



The Keeper Wore Skirts

Third in a Series

The Women of the Biloxi Lighthouse

by Clifford Gallant



dark brooding sky greeted the morning, and the birds that lived in the majestic, moss-draped oaks that usually saluted the day were quiet as though they sensed that something ominous was about to happen. Occasionally breezes stirred the blossoms of the magnolia trees growing on the boggy shore of the Biloxi Peninsula of Mississippi, but were unable to relieve the hot, humid weather.

Gradually the breezes gave way to high winds coming off the Gulf of Mexico, and the waves that usually caressed the shore at the foot of the lighthouse began to increase in size. Mary Reynolds, the keeper of the lighthouse, was concerned and secured all the doors and windows of the building. Before long the full force of the Caribbean hurricane hit the coast. Trees unable to resist the strong wind were uprooted, and debris from demolished buildings flew through the air. Waves churned the sea into a frenzy, and large mountains of water tore out chunks of the shoreline. Then the winds died down and an awesome silence enveloped the area. The elements seemed to be readying for a fresh assault.

Although frightened, Miss Reynolds did not abandon her station. She could see the raging sea attacking the foundation of the lighthouse and felt the building shake as each series of waves struck. Yet, she maintained her watch in the lantern room. The earth upon which the tower stood was largely eroded, and the cast-iron tower became perched precariously on a small section of land.

Finally the devastating storm passed. Still standing amidst a sea of debris was the cast-iron lighthouse, which now had a slight list seaward. Eventually a local contractor was hired to shore up and straighten the tower with large timbers. The lighthouse remained in this condition for a dozen years.

Miss Reynolds, who experienced this hurricane in 1860, was assigned keeper of this lighthouse in 1854. She served as keeper for seven years at a salary of \$400 a year. The lighthouse is a stately 40-foot-tall tower with a focal plane of 62 feet above the water. The light from the fourth-order lens could be seen well past the barrier



The Biloxi Lighthouse in 1892. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

islands of the Gulf. It assisted cargo ships and fishing vessels navigate through the several channels and into a safe anchorage.

When the Civil War broke out, the lighthouses along Confederate shores were either dismantled or had their lenses removed to deny their use by the blockading Union Navy. This was noted in a letter sent by Miss Reynolds to the Mississippi governor, John J. Pettus:

"On the 18th of June last, the citizens of Biloxi ordered the light extinguished...and demanded the key to the light tower which has since remained in the hands of a company calling themselves 'Home Guard.'"

"At the time they took possession of the tower, it contained valuable oil, the quantity marked on my books. I have on several occasions seen disreputable characters taking out oil in bottles.

"May I hope Gov. Pettus [that you] will see that I am again put in charge of the lighthouse stores?"

She also wrote that, "...owing to our political rupture" (the war between the states) she no longer received her salary.

She continued, "I have tried to do my share in our great and holy cause of freedom," and volunteered to make clothes for the Confederate soldiers. A large bolt of heavy cloth was delivered to her, and she worked day and night to convert the material into winter clothing for the Southern troops.



Biloxi Lighthouse in 1965. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

The exact date she left the station is unknown, but it is said that she remained on the Biloxi shore for the first year of the war. Reliable sources think that it was unlikely that she was ever again in charge of the lighthouse or paid a salary during the war.

After the Civil War, a brick foundation replaced the timbers that kept the tower from collapsing. The original equipment (lens, lamps, etc.) that had been hidden during the war was retrieved, refurbished, and reinstalled in the lighthouse. A new keeper was appointed.

The new keeper was Parry Youngans of Albany, New York. He had married Maria Logan of New Orleans and settled in Biloxi prior to the war. He was the owner of a brickyard that was destroyed by heavy shelling by Union forces stationed on Ship Island.

In 1865, through the efforts of a friend who was the superintendent of the New Orleans mint, he was appointed custodian of U.S. property in the area, which included the Biloxi lighthouse.

However, Youngans wasn't the keeper for long as he died the next year. His widow, Maria, became the new guardian of the lighthouse. Beginning with her appointment, women began an uninterrupted 62 years as keepers of the Biloxi beacon.

At the time of her husband's death, Maria's children, Edward and Miranda, were small. Because the parsimonious Lighthouse Board didn't consider it necessary for her to have an assistant, she was compelled to stand all the night watches, do most of the maintenance work, and tend to her children.

Occasional storms disturbed the even tempo of the days at Biloxi, but Maria and the children loved the peaceful hours in the remote location, the quiet infrequently interrupted by a passing horse and wagon wending its way over a road that had been an Indian trail.

Gradually Biloxi grew. When electricity finally came to the area, there was no longer any need for oil-burning lamps. The new lamps did not lessen the vigilance of the keepers. The aid was needed even more than in the past as the number of vessels calling on the Gulf ports increased.

When Edward finished school, he left home to seek work. His sister, Miranda, remained to assist her mother. Each year she did more of the watch standing, maintenance, and cleaning. Finally, when Maria could no longer climb the stairs of the tower, Miranda was officially appointed keeper.

During Miranda's years as keeper, changes came rapidly. Larger vessels were sailing past the area and calling on the ports, the shrimp and oyster industry grew, and gradually the swampy shore was filled



An aerial photo of the Biloxi Lighthouse taken in May 2005, just 90 days before Hurricane Katrina hit. Photo by City of Biloxi/Vincent Creel.

in allowing a road to be constructed on both sides of the tower. Today it sits in the middle of U.S. Highway 90.

Miranda never married and retired in 1929 at the age of 70 and died four years later.

If Mary and Miranda Youngans could see the lighthouse today, they would be shocked at the changes to the area. During their tenure the lighthouse was situated in a sleepy area on a lonely marsh on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

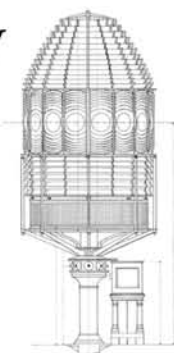
Hurricane Katrina completely flattened the buildings around the Biloxi Lighthouse but left the cast-iron tower standing, although with a slight tilt, since corrected.



Biloxi Lighthouse in August 2005 right after Hurricane Katrina. Photo by City of Biloxi.



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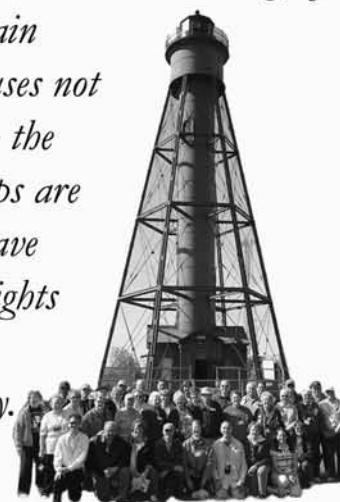
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