

Mobile Light No. 6639
(Middle Bay Light)
Middle of Mobile Bay
Mobile County
Alabama

HABS No. ALA-780

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49-MOBI,
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ALA-780

MOBILE LIGHT No. 6639
(Middle Bay Light)

Location: Middle of Mobile Bay, Mobile County, Alabama
Geographic Location Code: 01-2100-097.

Present Owner: United States Coast Guard

Present Occupant: Unoccupied

Present Use: Automated lighthouse

Statement of Significance: Constructed entirely of wood and resting on metal piles in the middle of Mobile Bay, the design and materials used for construction of this lighthouse are unusual.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1905
2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: The lighthouse has been owned and maintained by the United States Coast Guard since it was constructed. The light is now automated, and no lighthouse keeper has lived on the structure since 1935.

B. Source of Information:

Commanding Officer, United States Coast Guard, Choctaw Point, Alabama.

Prepared by Linda Carroll
Student Historian
August 29, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This lighthouse in the middle of Mobile Bay is interesting because it is in fact a residence

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built on pilings in approximately twelve feet of water. Built entirely of wood frame construction, the hexagonal structure presents an interesting aspect in Mobile Bay.

2. Condition of fabric: Although some of the metal pilings and turnbuckled tie rods of the supports are rusted through in places, the wooden portion has weathered well and stands solid.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The structure is a one-and-a-half-story hexagon measuring 18'-8" on a side, excluding the gallery which surrounds it.
2. Foundations: The lighthouse is supported by a large central pipe and outward-sloping metal legs at each of the angles of the hexagon, all of which are tied together by large metal rods and turnbuckles. It was not possible to investigate at close range this construction nor the footings below water line.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The bearing walls of the lighthouse consist of rough-sawn 4" x 6" (true size) studs sheathed with rough-sawn 1" x 12" boards and covered with 1" x 6" (nominal) horizontal siding which was painted white.
4. Structural system, framing: The first-floor framing consists of 9" x 5" I-beams radiating from the center post to each corner post; corner posts are tied with the same section, and the perimeter of the gallery is framed with 9" x 3" channel sections. Perpendicular to the faces of the hexagon, 9" x 3" wooden joists are wedged into the flanges of the metal members, with 2" x 4" wooden bridging. The sub-floor and finished floor have a combined depth of 2½". The second-floor framing consists of 8" x 3½" beams, 2" x 4" bridging, 1" ceiling boards and 1" floor boards. The roof framing consists of 3½" x 8" hip rafters, with 2½" x 6" intermediate rafters placed 16" on center, resting on 4" x 6" wall plate. Rough-sawn roof sheathing is 1" x 12".
5. Porches, stoops: There is a continuous wooden gallery, or balcony, around the structure, with cast-iron railing, and boat-launching davits on the north and south. There are two iron ladders down to the water line on two opposite sides.

6. Chimneys: Two terra cotta flues extend approximately 2" above the roof. Sections of the flues have been removed between the floors.

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7. Openings:

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- a. Doorways and doors: On the north wall, there is a 4'-9" wide opening, with a single four-panel wooden door in place, the other having been removed. Hinges indicate an outer set of doors was also used. On the south wall, there is a 3'-0" opening containing a pair of two-panel wooden doors, with the upper panel glazed. There are a pair of solid two-panel doors on the exterior.
- b. Windows and shutters: Although the glazing and muntins are missing, the first-floor windows were double-hung wooden sash with six-over-six lights; the second-floor windows had four-over-four lights. The sashes are mortised and tenoned with wooden pegs. The frames of exterior wooden shutters are similarly constructed; the adjustable wooden louvers are missing.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The hexagonal hipped roof is covered with slate and has flat "L"-shaped terra cotta ridge caps. The latter are stamped: "Davison & Company, Buckley Flintshire". The flat mast platform above the sloping roof has a tin covering.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There is no cornice, but the soffit of the overhanging eaves are sealed with boards.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Two dormers containing double windows project on opposite sides of the sloping roof. A hexagonal deck rises 2'-0" out of the center of the hipped roof, supporting a mast and modern light 18'-8" above the roof.

- C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The basic hexagon is divided down the center in a generally north-south direction by the enclosed stairway in the center, flanked by a band containing closets, lockers, and latrine. The remaining space on each side of this band is divided into two irregularly-shaped rooms of equal size. The second floor is divided similarly. There is a small enclosed open shaft with pulleys in the ceiling, evidently

used to move equipment to the second floor. Each room also has an access-hatch to space under the eaves.

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2. Stairways: Access to the main floor is provided by two metal ladders, rising from the water line 16'-0" below. The enclosed spiral stairs in the lighthouse are framed into a center mast and enclosed in a hexagonal space. A vertical wooden ladder leads from the second floor through a hatch to the deck above.
 3. Flooring: There are 1" wooden boards throughout.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Interior partitions are not the usual stud construction, but consist only of 1" horizontal tongue-and-groove boards, apparently nailed to the heavy vertical members framing the openings, with 1" vertical tongue-and-groove boards nailed on the opposite face, resulting in a 2" solid wooden wall. The wall enclosing the hexagonal stairwell is 6" thick.
 5. Doorways and doors: The two wooden doors existing in place are four-panelled, mortised and tenoned.
 6. Trim: The trim at doors, windows, base and ceiling are all finished mouldings.
 7. Notable hardware: None
 8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Circular terra cotta tiles inserted between floor and roof construction indicate that the structure was heated with stoves on each floor.
 - b. Lighting: None
- D. General setting and orientation: This free-standing structure is located approximately halfway between Mobile and the Gulf of Mexico, and also halfway between the two shores of Mobile Bay.

Prepared by Woodrow W. Wilkins
Supervising Architect
National Park Service
July 7, 1966

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as a cooperative project during the summer of 1966 between the Historic American Buildings Survey and various agencies, organizations, and individuals of the City of Mobile. The Historic American Buildings Survey supplied the project supervisor, Woodrow W. Wilkins, and three draughtsmen, Carl J. Rosenberg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Michael R. Foil (Auburn University), and Lowell K. West (University of Kentucky). One draughtsman, Elbert L. Coleman (Alabama A & M), was provided by the Mobile Housing Board, which agency administers urban renewal. The services of an additional draughtsman, James Eley, specifically designated as an architectural student from Auburn University, were made possible by contributions from numerous local architects and businessmen. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society, in agreement with the History Department of Springhill College, provided a student historian, Linda Carroll. Office space was supplied by the City of Mobile through the City Planning Commission. Roy Thigpen, a local photographer, was contracted to supply the photographs. All local arrangements were made by the Mobile Historic Development Commission, Mrs. Nancy N. Holmes, President. The project was edited during the summer of 1972 by Charles A. Herrington, Architectural Historian, in a cooperative effort between the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Mobile Historic Development Commission.