Washington (Wash) Jenkins, first Keeper of the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge, dressed in his Sunday-best. Taken sometime after his second marriage. Jenkins served as Keeper from October 1876 to June 1883.

Mr. Wiley, resident of Florida since 1946, came to Fort Lauderdale twenty-four years ago. He attended the University of Miami and is a licensed Property and Casualty, Life and Surplus Lines agent. Married and the father of two children, he is a member and volunteer of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, Inc. He has been writing as an avocation for many years.

PART 2 - THE KEEPERS

LIFE SAVING STATION NO. 4

And the quality of life at the House of Refuge

by Eugene E. Wiley

Caught on a jagged coral reef, the sinking schooner was being pounded to pieces by tons of water crashing over her defenseless decks. Only a few hundred yards from shore, the seamen aboard her had no fear of the short swim to the beach. Still, they hesitated. On this, the wild southeast coast of Florida, where would they find food and shelter and medical aid for the sick and injured? What indeed were the chances for rescue at all?

As they contemplated leaping into the broiling sea, how they must have cursed the luck that had caused their ship to founder on the uninhabited lower Atlantic coast of Florida instead of at a more civilized region where one might meet a human being or two on the beach.

Thrown shoreward by the towering breakers and sucked seaward again by the massive undertow, the swimming sailors must have recalled the stories, told in the bars in every western hemisphere port, of shipmates wrecked on these coasts and never heard from again.

It would have come as a pleasant shock to our hypothetical crew, as they staggered out of the
surf, to find a human being waiting on the sandy beach and to see the house to which he pointed just a few salty miles away. It was 1876 and, at last, the welcome arm of the United States Life Saving Service was extended down the long, exposed and deserted southeast coast of Florida. The human being appearing so unexpectedly on the beach was an employee of that Service and the house to which he pointed, where none had stood a few months before, was a House of Refuge.

Even though "Upon the coast of Florida the shores are so bold that stranded vessels are usually thrown high enough upon the beach to permit easy escape from them..." the United States Government decided that sailors shipwrecked on this coast were entitled to find real refuge from the sea and not just a drier death. So, in 1876 there appeared on the Florida Atlantic coast several of these houses, spaced approximately 25 miles apart.

Five houses were built in our tropic area; although it was designated Number 4 for its geographical position, the one at Fort Lauderdale was actually the last to be finished on April 24th.

The other houses were built on Biscayne Bay, seven miles north of Norris Cut; Orange Grove, which was five miles down the beach from the Haulover at the south end of Lake Worth (today's Delray Beach); Gilbert's Bar (St. Lucie Rocks) south of Jensen Beach; and Bethel Creek, thirteen miles north of Indian River Inlet.

Keepers of the Houses of Refuge were not expected, nor were they equipped, to effect actual life saving but merely were required to provide food, water and a dry bed for those shipwrecked persons lucky enough to have gained the shore. The houses were also their homes. Their wives came and their children were born and raised here.

The construction layout could not have been simpler as the buildings were pure rectangles, approximately 54' by 25', paralleling the ocean with four comfortable rooms downstairs and a stuffy, window-less loft for the "guests." The houses were extremely sturdy, built to withstand strong gales and even hurricanes, despite their exposed positions. Note the following from the original specifications:

"All outside and inside finish must be of specially selected stock. Sizes as follows: Lower sills, 8x8 inches; upper sills, supports and braces, 6x6 inches; floor joists, 2x10 inches, 16 inches on centers; studs, 2x4 inches, 16 inches on centers; corner posts 4x8 inches; window and door studs, 4x4 inches; rafters, 2x8 inches; girts 1x7 inches; wall plates of house, 4x4 inches; plates of piazza, 6x6 inches; piazza posts and braces, 6x6 inches; piazza rail, 4x4 inches."

The keeper and his family had many days of misery when cold weather came because there was no glass in the windows. There were wire mosquito netting and shutters, but no glass. An eight-feet-wide veranda around three sides of the building helped keep out rain. Heat was supplied by a 36-inch-wide fireplace built into the north wall of the kitchen. Outside, up against the chimney, the specifications called for a brick cistern to catch water which ran off new, unseasoned cypress shingles; the water was "brown in color, bitter and with a strong cypress flavor, more like medicine than drinking water." The cistern was supposed to have measured 12½ feet in diameter on the outside, 7½ feet on the inside and 2½ feet thick. Covered with a plank, a manhole was protected by a cover. A faucet was to be provided.

The lumber for the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge was unloaded from a schooner off the beach but the current was miscalculated, causing the lumber to come ashore much farther north than anticipated. Since no help was available to cart it back down the beach, the building was constructed on a site of its own choosing.

For fifteen years, House Number 4 at Fort Lauderdale stood and served on the beach not far from where Sunrise Boulevard now meets State Road A1A. In 1891 someone decided that the land on which the station was situated did not belong to the government but to the Cunningham family (now Birch property). Consequently, it was pulled down the beach on rollers to the south, to a site known as Coast Guard Base Number Six and still later as Bahia Mar, close to the old, rotting logs of the fort for which Fort Lauderdale was named. The move was completed on November 13, 1891.

The first keeper at Number 4 was Washington (Wash) Jenkins. The 25-year-old South Carolinian left his farm on New River to take the post. He had been a farmer since 1870, six years before the Houses of Refuge existed, with two of his six brothers, Josiah, now 23, and Joseph, 11. Keeping house for the men was fifty-year-old Mary Knight.

It appears from the census taken in 1870 by William S. Allen that the only neighbor Jenkins had that year was another farmer, the seventy-year-old Edward Baesley. Excluding Indian census taker Allen found only eighty five persons between St. Lucie and Jewfish Creek. Ten years later the count, taken by Adam C. Richards, had grown to one hundred ninety five, slightly more than one person per mile.

It would not be too long, however, before the New River area would be gaining a reputation throughout the north as a paradise on earth. The
later boom in real estate was probably helped along in 1882 by such stage setters as Dr. James A. Henshall from Cynthiana, Kentucky. On his second visit to Florida he wrote in part, "Rushing in and out with the tide, fishes can be seen by the thousands which snap at anything, even at a bit of rag tied to a hook and thrown to them by a strong handline. We took Crevalle up to 30 pounds and never less than ten. By anchoring a boat in midstream, they can be speared or grained as they swim rapidly by, often pursued by sharks or porpoises. Washington Jenkins takes them this way up to 40 pounds and cures and smokes them."

"New River, for six miles above its mouth, is the finest, straightest and deepest river I have seen in Florida, although narrow. It is famous for sharks (regular maneuverers, some of them) and for the immense number and variety of fish."

Dr. Henshall also mentioned how he whistled at some quail and soon had about thirty of the wild birds "hopping over my feet, cocking up their cunning little heads and looking knowingly at me with their bright, round eyes - ."

Unfortunately the 1890 census was destroyed in a fire, but one can imagine what four or five such stories, written home, could have done to the population figures of Fort Lauderdale.

Keepers of the Houses of Refuge had a monotonous life for the most part. Days and months droned by with little to remark about. For example the official log, required of the keepers who succeeded Jenkins, was almost never completed although it asked for the condition of the surf at four different times of the day and for the names of people on patrol or watch and for their hours of duty. Apparently the days were too repetitious and, besides, what few thoughts may have needed recording could be entered at the bottom of the sheet under "General Remarks."

Edwin R. Bradley, who succeeded Jenkins on January 2, 1883, was the first to be required to keep a log book. Two of the items the log asked about were the barometer reading and "Is the house thoroughly clean?" The barometric pressure was never given in those early days because no barometer was furnished. As for the house's cleanliness, Bradley's first entry on May 26th was the cryptic "No. No water in the cistern."

It is possible that he finally became disgusted with his circumstances at this time because a month and a half later, at noon on July 13th, he sailed with his family for Lake Worth, leaving the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge in the temporary hands of A. L. Daggett and leaving his late daughter Flora in the permanent hands of God.

The monotony of the Keeper's days occasionally was relieved by the arrival of visitors. The log, as kept by John Thomas Peacock, the third permanent Keeper at Number 4, indicates:

Nov. 3. Mr. Waterson and Mr. Williford came through the Everglades from Miami then took the beach afoot for LW (Lake Worth)

Nov. 7. Mr. Waterson and Mr. Williford walked the beach from LW and stayed overnight.

Nov. 11. Arrived: Schooner Geneva, Capt. Infinger, with Harry Peacock, Mrs. Peacock and family (Apparently the Keeper's family)

Nov. 19. Mr. Benest arrived through the Everglades from Miami with Indian Charlie.

Nov. 20. John Pent, Edward Pent and John Sanders came through the Everglades and kept on inside on their way to LW on the evening. W. H. Benest and Indian Charlie went by the same route in the morning.

Naturally, there were the vessel sightings to report:

Sept. 8. Small sloop with the Gleason boys put into New River bound for Indian River and the boys spent the night at the station.

Dec. 17. One of two steamers to pass was a sidewheel river boat with a saloon cabin and guards. Infinger went to Miami outside in a skiff.

Dec. 24. Arrived: Mr. Vincent in a small skiff through the Everglades enroute to Lake Worth and J. Infinger with stores for the station. These two spent Christmas at the station. Two steamers passed by in the morning. Arrived: Mr. Williford by schooner Geneva to settle at New River.

Feb. 7. Mr. Pierce and family in the Lilian (sic) bound for LW called today at the station. He is waiting for the sea to moderate.

Charles Coman took Peacock’s place and it is from the information about Coman that we gather that the Keepers of these houses earned an annual salary of four hundred dollars. “A House of History,” the Martin County Historical Society’s story of their House of Refuge, tells us that the wages were the same when their first Keeper Frederick Whitehead had started work twelve years earlier.

In 1891, when the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge was pulled south, Captain Dennis O’Neill had been Keeper for three years. In the vernacular, Captain O’Neill was a “natural” because he, himself, had been shipwrecked many times. In 1871, when a boy of 20, he had sailed aboard a schooner bound from Central America to Boston with a load of mahogany. The schooner was wrecked near what we know today as Hillsboro Inlet. Many times he told of his first landing in Florida, riding ashore on a mahogany log through a school of sharks.

By profession Captain O’Neill was a boat builder, a deep-sea diver and a sea captain. Captain Denny, as the early settlers called him, also acted as postmaster, trading outgoing mail with the beach-walking mailman for letters addressed to Fort Lauderdale residents.

In those days, anyone wishing to travel between Miami and Palm Beach was welcome to walk with the “Barefoot Mailman”—for five dollars! It may have been worthwhile, however, because there were many inlets to cross and the mailman’s skiff usually was the only available method. Then, one was also assured of a speedy trip for these carriers took pride in their fast service. It is said that one time the mailman stopped by Number 4 and asked for food but Captain Denny said that he could not spare any then. The carrier continued on his way. At the same minute the Keeper spied a wild turkey but, by the time he turned around to inform the mailman, he was out of hearing distance!

Sometime around the first of October 1894 there was a bad storm and, although we do not have local information, Captain Denny must have had his hands full. According to the History and Guide of Dade County, Florida, on October third, there was “considerable damage to wharves and boats. Two issues of the ‘Gazetteer’ were missed on account of stoppage of traffic of all kinds.” And on October tenth there were “Scores of dead fish around the lake. Two bodies came ashore on the beach. Hendrickson schooner Emily B., Captain Chas. Earnest, caught in the Keys, had to be scuttled and sunk in order to save her. British barkentine, Georgie, Capt. Paul LeBlank, total loss going ashore two miles north of Hillsboro. Large amounts of timber came ashore from storm and oysters at Hobe Sound and Jupiter badly injured by the fresh water that accompanied it.”

Captain Denny was a quiet man, unassuming, charitable and optimistic. In fact just twenty-four hours before his death in Aurora, New York, on August 15, 1930, the seventy-nine-year-old seafarer was saying that he “must get back to Fort Lauderdale before cold weather.”

Undoubtedly, more thorough research will reveal information regarding shipwrecks off New River Inlet but local sources are scarce concerning them. The Martin County Historical Society, however, not only has preserved and restored their Gilbert’s Bar House of Refuge, located four miles east of Stuart and four miles south of Jensen Beach, but has researched the National Archives and found many a salty tale of shipwreck, the printed details of which they have enlarged and posted in the boat shack north of the house.

The log shows, for instance, that the 371 ton Brig J. H. Lane out of Searsport, Maine, was northward bound from Matanzas, Cuba, to Philadelphia with molasses when she was wrecked on a reef to the southeast of the house. In trouble on April 16, 1886, she put out two anchors in an attempt to stay off the reef but the seas were too much for her. As the J. H. Lane started breaking up on the 19th, the eight crewmen took to a lifeboat. They had rowed no more than a few yards away from the stricken ship when their boat capsized. Luckily, the boat was fitted with lifelines which the men clung to for their lives. The surf, however, jerked the line away from the ship’s steward Henry Whitlock of Portland and he drowned. The others were saved mainly due to the efforts of Keeper Bunker who, although obligated to do no more than keep his House of Refuge well stocked and hospitable, waded into the surf time after time with a line which he tied around each crew member and pulled him, exhausted, to the beach and safety.

It is in the fall of the year when most of the bad weather hits southern Florida and the Number 2 log has many entries of wrecks during these months. At 8:30 P.M. on October 16, 1904, the 767 ton Bark Georges Valentine out of Camgoli, Italy, began losing her battle against a terrible gale, a smothering rain and high seas just 500 yards east of the house. Bound from Pensacola to Buenos Aires with a load of lumber, the ship was torn to pieces in the violent darkness. Only five of her crew of twelve were rescued and all of those saved were injured as they were slammed against the
rocks and battered unmercifully by the loose lumber. Some were with broken bones, bleeding and chilled through; many of these men would have died were it not for the existence of the isolated wooden house on the beach and its Keeper W. E. Rey, who sent for a doctor on the mainland.

With the storm still raging the next day the Cosme Colzado, 1246 tons out of Barcelona, Spain, ran aground three miles north of the house. One crewman swam ashore with a line and hauled in a three inch hauser; the entire crew of fifteen men was saved with the exception of one man who became entangled in the loose rigging and drowned. All that rainy day and for some time afterward the Number 2 House of Refuge bulged with twenty two very grateful guests.

Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge was the scene of a Christmas Day, 1911 celebration. Half the newly incorporated townspeople seem to have made their way to the beach by rowboat, skiff and an occasional power launch which they beached on the New River Sound behind the house.

H. B. Shaw was Superintendent of the Life Saving Service from Charleston, South Carolina, to Miami, Florida, in 1894 when he appointed John H. Fromberger to take O'Neill's place as Keeper of the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge. Fromberger and his wife arrived by stage coach at Frank Stranahan's New River trading post from Lantana on about February 14, 1895. At that time, the railroad had not been completed that far south and, in fact, the dirt road on which they traveled was only two years old.

Soon, however, Station Number 4 began to have a social life of its own. Although the house was accessible only by boat, its visitors became numerous and of all persuasions. Some of the travelers were traders but a great many, even in those early years, were retired people seeking a warmer climate and recreation in boating and fishing. There were a number, even then, who saw the possibilities in real estate. The sailing vessel Pearl stopped by occasionally with freight and with passengers enroute from Jacksonville to the Keys.

The length of time the visitors stayed at the station depended, for the most part, on the tides and the weather. Many of the early citizens came to these parts after the heavy frost of the '90s had killed the fruit trees in the northern section of the state. Volusia County was well represented, especially the New Smyrna district. Other parts of the country were represented also. Admiral George Dewey from St. Augustine, for instance, stopped a while with Professor and Mrs. Corey.

Gradually, people began boating over from the mainland for picnics and swimming parties, using the porches of the station and nearby trees for shade.

"Captain Jack" Fromberger and his wife Agnes were blessed with their first child Henry Spencer Fromberger on February 1, 1896. The doctor came to the station from Coconut Grove and the nurse from Palm Beach. Soon afterward the budding community had its own physician Dr. Thomas Kennedy who, with his wife, would be of tremendous service to the area in times of sickness and emergency.

Fromberger was on duty Saturday, May 29, 1898, when the ship Dauntless hove off New River Inlet during a southeast gale. He could have been witness to a strange bit of maneuvering between this ship, the small stern-wheeler Biscayne and an unnamed sloop, the latter two at anchor in the shelter of New River Sound.

Aboard the Dauntless, owned by W. A. Bisbee of Jacksonville, her captain "Dynamite" Johnny O'Brien must have cursed the high seas
which were causing such a discomfort and preventing the *Biscayne* from coming out to them. He probably had a few epithets as well for the shallow inlet which kept his larger ship from entering the sound. To W. S. Spiers, the *Biscayne*’s captain, the delay must have seemed even worse, not because of the storm which caused hardly a ripple on the sound but because thirty Cuban rebels under the command of Colonel Mendez were being kept out of sight below decks in the hot, crowded hold awaiting transfer to the *Dauntless*. To W. S. Spiers, the *Biscayne*’s captain, the delay must have seemed even worse, not because of the storm which caused hardly a ripple on the sound but because thirty Cuban rebels under the command of Colonel Mendez were being kept out of sight below decks in the hot, crowded hold awaiting transfer to the *Dauntless*. Although the United States was sympathetic to the cause of Cuban independence from Spain, they were not yet willing to allow overt rebel smuggling. Therefore, what made the scene so interesting was the fact that Fromberger was not the only onlooker who was suspicious. In that unnamed sloop was Special Treasury Agent Hambleton who had been on the trail of the arms and rebel smugglers for some time but had lost it the week before. Disgusted, he had decided to take a well-earned rest aboard his English friend’s sloop at New River. And there he was now, hoping to witness the actual crime in progress. But a couple of days later the seas abated and the *Biscayne* hauled anchor, flaunted her still empty decks under the agent’s nose, and went to her meeting with the *Dauntless* out in the Atlantic.

The March 31, 1897, issue of the *Miami Metropolis* contained a report about who had the last laugh, however. It seems that Agent Hambleton caught the two vessels in the middle of their operation, was beaten by the crew and put ashore with a warning. He notified the Key West authorities who dispatched the cruiser *Marblehead* to the scene and, after a short gun battle, the *Dauntless* was captured. Evidently, government officials were enough in sympathy with the rebel cause to look the other way because neither Bisbee, O’Brien nor Spiers received any punishment and the *Dauntless* eventually finished her voyage to Cuba. The Frombergers left in 1906.

Captain and Mrs. A. C. Skogsberg in front of the Fort Lauderdale Beach House. Captain Skogsberg served as Keeper of the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge from 1914 to 1925.
when Captain Jack was transferred to a larger station at Sullivan’s Island near Charleston, South Carolina. They were sorely missed because so many people recalled the good times that they had at the House of Refuge in the 1890’s. It is said that the house “overflowed with kindness and a stranger was just as welcome as a member of the family. Their home was used as a bathhouse for the bathers in the ocean and their kitchen was open to all the picnickers.”

James B. Vreeland, Keeper as of May 26, 1906, was a true lover of his town. A quotation attributed to him is: “People come to Fort Lauderdale to die — and then forget what they came for.” Father of the present day veteran charter boat captain Jim Vreeland, Fromberger’s successor witnessed many a loggerhead turtle roundup. Crews from schooners anchored in the bay west of the house would patrol the beach and catch the giant reptiles as they came ashore to lay their eggs. The flippers would be tied together and they would be shipped to Key West for sale.

The beach had no fascination for anyone in those days other than as a bathing and picnicking spot. Due to its inaccessibility, no one thought of it as a place to invest money. There was a mile of mangrove swamp under water at high tide to be negotiated and although there was some talk
about a bridge, no one had done anything about it. Most of Fort Lauderdale's beach had been sold to Hugh Taylor Birch and John MacGregor Adams for only three thousand five hundred dollars. Other unspecified lands were included in the sale.

James B. Vreeland, Jr., who was an eight year old boy when he came to the House of Refuge with his father, remembered the hurricane of 1909 which wrecked a Key West-bound schooner near the house. The entire crew reached the house in safety and stayed at the house until they were picked up and transported home. He recalled another boat that was wrecked while carrying railroad ties bound for Cuba. The ties were strewn all up and down the beach. After he had grown up, “Jimmie” Vreeland was hired to transport the troupe of D. W. Griffith, the famous motion picture producer who was here making “Idol Dancer,” to and from the river island where the picture was being filmed.

Until Labor Day 1914, the Keeper of the House of Refuge and his family were the only residents on the Fort Lauderdale beach with the exception of Hugh Taylor Birch who did not allow trespassers and seldom had visitors. Captain A. C. Skogsberg was the Keeper then and he was the last to enjoy the beauty of his surroundings in its wild and quiet state. A bathing pavilion was erected which had shower baths, seventy four dressing rooms, a dance floor and a refreshment stand. There was also a children’s playground. Gone were the cozy, intimate gatherings of swimmers and picnickers on the veranda of the Station. But for the lack of a road and a bridge the once deserted beach would have been over-run by half of the Fort Lauderdale population every Sunday. And soon it was.

The road to the beach and the hand-operated single-lane drawbridge were opened to the public in January 1917 with speeches and a motorcade which included nearly, every wheeled vehicle in town. But Skogsberg was to have more excitement. The United States entered World War I and the House of Refuge was taken over for the duration by the Coast Guard which instituted a motorcycle beach patrol. But Keeper Skogsberg remained with the House.

On April 1, 1925, Charles D. Stewart became the last Keeper of the House of Refuge at Fort Lauderdale. He served for less than a year until the United States Coast Guard took permanent possession of the property and relieved him of his duties on March 10, 1926. The Coast Guard brought the houseboat Mocassin to Fort Lauderdale from Miami and this became the Coast Guard’s Base Six.

Records of the United States Coast Guard, Record Group 26, show that the original building of the House of Refuge was “damaged beyond repair” in the hurricane of September 18, 1926. In a way there was justice in the passing of the station because it had outlived its usefullness. It had been home to nine permanent Keepers and their families, had been host to hundreds of visitors and had been a haven to countless men of the sea who gladly would have spelled it heaven. The original little house on the beach probably would have had a slow death of rot and decay if the hurricane mercifully had not ended what already had ceased to be a useful career.

Today the Coast Guard, thanks in part to improved hydrographic charts, rarely has to engage in the dramatic rescue of passengers and crew of large vessels and the beach, of course, is no longer uninhabited. But in the half century between 1876 and 1926 scores of seamen, upon arriving home safe and sound, must have included in their prayers of thanks some lonely Keeper of one of the Houses of Refuge on the then desolate coast of Southeast Florida.

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