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Pages From The Past

Early correspondence regarding the establishment of the first Pensacola Lighthouse and the relocating of the light vessel Aurora Borealis from the Mississippi Delta to mark the entrance of Pensacola Bay.

From: Collector's Office New Orleans
15 April 1823
To: The collector at Pensacola

Sir:

The permanent Light-House at the mouth of the Mississippi has been finished and lighted since the 20th Ultimo - the temporary Light Vessel, *Aurora Borealis*, under the command of Capt. John Gates, heretofore stationed at the N.E. Pass is now, in obedience to the instructions from Stephen Pleasonton, 5th auditor and acting commissioner of the Revenue, sent to your port to be stationed at such place, as you may consider best, calculated to promote the safety of its navigation. I make no doubt but you will have received instructions from the Department.

Capt. Gates will report himself to you, and receive any orders you may please to give him.

I have the honor to be
Very respectfully
Bev. Clew

P.S. The pay of the former crew was $50 per month to the commander & 3 men at $30 per month each. I presume the pay of the present crew will be the same rate.

From: Collector at Pensacola
July 5, 1823
To: Stephen Pleasonton, 5th Auditor

Sir:

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of April 30 and in reply beg leave to state that according to your directions the Collector of New Orleans has ordered the floating Light Vessel *Aurora Borealis* to this port, when she arrived on the 13th Inst. and was lighted on the 22nd... I shall have the pleasure to address you more fully by next mail and transmit the account for quarter ending 30th ultimo.

With great respect
I have the honor to be
Your most obedient servant
A. Scott, Jr.

From: Collector, Pensacola
24 July 1823
To: Stephen Pleasonton

Sir:

I had the honor to address you under date of the 5th Inst., since which period consulted with the most experienced Mariner and a gentleman of the Engineer Corps. who aided in making a survey of the harbor. I am induced to note my impressions as to the utility of the Floating Light moored (as you will perceive by the enclosed Notice) within the west point of Saint Rosa Island. It is totally impracticable to place her in such a situation as to enable vessels to steer directly for the Light, located as she is at present protected from a heavy sea to which she would otherwise be exposed. I am informed by Captain Gates that in rough weather the Lamps can with difficulty retain the oil, and that it would be extremely hazardous to moor her immediately under the bluff about three hundred yards to the N. West of Fort St. Carlos de Barancas. This bluff is about 60 feet in perpendicular height and a gin [three legged tripod] of 30 feet erected on the summit would give an elevation of 90 feet to which the Lantern attached, the Light would be seen in both an eastwardly and westwardly direction to an almost interminable distance - The expense of erecting a temporary gin until a Light House is built will not exceed $100 and I think it might be done for much less. By this arrangement the expense will be greatly diminished as one man can easily attend to it, and the security in navigating the coast infinitely augmented. Should the reasons assigned warrant such a course in your estimation it will afford me pleasure to receive any Instructions which you may be pleased to give.

I have the honor to be, Sir
Your most ob'ed Serv.
Alexander Scott, Jr.
Deputy Collector

From: Captain John Gates aboard the Aurora Borealis
Oct. 19, 1823
To: Alexander Scott, Collector at Pensacola

Sir:

There is required for the immediate use of the vessel an anchor, having lost one on the night of the 15th Inst. in a heavy blow and high sea. You informed me that this vessel could only be allowed three men as that was her compliment. While stationed at the Mississippi, permit me to state, this vessel required at her present station at least one or more than when at the Mississippi. For instance, when this vessel was under the command of Capt. Cranston she was moored between mud banks where she was entirely protected from heavy seas, and Captain C. being concerned with the Branch Pilots at the Belize, there was two or three Pilots continually on board in addition

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to her crew. In the next place he was at no trouble for getting wood and water, whereas I have to go for wood one mile and lying in a large bay exposed to heavy blows and seas and have to keep her sails bent which was not the case at her former station. The above statement comes under my own knowledge as I was an Inspector of the Customs and Boarding Officer stationed at the Belize at the time of her being stationed at the N.E. Pass.

Respectfully
John Gates

From: A. Scott, Collector at Pensacola
Dec. 1, 1823
To: Stephen Pleasonton

Sir:

Capt. John Gates having resigned the commission of the Floating Light vessel at this port, I have appointed Capt. John McGregor to command her temporarily or until your pleasure be known.

Being well acquainted with the qualifications of Capt. McGregor, I am confidently recommending him to your favorable consideration as permanent commander. No attention has been omitted on his part as regards the safety of the vessel or with the regularity with which the light has been kept since the vessel has been placed under his charge.

Alexander Scott

From: S. Pleasonton
January 3, 1824
To: Collector at Pensacola

Sir:

Your letters of the 1st and 12th ultimo have been received. You may continue Captain John McGregor whom you have appointed keeper of the Floating Light in the place of John Gates resigned, until a permanent appointment shall be made. A remittance will be made to you for the amount of your account of disbursement for the floating light for the quarter ending 30 September last.

S. Pleasonton

From: S. Pleasonton
3 January 1824
To: President of the United States

Sir:

I have the honor to enclose a letter from the Deputy Collector of Pensacola recommending John M. McGregor to be keeper of the floating light stationed off that place, the former keeper having resigned. His appointment is respectfully submitted, and that his salary be fixed at $600 per annum.

I am, etc.
S. Pleasonton

From: Collector at Pensacola
Sept. 2, 1824
To: Stephen Pleasonton, 5th Auditor

Sir:

I have deemed it advisable to remove from the Command of the Floating Light vessel Ens. Campbell for reason of aiding and abetting vessels to avoid the Revenue Laws. I have appointed Mr. Henry de Grand Pre formerly of this city to fill the vacancy who is well recommended by the principal inhabitants of this place. In making the change I have also in view your letter to my predecessor dated 26th Sept. 1823 requesting him to place the Floating Light at the rate it was at the Belize [mouth of the Mississippi].

The present incumbent is to receive the sum of forty dollars (commander) per month and to be entitled to three men who will receive twenty five dollars and one boy twelve and a half dollars per month.

I trust this removal and arrangement will meet with your entire approbation.

Collector's signature not clear.

From: Winslow Lewis
Boston
24 March 1824
To: Stephen Pleasonton

Sir:

I will contract to build the Light House and dwelling House at Pensacola agreeable to the advertisement in the *Boston Patriot* for four thousand nine hundred and seventy five dollars if no cellar is required or for Five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars should a cellar be required. If the dwelling house is built of brick the walls to be one foot thick, the story to be nine feet instead of eight feet as named in the advertisement, higher stories being better [for] circulation for warm climates. I presume that the climate of Pensacola was not taken into view when the cellar was named, a thing I believe not known in that country.

I will fit up and Light the Light House with ten patent Lamps and ten fourteen inch Reflectors and furnish two spare Lamps - six double tin oil butts to hold ninety gallons each - six wooden boxes - One lantern canister and trivet. One tube box. One wick box - One oil carrier. One torch. One hand lantern Lamp. One oil feeder. Two files. Two pairs of scissors. Six wick formers and have it completed in thirty days after the Light House is finished for seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Very Respectfully
Winslow Lewis

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From: Stephen Pleasonton
April 2, 1824
To: Winslow Lewis

Sir:

Your letter of the 24th Ultimo has been received. I have to inform you your proposal for building the Light House and dwelling House at or near the entrance of the Harbor of Pensacola, for four thousand nine hundred and seventy five dollars, and fitting up the Light House with ten patent lamps, reflectors, etc. for seven hundred and fifty dollars, is accepted. I have accordingly written to Mr. Dearborn [collector at Boston, where Lewis lived] to enter into a contract with you. The cellar under the dwelling House may be dispensed with, but the walls of it must be twenty inches agreeable to the advertisement. Mr. Hamilton, the Collector at Pensacola will point out to you the site on which the buildings are to be erected.

Stephen Pleasonton

From: S. Pleasonton
May 1, 1824
To: Winslow Lewis

Sir:

I will thank you to inform me for what sum you will fix the apparatus to the Light House at Pensacola so as to make it a Revolving Light instead of a fixed light as stipulated in your contract.

Stephen Pleasonton

From: I.W. Lewis
(Winslow Lewis's brother)
May 11, 1824
To: S. Pleasonton

Sir:

Your letter of 1st Inst. to my brother Winslow Lewis is received, he being absent on a tour of inspection of Light Houses as his attorney I answer your request.

The Light House to be erected at Pensacola shall be made a revolving Light with the same ten lamps & reflectors contracted for: for the additional sum of four hundred dollars and if you determine to have it fitted like Cape May or Ocracock on a triangular frame with fifteen lamps the expense will be one hundred dollars more.

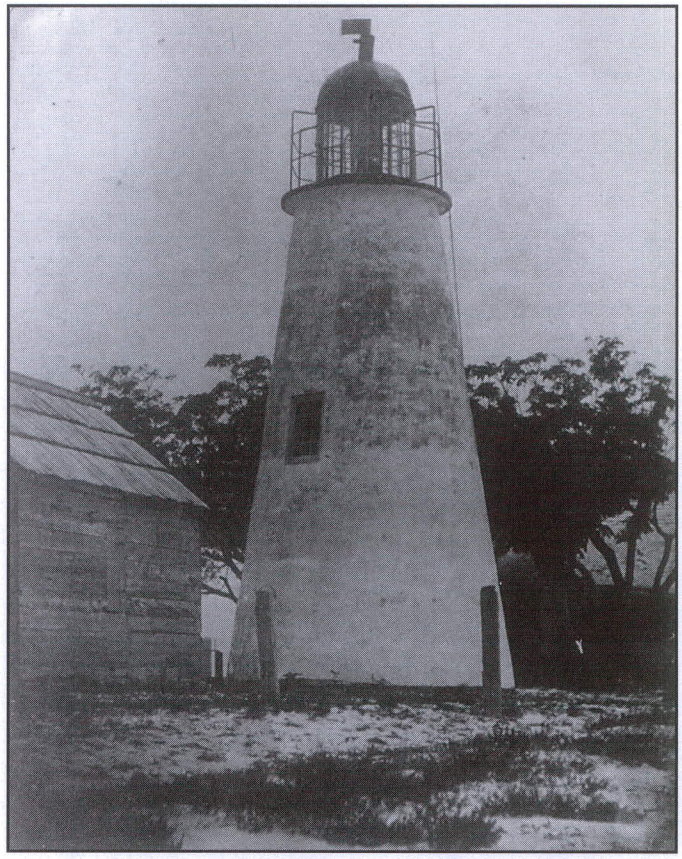
I.W. Lewis

From: S. Pleasonton
May 17, 1824
To: Winslow Lewis

Sir:

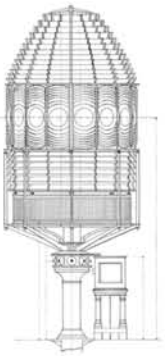
Your letter of the 11th Inst. offering to make a revolving light for the Light House at Pensacola, instead of a fixed light as contracted for, for the additional sum of four hundred dollars has been received. I have to inform you that the offer is accepted, and you will accordingly make it a revolving light.

Stephen Pleasonton



The first Pensacola lighthouse probably looked like this tower on Cat Island, near the mouth of the Mississippi River Delta. Many of the early towers in the area were constructed of rubble stone by Winslow Lewis. Note the old style lantern and directional exhaust vent. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

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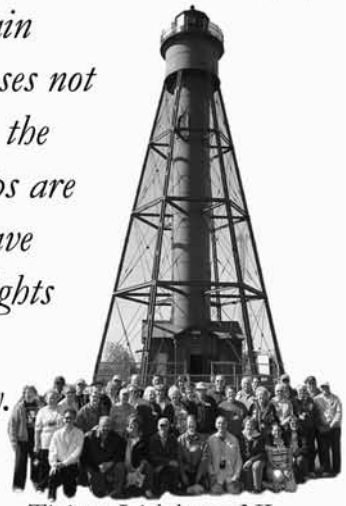
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