

Florida's Historic Lighthouses

A lighthouse is a tower with a bright light at the top, located at a landmark or dangerous place for navigation (travel over water). The lighthouse is like a traffic sign on the sea. It can warn the sailor of dangerous reefs beneath the sea or perilous coasts on land. It can guide ships into a safe harbor or back out to sea. Every lighthouse tells the mariner, "Here I am. Now you can compute where you are."

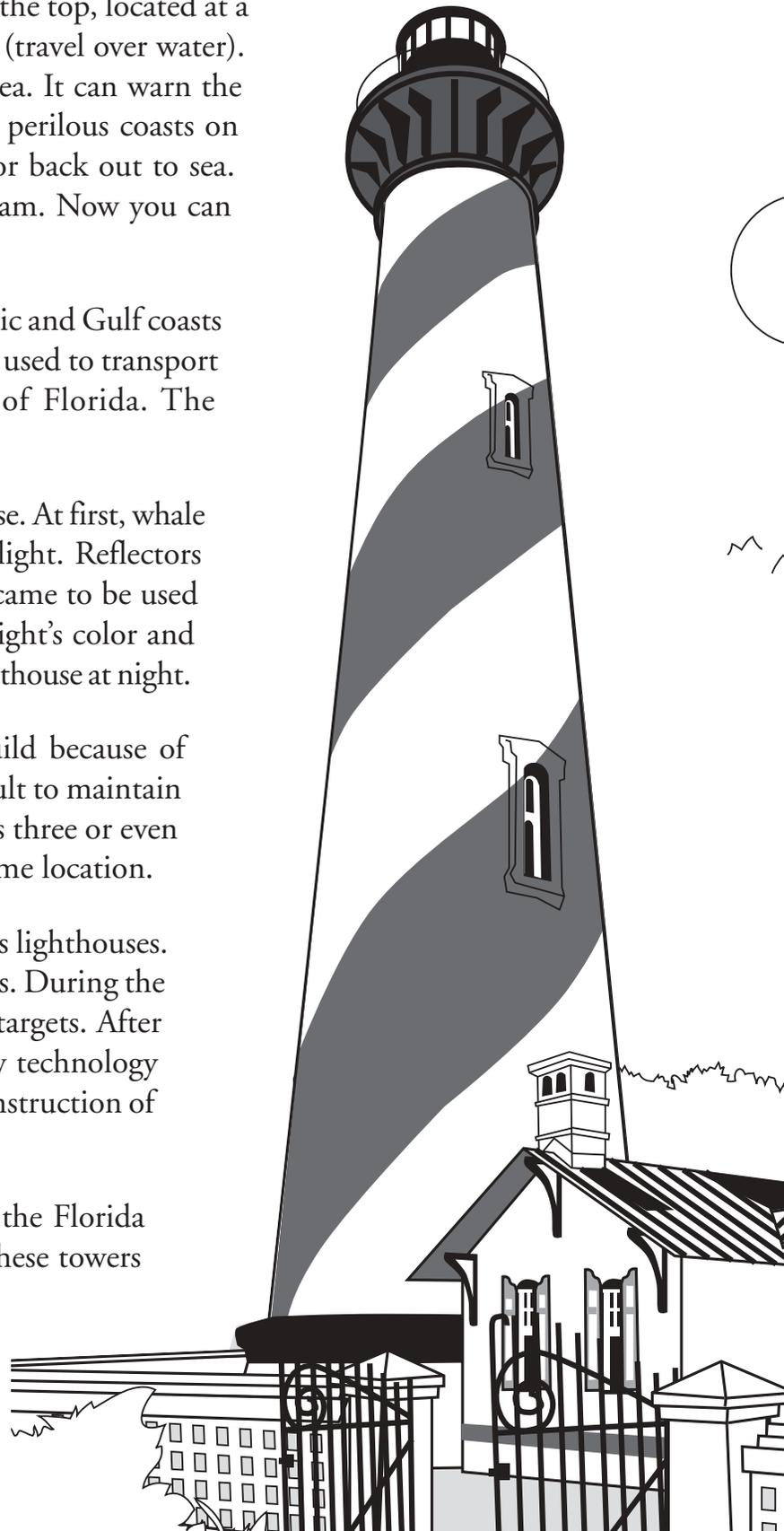
Many lighthouses were built along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of Florida. In the early days, ships were often used to transport people and goods around the peninsula of Florida. The lighthouses helped guide those early sailors.

Typically, the light shone from sunset to sunrise. At first, whale oil and kerosene were used to produce the light. Reflectors magnified the light beam. Later, electricity came to be used and a lens magnified the light beam. The light's color and flashing code could be used to identify the lighthouse at night.

In Florida, lighthouses were difficult to build because of soft sand, insects, and heat. They were difficult to maintain because of hurricanes. Over time, sometimes three or even four replacement towers were built at the same location.

Not only forces of nature challenged Florida's lighthouses. They were also challenged by historical events. During the Civil War, some became lookout posts and targets. After the war, materials such as cast iron and new technology such as skeletal steel towers permitted the construction of towers more suited to Florida's shores.

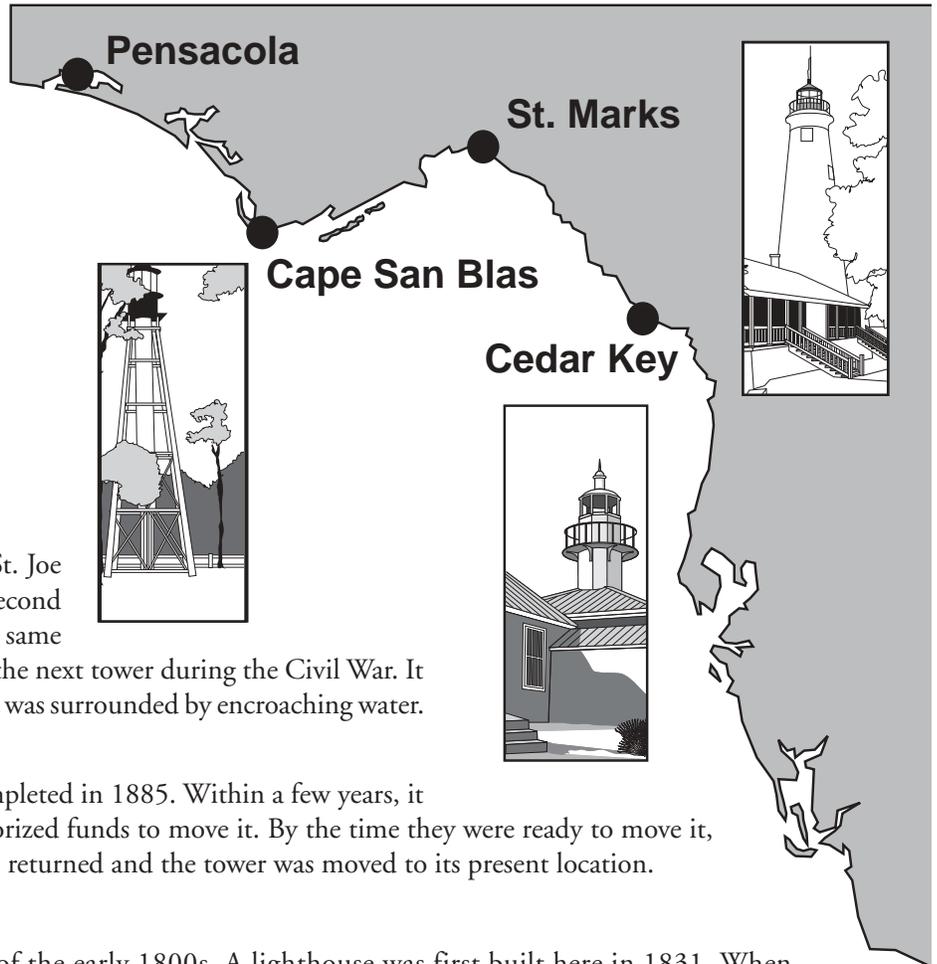
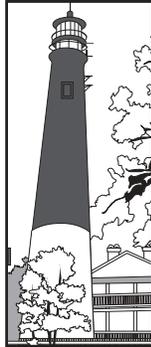
Today, 40 Florida lighthouses are listed on the Florida Lighthouse Page on the Internet. Some of these towers continue as active aids to navigation. Others serve as centerpieces to parks or historical sites. All remain as landmarks to their maritime



Pensacola Lighthouse

The U.S. government designated Pensacola as a Naval base in 1824. They authorized a lighthouse for the location. Pensacola lighthouse is the oldest lighthouse site on the Gulf Coast. The original 30-foot lighthouse was never tall enough or bright enough for such an important location. It was replaced and is now 171 feet tall and on a hill.

During the Civil War, Confederate troops attacked Pensacola. The tower survived with minor damage but the lens had to be replaced. Pensacola Lighthouse is located on the Pensacola Naval Station. The grounds are accessible for a lighthouse visit. The tower is open by appointment and on Sundays during the summer.



Cape San Blas Lighthouse

The lighthouse established in 1847 at Port St. Joe was blown over in a storm four years later. A second tower lasted only a few months before the same thing happened. The Confederates blew up the next tower during the Civil War. It was repaired after the war. By 1880, the tower was surrounded by encroaching water. It eventually toppled over.

The present 90 foot, skeleton tower was completed in 1885. Within a few years, it too was threatened by water. Congress authorized funds to move it. By the time they were ready to move it, the water had receded. Eventually the waters returned and the tower was moved to its present location.

St. Marks Lighthouse

St. Marks was a prominent Spanish town of the early 1800s. A lighthouse was first built here in 1831. When erosion threatened it was moved and rebuilt. During the Civil War the tower was damaged with one third of its base blasted away. It was reconstructed and relit. It is now in the National Wildlife Refuge. The tower is only opened during special occasions.

Cedar Key Lighthouse

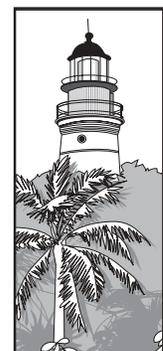
Cedar Keys Lighthouse was built in 1854 on a small island named Seahorse Key. The lighthouse is only 30 feet tall, but it is located on a sandy peak that is 42 feet high bringing the total height of the light to 72 feet. During the Civil War, Union ships attacked the island and captured two cannons.

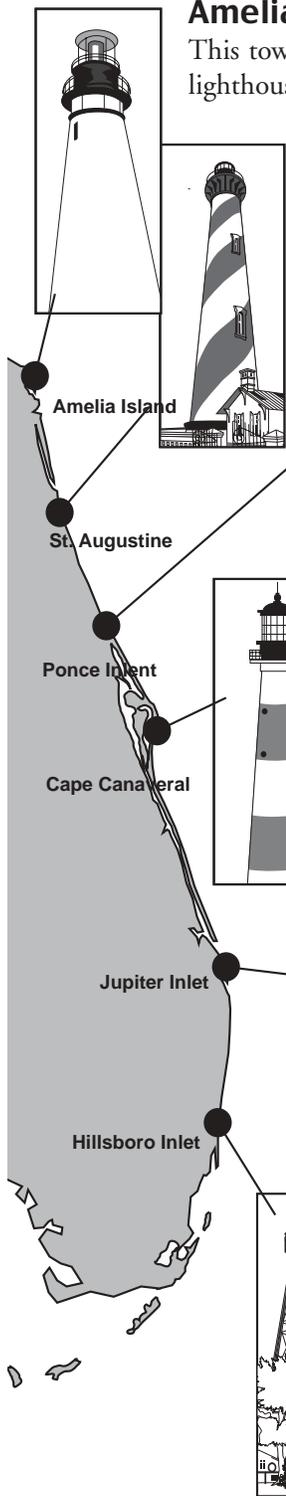
Trees growing up on the island and the presence of smaller lights in the surrounding area made the lighthouse less effective. In 1915, the lighthouse was discontinued. The entire island was made part of the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge in 1936, making it one of the largest bird nesting areas in Florida.

Key West Lighthouse

Originally completed in 1848, the tower was 66 feet tall. When a taller lighthouse was needed, 20 feet was added to the original tower. The lighthouse is no longer an active navigation aid. Today it serves as a working museum. Visitors may climb all the way up into the lantern.

Key West





Amelia Island Lighthouse

This tower was constructed at Great Cumberland Island, Georgia, and moved to Amelia Island in 1838. The lighthouse is located at the mouth of the St. Mary's River. The red sector in the lamp warns ships approaching toward the shallow water. Amelia Island Lighthouse has been modified several times but is still active. The tower is located in what is now a residential area.

St. Augustine Lighthouse

A watchtower was built on Anastasia Island to guard St. Augustine from pirate attacks. In 1824, a light was installed in the old watchtower. St. Augustine became the home of Florida's first lighthouse. Due to beach erosion and damage during the Civil War, the original tower was replaced in 1874.

The lens makes one rotation every 90 seconds. It has three bulls-eyes giving St. Augustine lighthouse its characteristic flash every 30 seconds. Both the tower and a museum in the keeper's house are open daily.

Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse

A lighthouse was first built on Ponce de Leon Inlet, south of Daytona, in 1835. Soon after it was finished, a severe storm washed much of the sand away from the base. Within a year, the tower had fallen into the ocean. In 1887, the present Ponce Inlet Lighthouse was completed.

At one time, the lighthouse was taken out of service and replaced by a beacon at the New Smyrna Coast Guard station. High-rise condos obscured the Coast Guard beacon and the old Ponce lighthouse was returned to service.

The tower, grounds, and museum are open daily. The light is on and the lens is rotating. It casts its historic beam around the walls of the museum.

Cape Canaveral Lighthouse

This lighthouse was completed in 1868. It was dismantled and moved a mile west in 1893 when beach erosion threatened. It is located on the grounds of Kennedy Space Center.

Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse

Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse was first lit in 1860. Heat, mosquitoes, and Seminole Indians hampered its construction. Confederate troops put out the light only one year later. It was relit in 1866. At 125 feet, the tower is a little short for a coastal lighthouse. However, it sits on a hill and this helps.

The lens is still in use. A bad hurricane in the 1950s damaged one of the bulls-eyes. It was glued back together to save it. The lighthouse is on a Coast Guard base. The tower is open for climbing and there is a museum.

Hillsboro Inlet Lighthouse

This 132 foot skeletal tower was constructed in Chicago and exhibited at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition. It was reconstructed in Hillsboro Inlet at Pompano Beach. The light can be seen for 25 miles. Hillsboro Inlet Lighthouse can be viewed from a waterfront park across the Hillsboro Inlet waterway from the lighthouse.