

# The Thacher Island News

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## Association Volunteers receive Preserve America Stewards Award from the First Lady.

*The Thacher Island Association was honored recently when Mrs. Michelle Obama, First Lady of the United States, designated it as one of the nation's newest Preserve America Stewards.*

Here are some of the weekly volunteers on the island in 2009.



In her letter she said, "Preserve America Stewards are committed to preserving America's diverse physical and cultural heritage, and their work demonstrates how individuals who care deeply about serving their country and their communities can make a difference," Mrs. Obama continued. "I thank and commend the volunteers of The Thacher Island Association for protecting our nation's historic treasures, both for your fellow citizens as well as visitors from near and far. You set a wonderful example for our young people, who are the future stewards of our heritage, while also improving the quality of life and economic vitality of our nation."

Paul St.Germain, President of the Thacher Island, who recently received the letter from First Lady, commented that "this was a national recognition that is well deserved by the volunteers who have worked both on the island and off over the past 30 years. Volunteers are the heart and soul of this organization and their contributions have been the mainstay of the successes achieved. We are blessed with individuals who have hands on knowledge of carpentry, wood working, electrical, plumbing, mechanics, welding, painting, grounds keeping, solar electronics, computers, boat handling, masonry, metal work, fund raising, grant writing, and event planning."

The Preserve America program is a federal effort to encourage and support community efforts to preserve and enjoy America's priceless cultural and natural heritage. The goals of the initiative include a greater shared knowledge about the

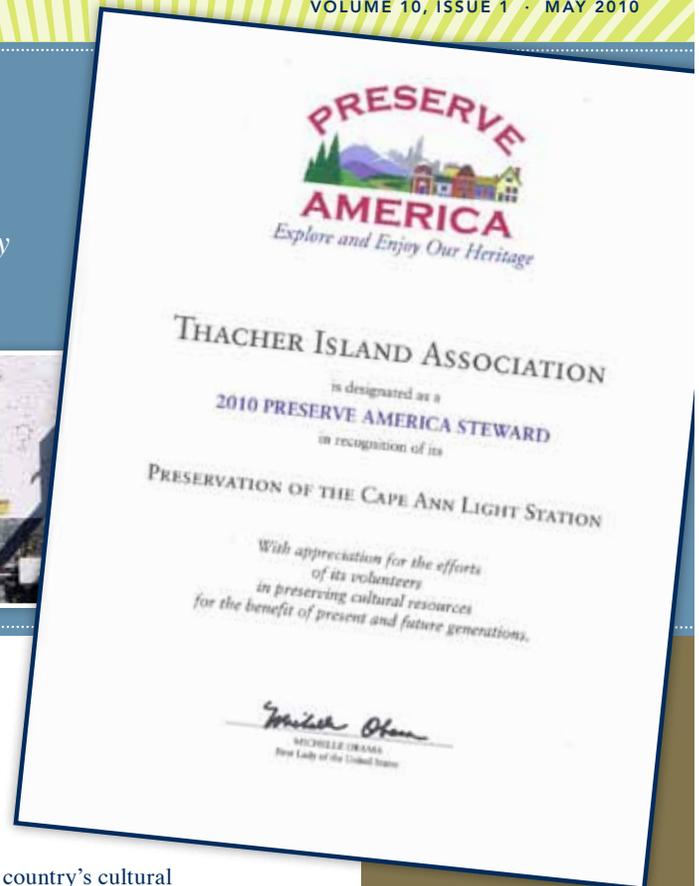
nation's past; strengthened regional identities and local pride; increased local participation in preserving the country's cultural and natural heritage assets; and support for the economic vitality of our communities.

This award is particularly important because it was awarded to only 8 recipients in 2010 and only 21 since the program's inception in 2008.

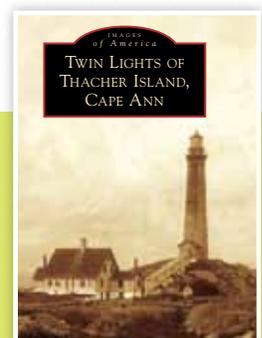
Volunteers typically provide over 3000 man hours a year to Thacher Island activities. Since 1994 the Association along with its volunteers has raised over 1.5 million dollars, all of which has gone back into the island.

## NEW BOOK ON THACHER ISLAND TO BE PUBLISHED IN MAY 2010.

Paul St.Germain is the President of the Thacher Island Association since 2002 and a Rockport resident for the past 20 years has recently completed a vintage photograph book on Thacher Island. In 2000 he researched and wrote the successful nomination application which resulted in designating the Cape Ann Light Station on Thacher Island as a National Historic Landmark by the Interior Department's National Park Service. During the two year research phase he unearthed a wide variety of original documents and photographs which traced the unique history of the twin lights of Thacher Island since 1635. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 3**



Official Certificate signed by First Lady Michelle Obama and presented to the Thacher Island Association volunteers.



## CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) administers Preserve America programs with the Department of the Interior, in cooperation with 10 other federal agencies. For more information visit [www.achp.gov](http://www.achp.gov) and [www.preserveamerica.gov/stewards](http://www.preserveamerica.gov/stewards) to see the page that showcases The Thacher Island Association volunteer efforts to care for important historic resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

### Straitsmouth Lighthouse.



## Straitsmouth Island Lighthouse accepted by Rockport Town Meeting.

On April 3 the Rockport Town meeting attendees voted unanimously to approve Article E of the Town warrant that stated; "To see if the Town will vote to authorize the Board of Selectmen to acquire by gift all right, title and interest held by the United States of America in and to that certain parcel of land known as The Straitsmouth Island Lighthouse containing approximately 1.8 acres of land more or less and located on Straitsmouth Island, off the coast of Rockport, Essex County, Massachusetts together with any improvements thereon; or act on anything relative thereto." The motion was made by Paul St.Germain, President of the Association, on behalf of the Thacher Island Town Committee and the

## Local TIA member donates ship models to the Thacher Island Museum.

Ed Locke, a TIA member and local Rockporter, has put his wood working skills to use. He has made several half hull ship models of various schooners and fishing boats that have inhabited the waters around Thacher Island in the 1800's. The models are made of a variety of woods including, poplar, mahogany and birch. Ed uses actual architectural boat drawings and from these he creates the half hulls that are to exact scale. These drawings came from Joe Garland's book *Down to the Sea*, the fishing schooners of Gloucester.

Each model is unique in shape and form. Ed mounts them on a wood back plate and adds a spar varnish finish to them.

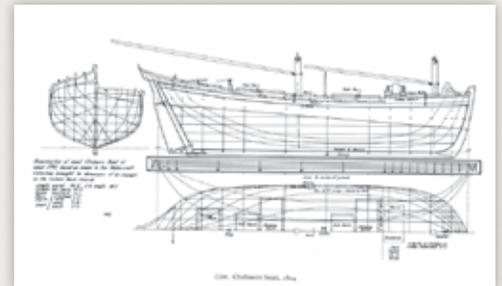
We provided Ed with a list of ships that we thought would be appropriate for the museum

exhibit. They include the Chebacco boat Lion about 1804 , the pinky Essex dated around 1821, the Gloucester schooner Onato ,built by Oxner and Story at Essex in 1904, and the Grace L. Fears ,1874 the boat that Captain Howard Blackburn went astray from in January 1883 fishing off Newfoundland. Blackburn was lost at sea for 5 days and rowed 60 miles in a blinding snow storm, lost his fingers from severe frostbite after wrapping his hands around the oars having lost his mittens.

Ed hopes to finish the series this summer. We plan to provide a special display area for all to appreciate his expert craftsmanship. We thank Ed for his generous donation and hope that we have many visitors to admire his work.



This half hull is model of the Chebacco boat Lion built in 1804. This is one of four different designs Ed Locke is building for the Thacher island Museum.



Chebacco Boat hull drawing from which Ed made his model.

Town of Rockport. He listed the reasons why this was a good idea for the town when he spoke on the issue stating;

- Reinforcement of Rockport's maritime heritage by ownership of a historically significant lighthouse dating to 1834 that is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.
- Addition of 1.8 acres of land to the Town's open space inventory at no cost to the Town.
- Acquisition of an attractive site which adds to the waterfront's scenic vista and to the Town's inventory of tourist attractions.
- Continue the Town's tradition to maintain and preserve historical buildings that add value to the Town.
- Preservation of a cultural icon to join the twin lighthouses of Thacher Island, Motif#1, Halibut Point, Paper House, Old Castle,

Community House and Library.

- Insures continued maintenance of Straitsmouth Island as a wildlife sanctuary in partnership with Mass Audubon.

**Next steps** include the signing and registering of the deed, and approval of a licensing agreement with the Mass Audubon for a right of way easement to access the lighthouse through their land. Then the biggest job will be to find sources of funding for the estimated \$300,000 cost to restore and repair the light tower over the next few years. Work is not expected to start until 2012 and depends on our success in soliciting funds via grants and donations.

# NEW BOOK ON THACHER ISLAND TO BE PUBLISHED IN MAY 2010.

## CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

He has been a board member of the Sandy Bay Historical Society as well as the Thacher Island Association. His interests in history and maritime activities, and living within view of Thacher Island, prompted his effort to create this pictorial history on behalf of the Thacher Island Association.

With assistance from the Sandy Bay Historical Society, the National Archives, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's office and many other sources, he has put together a revealing record and a fascinating pictorial history of this fabled island.

The book highlights how Thacher Island was named for Anthony Thacher, who in 1635 lost his four children and other family members in a shipwreck during the most severe storm ever to hit the Massachusetts coast. Only Anthony and his wife Elizabeth survived. The lighthouses have played an important role in several wars, including the Revolutionary War and World War I and II, when the navy established a radio compass station to protect the coast from enemy submarines. A ship bearing a U.S. president almost wrecked on Thacher Island, the island was used as a witness protection site for a Mafia criminal. Twin Lights of Thacher Island, Cape Ann captures the history, adventures, and intimate stories from over 200 years of lighthouse keepers living on the island, including how the two towers were built and how scientific discoveries were applied to improve the lights over the years.

Besides his focus on fund raising efforts for the restoration of the structures on Thacher Island, St.Germain volunteers

during the summer months to do carpentry work on the island. His current project along with his fellow volunteers is to restore the railway tram system which was used to transport coal and supplies around the island in the 1880's.

St.Germain said, "I hope this work will awaken more interest in Thacher Island, encourage membership to the Association as well as highlight the significant historical role Cape Ann Light Station on Thacher Island played in the growth of America. Proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the Association."

Arcadia Publishing has added this book to its Images of America series which celebrates the history of neighborhoods, towns, and cities across the country. Using archival photographs, each present the distinctive stories from the past that shape the character of the community today.

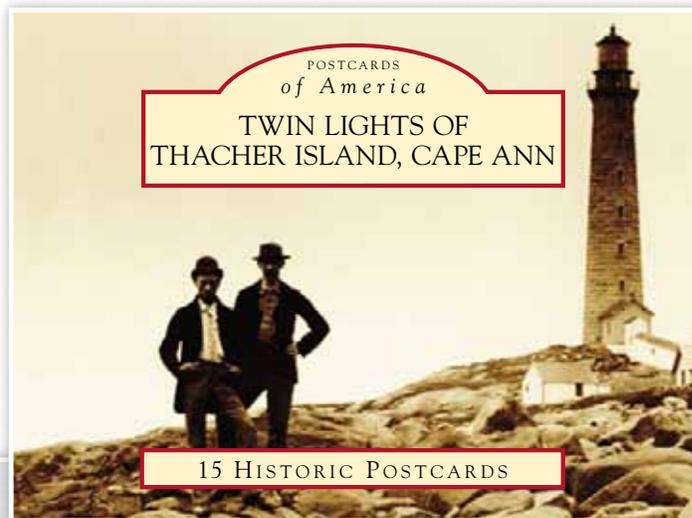
The book is 128 pages with 200 vintage

photographs, many never seen before.

It will retail for \$21.99 but is available through the Association for only \$19.00 including shipping if you renew your membership for 2010.

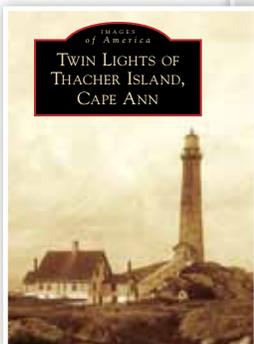
It is also available on Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com and a variety of other on-line book sellers.

Thacher Island Vintage Post Card packets, a companion piece to the book, are available featuring 15 different scenes taken from the book. The price is \$7.99 plus shipping also from the Association.

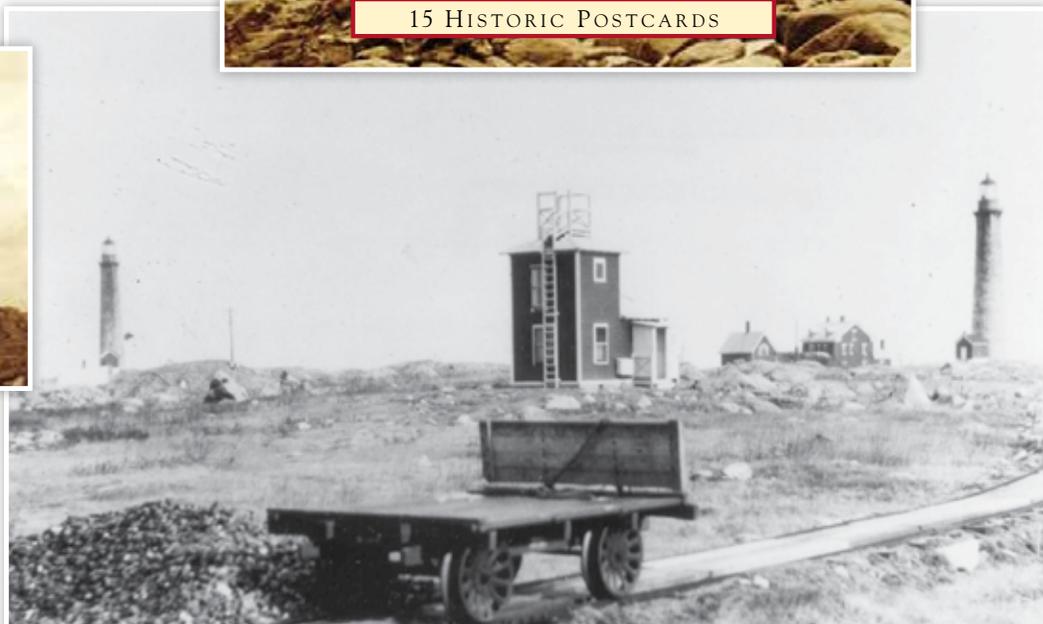


Postcard packet featuring 15 photos from the book.

Sample of a few of the 200 vintage photos included in the book.



Cover of new 128 page book by Thacher Island Association President, Paul St. Germain.



## Memories of a Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter.



Alice Orne Bickerton,  
age 83 in her home in Rockport.

Born on January 30, 1927, Alice Orne went to live on Thacher when she was only two weeks old with her father, First Assistant keeper Simeon Orne and her mother Gezella. Alice's mother boarded with a Mrs. Annie Dobson on South Street while awaiting Alice's birth. Dobson always opened her home to the keepers and their children in emergencies or when they could not get back to the island during stormy weather.

Alice remained on Thacher until 1933 when her father was transferred to Sandy Neck Light in Barnstable Massachusetts on Cape Cod.

This past June I spent some time with Alice Orne Bickerton to learn more of her life on the island.

Alice, the youngest of five children; her brother Curtis born in 1917, her sisters Florence born 1918, Jeska born 1921 and Eleanor (Ellie) born in 1923. Her family moved from Ilseford, Maine. Her Dad was originally with the U.S. Life Saving Service. He transferred to the Lighthouse Service and was assigned to Thacher in 1919. Simeon Orne served with Principal keeper Cecil Kelly, a bachelor, George Seavey, second assistant, Austin Beal, third assistant and Hubert Needham, fourth assistant.

Alice lived in the brick assistant keeper house adjacent to the principal keeper house. Their family was one of five families. The Seavey's had four chil-

dren, Melinda, Cara, Idella and Gladwyn. Austin Beal was married to Annie B. and had a son named Lloyd.

Alice remembered many stories about her time there. She related that there was no electricity and had to prime the pump in each kitchen for water which was stored in cisterns in each cellar. There were no toilets inside and they used an outhouse in the backyard. She told of the time Cecil Kelley, who she described as a prankster, would tie a goat to the door of the outhouse at night in order to scare the children when they went out to use the facilities at night.

Although she was too young for school she recalled her father rowing her siblings across Loblolly Cove so they could walk to school down South Street to the wooden school house (now the Boy Scout Hall). Most winters the children stayed at Mrs. Dobson's home for long stretches of time. The government paid her one a dollar a week for each child.

Alice had many good times on the island. She remembered the small coal cart railway stating "kids would love to be riding on those little cars. My brother would push the car up the hill to the whistle house and then we would ride it all the way down to the boat house by gravity. I broke my arm when I was about three."



The keeper crew in front of the boat house 1928. L. to R. Cecil Kelly principal keeper, Austin (Birdie) Beal, Simeon Orne, George Seavey, and Hubert Needham.



Simeon Orne standing in front of the North Tower on the railway track with his children in 1929. L. to R. their dog Tobey, Alice, Florence, Jeska and Ellie.



Alice at two years old in 1929

Recalling her mother Alice said, “my mother was known for feeding people. ‘have some more, have some more’ when we lived on Cuttyhunk Island the Coast Guard guys would patrol the island and they always stopped in and my mother would give them a nice piece of home-made pie. She used to cut the pie in four pieces—that was a piece of pie—a quarter of a pie. She did a lot of cooking, my poor mother.”

As Alice showed me many of her old photos she recalled “Oh, I can remember as kids we used to make a bonfire and we’d get these periwinkles and fill an old tin can with salt water and cook those up. We used to get a safety pin and eat those things. I tried it again when I was older, when I was pregnant with my first child, oh I got deathly sick. They didn’t taste as great.”

She particularly remembered working with her father on Cuttyhunk when she was about 8 or 9 years old. Cuttyhunk is the outermost of the Elizabeth Islands in Buzzards Bay. She and her family had lived on 4 lighthouse stations, Thacher, Sandy Neck, Dumpling Rock and Cuttyhunk. Her Dad served for 18 years in the Lighthouse Service and died at the early age of 54.

“He taught me how to light the light. I had to pump the pressure for the vaporizer. As a kid I had to stand up on the

thing. It was a vapor light thing and had what they called a mantle. They were so fragile, I had to swing it under the vaporizer. It had to get really hot then I would take the hood off and then it would glow inside the lens. The largest lens was on Thacher, because I remember you walk right into that one. The others were just small about half the size of a door.”(These were third and fourth order lenses at the other stations).

She recalled a shipwreck on Cuttyhunk and remarking “the islanders got these big bolts of cloth and all kinds of things, all from the wreck. You know, that was one of our pastimes because lots of liners and stuff, you could see them during the war and see convoys going all day and all night long. We used to have a telescope and I can remember lying down on my belly and looking at them going by.”

When ask what she did on the island she said “I’ll tell you what used to be one of our pastimes. We’d go out and we’d scavenge the beach and you’d be surprised, we’d get great big lounging chairs that would come off the decks of these liners. And then we would refinish them.”

Her father taught her to hunt. She recalled having cows and sheep on all the stations. She stated, “On Cuttyhunk we used to go duck hunting and eat a lot

of ducks and rabbits. They tasted pretty good the way my mother cooked them. Not all coots but I remember them saying shelldrake s and they’d soak them in soda and water overnight. My father would clean them and then she’d make a stew with gravy and dumplings. It tasted good.”

In recalling her sister Ellie she noted that she was married to a career Coast Guardsman, Manny Santos, and they were stationed on Thacher in 1947 and lived in the same house that they lived in 1927.

Alice had many more recollections which we have taped and will have available in the museum as an oral history collection we are in the process of creating.

Her final comment to me was “It was a good life though, a good life. I’d love to go back there and live, I really would. But you know you have to be a certain type of person, to enjoy your own company, and be able to read and stuff. I love looking back as you get older.”

Alice has not been back to the island for 60 years. The Association plans to take her back out to visit Thacher this summer. She said “she can hardly wait.”



Alice in the center with her sisters Jeska on the left and Eleanor (Ellie) on the right.



Simeon Orne stands near a ship wreck on south end of island.



Keeper children who lived on the island. L. to R. Gladwyn Seavey, Alice, Jeska, Ellie, Florence, Melinda Seavey and Curtis, Alice’s brother.

VISIT OUR VISITOR CENTER & MUSEUM

## Bill Lee, local fisherman, underwater researcher, marine surveyor and Thacher volunteer.



Bill at helm of the Ocean Reporter.

"I've recycled and diversified myself" said Bill Lee in a recent conversation. Bill Lee is a local fisherman who owns and operates the Ocean Reporter out of Rockport Harbor.

Bill was born and brought up in Rockport, a graduate of Rockport High School and a former Sea Scout. He joined the Navy as a Seabee and served a year in Vietnam and later in Puerto Rico as a welder. He was skipper of the oil rig barge Zeus in Gloucester Harbor working on dredging operations for the Gloucester sewer pipe project. He captained on an oil barge owned by Captain Dave at Rose's Marine in Gloucester. During his eight years there he delivered fuel to the Russian factory ships far at sea in the North Atlantic.

He eventually bought his own boat and started fishing in 1974. Bill, who turns 62 in August, recently sold his fishing license after fishing for ground fish for 35 years. Like many fisherman he could no longer

along with data for boat owners as to safety requirements and repair recommendations.

A few years ago he developed an interest in underwater photography. Purchasing some old security camera equipment at an auction and went on to construct a watertight camera case and lens system for his work. His underwater camera gear has the ability to record and film a variety of fish studies, fishing gear, bottom ground sediment studies, and shipwrecks. One of his first jobs was to test a side-scan radar system in Sandy Bay for Dr. Robert Ballard and the crew that discovered the "Titanic" in 1985. He won a gold medal second place prize in an international Kodak video contest. He produced a four minute underwater film entitled "Billy Bully the Lobster" and also stars as the voice of Billy. It can be found on You Tube. Bill has also done a video on the islands around Cape Ann including Thacher Island. He recently completed an underwater video for the coast guard investigation of the Patriot fishing boat which tragically sank off Gloucester last year with the drowning of two fishermen.

Bill now has contracts to take sediment samples for a variety of organizations. One of his first jobs was for the Army Corp of Engineers to test sediment samples in all harbors from Canada down the east coast and up the Hudson River to West Point, New York. He does marine surveys and fisheries research for Boston University, MIT and University of Massachusetts. He has done sand lance (sand eels) capture and research for the marine fisheries division as well as the New England Aquarium. The sand lances swimming in the N.E. Aquarium's tanks today were supplied by Bill. Bill has designed a number of new fishing gear nets and equipment to allow fisherman to reduce the amount of by-catch fish or to avoid disturbing the bottom when ground fishing. His underwater camera systems have been used to track fish migrating patterns as well as how fish enter and exit fishing nets.

Bill has been a very good friend to the Thacher Island Association. He and Bob Smith, who he calls his "Shore Captain" pull and replace the mooring buoys at Thacher every year. He also ferries a group of Thacher volunteers to the island during

the winter to check island conditions after big storms. For three years running he used his boat and seamanship skills to find and repair the underwater electric cable to the island. Bill is the resident expert on moorings around the Cape Ann area repairing or installing over 275 mooring annually.

Bill's office is now in the top floor of Motif#1 where he can keep an eye on all the boats in the harbor. His office is appropriately decorated with his many nautical artifacts, photos, and "do dads" given to him by many of the local fisherman whose wives won't let them hang them at home.

The Association thanks Bill Lee for his friendship and help on Thacher Island for the past 30 years.



The Ocean Reporter built by Lee in his backyard.

make a living due to the many new restrictive fisheries laws.

Bill said he has "zero fear of trying anything". Witness the fact that he has owned seven boats in his career, one of which was a WW II "Mike6" landing craft. He has had five boats named Ocean Reporter and two of those he built himself here in Rockport. His current steel boat was built in his backyard in 1986. It is 43 foot steel hulled fishing boat with a 365 HP Detroit Diesel with a three bladed prop that he has customized for his wide variety of work projects. He has sophisticated computers, monitors, radar and other specially designed mechanical equipment aboard.

He recently earned his marine surveyor license, inspecting boats and providing insurance companies information on boats



This cast iron U.S. Lighthouse Service 1830 sign was presented to the Thacher Island museum by Bill Lee.

### Bill Lee donates vintage sign.

While taking classes for a boat surveying course in Florida this winter, Bill Lee came across this vintage cast iron sign at a local nautical antiques store in Stuart, Florida. Although Bill claims that he bought it, the photo he sent us looks a little suspicious.

Curious as to where this sign came from Bill learned that it came from an antiques store in Key West, Florida. Investigating further we found that Key West was the headquarters of the Seventh District of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. The headquarters was located in the second oldest brick building in the town in Mallory Square. The sign may have come from that building when it was closed down and the Lighthouse Service was incorporated into the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915.