

Aransas Pass Lighthouse

By Wayne Wheeler



National Archives photo.



With the exception of the approaches to New Orleans, lighthouse construction along the Gulf Coast lagged behind other areas of the country and certainly didn't keep pace with the increasing maritime trade in the area.

The Lighthouse Board once remarked, "The cost of everything that enters into lighthouse construction on the Mexican Gulf Coast is exceedingly high compared with other parts of the Union; the smaller number of cities where supplies can necessarily be obtained at any price, in a district extending over a thousand miles of coast, measured on the shortest side...; from malarial fevers; the soft nature of the land and shoals in the greater part of the district, making operations of putting down foundations difficult and expensive; the unreliable means of communications with distant field parties by reason of the deficiency of railroads and packet lines, have prevented the Board from completing many of the works in the eight District"

The first principal aid to navigation on the Texas Coast was a lightship constructed in 1849 for \$11,000 and established inside the Galveston Bar. This was followed by a lighthouse at Matagorda in 1852. This was the last light a mariner would see leaving Pass Cavallo enroute Mexico, a distance of 175 miles. This is assuming the vessel wouldn't enter Galveston Bay which was lighted by the lightship inside the bay. Almost the entire coast from Pass Cavallo to the Mexican border was a monotonous low sandy coast, with almost no significant landmarks by which to navigate.

In 1852, the newly created Lighthouse Board investigated the situation on the Gulf Coast and determined there was no urgent need for lighthouses in that area. The board said, "The proposed lights along the Florida coast from the Keys and Dry Tortugas to Pensacola, etc., although necessary in general plan, are not deemed to be of present great importance....the Passes of the Mississippi lights are of great importance to the commerce of the Gulf of Mexico, and should be rendered the most efficient in the shortest

space of time." The Board thought the other lights in the Gulf Coast, west of the Mississippi, to be "of minor importance."

The Civil War quickly affected the lighthouse along the Gulf Coast. In April, 1861 the lighthouse tender Guthrie arrived in Galveston with supplies and was immediately held by port officials for several weeks. The Confederates began disabling the Gulf lighthouses as they realized they would be of assistance to the Union Navy that was blockading the coast. The Federal forces were initially able to maintain a few lighthouses, but by the end of the war only Ship Shoal was back in service. By 1866, only Ship Island in Mississippi and seven in Louisiana had been reactivated.

Although the Board had stated that the Gulf Coast west of the Mississippi delta was "...of minor importance", they did recognize that the lighthouse was needed at Aransas Pass. In fact the same Congressional Act that created the board included an appropriation for several lighthouses, including one for Aransas Pass.

The Coast Survey was responsible for identifying the specific site. Lieutenant Commander T.A Craven was dispatched investigate Aransas Pass. He noted that the, “harbor is a good one and is a place of some coastal trading”, but also stated, “From the frequent and rapid changes of the bar. . .I am of the opinion that a lighthouse cannot be built at this place, in a suitable location, with any certainty of it standing five years.” He mentioned that St. Joseph Island was moving southward and “the opposite point of Mustang Island wears away with equal rapidity.”

Overall LCDR Craven considered the harbor more of a place of refuge, rather than a port that would evolve into a major trading site. Because he perceived that the land was not suitable for construction of the lighthouse and that Congress did want an aid there, he recommend a lightship at the entrance, “. . .a small light-vessel of forty tons and light draught. . . inside the south breakwater. . .well sheltered from any storms. . .”

Coast Survey Superintendent Bache agreed with him and remarked, “. . .such a light-boat will subserve both the general and local wants of trade and navigation, and its position can be changed to accommodate it to the changing character of the entrance.” The other members of the Lighthouse Board didn’t agree with Bache and said that the Aransas Pass “required” a lighthouse and one equipped with

a 1st order lens. Bache ordered another survey of the area and ordered LCDR H.S. Stellwagen, “. . . to determine the expediency of placing a light-house or light-boat there.”

In 1853, Stellwagen visit Aransas Pass and notice that the topography had drastically changed since Craven had surveyed the area. He notice that the channel, which had run out northeast, now ran southeast and that the end of Mustang Island was washing away and that San Josef was accreting by the same amount.

Stellwagen stated that because of the ever changing channel a lightship would have to be continually relocated. He wrote, “. . .A light-house is very necessary here, and would be of great and essential aid to commerce, not only on account of the growing trade of Corpus Christi, etc., but it would be invaluable as a land-mark on a coast where there is so much sameness as to make it almost impossible to distinguish one place from another. Even old trader have been known to have been beating for several days, though absolutely windward of their port, not recognizing where they were.”

He recommended situating the lighthouse on a small island back of the pass where it would also serve as a guide for the coastal trade, and also, with small movable front lights, act as a range for entering the pass. He surveyed the area where he recommended placing the tower and found, “The top soil is an alluvial deposit of mud; beneath that the same mixed with sand. The

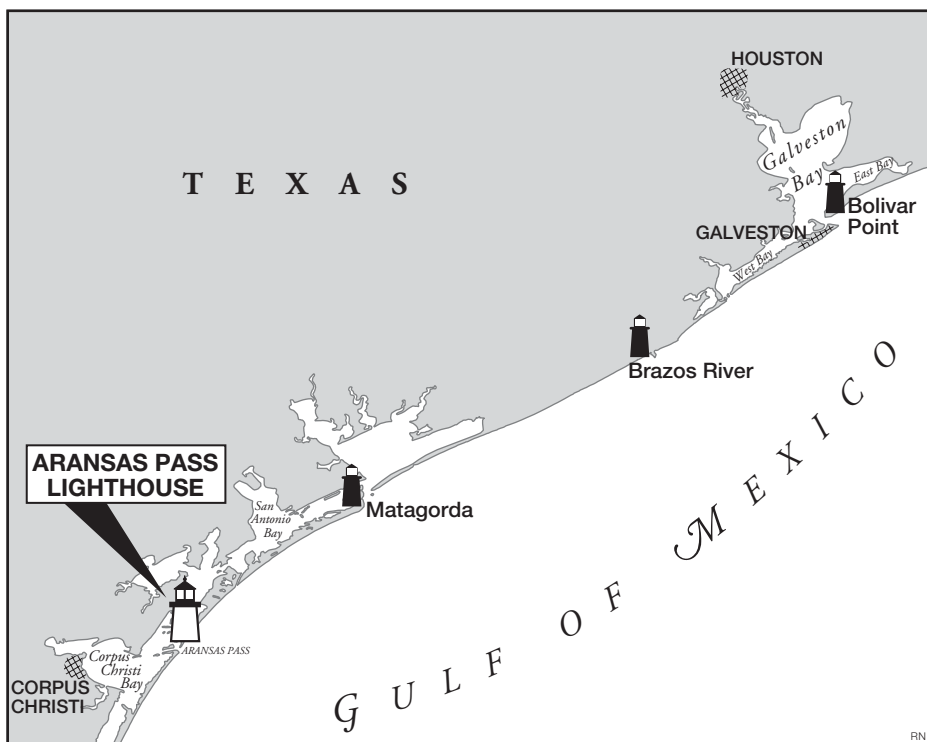
[surveying] rod penetrated rather easily for about nine feet, when it reached something pretty firm, but I suppose it was only compact sand.”

He recommended a screw-pile type structure. Superintendent, and Lighthouse Board member, Bache was not persuaded with Stellwagen’s recommendation. In forwarding the report to the other Board members he said, “The Light-house recommended by LCDR Stellwagen will probably be of service in entering the harbor after the bar is passed, especially if movable beacons be provided in connection with it. It may also benefit the extensive navigation of the coast, if raised sufficiently high, but is not in the best position for that purpose. It can offer no assistance in passing the very shifting bar at the entrance. The comparative chart shows that, while the depth of Aransas bar remains relatively the same, the channel has changed its position by nearly the whole breadth of the pass in two years. It is plainly impracticable to erect a fixed structure which would guide vessels over the bar. The light-boat proposed by LCDR Craven appears to me to be necessary for that purpose.”

The Lighthouse Board received Stellwagen’s report in September 1853 and turned it over to a committee for study to determine which aid was best for that locale, a lighthouse or lightship. In November the committee said that it depended on the suitability of a foundation. The Eighth District was instructed to conduct soil tests. The next March (1854) the Board received the results of the soil tests as well as a plan for the foundation.

It appears that the majority of the Board wanted a lighthouse in that area. A lightship would certainly serve vessels entering the pass very well, and it could be inexpensively relocated as the entrance shifted. However, a tall tower would better serve the coastal trade as the light would reach out into the Gulf much farther than that from a light vessel.

The Lighthouse Board wanted the new lighthouse constructed either on Mustang Island or St. Joseph’s Island since it was meant to mark the pass, as well as serve the coastal trade. In October, the Board wrote the District Inspector in New Orleans that it disagreed with Stellwagen’s recommendation. The Board directed that, “. . .the selection of the site nearest the sea and the bay at the greatest distance to guide him [mariner] to the outside anchorage. . .”. The District was also instructed to get on with the project, select a site and acquire title to the necessary land to



ensure that the funds [appropriation] would be used before they expired at the end of the fiscal year (June 1855). But, for some reason, the district was unable to comply and the fund expired.

In December, the Board again instructed the District to select a site and he final acquired 25 acres, "...on a low island about 17 miles... from the town of Aransas..", from the State of Texas for \$31.25. Up to this time there had been a disagreement between the Board and the District Inspector on the type of lighthouse to erect. District Inspector Stevens and his predecessor, Hunt, liked the screw-pile design. I.W.P. Lewis, who was erecting three screw-pile lighthouse in Galveston Bay, submitted a design for a screw-pile lighthouse for Aransas Pass to the Board. But the Board insisted that a masonry structure be built at Aransas Pass, although they did approve of a screw-pile lighthouse for the Ship Shoal location. The Board reasoned, "Iron is objectionable as a material for light-house structures on many accounts, and the Board feels compelled to give preference to masonry structures whenever the site will permit."

The Board wrote Inspector Stevens, "...it is very important that the Sabine, Aransas Pass, Shell keys, Ship Shoal, Baratavia, & Timbalier Lights should be built as soon as possible." On August 21, 1855 the Board set the District, "...a drawing showing vertical section of the base and upper of LT. House tower for Aransas Pass, Texas, the dimention which are made to conform to the Lantern and iron work for a light of this class." The Board agreed with the Inspector that day labor should be used, in lieu of a contract.

Back in 1851, Congress appropriated \$12,500 for a light vessel or lighthouse at Aransas Pass, the following year Congress added another \$2,500 to the total. The lighthouse Board used \$2,500 for the survey work and to procure the lens. The remainder of the money apparently was either returned to the General Fund of the Treasury or went into the Lighthouse general fund. In any event, when time came to construct the lighthouse the Board had to find the necessary money. They found that they had \$12,500 in an account to move the tower at Staten Island General Depot to Romer Shoals, but that they had delayed the project until further review of a suitable site for the beacon. In fact, the Romer Shoal tower wasn't moved from Staten Island until 1898. A small unmanned light was established on the shoal in 1886.

The District Inspector reported that construction commenced on the Aransas Pass lighthouse on February 16, 1856. Normally a five or sixth month project, this one took 18 months. One slight delay was caused when the vessel bringing the first load of bricks to the site sank in a January, 1856 gale. Still the structure was completed July 26, 1856 remained unlighted. The lens which earlier had been shipped to the depot in Galveston had apparently been used elsewhere. The Board ordered another fixed 4th order lens, but it wasn't shipped from New York until November of that year.

The Board prepared a Notice to Mariners sating that the light would be first exhibited on January 1, 1857. For some reason the lighting was delayed until sometime in July 1857. Perhaps the reason was the need to hire a keeper.

Very little information about the construction or description of the light station survives. The Coast Pilot for that era states, "On a low island to the N.W. of the S.W. end of San Jose [island, formally named St. Joseph Island], in Lat. 27.53.30, Long. 97.01.20, is an octagonal frame fifty-five feet high, colored brown, which shows a fixed white light of the 4th order, sixty feet above mean sea level of the sea, visible at thirteen miles."

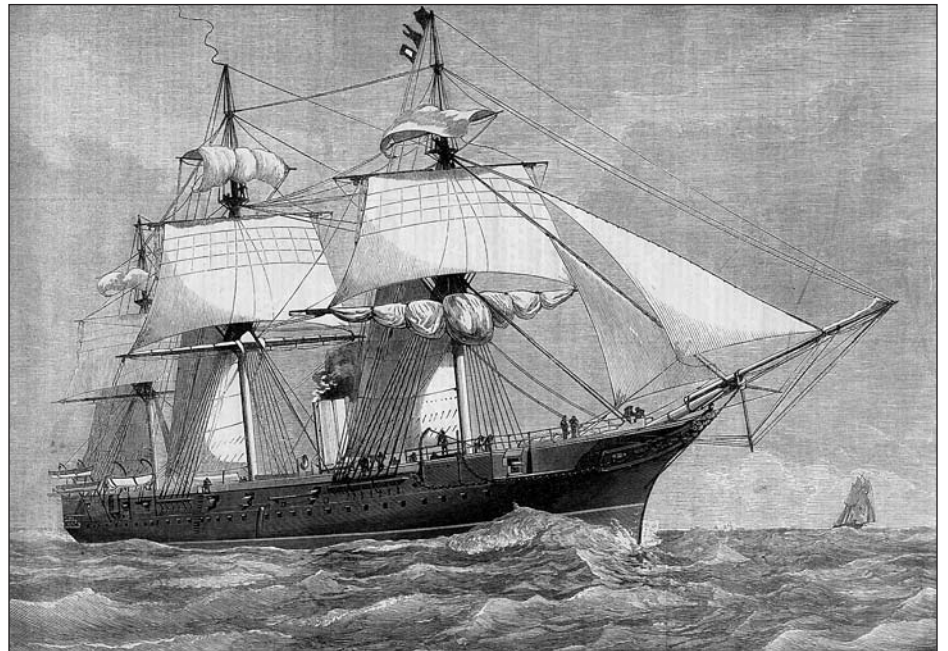
As initially there was only one keeper assigned to the station, it probably consisted of a simple dwelling, outhouse, wharf and perhaps a barn, in addition to the tower.

The first change authorized to the station was the erection of wire screening around the lantern to keep birds from smashing into the windows of the lantern. Next a request was made to enlarge the dwelling. Another request from the District for funds to place shutters on the dwelling was denied. The Board stated that it was low on funds and shutters at Aransas Pass were of a low priority.

Apparently the lighthouse was abandoned after the Civil War broke out. Either because the keeper no longer received pay from the Union or the south decided to deny aids to navigation to the blockading Union ships.

On February 4, 1862 the first Union vessel arrived at Aransas Pass. The 554 ton Bark Arthur, commanded by Lt. Kittredge, showed up to effect a blockade of the pass. He anchored off-shore and using two cutters from the ship, made several expeditions through the pass and into the bay. He ran one Confederate vessel ashore, captured several, lost them and eventually he and part of his crew were captured in September, 1862, and paroled for the duration of the war. While he was in the area he visited the light station and found it abandoned.

Until Lt. Kittredge was captured the Aransas Pass Lighthouse remained intact. Many in the Confederacy thought that the light station towers, even unlighted, provided an aid to the Union blockade forces. The Confederate commander of Texas was reluctant to damage the towers along the Texas coast. He probably reasoned that once the Confederacy won the



In February 1862, the Union bark *Arthur* arrived off Aransas and set up a blockade.

war they would be necessary for the needs of navigation and expensive to rebuild. However, when the Union forces arrived in great numbers in December, Major General Magruder, in charge of Texas, had second thoughts about the towers and ordered his troops to destroy the lighthouses at Pass Cavallo, Aransas Pass, Padre Island, Saluria. The order to destroy the Aransas Pass tower specifically stated to use two kegs of gun powder.

The exact nature of the destruction and date not known. Some local knowledge states the rebels removed the lens and hid it in the nearby dunes or marsh. But, this is the type of tale has been told about many southern lighthouses. We know that in many cases the Confederacy carefully removed lenses and stored them in warehouses for the duration of the war.

The Confederate soldiers assigned to the task destroying the Aransas Pass tower doubled the amount of gun powder ordered. The charge blew the top off the tower and it was said that the spiral iron staircase shot right up into the air. Although most of the tower survived, twenty feet of the top had to be rebuilt and a new lantern crafted. In their 1867 Report the Board stated – “The brick tower and dwelling were seriously damaged by the rebels in malicious attempts to destroy them. The work of restoring the station was commenced on the first of February, 1867, and completed on the 15th of April. It was necessary to take down and rebuild about 20 feet of the top of the tower, which had been split by the explosion of gun powder.

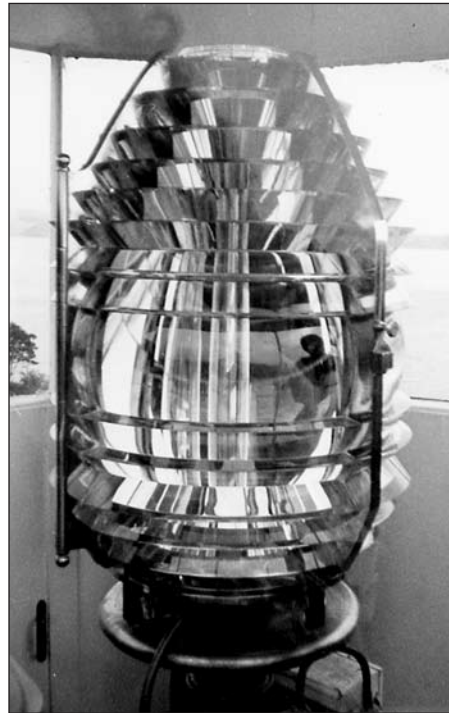
The lantern was repaired and a lens of the fourth order, fixed, fitted with Franklin lamps, supplied. The dwelling house was repaired in a substantial manner and a plank walk built from the dwelling to the tower.

During the reconstruction project a ‘blue norther’ came roaring in and the Board reported that, “The cold was so intense that fish, thrown ashore by hundreds, were frozen, and birds of all sorts sought refuge in the tower and camp of the workmen, where they perished in large numbers.

All the lighthouse apparatus damaged during the war and since recovered, which could be repaired within the district, was retained and used, and such as could not be repaired there was sent to the light-house depot on Staten Island.”

The lighthouse went back into operation on April 15, 1867, the last lighthouse on the Texas coast to be re-lighted.

The first keeper assigned to the renovated station was Sylvanus Dunham who earned \$700 a year. He was ‘removed’ a year later on July 14, 1868. His replacement, Jerome Tuttle also only lasted a year and resigned. His replacement fared better. P.W. Humphries was appointed on June 3, 1869. His assistant resigned that October and Humphries appointed his wife Pam as his assistant.



Fixed 4th order Fresnel lens. Lighthouse Society archives.

Many of the remote light stations along the Gulf Coast received annual food supplies.. In the 19th century the provision list for each keeper for a year was 2 half barrels of salt pork (200 lbs), 1 half barrel of salt beef, 2 barrels of flour, 50 lbs. brown sugar, 24 lbs. green coffee, 50 lbs. rice, 4 gallons of vinegar, 10 gallons of peas and beans and two barrels of Irish potatoes. Of course, they fished, dug oysters and hunted to augment their larder. The Humphries and other keepers grew vegetables on nearby Mustang Island and probably received certain crops from the local community. The Humphries were friends with a local Mercer family. Humphries son, Perry, was a good friend of the Mercer boys.

On one occasion Perry went to Mustang Island to marry Agnus Clubb. The ceremony was performed at her father house and it was apparently a real blow out. The Mercer diary states, “All hands lived to see the service performed then came hell in four volumes. There

was only one half gallon of whiskey, but it was enough to lay out the crowd. We all, that is the men folks, took a nap of four or five hours, but everyone was as bad as when they paid down. It was a bottle of the most damndest whiskey that was ever poured down a man’s guzzle. But we made out to go to Frank’s and have a dance and everyone enjoyed themselves hugely. No one cared for any more whiskey, they appeared to have had plenty and that was about three drinks apiece, but it was hell for certain, there was quite a crowd. . .After supper we gathered the young ladies and commenced dancing on the gallery (porch), and danced until midnight when it broke up. . .”

In 1885, when Keeper Humphries was around 78 years old, and his wife about as old, the District Superintendent wrote the Lighthouse Board that he thought they were too old to maintain the station. He then visited the station to investigate the situation. He discovered that it was more than the keeper’s age that was of concern. He wrote the Board urging Humphries removal for, “drunkenness, disobedience of orders and refusing to pay his debts.” Strangely, he recommended appointing the wife as keeper, but the board replied that it was, “. . .opposed to the appointment of women as keepers, particularly when they are as old as Mrs. Humphries.” The Humphries departed the station the following March.

The 1869 report mentions, among other things, “. . .This is a very exposed position, and during the hurricane of last August, the island upon which the light was built was covered with from two to three feet of water, which carried away one of the outhouses and some lumber.”

In 1888, a small (additional) dwelling consisting of two rooms with a porch around three sides was erected. A kitchen 13 feet by 13 feet was erected seven feet behind the dwelling and connected to the dwelling with an elevated walkway. Also, a new cistern was installed, a storage building 12 feet square built and a T wharf erected.

In 1895, an inspection of the station indicated extensive deterioration of the metal work of the tower’s lantern and numerous metal plates were replaced, the masonry of the tower was re-pointed to stop leaking, and a wire mesh was installed around the lantern to protect it from birds. But, the tower needed more work and the following year some of the iron railing was replaced and the gallery deck and dome repaired.

A 1916 hurricane swept across the Aransas Pass Light Station and flattened the keeper's dwelling, walkways, oil house and outhouse. Additionally it "badly damaged and wrenched" the assistant keeper's dwelling. Congress approved an Act on October 6, 1917, "...to supply urgent deficiencies, appropriates \$20,000 for repairing buildings and dwellings, out buildings, and appurtenant structures, damaged or destroyed in the hurricane of August 18, 1916, at Aransas Pass Light Station, Texas."

Keeper Stevenson lost personal property reported to be worth \$220 and his assistant, Roberts, property valued at \$502, including a piano. The Bureau turned down the keepers claim for reimbursement stating that the only way they could recoup damages was to write their Congressman, which they did, but there isn't a record if they were reimbursed.

Ironically, Assistant Keeper Roberts received a commendation from the Bureau for maintaining the light and protecting government property during the hurricane!

In rebuilding, the Bureau of Lighthouse engineers couldn't decide between a hollow tile or wood frame structure for the new keepers' duplex dwelling. They solicited bids for both types and when the bid for the hollow tile structure came in only \$800 more than the bid for the wood frame dwelling, they chose the hollow tile structure. In an area with high humidity and termites, the tile option certainly made more sense than a wooden dwelling.

The Midland Bridge Company was awarded the bid and was about to start work when the contractor was unable to obtain creosote that met the government's specifications. Creosote was needed to coat the pilings and until they could drive pilings they couldn't start on the building foundations. Finally, work started in May 1918. Other problems delayed the project. The Bureau's foreman rejected some of the millwork and the contractor's foreman, an obstinate person, refused to do some of the work according to specifications. He was eventually replaced and work went smoothly until September 13, 1919. The station was almost finished when a hurricane struck toppling the new oil house and sweeping away the assistant's dwelling. The workmen weathered the storm in the new tile dwelling. The new project foreman was staying in a hotel in Aransas and he barely made it out of the hotel before it collapsed. He was pulled from the rising flood waters by a Coast Guard vessel, but that boat was punctured by floating debris and the Coast



Above – The damaged Assistant Keeper's dwelling after the 1917 hurricane.

Opposite page – The Aransas Pass Light Station tower sustained little damage from the 1917 hurricane. Photos courtesy of the National Archives.



Damage to the Head Keeper's dwelling by the 1917 hurricane. National Archive photo.



Guardsmen and the foreman had to be rescued by a passing barge.

Early log entries made mention of the keepers fishing, digging oysters or hunting during the off hours. As the years passed less and less of these types of activities were mentioned. The Bureau of Lighthouses started to assign other aids to navigation to the keepers. Small unmanned lights, reached by land or boat and in some cases even buoys. By 1939, the keepers of the Aransas Pass Light Station were tending to 40 buoys and other aids to navigation. Much of the work was routine; replacing batteries, painting aids, cleaning the lenses and making minor repairs.

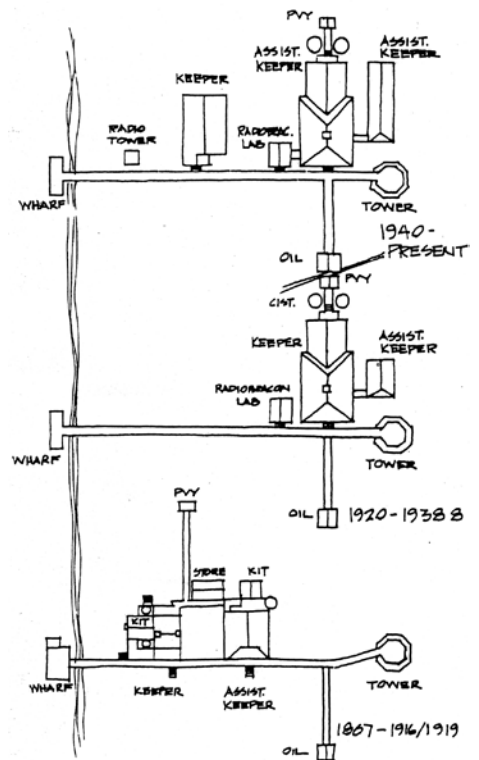
Although there were some neighbors in the vicinity with which the station families could interact, Aransas Pass was still semi-isolated. With just three families at the station sometimes the keepers or members of their families would get on the nerves of each other. In August 1939, at Aransas Pass, tempers flared when the wife of the second assistant keeper slapped the face of the Keeper's wife and used "obscene language." The incident resulted in the 2nd assistant being transferred to New Orleans, the 3rd to the Galveston Harbor lights

and the keeper to Brazos Santiago, Texas.

The station went out of service in 1952. A small optic was placed on a metal skeleton tower 36 feet from the old tower. The characteristic was changed to Occulting white, 3 sec. (three seconds on, one second off). Coast Guard personnel manned a Search and Rescue Station nearby.

The light station remained abandoned for several years. In 1955, the Coast Guard declared the station excess to its needs and transferred the property to the General Services Administration. GSA put it up for sale. Everett Bohls, of Austin, TX, had the winning bid of \$25,151, the mineral and oil rights were sold separately to Jack Rowe. Less than six months later Rowe sold his rights to the Harbor Development Company and a year later Bohl sold the light station to a partnership of three people. Finally, Jack Frost acquired both the property and the mineral rights. During the period that Frost owned Aransas Pass Light Station, he repaired the interior of the duplex, faced the four fireplaces with old brick, cut a door in one wall to link the two dwellings and installed a modern kitchen. The Frosts used the property as their retreat until Jack died in 1970. In 1971, Charles Butt bought the property.

This article based on the annual reports of the Lighthouse Board to Congress, Light Lists, Society archives and a privately published book by F. Ross Holland (1976).



Composite site plan of the Aransas Pass Light Station.



The Aransas Pass Light Station in 1995. From left, Assistant Keeper's dwelling, store house, Head Keeper's house and tower. Photo by Ainsley Dixon.