Humboldt Harbor Lighthouse

By

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The Gold Rush created a population explosion in San Francisco and central California which resulted in a tremendous demand for lumber to construct new houses and commercial buildings. Although there were lumber trees in the Bay Area and up in the Sierras, the tall redwood and Douglas fir trees in the Humboldt Bay area proved to be the most economical and abundant in supply.

The Bar Channel into Humboldt Bay is as dangerous as any on the west coast, but the bay is broad and fairly sheltered. Humboldt Bay is also the only major harbor of refuge between San Francisco Bay and Coos Bay in Oregon, a distance of four hundred miles.

The importance of Humboldt Bay was evident to the Lighthouse Service in Washington as it was designated as a site for one of the first eight lighthouses constructed on the West Coast: San Diego, Point Conception, Point Pinos, Farralon Islands, Fort Point, Alcatraz Island and Cape Disappointment (in Oregon Territory) were the other locations.

Humboldt Bay's leading city, Eureka, was founded in 1850 and by the middle of that decade the bay was ringed with lumber mills processing lumber products for shipment to San Francisco. Lumber would continue to flow out of Humboldt Bay right up into the 1980s when mills started to close. The Humboldt Bay area also shipped quantities of dairy products and became a major west coast fishing port.

Although $15,000 was appropriated for the construction of a lighthouse for Humboldt Bay in 1851, it wasn't until 1856 that construction began. The site selected was on the north spit of Humboldt Bay, a low sandy tract covered with scrub brush. The lighthouse was similar in

design to the other eight, and eventually sixteen were constructed along the west coast between 1854 and 1858.

A circular 45 foot high tower was surrounded by a 1 ½ story dwelling which contained a basement, two rooms on the first floor and two on the second floor. The Humboldt Bay Lighthouse lantern had unusual trapezoid style storm panes (windows) and was furnished with a 4th order Fresnel lens which produced a fixed white light visible for 12 miles.

There is speculation that at some point the tower was elevated. It is possible that the low sandy site and original short tower did not elevate the lens high enough be enable the light seen at its maximum range. Looking at photos of the lighthouse you can see a ring around the lower part of the tower. The lantern rooms of other west coast lighthouses were installed at about this level. However, the contractor could have constructed the tower to the design used for the other stations and then realized that it would be necessary to elevate the tower further to enable the light to be seen at its maximum range.

The first keeper was a J. Johnson who lighted the lamp for the first time on December 20, 1856. The station had been completed two years earlier, but the newly established Lighthouse Board changed the contracts of the West Coast stations to require Fresnel lenses to be installed in lieu of the old reflector system. The new Fresnel lenses had to be ordered and shipped from France, resulting in a delay of several years.

Keeper Johnson died on February 25, 1859 and his position was taken over by his wife Sarah. The next September her salary was reduced from $1,000 to $650. Still, she stayed on until August 19, 1863 when she resigned. She was replaced by a G.H. Nye and his salary was immediately increased to $750.

The Humboldt station was a one keeper station until a steam fog signal was added in 1875 and two assistant keepers were added. The bleak and remote north spit site of the station was not everyone's cup of tea. Although the City of Eureka was within view, getting there in those early days was a challenge. To reach the station sailboat, the keeper had to hike across the sandy spit and wade out to the moored vessel and sail across the Bay. Returning to the station with supplies was even more of an arduous task, as they had to be lugged across the sandy tract. The other option was a very long trip through the shifting sands of the north spit, circumnavigating Humboldt Bay to reach Eureka or one of the smaller and closer villages.

Between the time it was established in 1856 and abandoned in 1891, twenty keepers resigned, eight were transferred, seven were "removed" (fired), three died and one deserted.

To protect the lighthouse from high water during storms and the shifting sands of the north spit the Lighthouse Service constructed a barrier of logs around the dwelling. The 1867 Annual Report stated, "The breakwater of logs which was constructed last year seems to have answered the purpose of protecting the foundation of the structure, although the sand on the spit is constantly changing, and it is not improbable that the breakwater may at some future time be washed away and the stability of the lighthouse endangered. In this view of the case the Board has under consideration the propriety of removing this light to a point about four miles south of the entrance to Humboldt Bay, known as Table Bluff. This point is salient, with a firm and permanent foundation for a light-house, and a light there would subserve the purposes of navigation than where it is now placed; it is not so frequently enveloped in fog as the spit where the light now stands." The board was correct in its assessment about Table Bluff. However it was 14 years before Congress allocated funds to allow the Lighthouse Service to relocate the Humboldt Bay

station to Table Bluff.

It's interesting to note that of the first sites selected on the west coast five were inadequate and caused the lighthouses to be relocated: Point Loma, Point Conception and Point Bonita were located on high bluffs, above the layers of fog. They were eventually relocated to lower levels. Fort Point (in San Francisco Bay) was razed before it was even lighted: the Army wanted to build a fort at the location. And, as mentioned earlier, Humboldt Bay's north spit was too low, at risk to shifting sands and high seas and enveloped in fog a great deal of the time. Additionally, lighthouses at three other sites succumbed to erosion.

The Humboldt Bay station was constantly battered by sand or enveloped in fog. One year 1,100 hours of fog was logged. Because of the narrow and dangerous bar channel and the amount of fog in the area it was very clearly evident that a fog signal was necessary to assist the mariner locate the entrance and navigate the narrow entrance.

In 1874 Congress appropriated $10,000 for a steam fog signal at the station. Construction started in December of 1873 and the signal was completed the next March. The additional buildings were located to the rear, or east, of the lighthouse. Three wells were dug at the site to furnish water for the signal and a wood shed was converted into a home for an assistant keeper and his family. This may be one of the reasons the station experienced some resignations.

In 1877 materials were shipped to Humboldt Bay for a new assistant dwelling, boat landing and boat house (on the bay side of the spit) and a tramway between the dock and the station.

The new dwelling was completed the next August. An earthquake in November of that year caused cracks in the walls of the original dwelling and tower. Iron anchors were installed in

the walls, three feet apart. The structures were then considered safe.

In 1880 considerable repairs were made to the station. A call bell system was installed between the various buildings and a combination carpenter's and blacksmith's shop was constructed. A Haines mineral oil (kerosene) lamp replaced the old lard oil lamp in the lantern room. The Lighthouse Service started switching from lard oil to kerosene in the late 1870's.

The following year the keepers were furnished materials with which to effect repairs around the station. The bulkhead protecting the marine railway and boathouse on the bay side of the spit was damaged, the call bell system required upgrading and asbestos felting was provided to cover the fog signal boiler [ed. ah, the good ol' days!].

Earthquakes continued to plague the station. The 1882 report of the Lighthouse Board states, "The south gable end of the keeper's dwelling was cracked and separated from the rest of the building by earthquakes, which caused a shifting of the sand about the foundation. Though the gable was temporarily strengthened by two heavy timber braces, the damage is constantly increasing and as the fall of the entire wall at an early day does not seem improbable, it will be taken down and completely rebuilt. In spite of the extensive repairs which the duplicate upright boiler received early in the past year, it now has several cracks in its head and is in a dangerous condition. It will therefore, be replaced by a new horizontal boiler."

Then, in February of 1885, the District Inspector reported, "... a cyclone caused considerable damage to the station. The old dwelling and fog signal shed were partly unroofed, telegraph poles prostrated, plank walks torn up, and other minor damage was done."

The next year the Annual Report stated, "During an extraordinary high tide on November 24, 1885, a great quantity of driftwood swept across the north spit, upon which the light-house

and fog signal stand, by which all the buildings were temporarily endangered. The cellar of the old dwelling and tower was filled with water, and a dangerous increase in its settlement and cracking of the walls was noted. Upon careful examination it was decided that the combined tower and dwelling was unsafe for occupancy. It was then decided in view of the proposed removal of the station to Humboldt Bluff (Table Bluff), that a building should be put up for the temporary accommodation for the principal keeper, of such a character that it could be moved later across the bay to a new location and used as a fog signal shed, the existing one on the spit not being in good enough condition to warrant such removal. Plans and specifications were prepared and the house was built by hired labor, the material being sought by contract and being delivered on the spit. The new building is 46 feet long by 30 feet wide, very solidly framed..."

The 1887 Report to Congress from the Lighthouse Board reported that the tramway was renewed, but that the structures of the station were in such dilapidated condition that they were not worth repairing. The report requested an appropriation of $25,000 to construct a station across the Bay on the south spit, a site known as Table Bluff, "Besides it is found that the light and fog signal would be of more service to commerce if they were on the other side of the entrance to the bay."

The request for an appropriation for a new station was made each of the next three years stating, in part, " ... the commerce of this bay and Eel River justifies a generous expenditure, and the establishment of a light station at Table Bluff will benefit both entrances, and will be all that is needed until the Harbor improvements at Humboldt are completed, when local harbor lights will become necessary... ". The Eel River empties into the south end of Humboldt Bay, Eureka is located at the northern end. The harbor lights mentioned in the report were small unattended

kerosene lanterns placed on pile clusters which helped define the edges of the channels.

Finally, in 1891, Congress passed the requested appropriation and the service selected a site. However, the owner of the site demanded an exorbitant amount for his land. The District reported to headquarters in 1891, "... the owner of the selected land refused to sell for less than $5,000 for about ten acres of land and the right of way for a road from a county road to the proposed station. This price was deemed exorbitant, and measures were initiated to acquire the land by condemnation. The matter is now in the hands of the United States attorney. Meanwhile [we are] trying to effect a compromise, and thus get title with an expenditure of less time and money than by awaiting the slow motion of the courts." [ed. some things never change].

The next year the owner of the land capitulated and sold the ten acres to the government for $2,226, along with the right to take water from an adjacent spring. Bids to construct the station were opened in March of 1892 and a contract was made to construct buildings, $16,949, and for the ironwork, $845. The District Inspector reported, "At the end of the fiscal year the lantern was completed and accepted. The work on the buildings was begun in May, but little progress was made. The coal shed has been put up, and it will be used for quarters for the workmen ... No work of importance was done at the old station save some repairs to one of the fog-signal boilers." The new station as completed on October 5, 1892. The lens and one fog signal boiler were kept at the old station until October 31 when the light was exhibited at the new station for the first time and the old station was abandoned.

Within a few years only the original combination dwelling and tower remained of the old station. However, the service realized that the fog signal at the new station, while helpful to coastal navigation, didn't serve the mariner entering Humboldt Bay, or even in the bay, when the

weather was thick. In 1908 the Humboldt Bay Fog Signal station was established on the north spit, on the bay side of the entrance channel. The signal served for many years, but was constantly threatened by erosion and was finally discontinued. It is not known when the original Humboldt Bay lighthouse was razed due to being an "attractive nuisance". We have heard it was in the 1930's.

For many years thousands of sailing schooners plied the waters between Humboldt Bay and San Francisco transporting lumber, fish and dairy goods to a growing San Francisco. Sail vessels gave way to the medium sized steam powered lumber schooners like the Wawona on display in Sausalito.

The age of sail gave way to the age of steam. Over the years, until 1892, untold numbers of vessels approaching Humboldt Bay kept a sharp look out for the old lighthouse on the north spit and it's fixed white light which showed the way to the treacherous bar channel and eventually safe haven ... and it seems like only yesterday!