

# A REVISIT TO A LIGHTKEEPER'S HOME

*It was an isolated place where the kids would dash to the flagpole to dip the insigne in salute when a yacht or ship passed the lighthouse station and received a returning toot. The air was clean, the water crystal clear, game and fish sufficient to feed the families, remote, but not a "lonely place" as some people may believe.*



By Hibbard Casselberry, Jr.

Driving north on A1A from Pompano Beach to the Hillsboro Inlet and the lighthouse station on its north shore, three daughters of former lighthouse keepers remembered that the road was not always so smooth nor congested. Zora Isler Saxon, sitting next to her younger sister, Ruth Isler Hedden, said, "Part of it was an awful road, with sharp white gravel."

Mary Knight Voss remembered, "The Beach Road (Atlantic Blvd.) in the early 1920s was only a gravel road to the beach area and the road north (A1A) was a rutted sand road that ended here at the inlet."

At that moment the car rolled over the modern bridge spanning the inlet and was soon on the lighthouse property. As the three ladies stepped out of the car, more memories of early childhood on these very grounds and stories of even earlier days in south Florida became more vivid.

Three daughters of former lighthouse keepers return to the station for a visit in 1976. They are, from left to right, Ruth Isler Hedden, Mary Knight Voss, and Zora Isler Saxon.

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In the late 1800s, the south part of Florida's peninsula was very sparsely populated. As the widely scattered settlements grew, better trade routes were developed. What we now know as the Intracoastal Waterway was the Florida Coast Line Canal, completed to Biscayne Bay in 1890. The only other route south was a nine foot wide rock road inland for foot and cart travel connecting the settlements of Jupiter and Fort Lauderdale.

The Great Freeze of 1894-1895, when north-central Florida lost trees and vegetable crops, led to the development of southern Florida. Mr. Flagler extended his Florida East Coast Railroad to the Biscayne Bay area and in 1906 the state began draining the swampland in the Fort Lauderdale area. This land soon became one of Florida's richest agricultural regions.

With this gradual shift of the State's population, the Federal Lighthouse Board received funds from Congress to construct a lighthouse near the Hillsboro Inlet.

This site was picked for two reasons. First, it was a great distance between Jupiter and Cape Florida, the two existing lights. Ships coming from the Bahamas and missing the Jupiter light would have another guiding light. Second, this was a dangerous reef area. Ships traveling south would hug the shore line in an effort to keep out of the north-flowing currents of the Gulf Stream. Because of a reef just south of the Hillsboro Inlet, south bound ships had to change course, going further east to keep in navigable deep water.

### *Lighthouse Family*

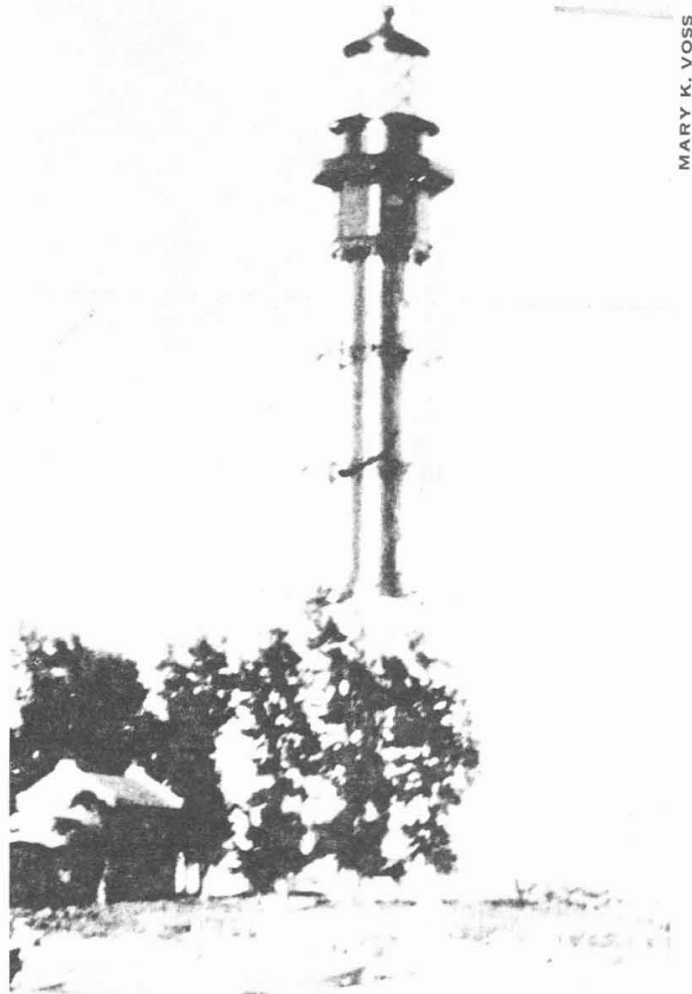
In the spring of 1907, Alfred A. Berghill was appointed lighthouse keeper of the new light. He was succeeded on August 1, 1911, by Thomas Knight who represented the third generation of lighthouse keepers in his family. His grandfather was Captain Mills Olcott Burnham, a Vermont Yankee, who had come to Duval County in 1837. A powerful man, he became sheriff of the newly organized county and later was sent on to the legislature. In 1853 Burnham was named keeper of Cape Canaveral Lighthouse, a brick tower built six years earlier. Thomas Knight's father was also a keeper of the same light until his death when Thomas was thirteen. Six years later, in 1898, Thomas became assistant lighthouse keeper of the Cape Canaveral light.



From left to right, Keeper Thomas Knight, wife Fannie Gray Knight, two of their children, Burnham and Ellis, and Mrs. Knight's parents.

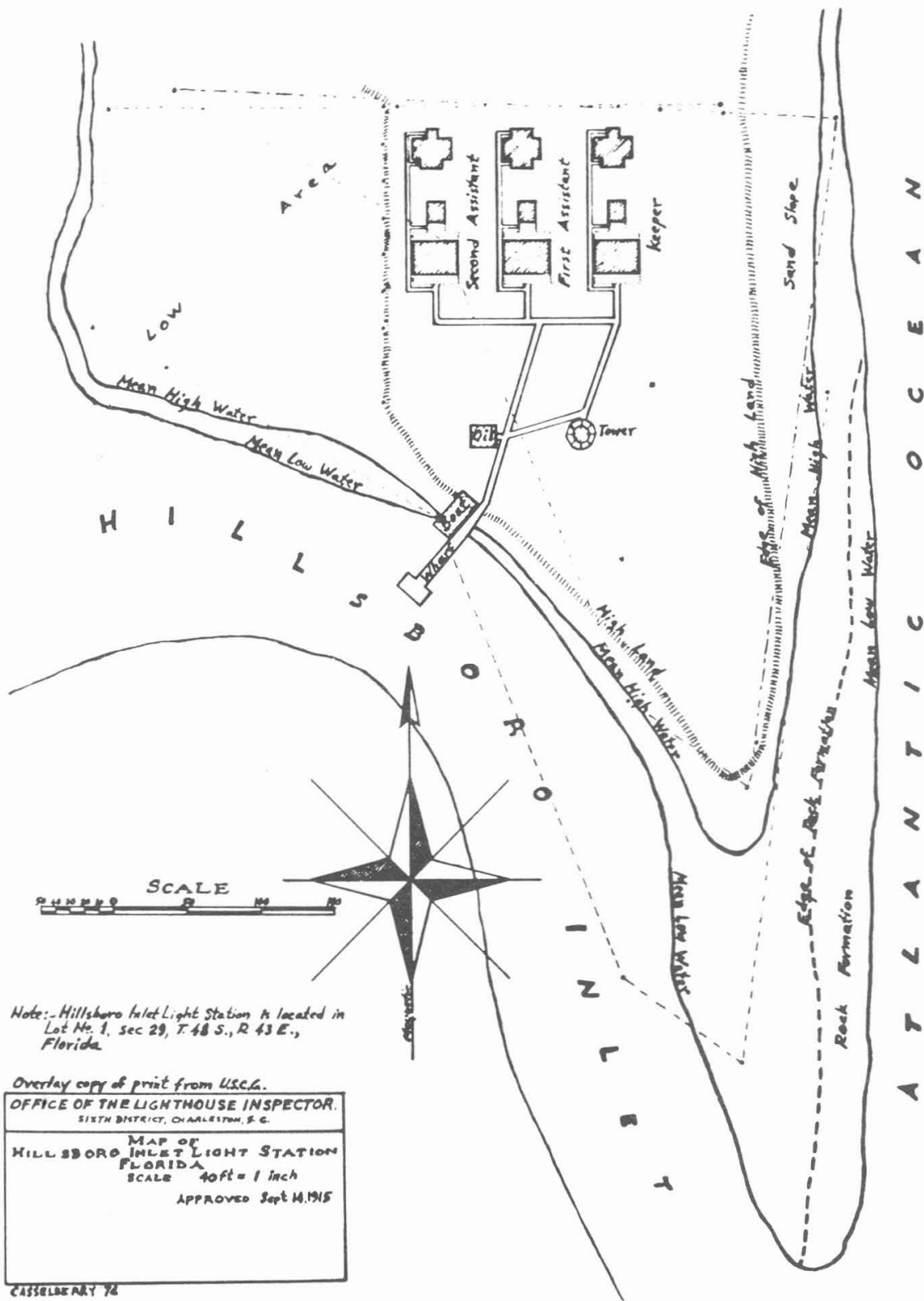
Mr. Knight brought his wife, Fannie Gray Knight, and their four children — Burnham Gray, Ellis Moore, Richard D., and Mary E. — to the peaceful remote station called Hillsboro Inlet.

As the three ladies walked around the grounds reflecting on the past, they made note of the changing landscape. The lighthouse station was on one of the several finger-like islands, each isolated from the mainland by a continuous strip of mangrove. In those days a round trip through the mangrove to Deerfield by row boat took most of the day.



The lighthouse and the brick oil shed, circa 1914.

There were three lightkeepers' houses on the grounds, neatly lined up just north of the lighthouse and the brick oil-storage house west of the tower. Each one-and-a-half story keeper's house had a nearby kitchen on the north side, connected to the house by an open-roofed breezeway.



On each breezeway, hanging in the shadow, was a screen cage where the oleo and other perishables were kept between mealtimes. The breeze kept the insects away and the supplies cool. Oleo came white with a packet of coloring. To make it look like butter, the two were mixed together in a bowl before putting a lid on it and storing it in the wire cage.

The house, breezeway, and kitchen were elevated on sturdy brick piers. The roof collected rainwater which was stored in a cistern under the breezeway near the kitchen. The kitchen sink had a pitcher pump along side of it that lifted the water up from the cistern with each stroke. Originally, the kitchen had a cooking fireplace on the north wall, with closet storage on each side of it. Later the fireplace front was closed and a kerosene burning stove sat in front of it.

"Because we swam so much," said Mrs. Voss, "we did not take baths very often. When we did, usually in the winter, the water was heated on the stove and poured into a tin tub in the middle of the kitchen floor. We girls would laugh and giggle a lot as we took our bath together."

North of each kitchen was a separate storage building, built close to the ground. Before the 1930s there were two-hole privies on the back of each storage building. The two holes were side-by-side, one large for adults and the other smaller for the youngsters.

The families at the station grew some of their own vegetables. Their diet also included salted pork, beef, fish and fresh turtle meat. On the mainland deer and other game were plentiful, but as the land was cleared for farming, the animals retreated farther into the remaining undeveloped grasslands and forests. Occasionally a Seminole hunting or fishing party came by boat to the station.

"Like the Indians and other isolated settlers, our fathers only killed what we needed for food," said Mrs. Voss. "He really enjoyed the duck hunting."

### *Farmer's Market*

In 1911, Florida's Governor Gilchrist and the State Cabinet inaugurated the construction of the Hillsboro Canal. It linked Lake Okeechobee to the small farming community of Deerfield and the Coastal Canal. Deerfield had two general stores and a population of approximately 250. Pineapples, beans, peppers, tomatoes, and other winter vegetables were raised. When the crops became too ripe to be shipped to the northern markets, the ladies would pickle or preserve them in glass jars. The lightkeepers' wives would trade their de-

licious homemade sea grape jelly to the farm families for a share of the pickle-and-preserving crop. Mrs. Voss remembered the family taking their boat up the Hillsboro River and Canal to Deerfield to get the fresh vegetables and to shop at the little general store (on Dixie Highway) for white oleo, flour, staples, yard cloth, and personal supplies.

"It was an all day trip, an excursion that the children looked forward to each time."

"We children had to entertain ourselves," continued Mrs. Voss. "We learned to swim at an early age. We were in the water continually. We all had learned how to row a boat. We'd go up and down the canal — you know how kids are — always exploring. We'd walk for miles on the beach picking up shells, then do more swimming. Sunday afternoons some of the young people inland would row their boats to the island or to the inlet for picnicking on the beach or fishing in the beautiful, clear water."

The children at the lighthouse station did have to go to school. "If there were nine children," continued Mrs. Voss, "the government would build a school and hire a teacher. Our first one was a Miss Emma Hoff from Indiana. She stayed with us. One of the three storage houses was converted to the school house. One of the men at the station was handy as a carpenter, so he built the desks. Some of the other students were from pioneer farmer and fishermen homes in this isolated area. John King lived on an island across from the light, and he went to school with us."

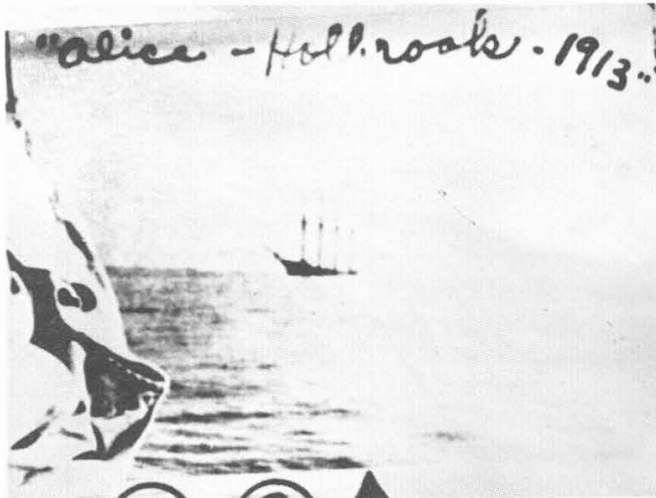
In those early days it took three men to operate the station. Their main task was keeping the beacon's light signal revolving from one hour before dusk to one hour after sun-up. The kerosene lamp had to burn clean and the large, heavy lens unit had to be rotated uniformly. The machinery for the lens rotation originally was powered by a weight hanging in the tube that went up through the watch room and connected to a steel drum and gears to the lens housing containing mercury. It would take approximately one-half hour for the weight to reach the bottom of the tube at which time the lightkeeper would insert a crank and wind it up again.

"Usually the night was divided into two shifts," explained Mrs. Voss. "The third man would have a full night's rest."

Once or twice each year the schooner *Cypress*, out of Charleston, South Carolina, would anchor off shore and send in a shallow-draft boat to the station bringing supplies of kerosene, mops, paint, first-aid medicine, and the like. The buoy tender *Water Lilly*, traveling the inland canals, also brought some supplies.

Around 1912, on a dark, clear-weather night, the four-masted schooner, *Alice Holbrook*, with a load of cement, got too close to shore and piled up on the reef. The ship's master, Captain Ellis, stayed with the Knights for several weeks hoping to salvage his ship. He was unsuccessful. The ship broke up with the pounding waves.

MARY K. VOSS



The four-mastered schooner, *Alice Holbrook*, ran aground on the reef south of the Hillsboro Inlet in 1913. It was eventually destroyed by the surf.

About the same time, Pompano built a wooden bridge across the coastal canal. The bridge was a swing-type to let boats pass. To operate it, the bridge tender had to walk in a circle with a big key, turning the gears to swing the bridge open or closed. The road east of the bridge was a sandy, rutted trail that only went a quarter mile or so. The white sandy beach attracted both the visitors from the north and local people. Deerfield was a "late bloomer;" its bridge across the coastal canal was not built until 1917.

World War I brought a number of changes to lighthouse life. Mrs. Voss recalled, "One of my father's friends who lived north of Palm Beach was a skipper of one of the Coast Guard's 64 foot cutters that patrolled along the Atlantic coast. Several times he brought his vessel up to the station's wharf. The inlet's channel was much deeper than it is now. The water was clean and clear so one could see the bottom and any obstructions. One of our storage buildings was converted into a barracks for the U.S. Coast Guard Beach Patrol. They communicated by semaphore (flag waving or beamed light). Four signalmen were always stationed here during World War I."

Occasionally a United States Navy seaplane would land in the interior of the inlet where the bridge is today. The pilot would taxi up to the beach next to the marine rail and boat house.

Jupiter station was the area's hub of communication. During World War I, ships passing the Jupiter Inlet Naval Wireless Station were required to maintain radio silence, but a platform was built on the weather bureau house and a signalman was stationed there with flags. Each ship was required to stop and give her name and destination. This was necessarily slow business and often several ships could be seen circling the buoy in the ocean off the inlet, awaiting their turn.

Mrs. Saxon and Mrs. Hedden's father, J.B. Isler, came to Hillsboro Inlet Station as assistant lightkeeper in 1920. He brought his wife, Mary Louise Isler, daughters Zora and Irene, and a son, Luther B. with him. A daughter, Ruth, and son George were born in their home at Hillsboro Inlet Lightstation. Thomas Knight and J.B. Isler worked together through the "bootleg era of the 1920s and into the population explosion of the 1930s."

MARY K. VOSS



A U.S. Navy seaplane, the *Seagull*, often landed in the inlet. This photograph was taken in 1915.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The author wishes to acknowledge the help and information given to him by Ruth Isler Hedden, Coast Guardsman Donald W. Partridge, Zora Isler Saxon, and Mary Knight Voss during interviews in 1976 and 1977.

Also used were materials from the Broward County Historical Commission, Broward County libraries, Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, Loxahatchee Historical Society and Jupiter Lighthouse Museum, Record Group 26 at the National Archives and Records Service, and the United States Coast Guard, Seventh District office.