

## Fueling the Light: The Oil House

While the lighthouse tower is the shining star of what used to be the St. Simons Island Light Station, there is a small building on the property that, though easily missed, served an important purpose in safely keeping a light shining over St. Simons Sound. The Oil House, constructed of brick and measuring 10.5 feet by 12.5 feet, is painted white purposefully to blend in with the white lighthouse tower.

In the late 19th century, petroleum-based kerosene became the standard fuel for the oil lamps that illuminated America's lighthouses. The scientists of the U.S. Lighthouse Board were always searching for brighter, more efficient and economical lamp fuel. They began experimenting with petroleum products as early as 1855. Kerosene was first reported in use in 1877.

Although kerosene was by far the most abundant and lowest cost option, its flammability greatly concerned the Lighthouse Board and its keepers. For this reason, it was at first only authorized for use in lighthouses with Third Order Fresnel lenses or smaller, of which the St. Simons Lighthouse is one. The massive First and Second Order lenses were considered too valuable to risk destruction.

Since the fuel posed a severe fire hazard, the Lighthouse Board began suggesting the addition of well-ventilated, fire-proof oil houses to many

light stations. Previously, the fuel for lamps had been stored within the lighthouse towers or adjacent work rooms, such as the hallway that connected the St. Simons Keeper's Dwelling to the tower. Dating from 1890, the St. Simons Oil House was among the first ones built. Not all stations were as fortunate, and it wasn't until 1918 that almost all land-based stations had a separate oil house.

Typically, within the oil houses there were wooden shelves that held hundreds of 5-gallon containers of kerosene. The light keeper was required to inspect the building daily for fuel leaks from storage cans. Additionally, the Lighthouse Board kept a close watch on how much kerosene a light station consumed to ensure that this valuable commodity was being used efficiently and only for approved purposes.

The use of electricity within lighthouses eventually made oil houses obsolete. Often they were transformed into regular storage sheds. The St. Simons Oil House has served many purposes over the years, including a brief stint as a gift shop for the first Museum of Coastal History. Today, it stores hurricane supplies for the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum.



LIGHT HOUSE. ST. SIMONS ISLAND. BRUNSWICK, GA.

*This month's image from the Coastal Georgia Historical Society archives is a postcard, circa 1920, showing the Oil House to the left of the Lighthouse. Also shown is the Oil House as it appears today.*

