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Florida's haven for shipwrecked sailors

Hampton Dunn

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



FLORIDA'S HAVEN FOR SHIPWRECKED SAILORS

By HAMPTON DUNN

STUART -- Gilbert's Bar House of Refuge on Hutchinson Island near here is the last of a group of lifesaving stations built in 1875 to aid shipwrecked sailors. Today it houses a marine laboratory, a museum of nautical and marine history and a sea turtle hatchery.

The rugged structure was erected by the U.S. Life Saving Service and was one of five such shelters built along the Florida east coast to take in shipwrecked sailors who made their way to shore.

The first keeper was Fred Whitehead of Saint Lucie who was appointed December 1, 1876, and was paid \$40.00 a month. The salary later was raised to \$400 a year.

The logbook of the House of Refuge reveals many thrilling stories of dramatic sea rescues. One of the first major rescues came on April 19, 1886, when the brigantine J. H. Lane, of Seasport, Maine, with eight crew members and a \$13,640 cargo of molasses headed for Cuba, was wrecked on a reef three-fourths of a mile from shore. The keeper and his assistants managed to haul the crew to the beach. It was stormy with a gale of wind blowing.

The log noted: "Cold wet, some hardly able to stand on their feet, it seemed hardly possible that they would be able to reach the station seven and a half miles distant, and the nearest shelter from the rain, that at intervals would pour down upon the already chilled and half dead men." But the keeper had a flask of brandy and gave the sailors a swig. Finally, all were safely inside the comfortable House.

