

Cape San Blas Lighthouse Added to Doomsday List

By Timothy Harrison

Because of a rapidly eroding shoreline, *Lighthouse Digest* has added Florida's Cape San Blas Lighthouse to the Doomsday List of Endangered Lighthouses.

This is not the first time that erosion has threatened to take the lighthouse. In 1890, nearly 1,300 feet of shoreline was lost, and plans were made to move the lighthouse 1½ miles from the encroaching water. However, in a reversal of Mother Nature's whims, she changed her mind and built the beach back up, and the lighthouse did not have to be moved. However, in 1919, when Mother Nature again changed her mind, and threatened the lighthouse, the tower was moved one quarter mile.

The cape where the lighthouse sits protrudes from the southernmost point of Florida's Panhandle. Before the current lighthouse tower was built in 1885, two previous towers occupied the site. The 1848 tower did not even stand ten years; it was destroyed in a storm on August 30, 1856. The 1859 tower that was built to replace it had its own problems: suffering at the hands of both sides during the Civil War. Although the tower survived the war, it was claimed by erosion and the structure toppled on July 3, 1882.

Just getting the materials to Florida's Panhandle to build the current iron skeleton tower of the Cape San Blas Lighthouse was a problem - the ship carrying the materials sank. However, the government was able to salvage most of the materials and the lighthouse was eventually completed.

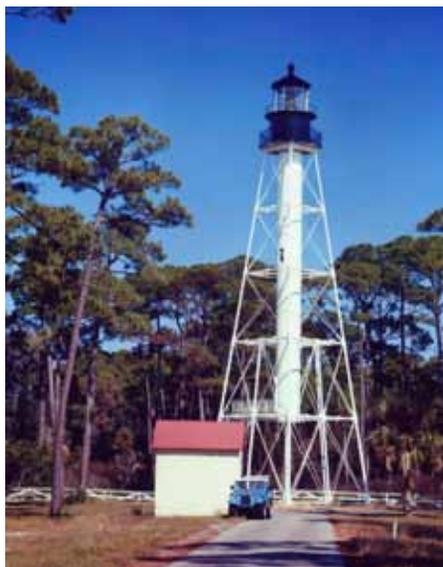
Human tragedy also found its way to the lighthouse. Lighthouse keeper Ray Linton, driven to the depths of despair, took his own life at the lighthouse in 1932. A few years later, on March 16, 1938, when assistant keeper Ernest W. Marler was late for lunch, his body was discovered by his daughter; he had been stabbed multiple times. The coroner's jury was adamant, when, on March 23, 1938, they ruled his death as a murder.

Marler's murder was never solved and speculation abounds around the case to this day. Some say he was murdered by moonshiners; others believe it was a revenge killing for his testimony a few



The encroaching ocean leaves little time for Cape San Blas Lighthouse to be saved.
(Photos by Beverly Mount-Douds.)





The magnificent Cape San Blas Lighthouse tower from a 1976 photograph by Richard Clayton from the archives of *Lighthouse Digest*.

days earlier against some thieves. The head keeper at the time of Marler's murder was Sullivan R. White, whose thoughts on Marler's murder are not known to us. White left the station shortly after Marler's death and probably thought that life at the lighthouse was way too dangerous to stay on. Who could blame him?

However, Frank Spongia, who succeeded White as head keeper at Cape San Blas in 1939, and served there until 1942, speculated that Marler was murdered by assistant keeper Jones, who was the man who took Marler's place as assistant keeper. However, investigators at the time felt that Spongia's claims were unjustified and they believed that, more than anything else, Spongia was just paranoid.

Most likely, as with old cold case murder files, the murder at Cape San Blas Lighthouse will never be solved. Or has it been solved? But, perhaps, just perhaps, author Charles Farley has unraveled and solved the murder at Cape San Blas Lighthouse in his new book, *Secrets of San Blas*; however, you'll have to buy the book to find out.

Over the years, other tragedies have also occurred at Cape San Blas Lighthouse. Driving over the beach on a return trip from Port St. Joe, one lighthouse keeper allowed children to ride on the fender of the car. His niece fell off the fender and the car rolled over her and claimed her life. Another time two civilian workers fell to their deaths while painting the tower. During the Coast Guard era, an officer was shooting a rifle. In an attempt to shoot

a hole through an old railroad iron, the round ricocheted back and killed the man.

However, life at the lighthouse should not all be associated with tragedy. Over the years, a lot of good has also happened at the Cape San Blas Lighthouse. Many lighthouse families enjoyed life at the station, which in many ways is its own little paradise. As well as the U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses, the lighthouse has been under the jurisdiction and care of the United States Coast Guard, United States Air Force, Gulf County, and, of course, the dedicated people of the area, who have helped to preserve the historical significance of the light station. In fact, their perseverance is obvious from the fourteen years it took just to restore the assistant keeper's house that is now home to the gift shop. But, because of erosion, all of that is now in danger of being lost forever.

Because of regulations, any efforts to stop the erosion will, most likely, be impossible to overcome. The area is part of the Coastal Barrier Resources Area, which does not allow beach re-nourishment projects. Believe it or not, it seems that the designation also specifies that federal funds cannot be earmarked for the area.



Frank Spongia, who served as the keeper of the Cape San Blas Lighthouse from 1939 to 1942, had his own theory on the murder of a former assistant keeper. (Photograph courtesy of Mary Martin.)

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From 1952 to 1981 a Coast Guard Loran Station was in operation at Cape San Blas Lighthouse. It was during which time that this official Coast Guard aerial photograph was taken. Notice how far back the lighthouse was from the ocean. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



The only solution left to save the Cape San Blas Lighthouse is to move it., which will be a costly project. An initial estimate to move the tower and both of the keeper's homes was nearly a quarter of a million dollars. It seems that if the federal government could step in with financial resources to help pay for the move of Cape Hatteras Lighthouse on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, as they did in 1999, they can certainly step forward to help pay to move Florida's Cape San Blas Lighthouse. And they should. The lighthouse was built with taxpayer money and today it is a vital historic landmark that is essential to Florida's Panhandle area. It is also an important link to the maritime history of the entire nation.



However, it will take an immense amount of money to move the lighthouse or change the legislation that would allow erosion controls to be put into place. Regardless of what happens, some of the money needed to save the Cape San Blas Lighthouse will need to come through private donations.

The sign in the gift shop at Cape San Blas Lighthouse reads, "Move It or Lose It."

The Doomsday Clock is ticking and, in the case of Cape San Blas Lighthouse, the clock may be running fast.

Donations to help save the Cape San
Lighthouse can be sent to:
St. Joseph Historical Society
Cape San Blas Lighthouse Fund
P.O. Box 231, Port St. Joe, FL 32457

Cape San Blas in July, 2004;
December, 2011; and May, 2012.
Since erosion controls are against
the law, there seems to be no
stopping the encroaching ocean.
(Photographs by Debbie Hooper
of JoeBay.com)

