

HISTORIC LANDMARK

Watchful over Tampa Bay stands a historic lighthouse that marks the entrance to the Port of Tampa – a witness to the many events that have defined the area.

An increase in commercial traffic required the construction of additional navigation aids to facilitate commerce along the Gulf Coast of Florida. In December of 1846, Congress appropriated \$10,000 for the construction of a 40-ft brick tower on Egmont Key. Officially certified and put into action in April of 1848, this structure was short-lived after a series of hurricanes damaged it beyond repair. The battered lighthouse continued to serve its purpose until its dismantling in 1858, when a new light shone over Tampa Bay.

On August 18, 1856, Congress appropriated \$16,000 for the construction of a new lighthouse and keeper's quarters. Completed and lit in May 1858, this 87-ft tower above sea-level was "built to weather any storm." The lighthouse has undergone several changes since its construction, yet the structure still stands today – one of the oldest structures serving its original purpose in the Bay area.



Egmont Key Lighthouse looking west, September 1933
Source: Coast Guard

A BEACON OF LIGHT



Fort Dade as seen from the lighthouse. Circa 1918
Source: Monroe County Public Library

A Useful Landmark

Lighthouses are one of the most common aids to navigation used to guide mariners into harbors and warn them of potential danger. Overseeing the entrance to Tampa Bay, the Egmont Key lighthouse was the only lighthouse between Key West and St. Marks at the time. Originally projecting a fixed white light with a third-order Fresnel lens, the Egmont Key lighthouse is now characterized by a white flash every 15 seconds, thus enabling safe navigation along the Gulf Coast.

Changes Over Time

More than just physical, the changes of the Egmont Key lighthouse reveal the influences of a shifting culture.

This landmark became crucial in a time of political conflict. During the Civil War, it is believed that Egmont Key served as a base for Confederate blockade runners early in 1861. Records show that lighthouse keeper at the time, George V. Richards, pretended alliance to Union blockaders shortly before abandoning the island with the lighthouse's Fresnel lens to "safeguard" from the Blockade control. Confederate command of Egmont Key was short-lived, as the island was taken back by the Navy and turned into a base for the East Gulf Blockading Squadron. The lighthouse was reactivated with a makeshift light until it was replaced with a fourth-order Fresnel lens in 1866.

In 1944, the 55-in Fresnel lens was removed and replaced with a two modern 36-in DCB airport beacons. The lamp house was no longer needed and was removed, trimming the structure back to 71-ft in height. In 1990 the Egmont Key lighthouse was one of the last lighthouses in the U.S. to be automated.

