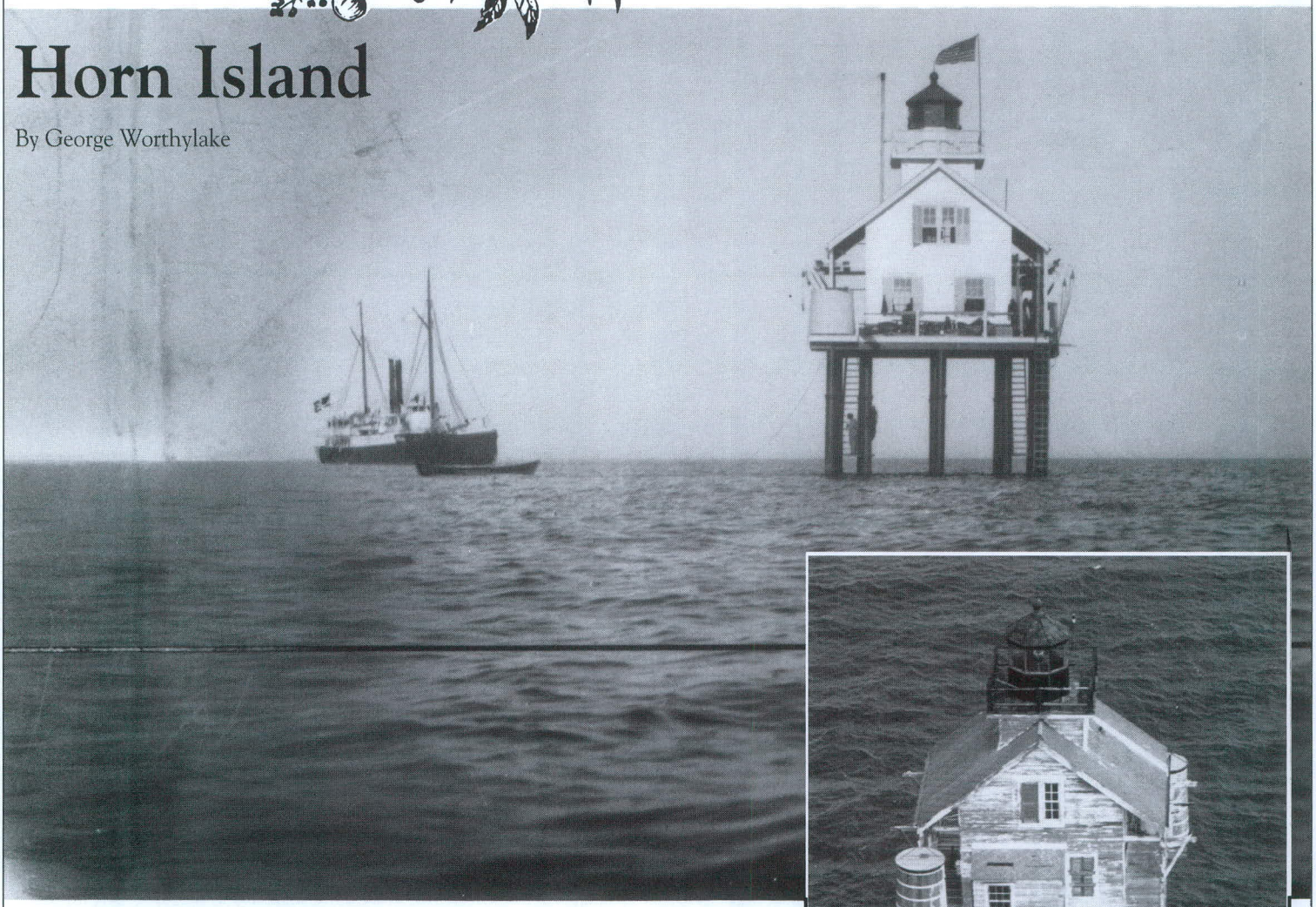
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Only Yesterday

Horn Island

By George Worthylake



Above - The third Horn Island Lighthouse on the day it went into operation, March 15, 1906. Numerous people can be seen on the porch, in the house and even at the bottom of the ladder, apparently waiting for the tender's small boat seen just below the bow of the tender. We would guess the people represent an inspection party as well as the keeper and his family. The tender is probably the *Magnolia* which was listed, in 1906, as the ship the 8th District used for supply and inspection.

Right - Horn Island Lighthouse in 1962, much the worst for wear and badly in need of paint. With a magnifying glass we could make out a modern optic in the lantern room. Both official U.S. Coast Guard photos.

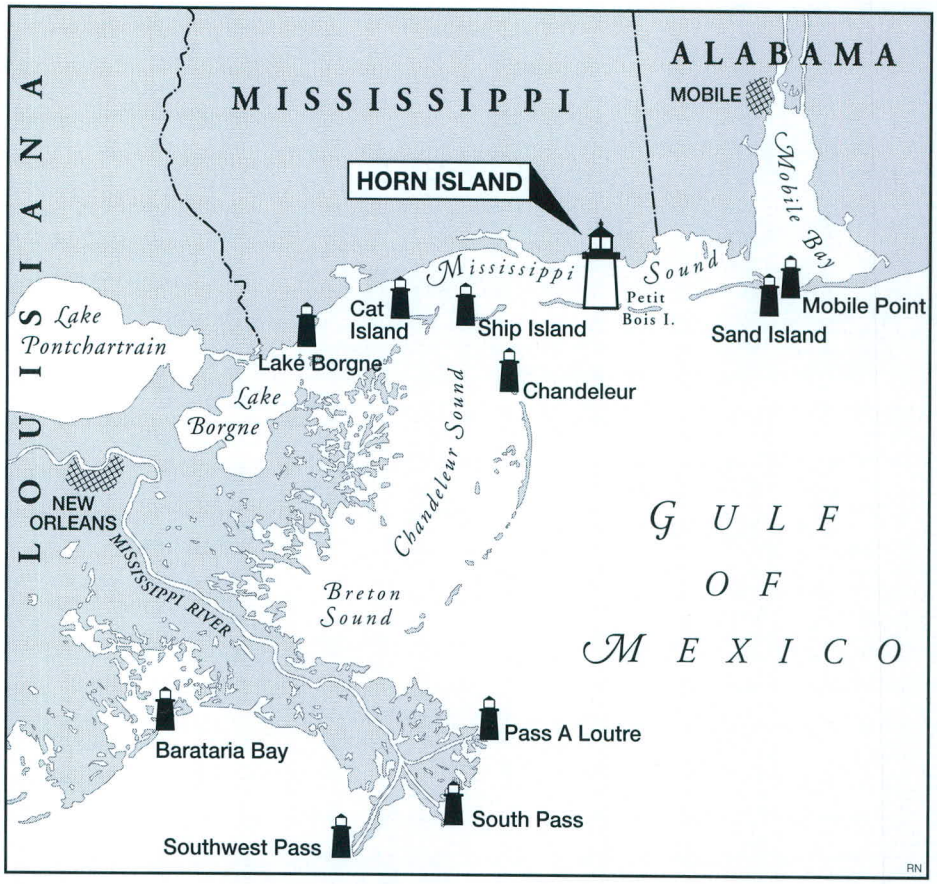
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A series of low off-shore islands off the Mississippi Coast form Mississippi Sound, a fairly well protected waterway. This sound experienced a large increase in coastal trading after the Civil War. In addition to a rapid growth of waterborne commerce, the area became increasingly popular with the fishing fleet. The increase in vessel traffic by the 1870s triggered the Lighthouse Service to establish more aids to navigation.

In 1872 the Service successfully petitioned Congress for $22,000 to construct a lighthouse on Horn Island. $22,000 was a hefty amount in 1872, but Congress authorized the amount in 1873 and a survey was conducted that year to determine the best location for the station. The finished survey recommended that a wooden structure on screw piles, similar to the nearby Cat Island Lighthouse, be erected on the east end of Horn Island on a sandy spit three feet above water.

Plans were made, proposals invited, and bids received and opened on July 2, 1873. The iron contract for the screw piles and lantern was awarded to a Baltimore company, to be completed by October 21.

The ironwork contract was delivered by a vessel, on schedule, to Fort Morgan, Alabama until the framing of the wooden portion of the structure could be completed. In January 1874 the entire structure was loaded in parts aboard the tender *Pharos* and taken to the site. The construction crew began to install the iron screw piles and broke every one of them, causing a considerable delay. In the later part of March the crew received and successfully installed a new set of five screw-piles. The structure was completed in June and first lighted on the last day of that month. The square wooden dwelling, on five iron piles, was surmounted by an iron lantern room. A 4th order Fresnel lens showed a fixed white light, varied by red flashes. This must have been a welcome sight to the shrimp boats plying the waters between Horn and Petit Bois Islands, as well as for the coasters cruising Mississippi Sound.



However, it wasn't long before the shifting sands of the low island threatened to undermine the structure. The Service moved the lighthouse 252 feet across the island to a set of wooden pilings in two feet of water in 1881. The barrier island kept moving north and within a year the lighthouse was 100 feet from land in 7 feet of water and certainly exposed to any hurricane which might visit the area.

A new lighthouse was constructed and the old structure, sans its lantern, was left as a daybeacon. The new 1 1/2 story structure was constructed on the island and was much larger than its predecessor. The dwelling contained a living room, kitchen, three bedrooms, a pantry and workroom. The lantern was placed on the roof. An oil house, wood shed and 4,320 gallon cypress cistern were constructed nearby. The lantern and lens from the old lighthouse were removed and installed on the new structure. Portions of the old lighthouse—doors, windows, fog bell, and anything else useable were removed from the old structure and taken to the service bases at New Orleans and at South Pass.

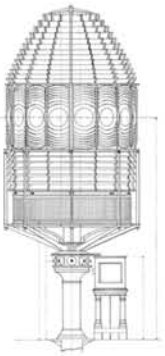
Erosion wasn't an immediate problem with the new station, but the Eighth Lighthouse District did have to install 1,000 feet of barbed wire to keep the station from being overrun by cattle, in 1888.

However, erosion finally did catch up with the station. A 1906 hurricane badly eroded Horn Island washing away a mile of the eastern end of the island along with the lighthouse and all out buildings. The keeper, his wife, and daughter perished in the storm.

The third and final Horn Island Lighthouse was constructed in 1908, exhibiting a light on March 15. It was a simple wooden 1 1/2 story dwelling on a series of wooden piles. The station was finally discontinued in January 1964 with minor beacons guiding the modern fishing fleet into homeport.

For 90 years a small, vulnerable, single family lighthouse marked a portion of the Mississippi Sound, viewing the end of the age of sail, the coming of the side-wheel steamers, a changing fishing fleet and an occasional hurricane and... it seems like only yesterday.

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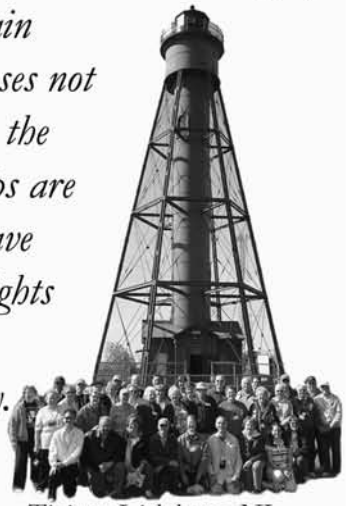
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