

LIGHTHOUSES IN WORLD WAR I: TRANSITION INTO WAR

By Ellen Henry, Curator, Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association



The Great War at the beginning of the 20th century was the result of a complex system of alliances and treaties among nations. When conflict arose between a few of these countries, it brought many others into the fray. The war was centered in Europe, and the principal alliances were the Allies, including Great Britain, France, and Russia, against the Central Powers, including Germany, the Kingdom of Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary. The war began in Europe in July of 1914 and ended on November 11, 1918. The United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, on the side of the Allies. Both the United States Coast Guard and the Lighthouse Service were transferred to the Navy for the duration of the war.

Regulations concerning the duties of the Lighthouse Service personnel during wartime were quickly distributed when the United States entered the Great War. The first of these regulations stated that when authorized by the president, vessels, equipment, stations, and personnel would be assigned to the jurisdiction of the War Department of the Navy Department. Those departments would furnish the commissioner of lighthouses with the appropriate names and addresses of officers to whom the Lighthouse Service would report.

The commissioner of lighthouses would provide the various district inspectors the contact information for officers under whom they would serve. Control by the Navy or War departments would begin as of the date of the president's proclamation of war, and the control of the Lighthouse Service by the Department of Commerce would cease on that date. The duties of the lighthouse district inspectors would remain the same as in peace time with the additional responsibilities of keeping their Navy or War Department superiors informed of all lighthouse and vessel activities. All light stations were closed to any persons not on official government business.

Some important new duties for Lighthouse Service vessels were

the setting of submarine nets at vulnerable harbors and inlets along the east coast where U-boat activity could be anticipated. Tenders would also plant mines in some areas, and the tenders with mine-planting equipment already onboard when the war broke out included:

First District, headquartered at Portland, Maine—*Hibiscus* and *Zizania*

Second District, Boston—*Mayflower* and *Azalea*

Third District, Tompkinsville, New York—*Pansy*, *Larkspur*, *John Rodgers*, *Mistletoe*, *Daisy*, *Tulip*, and *Myrtle*

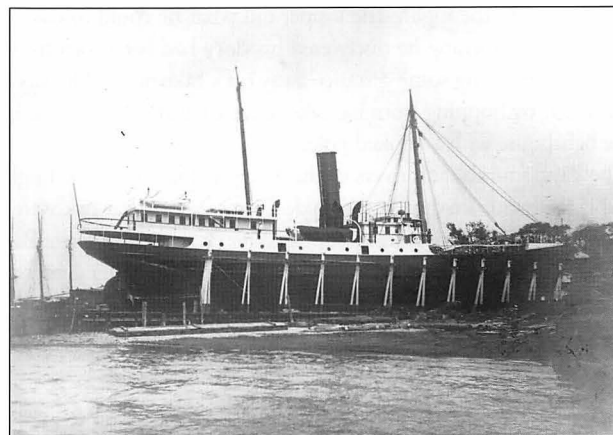
Fourth District, Philadelphia—*Iris*

Fifth District, Baltimore—*Maple*, *Jessamine*, *Columbine*, *Orchid*, and *Arbutus*

Sixth District, Charleston—*Cypress* and *Mangrove*

Seventh District, Key West—*Ivy*

Eighth District, New Orleans—*Camellia* and *Magnolia*



Cypress, 1908, Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association digital collection.



Collection of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.

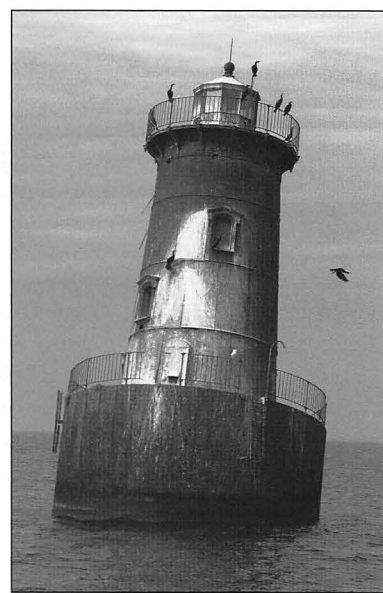
On March 19, 1917, George Putnam, the commissioner of lighthouses, sent a memo to lighthouse inspectors in all districts except 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15. The War Department would reimburse the Lighthouse Service for all mine-planting work carried out by lighthouse tenders. Inspectors were to forward their accounts covering such service promptly.

Putnam also sent out a confidential memo to the Navy Department on April 12, 1917, detailing his concerns about the lack of tenders:

In the last few years the Lighthouse Service has not been able to obtain appropriations and to get built sufficient tenders to meet the natural increase in the Service and to replace tenders worn out and condemned.... There is no surplus of tenders available over those needed for the efficient prosecution of their regular work. This Department desires to cooperate in



The first lighthouse at Sharps Island in the Chesapeake Bay was a screwpile design that was destroyed by drifting ice in 1881. It was replaced by a caisson tower (right) a few years later, but the annual assault by ice has caused the lighthouse to lean. Even so, it remains in service. Wikimedia Commons photo. Thomas Point Shoal Light (left) is the only screwpile lighthouse that remains in service on the bay. USLHS archives.



initiated an early thaw and ice began to move on the lake. Large chunks slowly passed the lighthouse and ground against the stone foundation. After supper, as Lorenz was working in the lantern, a loud bang jarred the entire structure. A few seconds later the kitchen wall gave way as an ice floe drove into the lighthouse. Lorenz rushed downstairs in time to see it recede into the night. The keeper did what he could to cover the hole. The next morning he discovered his dory had been torn from its davits and was sitting some distance away on a cake of ice. He was able to retrieve it by hopping from ice cake to ice cake and dragging it back to the lighthouse with a hooked pole.

The bays, sounds, and rivers of the Mid-Atlantic and New England were plagued with ice during the coldest winters. Most at risk were the screwpile-style lighthouses in the open water of the Chesapeake Bay—curious little lighthouses perched on iron legs that were literally screwed into the bay floor. Ice jams slammed these structures and did serious damage, sometimes shearing them off their legs. The *Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board* noted a particularly tough winter in February 1881 for the keepers of Sharps Island Lighthouse off the southern tip of Tilghman Island:

“The structure was lifted from its foundation and thrown over on its side and carried away by ice. The keeper and his assistant clung to the floating house and...drifted in the bay 16½ hours without fire or food, always in imminent danger...[the lighthouse] grounded however, full of water, on an island shortly after midnight at high tide.”

Twelve years later, another big ice jam in January 1893 ruined three screwpile lighthouses in the Chesapeake Bay at Smith Point, Solomons Lump, and Wolf Trap. The first two were damaged but not destroyed. The fearful keepers at Solomons Lump stuck to their post, but at Smith Point the men abandoned the lighthouse and lost their jobs

as a consequence. The Wolf Trap Lighthouse, situated at the entrance to Winter Harbor, was sheared off its legs and thrown into the bay. The two keepers escaped to their boat moments before the calamity. The lighthouse, with only its upper part above water, drifted for almost a day before being lassoed by a cutter and towed to shore.

Ice truly can be a contest between nature and manmade structures, and lighthouses feel the brunt of this bittersweet winter punishment. But not every winter blast caused mayhem. The late Frank Jo Raymond, keeper at Long Island Sound’s Latimer Reef Lighthouse in the 1920s, made peace with the snow and ice. When winter settled over the cast-iron, caisson-style tower and locked the doors and windows with its icy fingers, Raymond stoked the coal stove, made a big pot of coffee, and picked up his paintbrush. His oil paintings fetched extra income in the summer months when tourists swarmed the nearby shores.

One storm in 1925 kept Raymond sequestered inside for several days. During that time, he kept the light going, as required, and painted a fantastic winter scene on the circular walls of the tower’s interior. Unfortunately, when the lighthouse inspector came to visit a few weeks later to assess the storm damage, he ordered Raymond to paint over the mural. Regulations said all interior walls had to be white.

“I smiled and did as I was told,” Raymond said in 1987 interview. “But as soon as the next storm came, I picked up my paintbrush and went at it. You had to see that lighthouse in winter to believe it—so beautiful.”

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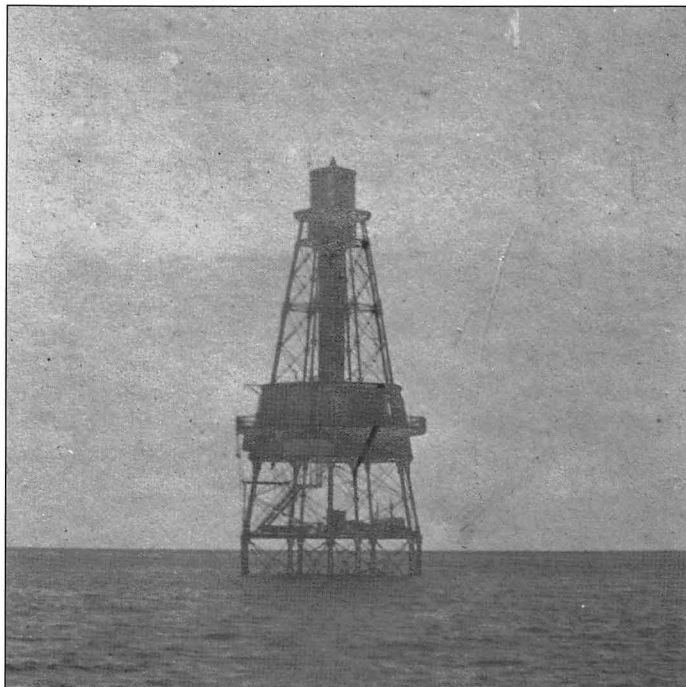
Marquette (Michigan) Pierhead Lighthouse, February 1938. U.S. Coast Guard archives.

every possible way, and the Bureau of Lighthouses and the Lighthouse Inspectors in charge of the various districts have been so instructed, but it is suggested that it may be well to have the facts set forth above fully understood by the officers in charge of the various coastal defense and naval districts, in order that they may be in a position the better to determine the relative urgency of various duties which may be assigned to these tenders after their transfer.

Putnam pointed out that there were only 48 tenders available, three less than in 1910. These tenders were charged with the care of over 15,000 aids to navigation, 3,500 more than there were in 1910. So, with fewer tenders serving more aids to navigation, the commissioner wanted to make certain the Navy understood that taking tenders away from the Lighthouse Service could well have a negative impact on the maintenance of militarily important navigational aids. Naval officers should carefully assess the urgency of any requests for tender use. In reply, the Navy requested that the Lighthouse Service keep it informed of the locations of all Lighthouse Service vessels and the nature of the work in which such vessels were engaged.

There would be direct communication between the Office of Naval Operations, the Office of the Chief of Coast Artillery, and the Bureau of Lighthouses on all matters affecting the details of carrying out the provisions of the act of August 29, 1916, which had outlined the changes in operations to be implemented in wartime. Additionally, many lighthouses would have to accommodate more personnel since three or more military signalmen would be assigned to each chosen lighthouse. The signalmen would be responsible for teaching and for carrying out communications with methods that included International Code signal flags, wig-wag flags, semaphore flags, and visual code provided by flashes from “the EVEREADY electric hand torch as an occulting light.”

In Florida and the Bahamas, Mosquito Inlet, Fowey Rocks, Carysfort Reef, Alligator Reef, Sombrero Key, Loggerhead Key, Great Isaac, Southwest Point, Gun Cay, and North Elbow Cay lighthouses would all be assigned three signalmen each. At Jupiter and Sand Key, both having Weather Bureau signal equipment, six men would be stationed, and at Hillsboro Inlet there would be four. Eventually, men would also be assigned to Sanibel Island and Egmont Key.



Carysfort Reef Lighthouse. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

A confidential memo from the Seventh Naval District, Key West, on October 1, 1918, stated that signalmen and keepers would maintain continuous watch 24 hours a day. Signalmen would watch from sunrise to sunset and keepers would watch at night. Daily signal practice for the Lighthouse Service crew would be led, of course, by the signalmen. Logs of the watches were to be kept in order to record all matters of general interest concerning conditions at and near the lighthouse, time and type of signal practice, all signals sent and received, all aircraft seen and any circumstances connected with them, all passing vessels, their type, names if possible, and direction of travel.

Signalmen were not allowed to challenge passing vessels unless peculiar circumstances were noticed. Any vessel in distress was to be reported immediately. Instructions went on to cover submarine spotting, any sounds of gunfire, aircraft sighted, and more, including instructions on keeping the light stations clean. Each signalman was required to purchase a minimum of 30 days worth of food and supplies for himself before departure to his assigned location. He would receive a subsistence allowance of \$1 per day.

When the official state of emergency was declared, William C. Redfield, secretary of commerce, wrote to George Putnam:

(To the...) Commissioner of Lighthouses:

The officers and men of the vessels of your Service, with the ships on which they serve, and the officers of certain important lightships and light stations are about to be called to serve their country during the present war under the charge of the military departments of the Government. They have in the past by unselfish devotion to duty under conditions often severe, often hazardous, shown their willingness to assume and their fitness to carry out any service for the public good whatever element of risk may have been involved.

This communication was followed by a series of telegrams from Putnam to ensure lighthouses and vessels were properly outfitted



Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse and Wireless Station. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.



Sand Key Light Station. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

with binoculars, motorboats, mine-planting supplies, and other equipment. Inspectors were advised not to give out information to anyone regarding movements of or repairs to lighthouse vessels except as instructions needed in notices to mariners. The lighthouse districts were now superseded by Navy districts which were similar to but not exactly the same as those of the Lighthouse Service. For example, the Seventh Naval District was everything south of Jacksonville, Florida, unlike the Seventh Lighthouse District which covered the state south of Jupiter Inlet to Perdido Entrance, including sea and gulf coasts of Florida.

Also in April 1917, an Executive Order of President Wilson established defensive sea areas around many east and west coast harbors as well as some in Hawaii and Manila, and specified regulations for vessels entering these areas. Any suspicious or noncooperative vessels could be boarded and taken by force. Defensive sea areas in Florida included a seven-mile circle at Key West and a six-mile circle at Egmont Key Lighthouse near Tampa.

On April 10, 1917, the chief of naval operations sent out a memo to the Navy's Bureau of Construction and Repair concerning the arming of lighthouse tenders. If available and if the ship design was suitable, six-pound guns would be installed. Otherwise, three- or one-pounders would be suitable. Whatever the armament, it was not to interfere with the function of the vessel as a lighthouse tender. The installation of these guns would be done at the Navy yard closest to the current home port of each designated tender.

As of April 11, the president announced the transfer of some lighthouse tenders to the War Department, including *Hibiscus*, *Anemone*, *Mistletoe*, *Iris*, *Orchid*, *Mangrove*, *Sunflower*, *Heather*, *Zizania*, *Pansy*, *Tulip*, *Maple*, *Laurel*, *Ivy*, *Madrono*, *Columbine*, *Mayflower*, *Larkspur*, *Daisy*, *Jessamine*, *Arbutus*, *Magnolia*, *Sequoia*, *Azalea*, *John Rodgers*, *Myrtle*, *Juniper*, *Cypress*, *Camellia*, and *Manzanita*. To the Navy Department went the tenders *Lilac*, *Woodbine*, *Holly*, *Water Lily*, *Snow Drop*, *Hyacinth*, *Sumac*, *Crocus*, *Amaranth*, *Mari-gold*, *Aspen*, *Clover*, *Fern*, *Rose*, and *Kukui*.

Also transferred to the Navy were various light stations. In the First Naval District, West Quoddy Head, Bass Head Harbor, Heron Neck, Pemaquid Point, and Cape Neddick were transferred. In the Second Naval District, there were the light vessel NANTUCKET SHOAL and light stations Gay Head, Point Judith, Block Island North, Sakonnet, Watch Hill, and Block Island Southeast. In the

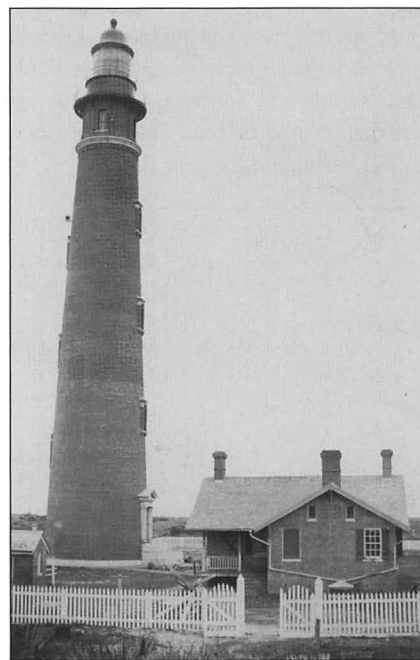
Third Naval District, Montauk, Fire Island, and Highlands of Navesink were transferred along with light vessel FIRE ISLAND. In the Fourth Naval District, Cape May and Cape Henlopen light stations were transferred. In the Fifth Naval District, Cape Charles and Cape Henry, and the light vessel DIAMOND SHOALS went to Navy control. No stations were transferred in the Sixth Naval District, but the light vessel FRYING PAN SHOALS was transferred. In the Seventh Naval District, the light stations at St. Augustine, Mosquito Inlet, and Jupiter Inlet were all transferred.

A list was sent out on April 12, 1917, giving the addresses of the coast defense commanders to which certain lighthouse tenders would report. In the Sixth District the *Cypress* would report to the commanding officer of Coast Defenses of Charleston at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina. The *Mangrove* would report to the Coast Defenses of Savannah at Fort Screven, Georgia. In the Seventh District the *Ivy* reported to the Key West Barracks. In the Eighth District the *Magnolia* reported to the Coast Defenses of Pensacola at Fort Barrancas, Florida. These orders involved Lighthouse Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 18 and 19. Other tenders were assigned to various naval commandants. Some tenders were assigned to the coast defense commanders and, following that assignment, to the naval commandants.

In the Sixth Lighthouse District, tenders *Mangrove* and *Cypress* were assigned to the Sixth Naval District at the Navy Yard in Charleston. Likewise, the light vessel FRYING PAN SHOALS. The tender *Water Lily* along with the St. Augustine, Mosquito Inlet, and Jupiter Inlet light stations were assigned to the commandant of the Seventh Naval District at the Key West Naval Station. From the Seventh Lighthouse District, the Tender *Snowdrop* was under Navy command at Key West. From the Eighth Lighthouse District, the tender *Magnolia* was assigned to Key West.

Lighthouse Service, Coast Guard, and private vessels being taken into the Navy for war service sometimes had similar or identical names. To avoid confusion these vessels were designated by a name and a number plus appropriate initials such as USS, CGC or LHT as prefix to the vessel name.

In May the Navy Department approved the enrollment of Lighthouse Service personnel into the Naval Reserve Force. Men serving on Lighthouse Service vessels would be able to



Mosquito Inlet Light Station circa, 1915. Collection Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.

retain their current status and pay unless or until they might be called by the Navy into active duty enrollment. Also, Navy men, enlisted or reserves, could be detailed to the Lighthouse Service vessels or stations or to the Coast Guard as needed to fill vacancies. Lighthouse Service men who had enrolled in the Naval Reserve Force would not be called out of the Lighthouse Service and into the Navy unless absolutely necessary.

In September of 1917, concerns were being raised about the status of Lighthouse Service employees who might be killed or wounded during the war. Would such personnel be covered by “War Risk Insurance”? The answer came back that such persons would be considered part of the Navy and be entitled to the same treatments and benefits as well as a pension for any future disability. The War Department had a different opinion of the status of the Lighthouse Service personnel working for them. Such persons would not be considered as military but would occupy a civilian status, so the Navy and War departments were asked to reconsider the question of status.

On April 18, 1917, a memo from the Navy Department Naval Communication Service to the commissioner of lighthouses specified that the Navy signalmen or electricians assigned to lighthouses, lighthouses with signal stations, or lighthouse service vessels, were subordinate to the principal keepers or vessel masters in all Lighthouse Service matters and should not interfere with keeper duties in any way.

The Navy Department took charge of not just existing aids to navigation but also assumed the right to create temporary aids such as lighted buoys. The Navy rather grudgingly acceded to a Lighthouse Service request that lighthouse keepers be informed when such temporary aids were established. A June 12, 1918, memo from the Seventh Naval District commandant’s office referred to this notification process as a “formality” that was for the purpose of cooperation with the Department of Commerce and not to be “considered as increasing or diminishing such authority to make changes in aids to navigation as may at present be vested in District Commandants by the Navy.”

Other incidents revealed that these transitions of control were not always well received. On September 12, 1918, a memo from the superintendent of lighthouses to the commandant of the Seventh Naval District addressed several typical issues. At the Dry Tortugas Light Station, the three keepers each had their own kitchens and

could decide whether or not to take meals together or separately. When several Navy signalmen arrived, they first ate with one of the keepers, but problems arose, so they decided to cook their own meals and the principal keeper provided them with a stove and utensils for this purpose. Apparently, this was going on at other light stations within the district as well.

The signalmen at Dry Tortugas also requested that a diving board be attached to the dock. Apparently the principal keeper was not enthusiastic about this request, and it took some time and encouragement for him to comply. Complaints about the principal keeper’s perceived rigidity were addressed in the lighthouse superintendent’s memo where he stated:

In reference to the Keeper appearing over jealous of his authority about the premises, finicky, etc. This lightkeeper maintains a model station, and in order to keep it so, everything must be systematical. He must have the courage to see that

the personnel complies with every requirement, for if he became lax, the station soon shows it, and on the next inspection he is cautioned, reprimanded, permitted to resign or is dismissed. It is not unusual for men and especially boys who are not yet accustomed to discipline to feel that the man in charge is finicky, unfriendly, etc., when as a matter of fact he is only insisting on the observance of the requirements.

The superintendent’s memo also addressed complaints that some light keepers were “harsh and unruly” in their treatment of the signalmen, but the Seventh District keepers had not been included in these complaints.

One incident in the Seventh District did turn hot enough to be recorded in correspondence of September 13, 1918, from William Demeritt, inspector of the Seventh Lighthouse District, to P.L. Cosgrove, Jr., master of the tender USS *Ivy*.

It is found that on the morning of September 3, 1918, when entering the Na-

val Station (at Key West) you were not recognized and were therefore stopped by the Acting Corporal of the Guard for identification. Instead of immediately showing this representative of the Authorities your evidence that you were the commanding officer of a Naval Vessel and a proper person to be admitted within the limits of the Naval Station, you entered into an argument with the Guard in which considerable excitement was evident. As an officer, and especially a commanding officer, you displayed very poor judgment and a lack of proper self control in permitting yourself to thus resent what you felt



A dirigible heads for its hangar at the Key West Naval Station. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.



Dry Tortugas, circa 1900. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

was discourteous treatment, and your actions on this occasion did not reflect credit on yourself or the Service from which you were transferred. You are therefore cautioned and further directed to refrain from similar actions in future, and whenever you feel that you have been improperly treated, submit a report in writing with all facts in the case, to the proper authorities, through the regular channels and not attempt to adjust the affair yourself.

Perhaps the most inadvertently humorous incident of disrespect between Lighthouse Service men and those of the Navy took place at the Fowey Rocks Light Station. William Demeritt, the Seventh District Lighthouse inspector, approached the station on board the tender *Ivy* on July 20, 1918. Demeritt boarded one of the ship's boats and as this craft drew near the tower, Navy Signalman Milton Terry came out on the balcony of the lighthouse and urinated down towards the inspector and his companions.

As soon as he reached the tower, Demeritt cornered Terry and informed him that the light station had a toilet and he should use it. Terry asked if his urination would "hurt the ocean." Demeritt countered that men were to use the place provided for the purpose, and no other location could be considered appropriate. Terry replied that he would take no orders from a lighthouse inspector who, as far as Terry was concerned, "did not amount to a piece of shit." To add insult to injury, Terry was also out of uniform at the time of the incident. The signalman was dressed only in dungarees and the inspector's report stated that the man was "naked to the waste"—both a wrong and hilarious choice of spelling consider-

ing what the man was doing. Wanting to *waste* no time, Demeritt promptly called the second commander of the second section and recited the facts of the case. In response, Terry was immediately removed from Fowey Rocks and confined to barracks for 10 days where he was kept busy washing windows and performing other menial tasks.

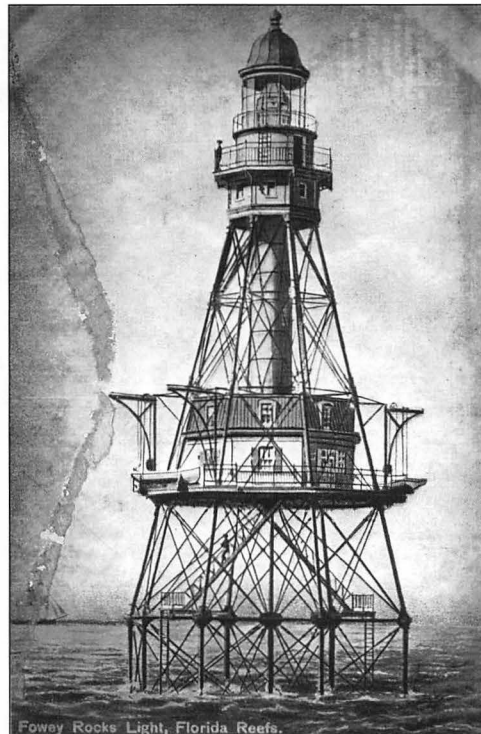
Apparently, Fowey was a place with more than one man with problems. On July 29, 1918, Demeritt received a letter from Sanders-Peacock Company of Coconut Grove, Florida. A crewman from Fowey Rocks had apparently purchased some provisions and neglected to pay his bill. The company was hoping that Demeritt could help secure a payment. Demeritt investigated and an assistant lighthouse keeper acknowledged the debt. He was in debt to others as well, but Demeritt suggested to Sanders-Peacock that the man would eventually make good on his debt if he were given a little more time.

As late as April 1919, many months after the end of the war, issues of mutual discomfort between men of different services were still to be considered. For example, at Roamer Shoal Light Station in New York harbor, when four signalmen were to be quartered there, E.B. Woodworth, assistant director of naval communications, wrote to the commissioner of lighthouses to assure him that the Navy men would be subordinate to the principal lighthouse keeper or to the master on board light ships.

On November 11, 1918, at the eleventh hour, a cease fire in the war was achieved. As soon as the Armistice was signed, debates began about returning the Coast Guard to the Treasury Department. Many believed that the Coast Guard should be left under the Navy Department's command, but after several congressional hearings, those in favor of returning the Coast Guard to the Treasury Department won the debate. The Coast Guard's future as a separate entity was assured. The Lighthouse Service, too, was returned to its prewar "home," the Department of Commerce, where it would remain until 1939.

All equipment, personnel, and materials of the Lighthouse Service that had been transferred to the Navy at the start of the war were finally surrendered by the Navy and transferred back to the Department of Commerce as of July 1, 1919. The Navy had held on to some of the Lighthouse Service tenders as long as possible after the Armistice. These vessels and the light stations reverted to their Lighthouse Service districts and operations, enhanced by new technologies and methods of communication. The Lighthouse Service continued on under the leadership of George Putnam until 1939 when it became part of the United States Coast Guard.

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Fowey Rocks Lighthouse. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.