



Lighthouses of Garden Key



Lighthouses serve as important navigational markers for mariners alerting them to areas of dangerous waters. Garden Key has been home to two different lighthouses. The first permanent structure in the Dry Tortugas was the 1826 lighthouse. This was later replaced with the harbor light which is perched atop of Fort Jefferson today.

History of Lighthouses of the Dry Tortugas

Given their location at the intersection of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean where the swift Gulf Stream current flows through the Straits of Florida, the Dry Tortugas witnessed considerable shipping traffic. Westward expansion in the U.S. led to an increase in the transport of goods from the interior of the continent to the cities along the east coast. Stormy weather or a captain's inexperience could result in ships veering off course and wrecking in the shallow reefs of the Keys.

In 1821, a survey was conducted for possible sites for lighthouses to alleviate the nautical risks within the Florida Keys. The first lighthouse in the Tortugas was located on Garden Key and was first lit on July 4, 1826. It was 70 feet above sea level and was fitted with 23 lamps and 14 inch reflectors.

Almost immediately, mariners complained that the light was difficult to see in the hazy conditions of the gulf. Ships could also find themselves in dangerous waters before the light was visible because it was too far away

from the reefs. The light was simply not tall enough to adequately mark the hazards of the Dry Tortugas.

After numerous wrecks and complaints from mariners, a new lighthouse was built on Loggerhead Key and lit on July 1, 1858. This reduced the lighthouse on Garden Key to a harbor light.



1826 Lighthouse on Garden Key

Hurricane of 1873 and 1875

The Dry Tortugas was hit by a very strong hurricane in 1873 that damaged many of the features of the fort including the wharves, bakery and brick oven on the parade ground. The 1826 lighthouse also took significant damage.

Another hurricane struck the Tortugas in 1875, and the tower and lantern sustained major damage. It was determined that the lighthouse was becoming unsafe and an eyesore, so it was torn down in 1876.

Plans were established for a new light to be built on top of the bastion 6 stair tower.



1826 Lighthouse Foundation Ruins

Construction of the Dry Tortugas Harbor Light

The new harbor light was designed much differently than the original lighthouse. A brick lighthouse can create dangerous brick fragments and shrapnel if it were to be hit by a cannon shell. The new hexagonal pyramid tower design incorporated boiler plate iron as the major construction material to help protect the personnel inside the fort from dangerous shrapnel.

Construction began in 1876 and it is 82 feet tall from the base of the fort, however the harbor light itself is only 37 feet high. The lighthouse was first lit on April 5, 1876 incorporating a fourth-order Fresnel lens and daymark of dark brown.



1876 Harbor Light Atop of Fort Jefferson

Lighthouse Keeper's Residence

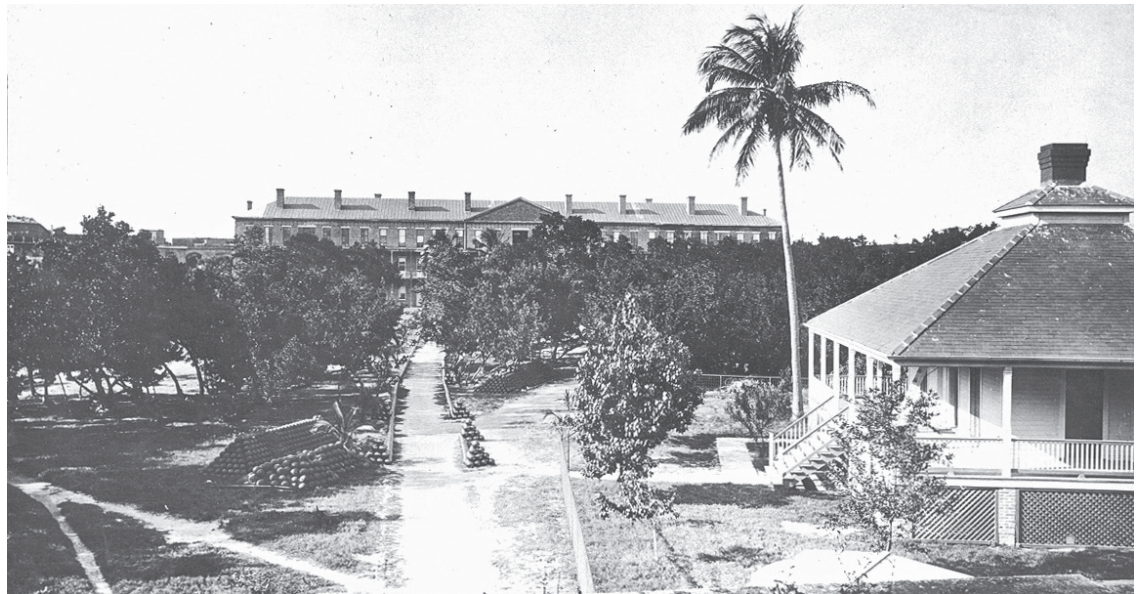
The original keepers's residence was a two story frame structure located just northeast of the sally port. Chief Engineer Totten issued a directive that the lighthouse property should be fenced when the Engineer Department began construction of Fort Jefferson in 1846, as it was not the property of the U.S. Army.

The hurricanes in 1873 and 1875 damaged the original keepers residence. Sometime around 1876, a new raised keeper's quarters with

wrap around porches was built slightly closer to the original lighthouse site.

In 1912, a devastating fire started in the outhouse of the keepers quarters and then spread to the house quickly engulfing it. No visible aspects of this building exist today.

Automation of the light tower occurred in the same year, with tanks of acetylene replacing the butts of kerosene to fuel the lights.



Post 1876 Lighthouse Keepers Residence with Wrap Around Porch

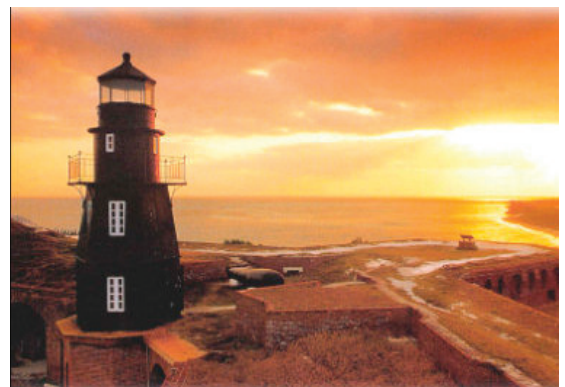
Present Day Use

The Tortugas Harbor light was deactivated in 1921 as it was deemed unnecessary as an official aid to navigation.



Harbor light powered by modern incandescent bulbs

The harbor light is currently lit at night and it is powered by three 75 watt incandescent bulbs.



Garden Key Harbor Light at Sunset

Contact Information

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