

FEATURE

Jupiter Lighthouse:

Where Old and New
Florida Come Together

By GLENN R. SWIFT



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Standing proudly on top of an ancient Indian mound, Jupiter Lighthouse majestically towers over one of the most beautiful, yet treacherous, vistas in all of Florida.

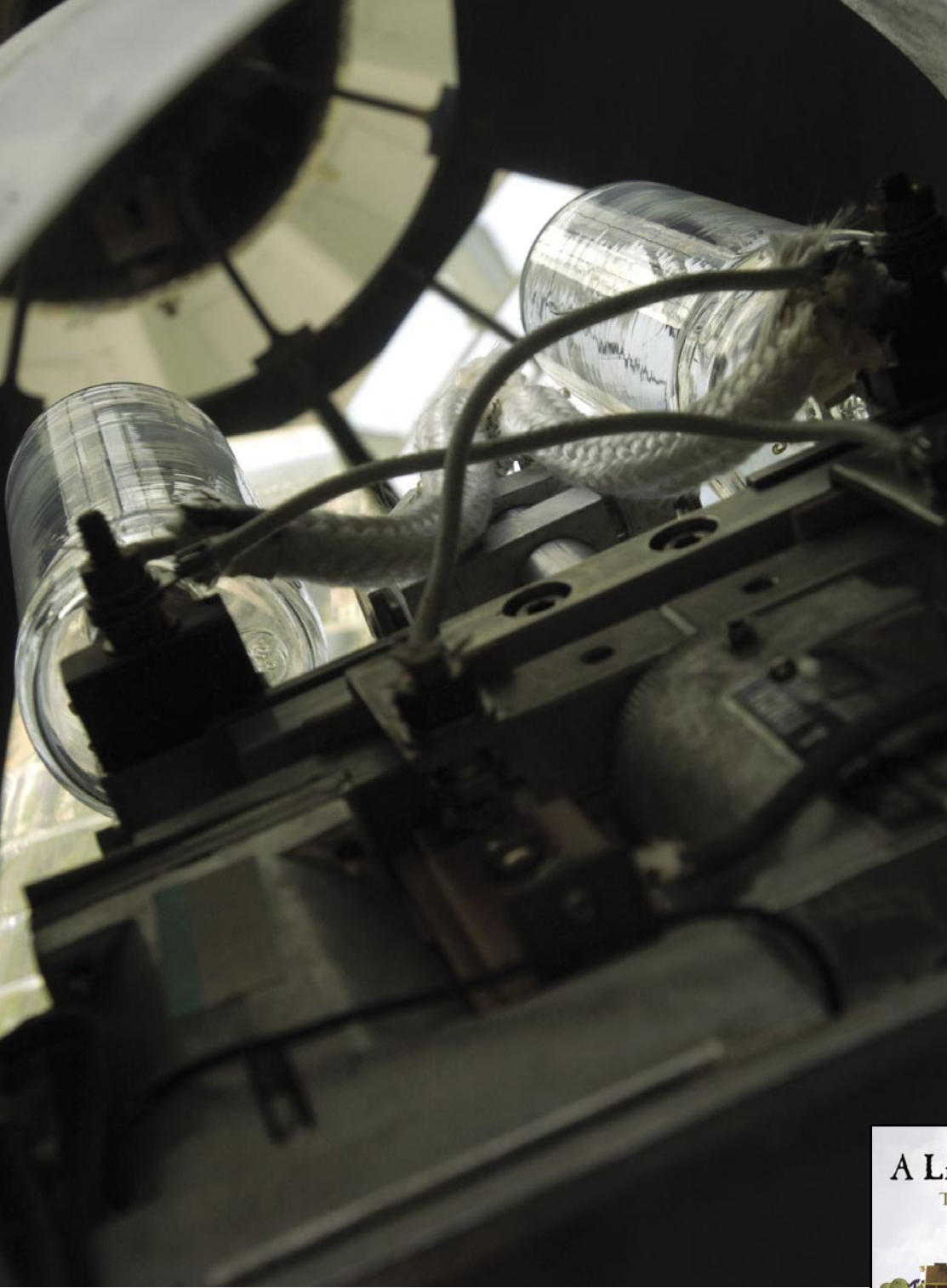
For nearly 150 years, countless mariners have looked to her brilliant beacon to steer them clear of rocky shoals and guide them to safe harbor.

Although still shining brightly while faithfully performing her maritime duties, Jupiter Lighthouse is best known today as a recreational destination for fun-seeking boaters from all over Palm Beach County and the nearby Treasure Coast. Boasting white sand beaches, spacious campgrounds, extensive picnic facilities, easily accessible boat ramps, fully equipped modern marinas, first-class dockside dining and lodging, Jupiter Inlet offers nearly every amenity for water lovers of all sorts, from the small boater to the sophisticated yachtsman.

Yet, it was not all that long ago when the area was not known for quite so many creature comforts. Simply put, it was down right desolate. So desolate that in the mid-19th century, dozens of shipwrecked mariners perished on the area's beaches for lack of fresh water. As more and more ships sunk off the perilous Jupiter Shoal, Congress in 1853 appropriated \$35,000 to construct a lighthouse. At the time, the site was part of the Ft. Jupiter reservation, established during the First Seminole War in 1836.

In a bizarre twist of fate, U.S. Army Col. Robert E. Lee was chosen to head up a team of surveyors to find a suitable location for the lighthouse, and Lt. George G. Meade of the Bureau of Topographical Engineers, was selected to help design the tower and assist in the overseeing of its construction. (Ten years later, both men would meet again at Gettysburg, Pa., where Meade would defeat Lee in the greatest battle ever fought on the North American continent.)

Photography By TRACIE VAN AUKEN

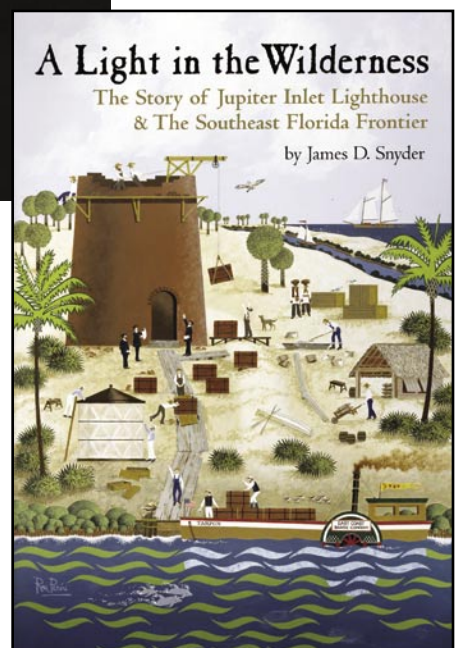


(Left) The twin bulbs inside the lens of the lighthouse emit light that is magnified by the lens itself. *(Below)* *A Light in the Wilderness* chronicles the creation of the Jupiter Lighthouse, as well as other events in the history of Jupiter and southeast Florida.

Work progressed slowly. Jupiter Inlet, although a natural passage, frequently sanded in. The resulting periodic interruptions forced the redirection of supplies through the Indian River Inlet (closed in 1914) 35 miles north. The shipments had to be ferried down the shallow river in small boats. Mosquitoes, malaria and the threat of Indian attack also forced numerous work stoppages. Work was further interrupted from 1856 to 1858 by the Third Seminole War.

Finally, after seven grueling years, the lighthouse was completed and first lit on July 10, 1860. Built at a cost of \$60,000 (nearly double what Congress had appropriated), the 108-foot brick tower (the natural mound underneath is 48 feet) with 31-inch thick walls at the base contained a fixed white light, varied by a brighter white flash every 90 seconds. The light was produced by a state-of-the-art Fresnel lens manufactured by the Henry Leparte Company of Paris and could be seen from an incredible 25 miles at sea.

Events on a much larger scale, however, would not allow the light to shine for long. Eight months later, Florida became the third state to secede from the Union. The



(Top) The Jupiter Lighthouse is still open to the public during limited hours, when one can climb to the top and take in the view of the Jupiter inlet.

(Below) James D. Snyder, author of *A Light in the Wilderness*, signs copies of his book about the Jupiter Lighthouse at an art gallery in Stuart.

assistant keeper, a Confederate sympathizer, organized a successful plot to capture the lighthouse from its pro-Union head keeper. Important parts of the lens were removed and hidden in a nearby mangrove swamp to prevent the lighthouse from falling into the hands of Union forces. The “newly darkened” inlet permitted Confederate blockade runners to operate clandestinely, albeit dangerously, without being silhouetted by the brilliant flash of the lighthouse. Despite the best efforts of the determined rebels, a Union agent by the name of Capt. James Armour later found the machinery where it had been hidden (Lake Worth Creek) and took it to Key West for safekeeping.

Shortly after the war, the missing parts were reassembled and the lighthouse was relit. Except for brief periods of repair, it has remained lit ever since. However, the lighthouse remained isolated. Supplies were delivered to the lighthouse keeper and his family just once a year by boat. Nearly always, the year’s supply of flour quickly went bad due to weevils and worms. To survive, the keepers were forced to hunt and fish for food. For additional sustenance, they purchased venison from local Seminoles for 10 cents a pound.

In the 1880s, the Coast Guard relieved the keeper from rescue duties and built a life-saving station close by. A telegraph was added in 1898, but little else changed until the lighthouse was painted red in 1910 to hide the discoloration of the brick. In 1928, the old mineral lamps and the weights that turned the lamp were replaced with electrical equipment. A diesel generator was also installed for emergency backup.

During the infamous “Killer Cane” of 1928, when nearly 3,000 in Palm Beach County perished in the powerful storm’s wake, the station’s recently constructed electrical plant was disabled. Local lore has it that the keeper’s 16-year-old son reinstalled the old mineral-oil lamps and turned the lens by hand to keep the light operating through the storm. (According to the keeper’s log, the top of the lighthouse swayed a full 17 inches during the monster hurricane.)

Although it could not have been foreseen at the time, the lighthouse was about to play its most important role ever.

In early 1940, when Britain’s Royal Navy was in the midst of a heroic life and death struggle against a relentless onslaught by Nazi U-boats, the U.S. Navy



established on the grounds of the lighthouse a secret listening post (code named “Station J”) to eavesdrop on German naval activities. For the remainder of the war, the station played a pivotal role in the Allies’ war effort by successfully tracking German submarines in the Atlantic. This was Jupiter Light’s “finest hour.”

Recently, well-known local author James Snyder released a new book on the lighthouse, *A Light in the Wilderness*. Snyder’s work vividly depicts the role of Station J during World War II as well as unearthing a number of long forgotten facts and anecdotes about the lighthouse.

■ How to Get There

If traveling by car, take I-95 south to Exit 87 (SR 706-Indiantown Road). Head east on Indiantown Road, turn left (north) on U.S. 1, and then make a right (east) at Beach Road. The entrance to Jupiter Lighthouse Park will be on your right hand side. If you're trailing a boat, the nearest ramps are located at Burt Reynolds Park off of U.S. 1.

For those who wish to visit the inlet by boat by staying "inside," take the Intracoastal Waterway until you reach ICW mile marker 1005 (GPS 26 56' 53" N, 80 05' 59" W). A favorite spot among boaters is the Loxahatchee River Sandbar. Located two miles west of Jupiter Inlet, the sandbar is about a half mile up the Loxahatchee River and is made of fine sand. So, it's OK to go barefoot!

Warning: Boats with deep drafts (more than 28-feet long) should not attempt to operate on the Loxahatchee River.

Lighthouse Historical Museum & Tour

The Jupiter Lighthouse Historical Museum is currently in the process of a \$1.3 million dollar renovation supported primarily through private donations. Located just inside the park's main entrance, the museum's artifacts are being combined with the extensive collection of the local Loxahatchee Historical Society. The new facility not only traces the history of the lighthouse, but that of the entire Loxahatchee River basin beginning with its Native American roots up through the pioneer era.

The museum is open Saturday through Wednesday from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, \$3 for students and children ages 6 – 18, and children under 6 years of age are free. The lighthouse and museum are closed Thursdays and Fridays as well as on the following holidays: New Year's Day, Easter, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Tours of the lighthouse are conducted (weather permitting) during museum hours with the last tour taking place at 3:15 p.m.. For an additional charge, sunset tours on the last Wednesday of each month are also available upon request.

Note: Participants for lighthouse tours must sign a liability waiver to be allowed on the property. In addition, no flip-flops or heels are allowed, and all climbers must be at least 48" tall. Cameras are permissible, but absolutely no bags, no pets and no smoking.

Dubois Pioneer Home

Sitting on a 20-foot Jeaga Indian mound and looking directly onto Jupiter Inlet, this well-preserved pioneer outpost features a Cape Cod/Florida Cracker design and gives you a glimpse into what life was like for Florida's early settlers. Interestingly, the home marks the precise location described by Jonathan Dickinson, the namesake of Jonathan Dickinson State Park, who in 1696 was shipwrecked and held captive for several days by the Jeagas. Jonathan Dickinson's Journal, one of the classic texts of Florida history, vividly chronicles his family's ordeal with the Jeaga Indians and their incredible 230-mile trek to safety in Spanish-controlled St. Augustine. Located on Dubois Road, just a short distance from Lighthouse Park, the home is open Wednesdays and Sundays from 1 p.m. - 4 p.m. Admission is \$2 per person.

Loxahatchee River Historical Society

Founded in 1971, the Loxahatchee River Historical Society (LRHS) is a unique cultural and educational institution based in Jupiter. Operating as a non-profit corporation with a dedicated group of volunteers, the Society operates the Dubois Pioneer Home, Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse, and the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Museum. The organization's mission is, "To collect, preserve, interpret, and promote the history of Florida, particularly emphasizing the southeast region and the area between the headwaters of the Loxahatchee River and the Jupiter Inlet," said Kathleen Glover, marketing director.

Glover could not quite hide her enthusiasm about her organization's plans for the expansion and renovation of Lighthouse



The Dubois Pioneer Home is located on what was once a Native American mound where Jonathan Dickinson was held captive by the Jeagas.

Park. "We are in the midst of a three-year project in which the LRHS will move into the two-storied waterfront military building which once served as the Married Men's Quarters for Station J. In addition to being able to display hundreds of fascinating artifacts inside the new museum, we will have an upgraded and expanded gift shop, and there will be signage and kiosks around the property's Indian mound (one of the largest in the state), as well as the old World War II buildings. We are also going to add additional activity space for summer camps and group tours so that when we are finished this will be one of the finest all-in-one educational and cultural facilities in the state."

If you're interested in volunteering your time or making a contribution to this worthwhile effort, call the Loxahatchee Historical Society at 561.747.6639 or visit www.lrhs.org.

Dining Dockside

The Crab House (561.744.1300) and Jetty's Waterfront Restaurant (561.743.8166) are located immediately south of the lighthouse and east of the U.S. 1 bridge. Both have docks directly in front of the restaurant and are located next to the well-equipped Jupiter Seasport Marina (561.575.0006).

The Square Grouper is a small "drinks only" tiki-style bar near the inlet. The locale is a favorite Jimmy Buffet hangout that was made famous in Buffet's and Alan Jackson's "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" music video.

On weekends, boaters can take advantage of Jupiter Floating Fast Food, converted houseboats serving burgers and hot dogs which anchor along the Intracoastal Waterway between the U.S.1 and Alternate A1A bridges. One of the floating eateries is permanently anchored just a short distance from the boat ramps at Burt Reynolds Park.



The Jupiter Lighthouse is known for its distinctive red color, which was painted on after its bricks began to fade.

“I was fascinated by the lighthouse and felt that it had never been done justice in the historical literature. So, I began researching the primary documents everywhere I could find them, from the Key West Library to the National Archives in Washington D.C. Because I suffer from writer’s disease, I decided to publish my findings,” Snyder joked.

Much of what Snyder has been able to unearth has intrigued those with an interest in the history of the lighthouse. “It was almost never built. With costs skyrocketing out of control, the secretary of state, John B. Floyd, wanted to forget the whole idea and so did most southern politicians at the time. Luckily, the northerners on the commission overseeing the project narrowly voted to keep it going by agreeing to send one last ship with a crew of 20 to get the job done. Well, a terrible storm arose and the ship overshot the inlet. They almost


didn’t make it,” Snyder said.

Snyder has also discovered that a previously unknown gentleman was actually the primary overseer of the lighthouse’s construction. “Capt. Edward A. York, clerk of works, someone no one had ever mentioned before in connection with Jupiter Light.” (As for any other neat little tidbits, you’ll have to read the book.)

A generation after its venerable role in our nation’s defense, in 1976, the federal


government placed the lighthouse on the National Register of Historic Places. It is the oldest structure in Palm Beach County. Amazingly, it was not until 1987 that the lighthouse was fully automated, being attended to by a keeper until that time. As for the original Fresnel lens, installed by Meade and his boys back in 1860, she’s still shining – as brightly as ever.

So whether you’re a water lover, a history buff, or a little bit of both, Jupiter Inlet might prove a welcomed destination. ■




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