

LOG

THE KEEPER'S

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ST. SIMONS ISLAND

By Wayne Wheeler



St. Simons Island Lighthouse. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

AN ACT—Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled. That as soon as the proprietor of the south end or point of St. Simon's Island, in the state of Georgia, shall convey, by good and sufficient titles, unto the United States so much land on the south end of the said island as the President of the United States shall deem sufficient and most proper for the site and accommodation of a light-house.... it shall; be the duty of Secretary of the Treasury to provide by contract, which shall be approved by the President of the United States, for building a light-house there on, and for furnishing the same with all necessary supplies; and also to agree for the salaries or wages of the person or persons who may be appointed by the President for the superintendence and care of the same: the President is hereby authorized to make such appointments.... Approved March 16, 1804



lthough this act approved the erection of four other lighthouses, and authorized funds for their construction, no funds were identified for St. Simons. Perhaps it was because the necessary land had not yet been ceded to the government.

On March 20, 1804, Secretary of the Treasury Gallatin wrote to the collector of customs at Brunswick, Georgia, that Congress had authorized the construction of the St. Simons Lighthouse and that

I wish to avail myself of your agency in affecting the preparatory arrangements. I have therefore to request that you will cause the situation which has been pointed out to be carefully examined and a suitable site fixed upon, designated by your proper metes and bounds, as much ground as may be necessary, and taking the proper measures for obtaining from the state, a concession for the jurisdiction over the same. Mr. Cooper, the proprietor of the island has offered the ground wanted for the accommodation of this establishment, gratis...this ought to command your first attention. Prior to making your report to me it will be proper to have it understood what elevation the proposed light ought to have, so that no expense may be incurred raising it unnecessarily, and it ought to be known whether there are any, and what kind of materials on the spot or in the neighborhood, whether good water may be had with convenience and whether the situation is acceptable at all seasons.

Gallatin ended his instructions with "Should any useful hints occur to you on the subject I hope to be favored with them."

In October of that year John Cooper (or Couper) sold four acres of land, known as Couper's Point to the government for one dollar.

Finally, three years later, an act passed on March 3, 1807, authorized \$19,000 to build the lighthouse. This amount far exceeds funds authorized for other lighthouses in this era. As an example, in 1806 \$5,000 was authorized for each of the following lighthouses: on Fairweather Island, Connecticut, and Franklin Island, Maine, and a two-towered station at Chatham, Massachusetts. The extraordinary cost may have been due to the remoteness of St. Simons Island (difficulty in obtaining workers) and incidence of mosquitoes and the associated sickness that occurred in the warm summer months.



The original St. Simons Lighthouse, 1848. National Archives photo.

On January 9, 1808, James Gould was contracted to construct the station. The 75-foot tower (exclusive of the lantern room) was constructed of lime brick (tabby) on a stone foundation. It measured 25 feet in diameter at the base tapering to a 10-foot diameter at the top. The upper part of the octagonal tower consisted of brick. The optic was probably a bucket-type lamp with solid wicks and burning some sort of fish or whale oil, suspended by chains. The contract included the construction of a one-story framed dwell-

ing with an attached kitchen. The final cost was \$13,775 (\$365,000 in today's money). The government apparently approved of his work. Upon completion James Gould applied for the position of keeper and was accepted.

In May 1810 President Madison appointed Gould, the contractor, as the first keeper. A letter, dated July 22, 1810, between two of his sisters states:

James has been officially appointed Keeper of the Light by President Madison,

at a salary of \$400 a year. The appointment came 4 May and he was, in spite of the small pay, plainly pleased to be entrusted with the keeping of his beloved lighthouse. He appears also proud of the tower, so far, but what he insists is my discontent, I feel is somehow his own. I simply try to make him laugh and attempt to understand what he really wants to do with his life once the lighthouse has been completed and he has been its keeper long enough to be satisfied that the lantern and all else is in order.

What he did with his life was serve as keeper for the next 27 years until he retired due to failing health. He died at the age of 80 in September 1852.

Shortly after he assumed the role of keeper, a Grand Jury Presentment, published in the *Savannah Advertiser*, November 18, 1811, proclaimed: "It has been proven to us that the St. Simons light is not visible a short distance from the land and that the buoys are allowed to lie and rust on the beach, which neglect surely must endanger the lives of the seamen bound on this coast and led to expect a light and buoys off the south end of St. Simon's."

When confronted with this accusation, Keeper Gould apparently flew into a rage. He felt that there wasn't a lighthouse on the entire coast of the United States as carefully constructed and maintained as was his. Not once, since the optic beamed out over the ocean had the light gone out...he was furious! His name was eventually cleared.

To The Public:

In answer to the Presentment of the Grand Jury of Glynn County, published in the *Savannah Advertiser* of the 18th Inst., the Collector of the Port of Brunswick begs leave to make a few remarks. The Presentment casts severe reflections on the Collector and Keeper of the St. Simon's lighthouse, therefore, I call attention that the buoys for the use of St. Simon's Bar were sent from Philadelphia in the summer of 1810 but my mistake, were unaccompanied by sinkers and could not be placed on the bar.

No time was lost, however, in sending for these appendages by Mr. James Gould, Keeper of the Light. To this date the chain and anchors have not been shipped, During the time of their expected arrival, Mr. James Gould sent several proposals to



James Gould, builder and first keeper of St. Simons Island Lighthouse. Theperfect-tourist.com image.

the government for funds needed to seat all Buoys and was rejected or his proposals overlooked. I further wish to plea that the Grand Jury did not correctly ascertain that the occasional dimness of the light was owing to neglect, since the light is often times and unavoidably obscured by fogs. The Collector, therefore, takes the liberty of considering both himself and Mr Gould exempt from blame.

Joseph Turner
Collector

In 1816 Winslow Lewis fitted up the St. Simons Island Lighthouse with his patented Argand lamps and reflectors. Nine lamps were installed on a chandelier, and although a much better light than the old bucket lamps, it's doubtful that the range was 15 miles as listed in the 1838 *Light List*.

In 1852 the Lighthouse Board assumed responsibilities for our aids to navigation system. One of the first orders of business was to import Fresnel lenses from France and install them in all American lighthouses. In 1857 a fixed third-order lens was installed at St. Simons displaying a white light with a range of 14 miles. Five years later, in 1862, Confederate troops removed the optic and hid it in a building in Brunswick, Georgia. They then destroyed the tower. After the area was "liberated" by Union troops, a series of searches were conducted for the lens to no avail.

The 1867 *Annual Report* to Congress from the Lighthouse Board



Nighttime view of the lighthouse. USLHS archive photo.

stated: "St Simon's—All the buildings at this station were completely destroyed by the rebels. It will be re-established upon new and improved plans as authorized by Congress." The report the next year stated it was under construction. The 1870 report to Congress said:

St. Simon's entrance to St. Simon's Sound, Georgia—After due public notice a contract was entered into with the lowest bidders for rebuilding a light-house tower 100 feet high and other necessary buildings at this place. The contractors agreed to complete these works in conformity to the specifications and terms of the contract within a proscribed period of time, but finding that the work could not, from delays in procuring and landing materials at the site, and, in commencing the operations, that it would be impossible to properly construct the tower and building in the remainder of the proscribed time, it was extended to November 1870, by which time it is hoped that the building will be satisfactorily completed, so that the light may be exhibited at an early day thereafter. During the last summer there has been a great deal of sickness in that vicinity, and one of the contractors, who was on that spot, died.

In 1872 it was reported:

St. Simon's Light-station, north side of the entrance to St. Simon's Sound, Georgia—This light-house which was contracted for in the fall of 1869, was delayed for various causes, the death of the contractor and one of his bondsmen (each while successfully superintending the work) being the main cause. At date of last report the tower was 51 feet high. It was then taken in hand by the surviving bondsman, and by him the work was completed. The tower is built of brick, of the form of a frustum of a cone, focal plane 104 feet above sea-level, and will show a fixed light of the 3rd order, varied by flashes alternately red and white, the interval between flashes being one minute. The light was exhibited for the first time on the night of September 1, 1872.

The nominal range of the light is 23 miles when observing the white of the characteristic, but only 18 when the red is observed. Due to erosion the new tower was constructed 25 yards north of the old tower.



The oil house at St. Simons Lighthouse was built in 1890. Photo by Jack Graham.

The impressive structure was erected for a cost of \$45,000. The well-known Georgia architect Charles Cluskey designed the 104-foot tower and the adjoining nine-room, two-story Victorian keepers' cottage to house both the keeper and his assistant and their families. The whole arrangement was soundly constructed of handmade Savannah gray brick. It was the only brick structure in the county prior to 1880. The walls of the cottage are 12 feet thick, designed to withstand the severest of storms.

Frederick Osborn was selected as the head keeper of the new station and John Stevens as his assistant. Keeper Osborn constantly complained to the Sixth District inspector about the condition of the drinking water and potential health hazard.

Finally, two years later, the *Annual Report* stated: "This station is very unhealthy, and it is attributed to the stagnant water in several ponds in the vicinity which have no outlet. It is proposed to drain these ponds during the coming winter, the only time the work can be done."

Obviously the ponds were a breeding site for mosquitoes and the cause of malaria (termed malarial poison at the time) which probably killed the original contractor and one of the bondsmen. The next year the *Annual Report* mentioned that the ponds had been "effectively drained," that an acre of land had been fenced for a garden, and seeds for a eucalyptus tree were planted.

Sometime in the 1870s kerosene was introduced, replacing lard oil which had been in use since the 1850s.

The 1876 *Annual Report* stated:

This station has received extensive repairs and improvement. The iron windows of the tower have been refitted, closets and fittings for storm-panes of lantern glass and keeper's implements have been constructed in the watch and oil rooms. A speaking-tube to connect the watch-room and dwelling for calling the relief-keeper

has been fitted. The tower has been painted outside and inside. The walls of the keeper's dwelling have been furred and plastered to prevent dampness. The roof has been repaired, made water tight, and the dwelling painted and whitewashed. The machinery of the lens has received a through overhauling.

In 1882 the *Annual Report* mentioned that if a small light was placed in front of the tower, creating a range with the bar buoy offshore, vessels drawing less than 12 feet could enter the sound at night and escape danger outside. "St. Simon's could then be used as a harbor of refuge for vessels of light draft. An appropriation of \$5,000 would suffice to establish the light, and it could be attended by the keepers of the main light." Apparently this idea wasn't approved as the same request was made again in 1885.

In 1886 an earthquake was felt on St. Simons Island. That quake devastated Charleston, South Carolina, destroying numerous buildings, killing 60 people, and badly damaging the Morris Island Light Station tower. The Light-House Board reported:

The keeper [at St. Simon's] reports he was in the tower lying down in the watch-room at the time of the first shock, which was on the night of August 31, at 9:30 p.m., sun time. The first two shocks lasted two minutes and thirty seconds. The noise was like that made by a horse running over a hard road. He felt five shocks that night. They were severe over throwing chimneys and injuring walls of houses. The first two shocks seemed like a jar and seemed to come vertically. He felt one every night from August 31 to September 20. The clock in the tower was stopped at 9:30 p.m., it was facing southeast, the night was beautiful, with starlight and a dead calm. The motion of the tower was northwest to southeast at the time of the shock. One of the red-flash panels of the illuminating apparatus was broken by the first shock.

Other lighthouses up and down the east coast experienced the earthquake. As Charleston was the epicenter of the quake, the Morris Island Light Station suffered the most damage. The earthquake was felt as far north as Boston, at Chicago and Milwaukee in the west, and as far south as Cuba.

In 1887 the dwelling was struck and somewhat injured by lightning. The damage was repaired and two lightning conductors, with improved ground connectors, were placed on the dwelling. The boathouse was moved and repaired.

In the 1920s, C.O. Svendsen was the keeper. On August 21, 1925, he wrote in the station log: "Receiving visitors in the tower at 12:30. Mr. Glover from Atlanta visited the tower and was not very nice to my son. As I was taking a bath and could not see him...he wanted to go in the tower at once. I had to change my clothes before I could see him." In October of that year he wrote: "St. Simon's



C.O. Svendsen in front of the oil house, circa 1910. He was keeper of St. Simons Lighthouse from 1907 to 1935. Coastal Georgia Historical Society photo.

Hotel and Jekyll View Hotel were destroyed by fire this morning at 4 a.m. Dr. Folk's cottage was destroyed by fire. This cottage was across the Shell Road from the station."

One of our Society members, Edith Cook, remembered keeper Svendsen. Her family had a cottage in the area. In a remembrance she wrote: "As we walked to the pier, we passed the St. Simon's lighthouse. There was a keeper and assistant. They lived in the keepers house (now the Museum of Coastal History). Often the lighthouse keeper, Carl Olaf Svendsen, would be out in the yard doing various chores. We would wave to him and he would wave to us."

The station received electricity in 1934 and was automated in 1950 when the last keeper retired.

The last keeper of the St. Simons Light Station was David O'Hagan. O'Hagan was born in 1904 at the Ponce DeLeon Inlet Light Station. He was the seventh child of Patrick O'Hagan, the principal keeper of the station. When his father retired at the Ponce station, his son Thomas, who was the assistant keeper, took over and David became his assistant. He later worked as a temporary keeper at the Hillsboro Inlet station and finally was appointed head keeper at St. Simons in 1941. When the Coast Guard took over the lighthouse service in 1939, Hagan became an enlisted Coast Guardman.

In later years during an interview, he stated that his duty, in addition to tending the optic and painting the tower and performing



Keeper C.O. Svendsen and his family in 1910. Coastal Georgia Historical Society photo.



St. Simons Lighthouse in 1997. Photo by Jerry Biggs.

other chores, included local minor aids to navigation. "Well, my day duty was out in the river. I had all the fog and river lights, and all the range lights around Brunswick, and that took more of my time than working around here [the station]. I had two assistants, Lupeck and Gregg. Lupeck moved his family in the upstairs unit, he was the last one to live in the station."

When asked about painting the 100-foot tall tower, he remarked: "We had a regular cradle outfit, a platform with a railing around it, we'd put two five gallon buckets of paint on each side, and two men would get in it, and we'd hoist ourselves up and down, work out of that cradle."

In the interview he mentioned experiencing hurricanes and seeing American ships being torpedoed offshore. Often life boats would land at the station with dead bodies. David O'Hagan was fondly remembered by locals. He died in August of 1986.

In 1972 the government decided the long-abandoned keepers' dwelling to Glyn County for use as a museum and visitor center. In 1975, after major restoration work by the Coastal Georgia Historical Society, the museum opened to the public. Several years later the tower was opened to the public.

Over the years, various grants have allowed the Coastal Georgia Historical Society to make needed repairs and continue creating interpretive displays. Today the grounds, exterior, and interior are in excellent condition, and the interpretive displays explain the history of lighthouses, St. Simons history, and how the various lighthouse items operate.

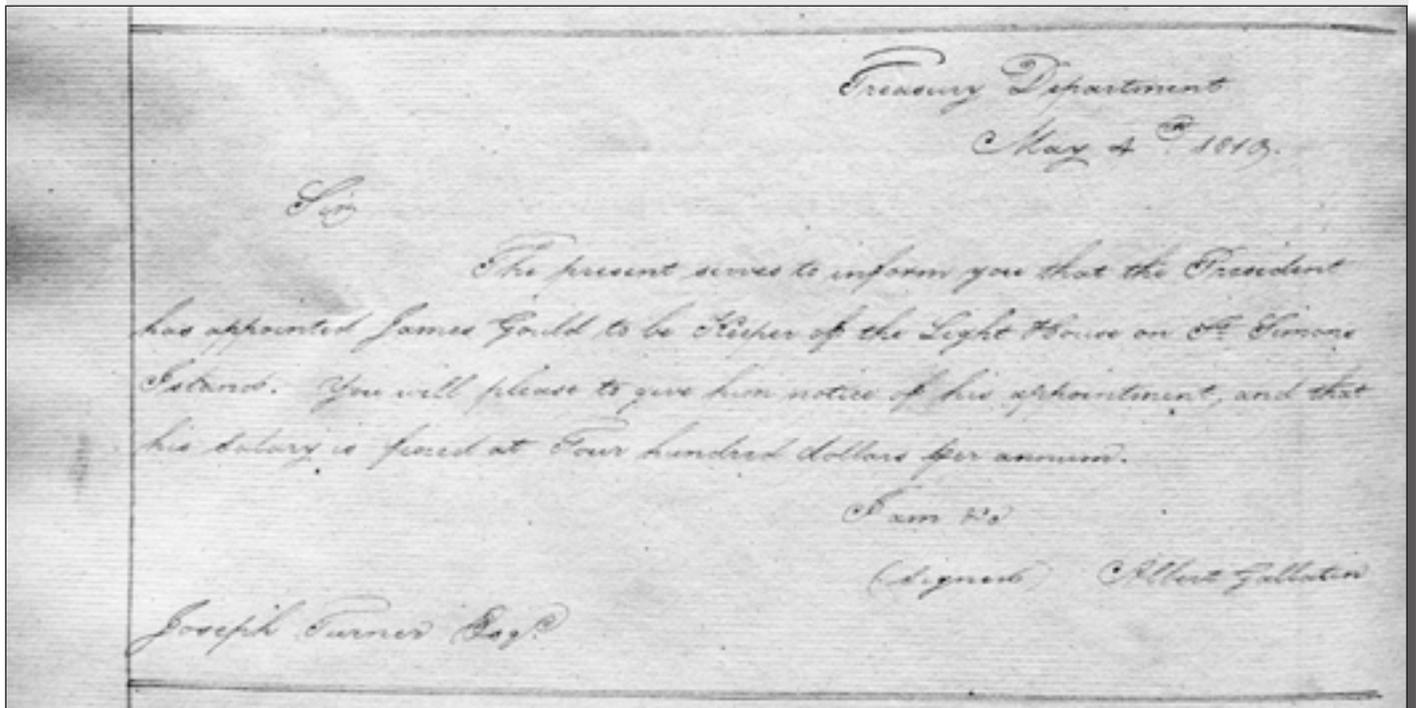
The St. Simons Lighthouse is one of the prettiest, most complete, and best-interpreted lighthouses in the country.

St Simons Lighthouse Keeper James Gould

Compiled and researched by Candace Clifford, U.S. Lighthouse Society historian, from the RG 26 collection at the National Archives, Waltham, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C.



ayne Wheeler's article mentions James Gould, who not only built the first lighthouse at St. Simons but was also its keeper from 1810 to 1837. Here are a few letters from the National Archives that illustrate his tenure.

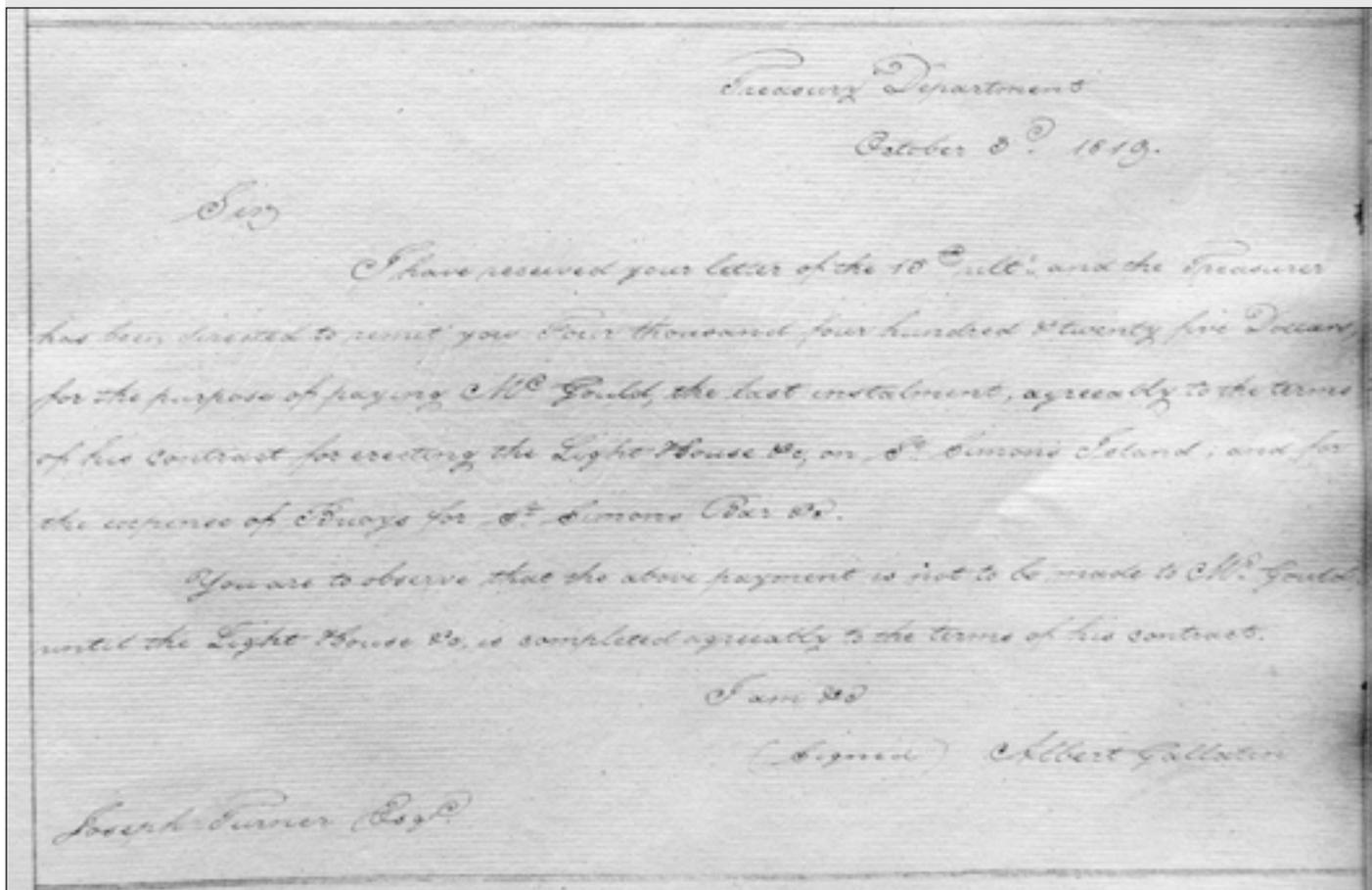


Copy of letter dated May 4, 1810, from Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin confirming the president's appointment of James Gould as "Keeper of the Light House on St. Simons."

Text reads: "The present serves to inform you that the President has appointed James Gould to be Keeper of the Light House on St. Simons Island. You will please to give him notice of his appointment and that his salary is fixed at Four hundred dollars per annum."

"I am &c

"(Signed) Albert Gallatin"



Copy of letter dated October 3, 1810, from Secretary Gallatin to local Customs Collector Joseph Turner, instructing him to pay Gould his last installment of \$4,425.

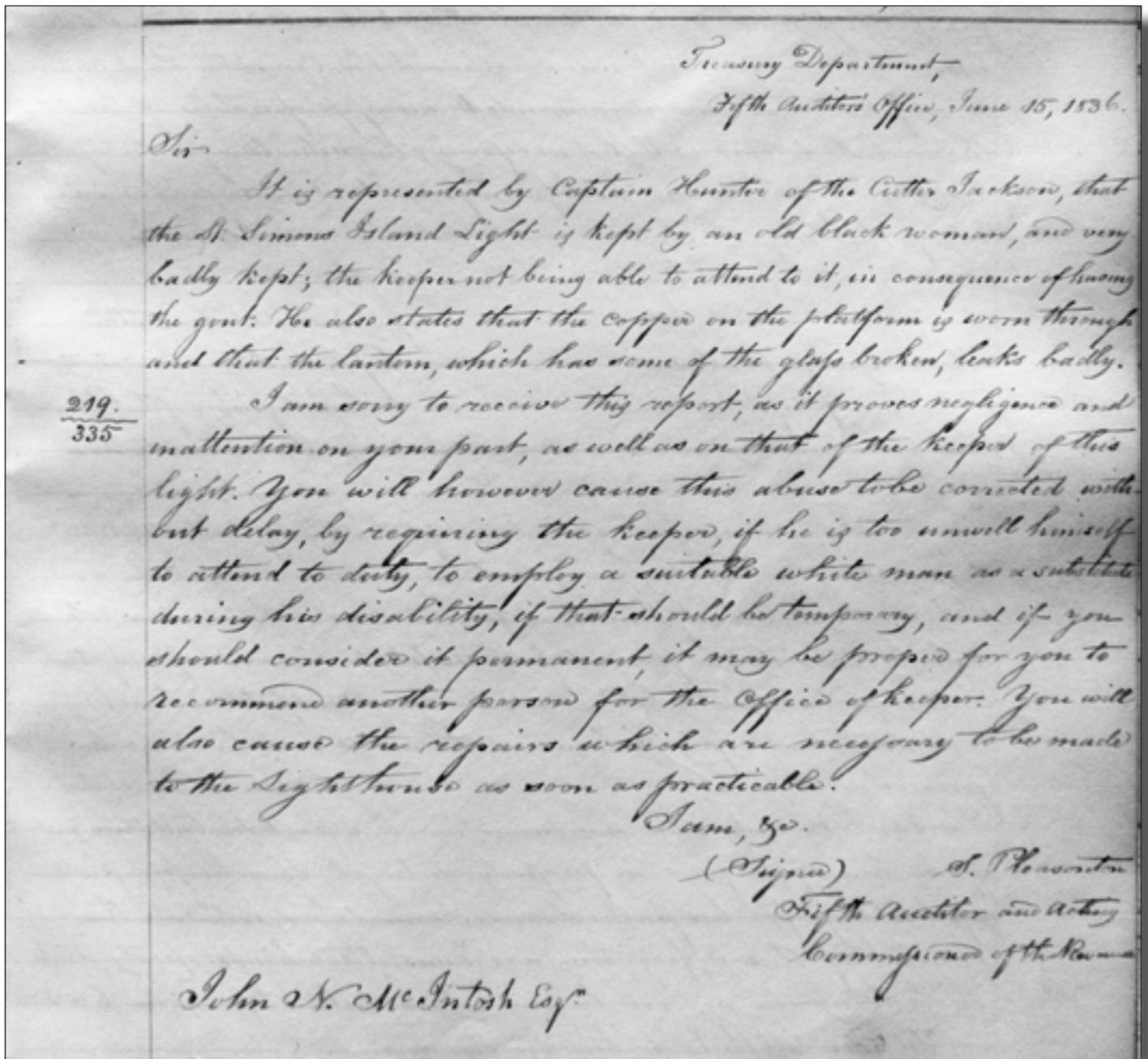
Text reads: "I have received your letter of the 15th [unreadable] and the Treasurer has been directed to remit your Four thousand four hundred & twenty five Dollars for the purpose of paying Mr. Gould, the last installment, agreeably to the terms of his contract for erecting the Light House &c, on St. Simons Island, and for the expense of Buoys for St. Simons Bar &c.

"You are to observe that the above payment is not to be made to Mr. Gould until the Light House &c, is completed agreeably to the terms of his contract.

"I am &c

"(Signed) Albert Gallatin"

Facing page: This letter dated June 15, 1836, from the fifth auditor, Stephen Pleasonton, to the superintendent of the lights, John N. McIntosh, is interesting on several levels. First it confirms that an African American woman kept the light at St. Simons for a brief period of time. We don't know her name and chances are she was Gould's slave. Many keepers of southern lighthouses were scolded for allowing their slaves do their work as keeper. Before the Civil War African Americans were allowed to be cooks on lightships but were not allowed to serve in any other Lighthouse Service positions in an official capacity. Next it shows that the Lighthouse Establishment relied on officers in the Revenue Cutter Service for first-hand information on the effectiveness and condition of the lighthouses. These captains would have access that the local customs collector would not. It is also interesting that Gould was allowed to continue as keeper despite his disability. Many keepers in the 19th century served until their deaths. There was no pension system to encourage them to retire. Keeper Gould retired a year later due to his poor health. He died in 1852.



Text reads: "It is represented by Captain Hunter of the Cutter Jackson, that the St. Simons Island Light is kept by an old black woman, and very badly kept; the keeper not being able to attend to it, in consequence of having the gout. He also states that the copper on the platform is worn through and that the lantern, which has some of the glass broken, leaks badly.

"I am sorry to receive this report, as it proves negligence and inattention on your part, as well as on that of the keeper of this light. You will however cause this abuse to be corrected without delay, by requiring the keeper, if he is too unwell himself to attend to duty, to employ a suitable white man as a substitute during his disability, if that should be temporary, and if you should consider it permanent, it may be proper for you to recommend another person for the office of keeper. You will also cause the repairs which are necessary to be made to the Lighthouse as soon as practicable.

"I am &c

"(Signed) S. Pleasonton

"Fifth Auditor and Acting

"Comissioner of the Revenue"