MATAGORDA ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

I. BACKGROUND

Matagorda Bay has a primary entrance at Pass Cavallo, at its southwest tip, just west of the man-made Matagorda Ship Channel entrance on Matagorda Peninsula. This excellent harbor was quickly recognized after Texas entered the Union on December 29, 1845. In 1852, because of increasing marine traffic through Pass Cavallo, the Federal Government erected a full-scale lighthouse, then called the Matagorda Light Station. This station served as a navigational aid allowing maritime transportation to Matagorda Bay and its ports. Captain James Cummings was named the first light station keeper.

The Matagorda Light Station was built on 7.5 acres of land at the extreme northeast end of Matagorda Island. A Baltimore firm, Murray & Hazlehurst, was contracted to fabricate and erect the cast iron structure with an appropriation of $15,000. The lighthouse, fitted with a reflector-type light, first shown over the entrance of Pass Cavallo in December of 1852. The lighthouse was painted in the spring of 1854 with a distinctive daymark of white, red, and black horizontal bands.[1]

Soon after the erection of the lighthouse, it was apparent that the light simply was not sufficiently observable far enough offshore of Matagorda Island. Necessarily, in 1857, the U.S Lighthouse Board again contracted with Murray & Hazlehurst to add an additional 24 feet to the height of the lighthouse tower. The extension was completed in 1858, and the original reflector-type light was replaced with a new third-order Fresnel lens.

II. OVERVIEW

As a result of the Civil War, in 1861 the operation of the lighthouse ceased along with the other lighthouses along the Gulf Coast. During December of 1862, Confederate troops removed the Fresnel lens and attempted to destroy the lighthouse with the use of an explosive charge. The

troops efforts were negligible, and the explosion only succeeded in damaging six cast iron panels of the lighthouse.

After the war ended in 1865, a temporary three-story wooden tower was erected near the lighthouse and fitted with a fourth-order Fresnel lens. The cast iron tower was being threatened by ever increasing beach erosion. In 1866, the tower was dismantled, and the pieces were stored on the island. The U.S. Lighthouse Board went to work to acquire a ten-acre tract of land located two miles inland from the original site to reconstruct the lighthouse.

In 1873, reconstruction commenced on the 92-foot above sea level structure at what is now the current location of the lighthouse. The six cast iron panels damaged during the Confederate blast attempt in 1862, were replaced and a new third-order Fresnel lens was installed. The tower is constructed of seven rows of cast iron panels bolted together at their flanged edges on the inside of the tower. Each panel is cast with an integral lap on two sides and, when bolted to the adjoining panels, helps protect the exterior joint high curved plates, reinforced with 12 gusset plates. Sandwiched between the lantern housing and the curved plates is a cast iron platform with an outside diameter of 16 feet and inside diameter of 5'-7½". The domed roof is constructed of eight radiused cast iron sections, bolted together on the inside, like the tower panels. On the top of the roof is a ventilation ball, which served as the primary vent for the fumes and smoke created by the oil-fired light. There is a spiral staircase beginning at the ground level and ending at a floor platform 66 feet up. The restored tower was painted solid black and once again illuminated the Gulf on September 1, 1873.[2]

As attestation to its strength, the lighthouse in its current location endured the hurricane of 1875, a storm that devastated the town of Indianola, and nearby Saluria by wind and storm surge. In 1886, the lighthouse once again persisted through yet another major hurricane. The significant impact of the 1875 hurricane on Indianola, followed 11 years later by the 1886 hurricane, collapsed the economy of the entire region and lasted for more that 50 years.[3] During the

hurricane of 1919, the lighthouse encountered a storm surge that set a record at 16 feet in Corpus Christi, and 13 feet in Port O'Connor.[4]

Then, on September 11, 1961, Hurricane Carla made landfall as a strong category four storm. The lighthouse sustained winds of 175 mph just before hurricane landfall, and a 22 foot storm surge that would push far inland and resulted in Port O'Connor being three-fourths destroyed.[5]

The Matagorda Lighthouse remained manned until electric power was brought to the island in 1956. The third-order Fresnel lens that was installed in 1873 remained in service until 1977, when the Coast Guard removed the lens with the objective of abandoning the lighthouse.[6]

In a community and governmental response to the shuttering of the lighthouse, the Coast Guard returned the lighthouse back into operation with a lower intensity light. The Fresnel lens was moved to the Calhoun County Museum where it can be seen today.

In 1995, the Coast Guard extinguished the light and the lighthouse was abandoned. However, in 1998, the Matagorda Island Foundation was formed and began working with Calhoun County and numerous agencies to get funding to restore the lighthouse. The Matagorda Island Foundation was successful and, at midnight on December 31, 1999, the lighthouse was once again relit. On June 11, 2004, federal, state, and county officials, along with residents from Port O'Connor, celebrated the $1.23 million-dollar renovation performed on the cast iron lighthouse. This renovation took a year to complete and included "repairing the foundation and lantern room and painting the tower."[7]

Today, the Matagorda Island Lighthouse is surrounded by the Matagorda Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The WMA is comprised of 56,688 acres of bayside marshes and offshore barrier island that stretches 38-miles.[8]

The Keepers of Matagorda Light Station/Matagorda Island Lighthouse

- Head: James E. Cummings (1852 – 1853), James R. McCreary (1853 – 1861), John F. Callohan (1865 – 1866), Almon Reed (1866 – 1869), William King (1869 – 1870), Thomas Harrison (1870 – 1871), Almon Reed (1871 – 1872), David P. Kane (1872 – 1877), William S. Chichester (1877 – 1885), Horace W. Crockett (1885 – 1888), Hermann Schrieber (1888), Joseph Forrestier (1888 – 1911), John M. Reynolds (1911), William B. Thompson (1911), Stephen P. Hill (1911 – 1913), Theodore Olsen (1913 – 1918), William H. Heinroth (1918 – 1946), Arthur B. Barr (1946 – 1956).
- Assistant: S.F. Cummings (– 1853), Henry Westerman (1853 – at least 1859), Almon W. Reed (1867 – 1868), Emily Reed (1868 – 1869), Nancy S. Reed (1869), M.J. King (1869), Almon Reed (1869 – 1871), Samuel C. Baker (1873), John S. Hicks (1874 – 1875), Joseph R. Sheldon (1875), James H. Collins (1875), Charles C. Burbank (1875 – 1876), James M. Turner (1876 – 1877), Martin Funk (1877 – 1879), Theodore B. Hays (1879 – 1880), Francis Sinnolt (1880 – 1885), Robert J. Horton (1885 – 1886), Joseph Forrestier (1886 – 1888), H.W. Hawes (1889 – 1896), William D. Thompson (1896 – 1898), Edward M. Reynolds (1898 – 1902), Stephen D. Hill (1902), Charles W. Heartt (1902 – 1903), Christopher M. Stervy (1903 – 1904), Forrest C. Hawes (1904), Daniel L. Cooke (1904 – at least 1912), James E. Cole (1913), Ray W. Dierlam (1913 –), Charles M. Teller (– 1915), John S. Reynolds (1915 –), Arthur J. Garland (at least 1917), Henry G. Olsen (at least 1920), Charles M. Teller (– 1923), Dallas M. Nelson (1929 – 1935), Arthur B. Barr (1935 – 1946)[9]

III. SIGNIFICANCE

In 1852, the Matagorda Light Station stood as the largest structure in Calhoun County, shining its light to guide captains safely into Pass Cavallo. Later, standing taller as a 92' above sea level tower of light, the Matagorda Island Lighthouse has endured the sufferance of the Civil

War and the power of Mother Nature's fury. In 1984, the lighthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, the Matagorda Island Lighthouse stands in solitude, surrounded by the natural beauty of the Texas Gulf Coast. Its location on Matagorda Island is only accessible by boat or plane. A historical marker for the lighthouse will serve as a reminder of its importance to the fishing and shipping industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, and honor the many keepers of the light that served the ports of Calhoun County, as well as Matagorda County. The proposed location of the historical marker at the Port O'Connor Library will allow viewing by a much larger audience than would otherwise be possible.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

[1] Baker, T. Lindsay. *Building the Lone Star*. 1986. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, pp. 156-158.

[2] Baker, T. Lindsay. *Lighthouses of Texas*. 1991. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, pp. 28-34.

[3] Roth, David. "Texas Hurricane History." National Weather Service, pp. 19-24. https://www.weather.gov/media/lch/events/txhurricanehistory.pdf

[4] "The Hurricane of 1919." National Weather Service, pp. 1-2. https://www.weather.gov/crp/hurricane1919

[5] "1961 - Hurricane Carla." Hurricanes: Science and Society. University of Rhode Island. http://www.hurricanescience.org/history/storms/1960s/carla/

[6] Calhoun County Historical Commission. *The Shifting Sands of Calhoun County*. 1981. pp. 18, 112-113.

[7] Anderson, Kraig. "Matagorda Island Lighthouse." p. 4-5. https://www.lighthousefriends.com/light.asp?ID=156

[8] "Matagorda Island (WMA)". Texas Parks & Wildlfe. p. 1. https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/wma/find_a_wma/list/?id=48

[9] Anderson, Kraig. pp. 5-6.