



Cockspur Island Lighthouse

Cockspur Lighthouse

Clinging to the tip of Cockspur Island, the Cockspur Island Lighthouse has withstood crashing waves, the roar of cannons, and the wrath of time. For more than 150 years it has defiantly stood guard over the mouth of the Savannah River. The forty-six-foot-tall brick lighthouse is poised on an islet off the southeastern tip of Cockspur Island. The tiny islet, which is often covered by high tides, is comprised of oyster beds, loose shells, and marsh grass. Located nearly 15 miles from the Port of Savannah, the light marks the South Channel of the Savannah River.

Construction

An earlier brick tower was built on this location between March 1837 and November 1839. This early tower was unlit, and served primarily as a day mark. In August 1848, John Norris, a noted New York architect, was contracted to supervise construction of an illuminated station. Norris designed several of Savannah's more notable structures including

the U.S. Customs House, the Hugh-Mercer house, and the Green-Meldrim house. For the lighthouse, Norris' duties were to "repair, alter, and put lanterns and lights on Cockspur Island...and to erect a suitable keeper's house." His tower housed a fixed white light using five lamps with 14-inch reflectors. The light was visible at a distance of nine miles.

Early History

Officially commissioned in 1849, the Cockspur Island Lighthouse guided vessels to the bustling port of Savannah. Tragedy struck the light in 1853 when its lighthousekeeper, Cornelius Mather, drowned in cold winter waters while servicing the light. The follow-

ing year, a massive hurricane destroyed the original tower as high winds and surging waters reeked havoc on Cockspur Island. In 1855, the tower was immediately rebuilt and expanded on its original foundation. The light was relit the following year.

Civil War

At the outbreak of the American Civil War, the Cockspur Island Lighthouse was extinguished by Confederate forces to hinder Union blockading efforts. On April 10, 1862, Union forces in eleven batteries along the northern shore of Tybee Island opened fire on Fort Pulaski.

Thirty-six Union guns participated in the 30-hour bombardment, with the Cockspur Island Lighthouse precariously located in the line of fire between the opposing forces. Despite its prominent location the tower suffered only minor damage during the battle, most likely due to the Union forces having to fire at a higher angle in order to reach the walls of Fort Pulaski over a mile away.

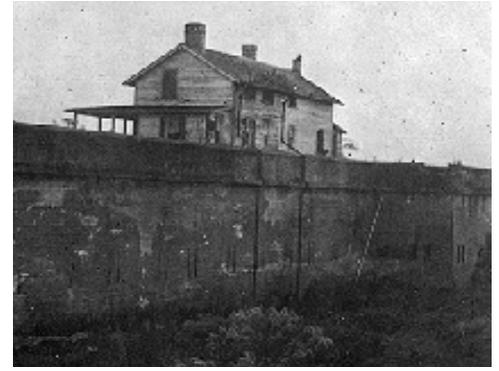


Post-Civil War

Soon after the war's end the lighthouse was again relit and painted white for use as a day mark. The tower continued to guide vessels through the Savannah River's South Channel. Meanwhile numerous hurricanes plagued the Georgia coast. In 1881, a powerful hurricane struck Cockspur Island causing water to rise 23 feet above sea level. The storm surge filled the lighthouse interior and destroyed the keeper's residence. The great hurricane of 1893 forced the light keepers to flee to safety in the northwest stair tower of Fort Pulaski.

Although it survived the roar of cannons and numerous storms, the light could not withstand the impact of natural-and-man-made changes to the Savannah River. Over time the North Channel became deeper and more suitable for larger vessels. Gradually the South Channel lost its importance leaving no need

for a lighthouse. On June 1, 1909, the Cockspur Island Lighthouse was officially extinguished



Following the hurricane of 1893, the light keepers decided to move to higher ground, building a two-story frame house atop Fort Pulaski's massive walls.

Transfer

After being extinguished, the now vacant Cockspur Island Lighthouse passed through several owners, including the United States Coast Guard. However, by the late 1950s, the National Park Service looked

into acquiring the historic lighthouse. On August 14, 1958, by presidential proclamation, the Cockspur Island Lighthouse officially became a part of Fort Pulaski National Monument.

Restoration

The National Park Service is dedicated to the preservation of this historic marker. Continually battered by wind and water, the tower routinely needs repairs. Over the years work has been done to maintain the structure, including masonry and painting projects.

In 1995 the cupola and railing atop the tower were removed for air-abrasive cleaning, painting, and electrolytic reduction. The care and upkeep of the lighthouse continues to be monitored and preserved by the National Park Service.

Today

Today the lighthouse is open to the public, although access is limited depending on changing tides. Visitors wanting a closer view of the tower can explore the Lighthouse Overlook Trail winding around the tip of Cockspur Island. The tower, one of only five lighthouses still standing in Georgia, remains popular with visitors because it proudly stands as a reminder of the rich history of Cockspur

Island, Savannah, and coastal Georgia. With your assistance, Fort Pulaski National Monument and the National Park Service can better serve the needs of the Cockspur Island Lighthouse and help protect it for the enjoyment and education of future generations. Please ask how you can help.

