

A Champagne Celebration: Portrait of Husband-and-Wife Lighthouse Team Discovered

Historians sometimes hear about treasure troves of artifacts or documents long forgotten in an attic or basement which, once discovered, reveal information about the past. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society recently found a hidden treasure not in an attic, but in another museum's collection.

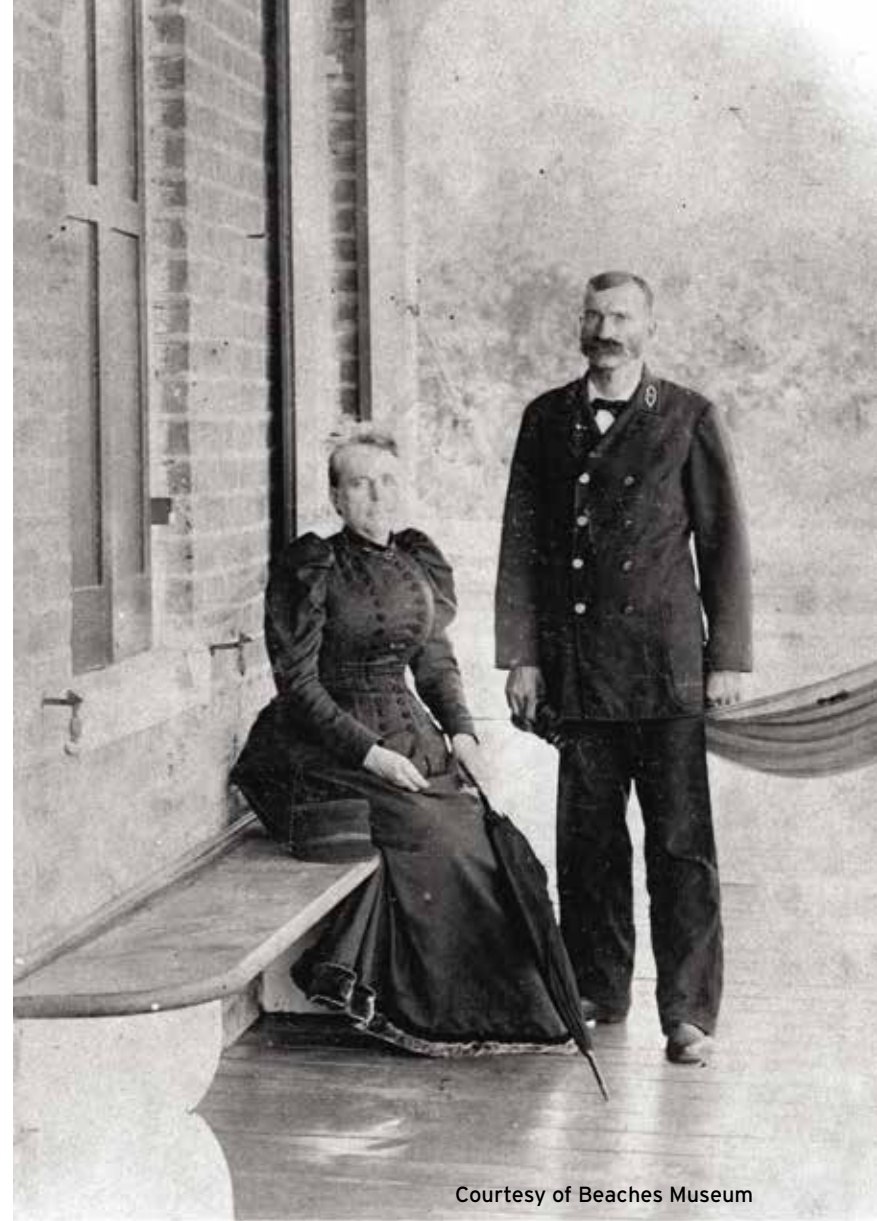
In June of 2021, a visitor at the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum asked if we had a picture of Joseph Champagne, the lighthouse keeper from 1892 to 1907. She had a friend who was a descendant and was seeking information. Regrettably, the Society does not have a photograph of Champagne in its collection. The visitor continued to tour the exhibits but soon came back to our volunteer docent saying that she had found an image of him online!

The photograph of Joseph and his wife Abbie, shown here, is in the collection of the Beaches Museum in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. While the Champagnes were accurately identified in the museum's records, the location was mistakenly attributed to the St. John's River Lighthouse, where

Champagne was keeper from 1890 to 1891. The location is in fact the front porch of the St. Simons Lighthouse Keeper's Dwelling.

The Society contacted the Beaches Museum and corrected this information based on architectural details shown in the photograph that match those of the St. Simons Keeper's Dwelling. In the image you can see the distinctive curves of the front porch ceiling trim and the bench supports. The brick pattern and placement of the front windows exactly match the St. Simons Dwelling and conclusively confirm the location, as shown in the present-day photograph.

This image is exciting not only because it is a recently discovered treasure, but also because it is a rare portrait of a husband-and-wife lighthouse keeper team. Joseph and Abbie were both employees of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, with Joseph acting as head keeper and Abbie as his assistant. In 1892, it was not uncommon for wives to be appointed as assistants. However, the Lighthouse Service never designed a uniform for women. In this formal portrait of the Champagnes, Joseph is wearing his dress uniform of a navy double-



Courtesy of Beaches Museum

breasted jacket, with embroidered gold "K" for keeper on the collar. He holds binoculars, signaling that part of his job was coastal observation. In the absence of a uniform, Abbie is wearing a formal dress in a similar shade, and the captain-style keeper's hat is on the bench beside her.

The St. Simons Light had one other married team, Isaac and Dora Peckham, of whom we do not have an image. If anyone happens to find a photograph of the Peckhams in another collection (or an attic or basement), please let us know!

