

SHIP SHOAL LIGHT STATION  
(Ship Shoal Lighthouse)  
Gulf of Mexico  
~~Berwick~~ vicinity  
Terrebonne Parish  
Louisiana

HAER No. LA-12

HAER  
LA-12

Theriot

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Southeast Region  
Department of the Interior  
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

SHIP SHOAL LIGHT STATION

HAER No. LA-12

Ship Shoal Lighthouse

*The most vicinity  
Terrebonne County  
Louisiana*

Location:

Latitude: 28-54-~~56~~ 15

Longitude: 91-~~04~~ 15 01-13

11 miles SSW of Raccoon Point off the Gulf coast of Louisiana on National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Map No. 11356 Isles Dernieres to Point au Fer

Date of Construction: 1859

Engineer: Drawings prepared by: J. K. Willdin, Civil Engineer

Builder: Materials Manufactured By:  
I. P. Morris & Co., Philadelphia, PA  
Erected By:  
Lieut. W. H. Stevens, US Engineer

Major Reconstruction in 1900  
N. J. Foundary & Machine Co.

Present Owner: United States Coast Guard  
Eighth District  
Ownership in process of transfer to the Town of Berwick, LA.

Present Use: Vacant  
Lighthouse was disestablished February 1950.  
Lighthouse removed from Light List in 1981

Significance: This lighthouse played a significant role in protecting the commerce of major shipping channels in the region from the hazards of the shoals in the vicinity of the lighthouse.

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Date: April 1997

## **Methodology**

This document has been prepared according to the standards of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) Guidelines for Preparing Written Historical and Descriptive Data prepared by the National Register Programs Division of the National Park Service, Southeast Region. The research for this report was conducted in the summer of 1996 by Marlene Walli Shade, AIA. Primary sources of information were found at the United States Coast Guard Historian's Office at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, DC. Files on the Ship Shoal Lighthouse contained primarily letters and memos related to the disestablishment of the lighthouse and photographs dating to the mid-1900's. The Cartographics Records of the National Archives II in Adelphi, Maryland, Records Group 26, for the Ship Shoal Lighthouse contained 18 drawings or pieces of drawings of the original 54 construction documents for this lighthouse. Ship Shoal Lighthouse files were also retrieved from the files of the U.S.C.G. New Orleans District office. These files covered the years 1943 to the present and included a note which indicated that earlier files were lost when the responsibility of the lighthouses transferred from the Bureau of Lighthouses to the Coast Guard in 1939. Other research was conducted at the National Archives and Library of Congress and included the Clipping Files, Correspondence Files, Index to Lighthouse Sites, Annual Reports, Light House Lists and Light House Descriptions. Information from 1910 to 1939 was minimal. Other information was found in the files of Gulf South Engineers in Houma, Louisiana, who are assisting the nearby Town of Berwick in their efforts to create a Lighthouse Museum. The Town of Berwick intends to relocate the Ship Shoal Lighthouse to Berwick, Louisiana where it will become part of the museum (Figure 1.)

## **Historical Background**

### *Light House Station*

The Ship Shoal Lighthouse is about 18 miles off the coast of Berwick, Louisiana between Timbalier Bay and Atchafalaya Bay in the Mississippi Delta. It lies in an area of the country which had changed hands numerous times prior to becoming part of the United States in 1804 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. It was also part of the Confederacy during the American Civil War. A complete history of this structure necessitates a discussion of the various governments which had control of this area, the history of the governing bodies of these Aids to Navigation, and the history of lighthouses in general including the development of various technologies that provided safer passage for the vehicles of commerce which traveled these waters.

As the European expansion across the North American Continent spread, there were many efforts made to chart the entire length of the Mississippi. The French had a great interest in exploring this area in hopes of connecting its settlements in Canada with the

Gulf of Mexico. The explorer LaSalle would finally reach the Gulf in 1684, claiming the land in this area for France.

As waterways were charted, the territory's ports and shipping became a major industry and would remain one into this century. Lighthouses along the coast of the Gulf protected this growing commerce from the sandy shoals and oyster beds which were common, and from the pirates which frequented these waters. There is some thought that a lighthouse in the Gulf of Mexico at a French settlement known as "the Balize" (Balise) may have been constructed in 1699 or 1700. This thought is based on the translation of the French word Balize - which means beacon. If so, it would have been the earliest known lighthouse in North America. The first lighthouse actually recorded in the Gulf would not be built until 1804 after the US purchased the Louisiana Territory.<sup>1</sup>

Early lighthouses in this area copied the brick lighthouse designs of the Northeast but were quickly found to be too heavy for the sandy soils. They were replaced by wood frame structures and at mid-century by the screwpile, cast-iron lighthouse type that would be built at Ship Shoal. The Ship Shoal Light Station<sup>2</sup> was considered a state-of-the-art lighthouse when it was built. These skeletal frames provided greater foundation stability due to the friction of the helicoidal, cast iron piles which were screwed into the sand, and also experienced less wind resistance due to their light frames. First used in 1850, one hundred lighthouses using this foundation system were eventually built.

### *Lightship*

The Ship Shoal Lighthouse on the Gulf coast of Louisiana was built in the mid-nineteenth century and replaced a lightship called the "Pleasanton" (and also referred to as "Ship Shoal" and "Ship Island Shoal Light Ship") which was located in this vicinity. In 1848 Congress authorized "For a light boat on Ship Shoal, near Dernier or Last Island, \$15,000.00 necessary for the protection of commerce, Approved, August 14, 1848."<sup>3</sup> The "Pleasanton" would be bought for over \$12,000.00 and service this area for ten years. This lightship was the former Revenue Cutter MCLANE. The MCLANE had been in service during the Mexican War and was later converted to a light ship. She was anchored inside the west end of the shoal at Latitude 28-56 N and Longitude 91-05 W and was used to guide vessels through the narrow passage between Ship Shoal and Isles Dernieres (Figure 2.) The ship was bought for \$12,774.63 and historical records show that she was illuminated by red lights on both masts at 30 feet and 45 feet. Later records

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<sup>1</sup> Review of Progress of Lighthouse Service, Eighth District, an unpublished article found at the National Archives and dated 1937 states that remains of the "Balise" tower were still visible a few years prior to the 1937 writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Light Station is the name commonly given to the site and all structures at each lighthouse. In the case of the Ship Shoal Light Station, there was no real site and only the structure of the lighthouse itself.

<sup>3</sup> Ship Shoal Lighthouse, Clipping File, Box B, NC63-E, United States Coast Guard, United States Lighthouse Service, 1848.

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show that the lights had been changed to white. This vessel had two masts, a black hull, a fog bell, and her light was illuminated by oil. The ship suffered storm damage in 1853, 1855, 1856, and 1859. In both the 1855 and 1859 storm season the ship was run aground. This was a common occurrence amongst the light ships, especially those in more exposed areas.<sup>4</sup> A typical annual salary at this time for the "Master" or "Keeper" of such a ship was \$700.00 and 360.00 for the "mate". Even in those times, a low salary for the harsh conditions under which they served.

The Light House Board began to consider a lighthouse to replace this ship as early as 1853, when the a petition was received by the Light House Service regarding the importance of a lighthouse in this location. However, it was not until 1859 that Congress had appropriated enough funds to complete the construction of the lighthouse. On September 15, 1859 the light ship was retired to Norfolk, Virginia where she served as a relief vessel. Light ships continued to serve as Aids to Navigation until 1983.

### *Lighthouse*

In 1852 \$3,000.00 was appropriated to locate a site for a light house and to conduct a survey of that site.<sup>5</sup> Earliest mention of the need for a lighthouse in the area of the Ship Shoal can be found in a petition for a lighthouse dated 1853. The lighthouse which would be built on the shoals was appropriated in three payments; \$20,000 dollars on March 3, 1853, \$30,000.00 on March 3, 1855, and a final payment of \$38,019.70 which completed the work of the lighthouse in August of 1856.<sup>6</sup> In August of 1857, as construction was beginning, the first wooden platform, which was built to place the piles, was washed away in a severe storm. The platform was rebuilt, and by May of 1859 all of the cast iron screw piles were inserted. On September 15, 1859 the lightship at this location was retired and a 122 year history of service began for the Ship Shoal Light Station.

The nature of this lighthouse structure; its remote and exposed location, and its construction of cast iron necessitated many repairs and many complete renovations during its lifetime. In most cases, the portions of the structure which were damaged were replaced in kind and its overall appearance changed little through the passage of time. This report contains three historical descriptions of this lighthouse. The first is a description drawn from the original 1859 construction documents. In 1911 and 1927 the keepers of this light prepared a document called Form 60. This form asked over 200 questions of the keeper in an effort to create a comprehensive and consistent description of each of the many lighthouses throughout the country. A copy of these forms are found in Appendices A and B. The 1927 form refers to a second major renovation which

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<sup>4</sup> Flint, Willard, Lightships of the United States Government. Reference Notes. Washington, DC, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> No deed or survey was located for this site in the Index to Lighthouses Sites.

<sup>6</sup> Records show many examples where several appropriations over long periods of time would be needed to actually execute the construction of a lighthouse or perform necessary repairs.

occurred in 1921. No information describing this repair was found. A fourth description of the lighthouse is taken from physical observation by photographer, Bill Lebovich and Marlene Walli Shade, AIA as part of the field survey of the structure done in August of 1996 in the preparation of this report. This last description is found in the "Description of the Structure" section of this report. The three historical descriptions follow.

*Description No. 1*  
1855-1859 (1871)

A written description of the original lighthouse was drawn from observation of the original construction documents, which are housed at the National Archives II, Cartographic Records Group 26, which contains 18 drawings or pieces of drawings which describe this lighthouse. These drawings, photographs of which appear in the photographic section of this report, are numbered LA-12-14 through LA-12-18, and depicted the building as follows: A rendered elevation of the Lighthouse indicated that the "drawings were prepared by J.K. Willden, Civil Engineer, and that the materials were manufactured in 1855 by I.P. Morris & Co., Philadelphia, and the structure (was) erected on the shoal by Lieut. W.H. Stevens, U.S. Engineering in 1859." This sheet was identified as "#1 of 54" sheets. (See LA-12-14)<sup>7</sup>

At the time of construction, the lighthouse stood in 15 feet of water on sandy shoals. Screw piles, nine of them, formed a 40 foot diameter circle supporting the lighthouse. Horizontal and diagonal bracing occurred just above the sandy bottom. Bracing also occurred from each joint to the central pile support. Five feet above the water line, the supporting legs of the tower inclined in at approximately 12 degrees and were horizontally and diagonally braced at this level. The incline continued up to the second gallery level, surrounding the watch room. Fifteen feet above the second horizontal support level was the keepers' dwelling. It was a cylindrical, two story space with the main staircase tower running through its center. The exterior walls of the dwelling were constructed of double-walled, metal panels with a wood paneling interior finish. The dwelling had a 6-1/2 foot wide gallery surrounding it, which had a metal railing at its edge. A second such railing occurred at the edge of the flat roof that topped the dwelling. Four more stories of vertical, horizontal & diagonal bracing above the dwelling unit led to the watch room and formed a cage around the enclosed stair tower. Several six-paned windows were situated in the cylindrical stair tower which contained a cast iron circular stair leading from the dwelling unit to the watch room. The tower was constructed of double-walled, metal plates. The focal point of the light was 11'-10" above the watch room or 109'-10-1/2" above the mean water level. Access to the lantern from the watch room was provided by a 7'-4-1/2" cast iron ladder. (See Photos LA-12-14 and LA-12-15)

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<sup>7</sup> Original Construction Drawings, Ship Shoal Lighthouse, National Archives II, Cartographic Records Group 26, 1856.

The watch room was also a cylindrical shaped, double walled, metal plate structure with surrounding gallery. Its railings had a more decorative appearance than the railings at the dwelling levels. The watch room had an interior dimension of 10'-2" diameter. Brackets built into the outer walls of the watch room cantilevered both to the exterior and interior of the room in order to provide a walkway just inside or just outside the protective glazing of the lantern. Four ventilators in the walls of the watch room provided free air flow while preventing water from entering. The second order fresnel light<sup>8</sup> which was shown on the drawing was further protected by a glass surround with three panes vertically and 10 horizontally around the relatively circular space. A second gallery, without a railing, occurred at the bottom of the glazing to allow the "keeper" to clean the outside of this glass (12 equal spaces with a 11'-3" diameter) is shown on the original construction drawings.

A davit to raise and lower a small boat hung from the side of the lighthouse. The top of the lantern was capped in copper roofing and contained a built-in gutter, which was part of an elaborate water collection and storage system. This roof was capped with a decorative and functional metal ventilator, and a lighting rod. A floor plan of this lantern can be found in Photo LA-12-16. The currently existing lantern roof differs from historical drawings and may have been altered during one of the many extensive renovations which this structure underwent, or it may not have been built according to the original drawings.

A section/elevation and floor plans of the dwelling unit that appear on a drawing dated 1871 was found in the possession of Gulf South Engineers of Houma, LA. (Figure 3) This drawing was not found at the National Archives but appears to be copies of pieces of the original drawings compiled onto one sheet and reissued as part of renovations. This drawing, prepared by George H. Elliott, Major of Engineering, show sectional plans of the lighthouse at seven levels. The largest diameter occurred at the first floor of the dwelling and is shown on the drawings as a circle, with a diameter of 27'6". This circle was pierced by a 8'0" diameter stair tower. The first level was split into four main pie shaped rooms, three of which contain two water storage tanks each. The fourth level was split into a corridor with storage and a second room for fuel storage. A door led from the corridor to the gallery which surrounded this dwelling and another to the stair tower. The west quarter of the circle was occupied by an unidentified room<sup>9</sup> and the east quadrant by the kitchen. A vertical pipe which collected water from the roof passed through this room.

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<sup>8</sup> Fresnel lens were invented by Augustin Fresnel in 1822 and quickly gained use throughout Europe. Stephen Pleasonton was reluctant to make use of this new technology and it would not gain use in this country until the later half of the 1800's. The fresnel lens was classified by size, and correspondingly by the brightness of the illumination, into six categories called orders. The Ship Shoal Lighthouse had a second order fresnel lens or the second brightest lens.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the lettering and labels on this drawing are illegible.

Doors opened from all but the fuel storage room onto the gallery which surrounded the keepers' dwelling. Davits on the northwest quadrant at the outer edge of the gallery suspended a boat above the gallery. A fourth room in the north quadrant of the first floor was also unidentified.

On the second floor of the dwelling, the segmentation of the rooms were rotated 45 degrees from those below. A four-foot wide storage/corridor area bisected the circle from east to west on either side of the stair tower. The northwest quadrant of this floor was labeled "bedroom." The southwest quadrant was a storage room for oil. Drawings show four oil tanks. The remaining two rooms were unidentified. Each had a window and doors led from the rooms to the corridors. The corridor also provided access from the individual rooms to the stair tower.

These drawings also provided a floor plan of the watch room and lantern room. The watch room was a circular space pierced by the circular stair, containing a ladder that provided access up to the lantern. The lantern shown on the 1871 drawings as a sixteen-sided polygon was described in the Light Description of both 1911 and 1927 as a twelve-sided polygon, and in the 1859 drawings as a twelve-sided structure.

As was common to lighthouses in exposed locations, the Ship Shoal Lighthouse required many and extensive renovations. This renovation replaced the roof, walls and floors of the keeper's dwelling and the lantern ladder as well as scaled and repainted most of the rest of the structural elements of the lighthouse. A new oil room and four new water cisterns were added. A copy of the specification which accompanied the request for proposals to perform this work can be found in Appendix 1 and describes this work in great detail. It also gives an interesting view into the contracts that were used for construction at the turn of the century and how little their format and content have changed over time.

#### *Description No. 2*

1911

Files for this lighthouse at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, DC included a document known as Form 60, which contained a description of the lighthouse filled out by the keeper in 1911.<sup>10</sup> This document described the lighthouse as follows:

- Lantern and Lantern Fixtures - The lantern was a ten-sided polygon, eight feet high with vertical bars. It was three plates in height with three plates on each side. Plates were 36-1/4 x 37-1/4; 30 x 31-1/4; 30 x 31-1/4.<sup>11</sup> There were no unglazed sides to

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<sup>10</sup> 1911 Form 60. A copy of this document is located in Appendix 2.

<sup>11</sup> No foot or inch designation was given in Form 60 for these items.

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this iron lantern. The roof was copper with a copper ventilator ball topped with a lightning-conductor spindle. The lighthouse had both a balustrade and outside gallery made of iron. It was accessed by a door in the lower wall of the lantern. The floor of the lantern was iron penetrated by a door leading by ladder to the watch room below. Four ventilators in the lower wall of the lantern provided ventilation. A four-inch iron draft tube led into the ventilator ball. Curtain hooks fitted to the soffit of the lantern allow for screening of the lantern with a linen lens protector during the day and iron ladders allowed access to the exterior of the plate glass for cleaning. The watch room itself contained one table and three small shelves. A bell wire led from the watch room to the keepers dwelling below.

- **Illumination-** The light was illuminated by a flashing white light made by Henry Lepaute of Paris. This was a second order light with an interior diameter of 4'7-1/8". At the time of the 1911 report, the light revolved every four minutes. The light contained eight flash panels which were each at 45 degrees. Eighteen prisms were placed above the central drum of the lens, and seven below. The light revolved on balls on a circular ball-raceway containing 36/one-inch balls. The clockworks that caused the light to revolve consisted of a 1/4" steel chord or chain with a 8" x 11" clock drum and 50 foot drop tube. Each time the clock was wound it would run three hours. The machinery of this clock was protected by glass and sat on a hollow iron pedestal with glass doors.
- **Lamp-** The second order lamp was originally illuminated by oil with one mantel of a 2-1/4" diameter. One spare lamp and two spare lamp burners were located at the station.
- **Fog Signal-** The fog signal for this station was a Gamewell No. 3 bell which took five seconds to signal. This bell was cast in bronze by John and Hitchcock of Troy, NY in 1856, was 38 inches in diameter and 28 inches in height. It would run 3-1/2 hours with one winding of the clock mechanism.
- **Dwelling for Keeper-** The dwelling for the keeper was located in the tower, made of iron, and consisted of eight rooms. The following furnishings existed within the dwelling in 1911: A Garland No. 7-60 stove, one table lamp and four hand lamps. Three wood cisterns-3-1/2 x 7 (feet) and two iron cisterns-2'-4" x 6'6", one iron cistern-3x7 (feet) collected water for this remote location. A still was used to purify the water.

*Description No. 3*  
1927

The Assistant Lighthouse Engineer completed another, slightly revised copy of Form 60 in 1927. At that time the lighthouse had been extensively renovated twice. Once in

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1900, and according to the 1927 Form 60, most recently in 1921. The nature of the 1921 renovations were not discovered as part of this research. By 1927, Form 60 had been revised to include additional questions and was no longer labeled Form 60. Many questions which had been left blank on the 1900 form were now answered. It provided much more detail on the description of this lighthouse. A copy of this form can be found in Appendix C. (This form provides additional information not contained in the prior Form 60 but does not indicate any major changes to have occurred.)

The Ship Shoal Light Station was accessed by boat from Morgan City, Louisiana. The lighthouse, at this recording, was painted brown, which may indicate that the coal tar which left the lighthouse black in color was no longer the coating used. Several windows were shown to be located in the tower; three were 21" x 25", four were 3'-0" x 5'-1". The tower also contained five doors; one which was 21" x 6'-0", the others 3'-2" x 7'-0".

The lantern appeared to have incurred little change since 1911. The second order fresnel lens was still intact and the light produced 160,000 candle power. The light had a 2.7 second duration of flash and 27.3 second duration of eclipse. The rotation mechanism, based on a clock, had remained the same. The protective curtain that surrounded the lens was now made of cotton instead of linen. The energy source for the light was oil vapor, with a 2-1/4" mantel remaining. This form also indicated that the lighthouse was located on the northwest end of the shoal. The fog signal is further described in this report as having 1,100 pound weights for operation. A chart which was added to this later version of Form 60 describes the furnishings which were provided to the keeper and his or her three assistants as follows: oil cook stove, enameled iron sink, No. 2 size pump pitcher, table lamps, hand lamps, and hand lanterns. Sixty years after an outbreak of lead poisoning which killed several keepers and assistants, the station was reported in very good health, with no diseases. Six tanks, two cypress and four metal provided 3,000 gallons of water. Two boats were assigned to this light station; a 21'-6" motorboat built in 1922 and a 14'-0" yawl built in 1907. Neither boat had sails.

The Ship Shoal Light Station saw many storms during its 122 years of service. Often these storms would result in severe damage which led to the many renovations this lighthouse underwent. By 1868 the foundation was severely eroded and required repairs. Stones were laid against the piles to stabilize them. In 1870 the lighthouse began what was to be one of several "leans." It would take until 1896 for stone from Fort Pickens to arrive and be placed against the foundation. By the turn of the century a major renovation to the lighthouse occurred. Much of the keepers dwelling was replaced or repaired. Another such repair was done in 1921. No description of this repair was found during this research. By 1929 the tower was again leaning due to the compromise of the foundation, and discussions began concerning the safety of the structure. During World War II the light was again dimmed, and by 1949, concern about the safety of the foundation led the lighthouse to become unmanned. By the 1960's commerce would pass on a path that would take it 32 miles south of the light to avoid collision with the many

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oil wells that peppered the area and are still found all around the area of the lighthouse today. In 1965 the lighthouse ceased all operation, and is now identified on maps as an abandoned lighthouse.

The Ship Shoal Light Station currently falls under the jurisdiction of the Eighth District of the United States Coast Guard. The district covers 1075 nautical miles from the coast of western Florida to Texas. In 1838 the Atlantic Coast was divided into six districts. The sixth district extended from Key West, Florida to Sabine, Texas, and included the Ship Shoal Light Station. In 1852 the sixth district was split into two, named the eighth and ninth districts. By 1867 a limit of 12 districts was established and the eighth and ninth were combined to make the eighth. Between 1867 and 1925, district boundaries changed four times, which may explain why some early records, including the original construction documents of the Ship Shoal Light Station mistakenly reference the ninth district.<sup>12</sup> The eighth district includes an area of the country which has had a very lively history. Sections of this part of the United States coastline fell under the influence of France in the first half of the 1700's as discussed earlier, and later under the Spanish from 1769-1803. During the American Civil War, the control of this area fell into the hands of the Confederacy and caused the disruption of service of many aids to navigation in this area as well as other areas of the country. In 1861, as a measure to thwart the Union's effort to control transport of Confederate war vessels in and out of New Orleans; lenses, clockworks, oil, tanks, burners and other equipment were moved to Berwick, LA. They would remain there until the end of the American Civil War and the relighting of the Lighthouse in 1865.<sup>13</sup> The Light House Board would supervise the activities of the lighthouses until 1910 at which point a Bureau of Light-Houses was created. This agency, under the Department of Commerce, governed lighthouses until 1939. Since that date, the Coast Guard has been responsible for these aids to navigation.

#### *Functional History*

While the light descriptions and specifications describe the structure of the lights, it is the Light Lists that provide the history of the changes in technology that occurred during the time the light was lit. Light Lists were tables describing the attributes of the lights, their locations, any additional warning signals related to the lights, and where the lights were housed. In some cases the lists included maps and photographs such as the 1901 map shown in Figure 4. Light Lists prior to 1900 are very rare; few copies were made and fewer remain. Light Lists from 1901 through 1985 were examined to obtain information regarding the functional history of the lights within the Ship Shoal Lighthouse. These lists were first begun by the 5<sup>th</sup> Auditor of the Treasury, Mr. Stephen Pleasonton, who was responsible for all lighthouses from 1820 to 1852 when he was replaced by the

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<sup>12</sup> Numerous records that were researched made reference to the ninth district.

<sup>13</sup> Lockwood, Elizabeth, Searching for the Light: Textual Records Relating to Lighthouses in the National Archives, unpublished article, 1990.

Lighthouse Board in the Department of Treasury. No doubt the Light Ship "Pleasanton" which preceded the Ship Shoal Lighthouse was named after him. Pleasanton began the practice of keeping lists of lighthouses and their vital statistics but the lists were often incomplete and relatively useless to the sea captains who might otherwise have made use of them. Often seafarers would use other commercially produced information instead. The inadequacies of these lists were the result of Pleasanton's notorious thriftiness rather than an intent to misinform.<sup>14</sup> Had sufficient resources been allocated to keeping the lists up to date they would have proved far more useful. These lists did improve over the years, especially when taken over by the Light-House Board in 1852. A brief summary of the description of the lighthouse as recorded in the later Light Lists can be found on the following pages. The value of this list is in its recordation of changes to the light and in its own way, a telling of the changes in technology which saw both the decline of the maritime industry, and which allowed safe passage for the remaining commerce without the use of lighthouses.

The following is a summary of this information kept in these lists:

- 1901-1907    Ship Shoal Lighthouse  
              In 14' of water on the northerly side of Ship Shoal,  
              near its westerly extremity, 11 miles SSW, of Raccoon point,  
              Gulf coast of Louisiana.  
              Lat. 28-54-56  
              Long 91-04-15  
              Flashing white every 30 sec.  
              Second order of light  
              Focal Point 105' above the water line.  
              Visible 16 nautical miles<sup>15</sup>
- 1908-1914    In 2-1/4 fathoms on northwest part of shoal.  
              Lat. 28-54-56  
              Long 91-04-15  
              1 white Fl (flashing) 30 sec.  
              Focal Point 105' above water

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<sup>14</sup> Lighthouse records and all contemporary writings regard Pleasanton as an excellent auditor and a very poor manager of lighthouses. He came to the service with little knowledge or interest in Aids to Navigation and in many ways, stunted the growth of the Lighthouse Service. He was also reluctant to apply new technology, such as the fresnel lens, then widely in use in Europe. The Ship Shoal Lighthouse, built after Mr. Pleasanton had been replaced by the nine member Light - House Board, was one of the new lights adopting both the new technology (new to the U.S.) of the fresnel lens and the later screw pile foundation. The clippings file (1870 - Annual Report) describes the Ship Shoal Lighthouse as follows: "This second - order lens apparatus with its appendages is one of the finest on the coast, and the light has been one of the best to be found anywhere."

<sup>15</sup> 1901 Light List.

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Visible 16 nautical miles  
160,000 candlepower  
Brown: pyramidal, iron skeleton, enclosing stair cylinder  
and cylindrical dwelling  
on piles.  
Bell: single stroke every 20 sec.  
Flash: 2.7 sec.  
Eclipse: 27.3 sec.<sup>16</sup>

By 1908 a “fog bell suspended from southerly side of tower, above roof of dwelling” was added. At this time the light was number 1737. When lighthouses first received numbers it was in relationship to their location on the coast. These numbers changed frequently over time as more lighthouses were added to the service.

The following description of the shoal was added in 1914: “The curve of 12’ of water extends 1-1/2 to 6 miles eastward of the tower. Curve of 18 feet of water is found 5 miles to westward to 15 miles to eastward and from ½ miles to northward to 3 miles to eastward and from ½ miles to northward to 3 miles to southward of it. In passing along the coast to the southward, it is best to keep in not less than 27 feet, and when the light beam bears N it should not be less than 5 miles distant. There is a good channel inside the shoal with from 24 to 30 feet.<sup>17</sup>”

In 1929 it was still a watched light, but a nun buoy<sup>18</sup> had been added 19 miles from the lighthouse. In 1930 the light was first listed as unwatched and the intensity of its light had been reduced to 4,000 candlepower with a one second flash of white light. Each eclipse of the light was nine seconds in duration and it was lit by incandescent oil vapor. By 1933 the light would be powered by acetylene gas and was reduced to a 3<sup>rd</sup> order light.<sup>19</sup> Two buoys would be placed in the vicinity of the Ship Shoal Lighthouse by 1937; one 4,100 yards at six degrees and one at 10 miles at 263.5 degrees. In 1943 three buoys marked a wreck. In 1944 a radio beacon was added. It transmitted on 290 kc, a signal of groups of one dash, two dots.

Electricity would power the lighthouse by 1946 and provide 16,000 candlepower. In 1951 the light was again powered by acetylene gas, compressed and provided 4,000 candlepower. In 1965, with only 8,000 candlepower the light was still visible from 16 miles. This was the last year it would be listed as a light, as the next year’s Light List would only list the Ship Shoal Day Beacon. By the year 1981 there was a note indicating

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<sup>16</sup> 1908 Light List.

<sup>17</sup> 1914 Light List.

<sup>18</sup> A nun buoy is a simple form of buoy that often looks like a nuns habit.

<sup>19</sup> 1932 Light List

that the Ship Shoal Lighthouse was abandoned.<sup>20</sup> It now shows up on present day nautical charts as an abandoned lighthouse. (See Figure 2)

### *Light House Keepers*

Any history of the lighthouse is much more than the history of the iron and stone that made up these structures, it is also the history of the unique persons involved in their construction and upkeep. Of these, the keeper is perhaps the most significant and colorful person in these stories.<sup>21</sup>

The keepers in such remote stations as Ship Shoal endured isolation, harsh and dangerous weather, disease, and the occasional foibles of the Light House Service. The keeper of the Ship Shoal Light Station answered to the superintendent, who in turn answered to the inspectors. These inspectors were responsible for making annual tours of the lighthouses in their jurisdictions and reporting the condition and the nature of any repair work in the annual report. Annual reports varied with their authors, and it was not unheard of to just repeat last years report. The Modern Light - House Service report describes the job qualifications of the keeper as follows: "The appointment of light-house keepers is restricted to persons between the ages of eighteen and fifty, who can read, write, and keep accounts, are able to do the requisite manual labor, to pull and sail a boat, and have enough mechanical ability to make the necessary minor repairs about the premises, and keep them painted, white washed, and in order."<sup>22</sup>

Keepers and their assistants were also subjected to the various fevers which often swept through this part of the country. Form 60, a standard form used to describe the lighthouses starting in the 1900's, even had a question regarding the health of the light station. Yellow Fever shut down Ship Shoal in 1875. In 1867 a series of deaths and paralysis would finally come to an end when the diagnosis of "lead-poisoning" was made. Potable water for this lighthouse was obtained through a built-in water collection system. Water would be collected through a system of gutters and pipes that led into one of several cisterns that were housed in the keepers' dwelling. All of these had previously been painted with lead paint to prevent corrosion. This lead would then leach into the water supply and it was assumed that in its concentrated quantities would cause the poisoning of the residents of the lighthouse. In 1867 the lead paint which had been so commonly used on structures of this sort was scraped off of the light house and then it was washed with a solution of caustic potash. After rinsing, a finish of three coats of hot coal-tar was applied. It is unlikely we will ever know with certainty the cause of these

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<sup>20</sup> 1981 Light List

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix E for a complete listing of Ship Shoal Lighthouse keepers.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, Arnold Burgess, 1889, The Modern Light-House Service, Washington, DC, Government Printing office.

deaths, but no further paralysis occurred after the paint was removed from the surface of the structure.<sup>23</sup>

Personnel problems were a common occurrence in the Light House Service, perhaps in some part due to the harsh and isolated working conditions. The removal of keepers for various disciplinary reasons was a frequent occurrence. In December 1870 there were reports made that both assistant keepers were destitute and charges were brought against the keeper of the Ship Shoal Light Station. Keepers were removed in 1872 and 1875. One report of the light house inspector of the 8th district reported that two assistants to the keeper at the Ship Shoal Light Station ran away and were last seen "loafing" in the City of New Orleans. The keeper requested that his wife and son receive the pay of these assistants since his family was actually doing the work. No record was made if this request was answered. In 1877, the 2nd Assistant Keeper was removed from his post in April, the keeper in May, and a second replacement assistant in the following February. Salary payments were unreliable and the widows of keepers such as the widow of Louis Johnson who died on duty in 1898 would sometimes wait years to receive the back pay they were due. Keepers also had to contend with the politics of the service. Keeper's positions were often given as political tokens of favor. Letters from keepers complaining to the Light House Board are found throughout the 1800's from all parts of the country regarding this matter.

## DESCRIPTION OF STRUCTURE

### *Ship Shoal Lighthouse*

The Ship Shoal Lighthouse is located 18 miles off the coast of Berwick, Louisiana between Timbalier Bay and Atchafalaya Bay, 1-1/2 miles from the location of the original lightship. It is a cast iron, open, skeletal frame structure with a screw pile foundation that is very similar to many Florida reef lighthouses. The 125 foot tower sits "in 14' of water on the northerly side of Ship Shoal, near its westerly extremity." Coordinates are given as Latitude 28-54-56 and Longitude 91-04-15.

The following describes the condition of the Ship Shoal Lighthouse during a field investigation which was performed by Greenhorne & O'Mara, Inc. on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, 1996. Due to the structural instability of the lighthouse, all observations were made from the water level by boat.

The Ship Shoal Lighthouse, which appears to have not been renovated since about 1945, has very little paint surface left. It has experienced severe rusting in several horizontal bands that surround the surface, generally six to eight inches below and/or above a riveted seam. The section of the piles which are under water and could be seen from the

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<sup>23</sup> United States Coast Guard, United States Lighthouse Service, Ship Shoal Lighthouse, Clipping File, Box 13, NC63-E, 1867.

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surface are covered with barnacles and are of unknown condition. As one proceeds up the lighthouse, the rusting is pronounced from the water surface to the height of the lantern (About 90 feet.) The lantern itself appears to be in fair condition, although rusty. No lamp or other equipment remains in the lighthouse. The current location of the fresnel lens is unknown. Five of the 50 panes of glass that surrounded the light remain in the lantern. A wire mesh that had at one time protected this glass has become unwrapped, and hangs down from the lantern. The metal frame of the lantern windows appear to be copper. The metal walls which surround the stairwell leading from the keepers dwelling to the watch room has severe corrosion in rings just above the 4<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> panel.

The single rail which surrounded the lantern at about mid-height and was used to provide support for washing the outside of the lantern glass, has broken loose and is hanging from the side of the lantern. Graffiti mars the railing around the lantern and the walls of the keeper's residence. The railing which surrounds the gallery at the lantern level is in fair condition and seems to be stable. This railing matches the railing shown on the original construction drawings.

The roof of the keeper's residence could not be observed from the water and has large weeds growing from it. The keeper's dwelling was constructed of a panelized metal system, with panels riveted together. Two vertical rows of panels sheath the keeper's house have excessive rusting in a horizontal ring around just above and just below the floor surface. All interior surfaces of the dwelling which were visible from the water through window or door openings, show interior walls of wood and doorways trimmed in wood.

The greatest overall corrosion occurs from the water surface to the ceiling of the first floor of the residence, and was in all likelihood caused by the corrosive activity of the salt-water waves. Three of the original windows remain but have broken panes. All openings in the stair tower and several in the keeper's dwelling are left gaping. Others are covered in sheet metal or plywood. Three original windows in various states of deterioration are still in place. The keeper's dwelling has pairs of round portholes on each alternating side. Most of the first floor gallery and railing is severely deteriorated, what little remains is hanging from the wall of the dwelling. This railing was chain link with metal supports of a contemporary design. A matching rail surrounds the edge of the roof of the keepers dwelling. The lower rail is very deteriorated, but the rail at the roof edge is intact.

Although the lighthouse is no longer active, it does contain several lights that serve to alert ships to its existence at night. On the east side of the lighthouse there is a yellow light. On the south side, attached to solar panels which power these lights is a white light. Two small lights are located at the top of the glass walls of the lantern just above the solar panel. The lighthouse currently serves as a daymark and has solar powered lights simply to mark it as an obstruction at night.

## ALTERATIONS

Although the earliest drawings of the ship shoal lighthouse show a neo-classical ventilator at the top of the cupola of the lantern, it appears that this was not constructed and a simpler onion dome ventilator was used. All early photographs show this simpler form.

Due to the exposed site and its construction of cast iron, one finds the normal amount of repairs one might expect at this lighthouse. The annual storm season from autumn through early winter also caused further damage and so one finds frequent reference to repairs and renovations to both the original light ship and the lighthouse. Some of these alterations are evident from the progressive descriptions of the lighthouse, others can be gleaned from reports and correspondence found at the National Archives.

The following partial list obtained from the annual reports and clipping files give a clear sense of the constant attention that was required to attend to this lighthouse and also give a synopsis history of the lighthouse

1857	Hurricane	Carried away platform which was being used to put down piles for the construction of the lighthouse.
1858	Weathering	Light Ship leaking. Light moved to platform of construction for new lighthouse. Heavy repairs to Light Ship.
1861	American Civil War	Light was out of service.
1865	End of War	Light Station repaired and relit after service interruption due to the War.
1867	Lead Poisoning	Severe illness and death of several keepers.
	Storms	Unspecified damage.
1868	Cyclone/Gale	Wind threw oil out of the reservoir. Light was out for over six hours.
	Erosion	Repairs were made to the foundation. Stones were laid.
1870	Weathering	Lighthouse began tipping slightly. Water depth on one side increased sharply.
	Neglect by Keeper	Damage to burners and lamps. Assistant keepers destitute, principal keeper charged.
1872	Maintenance	Rust scraped off, cleaned with acid. Keeper removed.
1873	Erosion	Severe erosion reported.
1874	Erosion	Deterioration of ballast placed at the foundation. Tower leaning.

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1875	Disease	Yellow Fever-work stopped.
1876	Erosion	Stone shipped to secure foundation.
1877	Weathering	Lower system of bracing badly corroded. New wooden floor laid in dwelling unit, wire netting around lantern glass.
1880	Renovations	3 new water tanks added.
1881	Renovations	New Chariot wheels for clock mechanism.
1882	Repairs	Repaired gallery floor in dwelling, cleaned and coal-tarred the foundation.
1886	Renovation	Electrical bells and lightning rods added .
1889	Weathering	New floors, floor joists and base board, rust scaled off entire lighthouse.
1892	Repairs	2 broken beams under piazza repaired. 3 plates replaced.
1896	Erosion	Stone from Ft. Pickens to shore the foundation finally arrives.
1898	Deaths	Deaths of several keepers reported.
1902	Weathering	Major Renovations: old gallery plates and rails removed, beams sealed and painted, new floor and rails put on.
1902	Repairs	“The old gallery plates and rails were removed, the supporting beams were scaled and painted, and new floor and rails were put on. A new iron ladder was put up leading from trapdoor on the gallery to lower tie beams with an iron platform at the foot with a rail around three sides, and another ladder was placed from the platform to the water’s edge. The old iron roof was removed and a new one was put on the dwelling with hand rail around it and new gutters. The beams and other supports under the roof were scaled and painted before the new roof was put on. The ceiling around the sides and the floors of dwelling were taken out and the iron wall plates were replaced by new ones. All the ironwork under floors and ceilings was scaled and painted. An oil room was built. Four new cisterns were installed in rooms in the lower floor of the dwelling and were fitted with faucets, connecting pipes, etc., and painted. New boat davits were put up on the southwest

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side of the dwelling. The fog bell was hung on a beam above the roof, and a platform was built under it to support the striking machinery. Twelve tension rods of the tower were repaired and all of the ironwork from the top to the bottom of the tower was scaled and painted. Various repairs were made.<sup>24</sup>

1904	Weathering	Repairs, more or less extensive.
1906	Hurricane	Unspecified damage.
1907	Hurricanes	Extensive repairs.
1916	Hurricane	Keeper and Assistants noted for bravery "during trying conditions."
1929	Erosion	Lighthouse left leaning.
1941	World War II	Light was dimmed.
1943		Light relit at reduced intensity (1000 candle power.)
1944	End of War Repairs	Light was relit to 1400 candlepower. Main columns and sockets of uncertain structural integrity. Landing ladders broken. Main deck beams reinforced. No further repair was recommended.
1945	Repairs	Installation of new landing ladders and boom to facilitate landing of personnel. (See Figures 5&6)
1948	Alterations	Underwater tie-rods replaced. Remaining 26 are severely corroded. Request to change from attended light to unattended due to structural problems. Radio beacon moved to Point Au Fer Reef Light Station.
1949	Unmanned	Due to conditions of underwater structure, lighthouse became unmanned. Light leaning 15-20 degrees northeast.
1952	Maintenance	Scaling and painting. Lens was still in light.
1954	Report	Listed structure in good condition. Some vandalism reported. Lighthouse abandoned at this point.
1957	Repairs	Replaced destroyed lens.
1960	Change in use	Due to large number of oil wells and draft of modern vessels, passage between ship shoal

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<sup>24</sup> 1902 Annual Report clippings file.

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1965	Discontinued	and coast was no longer practicable. Lantern deck cleaned and painted. March 11 light was eliminated. Structure remained as a day beacon.
1963	Survey	Tension and Compression members 50% left. Rehabilitation costs estimated at \$75,000.00.
1987		Lighthouse surveyed and declared excess property by Coast Guard. <sup>25</sup>

### Summary

The Ship Shoal Lighthouse, with a 122 year history of service could easily be a history of any of the many lighthouses throughout the country. It represents the needs of an expanding commerce and the innovative technology that marked the history of the United States during the 1800 and 1900's. Built during the early tenure of the Light House Board, it incorporated the new technology of the screw pile foundation, which provided a more stable support on the areas sandy soils than previous foundations. It also made use of the fresnel lens, a technology that was not new to Europe but that was just then being used in the United States. This lighthouse also represents the hardiness of its keepers, who weathered storm, disease, and human nature in keeping its light lit.

The original lighthouse construction documents at the National Archives differ from the lighthouse as it exists today in one unexplained significant way; its copula is of a simpler design than that in the original drawings. The cause for this discrepancy is unknown. It should also be noted that the Ship Shoal Lighthouse is very similar to many of the Florida reef lighthouses and to other Gulf of Mexico Lighthouses, many of which are intact.

As with all cast iron lighthouses, this one saw much repair and renovation over its lifetime. Much of the actual metal and wood of the lighthouse has been replaced at least once during its lifetime.

At this writing, it is the intention of the Town of Berwick to move the Ship Shoal Lighthouse to join the Southwest Reef Lighthouse in the town's waterfront lighthouse park. A rendering of this proposed park by a local Architect is found in Figure 1.

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<sup>25</sup> Report filed at New Orleans District Coast Guard Office. Notes for 44,45,48,52,54,57 were obtained from the Coast Guard Region Eight files.

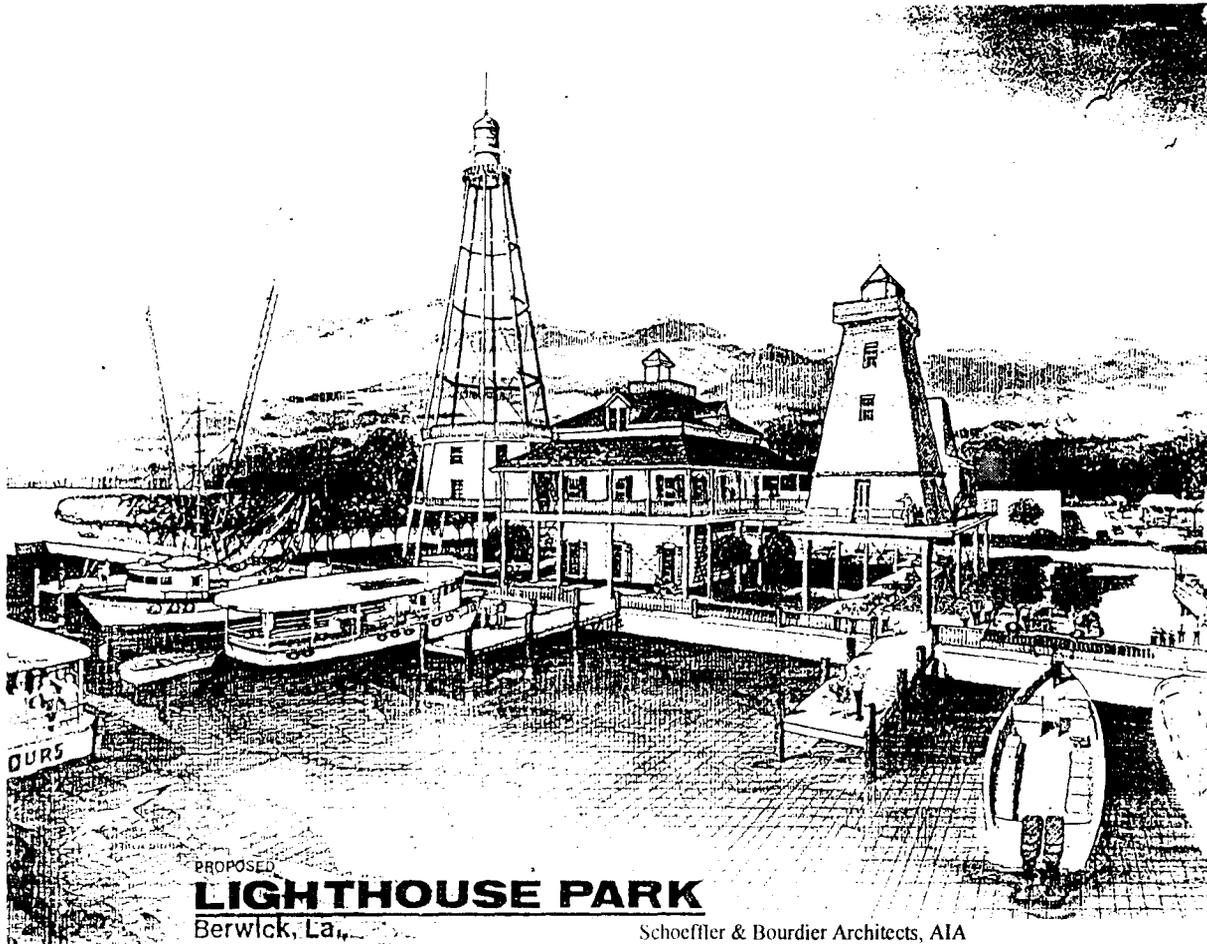
**List of Figures**

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Concept of Future Park

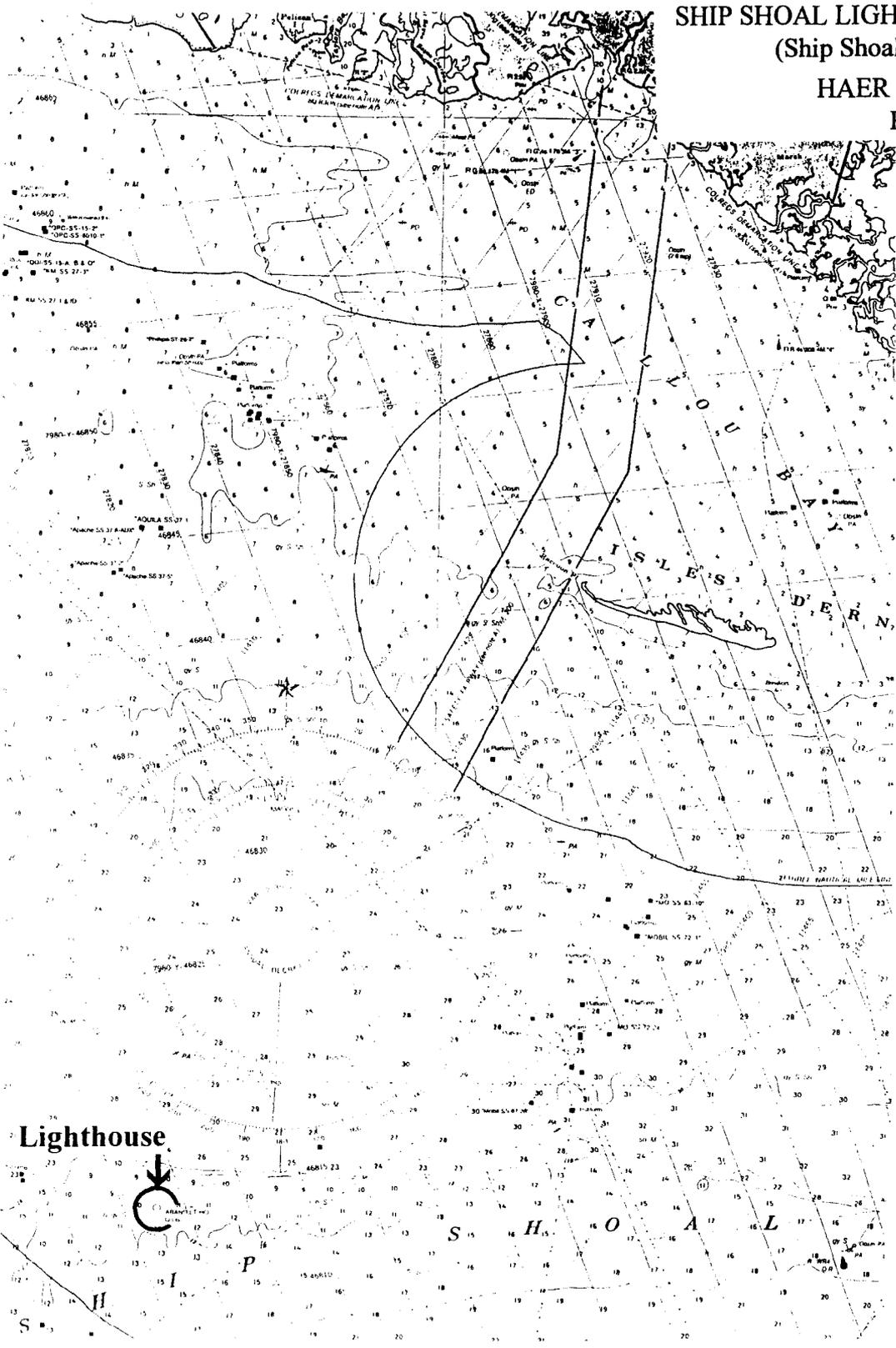
Figure 1

No Scale

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Scale 1: 160,000

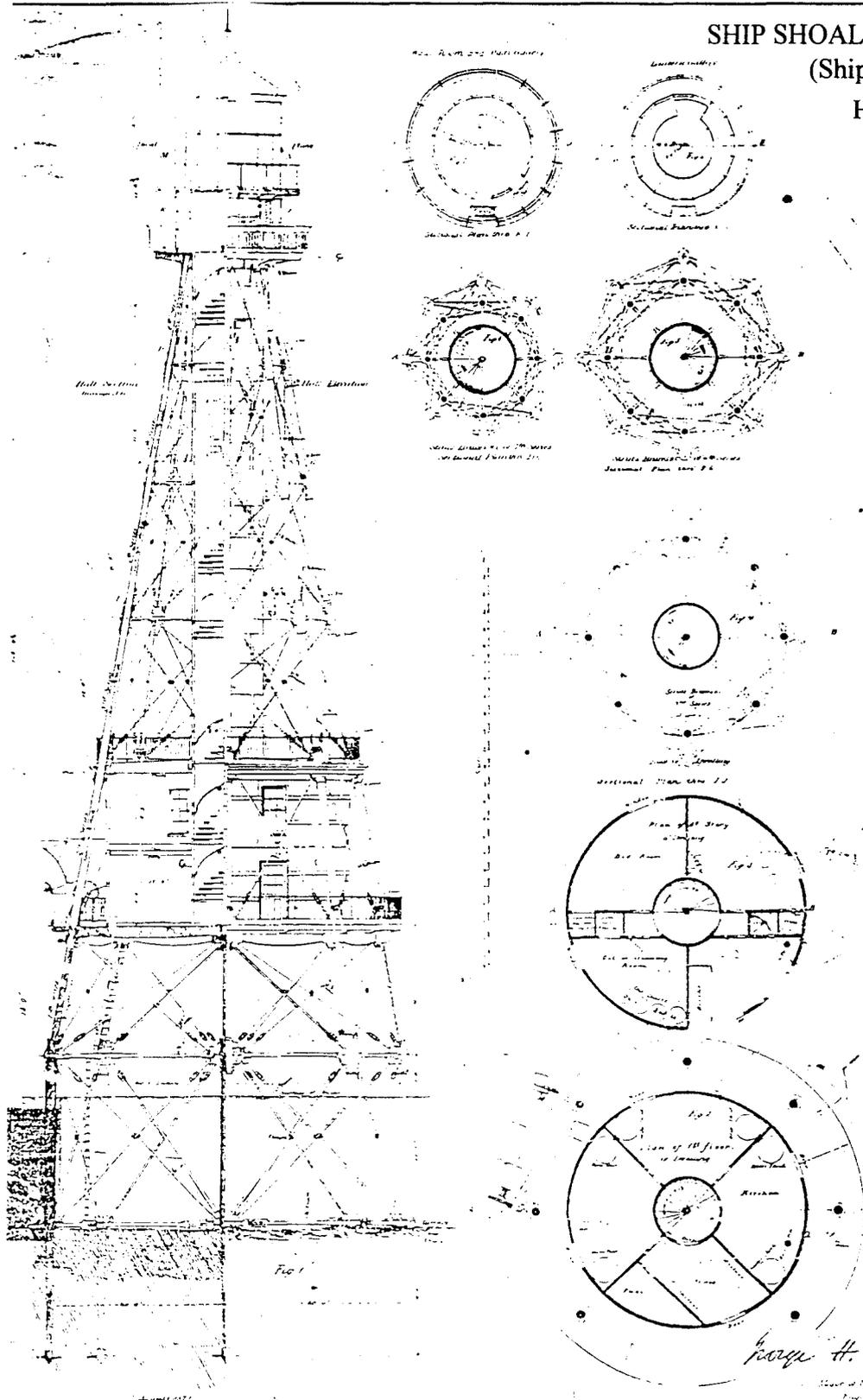
Source: NOAA, Isles Dernieres to Point au Fer, June 1, 1996

Nautical Chart of Shoal Area

Figure 2

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Note: A blueprint of this drawing is in the possession of Gulf South Engineers, Houma, LA.

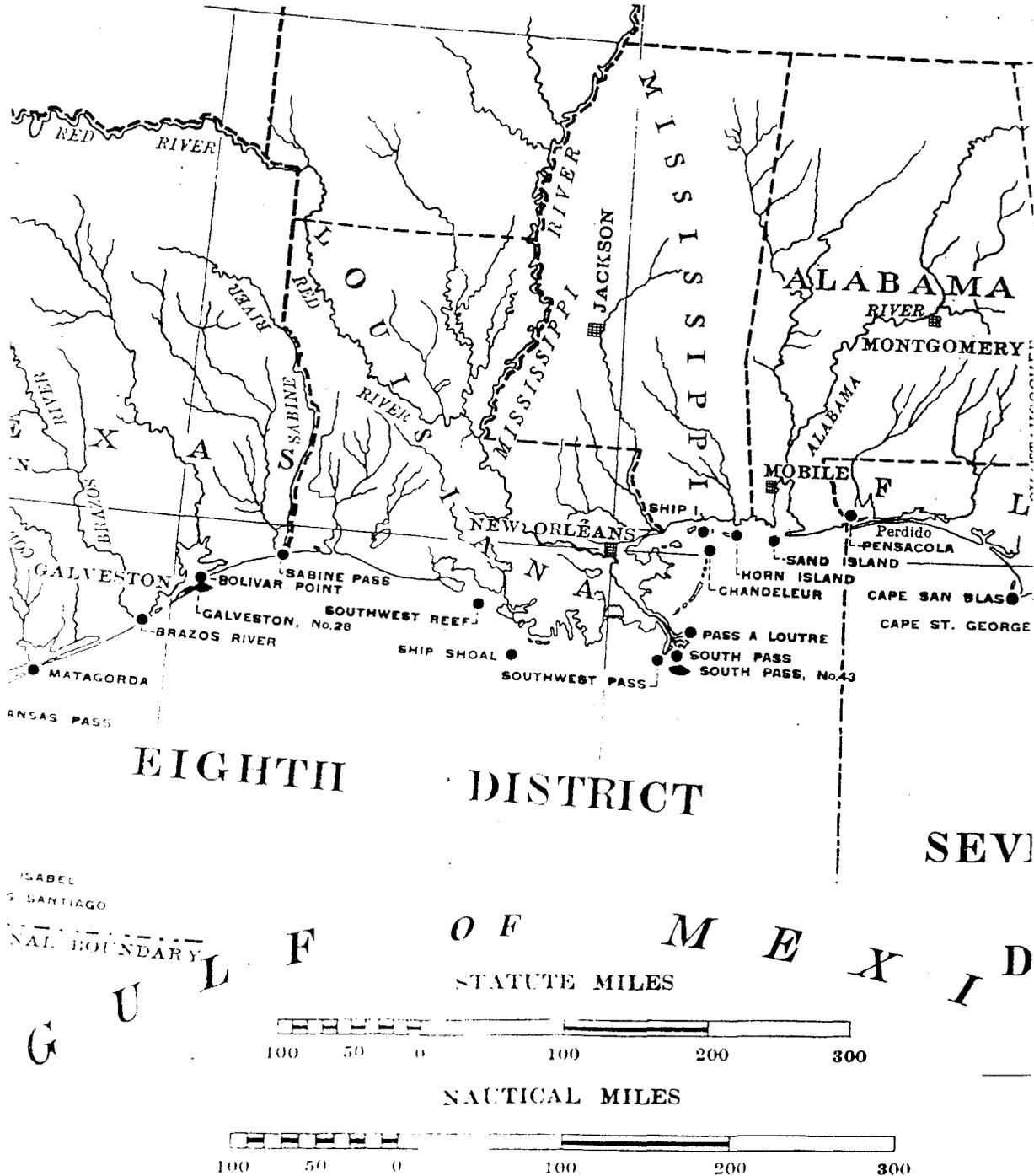
Scale: See Drawing

1871  
Floor Plan  
Drawings  
Figure 3

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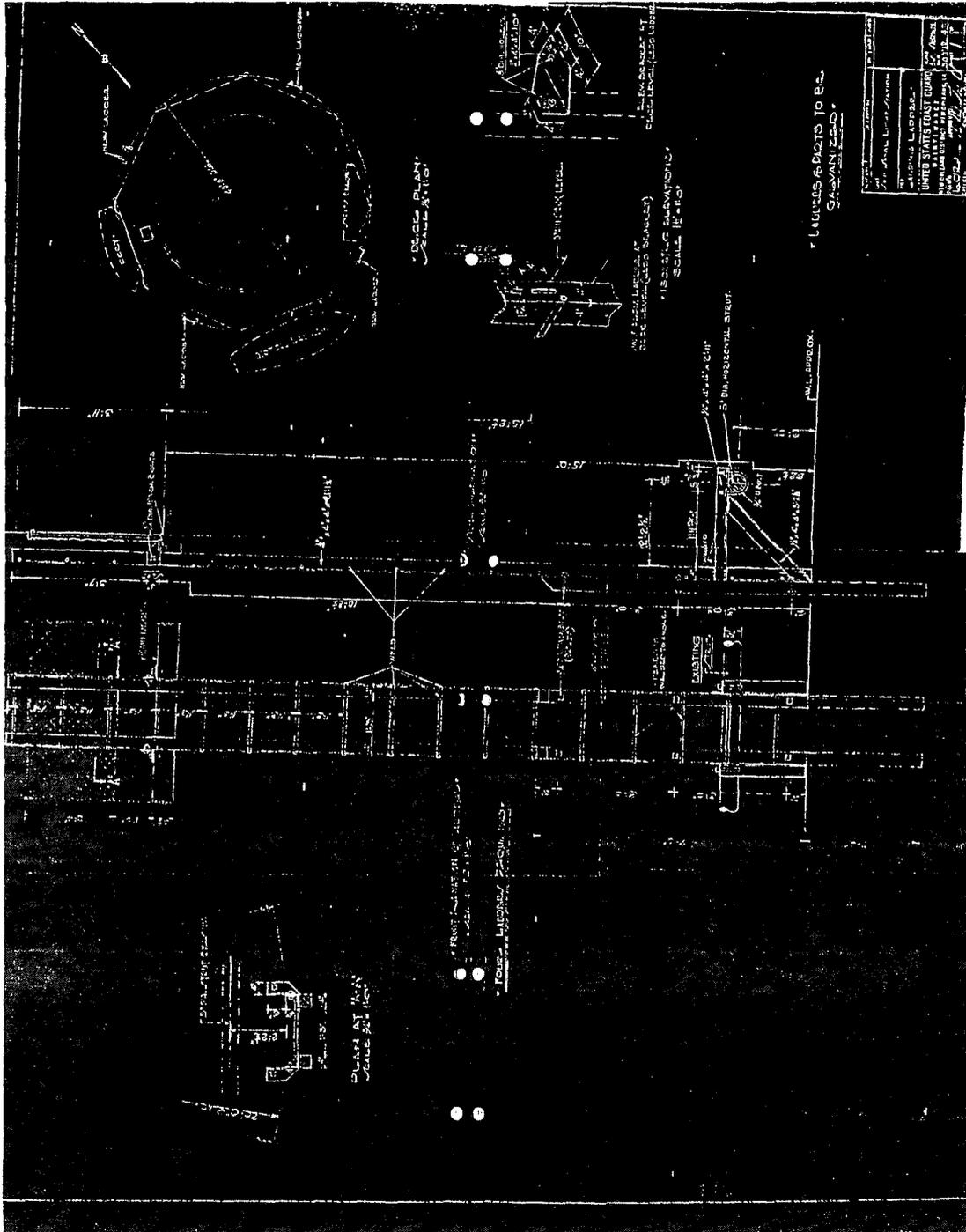
1901 Light List Map of Gulf Lighthouses.

Figure 4

Scale: See Map

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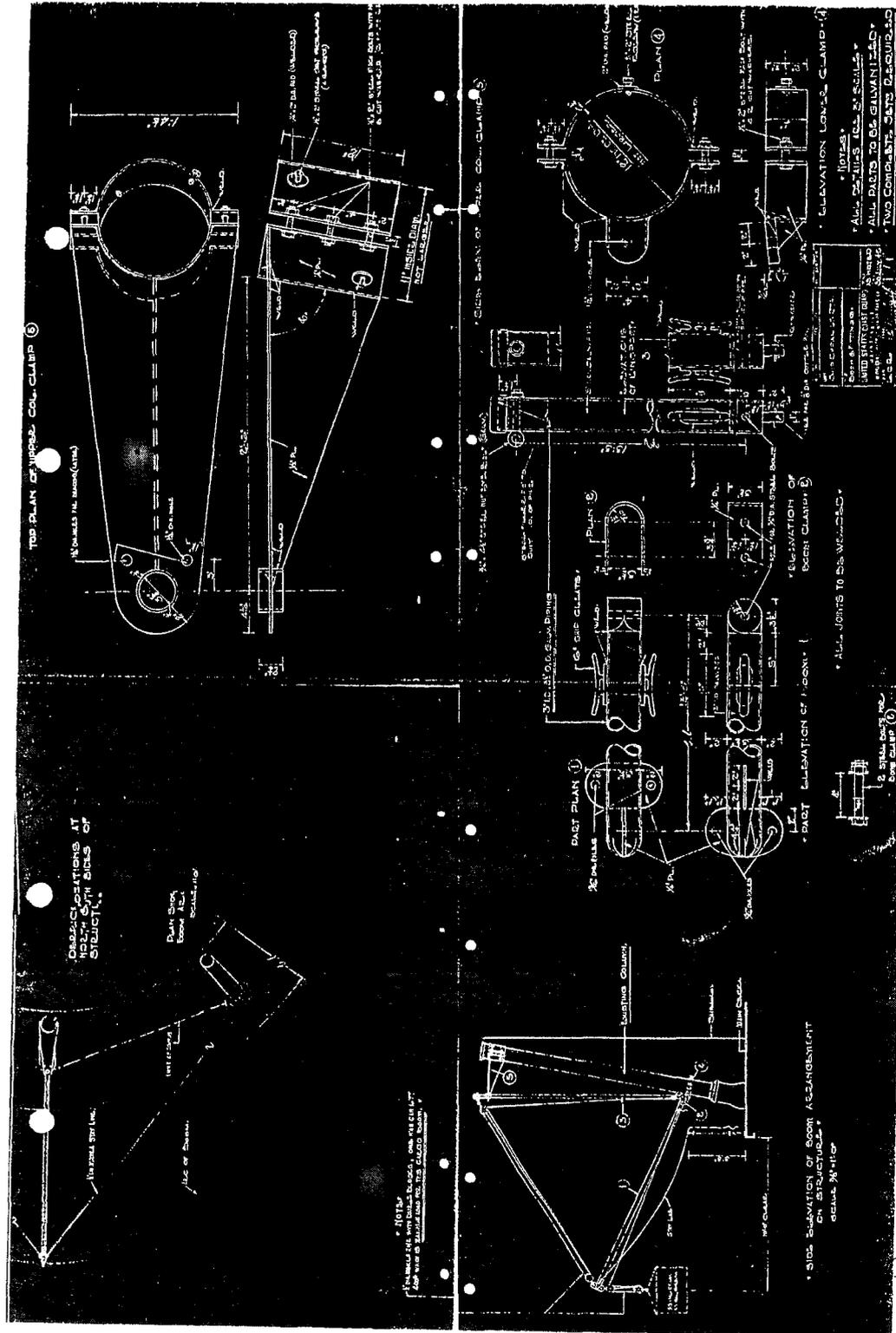
1945 Repair Drawing  
Figure 5

Scale: See Drawing

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Scale: See Drawing

1945 Repair  
Drawing  
Figure 6

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