

THE TIMELINE OF THE CROOKED RIVER LIGHTHOUSE

The start of the timeline of the events leading up to the construction of the Crooked River Lighthouse, really don't begin in Carrabelle, they begin about five miles out into the Bay on Dog Island. Soon after this areas first lighthouse was built on St. George Island, local mariners saw the need for a second lighthouse in a better location. This location was on Dog Island at a place to guide ships into the bay through the East Pass. Construction on this lighthouse was begun in 1838 and work was completed the following year. The lighthouse stood only 3 years when a storm blew it down along with the Keeper's house. Construction began on the second lighthouse in 1843 and it was completed later that year. This lighthouse lasted until a fierce storm toppled it in 1851. It was rebuilt the following year and it lasted until 1873 when it met the same fate as the 2 previous lighthouses. About 10 years later, Congress approved the idea for yet another, the fourth, lighthouse on the Island, but fortunately the Lighthouse Board, said they thought a lighthouse on a mainland location might be in a position to last longer.

Many delays ensued in selecting the mainland site, including changing the wording of the funding appropriation, correcting errors in the land title, and delays caused by a fire in a courthouse. So it wasn't until 1894 that borings were made to determine the character of the foundation soil. Real construction began in January 1895 to erect a 100 foot iron skeletal lighthouse, two keepers' houses, an oil house, a pier, and several out-buildings. Meanwhile a new type (1/3 open bivalve) fourth order lens was ordered from the Henry LaPaute company in Paris, France. This type of lens was so new and unique that it is thought it might have been the first of its type to be installed in the US.

The big day, or evening, came on October 28, 1895 when at 5:12 PM the Crooked River Lighthouse was lit for the first time by Keeper James A. Williams.

Minor changes at the Lightstation occurred over the next several years including fencing around the property, a new pier with a boathouse at the end of it, and a new day mark (color scheme) for the lighthouse.

Little change occurred for the next 30 years, until 1933 when the oil burning apparatus in the lens was replaced with an incandescent light bulb. This must have been a very welcome change to the then Keeper Thorwald Hansen, as the daily job of ever so carefully cleaning the very valuable lens suddenly got a lot easier. In about 1935 the Federal Government relinquished a strip of land to the State for the construction of Highway 98. It's expected that at this time all the supplies needed for the lighthouse arrived via the new highway which lead to the beginning of the deterioration of the pier and wood plank walkway from the boathouse to the lighthouse. More labor saving changes occurred in 1952 as the lighthouse became automated. However with these changes, which included the installation of a motor to replace the old "clockwork" mechanism, and a device to turn the light on at dusk and off at sunrise, the duties of the once all-important Keeper were quickly being eliminated. The Coast Guard realized this and, to the best of our knowledge, the last Keeper left the Lightstation property in either 1953 or 1954. From that time on the Coast Guard staff from the Aids to Navigation

section in Panama City made only periodic visits to the lighthouse to make sure the light bulb changer device was stocked with fresh bulbs. About 10 years after the last Keeper left, the Coast Guard published a bid to sell the 2 Keeper's Houses and all of the various outbuildings. The buildings were purchased by a local couple who moved them to the vicinity of the present day entrance to the Tate's Hell walking trail. Then in 1976 the Coast Guard inspectors noticed mercury leaking from the "float", a container filled with mercury which allowed the very heavy lens to revolve with little or no friction. By this time the Coast Guard was aware of the dangers of mercury, so the lens was removed from the tower and replaced by a small lens, referred to as a "modern optic". The original "classic" lens was taken to the Coast Guard's District 8 Headquarters for display where it remains today. Things rocked along at the Crooked River Lighthouse until 1986 when the Coast Guard painted the lighthouse and made minor repairs to the structure for the last time. Finally in 1995 they posted a notice to mariners of their intention to decommission the lighthouse. Few, if any, complaints were received so in late August of 1995, the light in the Crooked River Lighthouse was turned off, just months short of its 100th anniversary.

In mid 1999 five local folks heard that the Federal Government was about to declare the Crooked River Lighthouse surplus to their needs. This was of great concern to them and they decided to form the Carrabelle Lighthouse Association. In late 1999 they approached Franklin County to see if the county was interested in submitting a proposal to the National Park Service Federal Lands to Parks program to acquire the lighthouse. The county was concerned about possible expenditures related to the lighthouse and said they were not interested in submitting the proposal. Fortunately, the City of Carrabelle was interested in the idea of acquiring the lighthouse with the assistance of the Carrabelle Lighthouse Association. The application was prepared and submitted and at a quarterly meeting of the Florida Lighthouse Association, held in Carrabelle in 2000, it was announced that the lighthouse would be deeded to the City of Carrabelle. Two years ago the City applied for a special category historic preservation grant and a grant to secure funding to acquire additional land around the lighthouse to create a lighthouse park. Both proposals were approved and restoration work is anticipated to begin this summer and be finished by the end of this year. Hopefully next year the lighthouse, which has been dark for 12 years, will shine out into the Gulf once again and you all will be invited to witness this spectacular event.

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Carrabelle Lighthouse Association - July 2007