

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society

Lighthouses have always held a fascination for landlubbers and seamen as a picturesque necessity to guide mariners through dangers for thousands of years. Here in Georgetown County, a lighthouse has been in operation since 1798 when Paul Trapier donated land he owned on North Island near the mouth of Winyah Bay. According to Robert McAlister's book, "Georgetown's North Island" the wooden lighthouse was of octagonal shape, 26 feet in diameter, placed on a brick foundation. Near the top of the 72 foot high structure, the diameter decreased to 12 feet. The outside was covered with rough boards and cypress shingles painted white. Five flights of stairs led past two windows at each landing to the lantern platform." A hurricane in 1806 destroyed the structure.

Beginning in 1811, construction for a replacement began. The masonry walls were five and one-half feet thick for the lower sixteen feet of height, gradually decreasing to two feet thick at the top. Half a million bricks were used. The outside was painted white. A spiral staircase of 120 steps was composed of four landings with windows at each level. The lantern was made of cast-iron plates and was eight feet in diameter. The light was powered by whale oil and could be seen ten miles out to sea. Hundreds of vessels have been guided into Winyah Bay by this light.

Replacing the whale oil lamps, "Lewis lamps" and reflectors were used to enhance the beam. By 1844, it was reported that there were eleven Lewis lamps with nine inch reflectors. These remained in service until 1850 when they were replaced with the much more effective Fresnel lenses. The prisms in these new lenses were frequently improved upon and lit the Georgetown lighthouse until 1986.

During the last year of the War Between the States the lighthouse was destroyed by fire. Federal troops built a temporary one of 25 feet of stone, brick and timber. In 1867 it was repaired and extended to eighty seven feet.

Over its reign of the Atlantic Ocean and Winyah Bay, the Georgetown Lighthouse has witnessed many wrecks and interesting occurrences. Winyah Bay has always been too shallow and muddy to enable large vessels to enter the port. Many have tried and wrecked at various points along the bay. Many loaded schooners have been forced to wait for days until a tide was deep enough for them to continue to the port at Georgetown. The Federal Government was pressured to improve the channel and finally in 1890 funds were approved to build a jetty system at the mouth of Winyah Bay.

In 1865, two federal troops had been left to tend the light and otherwise had nothing to do. They observed a sloop approach and quickly judged the sailors were in a pretense of fishing but were watching the lighthouse and almost certainly up to no good. They went outside to intercept the rogues and were given some story about waiting for another vessel and asked if they could camp for the night. One soldier pretended there were others inside the lighthouse

and went in to “ask the Sergeant”. The second soldier was promptly knocked unconscious. Once inside, the soldier bolted the heavy door. An assault on the door proved useless and a piece of timber was employed as a battering ram. The soldier knew it would break through so he aimed through the small loophole and shot the leader in the shoulder, thwarting their effort. From the parapet, he was able to wound two more. Night approached and in the dark another marauder was shot through the loophole when he tried to rush the door. During the night, pitiful pleas were heard to accept their surrender, but were thought to be a ploy to have him open the door. After daylight, the soldier looked upon the scene from the parapet and saw the leader had died, three others were wounded and his companion soldier had recovered and taken their small boat out, preventing their escape. After being made to discard their weapons, he came out of the lighthouse. Their wounds were bound and a steamer took them up to Georgetown where they were arrested. One was wanted for murder and robbery and was either hung or shot at Beaufort. Upon boarding their sloop, a treasure of gold, greenbacks and jewelry was found. Seventeen years later while at Bucksport, SC, a ring that was part of the plunder was worn by the former soldier. It was identified by a gentleman as one stolen from him in 1864 and, of course, was cheerfully returned.