

PONCE PARK AND ITS POST OFFICE

By Kevin S. Nichols

As a local historian and member of the Ponce Inlet Historic & Archaeological Preservation Board, I was delighted to be asked by the FPHS editor to contribute an article on the town of Ponce Park and its famous lighthouse. I appreciate the assistance of Deane R. Briggs, M.D. with aspects of the postal history of Ponce Park and the use of covers from his collection.

The town of Ponce Park was originally established in Mosquito County, which became Volusia County when the post office was established on March 10, 1884. Bartola Clemente Pacetti was appointed the first postmaster. Bartola, the grandson of Andreas Pacetti, whose first wife was Gertrude Pons, first came to the Mosquito Inlet land grant in 1843. He settled on the north shore of Mosquito Inlet, on 210 acres of land that had previously been part of the Antonio Pons Spanish land grant, given to Spanish loyalists following the 1783 Second Treaty of Paris. Both Andreas Pacetti and Antonio Pons had been principals in the failed 1768 Turnbull plantation at New Smyrna during the period of British control of Florida. The north shore of Mosquito Inlet was included in the Turnbull land grant and Andreas Pacetti was likely familiar with the site. Bartola Pacetti built a driftwood home on the site in 1854, and eventually sold 10 acres to the government for a lighthouse site. He received \$400, which he used to enlarge his house and create the Pacetti Hotel, a fishing and hunting "resort." This was later sold to

Olivia Gamble (daughter of James N. Gamble of the Proctor and Gamble Co.).

The first lighthouse in the vicinity of Mosquito Inlet was actually built by the British in 1774, on the north side of the inlet and was described as a barrel on a pole for daylight use and a bonfire beacon on a dune at night. In 1834-35, a real lighthouse was constructed on the south side of the inlet. It was built by Winslow Lewis of Boston for \$7,500, but before the light was lit, a storm undermined the foundation and the tower collapsed.

In the early 1880s, General Orville Babcock was appointed the Engineer of the 5th and 6th Lighthouse District and was placed in charge of building a lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet. He also personally purchased additional portions of the Antonio Pons land grant property and intended to start a settlement with the name Ponce Park. Unfortunately, he drowned while unloading lighthouse supplies, before he could erect any improvements. The town was soon

established however, with Pacetti's Hotel (really just a boarding house), James Hardy's mercantile store, Mrs. T.H. Ferguson's restaurant, and eight to 10 houses. A real hotel, the Ponce Hotel, was built in 1890 by E.G. Rogers, with 26 rooms and a landscaped courtyard. A one-room school was opened in 1900.

The current lighthouse (first lit in 1887) was built of red bricks made in New York and Baltimore and cost \$170,000 including adjacent buildings, over three times

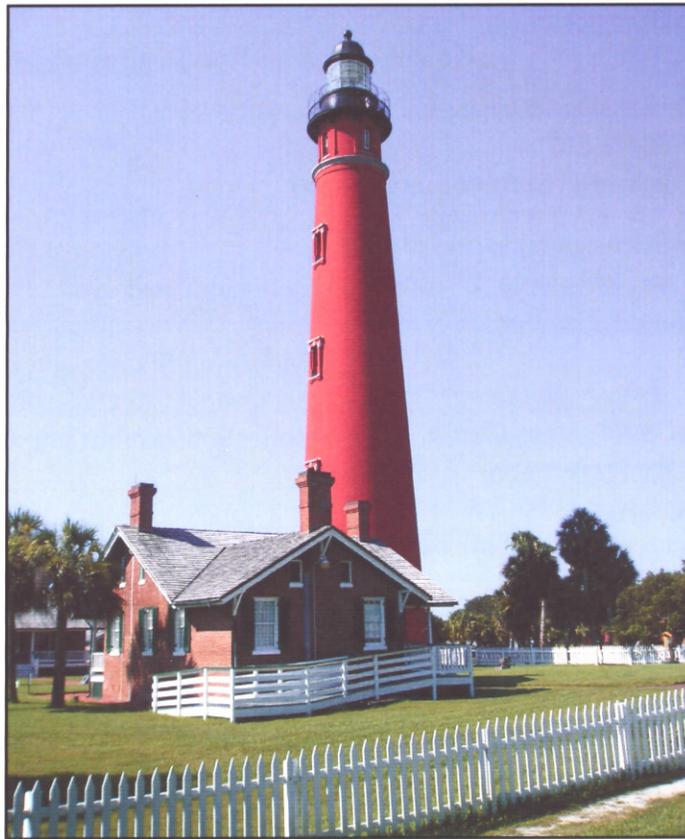


FIGURE 1
Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station, the name since 1927 for the Mosquito Inlet lighthouse at Ponce Park.

Photograph by the author June 2012.

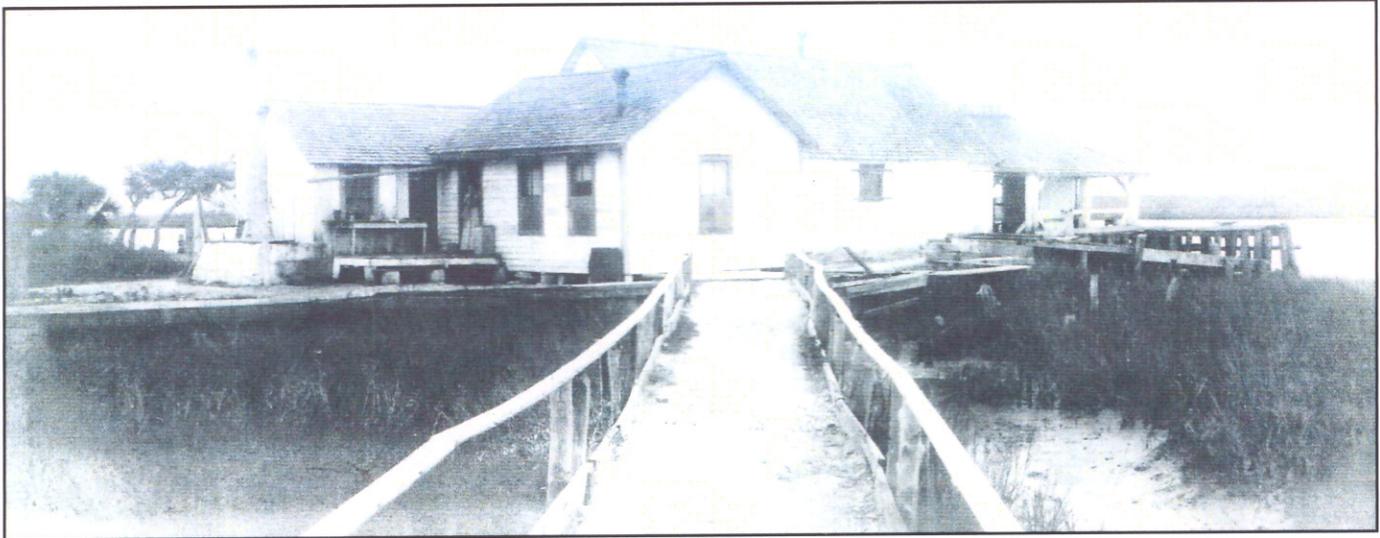


FIGURE 2
“Hasty Cottage” (c. 1903) post office and grocery.

the original Congressional appropriation of \$50,000 (*Figure 1*). The light was a 3,800 pound Fresnel lens made in Paris in 1867, and could be seen for 18 miles. At 175 feet, this is the second tallest brick lighthouse in the United States, only the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse being taller. William Rowliniski was the first Principal Keeper with a \$600 annual salary. It ceased functioning as a lighthouse in 1970, when the Coast Guard established a beacon on the south side of the inlet and abandoned the light-house.

Concerned members of the community formed the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association and persuaded the town of Ponce Inlet to acquire the deed to the Light Station from the Coast Guard in 1972. It was named a National Historic Landmark in 1998.

When a New Smyrna Beach condominium obscured the Coast Guard beacon, the Light Station was reinstated and modern beacon installed to function as a lighthouse in 1983. In 2004, museum staff completed restoration and reinstallation of the 1933 rotating Fresnel lens, and with Coast Guard permission, the lighthouse became

operational again as a private aid to navigation, maintained by the museum staff.

Author Stephen Crane was involved in the shipwreck of the *Commodore* 11 miles offshore of Daytona Beach in 1897 while on his way as an undercover journalist to cover the Cuban Revolution. His experience was related in his book, *The Open Boat*, in which the survivors (including Crane) rowed toward the Mosquito Inlet Lighthouse in a 10-foot dinghy.

The original post office location in Pacetti’s boarding house no longer exists, but a later site of the post office at the “Hasty Cottage” still stands (*Figure 2*). The Hasty Cottage was built by Nathaniel Hasty in 1890 as a trading post and with three additional rental cot-

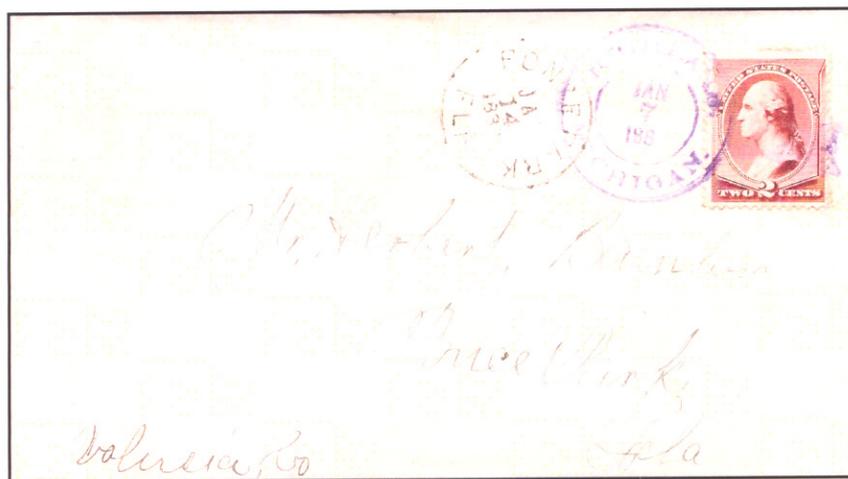


FIGURE 3
1887 cover from Highland, Michigan with “PONCE PARK / FLA. JAN 14 1887” receiving postmark.

tages for a fishing camp. Figure 2 clearly shows that it was the location of a grocery and by the sign below the grocery sign, also the post office. Hasty’s wife, Elizabeth, a school teacher, also served as postmistress for 25 years until she died in 1909. Initially, mail was handled

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at the waterside landing, and later in the Hasty Cottage itself. In 1909, Redwood Wharton Sr. (nephew of the founder of the Wharton School of Business) purchased the Hasty estate. Originally only a two-room cottage, it was expanded later to include a “Cracker style” home next door for Edward L. Meyer, the lighthouse keeper from 1937 to 1939. Meyer’s wife, Ellen Mary, became postmistress and distributed mail from the Hasty Cottage next door.

The cover in **Figure 3** is the earliest cover with a Ponce Park postmark in the Briggs collection. It has a January 14, 1887 receiving postmark on the front and a Port



FIGURE 4

Dateline of January 15, 1887 Ponce Park letter.

Orange transit mark with the same date on the reverse. It was sent by the recipient, Herbert Bamber’s father, and in addition to the father’s enclosed letter is a tissue paper copy of the reply letter mailed by Herbert Bam-

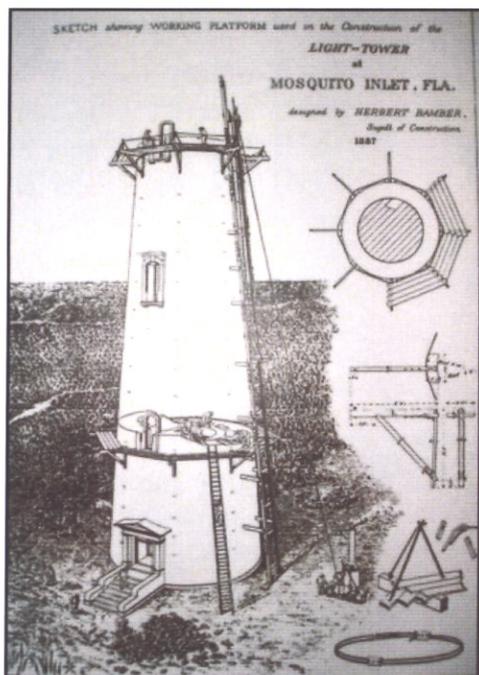


FIGURE 5

Herbert Bamber Working Platform.

ber the following day. This January 15, 1887 letter may represent the earliest surviving letter from Ponce Park, the dateline of which is shown in **Figure 4**.

Herbert Bamber had been named superintendent of construction of the lighthouse in July 1885, and had invented an adjustable

movable work platform for brick masons that was so effective that it was used on all further tower constructions in the United States. The design of this platform is shown in **Figure 5**.



FIGURE 6

Mail Boat, circa 1902.

Mail to and from Ponce Park was carried by boat across the Halifax River to Port Orange, the main distribution point. **Figure 6** shows the mail boat (circa 1902) while the photo in **Figure 7** shows an unnamed steamer (possibly the *Emeralda*) which carried mail to and from



FIGURE 7

Unnamed steamer (Emeralda?).

Port Orange. Gomecinda Pacetti is shown with a fishing party in a photo in **Figure 8**. He carried mail from 1904-1908. **Figure 9** shows the inside of his mail boat, complete with bicycle and mail bags.

Various postmarks are known from Ponce Park, but the most interesting are the Doane postmarks with two different types recorded. The Type II (2) [**Figure 10**] has recorded period of use from January 23, 1904 to January 15, 1906, and the Type III (2) [**Figure 11**] has known



FIGURE 8
Gomecinda Pacetti with fishing party.



FIGURE 9
Pacetti in mail boat with mail bags.

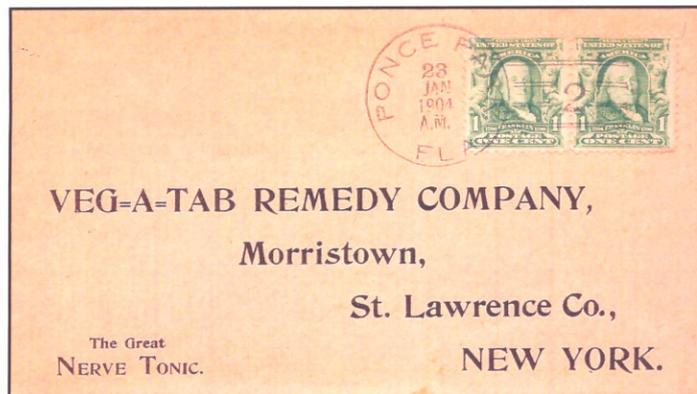


FIGURE 10
Doane Type II (2) "PONCE PARK / FLA. 23 JAN 1904" Earliest known use (Eku) postmark on cover.



FIGURE 11
Doane Type III (2) "9 MAR 1907" postmark. use from March 3, 1906 to December 19, 1907. The "2" in the killer bars reflects an annual \$100-\$200 postal revenue during that time period at a fourth class post office. It is believed that these postmarks were from the period that the Hasty Cottage housed the Ponce Park Post Office. The front of the post card shown in *Figure 11* also has a contemporary photograph of the Mosqui-
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FIGURE 12
Light House at Mosquito Inlet (1907).

to Inlet Light House as well as the lighthouse keeper's house and the porch and landing dock of the Hasty Cottage to the left of the lighthouse (*Figure 12*).

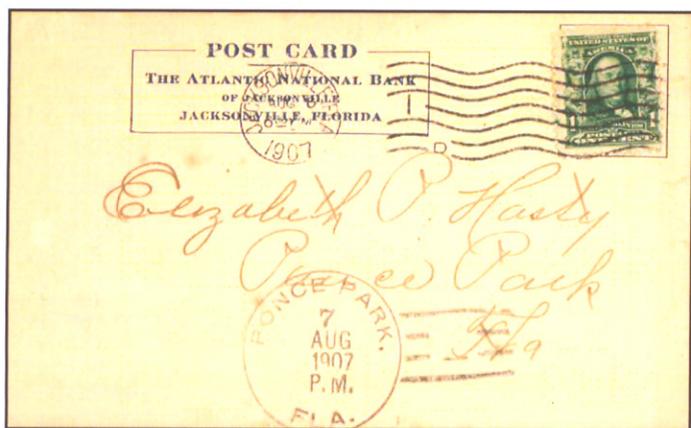


FIGURE 13

“PONCE PARK / FLA. AUG 7 1907” Doane Type III receiving postmark.

A post card from my collection (*Figure 13*), recently donated to the Ponce Inlet Historic & Archaeological Preservation Board, was addressed to postmistress Elizabeth Hasty and has the Type III Doane postmark used as a receiving mark and likely struck by her. Note the wear in the killer bars with the “2” only partially struck.

The 1899 cover in *Figure 14* is noteworthy in that it was written by Thomas Patrick O’Hagan, principal “Keeper” of the Mosquito Inlet (now called Ponce Inlet) Light Station. This cds postmark and killer was used until the Doane postmarking device was obtained in 1904. The 1902 cover (*Figure 15*) with this same

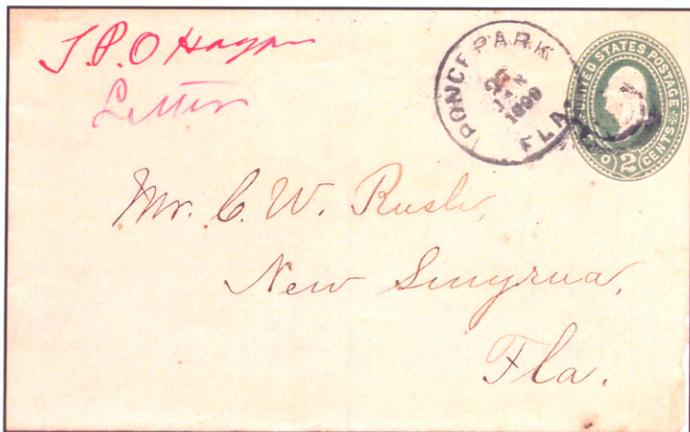


FIGURE 14

“PONCE PARK / FLA. 22 JAN 1899” postmark on cover to New Smyrna.

postmark is noteworthy in that it was written by Nathaniel Hasty (“N.H.”) The four-bar Type A postmark shown in *Figure 16* was used after the Type III Doane device became worn and its use discontinued, likely by sometime in 1908.



FIGURE 15

“PONCE PARK / FLA. 18 MAR 1902” postmark.

The post office continued as Ponce Park until it was discontinued on September 15, 1943, with mail handled at the Daytona Beach Post Office. The town is currently called Ponce Inlet.

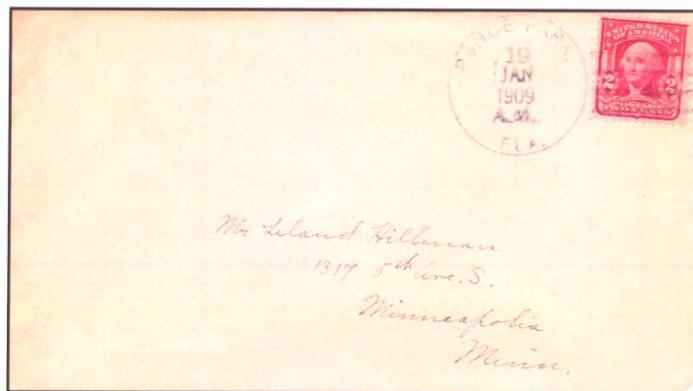


FIGURE 16

“PONCE PARK / FLA. 19 JAN 1909” four-bar “A” postmark.

ENDNOTE

Figures 2, 6-9 are from a photo album with the following inscription: “Nathaniel Hasty - Groceries/ Ponce Park Post Office/ Located at the end of Beach Street.” On the front page: “Mrs. Gorm. Pacetti/ Compliments of Jas. G. Menzies, Ponce Park, 1903.” The album is believed to currently be in the Gamble archives. The Gambles purchased the Pacetti hotel and the album was in the property.