

Two South Florida Lighthouse Keepers

By BESSIE WILSON DUBOIS*

1. CAPTAIN JAMES ARANGO ARMOUR:

KEEPER OF JUPITER LIGHTHOUSE

During the Civil War a young man, James Arango Armour served as a volunteer coastal pilot aboard the Federal Patrol boat, *Sagamore*. He had come to the Indian River in the 1850's and knew the intricate waterways of this section well. He was a native of New Amsterdam, New York where he was born September 5, 1825. In his early youth he had served aboard American clipper ships.

His services as guide and pilot aboard the *Sagamore* were very valuable to the Captain Earl English of this ship and other commanders under whom he served. He received letters of commendation from Capt. English and also Admiral Theodorus Bailey.

When the Jupiter lighthouse was darkened by southern sympathizers and important and necessary parts of the light mechanism were carried away and hidden, James Armour was detailed to hunt for them. He found them cached away in a palmetto hammock and carried them in a small boat to Key West. At Key West, he was made keeper of prize ships. At the close of the war he returned to Jupiter Light and was present as an assistant keeper when it was re-lighted in June, 1866. Two years later he became head keeper, a position he held for forty years.

On December 6, 1967 he married at LeCrange, Florida, Miss Almeda Catherine Carlile. He brought his bride to the lighthouse where she was the only white woman for a radius of a hundred miles. Their daughter, Katherine Dickerson Armour, born November 16, 1868 was the first white child born in this area and she lived to become in time the wife of Capt. Armour's successor, Joseph Wells, as keeper of Jupiter Lighthouse. The next children were Lida Thurston, Mary Elizabeth, James A. Jr., Charles Carlile, William Bryson and Bertha Lydia. Mary died in infancy and James Jr. as a young man. The only one of this generation of the family still living is Mrs. Bertha Bush of Eureka, California. She has supplied some stories of early days when she lived at the lighthouse.

The Indians were all very friendly with Capt. Armour and often visited the lighthouse. The names she recalls are Billy Bowlegs, Jack Scarber and

*Mrs. John R. DuBois of Jupiter is the historian of the Jupiter Lighthouse and the nearby Wreck of the Victor. See Tequesta XX (1960) and XXIII (1963).

Chief Tallahassee. She says one of them wanted her sister, Kate, as his squaw and her mother said Kate ran and hid whenever she saw the Indians coming to the lighthouse.

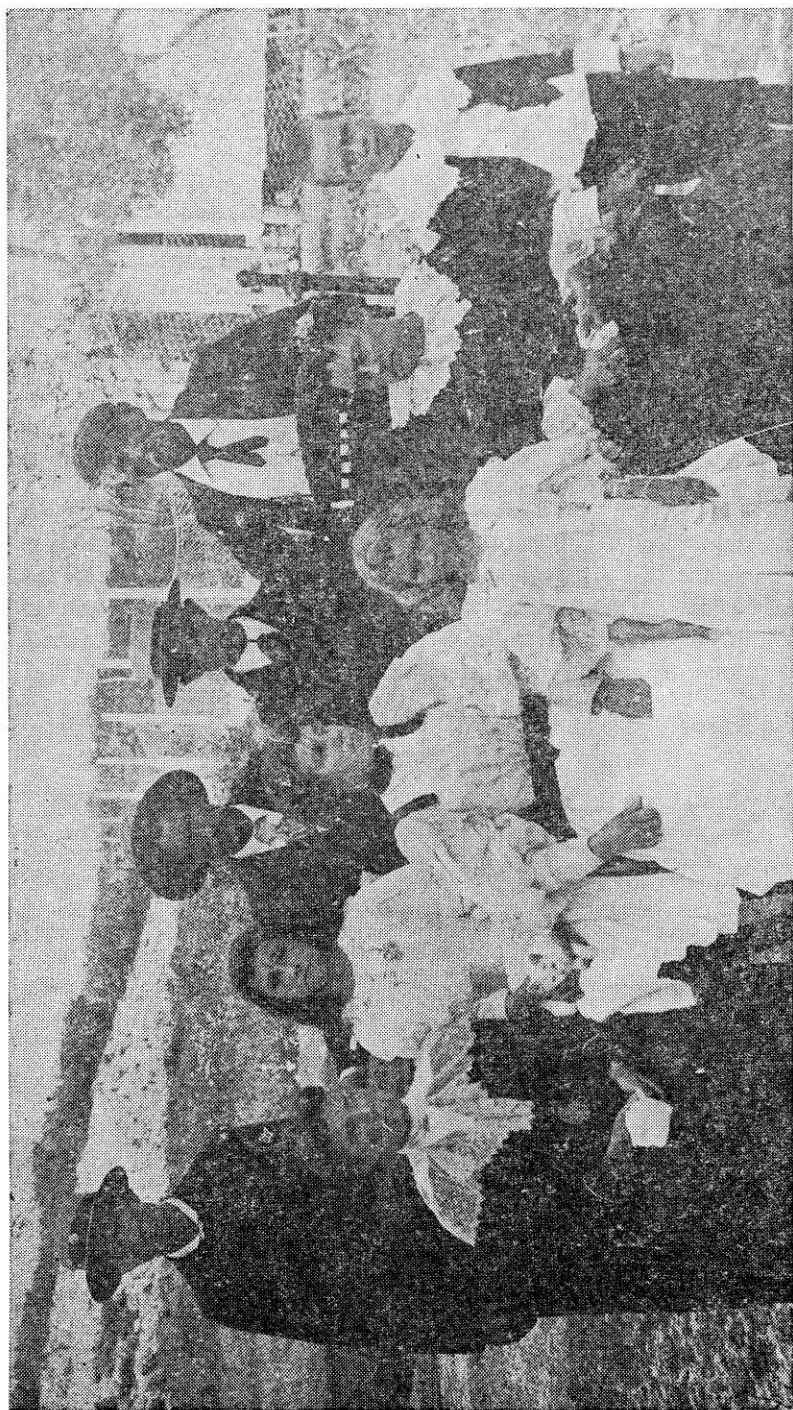
Mrs. Bush relates a frightening experience her mother had one day when the men at the lighthouse had gone to the ocean beach for several hours. An Indian came to see her father. He was a stranger unknown to her mother. He tried to explain who he was but she failed to understand. So he finally took out his big sheath knife and taking it by the blade, handed it to her mother. She was terribly frightened but she did not let him know it. She made signs to ask what she was supposed to do with the knife. He pointed to the handle where he had carved his name. Greatly relieved, she handed the knife back by the blade as he had offered it to her. He waited for a while but left before the men returned from the beach.

The Indians appeared so silently, apparently from nowhere that the young wife, preparing a meal in the kitchen would look up startled to find an Indian standing beside her. One time sitting in the living room Mrs. Armour felt someone lightly touch her on the shoulder and there at her side was a very large Indian.

Mrs. Armour's nephew, Alfred Smith was one of the first mail carriers. The Armour's had a large hog named Denny who was quite a pet. He came to the kitchen windows and grunted for hand-outs. Mrs. Bush says that when Alfred Smith started out with the mail he would cross the river from the lighthouse in a row boat and walk the beach from there to Lake Worth, returning the next day. Denny would swim behind the boat following Alfred and would go along with him for quite a distance on the beach until, as she supposed, he would get tired. He would then turn around and come home, repeating this journey every time Alfred set forth with the mail. Denny came to a sad end when he attempted to chew on a bear hide someone at the lighthouse was trying to cure. It had poison on it and Denny died.

One of the sad times at the lighthouse came to the Armour family when they awoke one night to find the little daughter, Mary in convulsions. They filled a tub with sand so they could make a fire in the sail boat to heat water. As they sailed with her to the doctor in Titusville, all the way up the river they gave her first cold then hot baths but in spite of this difficult treatment, little Mary died.

The Armour home at the lighthouse was called a haven of hospitality and many noted guests were welcomed there. Dr. James A. Henshall called here in 1880's and in his *Camping & Cruising In Florida* wrote that Capt.



Capt. & Mrs. James A. Armour and family, 1895. Standing from L. to R.: Charles C. Armour, James A. Armour, Jr., William B. Armour, James A. Armour, Sr. Seated: Almeda C. Armour (mother), Bertha L. Armour, Lida T. Armour Johnson, Kate D. Armour Wells. The two Children, Annie & Herbert Johnson are Lida's children.

Armour was a courageous and resourceful man. Kirk Munroe who wrote early juvenile books camped on the lighthouse grounds. In fact people who came to Florida in the early days were happy to stop at the lighthouse and see where they had been and expected to go.

When a panther raided the hen house of a pioneer family it was the lighthouse keepers who came with dogs and hunted the varmint down and killed him. They also killed bears on the reservation.

When the word came down river in 1872 that the palmetto shack of some newcomers named Pierce had burned to the ground with all their belongings, Capt. Armour set forth at once and met their boat coming down river. They were invited to the lighthouse where Pierce became an assistant keeper just in time to participate in the salvage of the steamer, *Victor* which replenished some of the family necessities.

An amusing episode is recounted in the story of Emily LaGow Bell in her trip down the Indian River in the 1880's visit to the lighthouse. They stayed over night on their boat. The sand flies were very bad in spite of the mosquito nets. The three children began to cry and to comfort them the good Captain sang them a song, reminiscent of his sailing days.

- A is the Anchor, which holds our jolly ship.
- B is the Bowsprit, which neatly does fit.
- C is the Capstan, on the deck it does stand.
- D is the Davits, where the small boats hang.
- E is the Ensign, of red, white and blue.
- F is the Forecastle, which holds the jolly crew.
- G is the Gangway, where the captain does stand.
- H is the Hawser which never will strand.
- I is the Iron which bounds our ship round.
- J is the Jib-boom where the head sails are found.
- K is the Kelson, that leads fore and aft.
- L is the Lanyards, that make back stays fast.
- M is the Main-mast, down through the deck goes.
- N is the Nasty old cook at his stove.
- O is the Order for all men to beware.
- P is the Pump where all men swear.
- Q is the Quadrant, the sun it does take.
- R is the Rigging, that never will break.

S is the Starboard, side of our jolly ship.
T is the Topsail, never will it split.
U is the Ugly old captain, down aft.
V is the Varnish that brightens our mast.
W is the Water, more salty than brine.
X Y Z there is nothing can rhyme.

Many of the heads of the first pioneer families spent a year at the lighthouse as assistant keepers to look around for homesteads. After they left the lighthouse service their friendship with the captain continued. He was visited and consulted by surveyors, homesteaders, hunters and fishermen. Reserved, selfreliant and kindly to all, his courage in this early wilderness was respected and depended upon by all who knew him.

In 1906 Captain Armour inherited a substantial fortune for those days and was able to build a spacious and comfortable home not far from the light he had tended for a life time. He passed his last years surrounded by his family and friends. He died July 8, 1910 and was buried in Jupiter cemetery. This was before roads and bridges in Jupiter and the funeral procession was by boat to the cemetery. Rev. C. P. Jackson, an Episcopal Clergyman, conducted the services. His son-in-law, Katherine's husband succeeded him as keeper. So the family served the Jupiter Lighthouse for over half a century.

REFERENCES: *FLORIDA STAR NEWSPAPER*, July 1910
MY PIONEER DAYS IN FLORIDA,
Emily LaGow Bell

2. CAPTAIN MILLS OLCOTT BURNHAM: KEEPER OF CAPE CANAVERAL LIGHTHOUSE

During the Civil War a schooner the *Red Wing* was wrecked near Cape Canaveral. Two of the crew were drowned but the captain and his wife and three other crew members made their way to shore. They were almost naked. The captain's wife was clad in an oil skin suit.

They worked along the beach and finally exhausted, cold and hungry, came to the Cape Canaveral lighthouse. The light had been dismantled for the duration of the war and pirates had vandalized the place, cutting up the keeper's four-posted bed and even drinking up the alcohol on his collection of rare fish. There was no food. In despair they circled the lighthouse area and found a sand trail leading off in the woods. Following it a short distance they came to a wrecked wagon which seemed to be the end of the road. As they stood almost ready to return to the beach they heard in the distance a rooster crowing. Reasoning there must be people where there were domestic fowl, they followed the sound and presently came out in a clearing where they were greeted by a benign, bearded gentleman with large sad eyes.

They were fed and cared for by his wife and five daughters. It was their very good fortune to find the secluded farm of Captain Mills Alcott Burnham, keeper of the Cape Canaveral light. When they had recovered sufficiently the good captain sailed them up to Sand Point from there they found a ship to take them to New York.

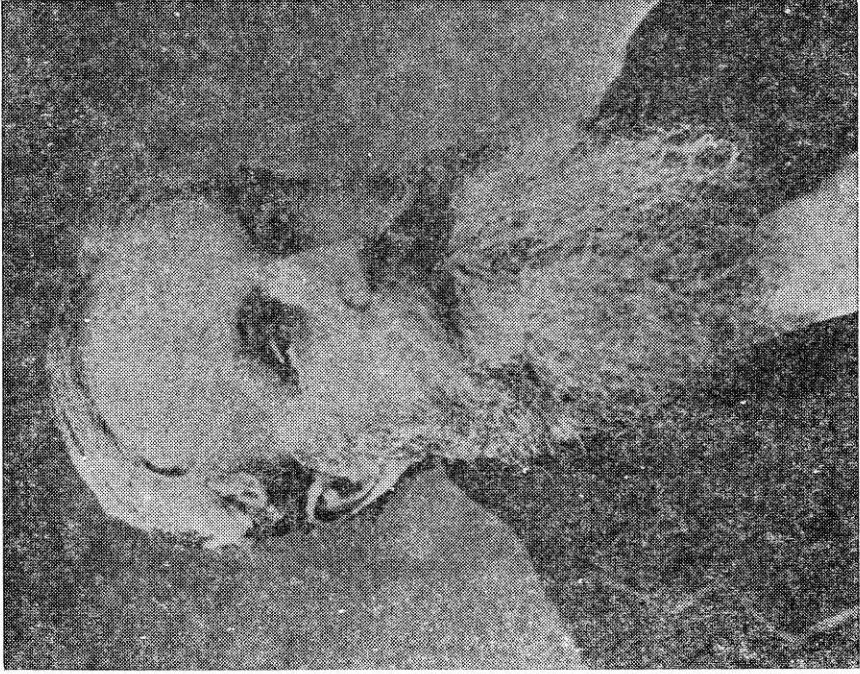
In retrospect it seems the rooster was very discreet and did not crow when the pirates were in the vicinity.

Of all the early Florida lighthouse keepers, Captain Mills Alcott Burnham is most outstanding. The lighthouses of those days were isolated and the keepers, in addition to keeping their lights in order, performed rescues during ship wrecks and generally represented their government with dignity and courage. They also served a lifetime.

Captain Burnham was born September 8, 1817 in Thetford, Vermont. Later he lived in Troy, New York and learned the trade of gunsmith at the Watervliet Government Arsenal. In 1835 at 18 years of age he married a Scotch-Irish lass of 16, Mary McEwen. Two years later it was thought he had the lung disease and he was sent south for his health. He spent the winter in Duval County at a place known as Garey's Ferry where it is supposed he worked at his trade of gunsmith. His health improved and he evidently found Florida frontier life to his liking as in 1839 he brought his wife and son and daughter to Jacksonville and remained a Floridian for the rest of his life.



Mary McCuen Burnham, Mrs. Burnham (Mother).



Capt. Mills Olcott Burnham.

His health not only improved but he became well known for his feats of strength. When newly formed Duval County needed a sheriff, able to contend with some very unruly frontier badmen, they selected Mills Alcott Burnham. Later in 1841-1842 he became a member of the Territorial Legislature.

In 1842 Congress passed the Armed Occupation Act which allowed 160 acres of land south of Palatka on either the east or west coast of Florida to any settler who could hold this land among the hostile Seminoles for seven years. Two bands of settlers went forth. The ones on the east coast settled from St. Augustine south to Fort Jupiter. The settlers were situated near the waterways as they depended for supplies upon schooners.

Captain Burnham took up land on the Indian River near Fort Pierce. He was very friendly with the Seminoles. They admired his strength and his knowledge of guns and came in numbers to camp on the edge of his land and enjoy his hospitality. Mrs. Burnham did not share his trust in his Indian friends and was terrified of them. Burnham had a standing agreement that when he was away they were not to come, a pact they faithfully kept.

Cash was very scarce and often Burnham would load his schooner with green turtles and sail up to Charleston, South Carolina where they brought a good price. He made wooden cradles to support the turtle necks as they lay on their backs on the deck. He also had his crew sponge their eyes with salt water at intervals. His turtles arrived in better condition than others and brought more money.

It was while the Captain was on one of those trips to Charleston the Indian River Colony came to grief. The Seminoles became incensed with a trader named Barker who they alleged put black sand in the gun powder and watered the fire water. One morning in August, 1849 the Indians appeared in the settlement and shot Barker. His brother-in-law, a Major Russell knew he would probably be the next victim so he persuaded the other settlers that the Indians planned to massacre all of them and they should flee their homesteads. The only transportation was a schooner belonging to a Captain Reuben Pinkham who lived on the Indian River inlet. Hastily they embarked. The Indians appeared as they sailed away and took a parting shot at Major Russell, the bullet lodging in his arm. During the night the pain became intense and he rummaged around in the cabin for a remedy. He found what he thought was salve but was in reality a bottle of ink with which he massaged his arm. He was horrified in the morning to find it black and concluded it was "mortified."

The schooner was becalmed in the hot sun for several days and the settlers who had not even brought hats suffered. When they finally reached St. Augustine Major Russell looked up Dr. Peck and insisted that his arm be amputated. Some of the men aboard knew about the ink but they so disliked the Major and were bitter about the loss of their homesteads, that they said nothing so the arm was amputated.

The Burnham family were delighted to find the captains' schooner had just come in to St. Augustine. They never returned to the homestead on Indian River. All the settlers lost their land except Captain Pinkham who having a schooner was no doubt able to return to his property.

In 1847 the Cape Canaveral lighthouse was built and in 1853 Captain Burnham was appointed keeper of the light. He held this position until his death 33 years later. He and Mrs. Burnham, at the time he became keeper had one son, Mills and four daughters. Another son died at 14 years of age and another daughter was born at the lighthouse. The eldest daughter, Frances, at first helped her father tend the light. In 1856 Frances married Henry Wilson who became Captain Burnham's assistant keeper.

The Captain and his son-in-law explored along the Banana River and found a piece of land about four and a half miles from the lighthouse. This became their farm. There were sour oranges on the property. These were budded with stock from Dummit grove and in time expanded into a fifteen acre orange grove. They also planted pineapples, bananas and sugar cane.

At the outbreak of the Civil War all the lighthouses along the southern coast were ordered darkened by Confederate Secretary of War Mallory. Captain Burnham carefully dismantled the mechanism of the light and packed all in wooden chests which he buried in his orange grove. These were turned over to the lighthouse service after the war in good condition.

Henry Wilson, Burnham's son-in-law and his son, Mills marched off to join the Confederate forces and Captain Burnham, his wife, five daughters, an old negro retainer and an elderly friend retired to the farm where they lived an almost idyllic existence for the duration of the war. Game was plentiful, fish and oysters in abundance. The Captain's cane patch provided syrup and he also made his own rum. Also he grew corn for his stock. It was said they lacked nothing except the daughters might have wished for some more fashionable material for their dresses than the several bolts of striped bed ticking their father bought before the war.

As the war neared a close Captain Henry Wilson came home on furlough weary from a long march from Virginia, the last 175 miles on foot. The

war ended before it was time for him to return so he remained at Canaveral. Sad to say the Burnham's only son, Mills, died of illness at Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The lighthouse at Canaveral was replaced with another tower costing half a million dollars. It was commenced in 1866 and completed in 1868. By 1886 the sea came within 70 feet of this latest tower. Another appropriation of \$300,000. was made to move the tower three quarters of a mile inland, an engineering feat that took about 18 months.

With the death of Captain Burnham's son, Mills, the Burnham name did not continue. His five daughters found husbands among the young assistant keepers. Later Captain Burnham's sons-in-law were keepers of many lights along the coast. His son-in-law, George Quarterman became keeper of Canaveral light after Captain Burnham died in April, 1886. Another son-in-law, James M. Knight succeeded Quarterman as keeper of Cape Canaveral light. Clinton Honeywell also served as keeper. In fact the Burnham family served the light continuously for 73 years.

Among Captain Burnham's great grandsons are Charles Nauman to whom I am indebted for the pictures of the Burnham family. He made a trip to Canaveral to borrow them from an elderly uncle. Also there is Raymond Swanson an enterprising young electrician whose mother was a Honeywell and whose grandmother lived on the Cape and did beautiful palmetto weaving.

Another great-grandson, the late Burnham Knight, was a son of Captain Thomas Knight a lifetime keeper of Hillsboro light. Knight was very proud of his illustrious great grandfather and used to imitate his feats of strength.

Captain Burnham died in April of 1886. His last birthday was also his golden wedding anniversary. He and Mrs. Burnham had a two day gala festival for all their family and many friends. At his death it was proposed by the lighthouse inspector and his long time friend, Captain P. B. Lenberton that he be buried on the lighthouse reservation but his wife, recalling the happy years on the farm, asked that he be buried in the orange grove under the spreading live oak trees where in less than two years she joined him.

A man whose great grandsons' faces light up in pride at the mention of his name—does not need an epitaph.

REFERENCES—*EAST COAST FLORIDA MEMOIRS*

By Robert Ransom

RECORDS OF THE LIGHT STATION

DISTRICT OF FERNANDINA

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