Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log - Vol. 3 #1 - 1986 Visit USLHS.ORG

Lighthouse Memories



by Ralph T. Williams

A fifth-order lens and a failed canal aren't memorable things in the lives of most people, but I remember them well because my father was keeper of West End Light in New Orleans and I lived there as a boy. I recall those years as lonely years, but sometimes —living in the real world of stress I have since created for myself—I yearn deeply for the solitude of that place.

During the summer, people came to swim from the tiny patch of sand and broken oyster shells piled in the corner formed by the lighthouse reservation bulwark and the stepped concrete seawall of Lake Pontchartrain. Diminished by the winter storms, the "beach," as we facetiously called it, was always replaced by New Orleans city workers who arrived with big dump trucks loaded with fill. But the summer was always too short; spring took until May to warm the lake to swimming comfort, and, as though in obedience to some natural law, few callers came to West End after Labor Day. Winter was long and cold, and for months the icy winds blowing off the lake made my special world inhospitable to visitors. It's no wonder lighthouse dwellers become self-sufficient, introspective, and prone to talking to themselves.

I don't know when the New Canal Lighthouse of circa 1838 became the West End Lighthouse of the 1930s. It probably had something to do with there being at least two different structures between the first and the last, which was built around 1890. Similarly, the New Canal, conceived to connect Lake Pontchartrain with the Mississippi River, became the New Basin Canal. That project never got much beyond the middle of New Orleans before it was abandoned, so the name change makes sense, I suppose, if you think of the canal as a long pencil-shaped reservoir of water.

Many years after I had moved away from the lighthouse, I returned to West End. In 1939, the Coast Guard had taken over the Lighthouse Service, so the place was under new management. My father had retired from the Lighthouse Service the same year. I had survived a war in Navy aircraft carriers, and simply wanted to renew touch with my past. When I viewed the lighthouse from beyond its confines, I felt as one does when he sees an old friend after a long separation.

The day was nearly over, and I didn't ask to be admitted, even though the December wind made me shiver uncomfortably. The building seemed to be much the same as when I had lived there as a boy, except that the bell tower where fog signals were tolled had been removed. The main structure still resembled a four-sided pagoda without the curving eaves at the storied intersections. Actually, it made a very nonoriental pagoda, but the mental association was a reprinted picture out of my romantic boyhood imagination.

Overall, the house seemed smaller than I remembered, and quite squatty, but it was only three stories high, including the glass-enclosed light compartment at the top. When I lived there I had eventually adjusted to the embarrassment that its appearance was inferior to those picturesque lighthouses at the edge of the sea, those of imposing columns towering cloudward as such symbols were expected to do.

Still, West End Light was a durable, seemingly timeless, navigational aid doing its job. As a youngster, sailing my catboat on the lake during summer evenings, I had always appreciated the sureness of its guidance. Even as I studied it that winter day, the lighthouse had an aura of stability as it watched silently from its complex understructure of pilings and iron braces. But the reservation had another air about it that I remembered well: isolation, standing apart behind its creosoted-oak bulkhead overlooking Lake Pontchartrain from a small V-shaped jetty of land.

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log - Vol. 3 #1 - 1986 Visit USLHS.ORG

The tall white picket fence on the shoreward side of the enclave served all the more to seclude the place in its atmosphere of loneliness. About the grounds, the stark limbs of chinaberry trees, winter-stripped, whipped back and forth in the chilling northeast wind. Overhead, gulls rode the air effortlessly, now soaring, now remaining poised in space for long periods. The "beach" had been eroded to a small shingle.

Along one leg of the triangular reservation lay the mouth of the New Basin Canal, at the base of the adjoining leg the seawall stretched away interminably, separating soggy marsh from the gray-green waters of Lake Pontchartrain. The lake, urged on by the wind, beat on this sturdy retainer or reclaimed land, as though trying to break it loose or crack it beneath the force of watery blows.

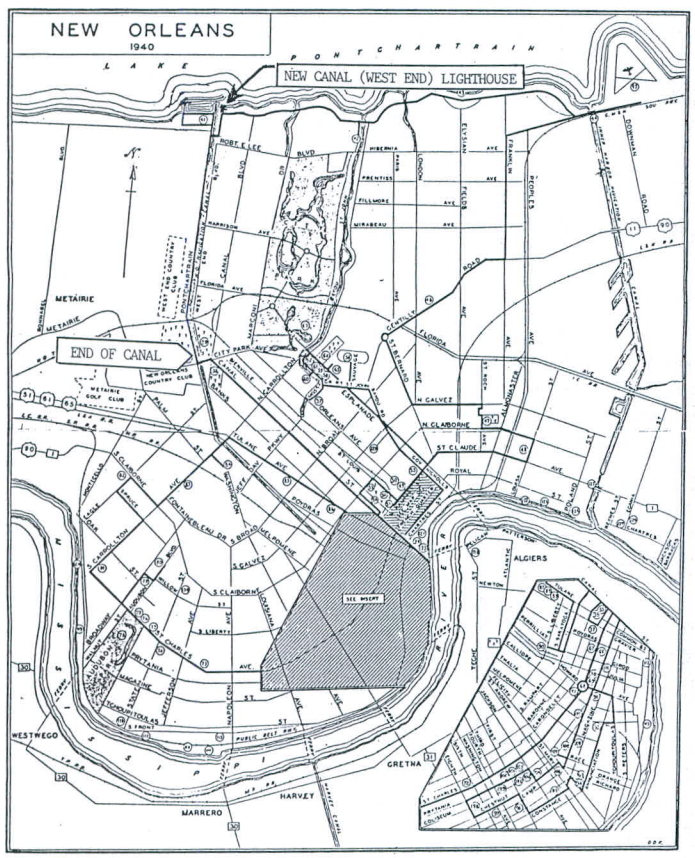
I sat on the top step of the seawall for a long time, even as I had lingered and pondered in the same spot as a boy. The sun had not once broken through the scudding clouds, and day was moving quickly toward evening. Suddenly it was dusk and the keeper turned on the big flasher at the top of his western-style pagoda.

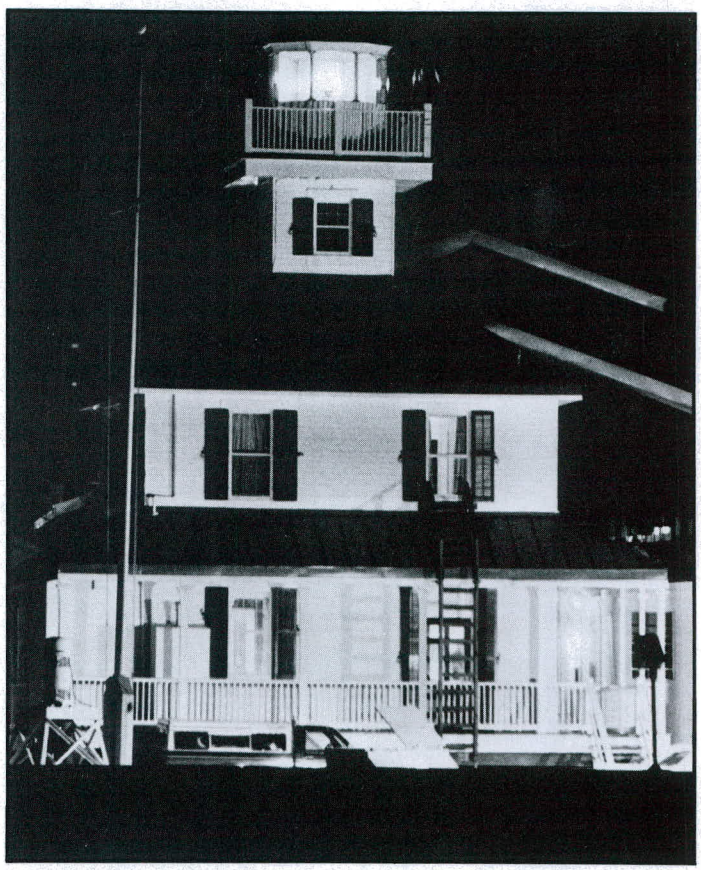
Three seconds on, two seconds off; on, off; on, off...So went its signal through the gathering night. The characteristics were prosaic compared to other, more famous, lights at the edge of the sea, but I remembered the timing for a practical reason. It fitted the rhythm for giving artificial respiration to drowned sailors, and on many tragic summer nights the light had served as a medical aid while waiting for a pulmotor-equipped ambulance from Charity Hospital.

Tall waves tumbled over one another to reach the seawall in the fading light, and the sound of air trapped beneath the crashing breakers echoed like that of huge paper bags being burst by giant hands. Soon the darkness was complete, made darker by the intermittent light impelled by its mechanical timer to shine for three seconds then succumb to the night for two.

At times, when the light flashed on for an interval, I could see ghostly shapes in the air, skimming in the brief incandescent rays. It gave me an eerie feeling to know that gulls would soar in the wind of a winter night, navigating blind for two seconds out of every five.

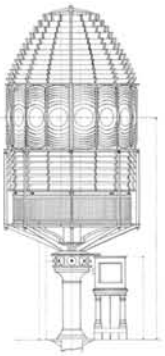
Almost fifty years have passed since I lived in West End Lighthouse, and lately I think about returning. I have no doubt it is still there, flashing three on, two off. Next time I'll go in summer.





The New Canal (West End) Lighthouse was to show the entrance to a canal linking Lake Pontchartrain with the Mississippi River. However the canal was never completed.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

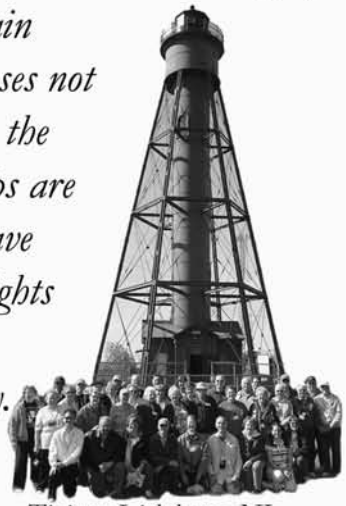
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log *magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.*

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ

To learn more visit

www.uslhs.org

or

call Headquarters at

415-362-7255