

The Lure of the Forgotten Coast Lighthouses

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid

Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:27 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:41



Whatever the lure of a lighthouse standing steadfast in a place suspended between the sea and the sky, anchored on the very edge of land and water, a lighthouse is where history and legend meet. As a tower of strength safely guiding ships through the darkness of night and turbulent storms, a lighthouse seems characteristically noble, a reflection of the stalwart keepers who once faithfully kept the lanterns burning and the lighthouse alive. Our modern day lighthouses, witnesses to evolving technology, are now illuminated by electricity and fully automated. Sadly, the services of lighthouse keepers are no longer needed except for the rich maritime history they so significantly provide.

Florida has over 2,000 tidal shoreline miles, so it is not unexpected that a great number of lighthouses can be found marking our coasts. The Forgotten Coast is home to four of these exceptional towers, each with their own colorful place in Florida maritime history.

The lighthouses of our area guided the lion's share of vessels during the days of the lucrative cotton trade. Prior to the Civil War, approximately 75 percent of revenue of our nation's treasury was based on cotton. It is easy to imagine that a lighthouse in Florida faced many natural adversities such as hurricanes, summer storms, fires, and encroaching erosion, but in this region, they also became targets for hostile forces during the Civil War. Each of four lighthouses

The Lure of the Forgotten Coast Lighthouses

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid

Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:27 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:41

along the Forgotten Coast has been rebuilt or replaced three to four times in their respective histories. Constructions have been of wood, brick, or steel, and once, even a tall pole as a temporary measure.

Today these lighthouses and their dwellings have been saved and lovingly restored by citizens and lighthouse enthusiasts who honor our heritage and value restoration and historic preservation. Earlier this year in commemoration of Florida Lighthouse Day in April, over 400 participants rose to the first Forgotten Coast Lighthouse Challenge by climbing or visiting all four of the showcased lighthouses.

Here in Wakulla County, we are privileged to have the second oldest lighthouse in Florida stand sentinel over our shores of Apalachee Bay. First constructed in 1831, the picturesque, highly photographed, whitewashed masonry tower and keeper's quarters rest securely on a base of limestone rock taken from nearby Fort San Marcos de Apalachee. The lighthouse is located within the boundary of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The lighthouse is in the process of transfer from the Coast Guard to Fish and Wildlife Service. For now, the structure itself is only open to the public on special occasions, but once the transfer is complete, plans are to open the lighthouse with a museum and eventually lighthouse climbs. Contact: (850) 925-6121

Jumping from the far easterly side of the Forgotten Coast over to the most westward of our lighthouses, we encounter the Cape San Blas Lighthouse. The site of terrible misfortune and calamity, three of the keepers lost their lives tragically – one took his own life, one perished most prematurely, and one was attacked and stabbed in his workshop where his young daughter later discovered her father's lifeless body when she went to call him for supper. His murderer was never found. When the lighthouse needed to be replaced for the fourth time, it was decided an iron skeletal structure would be the wiser choice. The pieces were manufactured in the north and sent by ship down the eastern seaboard and around the peninsula of Florida for its journey up to the cape located on the northern panhandle. Unfortunately, the ship sunk somewhere off the western coast, but fortunately, the ship went down in shallow waters where most of the pieces could be retrieved. Today, this lighthouse is unique in that the staircase does not go all the way from the lantern room to the ground. An external metal stairway rises 20 feet above the ground to meet the staircase door adding additional protection against rising waters. The Cape San Blas Lighthouse is owned by the Air Force and managed by Gulf County. A lighthouse gift shop occupies one of the two restored keeper's dwellings. Contact: "The Lighthouse Lady" (850) 229-1151

The Lure of the Forgotten Coast Lighthouses

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid

Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:27 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:41

Heading back to our east, we venture out onto St. George Island where we find the newly restored Cape St. George Light. The lighthouse once stood guard over the far western tip of the island, then moved to the southern shores of Cape St. George where it stood vigil until collapsing into the sea on that heartbreaking day in October 2005. Volunteers lovingly cleaned the 24,000 bricks which could be retrieved. Now the lighthouse stands proudly again, this time in the center of the island surrounded by an inviting park. Visit the museum and climb the 92 steps of the beautiful heart pine staircase up to the lantern room for breathtaking views of the Gulf. Contact: (850) 927-7744

Finally, we arrive at the Crooked River Lighthouse. Once located on Dog Island to guide ships during the days of big cotton and later timber ships and fishing vessels through the treacherous East Pass, the lighthouse was eventually moved directly across to the mainland after succumbing to storms three times at its original location. John Canetta, historian of the lighthouse explains the decision to move the structure inland and change the construction to an iron and steel skeletal 103-foot tower which could be dismantled and moved as necessary. Just months short of its 100th anniversary in 1995, the lighthouse was decommissioned and the light extinguished. When a small group of local citizens learned the government was about to auction off the lighthouse as surplus, they formed the Carrabelle Lighthouse Association (CLA) and successfully saved the Crooked River Lighthouse.

Today, the light shines again from a Fresnel lens replica of the restored lighthouse, and the completed reproduction of one of the twin keeper's dwellings houses a museum featuring lighthouse artifacts and period furnishings. Outside, a 70-foot pirate ship, the Carrabella, is moored in the park playground, a delightful place of exploration for the young and old alike. Last All Hallows' Eve marked the first Lantern Fest, bringing magic and history together in the birthday celebration of the Crooked River Lighthouse. Outside guests were entertained on the pirate ship stage enchantingly illuminated by 100 colorful lanterns swinging in the trees and glowing luminaries lining the pathways. Live music, historic re-enactors and local actors presented lighthouse stories and tales of shipwreck adventure. Inside the museum were presentations by shipwreck archaeologist, Franklin Price, and Ken Horn explained pieces of his exquisite scrimshaw collection. Joan Matey, museum curator, promises the 2010 Lantern Fest, to be held on Saturday, October 30 from 1–10 pm, will be bigger and better than last year. Adventure seeking guests who join the night climbs will be treated to an aerial view of the enchanted forest below glowing with 115 birthday lanterns. Contact: (850) 697-2585. The Carrabelle Lighthouse Association meets the first Tuesday of each month and is always in search of volunteers and new members.

We conclude our Forgotten Coast Lighthouse Tour with Lesley Cox, a fellow certified green

The Lure of the Forgotten Coast Lighthouses

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid

Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:27 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 January 2012 09:41

guide, who also serves as CLA secretary. Lesley is a seasoned hiking guide offering tours through north Florida's natural habitats. She also conducts a walking/driving tour exploring the museums and historical sites of Carrabelle. You might consider Lesley a modern day lighthouse keeper. An easy walk down the dirt road from her front door lands you at the steps of the lighthouse. She is the keeper of keys and feels a keen responsibility for "my neighborhood park." With the lighthouse and coast at her front door, and Tate's Hell State Forest and the Apalachicola National Forest at her back door, Lesley feels truly blessed to live and love along the Forgotten Coast