

CEDAR KEYS LIGHT STATION

The Cedar Keys Light Station is located on Seahorse Key, the southwestern most island of a collection of islands known as the Cedar Keys on Florida's Gulf Coast. The geographic attributes of the island came to the attention of General Zachary Taylor during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) when the island was used as a detention center for Indians awaiting transfer to the west. Taylor recommended to President Martin Van Buren that all of the Cedar Key islands be reserved for military purposes and an order withholding them from sale was entered on March 2, 1840.

As the Port of Cedar Key developed under the entrepreneurship of Augustus Steele, the need for a lighthouse was brought to the attention of the U.S. Congress. In 1851 President Millard Fillmore signed an Executive Order setting aside the 109 acres of Seahorse Key for lighthouse purposes and Congress appropriated \$12,000 for construction. In the summer of 1853, Lieutenant George G. Meade visited the proposed site and returned to the Corps of Engineers office in Philadelphia to draw up the plans and estimates for the construction of a lighthouse. In March of 1854, the materials and a working party were dispatched to the Cedar Keys from Philadelphia and on July 20th, the first light keeper, William Wilson, took possession of the structure. The light was exhibited for the first time on August 1st.

The lighthouse was constructed of brick with a shingle roof and an iron lantern tower. The building measured 70 feet square and had a covered gallery which ran around all four sides. The first floor was 51.48 feet above sea level placing the 4th order Fresnel lens 75 feet above sea level and visible 15 miles out into the Gulf of Mexico.

At the beginning of the Civil War, jurisdiction of the light station passed to the Confederate States of America Light House Bureau who instructed light keepers that all lenses and fixtures be removed so they would not fall into the hands of the enemy. Six months later the Union steamer U.S.S. *Hatteras*, blockaded the port. Seahorse Key and nearby Depot Key or Atsena Otie, were utilized as refugee camps and to house Federal troops and their families for the remainder of the war. The Cedar Keys Light Station was relighted on August 23, 1866 and continued to serve until abandoned in 1915.

In 1929, President Herbert Hoover established the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge but Seahorse Key was not taken into the refuge until 1936. That same year, a private individual obtained a long-term lease for the exclusive use of Seahorse Key and the lighthouse. Following the 1950 hurricane, the private individual decided to abandon his lease on Seahorse Key and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service entered into an agreement with the State Board of Education of Florida. The lease agreement signed April 15, 1952 stated that the facility was to be used for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a laboratory of marine biology and a biological field station for the benefit of the University of Florida. Since the island also serves as a nesting area for massive numbers of nesting seabirds and wading birds, the island and beaches are closed to visitors from March 1st through June 30th. The historic cemetery located on the island reveals much of the history of the area.

The lighthouse reservation is open to the public one Saturday in July and the third weekend in October of each year. Access is by boat only. For more information contact the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge, 16450 NW 31st Place, Chiefland, Florida 32626. By telephone (352) 493-0238 or on line at <http://www.fws.gov/cedarkeys/>.

[photograph]
Cedar Keys Light Station, FLA
January 17, 1893
NARA, College Park, MD

Reference

- Collins, Toni C. 2011. *Cedar Keys Light Station*. Suwannee River Publishing Co., Inc., Chiefland, Florida. www.suwanneeriverpublishing.com.