

A Brief History & the Point Isabel Lighthouse



🌟 On the occasion & the 150th Anniversary & the
Point Isabel Lighthouse. Port Isabel, Texas. 1852-2002



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We would like to thank Valerie Bates for the beautiful cover as well as the booklet design.



Point Isabel Light Station fig. 1

Point Isabel Lighthouse, 150 Years Strong

The Point Isabel Lighthouse, one of the nation's southernmost lighthouses, has been a landmark for the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas for the past 150 years. Located in the coastal town of Port Isabel, Texas, the lighthouse has withstood wars, hurricanes, and progress. Its resilience throughout the years has made it a symbol of the past and as an inspiration for the future.

Strategic Location

The name El Fronton De Santa Isabel or Point Isabel was derived from the natural land formation as well as from the Mexican grant it came from, *Santa Isabel*. The area formed a natural bluff that rose approximately 25 feet from the shore of the Laguna Madre Bay. One could see from the "point" a clear 360-degree angle of land and sea. Its strategic location was a natural lookout for viewing both the Laguna Madre Bay



fig. 2

and the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, across the bay from Port Isabel was a natural cut through the island from the Gulf. These natural formations were instrumental in the settlement



fig. 3

and development of this area and was an important force during the U.S./Mexican War, Civil War, and maritime commerce.



fig. 4

Inhabitants of the Area

The Coahilitcan Indians originally inhabited this land. During the 1500s, Spain sent explorers to find precious metals, land, and labor. Spanish galleons could have been seen regularly passing this area.

Lt. Alonso Alvarez de Pineda, the first European known to set foot

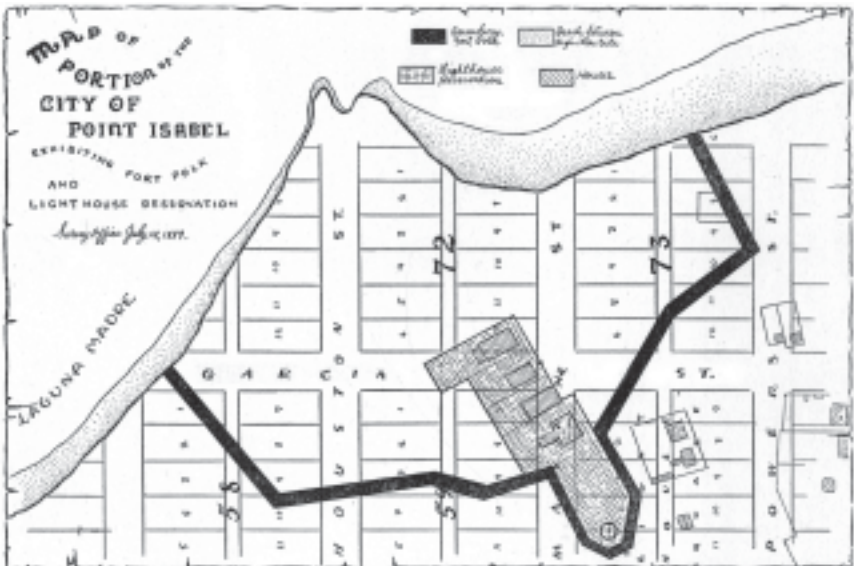


fig. 5



upon the land destined to become Texas. In addition, Alonso de Leon also explored this area. During the mid 1700s, Spain established the Colonia de Nuevo Santander, which established settlements across the south Texas plains, the Rio Grande and along the Gulf of Mexico. As a result of these Spanish land grants, new colonists and soldiers established ranchos where many head of cattle were raised. Doña Rosa Maria Hinojosa, owned land that comprised most of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy counties. Her son, Padre Nicholas Balli, later obtained a grant to what is now Padre Island.



Maritime Industry

The Texas coast gained importance to Mexico, the U.S., and smugglers from both countries during the early 1800s. Legend has it that Pirate Jean Lafitte took refuge in this area and dug a well in present day Laguna Vista, courted a mistress in Matamoros, and frequented Bagdad, an important international port city on the southern side of the mouth of the Rio Grande. Local ranchers formed business alliances with pirates who sailed their contraband between the Rio Grande and Corpus Christi. During the early 1800s, Mexico rebelled against Spain and finally gained independence. At this time the coast became more important to Mexico, the United States, and smugglers from both countries. Mexico opened the Port of Matamoros, about three miles from





fig. 9

the location of the Lighthouse. The bulk of trade was with New Orleans and other sea ports. Because of the port's prime importance, a Mexican sloop-of-war was stationed in the harbor near the entrance, the bar at Brazos Santiago. During the 1830s Don Rafael Garcia established El Fronton de Santa Isabel (Point Isabel) which became the base for the growing Port of Matamoros and the privateer fleet.

The U.S. Mexican War

In March 1846, General Zachary Taylor under orders from Secretary of War William Marcy lead approximately 3,000 soldiers from Corpus Christi across nearly 200 miles known as the *Nueces Strip* to the Rio Grande River to participate in what would be known as the U.S. Mexican War. The conflict involved land between the

Nueces River and the Rio Grande River.

Before arriving to his destination, Taylor stopped at a point of land where Port Isabel stands today and felt the strategic location of the natural bluff would be ideal to build a fortified supply depot to aide the soldiers fighting in and around the left banks of the Rio Grande River. The bastion was built and named for then President James K. Polk.

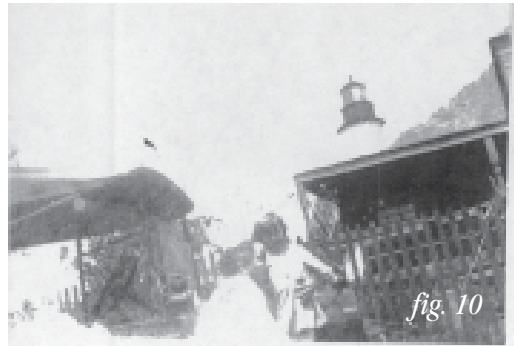


fig. 10



fig. 11

In Thomas B. Thorpe's book *Our Army on the Rio Grande*, an eyewitness account from the front, he states that Point Isabel before the arrival of the U.S. Army on March 25, 1846 "was... a small Mexican village,



fig. 12

composed of grass thatched cottages made of reeds or spars of wrecked vessels." There, on "a bluff some fifteen or twenty feet high" overlooking the Laguna Madre, lived "fifty or sixty idle inhabitants". He reported that a Mexican customs house at the Point was in the charge of a man "by the name of Don Roderiguez," and that the area was defended by a Mexican army officer, Garcia, "who had with him... a force of two hundred and fifty men, composed of infantry and artillery." The name of the place he said was Fronton de Santa Isabela. It was reported that when General Taylor established Fort Polk that many of the villagers, following orders from the Mexican Government, set fire to their homes. Only a few of the structures, most likely Jacales, huts made from mesquite and mud were saved. The fort included one of the largest military hospitals in the United States (186' x 68' surrounded by a 12' gallery). Famous individuals including Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and other notable men were stationed at this fort. Around the fort, sutlers and camp followers occupied some of the remaining homes and built some crude

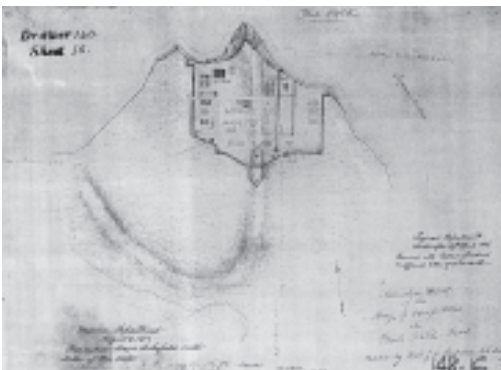


fig. 13

sheds and houses. A year later in 1847, with the growth of the fort and its surroundings, Simon Mussina attempted to establish the city of Point Isabel along the Laguna Madre west of the fort. In 1850, the United States Army evacuated the

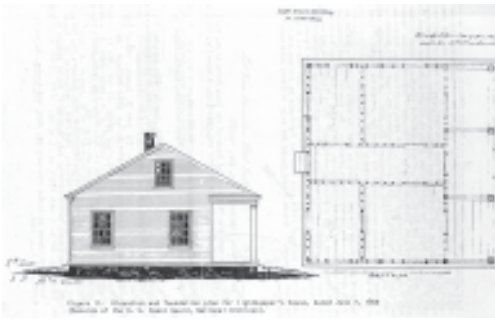


fig. 14

Civil War and numerous hurricanes, finally becoming Texas' smallest state park in 1952. However, in 1850, the U.S. government appropriated \$15,000.00 for construction of a beacon and lighthouse at Brazos Santiago. Through much controversy, Point Isabel was selected for the lighthouse location rather than Brazos Santiago. By 1851, the custom house was situated in the former commanding officer's quarters of Fort Polk, and the site selected for the lighthouse was the

interior of the main earthen bastion of the fort. John E. Garey of Brownsville was contracted for construction of the lighthouse. The Point Isabel lighthouse was completed and lighted on April 20, 1853 along with the beacon at Brazos Santiago on Padre

fort, and by 1851, Mussina's attempts failed.

The Building of the Lighthouse

In 1852, the Point Isabel Lighthouse was built to serve the maritime industry. It survived the



fig. 15

Island, a square wooden tower which was painted black. In 1855, Charles Stewart of Galveston was contracted to build a one-story, four-room-and-a-hall wooden house, 32' x 36', with



fig. 16

gallery, at a price of \$1,400.00. The workmen and materials were sent from Galveston.

Lighthouse during the Civil War

The Lighthouse served as a valuable function as a lookout tower during the Mexican insurrections and the Civil War. Confederate soldiers attempted to blow up the lighthouse as Union boats approached Point Isabel on May 28, 1863, but did not succeed, only slightly damaging it. In 1864, Union soldiers destroyed the Catholic Church and took the bell to Brazos Island.

fig. 17

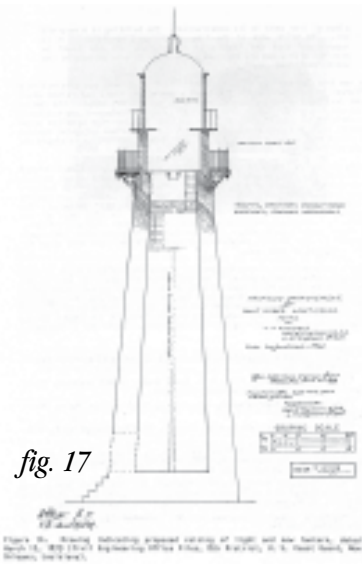


fig. 18



fig. 19

In 1865, Point Isabel lost its importance as a port due to a military bridge built from Boca Chica to Bagdad, Mexico, a prosperous shipping town that had a population of 15,000. In 1866 and 1867, bad weather destroyed Bagdad and once again Point Isabel prospered as a port. In the late 1860s the lighthouse was in good repair, part of the lighthouse

keeper's house served as an office for the customs collector and some of the remaining houses from the early Point Isabel settlement were said to be occupied by families of the soldiers of the Civil War.



fig. 20



fig. 21

Lighthouse during the 1870s -1890s

In the 1870s, with the new Rio Grande Railroad track, businesses were established south of the lighthouse and in 1875, a new town plat was developed. Daughters of Don Rafael Garcia named the streets east of the original town site. In the 1880s, the lighthouse lantern was modernized and harbor improvements to deepen the channel across the bar began. After the lighthouse was decommissioned, its structure was used as a tourist attraction.



fig. 22

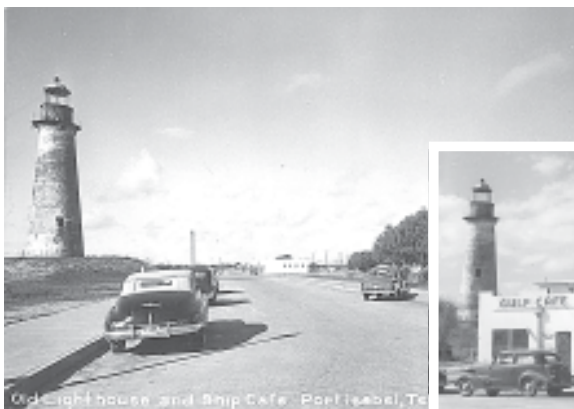


fig. 23



fig. 24

During this time, Point Isabel's population was 500 to 700. In the 1890s, the lighthouse was repaired and again relit. Charles Champion built a brick Victorian style building to be used as a dry goods store.



fig. 25

The Lighthouse during the 1900s

In the early 1900s, a new railroad linking Corpus Christi to Brownsville along with the sinking of the lighter *Luzon* at the railroad wharf led to a decline in shipping traffic, and in 1905 the lighthouse was permanently closed.



fig. 26

Since the turn-of-the-century, Point Isabel has become a recreational spot for relaxing and fishing and at one time

had the largest shrimping fleet in the nation. During the early 1900s, the square had some beautiful homes, one in particular



fig. 27



the Creagar home where President Warren G. Harding was entertained. By 1915, the population of Point Isabel declined to 300. At this time, the Wireless Station, one of the largest radio stations used for the military, was set up east of the lighthouse on 22 acres.

The Lighthouse during the 1920s

Wanting to attract more visitors, the newly renamed Port Isabel, incorporated in 1928, decided to develop a beach by removing the bluff. The hill on which the lighthouse stands is the original

elevation of the area. The removed soil was used to fill in a salt flat where the Port Isabel Yacht Club now stands. Several businesses and a hotel replaced the historic homes that once surrounded the Lighthouse Square. The booming tourist trade, however, bypassed Port Isabel for South Padre Island. By the 1920s, a new vision of Point Isabel was realized. The Port Isabel Company purchased the lighthouse from J. S. Ford of Brownsville. The Port Isabel Company repaired the lighthouse and opened it as a tourist attraction. In 1928, the City was incorporated and the slogan “Building a City where a City Belongs” set the premises of changing this small fishing village into a tourist destination. Streets were paved, canals were constructed, electric lights installed and industry and mercantile businesses established. After the 1933 hurricane many of the homes were destroyed and in their place businesses and a hotel which was known as Purdy’s Point on the bluff were built.

Today

Today, Port Isabel has blossomed once again with unique shops, restaurants, historic hotels, and museums that make up this historic and colorful community. Spend a day discovering Port Isabel- climb the beautiful newly restored Point Isabel Lighthouse for a breathtaking view of the Laguna Madre, learn about Port Isabel’s fascinating history by visiting both the Port Isabel Historical Museum and the Treasures of



fig. 30



fig. 31



fig. 32



fig. 33



34



fig. 35



fig. 36

the Gulf Museum, select a unique gift at of the many fine specialty shops, savor the flavors of the region by visiting the many restaurants, and pick up fresh seafood from one of the oldest fish markets in the area. Many of these places are within walking distance from each other. We hope you enjoy your visit to historic Port Isabel.

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

John Ham 30 August 1853 - 8 March 1860

Hannah Ham 8 March 1860 - Civil War 1861

Closed for Civil War 1861 - 1866

Benjamin Bergreen.....17 March 1866 - 4 February 1868

Frank Meyer.....4 February 1868 - 24 August 1869



fig. 37



fig. 38

Henry Wildman..... 24 August 1869 - 12 September 1884
 Herman Schreiber..... 12 September 1884 - 26 May 1888
Closed 7 years to settle property ownership
 William Egly 13 May 1895 - December 1905
Closed December 1905

LIGHTHOUSE ASSISTANT KEEPERS

Hannah Ham 30 August 1853 - 8 March 1860
 William E. Thwaites 8 March 1860 - 4 October 1860
 James S. Thwaites 4 October 1860 - Civil War 1861
Closed for Civil War 1861 - 1866
 George Sanders 17 March 1866 - 4 November 1884
 Verdine E. Hodgson 2 November 1884 - 20 November 1884
 William Egly 29 December 1884 - 6 March 1886 (Acting)
 6 March 1886 - 9 April 1888
Closed 7 years to settle ownership
 Frank Garriga 11 May 1895 - 22 December 1895
 Peter Lambert 10 January 1896 - 15 January 1899
 James Hill 17 February 1899 - December 1905
Closed December 1905

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*fig. 19- US belt buckle, found locally****

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*fig. 39- Diagonal aerial of downtown Port Isabel, ca. 1970s****



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***photo: Valerie Bates*

****Rod & Valerie Bates Collection*

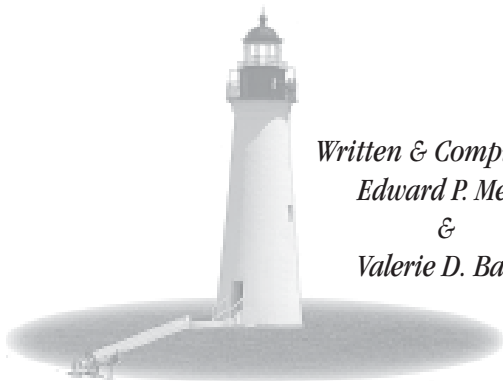
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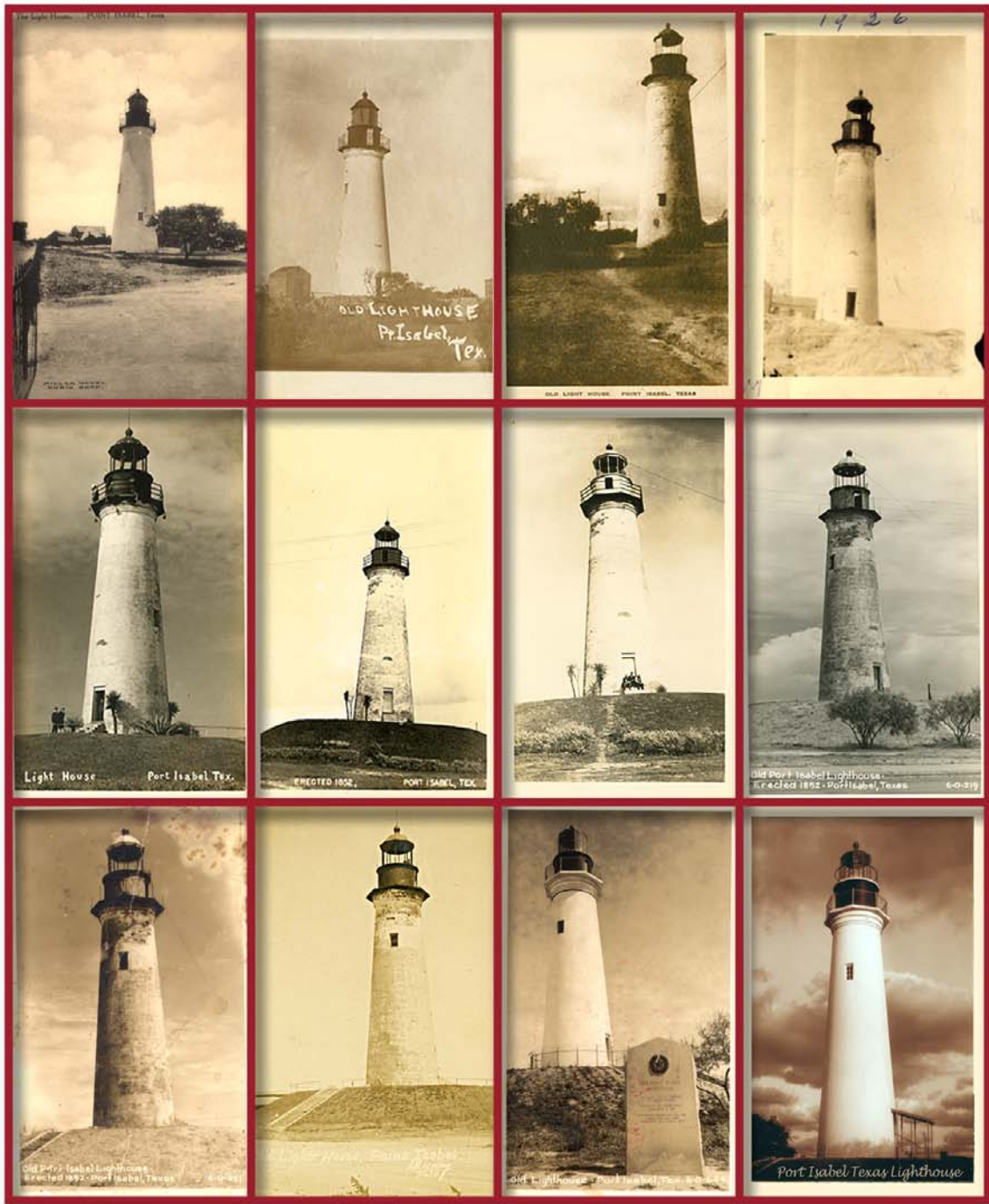
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Point Isabel Lighthouse
Sesquicentennial



Pictorial View of 100 Years of the Port Isabel Lighthouse:

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1. 1890s | 2. 1890s | 3. 1900-1910 | 4. 1926 |
| 5. 1930s | 6. mid 1930s | 7. late 1930s | 8. early 1940s |
| 9. mid 1940s | 10. late 1940s | 11. 1952 | 12. 1990 |



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