

Desdemona Sands

By George Worthylake

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On January 1, 1857 the bark *Desdemona* entered the Columbia River, Captain Francis Williams commanding, without a pilot, and promptly ran aground on a shoal off Astoria, OR. At the time the shoal was not named, but after Captain Williams' vessel became stranded and was eventually a total loss (including cargo) it was forever more called Desdemona Sands.

Captain Williams complained, to no avail, that a navigational buoy was off position and the cause of his stranding.

The long Desdemona Sands shoal went unmarked until 1902 when the Lighthouse Service constructed the Desdemona Sands Lighthouse. The 1½ story octagonal structure was placed on a platform supported by many piles and similar in design to the Willamette River fog signal station, up river, and the Semiamhoo Lighthouse near the Canadian border.

The lighthouse was constructed in 12 feet of water and originally displayed a fixed white light from a 4th order Fresnel lens, 46 feet above water. A Daboll reed trumpet was installed as the fog signal.

The light went into operation on December 16, 1902. On January 1, 1903 the keeper wrote in his log, "The New Year came in calm and clear, several of the eleven ships, lying at anchor near the light station, welcome the coming of the New Year by the ringing of bells, singing, music and general Good Cheer."

For many years the Axel Karlson was the keeper. He and his wife and six children lived at the station.

Over the years more and more navigational aids were established in the lower Columbia. They eventually negated the need for the lighthouse and the structure was dismantled shortly after WWII.

For many years the Desdemonda Sands lighthouse stood boldly in the middle of the mighty Columbia greeting mariners as they entered the River. It was a familiar and friendly sight to the residents of Astoria, Oregon and it seems like...Only Yesterday.



Opposite page — Desdemona Sands Lighthouse looking north, circa 1930. USLHS photo.

Above — Desdemona Lighthouse in 1932 looking east. Note the keeper at right and the large fog horn above the window of the small fog signal shed. The crane at left is for hoisting supplies. Oregon Historical Society photo.

