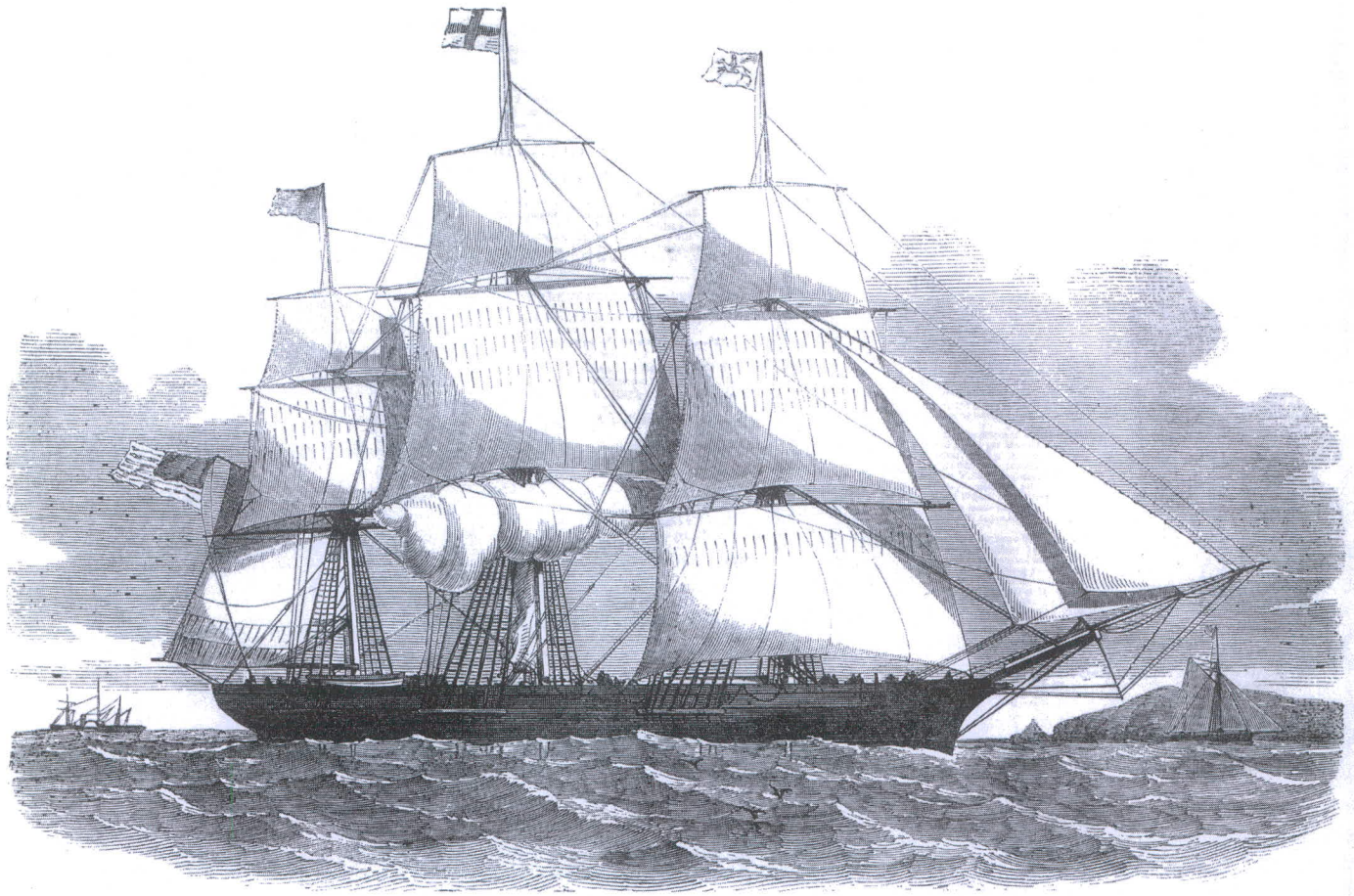


Legacy of the *Carrier Pigeon*

A History of the Pigeon Point Light Station

By Frank Perry — Edited by Dave Snyder

"The beautiful clipper ship **Carrier Pigeon**, *of 843 tons, was towed to Boston by the steamer* **R. B. Forbes**, *Thursday. She is probably the best modelled clipper that has gone out of the Kennebec this season, and is built and finished in the best manner. Trufant, Drummond & Co., builders."* — **Weekly Mirror** *(Bath, ME), January 1, 1853*

The decade of the 1850s could well be called the "Age of the Clipper." They were the sleekest and swiftest of merchant sailing vessels. The ***Carrier Pigeon*** measured 175 feet long and just 34 feet wide. She was rated at about 845 tons burden and had a beautiful gilded pigeon as a figurehead. Launched from the shipyards at Bath, Maine, in the fall of 1852, the ***Carrier Pigeon*** departed Boston on her maiden voyage January 28, 1853.

The ship took the waves with ease as she rounded Cape Horn and sailed north along the western edge of the Americas toward San Francisco. On the morning of June 6 she was sighted off Santa Cruz. The ship then continued northward as a thick fog blanketed the water, concealing the shoreline. By nightfall Captain Azariah Doane, believing he had veered far from shore, steered the vessel towards the coastline, hoping to catch sight of land. Suddenly, there was the sound of splintering timbers as the ship's hull drifted into the grasp of the jagged sea bottom. Within fifteen minutes seven feet of water was sloshing through the ship's hold. Fortunately, the captain and crew made it to shore safely, and the next morning they sent word of the disaster to San Francisco.

The news reached San Francisco the evening of June 7, and the U.S. Coast Survey steamer ***Active*** went to the scene to offer assistance. Soon, the sidewheel steamer ***Sea Bird*** also arrived, having been sent by the underwriters to salvage as much of the cargo as possible. The magnificent clipper was a sorry sight. Her hull was wedged firmly on a ledge of rocks just 500 feet from shore, the tide ebbing and flowing through the ship nearly up to her between decks.

The ***Sea Bird*** had been engaged in salvage work for only a day when it, too, ran into trouble. After breaking free from her anchorage in heavy swells, the ship began to drift toward the same rocks that claimed the ***Carrier Pigeon***. The captain, however, was able to get up steam and run the ship upon the beach of Point Año Nuevo. A fourth ship, the ***Goliah***, then came to the rescue. The ***Carrier Pigeon***'s crew and 1,200 packages of merchandise were taken to

San Francisco by the ***Goliah***. Although more cargo was taken from the ***Carrier Pigeon***, by July the ship was breaking up. The ***Sea Bird*** was eventually refloated in October.

The loss of the ***Carrier Pigeon*** was no small matter. The ship and cargo had been insured for about $195,000. Comparatively little of the cargo was recovered, and the ship, valued at $54,000, was sold as she lay for $1,500. News of the tragedy touched both coasts, and the location of the disaster would, from that time on, be called Pigeon Point.

The wreck was still fresh in the minds of the Coast Survey team when, in the fall of 1853, they began mapping the coastline between Santa Cruz and San Francisco. First they examined a site at Santa Cruz for which Congress had recently funded a lighthouse. They then traveled north and mapped Point Año Nuevo. The surveyors concurred that erection of a lighthouse at or near Año Nuevo was of greater importance. In a letter dated December 10, 1853, LCDR T. H. Stevens wrote:

> In the first place, I consider it [Point Año Nuevo], from its character, an extremely dangerous point, and it should, therefore, have a light upon it for the purpose of warning the mariner of approaching danger. It possesses all the requisites, from its proximity to Santa Cruz, for a guide to that harbor; it would prove of advantage to vessels employed in the coasting trade; and, as it is frequently the first land made by vessels coming from distant ports, its importance is manifest in this connection. For these reasons, and from the fact that a light-house at Santa Cruz would only serve a local trade, I respectfully recommend the establishment of a light at Año Nuevo as of far greater importance.

Stevens suggested that the lighthouse be built on the island, which at that time was connected to the mainland at low tide by a narrow sand spit. Coast Survey Assistant A. M. Harrison argued that the lighthouse should, instead, be erected on Point Año Nuevo. Although the sector of visibility would be less, he said, the lighthouse would be more accessible, at a higher elevation, and on a more stable foundation. The recommendations of Stevens and Harrison were forwarded to the Secretary of Treasury, who was also ex officio president of the United States Lighthouse Board. In August, 1854, Congress appropriated additional funds, this time for erecting a lighthouse at either Point Santa Cruz or Point Año Nuevo.

Subsequent surveys in 1855 favored Pigeon Point as a lighthouse site. Coast Survey Assistant W. M. Johnson reported that this point was nearer to shipping lanes, had a boat landing that was protected from storms the majority of the year, and was composed of hard sandstone and conglomerate that would make for a better foundation than Año Nuevo point or island.

By 1857 lighthouse District Inspector Hartman Bache, frustrated by delays in building a lighthouse at Point Santa Cruz, proceeded with plans for a Point Año Nuevo lighthouse. (In the late 1860s, the land title difficulties at Santa Cruz were finally resolved and a lighthouse was erected there.) Major Bache still preferred Año Nuevo to Pigeon Point. A lighthouse was designed, and plans were drafted in keeping with the other sixteen lighthouses erected along the West Coast during this decade. It was to be a Cape Cod style dwelling, made of brick and stone, with a tall, conical tower rising from it. The lantern room was to house a second-order Fresnel lens with a focal plane about seventy-five feet above ground level. It would have most closely resembled the Cape Flattery lighthouse in Washington, which was lighted in December of 1857 and still stands.

One can only speculate as to why these early lighthouse plans for this area were not executed. In all likelihood, gaining proper title to the site was a problem here as at many other proposed lighthouse sites in California. It is worth noting that the Rancho Punta del Año Nuevo land grant was not patented until December, 1857. Or perhaps construction was precluded by the political climate of the time and the impending Civil War. Only two more Pacific Coast lighthouses were completed before the war.

During the 1860s, three more ships met their demise along this stretch of coast, this time with terrible loss of life. Colonel Albert Evans painted a vivid description of the coast here in his 1873 book *A La California*. It is a place, he said, where "black reefs of rocks rear their ugly fangs, like wild beasts watching for their prey. A current sweeps in from Point Año Nuevo toward Pigeon Point, and many a vessel has been drawn in in the fog, to be dashed on the rocks." He further reported: "On the sandy bluff at Point Año Nuevo is an inclosure within which lie buried, side by side, forty of the victims of these terrible disasters."

The first in this trilogy of tragedies was the ***Sir John Franklin***. Like the ***Carrier Pigeon***, it was an American clipper from the East Coast on its way to San Francisco. On a very foggy



Pigeon Point Light Station circa 1930. The original four-plex dwelling exists in this photo. A dock and stiff legged crane can be seen at far right. USLHS photo.

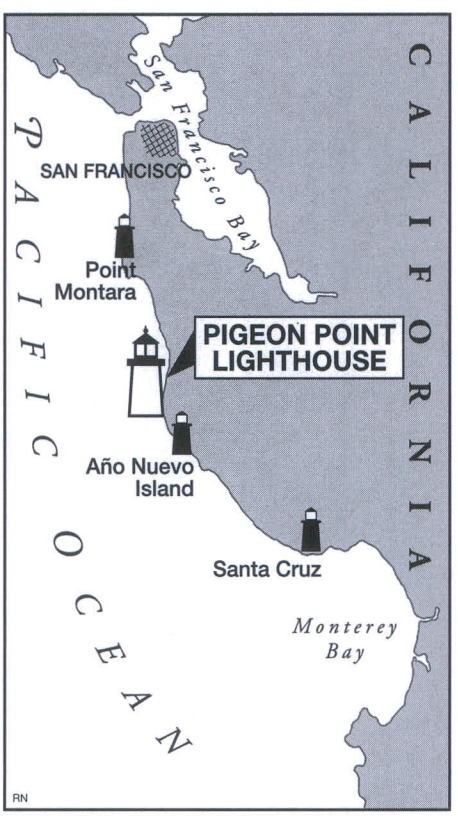
January 17, 1865, thinking they were sixty miles from shore, the captain decided to bring the ship in closer to the east. Quickly finding themselves in dangerous water, the captain and crew made vain attempts to correct the ship's course. She struck bottom, split in half and spilled her cargo and twenty men into the sea. Only eight made it to shore alive.

Twenty-two months later came the loss of the British bark **Coya**. The **Coya** had departed Sydney, Australia, September 22, 1866, with a shipment of coal. In addition to her crew of twenty, ten passengers, including several women and children, were on board. After a brief stop at Pitcairn Island on October 13, she set sail for San Francisco. According to George Byrnes, one of the few survivors of the disaster, everything went well until November 24, "all of which day, and the day previous, we had very thick and squally weather." Captain Paige and crew believed they were near the Farallons and, at about 7:30 p.m., were all down at tea. Suddenly the second mate reported land on the lee bow. Captain Paige immediately climbed on deck and ordered a change in course. As this was being done, she struck a reef. Mr. Byrnes wrote: "The sea kept lifting her from rock to rock, crushing her bottom in. She had at this time made considerably nearer land, and we all gave ourselves up for lost. The sea commenced breaking over the bow, carrying everything before it. . . . The scene now was something fearful; the main deck, being torn up by the pressure of water underneath, made one of the most frightful noises ever heard, the ladies screaming and being washed away one by one, and drowning under the lee rigging." The ship, cargo, and twenty-six lives were lost.

Both shipwrecks drew nation-wide attention, including that of government lighthouse authorities. They responded quickly. According to maps in the General Land Office, it appeared that Año Nuevo Island was not included in the patent for the Año Nuevo rancho. Since the island was supposedly unclaimed, President Andrew Johnson declared it a government reservation for lighthouse purposes. Due in part to the efforts of U.S. Senator Cornelius Cole, Congress on July 20, 1868, then appropriated $90,000 for establishment of a first order lighthouse at "Point Año Nuevo or vicinity." Plans for a lighthouse were again underway, but not soon enough to prevent still another wreck—that of the **Hellespont** in November, 1868.

The circumstances surrounding the loss of the **Hellespont** were frighteningly similar to those of the **Coya**. Like the **Coya**, she was sailing from Australia to San Francisco with a load of coal. For three days prior to the disaster there had been thick clouds with light mist, later turning into rain. Due to the overcast sky, Captain Soule had been unable to make reliable astronomical observations to determine his position. On Wednesday, November 18, the captain ordered the ship more to the northeast and guessed that they would sight land by daybreak. At twenty minutes before five the following morning, seaman Charles Wilson, the lookout, shouted "breakers ahead." All hands leaped out of their bunks, sprang on deck, and attempted to turn the ship away. Their efforts proved to be in vain as heavy rollers began pounding against the side of the vessel. Just ten minutes after breakers were first sighted, the ship struck the bottom. The first strike was light, but then an extraordinarily large wave lifted the ship up and brought her down with such tremendous force that she was literally smashed to pieces.

The crew clung fearfully to the bits of floating wreckage, struggling through the darkness towards shore. Remarked one of the crew, "Captain, you were a little nearer to shore than you thought you were." Just seven of the eighteen-man crew survived.



As news of the **Hellespont** disaster spread, public outcry over lack of a lighthouse grew quickly. On November 28, H. A. Scofield, editor of the *San Mateo County Gazette*, eloquently summarized the urgent need for a lighthouse:

> "The recent terrible wreck of the ship **Hellespont** at Pigeon Point in this county, which resulted in the loss of eleven of her crew, including Captain Soule, constitutes another appeal to the government at Washington for the establishment of a lighthouse at Pigeon Point. Several vessels have been wrecked in that vicinity within the past few years, in every instance of which, many lives have been lost, and the vessels invariably a total loss. Pigeon Point is the most extensive promontory on the coast south of the Golden Gate, and which point seems especially adapted for a light-house. No other one place on the Pacific Coast has proved so fatal to navigators as this locality, and it behooves those most interested in maritime affairs on the coast as well as in the East to bring their influence to bear immediately upon the government officials, and never relax their efforts until a lighthouse is erected at Pigeon Point.
>
> "If we are not mistaken, it is a matter of fact that all of the vessels that have been lost in the vicinity of Pigeon Point have been wrecked in consequence of dense fogs which prevented the land from being sighted until the vessels were among the breakers. A fog-bell or whistle would unquestionably in most instances be found more useful than a light. Either a bell or whistle of sufficient volume at Pigeon Point would have saved the **Hellespont**, the **Franklin** and other vessels which have been lost in that vicinity. Our delegates in Congress are expected to make it their business to look after this matter, and they should not be permitted to forget the interests of their constituents."

One of San Francisco's papers, the *Daily Alta California*, castigated the Lighthouse Board and the district engineer for the delays in lighthouse construction. "The public of

California have been waiting for eighteen years to have their Government provide **one** lighthouse for the ninety miles of coast lying south of the Golden Gate," it said. "There has never been a light there and, from present appearances, there never will be."

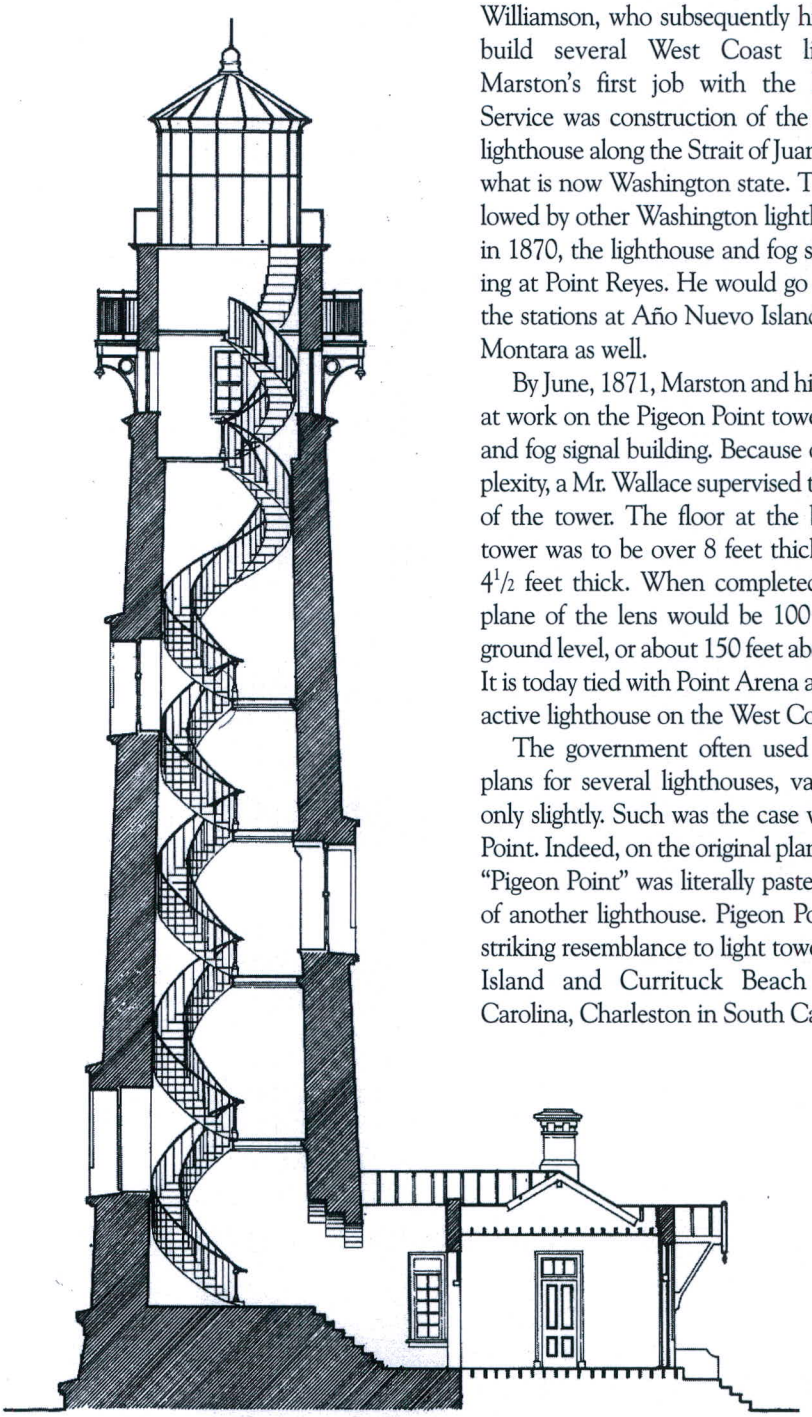
Lt. Col. Robert S. Williamson, an army engineer on detached duty with the Lighthouse Service, was charged with supervising construction of lighthouses in California at that time. Williamson said he had not yet received instructions from Washington, D.C., stemming from the Congressional appropriation. To make matters worse, Año Nuevo Island, which had supposedly been reserved by the President for a lighthouse, was being claimed by the owners of Año Nuevo Rancho. Further investigation proved the owners' claim to be valid, thus necessitating purchase of the island by the government before a lighthouse could be erected.

Loren Coburn, a land speculator, and his brother-in-law, Jeremiah Clarke, an attorney, had purchased the 17,000-acre rancho in 1862 for about $30,000. Even before Coburn and Clark had purchased the Rancho they had made arrangements to lease much of the land at a handsome profit to a group of dairymen. The pair knew about the lighthouse proposals and surveys of the 1850s and, realizing the chance to sell the sites to the government at great profit, purposely excluded Año Nuevo Island and Pigeon Point from the land they leased.

Coburn and Clarke reportedly demanded $40,000 for the island alone—more than they had paid for the entire rancho. Lt. Col. Williamson, acting on behalf of the Lighthouse Board, offered $5,000. The government then raised its offer to $10,000, but Coburn and Clarke would not budge. There was little progress in negotiations until April, 1870, when the government threatened to condemn the land. Finally, on May 18, 1870, the deed was signed. The government purchased a total of 19½ acres: 1½ acres at the tip of Pigeon Point, a 9-acre tract located about 500 yards inland from the point for "water privileges," and the 9-acre Año Nuevo Island.

Negotiations had taken so long that most of the lighthouse appropriation (except for that spent to purchase the land) reverted to the U.S. Treasury. Not until March 3, 1871, did Congress reappropriate the funds—another $90,000.

As late as December of 1870 there had still been discussion as to whether Año Nuevo Island or Pigeon Point would be the best site for a lighthouse. By the following spring, however, it was decided to erect a first-order lighthouse and fog signal at Pigeon Point and to establish only a fog signal at Año Nuevo. Año Nuevo Island Fog Signal Station began operation May 29, 1872. It was manned by the Lighthouse Service as were light stations, even though a light was not added until the 1890s.



The 1870 tower design was used at Pigeon Point as well as for several East Coast towers.

Construction at Pigeon Point commenced soon after the 1871 appropriation. In charge of the operation was Phineas F. Marston. Marston had begun his career as a New England carpenter and builder of churches and army barracks. In 1858, at age forty-five, he came to San Francisco with his wife and family and was placed in charge of construction of the barracks at the Presidio, Black Point (Fort Mason), and Angel Island. His fine work attracted the attention of Lt. Col. Williamson, who subsequently hired him to build several West Coast lighthouses. Marston's first job with the Lighthouse Service was construction of the Ediz Hook lighthouse along the Strait of Juan de Fuca in what is now Washington state. This was followed by other Washington lighthouses and, in 1870, the lighthouse and fog signal building at Point Reyes. He would go on to build the stations at Año Nuevo Island and Point Montara as well.

By June, 1871, Marston and his crew were at work on the Pigeon Point tower, dwelling, and fog signal building. Because of the complexity, a Mr. Wallace supervised the erection of the tower. The floor at the base of the tower was to be over 8 feet thick, the walls 4½ feet thick. When completed, the focal plane of the lens would be 100 feet above ground level, or about 150 feet above the sea. It is today tied with Point Arena as the tallest active lighthouse on the West Coast.

The government often used one set of plans for several lighthouses, varying them only slightly. Such was the case with Pigeon Point. Indeed, on the original plans the name "Pigeon Point" was literally pasted over that of another lighthouse. Pigeon Point bears a striking resemblance to light towers at Bodie Island and Currituck Beach in North Carolina, Charleston in South Carolina, and

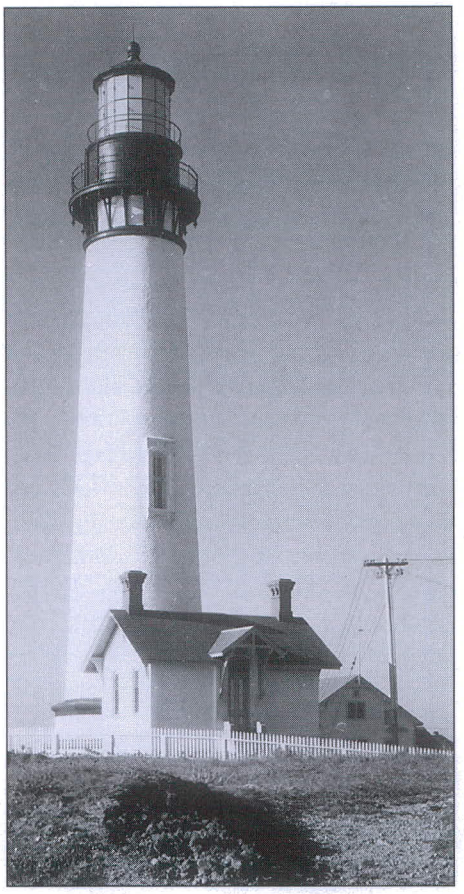
Yaquina Head in Oregon. All differ in height, but are otherwise virtually identical in appearance. Materials for the light station came from many different sources, some nearby, some far away. Lumber was purchased from the firm of Chandler and Harrington, proprietors of Glen Mills along nearby Whitehouse Creek. The stairs, platforms, balcony, and other iron work were fabricated by Nutting & Son, San Francisco. The lens was manufactured by the firm of Henry-Lapaute in Paris, France. The lantern room was constructed at the Lighthouse Service general depot in New York. Perhaps most important are the estimated 500,000 bricks used to build the tower. A visitor to Pigeon Point in early June, 1871, announced, "Men are already at work making the brick on the government ground some forty or fifty rods back from the site selected for the erection of the light-house." Apparently this brick was of unsatisfactory quality. A memorandum concerning Pigeon Point written to Assistant Lighthouse Engineer Eusebio J. Molera stated: "No brick except city brick to be used in completing the tower. The brick hauled from the kiln of brick on the 9-acre lot to be hauled back there **without expense to the U.S.** If any of those bricks have been put in the tower they must be taken out and hauled back to the kiln." According to still another account, the bricks were made in nearby Pescadero. In any event, they came from a fairly local source. Even for the earliest lighthouses built in California, local sources were tapped for brick and stone.

The trouble with the bricks noted in the memorandum was but one of many delays in construction. Over a year before the lighthouse was operational, on September 10, 1871, the fog signal went into operation under the command of Keeper J. W. Patterson and one assistant. The tower would not be completed for another 14 months. Torrential rains, which slowed construction, and difficulty reassembling the spiral staircase were two reasons for the delay. In April work ceased, awaiting arrival of the lantern room, expected to be shipped from New York around May 1. On July 6, 1872, the *San Mateo County Gazette* reported: "The light, first-class, is on the ground, but not yet up, the workmen having suspended their labors some time ago for reasons known only to the Government."

Not until November did Captain Charles J. McDougal, Lighthouse Inspector, formally examine the station and pronounce it ready for lighting. Thomas J. Winship, district lamplist, readied the oil lamp and instructed the keepers on the particulars of its use. At sunset on Friday, November 15, 1872, the brass clockwork began ticking, the smell of burning lard oil filled the lantern room, and the powerful beacon cast its first rays across the Pacific.

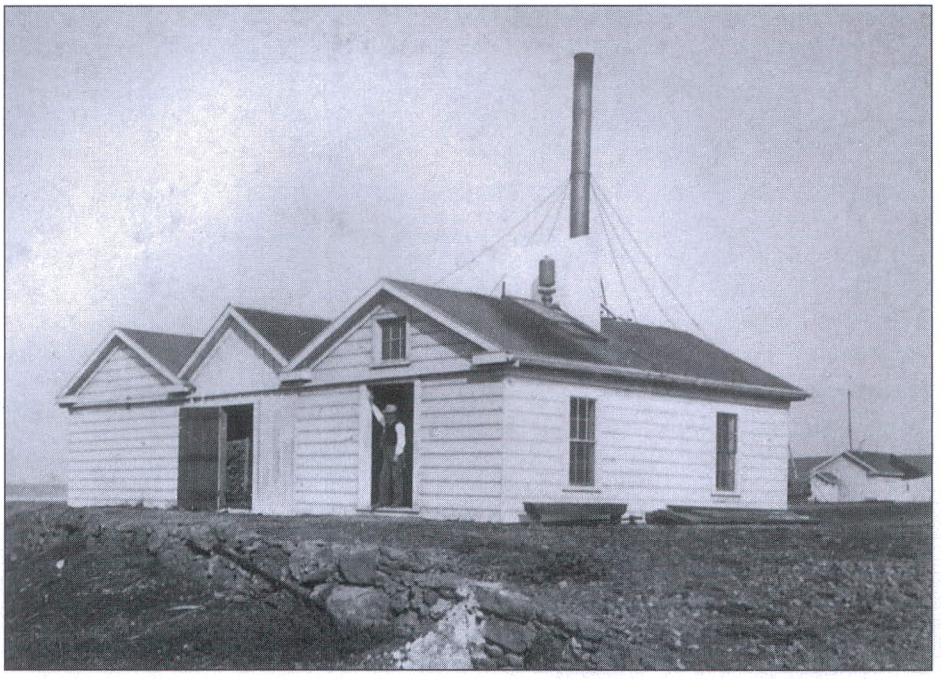
Pigeon Point Light Station was built to serve several purposes: as a warning of danger, as a guide for coastal vessels, as a landfall for ships arriving from across the ocean, and as a day mark. Being a major seacoast light, Pigeon Point was equipped with a first-order lens, the largest and most powerful lens utilized in lighthouses on the Pacific Coast of the United States. Of the over forty lighthouses eventually built in California, most of those on the outer coast utilized lenses of this size. In northern California these included Point Sur, Southeast Farallon Island, Point Reyes, Point Arena, Cape Mendocino, St. George Reef, and Point Conception.

The great Scottish lighthouse engineer, Alan Stevenson, once remarked, "Nothing can be more beautiful than an entire apparatus for a fixed light of the first order. . . I know of no work of art more beautiful or creditable to the boldness, ardor, intelligence, and zeal of the artist." Having devoted his life to lighthouses, Stevenson was, of course, biased, but anyone who has seen a first-order lens is sure to agree that it is not only a remarkable engineering feat, but also a work of art. Pigeon



Above — Pigeon Point tower. The small structure at the base has an "office" and a room for lard oil storage. When the station started to use kerosene a separate oil house was constructed. USLHS photo circa 1930.

Below — The original fog signal building in the 1870's. Note the steam whistle fog signal in front of the baffle by the smoke stack. Bancroft Library photo.



Point's lens comprises 1,008 separate lenses and prisms, each ground and polished by hand to exacting specifications and meticulously mounted in a brass framework. Six feet in diameter and eight-and-one-half feet high, the apparatus weighs about three tons. It focused the light from an oil lamp, and later an electric light bulb, mounted inside at the focal plane.

The Pigeon Point lens has twenty-four flash panels, each of which produced a beam of light. When the keeper wound up the weight and engaged the clockwork, the lens completed one rotation every four minutes. Since one twenty-fourth of four minutes is ten seconds, Pigeon Point's characteristic was one flash every ten seconds.

No one knows how much the government paid for Pigeon Point's lens. However, Arnold Johnson, in his 1890 book *The Modern Lighthouse Service*, lists first-order lenses as costing between $4,250 and $8,400. Today, they are considered priceless.

No other aspect of this lighthouse's past has attracted such wide attention as the mysterious early history of its lens. A brass plate attached to the lens base gives the name of the manufacturer as Henry-Lapaute. This firm was one of three Paris optical companies which produced lighthouse lenses. The other two were Sautter, Lemonnier & Cie, and Barbier & Fenestier. The United States bought almost all of its Fresnel lenses from France.

There is some mystery as to where the Pigeon Point lens came from. One of the earliest versions of the story appears in the *Illustrated History of San Mateo County, California*, published only six years after the lighthouse began operation:

> "The lens of the Light House has also a historic interest, having formerly been in use on the Atlantic Coast at Cape Hatteras, where it was captured by the Confederates during the War of the Rebellion and afterwards recaptured by Federal forces. The present management of the Government Works here is under the charge of a faithful and gallant ex-soldier of the Union Army, Mr. C. H. Howard."

An article published in the *San Mateo County Gazette* at the time the lighthouse was first lighted corroborates the story that the lens was used previously at Cape Hatteras. The stories of the lens being captured during the Civil War, however, are doubtful. The most definitive statement on the matter comes from Commissioner of Lighthouses George R. Putnam, in a letter dated May 2, 1924. Putnam was in charge of the nation's lighthouse system at that time and was also a historian. He wrote in response to an inquiry about the lens's history by district superintendent Harry Rhodes:

> "You are advised that the lens now at Pigeon Point appears to be the second lens placed in commission at Cape Hatteras Light Station, North Carolina, in 1863, following what is said to have been the destruction of the lantern and original lens placed at this station in 1854. There is also a notation on the records here that the original lens was carried by Confederate agents to Raleigh and was subsequently recovered, but it is difficult to state whether these statements are true or not for the files of the Bureau covering this period were badly burned a few years ago and are difficult of access.
>
> "However, the second lens, the one now in commission at Pigeon Point, was discontinued in 1870 when the new (present) tower at Cape Hatteras was established, and there is a record here that it was placed in storage at the General Lighthouse Depot on January 17, 1871, and on August 11, 1871 was shipped to Pigeon Point."



Keeper's four-plex dwelling shortly after completion. Photo by Eadweard Muybridge, courtesy of the Bancroft Library, U.C. Brekeley.

The light source, too, has fallen victim to historical romanticism. It has often been written that Pigeon Point Light Station originally used a whale oil lamp. Some of California's earlier lighthouses utilized sperm whale oil, but by the late 1860s these and other United States lighthouses had been converted to lard oil. The reason for the switch was simple economics. During the mid 1800s the price of sperm oil continued to rise as sperm whale populations declined and the industrial demand for the oil increased. Experiments by Professor Joseph Henry, member of the Lighthouse Board and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, revealed that lard oil would work just as well and at about half the price.

The claim that Pigeon Point used (or was to use) whale oil began even before the light was first lighted. In May of 1872 Capt. Patterson, the keeper, said to an interviewer that as soon as the nearby Portuguese whalers could catch and try out a whale, the lamp would be filled, installed, and set "exchanging winks and blinks with its neighbor of the Farallons on moonlight nights." This was the same keeper who claimed that the fog signal was produced by two large bulls hung up by their tails alternately every seven and forty-five seconds.

For the first sixteen years the lamps were fueled by lard oil. Around 1888, Pigeon Point's oil lamp was replaced by one which burned kerosene. New containers were also supplied to the station to store the more volatile and dangerous fuel. Kerosene was an even cheaper fuel and, by 1890, had entirely replaced lard oil in United States lighthouses. In the early 1900s a separate oil house was constructed away from the tower to prevent damage to the lighthouse in event of fire or an explosion. Prior to this, the oil was stored in the oil room at the base of the tower.

Both the lard oil and kerosene lamps were wick lamps. The kerosene lamp, called a Funk's Mineral Oil Lamp, had five wicks arranged concentrically. Each night the keepers had to trim the wicks as part of their duties.

During fiscal year 1911-12, the kerosene wick lamp was replaced by an incandescent oil vapor lamp (abbreviated I.O.V.). The device worked similarly to the Coleman lamps used today by campers. Kerosene was forced under pressure into a vapor chamber where it was converted to a gas. Then it passed through small holes upward to the mantle, where the gas was ignited to produce a brilliant white light. The I.O.V. lamp was a great improvement over the kerosene wick lamp, producing a brighter light with no increase in fuel consumption. In 1912 Pigeon Point was rated at 160,000 candlepower with a visibility of eighteen miles.

Conversion to electricity occurred around 1926. The one thousand watt light bulb boosted the station's output to 680,000 candlepower and relieved keepers of many of their chores. In fact, Pigeon Point was converted from a four-man station to a three-man station soon after electrification.

Even powerful lights like Pigeon Point's can be rendered useless in thick fog or rain. Its first fog signal was a steam whistle, similar to the whistles found on locomotives and ships. The fog signal building housed one, and later two, steam plants, each connected to a whistle mounted on the roof of the building. (The second was added as a back-up system.) Each steam plant consisted of a firebox, a boiler, a smokestack, and a timing device to regulate whistle blasts. Cordwood from nearby mills was purchased for fuel, and water for the boilers was piped from a well on the nine-acre plot north of the lighthouse.

Fog signals were assigned different characteristics so that mariners could distinguish one station from another. Pigeon Point's whistle blasts were four seconds in duration, separated alternately by seven and forty-five seconds of silence. In contrast, the signal at nearby Año Nuevo Island produced ten-second blasts at intervals of fifty-five seconds.

Contemporary accounts frequently compared the sound of the signal with that of cows. One visitor reported that it resembled an "asthmatical old bovine," and claimed that had it been located closer to the town of Pescadero, residents there would have been entitled to damages sufficient to bankrupt the government. Another said it sounded like a "stuck hog," or, at a distance, "a cow in distress." The first night that one of the local dairymen, William Pinckham, heard the signal, he indeed mistook it for a cow in distress and believed that a grizzly bear was preying upon his stock. He rounded up five or six armed men, and they crept out into the darkened pasture. Of course, no bear was found. Not until the following morning did they learn the embarrassing truth about the origin of the noise. Another story in a similar vein was told by the residents of the Steele Ranch



The Pigeon Point Light Station in 1954. The dwelling exists in this photo. The second (1902) fog signal building is at center, flanked on the left by two water tanks disguised as a building, a carpenter shop at right. U.S. Coast Guard photo 1954.

near Año Nuevo Island. When the whistle on the island sounded for the first time, nearby cows stampeded across the fields down to the beach. Mrs. Steele exclaimed that they must have thought there was a wonderful bull down there!

The signal, though it could usually be heard for several miles, was not without its problems. The sound resembled a ship's whistle, and thus there was the danger of confusing mariners. Another disadvantage was that the boiler took forty-five minutes to develop sufficient steam pressure. To minimize delays, wood was placed in the firebox and readied for lighting at a moment's notice. As at most stations on the West Coast, Pigeon Point also had water problems. The well water was found to contain minerals destructive to boiler tubes. In the early 1880s, a 20,000-square-foot rainshed was laid on the nine-acre lot, and two storage tanks for the captured water were erected beside the signal house. Despite this, the equipment needed regular repairs and replacement parts. In 1900 the entire signal house was replaced by the fog signal building which stands today.

The whistle operated an average of 900 hours per year and consumed about one cord of wood for every ten hours of use. On one occasion, the signal ran night and day for six weeks. Foggier stations such as Point Bonita, forty miles to the north, frequently blasted away for well over a thousand hours per year. During one year, a lightship anchored off the coast of San Francisco logged 2,221 hours of fog—over three months' worth.

In 1911 the whistle was replaced by a first-class compressed-air siren. The air compressor was powered by a gasoline engine, enabling operating pressure to be attained in just a few minutes. The siren had a different characteristic from the whistle: two-second blasts alternately separated by six seconds and twenty seconds of silence.

In 1935 the siren was superseded by a two-tone diaphone. It is the mournful bee-ohh of the diaphone that people most often associate with foggy coastlines. A Canadian invention, the diaphone was first introduced in the United States in 1915. By the 1930s it had come into common use in this country. Like the siren, it ran on compressed air. At Pigeon Point the siren's characteristic was adopted for the diaphone as well, and the siren was maintained for many years as a back-up signal. Compressed air for the diaphone was pumped into giant steel tanks and maintained at about forty pounds pressure. A slotted reciprocating piston produced the two-tone sound, which had a normal range of four to five miles. The diaphone remained in use at Pigeon Point until the mid 1960s. Three of the large air tanks can still be seen inside the signal house.

The diaphone was even more powerful than the siren, but it required large quantities of compressed air. It was replaced in the mid 1960s by the smaller and more efficient diaphragm, which produced a single note sound. It was mounted on the side of the lighthouse tower in front of the lower window.

Earlier, before the diaphragm replaced the diaphone, another important navigational aid was added to the station. In 1943 a tall antenna was installed which beamed forth a Morse code radio signal unique to Pigeon Point. A real technological breakthrough, the radiobeacon could be detected up to a hundred miles away. Mariners can determine their position at sea by triangulating the signals from several radiobeacons. In later years, the radiobeacon was synchronized with the diaphone for distance finding. Since both "sounded off" simultaneously, the mariner could calculate his approximate distance from the point by counting the number of seconds between picking up the radio signal in his receiver and hearing the diaphone.

In recent years, radar, radio direction finders, Loran, and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) have become standard equipment even on small vessels. These inexpensive and accurate electronic aids to navigation led to the discontinuation of the audible fog signal at Pigeon Point in 1976.



Pigeon Point station in 1970 showing the four ranch style dwellings which replaced the original four-plex. The fog signal is at the end of the driveway and paint shop/storage building to the left. The tall antenna was for the radiobeacon. The private structure at lower left has housed several enterprises, including an oyster farm. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

"In the lonely watches of the dreary, stormy night, with the fury of the wind about him, and with the roar of the breakers dashing against the rocks below him, . . . sits the keeper, true to his trust, faithful to his charge, doing well and honestly his duty, keeping his lamp trimmed and burning, sending forth the ray to guide and make glad the storm-encircled sailor."

History of San Mateo County, California - 1883

Over a dozen men served as principal keeper at Pigeon Point between 1871 and 1939. Dozens more served there through the years as assistant keepers, residing at the station with their families. From 1939 to 1981 Coast Guardsmen carried on the tradition of keeping the light.

Many of Pigeon Point's keepers had previous experience with the sea. Captain Patterson, the first keeper, came to the Pacific Coast in 1823 on board the ship ***Mentor***. James Marner, keeper from 1888 to 1896, also spent many years at sea and, prior to his appointment as a light keeper, had worked on board the lighthouse tender ***Manzanita***.

In 1872 the principal keeper earned $1,000 per year, paid quarterly. By the 1880s and '90s, however, the salary for that position had decreased to $800 per year. During this time, first assistants earned $600, second assistants $550, and third assistants $500 annually. "A very penny wise, pound foolish, policy of economy has been adopted by the government, by which the salaries of these men have been cut down to a mere pittance. . . ," said one writer in 1883. "When it is considered how these men have to live, far removed from society, subject to the dangers and fatigues incident to their vocation, and the great responsibility which rests upon their shoulders, it would seem that the government could well afford to be far more liberal in remunerating their services. The fate and destiny of valuable property and precious lives are in their hands." In spite of such criticisms, Congress did not appropriate funds for salary increases until well into the 1900s.

J. W. Patterson had officially served at the rank of keeper just two-and-one-half months before he was removed by the superintendent and replaced by Richard H. Fairchild. "The Government . . . can do about as it [has] a mind to with its servants," said the local newspaper, "but it seems hard that a gray-headed old man, who has spent his life going down [to the sea] in ships and is now unprovided for, should be removed from a small office to subserve no other ends than those of politics."



Richard Fairchild served as principal keeper from January 1873 to October 1875. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Pigeon Point originally had three keepers: a principal keeper plus a first and second assistant. In 1873 the position of third assistant was added. When the station was electrified in the 1920s, it was changed back to a three-man station, then again to a four-man station under the Coast Guard in the 1940s.

The Lighthouse Board provided keepers with detailed, written instructions on operation of the station and with a thick book of regulations. Nothing was left to chance. Every detail of the operation of the equipment was spelled out, from how to trim a wick, to recipes for whitewash. Nightly, daily, weekly, and monthly duties were meticulously described.

The principal keeper had the added chore of keeping records. A list of forms kept at Pigeon Point Light Station in 1896 reveals the amount of paper work: vouchers for keeper's salaries, payroll forms, receipts for extra supplies, keeper's receipts for property on taking charge, annual property returns, returns of expenditures for oil, wicks, and chimneys, monthly reports of condition of station, fog signal reports, absence reports, and shipwreck reports. In addition, the keeper had to maintain record books, including a list of allowances for supplies; daily expenditures of oil, wicks, and chimneys; fog-signal records; a general account book; and a daily journal of activities at the station, including the weather and any unusual events.

Visitors often stopped by the station and were given tours. Some keepers enjoyed giving tours but would occasionally exaggerate their stories and explanations. In the fall of 1883 a reporter for the *San Mateo County Gazette* visited the station: "Our escort was of a very talkative disposition and took great pride in dilating upon the wonders of the establishment. As we stood inside the immense lens which surrounds the lamp, he startled us by stating in impressive tones that, were he to draw the curtains from the glass, the heat would be so great that the glass would melt instantly, and that human flesh would follow suit; we begged him not to experiment just then, and he kindly refrained."



Janes Marner served eight years as principal keeper, resigning in 1896. Santa Cruz Public Library drawing.

Many of the keepers had chosen the Lighthouse Service as their career and, after beginning as a second or third assistant, were eventually promoted to keeper. Often promotions came with transfers. Samuel M. Farran, appointed assistant keeper in January of 1873, was promoted the following year to keeper at East Brother Light Station on San Francisco Bay. In 1896 John McKenna was promoted to keeper at Pigeon Point after having served as first assistant at Point Reyes and then Point Sur [he later drowned while keeper at Lime Point Fog Signal Station in San Francisco Bay].

For the most part, the keepers were hard working men who deserved the public's praise. In the government's register of keepers at Pigeon Point there is only one notation of removal due to "inefficiency," that in 1873. Some were genuine heroes such as John C. Ryan, who, in June of 1882, plunged into the surf near the lighthouse to rescue the little daughter of Manuel Silva. The girl was swept off the beach by a large wave and would surely have drowned had Ryan not swum to her rescue.

Though Pigeon Point was not isolated like the Farallons or St. George Reef, the keepers nevertheless lived in close quarters, and tempers sometimes flew. A letter to the inspector written in 1900 by Keeper McKenna accused First Assistant Keeper Louis Engilbrekt of using violent language at the station. The assistant vehemently denied the accusation, adding that he never spoke to the keeper except while on duty. Engilbrekt then accused the keeper of numerous improprieties, including drunkenness while on duty and speaking abusively to Mrs. Engilbrekt. "I have not been in Pescadero since April 2nd," wrote the assistant in August. "At that time I asked him if I could go to town and he told me to go to Hell. After that I never asked to leave the station except to go fishing three times," he said. "I have been treated like a dog . . ." Both were veterans of the service, and it appears the inspector was uncertain who to believe. Engilbrekt eventually resigned, and McKenna later transferred to Lime Point.

In the late 1800s Pigeon Point was not only the site of a lighthouse, but also the location of a small shipping center and whaling station. In fact, prior to the wreck of the ***Carrier Pigeon***, the point was marked on charts and maps as Punta de las Ballenas (Point of Whales). In the 1860s a boom and cable were rigged up to load lumber and crops onto ships. A 30-by-100-foot warehouse was also erected. About the same time the lighthouse was built, a wharf with a grain chute at the end was erected about 300 feet from the lighthouse reservation. The region exported potatoes, butter, cheese, whale oil, lumber, shingles, and grain—mostly to San Francisco. For a time there was even a post office and school, but these later closed. Portuguese shore whalers established a station at Pigeon Point in about 1862, and it continued operation until 1895. In 1871 the station supported seventeen whalers.

The lighthouse and fog signal nearly put an end to major shipwrecks at Pigeon Point, but not quite. On July 14, 1896, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's liner ***Colombia*** ran aground a short distance south of the lighthouse. The five-year-old steamer was making her first run from Panama to San Francisco in what would have been record time. Though thick fog cut visibility to barely 100 feet, Captain William Clark continued at full throttle, hoping for fame. Instead he achieved disgrace. The Captain heard a fog signal which he believed to be Pigeon Point, though it must have been from Año Nuevo Island. He then heard a second signal (actually Pigeon Point), but said it sounded as though several miles distant and from out at sea. Believing this was from an approaching ship, he turned his ship slightly eastward to avoid a collision, and it was then that she struck. The Captain reportedly had no idea where he was when he landed. Lighthouse authorities remained baffled as to how the captain could confuse two signals with such markedly different characteristics.



The Pacific Mail Steamship Company's vessel *Columbia* on the rocks just south of Pigeon Point in 1896. The 327-foot-long steamer eventually broke up. Photo courtesy of the San Mateo County Historical Museum.

The event mostly generated amusement, that is, for everyone except the owners and captain. None of the passengers were hurt, and all remained on board for quite some time, at first believing that the vessel would be pulled free of the rocks. Old time residents of the region were quick to recall the wrecks of the ***Carrier Pigeon*** and ***Sir John Franklin*** and the bounty cast up by the waves. Huge crowds flocked to Pigeon Point to view the doomed steamer. According to one observer, city folks had great fun "rescuing from the breakers the little yellow limes that swam shoreward to be salvaged . . ." From land, the ship gave the appearance of simply being anchored. Keeper James Marner was on watch when he heard the ship strike. "I thought it was the tender ***Madroño*** that had come up in the fog and dropped her anchor," he said. "I hollered to the boys, and they ran to put on their good clothes to receive the inspector, but we found our mistake. I could make out the ***Colombia***. She was right up almost on dry land, and my fog horn blowing twice a minute all night. This is one of the queerest accidents I ever knew of, and I've been thirty-five years at sea." The keeper remarked that she could not be saved, partly because there was ". . . over twenty-six feet of water in her forward compartment, a big rock sticking straight up in her bow and holding her there while the sea whips her tail and rolls her round like a piece of drift."

Hauling the supplies delivered by lighthouse tender was always a huge job. Frank E. Davis was interviewed by the author in the 1980s. Born in 1899 near the lighthouse, Davis's father had the contract for unloading and ferrying supplies from the ship for $2.00 per ton. The tender ***Sequoia*** would drop anchor a little way off shore and the ship's crew would first haul the supplies to the beach by dory. "It then took four of us men with four horses most of the day to cart the forty tons of coal, kerosene,

and other supplies from the beach to the lighthouse," recalled Davis.

During the 1906 earthquake the mighty brick tower survived virtually unscathed. Keeper Lind discovered but one small crack in the masonry about forty feet up—testimony to both sound construction and its location on solid bedrock. The quake also generated small cracks in the chimneys and plaster ceilings of the keepers' dwelling, but the damage was not serious. Frank Davis was not quite seven at the time, but still remembers seeing the huge clouds of smoke billowing up from the north as San Francisco burned: "Us kids were really scared." Another memorable event occurred in 1908, when Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet steamed by early one morning. The giant warships passed one by one and made a lasting impression on the boy.

The point continued to be the site of shipwrecks, though none were of the magnitude of earlier decades. In August, 1913, the steam schooner ***Point Arena*** wrecked after getting her propellor entangled in a mooring buoy line. The ship, unable to be properly maneuvered, was soon dashed against the rocks. All hands made it safely to shore, but the 233-ton vessel quickly became a total loss. It broke in half and, according to Davis, was later burned so that it would not be a hazard to navigation. Besides, he said, it just would not have looked good to have a wrecked ship in front of a lighthouse.

On April 18, 1911, the German power schooner ***Triton*** struck a drifting log, thirteen miles out. The ship, bound for Jaluit in the Marshall Islands, quickly sank. The two German officers and nine Polynesian crewmen rowed towards shore all night, guided by the lighthouse's beam. As they neared shore, Joe Davis guided them to the landing. That morning the light keeper, much to his amazement, found two Germans and a group of South Seas natives on his doorstep.

Mrs. Jessie M. Davis of Redwood City called the lighthouse home during the 1920s. Her father, Jesse E. Mygrants, served as an assistant keeper at Pigeon Point from 1924 until 1941. Her vivid recollections help paint a detailed picture of lighthouse life at that time and what it was like to be a light keeper.

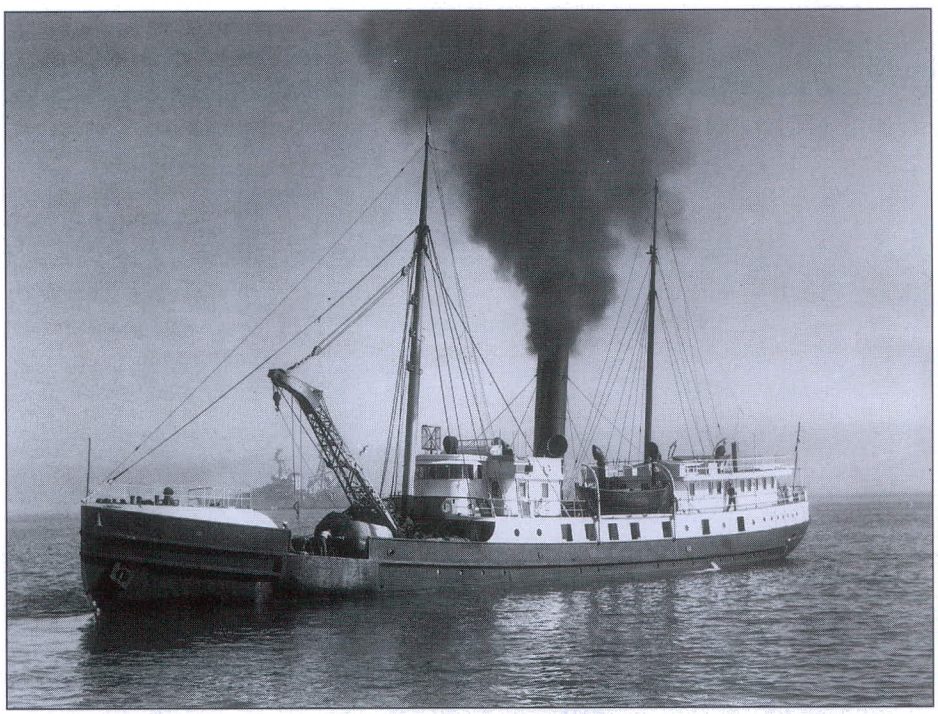
Prior to joining the Lighthouse Service, Jesse Mygrants operated a bakery in Indiana. The flour dust in the air began to irritate his throat, thus forcing him to seek another line of work. His brother, Lloyd, had joined the Lighthouse Service and was stationed at Piedras Blancas Light Station out on the West Coast. Jesse successfully applied for a light keeping job and was assigned to Point Arguello Light Station in southern California. Uncertain whether this new career would work out, he waited two years before sending for his wife, Minnie, and two daughters.

In September of 1923, while Mygrants was stationed at Point Arguello, seven Navy destroyers ran aground nearby in a dense fog. For his part in helping to rescue the survivors, Mygrants received commendations from the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for rendering assistance to the men. Mygrants transferred to Pigeon Point, a "school station," so his daughters Rosamond and Jessie could attend school. In October, 1924, the family moved to Pigeon Point. Jessie, then in the eighth grade, attended Gazos Creek School, located a couple of miles south of the lighthouse.

she remembers, "and there my father would help me with my algebra." It was a quiet, peaceful place to work, with only the sound of the clockwork ticking away as the giant lens rotated ever so slowly above their heads.

In addition to standing watch at night, the men did chores about the station each morning from nine o'clock until noon. There was always work to keep them busy, including maintaining and checking the lens and fog signal equipment, painting, or making minor repairs. Polishing the brasswork was an especially big chore. When the inspector came once a quarter, he expected everything to be very neat and tidy all about the station, inside and out.

By the 1920s keepers were paid monthly, and somewhat more than in earlier years. "My father earned $90.00 per month as second assistant," remembers Mrs. Davis, "and $100.00 per month after he was promoted." In addition, each year he received a month's vacation time.



The Lighthouse Service tender *Sequoia* worked buoys and serviced light stations along the entire California coast. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1930.

Mygrants served as a second assistant and later a first assistant at Pigeon Point. Watch hours and work hours were divided equally among the four men. The schedule was: watch four hours, off eight hours. The schedule rotated each week. When her father had an early watch, Jessie Mygrants sometimes did her homework under the lighthouse lens. "There was a small desk in the watch room,"

The station's giant Victorian-style dwelling was divided into four apartments. Jessie grew to know some of the other station residents quite well. Sometimes the children played cards together in the evenings on the Mygrants' kitchen table while their mother made fudge. On several occasions they went on beach picnics together. For most of the 1920s the principal keeper was John Nixon.

He was replaced by Gerard Jaehne, who lived in the upper west apartment with his wife, Etta, and several children.

One of the most frightening events in the lighthouse's history occurred in the spring of 1933. The keepers were using blow torches to remove old paint from the outside of the residence before repainting it. Mr. Mygrants noticed that one of the nails remained hot. He then put his ear to the side and could hear the crackling of flames inside the wall. Soon, smoke started pouring from the building and, fearing that the house might burn to the ground, the families began frantically unloading their possessions. While the families and nearby migrant workers attempted to save some of the families' belongings, the keepers battled the blaze as best they could while waiting for the fire truck to arrive from Redwood City. The fire truck took forty-five minutes to reach the lighthouse—record time for the narrow, winding road over the mountains. When the fire was finally extinguished, damage was not as severe as had been feared. Most of the damage was to the east side of the building. In fact, damage from the water and chemicals proved to be worse than that from the flames. For awhile Jessie and her parents had to eat their meals in the laundry house. Soon however, the Victorian was cleaned up enough so that they could move back. That summer a crew of eight to ten carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and painters arrived from the Lighthouse Service's district headquarters to make repairs. Mrs. Mygrants had the job of feeding the crew. She not only made them three meals a day but also baked bread, cakes, and pies.

Supplies were delivered monthly by lighthouse tender, as in earlier years. Each family was allotted four tons of coal per year for household heating and cooking. In addition, the families could buy flour, sugar and other food through the commissary. These were delivered by tender as well.

During Prohibition (1920 to 1933) San Mateo County's isolated coastline, vast sparsely-populated mountainous areas, and proximity to San Francisco made it a center for West Coast rumrunners, bootleggers, and moonshiners. Tens of millions of dollars in contraband whiskey was hauled ashore annually by rumrunners working in remote shoreline coves under cover of darkness. "Rum ships" from Canada would anchor outside the three-mile limit, sometimes taking weeks to unload the cases of booze into smaller boats from shore.

Pigeon Point was an ideal location for rumrunning: it was isolated, had a derrick for hoisting the liquor from the beach, and was close to the highway. "They were a rough bunch of characters," according to Jessie Davis, "and were very vigilant. They could recognize any car that wasn't local." The lighthouse residents were powerless to try to stop the illicit activity, even though the rumrunners used the government's derrick. When planning a landing, the rumrunners always chose a moonlight night. They posted lookouts and threw a chain across the telephone wires to short-circuit the lines and prevent someone from calling the government agents. For many, the risks were worth it. A single shipment could be worth $10,000.

One night while Assistant Keeper Mygrants was on watch, one of the rumrunners came to him and demanded a ride down the coast. The keeper protested, saying that he absolutely could not leave his watch. The rumrunner then pulled out a revolver, giving Mygrants no choice but to comply. He took the man eight miles down the coast in the family's Model T. Mygrants did not reveal the incident to his family until many years later for fear of worrying them.

On another occasion, Jessie, her sister, and two young men were returning from a dance they had attended in Santa Cruz when, just prior to reaching the lighthouse, the car was stopped by one of the rumrunners. Though he must have recognized the car, he demanded to know what they were up to. The young driver explained that he was simply returning the girls to the lighthouse where they lived. "Well, go straight into the house," said the man to the girls sharply. "We were both really scared," says Mrs. Davis. "We went right to bed and soon heard the squeaking of the winch as the liquor was hoisted up with the government's derrick."

The rumrunners usually eluded the Prohibition agents, probably due in part to tip-offs from the inside. On a few occasions, however, their landings were foiled. In May of 1925, a 75-foot launch called the ***Pilgrim*** came to grief on the rocks near the point with a cargo of 175 whiskey cases and 100 barrels of beer. The crew had disappeared. Later that year a Coast Guard cutter patrolling off the point captured a fishing schooner with 329 cases of whiskey stashed in its hold.

In the 1940s, around the time the radiobeacon was installed, Pigeon Point once again became a four-man station. Lighthouse keeping was still a twenty-four-a-day job. In the radio room, radiobeacon clocks, which were synchronized with master clocks in Washington, D.C., controlled the radio signals. Emergency gasoline-powered generators were kept ready in case of a power failure. With these generators, the light, radiobeacon, and diaphone could all be kept operational.



Keeper Jesse Mygrants with wife Minnie, daughter Rosamond (left) and a friend in 1927. Photo courtesy of Jessie Davis.

During the Coast Guard years the station continued to be a home for young families. Life was a mixture of the old and the new. Some of the Coast Guardsmen kept vegetable gardens near the dwelling and enjoyed fishing off the rocks during off hours. They caught perch and cabezon, and pried abalone off the rocks at low tide. "Some didn't like it here and asked for a transfer," said Seaman First Class Mel Braunagel while stationed there in 1958, "but it suits me fine. We're on duty six hours and off eighteen. We've got our own private fishing area, and good living quarters. If you like it here and can do the job, they'll let you stay as long as you want."

Although the living quarters satisfied Braunagel, Coast Guard officials decided that more modern accommodations were in order. In 1960 the large four-plex, though still sound, was demolished and replaced by four ranch-style houses.

In the mid 1960s the Coast Guard launched its Lighthouse Automation Program (LAMP). Under LAMP, the Coast Guard hoped to automate the roughly 400 lighthouses under its jurisdiction by the mid 1980s. In California, smaller stations were automated first, but the abandoned lighthouses proved to be attractive to squatters and vandals. At many locations this problem was resolved by demolishing the old buildings and installing modern vandal-proof towers of steel and concrete. Following outcries from historic preservation groups, the Coast Guard began to search for alternative uses for the stations, such as leasing the buildings to other government agencies or local historical societies.

In 1972, a 24-inch rotating aero-beacon was attached to the railing outside the lantern room, replacing the Fresnel lens. In 1974, monitoring devices at the Coast Guard Group on Yerba Buena Island were linked to Pigeon Point's light, fog signal, and radiobeacon, thus completing automation. One Coast Guard family remained as caretakers to ward off vandals.

In the meantime, public interest in the history and preservation of the lighthouse grew. In ceremonies held at the lighthouse on September 18, 1976, the San Francisco Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers declared the lighthouse a California Historic Civil Engineering Landmark—at that time one of only sixteen such structures in the state to be so honored. Public access to the station, however, was limited to a few special occasions. When the Coast Guard offered tours of the station during three weekends in March, 1978, over 6,500 people showed up. Overwhelmed by the experience, the Coast Guard was understandably hesitant about doing that again.

On October 3, 1980, ceremonies were again held at the lighthouse as State Park and Coast Guard officials joined to unveil a large brass plaque declaring the lighthouse a State Historic Landmark. The lighthouse was also placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

By this time, an alternative use had at last been found for those station buildings no longer needed by the Coast Guard. In 1980 the Coast Guard agreed to lease the land containing the dwellings and fog signal building to the State Department of Parks and Recreation. The state, in turn, agreed to sublease it to the American Youth Hostels, Inc. This private, non-profit organization operates a nation-wide chain of hostels patterned after European youth hostels. In late 1980 and early 1981, the four Coast Guard dwellings were converted to low-cost, dormitory-style accommodations for overnight guests. In addition, the fog signal building was made into a meeting room both for hostel guests and other groups. The lighthouse has proven to be an ideal location for a hostel, attracting a diversity of users including many foreign visitors.

In 1984 the Año Nuevo Interpretive Association, with the cooperation of the Pigeon Point Hostel and the U.S. Coast Guard, established a program of regular public tours at the lighthouse. Volunteers not only conduct the tours, but also help with upkeep of the facility, including cleaning the lens and painting. Funds from tour fees are used to help purchase materials for lighthouse maintenance and restoration. Today, the program is run by California State Parks.

Through the years the Coast Guard's budget for lighthouse upkeep has been gradually cut. In the meantime, wind, rain, and salt air have continued to take their toll on the masonry and ironwork. Only through continued public interest and support can this and other lighthouses be appropriately preserved. Pigeon Point Light Station now serves more purposes than ever before, making continued preservation a particularly worthy goal. It is not only an aid to navigation, but also a link in a chain of coastal hostels and a landmark that preserves a small yet significant slice of maritime history.

This article was condensed from an excellent book titled the ***History of the Pigeon Point Lighthouse*** by Frank Perry. It includes additional, general information on lighthouses, Fresnel lenses and fog signals, more photographs, plus the author's endnotes and suggestions for further reading. Available through the Keeper's Locker for $7.95 plus $4.00 shipping, it is an excellent addition to one's lighthouse library.



The Coast Guard demolished the original dwelling in 1960 and replaced it with four ranch-style houses. Photo courtesy of Ron Duarte.

Pigeon Point L.S.,
Aug. 9, 1900.

Comdr. U. Sebree, U. S. N.,
Inspt. 12th L. H. Dist.,
San Francisco.

Dear Sir:

I have rec'd your communication by registered mail enclosing two letters written by Jno. McKenna, Keeper P. P. Light Station accusing me of using violent language on the station. I have never abused him to any of the other assistants nor talked to him except when on duty. The third assistant wants me off from the station so that he can be promoted. There are three against me, and I have full proof of all things. McKenna says there are no rules or regulations for the principal keeper — that he can go and come as he pleases, and stay as long as he likes without notifying anybody if he doesn't wish to, as he is boss.

Nov. 29, '99, he (McKenna) commenced drinking. His watch was from 3 to 7.30 A.M. He could not stand his watch as he had come home drunk during the night.

Mr. Pereira cleaned up the tower and I turned out early in the morning finding whisky bottles in the yard, half filled with whisky.

He left the tower the same night (Nov. 29th, at 8 o'clock) intoxicated.

Jan 1, 1900, McKenna came home at 8.30 P.M. I was asleep and he woke me. He had four bottles of whisky in a box. Then he went up in the tower at 9 o'clock drunk. I relieved him at 11 P.M. He went down to the house and insulted my wife.

Jan. 21st, at 9 P.M., he was carrying a can of coal oil, and being drunk, dropped the can on the steps, spilling the oil and battering the can. I rung the bell from the house — could not get any answer — I ran up in a hurry — he was fast asleep and I could hardly wake him. Newspapers and books were all over the tower.

McKenna has also given away various things such as coal oil, stove-pipe, sewer pipe, shingles, about 60 ft. good water pipe, 1 1/2 inch, sleeves and elbows to connect pipes.

I have not been in Pescadero since Apr. 2nd. At that time I asked him if I could go to town and he told me to go to Hell. After that I never asked to leave the station except to go fishing three times. I will wait until you come to the station and will tell you the rest. I would have reported the matter long ago but he requested me not to make him any trouble as it would be all right and we would be chums. I have been treated like a dog so that I would be heartily disgusted. I have faithfully done my duty since I have been in the service.

I was on the Farallones for 3 yrs. & 4 Mo. and I never had any trouble there as I have always attended to my duties. Also on Alcatraz for 13 months. I was only here a few days before I had trouble with the Keeper.

Some one broke a hammer shaft and told me that I did it. McKenna said that he would tell the Inspector. He said I was a liar and he would not believe me.

On the 16th of July a box of nails, paint brushes and one new whitewash-brush disappeared from the station.

Ranchmen are coming to the station all the time to have tools sharpened, and tools are loaned all over the country.

July 29th at 8.30 P.M. I was called to admit a party to the tower. I informed them that such a thing was against the rules. But the substitute took the party up, anyway.

Very respectfully yours,
LOUIS ENGILBREKT
First Assistant Keeper Pigeon Point Light-house.

Addendum

1st Assistant Engilbrekt left the service on October 4, 1900. Keeper John McKenna transferred to the Lime Point Fog Signal Station in San Francisco Bay on August 1, 1901. On December 22, 1902 the following entry was made in the station log, "The keeper, John McKenna's body, was found on the rocks near the station about 11 a.m. by the son of Ass't Keeper, he apparently having fallen over the bank sometime during the night while returning to the station. This entry made by the Inspector, J.B. Milton, U.S. Navy, Inspector."

For more information on Pigeon Point Light Station, visit their official website at <http://www.pigeonpointlighthouse.org> or call (650)879-2120. If you wish to stay in the hostel call (650)879-0633.