

Eric Wiberg • Lighthouses

Cay Sal Bank and Old Bahama Channel lighthouses



FROM a letter by Sir George Pocock to the Secretary of the Admiralty in July 1762. A fleet of British ships described carefully entering the Old Bahama Channel from Cay Sal, led by a New Providence pilot using Lord Anson's charts, and on the advice of a very diligent and careful Captain Elphington and Captain Lindsay of HMS Trent, with ships HMS Alarm and HMS Echo, HMS Barbadoes, HMS Benetta, and HMS Richmond.

Between Cape Lobos and Cayo confino," they describe, "they kept good freights on each Cayo for our directions."

Early in 1840, the US and British authorities issued a joint statement in the press regarding Her Majesty's government having established a light house at Salt Cay Bank. On February 15, the light was lit, atop a base 46 feet above high water, a tower 54 feet high, holding a fixed light almost 360 degrees around and visible for nine miles. Customs Collector WT Hamlyn describes tides up to three feet, with strong currents, and the proximity of Water and Double-headed Shot Cays. The light is 100 feet above sea level and visible for 14 miles.

The leading light of the massive triangle of shallows named Cay Sal Bank is situated on Cay Sal, in the Double-Headed Shot Cays. It was the third one completed by the Imperial Light Service (ILS) in 1839, yet soon thereafter it was needed less, as motorized ships became more reliable and better able than sailing ships to avoid the current-laced reefs. One of the earliest wrecks on Cay Sal Bank is said to be the fleet under a Spanish admiral trying to work north from Havana to Spain when adverse winds drove them ashore in 1733.

In 1856, Superintendent of Lighthouses, James Long, wrote from Nassau that the Cay Sal Light had been extinguished and was replaced by a temporary light in January 1856, but that the new light was not as visible as the prior one. In 1879 a change for the light at North Elbow Cay Light was issued, underscoring the importance of these lights to navigation and commerce.

An 1895 New York Herald article is entitled "A Nest of British Islets: Salt Key Bank is a British Possession, Lighted by a British Lighthouse - a Convenient

Station for Strugglers and Insurgents," referring to its filter-like position straddling

Cay Sal.

In 1958, both Bahamas California Oil and Bahamas

Cay Sal Bank. He claimed that a schooner named Dellie at Key West supplied him

to Nassau. Then a Dutch steamer named Andania under Captain Vanderlin ran

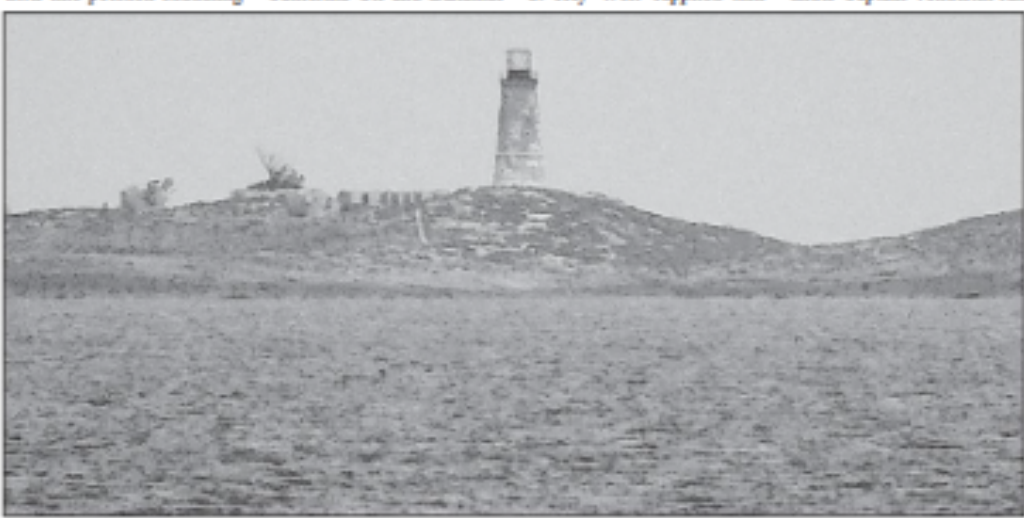
light of the seizure of arms deposited there." Complicating enforcement there, an American developer named Clarence Moody purchased a 99-year lease at Cay Sal, intending to build a fishing and vacation resort there, which he indeed began, and was often interrupted by folks in distress or in misdeeds.

In mid-1840 a big ship with painted ports was seen aboard at Cay Sal Light-house, and another one with all her rigging had seven wrecking ships at its side like piglets to a sow, a dozen miles south of Gun Cay, Bimini.

In 1994, a charter boat named Eagle took Americans from Florida to Cay Sal Bank and a Palm Beach Post writer observed jugs of water and food left for refugees from Cuba and overflights from American civilians looking for refugees from Communist Cuba to help. In mid-2015, the US Coast Guard described the region as wild west, with 2,600 refugees intercepted in half a year and 4,000 expected for the year. If Cubans arrived with wet feet - via water - they could apply for citizenship, whereas Haitians were generally denied that right and sent home under a law known as "wet foot/dry foot policy."

Wrecker J. Newton Wilson spent half of 1876 aboard the ship *Plowar* at Cay Sal Light. He had a crew of Bahamian divers who worked for Captain Bob Growler, who said he had a lease on the islands. They dove on half a dozen or more wrecks, salvaging anchors, brass, copper and other valuables. They also found the carcass of a ship named *Golden Postana*, the skull of an alleged escaped slave, and an upside-down Baltimore sailing vessel named *Union*. That ship's sugar cargo from Matanzas Cuba had disintegrated, but they managed to pry some valuables from the ship, which had drifted from Lavender Reef in the Old Bahama Channel.

The survivors were in apprehension of sharks, Cuban contrabandists, or smugglers, and Florida Cay or even Bahama wreckers. Wilson said there were wrecks aplenty off Cay Sal. He spoke glowingly of turtles laying eggs, bird rookeries, and abundant wildlife. Such a windswept and isolated place - no one born there, so many dying there in purgatory in the triangle between three nations.



waters from Cuba to the US. One smuggler mused that with so many cays, the lighthouse had been given many names by smugglers, and revolutionaries, and refugees.

These reefs were so deadly that in hurricanes one schooner, *Invincible*, saw 20 wrecks nearby in the Florida Keys. "Talk about the key to the gold," said one old salt. "What is Key West or Dry Tortugas compared with Salt Key Bank?" He sang praise of the lawlessness of the bank, saying that unless a Royal Navy happened to make a pass through, "there are no British authorities here higher than the lighthouse keeper." He described the many cays as ideal for "temporary refuge" in "unprotected British territory for 'smugglers under pressure, or revolutionists'."

According to Annie Potts, Cuban immigrants seeking to land in the US still use the light as a place to rest roughly half way. "Many rafts and small boat wrecks on Cay Sal Island. The lighthouse on Elbow Cay usually has a few jugs of water and some food stashed in the base of the light tower... [which] is decorated with the names of many who have attempted the journey."

A Cold War period in 1954 was made hot when Cuban patrol ships entered Bahamian waters to capture 19 Cubans at Anguilla Cay in Cay Sal Bank. A headline read that the tranquility of the Bahamas was broken by its proximity to Cuba in such tense times as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 48 hours 27 new refugees were found in

Gulf Oil announced their intention to drill exploratory oil wells in Cay Sal Bank, a practice that continues into recent time. Bahamians mused on how the refugees had been fisherman and professional mariners, but were replaced by amateurs, many of whom had never been to sea.

In March 1817, a pirate schooner captured a valuable Dutch ship off Cay Sal Bank, took the treasure, and after being barbarous to them, set the hapless Dutch men adrift. The following year the George Amistad of Baltimore was overcome by the pirate ship *Young Spartan*. In 1822, a brig named *Aurilla* from New York to New Orleans was taken with several women. The pirates anchored her at Cay Sal Bank, tortured the men and were cruel to the women. Many were the atrocities meted out to victims of pirates. As a result, governments and governors showed no mercy to the brigands they apprehended.

In 1854, Captain R. Leavitt on the brigantine *Globe* from New York was run aground at Dog Rocks on Cay Sal Bank, and the next day a brig named *Ada* of Maine took many of the men off the *Globe*. However, the captain stuck with his ship and the barque *Helen* helped him save her. Then the wrecker named Sarah under sailor Captain Fernandez towed her to Nassau, saving the cargo of hides.

In 1896, a Cuban revolutionary in Key West denied that he had been supplied with weapons by a British ship named HMS *Pelican* at

instead. It was a time of intrigue, two years before the Spanish-American War broke out.

In October of 1914, the principal light keeper of Cay Sal Lighthouse, Mr. Selathiel W. Roberts was killed while on duty in his 49th year of life and after many years of service. The news arrived in Nassau via Havana. The Miami Herald reported in 1994 how "Cay Sal Bank has become a popular stopover point for Cuban refugees on their way to the Florida Keys," noting that the only inhabitants were seven RBDF members on Cay Sal itself.

Late in 1870 the US Consul in Nassau reported that at Cay Sal Bank the bark *WK Brown* was wrecked during a hurricane, with some of its cargo saved. Six other ships were smashed there as well, with none of the crew surviving and their cargo also lost. In 1853, Captain Blein aboard a ship named *Victoria*, an rouse from Spain to Havana wrecked in Cay Sal, with the crew saved and the captain endeavoring to save some cargo.

In 1890, a ship threaded between the Elbow Cay Light in Cay Sal Bank near Double-Headed Shot Cays and the water shallowed so quickly it became a light green colour near the tall light tower. They crossed the 60-mile bank into the Old Bahama Channel, where they found Cay Lobos Light. In 1862, when Union State ran aground south of Double-headed Shot Cays and sank in three hours, the wrecking schooner *Ocean Monarch* brought the crew

ashore with a cargo of meat, cotton, and rice. American wreckers from the Florida Keys in a ship named *America* were first on the scene.

In 1863, a steamer named *Marion* under captain Johnson wrecked there too. Fortunately, Mr. JB Squires was building a building attached to the lighthouse and saved much of the ship's cargo. Some passengers went to Nassau and others to Cuba, while some elected to stay in tents until rescued.

In April 1863, the foremen crew of the schooner *Loyal Scranton* were taken off the poop deck of their ship wrecked near Salt Cay, by the brig *Philip Larabee*. The ship and its cargo, from New York to Alabama, were all lost.

In 1870 the lighthouse tender *Richmond* was de-masted off Cay Sal Light station. It limped to Water Cay. HMS *Philomel* towed the lighthouse schooner *Richmond* to Nassau where Captain Stuart said that in the hurricane of 6 October 1869, "it blew so furiously as to drive the sea over the cay 40 feet in height, and nothing could be seen half a mile."

Louis Lourie from Corsica floated to the lighthouse on a board. He was from the *Victoria* of Spain, one of seven vessels lost nearby and 83 men are believed to have been killed on six ships. The sky as the hurricane approached was described by Stuart, whose vessel lost all its masts, as "like a black wall."

In 1956, a British paper wrote that Cuba's pro-Castro leader, Batista, wanted to "ensure that aggressions against Cuba do not come from Sal Cay in the