



The Port Isabel Lighthouse has long been a dominant feature at the southern tip of the Texas Gulf Coast. Its heavy brick walls have withstood the elements for more than a century, and its light has aided many a seafarer.

THE REGION

Spaniards discovered and mapped the Gulf shores, peopled by the coastal Borrado Indians, in the early 1500s. Some two centuries later, ranchers from Mexico settled in what became south Texas. By the 1830s the small settlement of El Frontón de Santa Isabela became headquarters for one of the large ranches established by these settlers.

In 1846, the United States military moved into the area under the leadership of General Zachary Taylor when animosity between the U.S. and Mexico intensified. This gave south Texas national attention for the first time. Early battles in the Mexican-American War took place at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, north of today's Brownsville. Serving as a supply depot, Point Isabel received wounded soldiers from these conflicts.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

After the Mexican-American War, posts established by the U.S. military along the Rio Grande required supplies. Ships sailing through Brazos Santiago Pass to Point Isabel needed a navigational light. The U.S. government set aside lands and funds and began construction of a lighthouse, completing it in 1853. The brick tower was topped by a stationary white light that could be seen from a distance of more than 15 miles at sea.

During the American Civil War, Confederate troops controlled the area but Union troops blocked transportation to the Confederacy and took control in 1863. Both forces used the lighthouse for an observation post. At nearby Palmito Ranch, Union and Confederate forces clashed more than a month after General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

After the war the lighthouse and its beacon were repaired and re-lighted to guide commercial vessels to southernmost Texas. When ownership of the property was contested late in the 19th century, the beacon was extinguished and at the turn of the century, when shipping traffic declined, the lighthouse was abandoned. Even though coastal defense was crucial during the World Wars, the tower at Point Isabel stood a dark watch.

CARING FOR THE LIGHTHOUSE

Mr. and Mrs. Lon C. Hill, Jr., and the Port Isabel Realty Company donated the lighthouse to the State of Texas as a historic site in 1950. The State Parks Board, which preceded the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), remodeled the tower by replacing the iron platform with concrete and raising the glass dome to provide easier access for visitors. TPWD performed major repair work in 1970 and conducted an extensive restoration between 1997 and 1999. The lighthouse keeper's house was recreated, and today it serves as the Visitors' Center, with an exhibit covering the lighthouse's construction and history.

With its mercury-vapor light, the tower is still marked on sea charts as an aid to navigation. Of sixteen lighthouses along the Texas coast, the Port Isabel lighthouse is the only one open for visitors to enjoy. It is operated by the City of Port Isabel in partnership with TPWD.



Port Isabel Lighthouse

STATE HISTORIC SITE

421 Queen Isabella Blvd.
Port Isabel, TX 78578 • (956) 943-0755

Open:

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. — everyday
(weather permitting)

Summer hours:

9 a.m. – 6 p.m. — Sun.–Thurs.

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. — Fri.

10 a.m. – 7 p.m. — Sat.

City of Port Isabel Visitors Center

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. — Mon.–Sat.



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