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PONCE DE LEON INLET

by ALICE STRICKLAND

IN ITS DAY it has been called the "Killer Inlet" because of its treacherous bar that has ripped out the insides of ships and hurled men to the sandy, shifty bottom to strew their white bones like beads from a broken necklace. From early Spanish times it was named Mosquito Inlet; since 1926, it has been called Ponce de Leon Inlet.

Located on the eastern side of Volusia County, on Florida's northeast coast, its two salt water lagoons called rivers, extend to the north and south of the Inlet. The Halifax River, named in British times for George Montagu Dunk, Earl of Halifax, is north of the Inlet, and to the south is Indian River North. Until 1901, this latter river was known as the Hillsborough River.

About twenty-three miles north of the Inlet, the Halifax River ends in the Tomoka Basin, into which runs the fresh water of the Tomoka River. Early Spanish documents referred to the Inlet, Indian River North, Halifax River - and even lands along the Tomoka - as Mosquito, Los Mosquitos, Mosquettos, Muschetos, and other variations of the word. The Memorial of Captain Antonio de Prado of 1569, gives one of the earliest references to the Inlet, describing it as the port of Mosquito.¹ The captain said the Indians in this area had killed many of the Spaniards who were shipwrecked or travelling along the coast from Canaveral to Los Mosquitos.²

Likely, there was no settlement in this area during the first Spanish occupation of Florida. It was the British who started the first settlement on lands adjacent to the Inlet. Governor James Grant, first British governor of East Florida, wrote a letter May 8, 1765, recommending the erection of a small fort in the area:

My Lord:

I have the honor to send your Lordship, by this conveyance (The Grenville Packet Boat having been lost) a Plan

1. Jeannette Thurber Conner, ed., *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1925), I, 291.

2. *Ibid.*

of the Mosquetto Harbor, which, from its Soundings and Situation, Your Lordship will See is the best-which has yet been discovered in this Province. . . .

I expect that a Number of People will soon settle at land near the Mosquettos, a Detachment of his Majesty's Troops appears to be necessary to give a Countenance to those Inhabitants upon their first Establishment in that remote and yet uncultivated country. Your Lordship will please to Observe a Place marked in the Plan, for such a Post; There is Stone and Lime upon the Spot and wood in plenty near it, a small Fort or Barrack, for Three Officers and Fifty Men, could be made for about 300 pounds. From the Situation of the Place, which Your Lordship will see is a Peninsula, no Indian Enemy could hurt or even disturb the Garrison, which has been made to many American forts.

Such a Post would be no real Security to the Inhabitants, but it would make them easy in their own Minds. Business would be carried on by that means, with more Spirit. The Proximity of the Troops, therefore, would be of very great Utility in forming that Settlement.

As the Plan proposed is not attended with great Expense, if it should appear to your Lordship to be a necessary measure for the good of this Infant Colony 'tis to be hoped you will take it under your Protection and recommend the Execution of it to His Majesty.

I have the honor to be, with the greatest
Respect My Lord,

Your Lords most Obedient and most
humble Servant

James Grant ³

About a year later, some forty people came to the Mosquito Inlet from the Bahamas to cut live oaks, highly prized for ship-building because of their durability, buoyancy, and strength. The cutting of Florida live oak continued almost into the twentieth century, and scores of ships sailed from the Inlet loaded with this valuable cargo. ⁴

History does not record the story of these Bahamians, and it is not known whether they left Florida or were still at the Inlet when the more than fourteen hundred Italians, Minorcans, Corsicans, and Greeks were brought to the lands along the Hills-

3. *Transcriptions of the British Colonial Office Records*, copied from the Library of Congress Collection for the files of the Florida Writers Project, Work Projects Administration, II, 565-566.

4. W. T. Cash, *The Story of Florida*, 4 vols. (New York, 1938), I, 148.

borough (Indian River North), two miles south of the Inlet, by the Scottish physician, Dr. Andrew Turnbull, in 1768.⁵ Named New Smyrna in honor of the birthplace of Dr. Turnbull's wife, the colony was ill-fated; its leaders became involved in political squabbles with acting British Governor John Moultrie and Governor Patrick Tonyn. The colonists revolted while Turnbull was away visiting at a plantation north of New Smyrna. When he received the news, he returned to the colony immediately and sent for help from St. Augustine. A ship loaded with stolen provisions was taken by some of the dissatisfied colonists who attempted to escape by sailing through Mosquito Inlet. The timely arrival of British ships from St. Augustine, however, prevented many rebels from escaping and the revolt was brought to an ignominious end. In the summer of 1777, when Dr. Turnbull was on a visit to England, the colonists abandoned the settlement and moved to St. Augustine.

In the meantime, other British subjects, among them Sir Richard Oswald, John Moultrie, James and John Grant, Colonel James Moncrief, and Captain Bissett, received large land grants in the Mosquitos. On Bissett's plantation, Mount Plenty, there was a large Indian mound which served as a lookout, a twenty-by-thirty-foot frame dwelling house, offices, indigo vats, hen houses, a stable, barn, corn house, and cabins for seventy slaves. The Mount was covered with a sour orange grove and there was an abundant supply of the "Kali Weed of which the Barilla potash is made."⁶ The plantation flourished until 1779, when a Spanish privateer sailed into Mosquito Inlet and sent armed boats up the Hillsborough River, committing depredations.⁷ After the attack, Bissett abandoned the property, probably because he feared other trouble.

Governor Grant's suggestion to build a fort near the Inlet evidently had been heeded, since the records show that during the turbulent era after 1783, when Florida was ceded back to the Spaniards, "a sergeant and eight men mutinied against their

5. E. P. Panagopoulos, "The Background of the Greek Settlers in the New Smyrna Colony," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXV (October 1956), 114.

6. Wilbur Henry Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1929), II, 250-251.

7. *Ibid.*, II, 309.

superior officer and deserted from the Mosquito blockhouse.”⁸ The deserters did not travel far before they were captured by the militia who were well rewarded for their efforts. A beacon was also maintained at the Inlet during British times, and pilots were on hand to assist vessels over the treacherous bar.⁹

In 1788, a ship slipped quietly into Mosquito Inlet carrying one of the most colorful and controversial figures in all Florida history, William Augustus Bowles, whose life story is as exciting and as full of adventure as any hero of modern historical fiction. At the time, Bowles was associated with Lord John Murray Dunmore (Governor of the Bahamas) and the trading firm of Miller and Bonamy of Nassau, and was now on his way with sixty followers planning to capture the store near Lake George, opened by the rival trading firm of Panton, Leslie Company.¹⁰ This venture failed and his followers deserted, but Bowles continued with his wild schemes and spectacular adventures.

Antonio Ponce was granted 170 acres of land “at Orange Grove at the bar of the Mosquito” by Enrique White, the Spanish governor of East Florida, October 11, 1803. The claim to this property by Ponce’s widow and heirs was confirmed in February 1827, by the United States after Florida had become an American territory. Old grants that once belonged to the British were again cleared by the new American owners, and it is believed that by 1835, at least sixteen plantations flourished along the Tomoka, Halifax, and Hillsborough rivers. Produce from these plantations was brought down the rivers in slave-manned boats to Mosquito Inlet to be transhipped to northern and European markets. Before the outbreak of the Seminole Indian War in 1835, ships often sailed into the busy Inlet. On March 30, 1830, planters and ship captains doing business at the Inlet sent the following petition to Congress asking for the erection of a lighthouse:

The Memorial of the Subscribers, Inhabitants, of Mosquito County in the Territory of East Florida, and Masters of Vessels, and others, now in the Harbour of New Smyrna in said District, Respectfully Sheweth, that we are suffering considerable privations, and difficulties, in the trade to this

8. *Ibid.*, I, 144.

9. *Ibid.*, II, 379.

10. *Ibid.*, I, 178.

quarter in consequence of there being no Light House at Musquito Inlet, of Buoys on the bar; that Since the Territory came into the possession of the United States, the intercourse and trade of this immediate district, has rapidly ecreased [*sic*], and from the zeal manifested in taking up lands for the culture of Sugar it may fairly be presumed, that a Vast business will ere long be carried on in that article, in addition to which large Quantities of Live Oak timber, so essential in the construction of our Navy, grow in this Section of the Territory all of which must pass over Musquito Bar, we would here further state that during the last fifteen months about Thirty sail of Vessels (principally Brigs, and large Schooners) have passed over this bar, and that at this time there are seven sail of vessels in this Harbor, ready for Sea; We therefore respectfully request your honorable body to pass a law for the erection of a Light House, on South side of Musquito Inlet, and placing buoys on the Bar, and your memorialists in duty bound that ever &c. ¹¹

A contract was awarded October 31, 1834, to Winslow Lewis of Boston to build a lighthouse, and a brick dwelling on the south shore of the Inlet. ¹² The lighthouse tower was to be "round, the foundation to be laid as deep as may be necessary to make the whole fabric secure. The height of the tower to be forty-five feet from the surface of the ground - the diameter of the base twenty-two feet and that of the top, ten and one-half feet - the walls to be three feet six inches thick at the bottom, graduating to two feet at the top - laid in good lime mortar - plastered on the outside with Roman Cement, and white washed twice over. The floor of the Light House to be paved with brick, circular stairs connected with a center post to be carried up from the floor to within six feet of the deck of the lantern. The stairs to be made from two inch plank, eight inches rise; to be three windows and a door in the tower - the door to be six feet high and three and a half feet wide, made of inch boards, double and cross nailed, with strong hinges, lock and latch; the windows to have strong frames, and sashes to contain twelve lights 8 x 10 glass." ¹³ The lantern was to be of wrought iron and octagon shaped, each light containing an iron shade. The twenty-one lights

11. Clarence E. Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Florida: 1828-1834*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1959), 378.

12. National Archives Record Group No. 26, "Contract for Light House at Mosquito Inlet, Florida."

13. *Ibid.*

would "be glassed with the first quality of glass of double thickness from the Boston Manufactory, except the lower tier which is to be filled with copper."¹⁴

The one-story, two-room dwelling was to be thirty-four by twenty feet in size. Each room would have a fireplace. Walls would be twenty inches thick, painted white; walls and ceilings would be lathed and plastered; and floors double and well nailed. The roof was to be rectangular, covered with good dry boards, and well shingled. There would also be a cellar with stone walls, twenty inches thick. A brick porch was to be attached to the house, and there would be a well and cistern.

Lewis also agreed to fit up the lighthouse with "eleven patent lamps, eleven fourteen inch reflectors, spare lamps, double tin oil butts sufficient to hold five hundred gallons of oil, one lantern canister and an air trivet, one stove and funnel, one tin wick box, one tin tube box, one oil carrier, one oil feeder, six wick formers, one hand lanthorn, and lamp, two tube cleaners, one glazier's diamond, two files and a pair of scissors."¹⁵ The contract was to be completed before March 1835, and the price was \$7,494.

The lighthouse was completed in 1835, but was never put into service. A gale the same year washed the sand away from around the foundation, and because of Indian disturbances, repairs could not be made and the tower eventually collapsed.¹⁶ The Indians also damaged the lighthouse at the very beginning of the Seminole War, probably January 1836. James Ormond III, who skirmished with them north of the lighthouse site, claimed that Coacoochee (Wildcat) wore a reflector as a head dress.

The warning that the Seminoles were ready to go on the war path was given to the Inlet area by a Negro slave, who told Mrs. Jane Sheldon, on December 24, 1835, that she had seen Indians lurking about the nearby Hunter plantation the evening before. When hostilities began, the Sheldons hurriedly loaded two lighters with household goods, and their slaves rowed them across the Hillsborough River to the home of Captain Douglas Dummett.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Daytona Beach *Observer*, August 29, 1936. Letter to the editor from W. P. Harman, administrative assistant to the Commissioner of Lighthouses, Washington, D. C.

That night, they saw flames rising from the burning buildings on the mainland. Still fleeing the Seminoles, Mrs. Sheldon and her mother were rowed in a small boat to the temporary safety of a schooner anchored in the Inlet, and Mr. Sheldon went back for their belongings. He discovered that the Indians had crossed the river and were already destroying the contents of several trunks of clothing. He moved his family to the Bulow plantation (north of present-day Ormond Beach), where they remained until January 1836, when they fled to the protection of St. Augustine.¹⁷ Years later, after the Sheldons returned to New Smyrna, a lighthouse reflector was found in the woods where it had been discarded by the Seminoles. Mrs. Sheldon "had the opening neatly filled in with a copper disk; a rim fitted to the curved underside and the reflector became a wash basin which was used on a bench back of the Sheldon cottage for years."¹⁸

Not so fortunate were the survivors of a French schooner, which had been wrecked between Cape Canaveral and Mosquito Inlet in 1835. Eight or ten men off the ship attempted to walk up the beach to St. Augustine, but without a boat they were unable to cross the Inlet. They made a raft from logs and driftwood, but while waiting for the tide to change they made the mistake of lighting a fire. Indians on the mainland crossed the river and slaughtered the unfortunate seamen. Today, this site, about a half mile south of the Inlet, is known as Massacre Bluff.¹⁸

During the Seminole War, schooners carried soldiers through the Inlet to the small army post that had been established at New Smyrna. The steamer *Florida*, with General Joseph M. Hernandez and his staff aboard, towed the schooners *Medium* and *Oscar*, carrying the First U. S. Artillery Regiment, over the bar in November 1837.¹⁹ That same month, the steamer *John McLain*, taking Captain Harvey Brown and a detail of soldiers to the post, was wrecked at the Inlet with no loss of life, but the ammunition and muskets were lost. On November 24, 1838, Captain Harvey Brown reported in a letter to the *St. Augustine News* that a soldier

17. Interview with Mrs. Zelia Sweett, New Smyrna Beach, Florida, April 1964.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Jacob Rhetie Motte, *Journey Into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Field During the Creek and Seminole Wars, 1836-1838*, edited by James F. Sunderman (Gainesville, 1953), 150.

walking along the beach north of the Inlet had found a bottle containing the following message:

Ship *Dryope* of Liverpool, Captain R. Hamilton, at sea this 10th day of March, 1838 in lat. 10° N. and long. 38° 15° W. from Pernambuco, bound to Liverpool; out 12 days, with the following passengers on board, all well: Mrs. Brocklehurst and two children, Mrs. Masset, Miss Watts, (daughter of B. M. Consul of Pernambuco), Miss Hadfield, Miss Fox, Mr. Jones, and Mr. H. P. Goodland. Should this note fall into the hands of any person, I shall feel obliged by the same being published.

Robt. Hamilton, Master ship *Dryope* ²⁰

Over the years the Inlet became an important port for the shipment of live oak and other timber. This industry reached its peak in the area before the Civil War. The Swift brothers-Rodolphus, Elijah, and Obed-from Massachusetts, were important lumbermen and their schooners brought woodsmen to Florida from the North during the winter months, and returned them to their homes when the fever months of summer set in. When the Civil War began, the Swift "live oakers" had thousands of feet of lumber piled up along the Halifax River which the Federals feared the Confederates would destroy. Samuel F. DuPont, commanding the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, ordered Acting Master T. A. Harris of the *Henry Andrew* to protect the timber until he could have it transported to the North. Harris made a reconnaissance four miles up the Halifax River and discovered about 40,000 feet of live oak and 2,000 feet of red cedar on the river bank, protected with a covering of palmetto leaves and mud. The Confederates, however, set fire to the timber before the Federals could capture it. ²¹

The Civil War brought more exciting activity to Mosquito Inlet. Blockade runners sailed furtively from its restless waters and attempted to run the blockade to Nassau. Two of the most notorious blockade runners that used the Inlet were the *Kate* and *Caroline*. Admiral DuPont ordered the gunboats *Henry Andrew* and *Penguin* to cross the shallow bar of the Inlet, blockade the entrance, and capture any vessels found there. On March 22, 1862, the *Henry Andrew* entered Mosquito Inlet, sailed up the Hillsborough River four miles, and anchored. It was later report-

20. St. Augustine News, December 1, 1838.

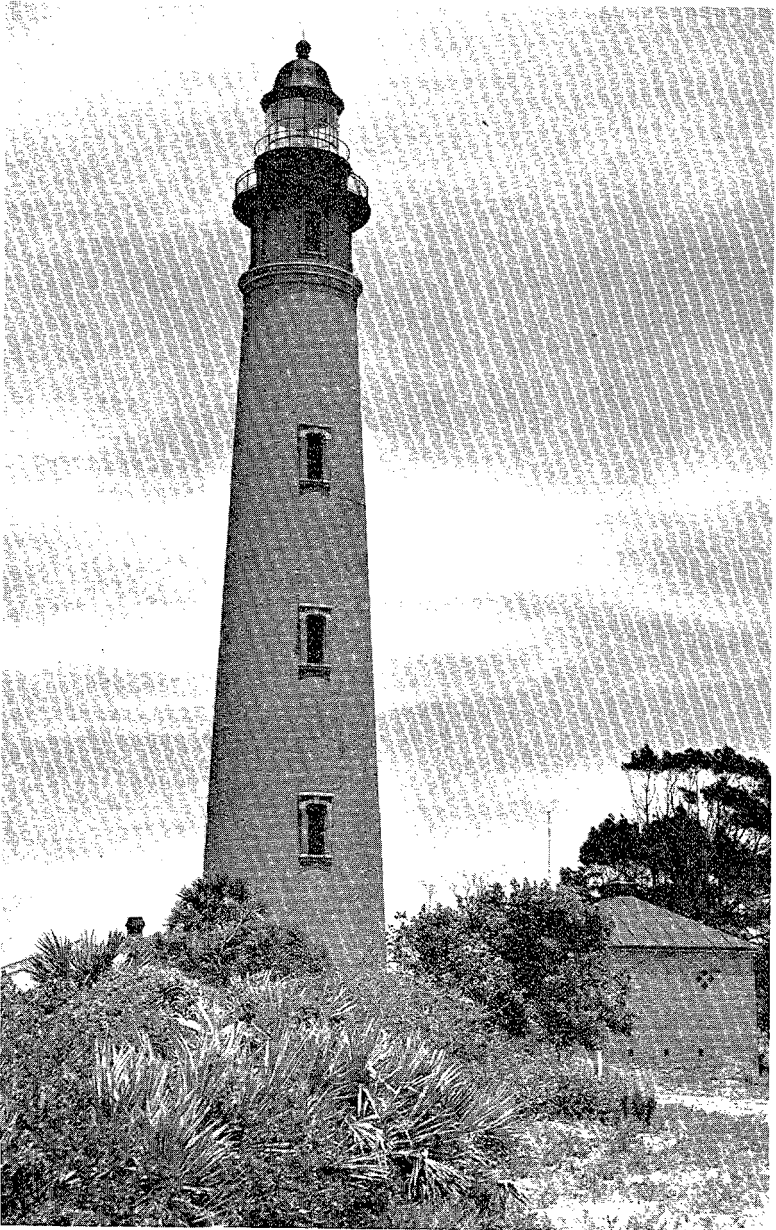
21. Daytona Beach Observer, December 12, 1936.

ed that a Negro swam out to the gunboat and gave the location of the Confederate salt works. He may also have mentioned that a cargo of arms and ammunition, landed by a blockade runner, was stored in a palmetto-thatched shed near an old stone wharf at New Smyrna.

Acting Lieutenant T. A. Budd of the *Penguin* and Acting Master S. W. Mather of the *Henry Andrew*, with about forty-three sailors, set forth on an expedition up the Hillsborough River in six light draft boats to destroy salt works near Oak Hill. However, unknown to the Federals, two companies of Confederates had been sent to protect a cache of arms and ammunition at New Smyrna. The Southerners watched the Federals sail up the river and prepared an ambush for their return. As the Federals attempted to land at the New Smyrna wharf, the Confederates, under command of Captain Strain, came out of the thick underbrush and ordered the Federals to surrender. The surprised but intrepid Lieutenant Budd replied, "Go to Hell!" and ordered his men to shove off. The Confederates started firing and Mather, Budd, and some of their men were killed. A few of the Federal boats reached the opposite shore and some of the sailors eventually made their way back to the gunboats by wading marshes and swimming creeks. Acting Masters Mate McIntosh returned after dark and brought back arms, ammunition, flags, boats, and the body of one of the sailors. He also had the presence of mind to throw overboard a rifled howitzer that had been in the rear boat and had been ineffective in firing at the Confederates. The sailors taken prisoner by the Confederates were later sent to Andersonville and Libby, and a Negro who had piloted the Federals into the Inlet was hanged. The bodies of the two officers and their watches and papers were later returned under a flag of truce to the Union gunboats.²²

In retaliation for the attack, Federal vessels shelled New Smyrna on July 9 and July 11, 1863, but caused no damage. It was a different story though on July 26, 1863, when two Federal ships, the *Oleander* and *Beauregard*, sailed through the Inlet and anchored opposite the little village. Their guns were deliberately aimed at the Sheldon Hotel, built on top of an Indian shell mound,

22. Alice Strickland, "Blockade Runners," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (October 1957), 88-89.



PONCE DE LEON INLET LIGHTHOUSE

*Seventh Coast Guard District, Miami, Fla.
Courtesy Public Information Office,*

and a perfect target. As the Sheldon family and their guest, Jacob Harry Dressner, a young Northerner who hoped to make his way back to New York on a ship going out of the Inlet, were sitting down to a mid-day meal, a shell from one of the gunboats crashed through the hotel, "slicing the top off the piano and sending splinters flying."²³

The Sheldons sought shelter in the woods to the rear of the hotel as the Federals continued firing. Later that afternoon, two boatloads of sailors landed and burned the hotel. When the *Oleander* later sailed, young Jacob Harry Dressner was aboard. He had waded out into the river and waved his white shirt as a flag of truce at the *Oleander* during a lull in the firing, and he was allowed to come on board. He was taken to Port Royal and from there made his way on another ship to New York.²⁴

After the Civil War, there was an influx of settlers on the north side of Mosquito Inlet. Dr. John Milton Hawks,²⁵ and his associates, James A. Fowler, and George W. Dewhurst, all former Federal army officers, organized the Florida Land and Lumber Company and planned to settle a colony of free Negroes on public lands at the Inlet.²⁶ Homesteads were settled by Negroes at nearby Spruce Greek and at Dunn Lawton (present-day Port Orange) on the Halifax River. Many Negro families were brought in by ships through the Inlet to these settlements. The company was unable to fulfill their offer of forty acres, a plow mule, and rations, and the colonization project failed. The Negroes lived in palmetto huts and "subsisted on fish, oysters, and game, but lacked bread and would come to the houses of the settlers and beg a few ears of corn, which they would grind at the handmill to make their

23. Zelia Wilson Sweett, *New Smyrna, Florida, in the Civil War*, Volusia County Historical Commission (New Smyrna Beach, 1963).

24. Information received from Mrs. Zelia Wilson Sweett, New Smyrna Beach.

25. Dr. Hawks, born in New Hampshire, taught school in New York and southwestern Georgia, before graduating from medical school in Vermont. His wife was also a physician, and both were interested in the plight of the southern Negro. They were active in the Freedman's Aid Society of New York. Hawks helped organize a Negro regiment during the Civil War and was its surgeon.

26. T. E. Fitzgerald, *Volusia County Past and Present* (Daytona Beach, 1937), 160.

meal.”²⁷ Farmers in the area hired them, and only a few Negroes remained on their homesteads.

The land which Hawks and his associates purchased in Florida was just north of the old Ponce grant at Mosquito Inlet, and Hawks, who was the first postmaster, named the settlement Port Orange. He explained, “I chose the name . . . because there was no Port Orange postoffice in the United States. If a person forgot to add the state on the envelope, it would come to Florida alright [*sic*]. Several times the Department at Washington addressed me at ‘Orangeport’ but I corrected them until finally letters came correctly addressed.”²⁸

A large sawmill was supposed to be built but part of the machinery, costing \$30,000, was lost enroute to the Inlet. An engineer, J. C. Maley, had arrived from Pennsylvania to operate the sawmill, but he eventually moved to Daytona on the Halifax River. The flight of the company treasurer with the firm’s funds brought an end to the settlement. The post office was moved to Allendale, between present-day Port Orange and New Smyrna Beach, on the mainland. Later, it was transferred to Dunn Lawton. Hawks remained in Florida, and after a sojourn in Jacksonville, founded, on a former Spanish land grant, the village of Hawks Park, now the town of Edgewater.²⁹

When the freeze of 1886 struck the Inlet area, Dr. Hawks wrote: “On Saturday and Sunday, the 10th and 11 of January (1886) there was a strong wind from the Northwest - the wind that always brings our hardest frosts. On Sunday morning at Mosquito Inlet the mercury stood at 22, the lowest on record in that region. The crop of oranges remaining on the trees was frozen; some so solid that no juice flowed when they were cut open. Pieces of ice taken from a tub lay on the ground all day without melting. Fish of all kinds in the river were so chilled that they were left on the shores and sandbanks as the tide went out, and died there, and cartloads of them lined the shores.”³⁰

Many ships have been wrecked while crossing the treacherous and shallow bar at the Inlet, and along the ocean shore to the

27. Pleasant Daniel Gold, *History of Volusia County, Florida* (DeLand, 1927), 96.

28. Fitzgerald, *Volusia County Past and Present*, 160.

29. Daytona Beach *Observer*, September 5, 1936. In Jacksonville, he compiled and published *The Florida Gazetteer* in 1871.

30. Fitzgerald, *Volusia County Past and Present*, 184.

north and south. The steamship *Narragansett*, bound from New York to New Orleans, was wrecked just north of the Inlet, before the Civil War. Years later, part of the *Narragansett's* hull floated through the Inlet into the Halifax River, and the settlers salvaged copper sheathing, bolts, and other equipment from the wreckage. The *Roxanna* also went ashore north of the Inlet, but the *Ocean* managed to get through, only to be grounded on a sand bar. During the 1860's there were three wrecks. The *Luella*, carrying machinery, came into the Inlet safely, but on her return she was wrecked. The *Martha* ran into a heavy blow off the Inlet and capsized. Two of her crew drowned, but her cargo of salt mullet was salvaged.

The *Wilton*, owned by the Florida Land and Lumber Company, was carrying machinery and provisions for the Port Orange settlement when she ran into a severe storm north of the Inlet. In a desperate attempt to keep her from going on shore, the sailors put out anchors and cables, but so severe was the storm that the cables broke and the vessel headed for the beach. Four miles south of the Inlet the *Wilton* grounded. Passengers, including Dr. Hawks and crew, made it safely to shore, but the cargo was lost.

Captain Charles Fozzard, early pioneer of the Halifax River area, was the hero of the wreck of the schooner *Frank E. Stone*. On June 28, 1877, the ship ran into a severe storm and Fozzard attempted to bring it across the ill-fated bar of the Inlet. The schooner lacked enough ballast, however, and the wind blew her over into the tumultuous waters of the Inlet and her sails dragged in the rough waves. Passengers and crew clung to the keel, and a valiant effort was made to cut loose a tender being towed astern, but without success. Fozzard swam ashore, where he procured a boat with which he rescued all his crew and passengers, except three who had lost their grip on the keel and had drowned.³¹

On April 3, 1878, the settlers for miles around learned of the wreck of the *S. S. Agnes* near the Inlet and came to salvage its cargo. No lives had been lost on the *Agnes* which had been fitted out earlier to carry the mail between Cedar Keys, Key West, and Havana. The wreck drifted until it settled diagonally across the *Narragansett*, that had come to grief thirty years before. Some years later both vessels were blown up by dynamite. A hurricane in September 1878, caused three other ship wrecks: a Norwegian

31. Daytona Beach *Observer*, August 29, 1936.

bark *Dora Ellen*, loaded with mahogany, and a Central American schooner carrying 125,000 coconuts. The coconuts washed ashore to be collected by the settlers who used the dried meat in cakes and corn bread.³²

A tragic shipwreck occurred near the Inlet on August 25, 1880, when the *City of Vera Cruz*, bound from New York to Havana, broke up in a storm. Bodies of the crew and passengers were strewn along the beach from Cape Canaveral to Matanzas Inlet. Among the few passengers who escaped drowning was a Cuban who, according to Captain Charles H. Coe, came ashore naked and covered with sores from the sea water. When he was well again, the Cuban visited Coe's office where he saw the life preserver that had saved his life. He had lost his wife in the disaster and also a trunk "filled with thousands of dollars in gold."³³

Cargoes from wrecked ships were welcome supplies to the isolated settlers, but the customs collectors at New Smyrna were ordered to seize and hold salvaged goods. The settlers knew that the officers were unable to patrol the many miles of beaches and treated the matter as a big joke. However, feeling ran high on the subject for a time, and Deputy Collector Coe wrote that one customs collector was "struck with a cane" by angry settlers, and another threatened to "drive the captain into the ground."³⁴ Among the pioneer customs collectors at New Smyrna were Douglas D. Dummett (1842); John D. Sheldon (1854); Thomas S. Foster; E. K. Lowd (1866); and Pedro Benet (1867). These men also served as pilots when needed.³⁵

The frequency of shipwrecks in the vicinity of the Inlet brought demands for construction of another lighthouse. On November 15, 1883, the government purchased ten acres of the former Antonio Ponce grant,³⁶ and General Orville Babcock was placed in charge of building the red-painted, brick lighthouse "575 feet from the Halifax River" on the north side of the Inlet.³⁷

Babcock purchased the north quarter of the former Ponce

32. Fitzgerald, *Volusia County Past and Present*, 171.

33. Daytona Beach *Observer*, June 27, 1936.

34. *Ibid.*, July 25, 1936.

35. Letter to the author from Mrs. Zelia Wilson Sweett, New Smyrna Beach, May 27, 1963.

36. Letter from Lt. (j.g.) C. L. Larance, public information officer, Seventh Coast Guard District, Miami, to author, March 23, 1964.

37. *Ibid.*

grant and built a home, later destroyed by fire. He hoped to make a park on his property and called his land Ponce Park. (The name was retained until May 1963, when the small settlement was re-named Ponce Inlet and incorporated by the Florida legislature.) In 1884, the general was drowned, but work on the lighthouse was continued under the direction of General Jarrell Smith.

In January 1886, the *Halifax Herald* reported that "out of eight or ten schooners employed in the lighthouse work five have been wrecked, viz: *Godfrey*, *Augusta Wilson*, *Ajax*, *Freewind*, and the *Johnson*; the *Mary Brown*, now lying at the lighthouse dock, is crippled. We have been assured that nearly all of them received the injuries resulting in wrecks on the Inlet bar or in the river. Six men have also been drowned."³⁸

Later that year, the paper noted that "the lighthouse at the Inlet has reached a height of over 100 feet. Work has been suspended because many of the workmen could not get along with the superintendent and on account of the supply of suitable brick failing. Meantime foundations for the dwelling are being laid."³⁹ The lighthouse went into commission on November 1, 1887. The 168 foot structure was a brick tower, conical in shape. The kerosene-powered lantern of 15,000 candlepower was visible nineteen miles.⁴⁰ The arrival of the light-ship was always an outstanding event in the early days. The ship, carrying 500 one-gallon tins of kerosene, would ride at anchor while small whale-boats equipped with sails, took the kerosene, mops, brooms, and other supplies ashore. There was no wharf, and the sailors waded ashore carrying the loads on their shoulders.⁴¹ The first keeper was William Rowinski, whose home was located between the lighthouse and the Halifax River. His assistant, J. R. Turner, was also a sheriff of Volusia County for many years.⁴²

An unsolved mystery for a long time has been the old Rock House, whose ruins were on top of an Indian shell mound located on the mainland facing the Inlet. The mound was destroyed about 1907, and an old photograph of the ruins and a

38. Daytona Halifax Journal, January 28, 1886.

39. Ibid., September 9, 1886.

40. Letter from Commissioner of Lighthouses to Mrs. Zelia Wilson Sweett, June 2, 1925.

41. Ianthe Bond Hebel, "Ponce Park Through The Years," *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, July 28, 1963.

42. Daytona Halifax Journal, September 13, 1888.

few scattered references are all that remain of the house of mystery. Henry B. Martin received 400 acres of land "north of New Smyrna, opposite the inlet" on September 11, 1803, from the Spanish government, and the coquina rock house was on this property.⁴³ Martin and his family were driven from their home by hostile Indians in 1808, but Martin's father-in-law continued to occupy the property and, "with uncommon patience and suffering," remained there until 1812.⁴⁴ Another tenant on the property supposedly was living in the Rock House in 1821, and at the time this was the last inhabited house south of St. Augustine."⁴⁵ A newspaper described the house in 1893: "Nothing is known of the origin or early history of this house. . . . The builders were evidently Catholics, as is shown by a niche in the wall. If this supposition is correct the building is one of the oldest in the United States. The house is 20 x 36 feet, and has a well preserved chimney and fireplace. A large cedar stands in the center of the room, which adds to the picturesqueness of the scene. A magnificent view of the inlet, ocean and lighthouse is obtained from this point and that is probably the reason why this site was selected for this building. And the foundation of an ancient flag-staff, which probably served as a lighthouse, stands near the ruins."⁴⁶

About 1883, Charles W. Jones was living at the extreme north end of the Ponce Park settlement, and to the south was the home of Nathaniel Hasty who operated a small grocery store. Mr. Hasty was also postmaster for Ponce Park and the mail was brought to the store by sailboat. Boats passing up and down the Halifax River always stopped at the Hasty store where a man named "Pony" Hayward prepared fish dinners for the visitors. Hasty's wife, Elizabeth Pauline Hasty, acted as postmistress for a while, and she was succeeded by Annie E. Stone, who was commissioned June 1, 1910.⁴⁷ Gertrude Ryan was postmistress at Ponce Park until World War II, and Ellen Myers took over the postoffice until it was discontinued.

When Mrs. Ianthé Bond Hebel taught school at Ponce Park in 1903, the term was five months. She received a salary of thirty

43. Gold, *History of Volusia County Florida*, 35.

44. Zelia Wilson Sweett and the Reverend J. C. Marsden, *New Smyrna, Florida: Its History and Antiquities* (New Smyrna, 1925), 36.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 4, 1893.

47. Document at the Timmons' Fishing Camp, Ponce Inlet.

dollars a month. The school building was frame, painted white, and equipped with a water pail and dipper, "a tripod on which were charts and maps, material for teaching the first grade, aids for other subjects; a pointer and several erasers."⁴⁸ There were twelve students, six were the children of the lighthouse keeper, Captain Thomas O'Hagan.

In 1907, the "entire Lighthouse was repaired and renovated,"⁴⁹ and the following year a bird reservation was established at the Inlet. Bartola J. Pacetti was appointed supervisor of the reservation.⁵⁰ A shell road was built in 1904, extending from the beach to Ponce Park.⁵¹ Nathaniel Hasty paid for the road and it was first known as the Hasty Road, and later as Peninsula Drive. In 1916, a road was completed from Ponce Park to Daytona.

The quiet atmosphere of the Inlet was shattered in the 1920's by the arrival of the exciting boom and the prohibition era. The area now witnessed clashes between bootleggers bringing in contraband liquor from the Bahamas and Federal revenue agents determined to apprehend them. Mysterious signal lights flashed from shore to sea while government men hid in the scrub palmetto along the dunes and tried to keep up with the daring activities of the law-breakers. Headlines of the *Daytona Beach Journal*, Friday, June 11, 1926, proclaimed: "Huge Liquor Seizure made on Peninsula. Hotel Storeroom Raided by County Sheriff's Deputies." The raid had been made on the storeroom of the Ponce de Leon Hotel, a frame building at Ponce Park. Four hundred cases of liquor valued at thousands of dollars were seized by the police.⁵² Another raid had been made the day before at Wilbur by the Sea, a small settlement located on the peninsula between the Inlet and Daytona. Thirty-two cases of assorted liquors were seized and three bootleggers arrested.

The boom of the 1920's was also felt at the Inlet, and real estate advertisements of the "Inlet Terrace Subdivision" were as enticing as any in Florida: "Inlet Terrace Where The Ocean And River Meet. Set off like a gem in a gorgeous tropical setting, Inlet

48. Hebel, *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, July 28, 1963.

49. Letter from Lt. Larance, March 23, 1964.

50. Hebel, *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, July 28, 1963.

51. *Daytona Beach Observer*, March 11, 1939.

52. *Daytona Beach Journal*, June 11, 1926.

Terrace was laid out and carefully planned to be the most tropical homesite in the entire region. This is being accomplished - for the owners and developers of this ideal spot have continuously worked with this aim in mind."⁵³ Workmen were constructing the million dollar Inlet Terrace Hotel on the north shore of the Inlet when the boom bubble burst. The partly-built hotel was abandoned to the tides and drifting sands.

Awakened interest in the Inlet during the 1920's focused attention on its forbidding name Mosquito, and, in 1926, this was changed to Ponce de Leon Inlet. The possibility of deepening the Inlet and turning it into a thriving port was also discussed. The estimated cost of such a project was \$1,425,000, according to a survey in 1926,⁵⁴ and the Daytona Beach paper strongly urged its readers to endorse the bond vote that was set for June 21, 1926.⁵⁵ Supporters of the "Port Plan" believed that shipments of "lumber, citrus fruits, petroleum products, building materials, furniture, automobiles and food supplies would all benefit by opening of the waterway."⁵⁶ The election for the deepening of the Inlet was a success, but when objection was raised "to the validation of the bonds," nothing more was done about the project for the time being.⁵⁷ However, boats continued to sink in the ever treacherous Inlet; lives were lost (on an average of six a year), and the plan for deepening the Inlet was not completely abandoned.

The Ponce de Leon Coast Guard Station, located just south of the Inlet, has been operating since 1938. The twenty-five man crew services the area from Cape Kennedy to St. Augustine, and takes care of about 150 missions a year to vessels in distress.⁵⁸ A forty-foot rescue boat and a thirty-foot utility boat are used for rescue work, and the one-hundred-foot *Smilax* is a coastal buoy tender manned by a crew of ten men. Smaller boats are also used for rescue work and for inland waterway use. The Ponce de Leon lighthouse is operated under the command of the station.⁵⁹

53. *Daytona Morning Journal*, November 30, 1924.

54. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1926.

55. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1926.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Gold, *History of Volusia County Florida*, 154.

58. *Daytona Beach Sunday News-Journal*, February 23, 1964.

59. Letter from M. C. Hutto, commanding officer, Ponce de Leon Inlet LBSTA, to author. February 25, 1964.

The dream of a deeper and safer Ponce de Leon Inlet was revived in 1941, when the Florida legislature established the Ponce de Leon Inlet and Port District, which "extends along the entire east coast of Volusia County, from the Flagler County south line to the Brevard County north line."⁶⁰ Again, engineers made surveys and reports on the Inlet, and newspaper articles and editorials emphasized the importance and benefits of deepening the "Killer" Inlet. A bond issue for \$2,700,000 was approved by the voters on May 26, 1964, to finance the district's share of construction costs and future maintenance,⁶¹ but the project still has to be approved by Congress. If Federal appropriations are forthcoming, work may start on jettying the Inlet sometime in 1966. The stabilization of the Inlet would be of great benefit to recreational boating, it would increase property values and be a boon to commercial fishing and shrimping.

The future looks bright for the ancient Inlet. Modern engineering methods may even tame it some day. Instead of ships wrecking on the murderous bar, they will go safely over it, and instead of drowning in the Inlet's waters, men will ride safely above it on a strong bridge. The light from Ponce de Leon Inlet lighthouse will continue to throw its broad beam over the waters, and perhaps along the white sand dunes the ghosts of the past will stand among the scrub palmetto and sea oats, and applaud the progress man has made.

60. "Information Concerning Inlet Stabilization." Brochure prepared by the Ponce de Leon Inlet and Port Commission, 1964.

61. Daytona Beach *Evening News*, June 4, 1964.