



COASTAL GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Our mission is to connect people to Coastal Georgia's dynamic history
through the stories we share and the collections we preserve.*

Coastal Georgia Historical Society is dedicated to the original vision of our founders to serve Glynn County and the Coastal Georgia region. In the spirit of our refreshed mission statement, shown above, we have been exploring the dynamic history of our region in a series of articles. This article is the last of four installments which appeared this fall.

An Enduring Symbol of Our Community: The St. Simons Lighthouse



The St. Simons Lighthouse under construction in May 1871. Ruins of the first St. Simons Lighthouse are visible to the right. The first tower, completed in 1810, was destroyed in 1861 by Confederate troops.

On September 1, 1872, the current St. Simons Lighthouse was officially illuminated for the very first time. In the 150 years since that night, the beacon has withstood ferocious storms and guided countless ships safely into port. The lighthouse has also become one of the region's most recognizable and beloved historic landmarks, providing a bright and warm welcome to the Golden Isles.

Of all the men and women who worked as keepers of the St. Simons Lighthouse, the longest serving was Carl Olaf Svendsen. He was born in 1878 on his father's ship in the harbor of Cardiff, Wales and spent his life by the sea. His father, mother, and brother all served as keepers at various times in lighthouses from South Carolina to Florida.

As the head keeper from 1907 to 1935, Svendsen witnessed 28 years of history at the St. Simons Light. Two of his three children were born during this time. And, in 1922, he and his family celebrated the lighthouse's 50th birthday. The dedication of keepers like Svendsen and their assistants has ensured that, in spite of wind and weather, the lighthouse endures.

One of the worst storms during Svendsen's tenure occurred on the night of September 17, 1928. The assistant keeper at the time was Franto Mollycheck. The Keeper's Log noted the damage: "The entire fence on the east side. The lights in the house were out all night. The boat shed washed away. Also 75 ft. of land ... [It] blew out one of the storm frames in the tower."

The brief notation about the broken storm frame downplays the harrowing experience of the keepers that night. Storm frames protected the fragile Fresnel lens and the kerosene lantern flame from wind and rain. With even one storm window broken, the lighthouse's beacon

could be extinguished. Assistant Mollycheck's wife, Lilla, would later relive that night in stories told to her grandchildren. She recounted that her husband stayed up all night with Svendsen, holding a board over the broken window. As she explained, "They had to keep the light burning." In 1934, the light was electrified, replacing a lantern flame fueled by oil with a 1,000-watt lightbulb. Svendsen died in 1935 and was buried at Christ Church Frederica. Within 20 years, the light would be automated, eliminating the keeper position altogether.

In 1971, the keeper's house at the St. Simons Station was declared surplus and under threat of development. Coastal Georgia Historical Society was instrumental in saving the historic structure and ever since has preserved and maintained the building as a museum of coastal history. The tower itself was deeded to the Society in 2004 under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act. For the past 27 years, our local Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 10-10 Light Crew has maintained the light as an Active Aid to Navigation. With the generous support of volunteers and donors, the Society will continue to protect this beloved symbol of our community and tell its evolving story.

A series of events is being planned to celebrate the Lighthouse's 150th birthday on September 1, 2022. We will share details over the coming year and hope you will join us!



Keeper Svendsen is pictured c. 1909 with his wife Annie and their children Helen and Carl, Jr. Daughter Lucile, known as "Happy," was born in 1910. Courtesy of the Svendsen Family.



The St. Simons Lighthouse is shown on a colorized postcard as it appeared during Svendsen's tenure. c. 1920

Free Admission to the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum for Glynn County Residents December 17–23

St. Simons Lighthouse Museum, 610 Beachview Drive, St. Simons Island

Monday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Sunday, 12 p.m.–5 p.m.

Show proof of Glynn County residency to receive free admission.

Visit coastalgeorgiahistory.org for more information.

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is headquartered in the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, located on the campus of the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum. The Society is the owner of the St. Simons Lighthouse and custodian of the Lighthouse Keeper's Dwelling and Historic Coast Guard Station at East Beach, which houses the World War II Home Front Museum. We welcome the public to the museums 360 days a year.

