

Ponce Inlet Lighthouse Park feature

By Jeff Louderback

PONCE INLET, Fla. -- Sometimes, as the sun slowly fades over the horizon, Thomas Taylor climbs to the top of the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse and marvels at the view of nearby Daytona Beach, where the sand stretches as far as the eye can see.

"Just think of all the lives that have been saved and all the ships that have been preserved because of this light," said Mr. Taylor, a historian for the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Society. "Because of the way they were built and the role they have served, lighthouses are both architectural and historic treasures."

Standing 175 feet tall and named a National Historic Landmark, the majestic red-brick Ponce Inlet tower is the second tallest lighthouse in the nation. The beacon at Cape Hatteras holds the country's top spot. Though dozens of restored lighthouses line Great Lakes shores and ocean coasts, few are 19th-century stations that feature original buildings.

Opened in 1887 and abandoned by the Coast Guard in 1970, the lighthouse station at Ponce Inlet, which includes eight buildings and the tower, was saved from destruction in 1972 by citizens who formed the Ponce de Leon Lighthouse Preservation Association. The station includes three dwellings which once housed the lighthouse keeper and his two assistants. Today, these spaces are museums that tell stories of lighthouses and shipwrecks, and depict the adventurous and sometimes dangerous lives of lighthouse keepers and their families.

"Though many lighthouses were destroyed when they were no longer used, there are several places where you can see a tower and climb the steps to the top," Mr. Taylor said. "There are only a handful of lighthouse stations, though, where you can see where the keepers lived and develop an understanding of what their world was like."

The Ponce Inlet Lighthouse, topped with a bell-shaped dome, was designed by Francis Hopkinson Smith, whose father, Francis Hopkinson, was a member of the Continental Congress.

More than 1.3 million bricks were used to construct the beacon, which is 32 feet in diameter at the base and 12+ feet around at the top. The iron spiral staircase has 213 steps that lead to the gallery, where the view of the Daytona Beach area and the Atlantic Ocean are worth the long, exhaustive journey. The tower recently underwent a \$1.1 million renovation.

One of the station's highlights is a new building that houses a collection of rare lighthouse lenses. The display's centerpiece is a working First-Order Fresnel lens that illuminated the Cape Canaveral Lighthouse from 1868-1993. Featuring ornate glass and brass, the lens was made in France and is worth \$2 million, Mr. Taylor said. Preservation

association members are restoring the original Ponce Inlet Lighthouse First-Order Fresnel lens from 1887.

The principal keeper's house is now the Museum of the Sea, where navigation instruments, pirates' treasures and other intriguing nautical artifacts are displayed. Here, the Commodore's tragic demise is remembered. In 1897, as the Spanish-American War was brewing, the ship carrying guns and ammunition left Jacksonville, Fla., bound for Cuba. One of the passengers was writer Stephen Crane, who wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* and who was serving as a war correspondent for a New York newspaper.

Weakened by running aground twice, the Commodore sank off the coast of present-day Ponce Inlet, then known as Mosquito Inlet. Though several men were killed, many sailors reached the safe haven of the lighthouse in their lifeboats. Mr. Crane survived, battled the rough waves and washed ashore at Daytona in a 10-foot dinghy a day later. He wrote about the ordeal in his short story, "The Open Boat." The Museum of the Sea displays an assortment of guns and ammunition recovered from the wreck site, including custom-made Remington rifles.

Formerly the second assistant keeper's dwelling, the Lighthouse Museum showcases clothing, relics and photographs from keepers and their families. The museum also describes the lighthouse's storied history. Among the displays is a model of the first lighthouse -- a 55-foot-tall brick tower built in 1835. Not long after construction on the beacon was completed, the boat carrying oil to light the lanterns sank off the coast of Savannah, Ga. Before another shipment of oil could be delivered, a hurricane washed away the keeper's quarters and severely damaged the tower.

That December, during the Second Seminole War, Seminole Indians set fire to the lighthouse and took the lamp reflectors. Chief Coacoochee wore one as a headdress at a battle three weeks later. The Seminoles prevailed, and Mosquito Inlet was abandoned. A year later, the lighthouse crumbled into the ocean, and more than 50 years passed before another tower was constructed.

For an image of what home life at the station was like, explore the first assistant keeper's home, which was restored to appear as it would have in the late 1800s. The house is stocked with several original furnishings, such as the china cabinet and the dining room table and chairs.

One former keeper, Joseph Davis, died of a heart attack in 1918 when he climbed to the top of the tower to light the lantern. Reportedly, his spirit still roams the spiral staircase, where Mr. Taylor has painted the steps several times over the years.

"I paint the steps at night when nobody is here," Mr. Taylor explained. "At times, I have clearly heard the footsteps of someone walking up the tower, but when I looked down, I did not see anyone.

"On a couple occasions, when I was playing a cassette in my stereo, suddenly I heard the

sound of the player eating the tape, but when I took the tape out, it was in perfect condition," Mr. Taylor added. "I guess there are certain songs Mr. Davis doesn't like to hear." If you go

What: Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse.

When: 10 a.m.-8 p.m. May 1-Labor Day and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. the day after Labor Day-April 30. The lighthouse station grounds and gift shop open at 10 a.m. and remain open an hour after the lighthouse tower closes.

Admission: \$4, \$1 children 11 and under.

Information: (904) 761-1821; www.ponceinlet.org