Eric Wiberg • Lighthouses

Lights and wrecks of Ragged Island, the Jumentos, and Long Island

SOUTH POINT LIGHTHOUSE, Long Island

HMS Spey took on a local pilot at Crooked Island and then doubted him. The wreck was south of Buena Vista Cay, north of Ragged Island in the Crooked Island Passage. The navy captain "believed the post-master at Crooked Island was not a seaman," however "he was not aware that he was in fact a teacher of navigation."

He underestimated local talent.

The crew had run on a sand bank on their previous time passing north of St. Domingo Cay (east of Ragged), and so the lead soundings were flying, yet the captain was ill, and they attempted the route at night.

HMS Spey was under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Robert Barard James. While being piloted by the sailing master, Mr Barrow, and Lieutenant James, "on her passage from Crooked Island to Havannah, between the Raccoon and Buena Vista Cays" of Ragged Island, she struck a coral reef. This is a surprising choice, given that between Nurse Cay and Raccoon Cay, the deep channel is only about 1,200 feet wide, whereas just northwards are channels of over three miles, as north of Man of War and south of Flamingo Cay.

The captain ceased the salvage of quicksilver (mercury) and other valuables at the expense of saving his own belongings, and all passengers and crew were rescued.

Fortunately, the beacons were used to guide them. After arriving from the UK at Crooked Island, they intended to "run over the Great Bahama Bank by a passage between the Raccoon and Buena Vista Keys, on arriving in sight of the beacon on Raccoon Key. The Master was in the forecastle and, but a few minutes before, had been remarking how well the banks had been laid down in the charts. They were steering mid-channel, but rather inclined to the beacon side" and making five knots with good weather and many depth soundings made (meaning a young voice would be shouting data at them).

The guns were thrown over, water pumped out, and goods landed on the cay, which was close enough to get a line to. Though they moved the ship six feet, by the next day, word was sent to Governor Cockburn in Nassau that their ship was doomed. Nearly 200 years later, bits of her must still be there.

The detailed transcript of the courts-martial contains some details that make for colourful reading, from the usual blame game to terrifying descriptions of channels, currents, and weather in The Bahamas and the relative skills of local pilots. We learn of "passages marked on charts with a view to expedite the mail to Havannah." We learn that "the dangers of the old channel are so numerous and subject to such uncertain currents that it was thought highly desirable to cross the bank."

And then there is the "but he did it!" blame game: "passages do exist over it, proved by the HMS Thunder having come down the back and crossing the bank," and "many square rigged vessels were soon to cross while HMS Spey was aground."

Though in his 11 years in the navy's packet service, the captain had transited Crooked Island Passage four times, in this case, he was sick and delegated the duty to the master, who felt this option was safer than the current-strewn Old Bahama Channel. They brought on board Mr Malcolm from Crooked Island, "a skilled islander and a gentleman we know to be knowledgeable on navigation."

Their problem was the gyrations to deliver the mail. On the previous voyage, they lost eight days in the Old Bahama Channel and estimated they could save two weeks by cutting between the Jumentos Cays and into the shallow Great Bahama Banks, where they could also anchor if needed. The court severely reprimanded the two junior officers and placed them at the bottom of the list of those eligible for promotion.

The primary lighthouses of Long Island are Cape St. Maria Lighthouse to the north, Nurvitas Rock Light to the central-southern west – on the way to the Jumentos Cays on the Exuma side – and on the main island past Dunmore, Rose's, Cabbage Point, Gordon's and Northmore, is South Point Lighthouse. These lights must be similar to well-built military fortresses that deter assailants and thus have little combat histories, since it's challenging to find details of wrecks at them. Instead, in the early 1900s, we learn of the heavy lifting of lighthouse tenders like Cimarron, Ana Patricia and Pinguoon that dutifully ply the remote Bahamian islands, supplying light stations.

The lighthouse department's buildings had many uses, including the study of dead pets. In December of 1913, we find a rather unusual article in the Nassau Tribune on the canine post-mortem for the captain of a Russian sailing ship (barquentine Tsars).

"Examination of the body of the pet dog, which was supposed to have been the victim of foul play, was held in the Lighthouse Department Yard by Dr F. W Brace, who disclosed that the dog had swallowed a bone which caused a spasm resulting in death."

In 1971, a renowned naval interior designer and graduate of Harvard Business School named Nathaniel Armor, who furnished the nuclear submarine USS Nautilus as well as many ocean liners for the United States Lines, passed away at Cape Santa Maria, Long Island.

The reliability of these lights was considered significant enough to make the news. For example, in the New York Herald of 1921, USS Wyoming's commanding officer reported that at 9 pm the San Salvador Light "was observed to be showing 1 group of 2 flashes every 29.75 seconds, thus: flash 2.25 seconds, eclipse 5 seconds, flash 2.56 seconds, eclipse 5 seconds, flash 2.56 seconds," and again in 22 seconds.

The fact that this was news in a foreign country stands in stark contrast to modern times, where we rely so much on technology for our information, including electronic charts, radar, and satellite communication.

Those visiting lighthouses today may have to cling for hundreds of feet onto rusty and almost ruined flakes of salted steel that used to be sturdy steps. After carefully mounting countless steps to explore these structures, you may find the lights shot out by criminals who don't want their activities seen. You'll often find irreplaceable Fresnel lenses, hand-lit, in shatters. Scattered around are personal belongings like medications and little backpacks with clothing scattered, evidence of people smuggling.

Many lights either don't work or are no longer relied upon. This is particularly true after storms, when they are most needed, but instead are damaged and dragged off location. After all, a navigator is rarely able to rely on one source. Rather, he must consider several factors on a running basis, checking off data inputs and correlating them with his positions as he and shipmates go from landmark to landmark along a coast.

Thankfully, the lighthouses – automated or not – are still there as part of a mariner's safety suite.

NUEVITAS Rock Lighthouse between Exumas, Long Island and Jumentos Cays

CAPE St. Maria Lighthouse Long Island

RUINS on Raccoon Cay where HMS Spey wrecked and there was a beacon in 1840