

“Volunteers” Report Destruction of Lighthouses

Edited by DOROTHY DODD

When the Southern states seceded in 1861, lighthouses and other property belonging to the United States lighthouse establishment were seized and their lights extinguished. By the end of April, Southern partisans had accomplished the extinguishment of all lights and the destruction or removal of other aids to navigation from Chesapeake Bay to the Rio Grande with the exception of the string of lights on the Florida coast from Jupiter Inlet to Dry Tortugas.¹

The Florida lighthouses remaining in Federal hands were those designed to guide shipping around the Florida peninsula and consisted of the primary seacoast lights at Jupiter Inlet, Cape Florida, Carysfort Reef, Dry Bank, Sand Key, and Dry Tortugas, and the harbor lights at Key West and Garden Key.² Since Jupiter Inlet light was on the mainland and Cape Florida was relatively easy of access by boat, it was not long until they, too, were extinguished.

“In August last,” the Secretary of the Lighthouse Board wrote in his annual report for 1861, “a band of lawless persons visited the Jupiter Inlet light-house, on the coast of Florida, and removed therefrom the illuminating apparatus. A few days afterwards, the same band visited the light at Cape Florida and destroyed the illuminating apparatus.”³

Materials for repair of the Cape Florida light were assembled as soon as possible and sent to Key West, where they were stored until Federal control of the light could be assured.⁴ As soon as the war ended, an experienced agent was sent to Key West with instructions “to use every exertion” to relight the important light stations at Cape Florida and Jupiter Inlet.⁵ Cape Florida light was re-established on April 15, 1866; Jupiter Inlet light on June 28, 1866.⁶

The following letter, signed by three Southern patriots who comprised the “band of lawless persons,” tells how the lights were extinguished. It is in the handwriting of James Paine and is not dated. Paine was probably the

James Paine who represented Brevard County in the House of Representatives in 1871 and 1872 and was postmaster at St. Lucie in 1887.⁷ Nothing has been ascertained about A. Oswald Lang and Francis A. Ivy. The manuscript is in the office of the Secretary of State at Tallahassee.

To

His Excellency M. S. Perry
Governor of Florida

Sir —

We the undersigned residents of Indian River, believing it a solmen [*sic*] duty of every Citizen, to try and serve his State and Country in whatever capacity hé may be most able, would in accordance to such feelings, report to your Excellency, that we have taken the responsibility of putting out the Lights at both Jupiter Inlet and Cape Florida, believing them to be of no use or benefit to our Government, but on the contrary, of great importance to our enemies.

We had felt the importance of such a measure for some time, thinking some authorized Agent of our Government would be sent to perform it, but finding no effort was made by either the Government or the Keeper of the Light, we resolved to assume the responsibility ourselves, and report the result to your Excellency, hoping that it may meet your approval. At Jupiter we destroyed no property whatever, the Light being a revolving one and of very costly make, we took away only enough of the machinery to make it unserviceable.⁸ There is a quantity of property belonging to the Light consisting of Tools, machinery, Paints, oil &c which we have secured under lock and Key.

At Cape Florida the Light being within the immediate protection of Key West and almost indispensable at this time to the enemyes [*sic*] fleet, as well as knowing it to be useless for us to try and hold it, we determined to damage it so that it will be of no possible use to our enemies.

The Keepers at Cape Florida were armed, and instructed not to surrender the Light, only with their lives, the possession was gained however without any resistance, owing to the complete manner in which our plans were executed, we brought away the Lamps and Burners, and broke the Lens Glasses.

The seizure and surrender was made at midnight of the 21st August, while the two Keepers were in the Tower, and the Iron door below bolted and

locked on the inside—one of the party being acquainted [*sic*] with the Keeper and knowing that he expected supplies from Key West daily, devised the plan to get them down by telling them he had news for them from Key West, which brought them both down, and as soon as the door was opened, we secured them as prisoners. The party being small, and having only a small Boat to return in, we concluded not to take them prisoners, they professing to be strongly in favor of the South, although they had repeatedly boasted that they would defend the Light to the last.

The Keeper of Jupiter Light although professing to be with the South, yet by his acts he falsified [*sic*] his professions—he was repeatedly urged by his Assistant Mr. Lang to put out the Light, but refused to do so, and was quite satisfied to receive pay and provisions from the U. S. Government. We thought that he was not the proper person to be in such a responsible position, and consequently turned him away. We brought away from the Cape a Sail Boat, two Muskets complete two Colt Revolvers, and three lamps and burners belonging to the Light, all of which is at Jupiter waiting your decision—the arms captured will be much needed at Jupiter in case of an attack.

Mr. A. Oswald Lang the Asst Keeper resigned his position when he found the Keeper Mr. Papy was intent on Keeping the Light burning, and is now in charge of the light and property, and will be glad to receive instructions from your Excellency [*sic*] in relation to his duty in this matter.

As it is most likely that the enemy will undertake to retaliate [*sic*] by destroying the Light and property, we would suggest that a Guard be Sent to protect it, or if not, instruct us to have the property removed to some safe place.

We have addressed this report to your Excellency, thinking you the proper person to give the information, and hoping our action will be approved, as our only desire was to serve our Country having performed a journey of about 140 miles, 90 of it on foot, being exposed to a burning Sun and drenching rains, and with a very scant allowance of food.

We are very Respectfully

Your Excellencies [*sic*] *Most obt. Servants*

James Paine

A. Oswald Lang

Francis A. Ivy

¹ S. Doc. 2, 37 Cong., 2 sess. #1121, p. 204.

² See list of lighthouses on the Florida coast in S. Doc. 2, 35 Cong., 2 sess. #979, pp. 416-419.

- ³ S. Doc. 2, 37 Cong., 2 sess. #1121, p. 204.
- ⁴ H. Doc. 3, 38 Cong., 1 sess. #1186, p. 157.
- ⁵ H. Doc. 3, 39 Cong., 1 sess. # 1254, p. 197.
- ⁶ H. Doc. 4, 39 Cong., 2 sess. #1287, p. 219.
- ⁷ J. M. Hawks, *The East Coast of Florida*, Lynn, Mass., 1887, p. 97.
- ⁸ Since Jupiter Inlet was lighted for the first time on July 10, 1860, it was fitted with the most up-to-date equipment (H. Doc. 2, 36 Cong., 2 sess. #1093, p. 368). For the history of Cape Florida lighthouse, see Charles M. Brookfield, "Cape Florida Light," *Tequesta*, 1949, pp. 5-12.