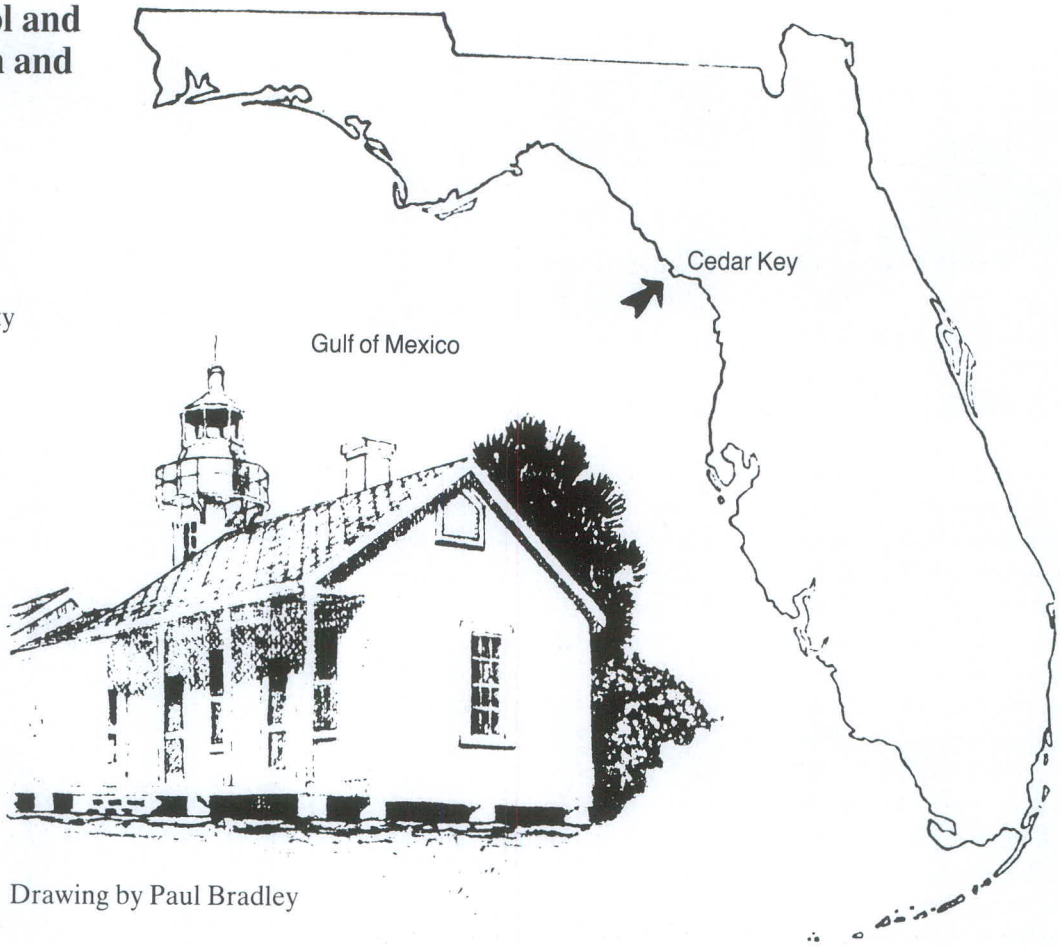
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Cedar Keys Lighthouse

A Continuing Symbol and Source of Inspiration and Illumination

by Charles C. Fishburne, Jr.

Archivist
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Drawing by Paul Bradley

In 1802, from a wooden tower atop a magnificent 52 foot high sand dune formed thousands of years earlier as crown of the outermost island comprising *Les Yslas Sabinas,* Spanish Florida, a lookout shouted a warning to his Portuguese and American companions. Sailing vessels were approaching from the west. They were correctly assumed to be hostile ships of the Spanish coastal patrol cruising eastward from New Orleans.

The banana-shaped island, more suggestive, some would say, of a seahorse was the locus of an anchorage and supply base known as "Port Power" to followers of William Augustus Bowles, self-styled "Director General of the Creek Nation" as embodied in his vaguely delineated "State of Muskogee."

The port was named for Richard Power, sea captain and chief naval officer under Bowles, whose "privateers" ravaged shipping in the Gulf of Mexico—especially Spanish.

The colorful Bowles, born in Maryland, proved Loyalist during the American Revolution, was commissioned in the British forces, and subsequently became a half-pay officer with influential connections in the Bahamas and London. He fancied himself an Indian Chief, "Estajoca," and, indeed, he was to many of the Creeks who found themselves alienated toward Spaniards and Americans. The "State of Muskogee" ranged from the Chattahoochee River eastward beyond the Apalachicola and northward from the Gulf of Mexico past the disputed boundary between Spain and the United States. As a constant irritant to the Spanish on land and sea, Bowles and his followers were comparable to pirates in the view of Spain's authorities from Madrid to Havana to New Orleans to Pensacola to St. Augustine.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Bowles' lookout in *Las Yslas Sabinas* eventually identified the approaching vessels as schooners and a galley coming to investigate their activities at "Port Power." On the schooner, *La Catalina,* was veteran commander of such expeditions, French-named Pierre Rousseau, served by French-named pilot, Renato Beluche. Just a few years later, the young pilot would be sailing the high seas as master of the schooner *Two Sis-*

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ters in association with the notorious Baratarian pirates Jean Lafite and Dominique You and Pierre Laffite.

Out of these documented wisps of history have arisen, no doubt, a very persistent legend among inhabitants of the Cedar Keys, alias *Yslas Sabinas,* which holds that pirates and Spaniards in the dim past used the high key now called Seahorse. It is possible that signal fires as well as the documented lookout activity characterized use of Seahorse Key in the early 1800s, perhaps even much earlier.

The first documented reference to prospective use of Seahorse Key for lighthouse purposes emerges during the seven-year-long Second Seminole War (1835–42). Army Commander, general Zachary Taylor, soon to become President of the United States (1849), wrote to Washington City on January 27, 1840:

> *These keys . . . I have to request that they be reserved for military purposes. The outer key of the group the Government should retain, as on it will no doubt be erected, at some future time, a lighthouse for the benefit of vessels trading to the Suwannee River.*

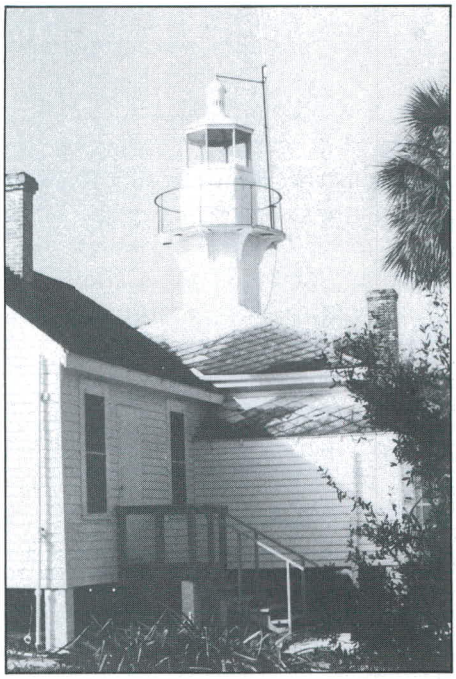
Trading up the Suwannee River, it may be noted in passing, had venerable roots. As historian Amy Bushnell has pointed out in *The King's Coffer,* the Suwannee/Santa Fe river system, known in earlier times as the *Rio de San Martín,* carried significant trade in the Seventeenth Century between *El Hacienda de la Chua* and Havana. One cannot escape wondering, therefore, if *Los Cayos de San Martín* of that era may not be another alias for today's Cedar Keys. Historically, islands near the mouths of significant, navigable rivers have proven useful for way stations and various functions, including lighthouse sites. The Cedar Keys, as the record shows, have been no exception.

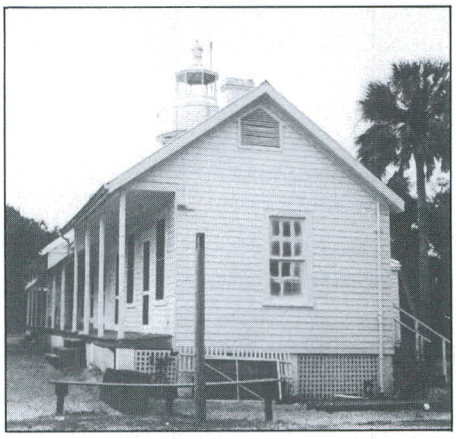
Not until September 2, 1851 did an Executive Order by President Millard Fillmore reserve Seashores Key for lighthouse purposes. Several months later, on January 30, 1852, a *Report of the Light-House Board* (p. 711) included "Cedar Keys, Florida" as one of thirty-three proposed sites for seacoast lights. The priority was No. 30 and it was to have a first-order lens.

These actions had been *preceded* by an appropriation of $8,000 by Congress, September 28, 1850, "for the erection of a lighthouse on Sea Horse Key, in the State of Florida," and they were *followed* on August 31, 1852 by an additional appropriation of $4,000.

A file in the National Archives documents an incident involving one Samuel Johnson, resident of Atsena Otie Key, who was spreading on the record, perhaps as some kind of final ploy, his claim to own all of Seahorse Key. Mr. Johnson, by letter dated December 9, 1853, informed the Light-House Board, Department of the Treasury, that he was willing "to give the land that may be deemed necessary" for erecting a light on that island.

The fact is that Samuel Johnson had been issued a permit (No. 188, 18 February 1843) by the U.S. Land Office, Newnansville, Florida, under the Armed Forces Occupation and Settlement Act of August 4, 1842, to enter upon and homestead the island known as Seahorse Key.







Three views of the Cedar Keys lighthouse. Photos by District Superintendent Paul Bradley.

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What Johnson had ignored (or possibly never received) was a cancellation of his permit in conformity with instructions from Washington reminding the Newnansville Register and Receiver that permits allowing entry and settlement in the Cedar Keys were invalid because "the whole of said keys . . . [had been] reserved by order of the President for military purposes on 2 March 1840."

Johnson may have been puzzled by the apparent exceptions made for Way Key and Atsena Otie (Depot) Key where a port facility and railroad terminus were being promoted by Judge Augustus Steele and his good friend David Levy Yulee. Mr. Johnson no doubt was aware that Yulee had not gone to Washington as one of Florida's first two Senators just for the social life, and he probably was not at all surprised to see Yulee returned to the U.S. Senate in 1854. Suffice it to say that Samuel Johnson's claim to be owner of Seahorse Key turned out to be a flash of humor in a rather dull file.

George Gordon Meade graduated in 1835 from the United States Military Academy at West Point ranking number 13 out of 56. The future Commanding General of the Union Army of the Potomac, 1863–65, was in January 1854 submitting to the Light-House Board detailed plans and cost estimates for construction of the Seahorse lighthouse. On January 30 the Board approved them, and by the end of March materials and a construction crew were on site. William Wilson, the first keeper, took possession of the lighthouse on July 20, 1854, and the light first shone on August 1. It was a Fresnel fourth order lens, "fixed, varied by flashes every minute." The light was displayed 75 feet above sea level and visible for 15 miles.

William Wilson served as keeper until May 7, 1855 when he was succeeded by Jabez Delano. It is fitting that the first keeper, who died in 1866, was buried in a small cemetery on Seahorse Key.

Before Commander George F. Emmons of the U.S.S. *Hatteras* raided and wrecked the port and railroad terminus in the Cedar Keys in January, 1862, the lens had already been removed from the lantern room on Seahorse Key. Official records simply state that "during the Civil War the light was extinguished, and on August 23, 1866 it was relighted after having been overhauled and repaired."

Amidst the urgency of war with Spain in 1898, a set of three new improved fourth order lamps was furnished. A few years later, in the aftermath of what Secretary of State John Hay had called the "splendid little war," the Navy in 1905, installed a wireless telegraph station at the site.

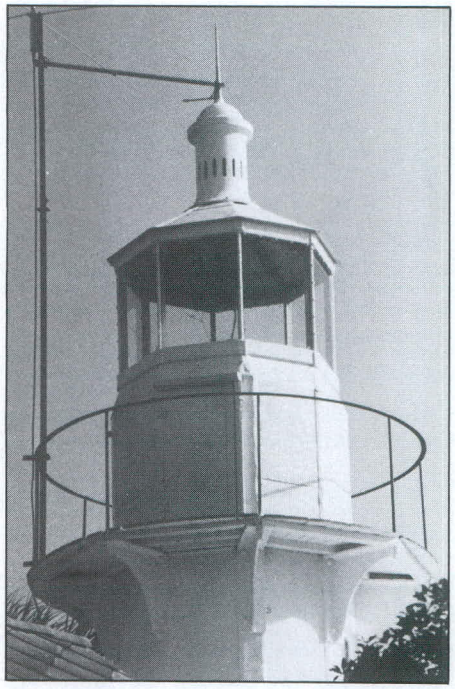
Charles H. Gardner was the last keeper. He took charge on July 1, 1907 and served until the light was deactivated. The station was discontinued in 1915.

In 1935, the reservation was transferred to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Biological Survey. Then by Executive Order 7484 on November 6, 1936, President Roosevelt made Seahorse Key a part of the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge under the Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

Since 1952, the Bureau has permitted the University of Florida to operate a marine laboratory on the Key in order to pursue scientific research and to educate and train persons in the marine sciences.

Thus does the Cedar Key light of the 19th Century continue to project its illumination in another manner. This proud symbol of past applied technology and dedicated human service not only inspires efforts to enlighten and to inform, as through the local newspaper, the *Cedar Key Beacon* and the Cedar Key Historical Society, but it actually functions as temporary shelter for transient students at the marine laboratory.

How fitting that the "retired" lighthouse should stand and be seen on its original site, bearing silent witness to the illumination of young minds in this age of galloping high technology!



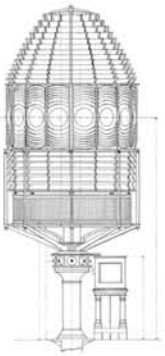
The lantern room of the Cedar Keys lighthouse. The lens was a 4th Order. Photo by District Inspector Paul Bradley.

Keepers of the Cedar Key Lighthouse

William Wilson	July 20, 1854
Jabez Delano	May 8, 1855
A. P. W. Crane	Feb 12, 1856
R. S. Mulloy	June 20, 1857
N. J. Collier	Sept 13, 1866
Henry Selner	March 2, 1867
Benj. L. Block	Oct 3, 1868
Andrew D. Hobday	Jan 6, 1861
John Johnson	April 5, 1890 (Acting)
	Aug 6, 1890
William A. Taylor	June 22, 1891 (Acting)
Charles A. Gardner	Jan 30, 1892 (Acting)
	Aug 1, 1892
William R. Cook	Dec 3, 1896
Charles H. Gardner	July 1, 1907

Station discontinued in 1915

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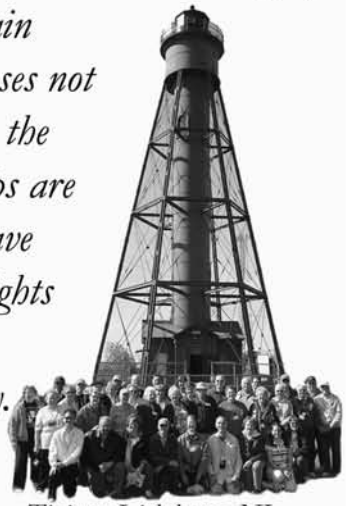
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