

Frank's Island Lighthouse  
Mississippi River North East Pass,  
Louisiana

*Plaquemine Parish*

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
Louisiana District

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Richard Koch, District Officer  
614 Audubon Building, New Orleans, Louisiana

"FRANK'S ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE" (Old Tower)  
North East Pass Mississippi River Louisiana  
Plaquemine Parish

Owner

State of Louisiana

Date of Erection

1823

Architect

Henry S. Latrobe

Builder

Winslow Lewis

Present Condition

Ruinous; tower sunken twenty feet in marsh

Number of Stories

Tower seventy-five feet high

Materials of Construction

Brick; marble slab with inscription;  
Cypress stairway, rotted away;  
Iron Light

Other existing Records

Journal of Latrobe - D. Appleton & Co., 1905  
Specifications - Department of Commerce; Bureau of Lighthouses  
American State Papers - Vol. XI, Commerce and Navigation;  
p. 839 & p. 44  
Louisiana Courier - February 4, 1818; March 11, 1818;  
April 13, 1818; February 13, 1818  
Acts of the State Legislature (Louisiana) Approved March 2, 1818

Additional Data

In writing the introduction to the "JOURNAL OF  
LATROBE" in 1876, John Hazlehurst Boneval Latrobe, referring  
to the work of Henry S. Latrobe in New Orleans stated that:

"The lighthouse that he designed on Frank's Island at the mouth of the Mississippi has been pronounced by a distinguished judge to be unsurpassed save by the Eddystone Light and the celebrated light of the Caduan."

This light has long since been abandoned and the island on which it was erected has sunk into the marsh of the delta leaving the ruins of the tower standing in several feet of water in the midst of an almost impenetrable cane-brake. It has sunk possibly twenty feet or more in the marsh, leaving only the cylindrical brick tower visible.

Above a door or window, it is impossible to tell which, is a marble slab with an incised inscription which reads as follows:

"ERECTED IN 1823

Contracted for by Winslow Lewis of Boston  
Executed by Benjamin Beal  
and Duncan McB Thaxter"

The "3" in the date seems to be carved over an earlier numeral, possibly an "0", as records on file in the Bureau of Lighthouses indicate that the building was completed by Lewis in 1820. For reasons which are not entirely clear it proved unstable and had to be rebuilt, using materials from the original structure, this being done in 1823.

Some idea of the importance of this lighthouse at the time it was erected may be obtained from early newspaper accounts. The Louisiana Courier of February 4, 1818, reported Governor Villere as stating to the Legislature that:

"The importance of such an establishment, the advantages which our commerce will

draw from it, are of such nature as to render any observation unnecessary. Permit me, therefore, gentlemen, to recommend you to adopt without delay such measures as you may deem proper to enable the general government to carry this plan to execution."

The State Legislature, on March 2, 1818, passed an act to cede the United States jurisdiction over the island. The contract for the building was signed in Washington and reported in the Louisiana Courier of March 11, 1818. Materials began immediately to arrive at the Balize, an account of the landing there of the Brig Triton from Boston being published in the Courier of April 13, 1818.

On March 11, 1820, the Secretary of the Treasury submitted a report of the Fifth Auditor, to the House of Representatives, which stated that the building was settling dangerously, large cracks being produced in the walls. As to the cost, the report states:

"For the erection of the building (which is calculated for the residence of the keeper of the lights) the sum contracted to be given, in January, 1818, was seventy nine thousand dollars, sixty five thousand of which have been paid, and the residue to be paid when it is completed."

The reports published in the American State Papers, Vol. XI, Commerce and Navigation, contain <sup>N</sup>o further reference to this lighthouse, except in a listing of lighthouses in the United States, which gives the year of erection as 1820 and the cost as \$85,507.56. This far exceeded the cost of any other lighthouse in the country up to that time. The

complete specifications under which Winslow Lewis agreed to complete the structure are still on file in the Bureau of Lighthouses of the Department of Commerce.

The necessity of providing a lighthouse at the mouth of the Mississippi was recognized by the Government soon after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. As early as 1806 Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury, appointed Lewis Dumaine to make a survey of the Louisiana Coast and select a site for the lighthouse. He was also directed to consult with Benjamin Latrobe, then surveyor of the United States, with whom the Department had already consulted and who had apparently made some drawings for the lighthouse at that time.

Dumain submitted his report the following year, having selected a site and made soil tests. Nothing was done however, until after the war, when on June 18, 1816, P. L. B. Duplessis, Jr., Collector at New Orleans, Commodore Daniel T. Patterson of the U. S. Navy at New Orleans and Henry S. Latrobe, Architect, were appointed as a commission to report on a proper site and type of building best suited, and also to report on the advisability of adopting the site and plan of 1807. These men, after a careful investigation and exploration of the various passes, submitted a lengthy report, November 12, 1816.

This extremely interesting report is published in the American State Papers along with other documents on this

subject.

Concerning the building itself, a plan of which was apparently prepared by Latrobe, the report states:

"We send on the plan, herewith annexed, not as being absolutely the best plan that can be adopted, but rather to show what we conceive it to be practicable to execute, and what we think the mode of building best adapted to resist the hurricanes to which the building will be exposed. The probable cost of the building, or any similar one of the same materials and the same height will be from \$80,000 to \$90,000. In this estimate, we suppose the colonnade, the cornice of the basement story, the cap, and the platform, and the staircase to be stone; the remainder of brick plastered; the lantern light to be of iron. We would recommend the following as the proper method to be employed in securing the foundation of any heavy building that may be erected there. The surface to be covered by the lighthouse, and ten feet around, must be dug down to the level of the water. This space must be filled with piles twenty five feet long and one foot diameter, driven in as close as possible, and as long as they can be forced down with the battering ram. The piles must all be cut off level with the surface of the water. Upon the heads of these piles must be laid square timbers of the greatest length that can possibly be procured, and not less than one foot square, and not more than one foot six inches apart. Across these and halved onto them, must be laid timbers of the same dimensions, and placed at the same distances. The intervals between the timbers must be filled with shells or rubbish, beaten down and united together by pouring in grout.

Upon the top of this must be laid a close floor of plank, at least four inches thick and twenty feet long, breaking joints, and spiked onto the timbers with spikes at least nine inches long.

Upon this floor the foundation must be laid, taking precaution to turn reversed arches under all the walls. Should the ground

settle, the building will descend altogether, and no injury will arise to any part. No timber is so good for the purpose of the foundation as the cypress of this country, which never rots or is attacked by the worm below the surface of the ground."

Undoubtedly a monumental type of building was intended with colonnades, stone cornice, etc. It is impossible to tell if it was built in this manner without referring to the specifications at the Bureau of Lighthouses. The present tower may have had such a colonnade around its base, but has so far sunk into the marsh as to leave no trace of it visible. There is no evidence of plaster on the brickwork, and the iron of the lantern light has almost all rusted away. The interior stairway was a spiral one of wood, the steps being housed into a central pole and into the brick of the wall. This has completely rotted away and collapsed. The brickwork is however, in good condition, without cracks, although the building in settling leans slightly to the south. The walls are four feet thick near the base and seem to be composed of an inner and outer shell each of 18" with a one foot space between.

The lighthouse was abandoned probably before the Civil War although it is not known whether due to its settling or to the abandonment of the pass. Another lighthouse was built nearby on Pass à l'Outre about 1850, and has also since been abandoned after having sunk over twenty feet.

May 30, 1935

Samuel Wilson, Jr.

*Revised 1936 by H.C.F.*