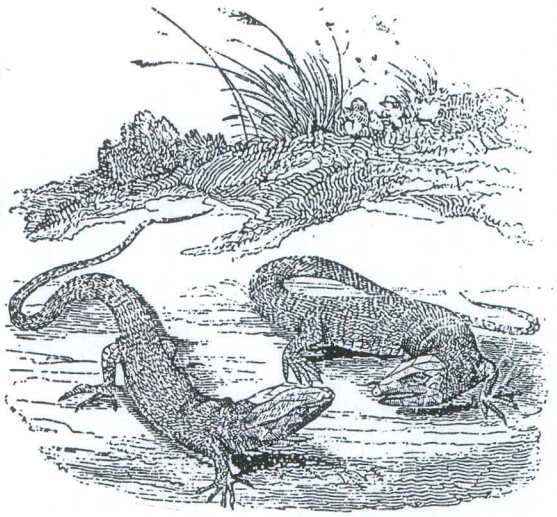
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Navassa Lighthouse



by Neil Hurley

"Navassa Island Light, where chickens only miraculously survive the attacks of lizards."

Thus began the description of life at the Navassa Island lighthouse in a letter dated July 18, 1923 by F.P. Dillion. Dillion, Superintendent of the Ninth Lighthouse District (Puerto Rico and nearby U.S. Islands), was desperately trying to solve the personnel problem at that station.

Navassa Island, perhaps the most inhospitable site ever of an American lighthouse, is an American possession 30 miles west of Haiti. The light station was manned from the time it was established in 1916 until 1929 when it was automated.

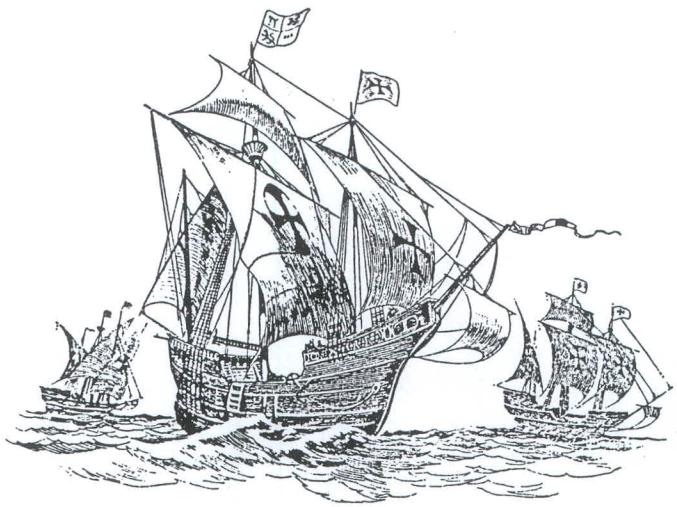
The reason the United States owns this small desolate island so far from our shores is summed up in one word, guano. Guano has long been prized as a fertilizer and in the manufacture of gunpowder. In 1856 guano was big business. In that year the United States Government passed the Guano Act. The Act allowed U.S. citizens to take peaceable possession, and occupy, any island in the name of the United States on which a deposit of guano was found, provided that is was not already occupied by another nation. Thus one Peter Duncan claimed Navassa Island as a possession of the United States on July 1, 1857.

This territory of the United States is a far cry from a tropical island paradise. Roughly pear shaped, it has a land mass of only one and a half square miles. The majority of the island is a mesa 200 feet high with a narrow flat shelf, thirty feet above the water, circling the mesa on all but the northwest side.

The inhospitable environment of Navassa was first recorded by Captain Diego Mendez in 1503. In that year Christopher Columbus, during his fourth and last voyage to the new world, shipwrecked on Jamaica. With a starving crew near mutiny, Columbus dispatched Captain Mendez with a crew of 14 Spaniards and 20 Indian paddlers in two dugout canoes for a desperate (and Columbus thought hopeless) attempt to reach the Island of Hispaniola (today known as Haiti and Dominican Republic). Before long one of the native paddlers died of dehydration and others were drinking seawater. Then Navassa Island loomed on the horizon. The crews managed to land on the rugged island. Despite Mendez's efforts to have the men only sip the standing water they found in crevices, two Indians drank too much, too quickly, and died. The rest of the crew cautiously drank the water and refreshed themselves on island birds and their eggs. Departing Navassa the party safely reached Hispaniola and eventually brought about the rescue of Columbus.

Few people visited Navassa during the next 350 years . However, Peter Duncan and the Guano Act changed all that. Within seven years of the Guano Act of 1856 the Navassa Phosphate Company of Baltimore, MD formed and constructed extensive facilities on the island that included at least 25 buildings (including a church and 4 cell jail). This small town was clustered around Lulu Bay, the site of the only boat landing on the island.

The phosphate company claimed that the island was "covered with luxuriant vegetation of dense woods and grass" and that, "100 tons a day (of guano) are frequently put on board one vessel with only 30 or 40 men and two boats" and



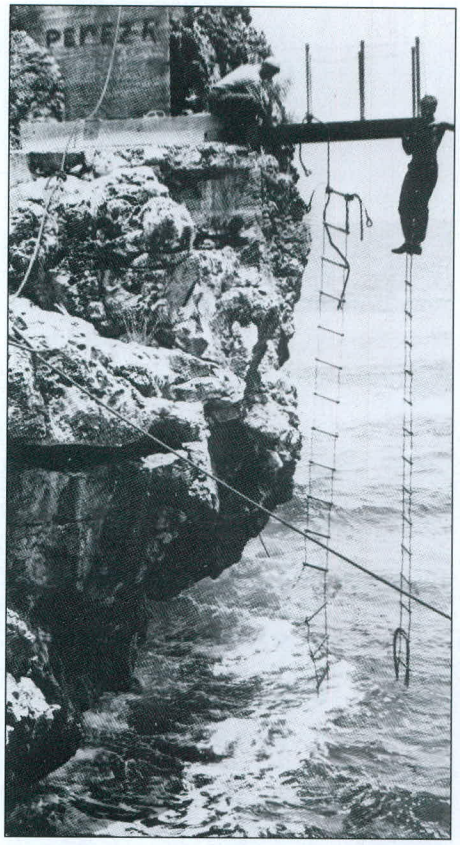
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that "pick and shovel are the only tools needed." Reality was a far cry from those statements. The landing at Lulu Bay, dangerous under ideal sea conditions, is actually only a area where a small boat can be held long enough for men to jump onto a rope ladder dangling from a catwalk jutting out from a low cliff. A miscalculation by a boat crew could cause the vessel to broach in an incoming swell, be dashed against the cliff or capsize by a receding backwash. In 1889 one sailor stated that the backwash was like "the turbulence under a waterfall or of a rapid."

The miners shoveled guano into small tram cars and pushed them over a narrow gage railway to Lulu Bay where the contents were loaded into small boats via a chute. Under ideal sea conditions a lighter transported ten loads of guano a day between the island and the company's inappropriately named barque *Romance*.

Despite the glowing reports from company owners, the island quickly established a reputation for being the hell hole that it was. Since no natural wells existed rain water had to be collected from building roofs and piped into cisterns located under each structure. The island is composed of limestone and guano with no soil for growing food. And as if the natural fauna of giant 4 foot lizards, termites, mosquitoes and scorpions weren't enough, rats and roaches were introduced by the guano miners. Daily temperatures of 80 degrees in the shade spoiled supplies. Conditions were so bad in 1889 that 150 laborers rioted and attacked the company foremen. The mine superintendent and nine laborers were killed and 22 men injured. Three of the workmen were hanged as a result of the incident. Mining operations steadily declined until 1900 when the company went bankrupt and the island was deserted.

Navassa was a peaceful ghost town until 1915. In that year the Panama Canal opened and lighthouses were needed to guide shipping to the new waterway. One of those new lighthouses was Navassa. George R. Putnam, Commissioner of the Bureau of Lighthouses, called the Navassa Island Lighthouse the "first signal" for the Panama Canal and said it "was the most important lighthouse built by the United States in the last quarter of a century."



A worker hangs from the 'landing platform' at Navasa island's Lulu Bay. Official Coast Guard Photo.

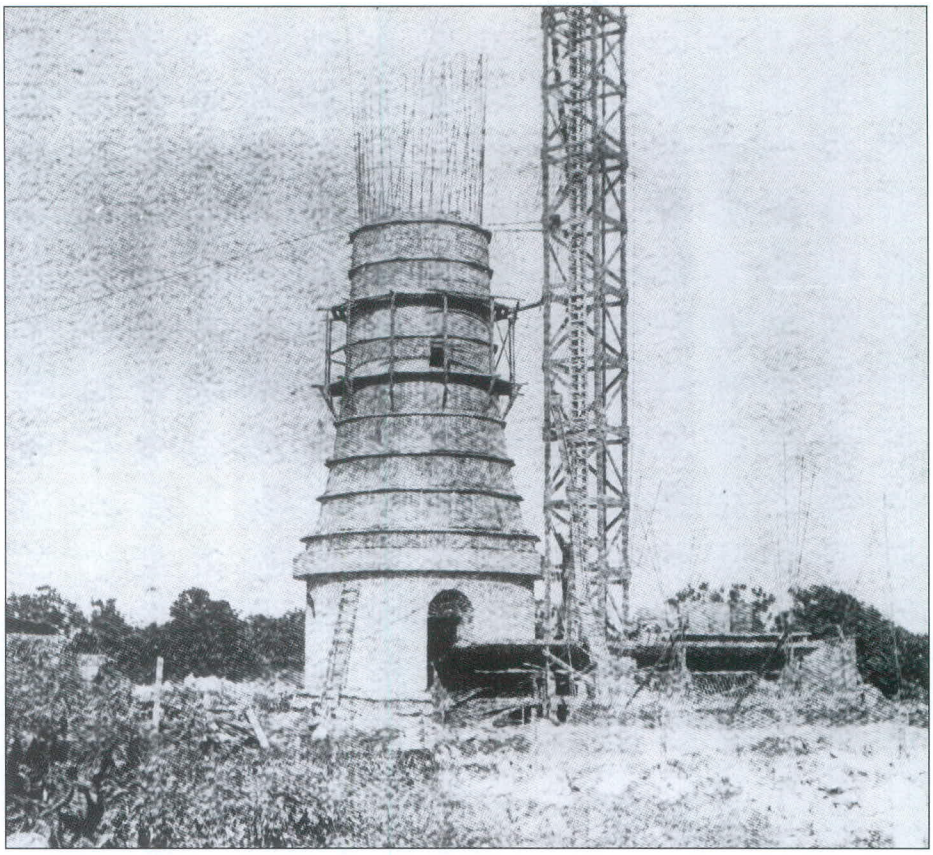
Construction of the light station required that skilled workmen, special tools and equipment be transported to Navassa from the United States. Sand, water and other supplies were delivered from Jamaica and laborers were brought in from Cuba. Because only one small schooner was available for logistics it took 21 months to complete the station. At a 162 feet the completed tower was the tallest reinforced concrete (a relatively new method of construction) tower built to that date . The walls at the base of the tower are six feet thick. A reinforced concrete house for the keeper was built alongside the tower. The 2nd Order Fresnel lens, placed in operation October 21, 1917, had a focal plane 395 feet above the water and the exceptionally clear air of that part of the Caribbean enabled the light to be seen at 29 miles.

Things, predictably, got off to a rocky start on Navassa. During the first year the supply schooner was damaged in a storm and supplies ran out. The keepers sustained themselves on wild goat, pigeons and fish until they were resupplied. Commissioner Putnam made the observation, "The men (ed - keepers) quickly tired of the monotonous life. On account of the climate and difficulty of transportation of materials from the landing place to the site (ed - lighthouse) was a most burdensome task", which involved pushing the supply filled tram cars by hand.



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The cost of supplying the light station and the difficulty in finding qualified lighthouse keepers who would stay at the station was evident as early as 1923 when Superintendent Dillion submitted a proposal to automate the lighthouse. In his letter he cited "...in a tropical climate, without means of conserving a food supply, with a barren rocky soil where the keepers have tried in vain to raise fresh vegetables, where even chickens only miraculously survive the attacks of lizards, wild dogs, cats and rats, where the keepers find difficulty in maintaining a few scrub goats, it is my opinion that it is almost foolhardy to expect a normal healthy American of sufficient quality and ability to live contentedly or successfully." His proposal to automate the station was rejected, even though he stated it would result in an estimated savings of $8,422 a year. The valuable weather reports made by the keepers were one reason. Another may have been Commissioner Putnam's association with the construction of the station.



Above—The Navassa Island tower under construction. The use of reinforced concrete was a relatively new method of construction in this era.

Below—A supply vessel backs in to the landing platform at Lulu Bay.

National Archive photos.

But District Superintendent Dillion persisted and in 1925 he petitioned the Commissioner again. He offered three possible solutions to operating the station; (1) Automate the light (2) Hire foreigners from Jamaica, Cuba or Haiti or (3) Platoon the keepers with others in the District on a six month rotation. Commissioner Putnam replied;

"1. ... the Bureau is confident that the appointment of keepers from foreign countries would not be permitted by the Department. Compulsory details of keepers from other 9th District stations for a period of service at Navassa Island Light Station is contrary to the custom of this service and it is not believed they should be resorted to except in a national emergency, or unless keepers were appointed with the understanding that such detail would be made.

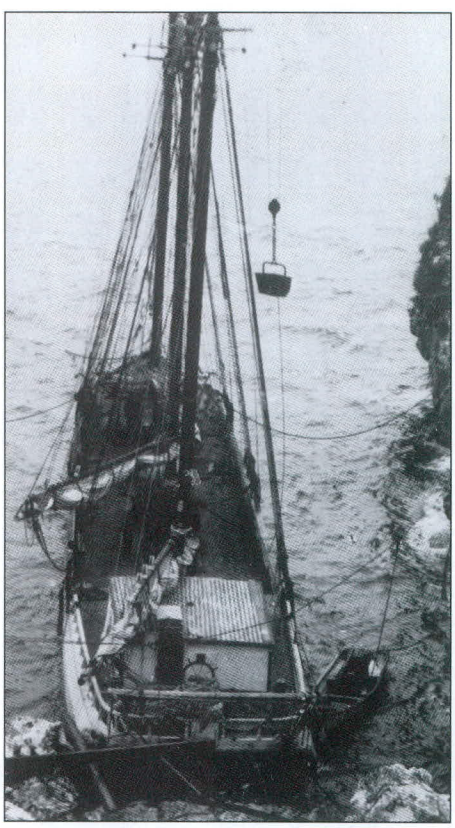
It appears also that the plan of compulsory detail would prevent the continuation of the plan for the utilization of radio communication (ed — weather reports).

2. An automatic light may be the ultimate solution, possibly with two independent units to insure continuity, but as there is good prospect of further development in automatic apparatus it is not considered advisable to take any steps in this direction at present.

3. In view of the above the Bureau considers it necessary to continue the present system."

Despite Commissioner Putnam's report, within three years it had become increasingly difficult to encourage keepers to stay on Navassa. In 1928 the families were removed and an unsuccessful attempt was made to provide keepers with incentive pay.

Faced with disgruntled keepers and the high cost of supplying the station a decision was made in 1929 to automate the light. Just prior to conversion a member of a work party from the Lighthouse Service Tender *Acacia* was killed. He was riding in one of the tram cars being lowered from the top level of the island when the lashings parted hurling him down the cliff to instant death.



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Navassa island Light Station circa 1978. Note that the roof of the keeper's dwelling has succumbed to the elements. The tiny structure next to the base of the tower is the fuel house. Photo by RM 1 Ferguson, USCG.

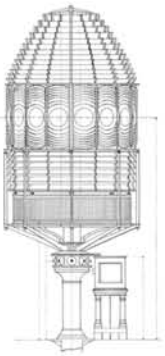
The automated light was powered by acetylene until converted to electricity in 1961. In 1980 the second order lens was removed and a solar powered optic was installed. The light tower and walls of the quarters remain in remarkably good condition, but the wooden roof of the keeper's dwelling has long since disappeared. Among the ruins of the old Navassa Phosphate Company town only the jail and basements of the other buildings still stand.

Today the Coast Guard has jurisdiction over the island and requires that the few visitors allowed to visit sign releases outlining the many dangers of the island. Scheduled visitors are Coast Guard personnel servicing the light and Ham radio operators maintaining their relay station. Illegal visitors (Haitian goat hunters and drug smugglers) are more common and add to the dangers which await authorized visitors.

If a light station had a personality, Navassa could be given the moniker Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. Twice a day it makes the transition from good to evil. There are a few pleasant moments after sunrise before the dry, dusty heat of day envelops the island and, again, at sunset the island station experiences a serene beauty which slowly gives way to darkness, rattling sounds and strange cries in the darkness as Navassa Island reverts to its forbidding nature.



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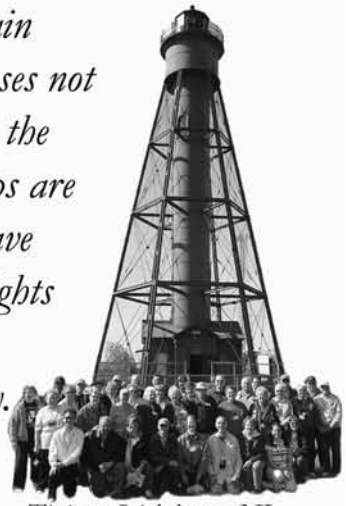
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