PATRONAGE, POLITICS AND PREFERENCES

Pt. Fermin Lighthouse Keeper Mary Smith's Truncated Career

By Henrietta E. Mosley and Kristen Heather

The access road to the Point Fermin Lighthouse in San Pedro, California runs through a heavily utilized urban park maintained by the City of Los Angeles since the 1920s as a green and breezy oasis for inhabitants of the crowded Los Angeles Harbor region. Any weekend visitor who sees the number of joggers, babies in strollers, Frisbee throwers, picnicers and other recreational users the park accommodates on a weekend, under a canopy of ancient-looking Moreton Bay Fig trees, will have a hard time imagining that the Point was once a remote and isolated desert wilderness. That is exactly what it was, however, when the first lighthouse keepers, sisters Mary L. and Ella T. Smith, arrived in October 1874. Local legend has it that they departed in 1882 because they found the place "too lonely."

Documents recovered from the National Archives by Kristen Heather, Curator/Director of the Point Fermin Lighthouse Historic Site for the City of Los Angeles, tell a different tale. These documents suggest that over a period of less than three months in 1882 Mary Smith was hounded from her post as principal keeper by an ambitious would-be successor, and that the agency to which she had given over twelve years faithful service failed to back her up in the manner she had a right to expect. While it is unrealistic to assess the matter with the standards of a later time, it does throw light on the pressures and tensions that existed within the U.S. Lighthouse Service in the post-Civil War era.

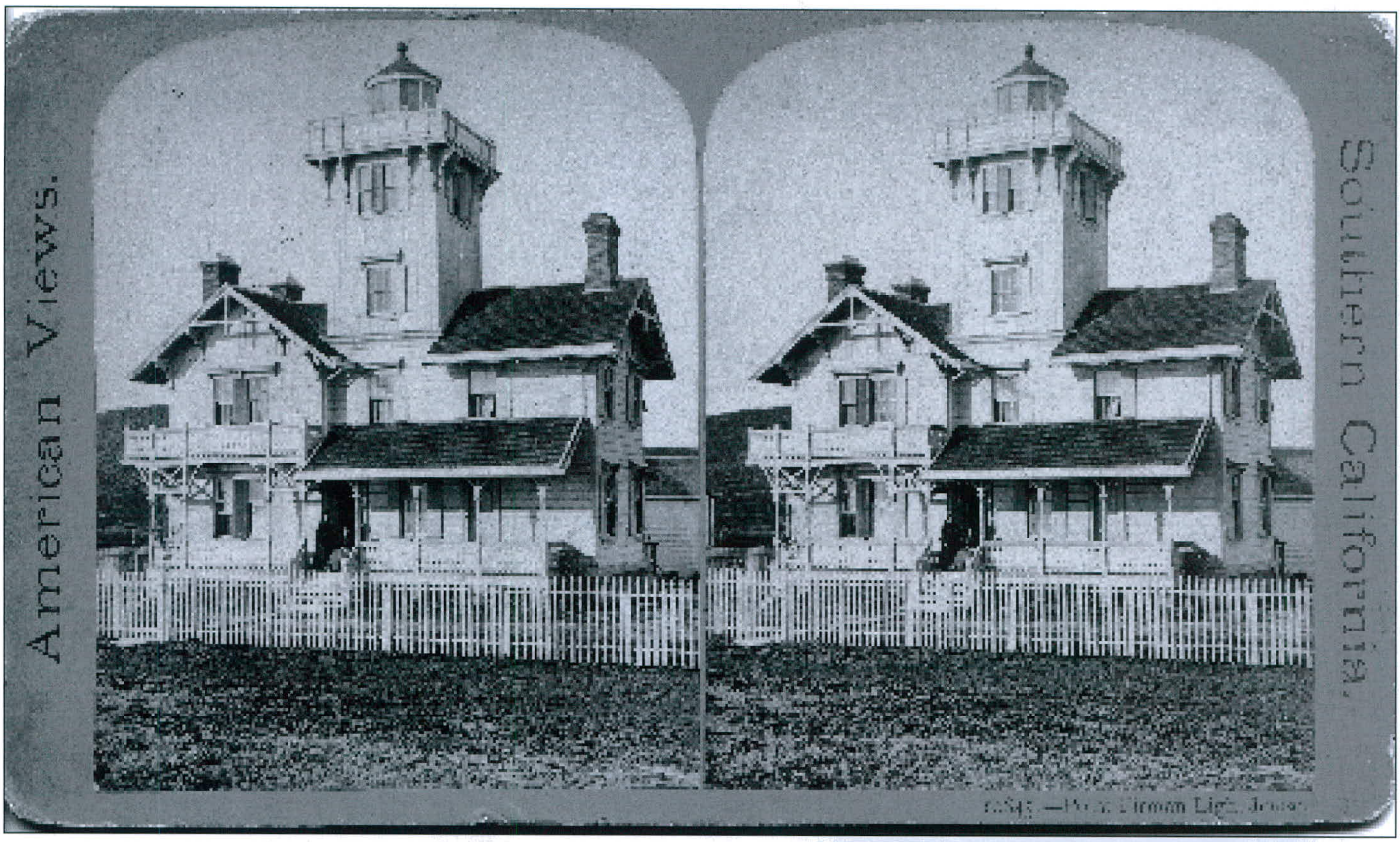
The lighthouse must have smelled of varnish and wood chips when the Smith sisters first walked in the door. From the empty lantern room, awaiting its first lens, Mary and Ella probably took a few minutes to admire the view of Catalina Island and the sun-speckled Pacific. They would catch their first sight of south-bound vessels as they rounded the tip of Point Vicente on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. To the east, the harbor entrance was much closer than now, since the breakwater that would enable shallow San Pedro Bay to be dredged and developed over time into the sprawling Port of Los Angeles would not be built for another twenty-five years.

It must have been disturbing for the sisters to look out at the rough waters above the shallow reef that runs seaward from Point Fermin and reflect on their responsibilities. Nine years earlier, in July 1865, their older brother Victor had perished in the wreck of the steamer *Brother Jonathan* when it struck an outcropping of St. George Reef near Crescent City, California.

Victor Smith had been the mainstay of his family and a controversial figure outside of it. Formerly a newspaper editor in Cincinnati, he was appointed in 1861 by the Lincoln administration to be Collector of Customs for the Puget Sound District in Washington Territory and a special federal agent to strengthen the Territory's defenses. His detractors claimed that in that position he promoted tiny, primitive Port Angeles as a potential naval base while investing in the land company that brought in settlers. When he forcibly removed the customs books from Port Townsend to the customs house he had built in the new town, he enraged the residents of Port Townsend by depriving them of the trade that flowed through the port of entry. With responsibility as Customs Collector for the area's lighthouses, he



Stereograph taken in the 1870s by California photographer Carlton Watkins. The people in the buggy are unidentified. Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.







Top: 1870s stereograph of Point Fermin Lighthouse with Mary and Ella Smith on the front porch. Photo courtesy of Dr. James Brust.
Above: Blow-up of Mary and Ella Smith from stereograph.
Left: Lens from the Point Fermin lighthouse.

dismissed the keeper of the Cape Flattery Lighthouse and gave the post to his father, George Knight Smith in 1862, then moved him on to the Ediz Hook Lighthouse at Port Angeles when it was completed in 1864.

Several other members of Victor Smith's family settled in Port Angeles. A brother, Henry Smith, opened a trading post in partnership with Samuel Stork, husband of their oldest sister Abbie. Three more sisters, Mary, Ella and Cynthia Smith, assisted George K. Smith with his light keeping duties. When he retired in 1870, Mary, at age 30, took over as keeper of the Ediz Hook Lighthouse with Ella, about 20, as her assistant.

Port Townsend's citizens continued to pursue their grievances until, in 1863, Victor was dismissed as collector of customs and reassigned to oversee Pacific Coast customs operations—a less hands-on position. With the ending of the war, Port Townsend got its customs house back by an act of Congress that passed just a few days before Victor went down with the *Brother Jonathan*.

Life in Port Angeles was never easy for members of the Smith family. Victor's wife, Caroline Smith, barely managed to save her four children from a flash flood that demolished their home in 1863. Her second house was destroyed by fire a few months after Victor's death in 1865. She stayed on in a small house near the lighthouse until 1869, when she left with the children to be with her family in Adel, Iowa.

By 1874 Mary and Ella may have been delighted to leave their memories of Port Angeles behind and trade the rainy weather of the Pacific Northwest for Southern California's fabled sunshine. Looking over the sage scrub and cactus landscape behind the lighthouse, however, they may have begun to realize that sunshine had its disadvantages and wonder how they would fill the 10,000 gallon brick cistern from captured rainwater alone. In a pinch water could be obtained from the well on the Sepulveda family's rancho a few miles inland, but as experienced lighthouse keepers they knew such purchases should be kept to a minimum. The Lighthouse Service inspector would be checking to see how well they could make do with the resources at hand.

In the first week of November a Fourth Order Fresnel lens was installed in the tower, to be lit by a Funck's hydraulic-float lamp utilizing a wick floating in a mechanically regulated quantity of lard oil within the lantern's float chamber. It was an intricate apparatus that required a great deal of attention while it was burning and meticulous cleaning afterward to prevent soot build-up. The only criticism of Mary's maintenance of the light and lighthouse within an otherwise unbroken sequence of glowing reports was an inspection report in November 1878 that noted, "House and grounds in excellent order, lantern and lens clean, lamp dirty. Called Keeper's attention to soot in [damper?] and directed her to have it cleaned every morning when the lamp is prepared or got ready for lighting." The Funck float was replaced by a Hains mineral oil lamp in 1880.

The signature of Point Fermin's first light was an alternating red and white flash. Perhaps white was to indicate the approach to the harbor while red was to warn of the reef. The red and white pattern would continue until it was replaced with a steady white



Postcard of Point Fermin lighthouse and cliffs, circa 1900. Point Fermin Lighthouse Collection.

light in 1889.

Throughout the long night shifts whichever sister was on duty in the watch room would hear above her the rumble of the chariot wheels turning in their track as the heavy lens was revolved by its weight-activated clockwork mechanism. Every few hours she would climb the stairs to the lantern room to turn the crank that retrieved the weight and restarted the mechanism.

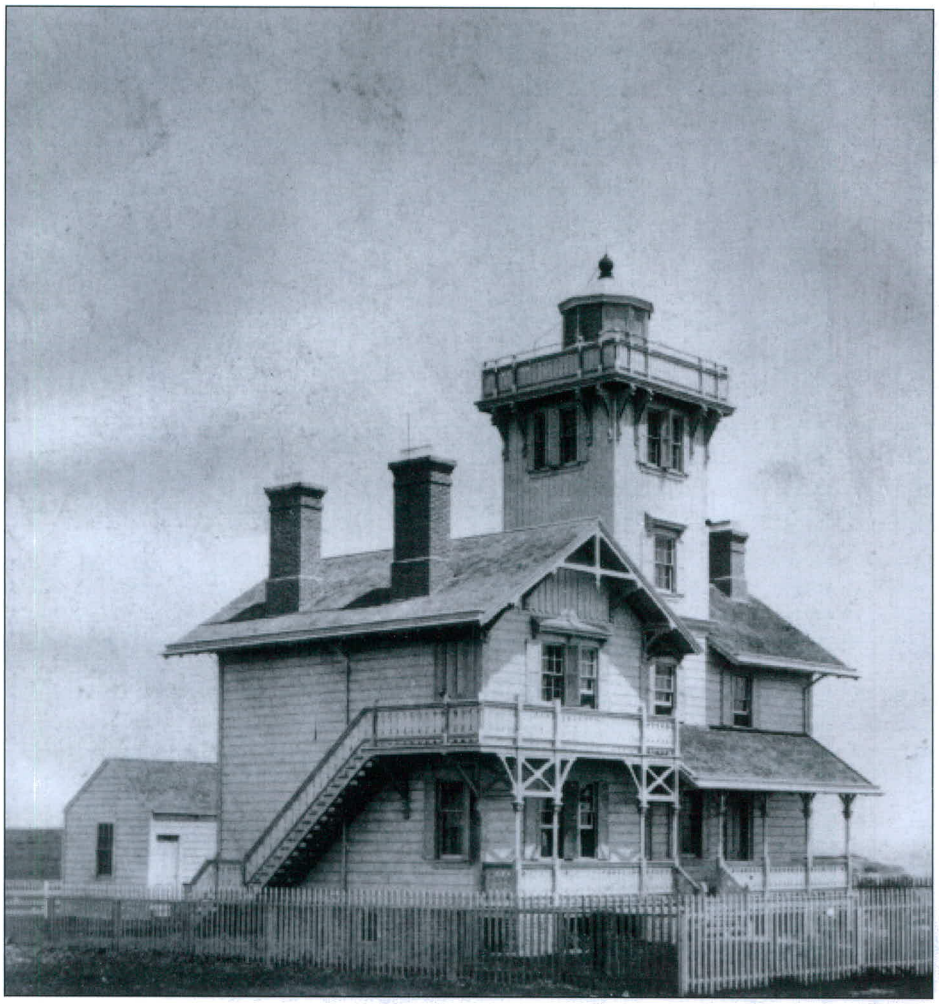
Point Fermin's revolving apparatus was quirky. Mary's Keeper's Log shows numerous attempts by the lampist to regulate the device, but it never worked well. In 1884, after the Smiths had departed, the entire pedestal and clockwork assembly was changed out for an improved model that could run ten hours without rewinding.

We can't know how many ships were warned away from the reef by the presence of the light, but Mary's Smith's log books record only two wrecks near the lighthouse during her time at Point Fermin. The Brig "*Kalori*" (or *Kalorama*) went aground on San Pedro Beach two miles east of the light on February 8, 1876, and the Bark *Amy* was dashed onto the rocks near the lighthouse on January 12, 1882.

Every few months, when the lighthouse tender visited, the Smith sisters' pantry would be replenished with basic provisions—flour, beans, rice, sugar, potatoes, onions, coffee and other imperishables. Lighthouse keepers were expected to supplement their diet with fish from the surrounding waters and whatever vegetables they could grow in the garden. They might also keep chickens and a cow or goat.

No doubt the Smith sisters tried to be as self-sustaining as possible to the extent allowed by their limited water supply. Going grocery shopping meant a long trip over the mud flats to Wilmington. At least they could get there with their own horse and buggy, weather permitting—the road was impassable after a rain—whereas a journey to Los Angeles would require a mule team pulling a wagon. They kept a hired man at their own expense to help with the outside work and care for the horse.

In 1876 the Smith sisters' domestic routine was broken by a visit from their 18-year-old nephew Norman Smith, one of Victor's sons. Norman had been acutely affected by the loss of his father when he was seven. In a memoir he wrote late in life,



Early stereograph of Point Fermin shortly after construction was completed in 1874. Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.

he stated that when he left for Iowa with his family in 1869 his heart remained on the Pacific Coast. Upon receiving his Aunt Mary's invitation to come out for a visit, he jumped at the opportunity.

When she extended her invitation, Mary was planning a journey to the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 which would include a U.S. Lighthouse Board display of models, equipment and photographs. Perhaps Mary had an official role to play as the principal keeper at one of the nation's newest western lighthouses. Her letter to Norman suggested she would collect him during her trip to the Exhibition, but instead she sent him train fare when she got back. He took the train to San Francisco, where he boarded the coastal steamer *Senator* for the voyage south to San Pedro.

Although Norman Smith's description of his visit to his aunts in 1876 may be embellished by the passage of time, it still provides a rare first-hand glimpse of their life at Point Fermin. We learn that passengers were lightered from the coastal steamer to the landing at San Pedro, and that the Smith sisters exchanged signals with the skipper, Captain Johnson, who would sometimes leave a block of ice on the shore for them as a special treat. On one occasion during Norman's visit, Ella had a frightening encounter with a mountain lion while sitting in the buggy at the edge of a bluff waiting for him to retrieve the ice from the beach below. Norman reappeared just in time to smash the thirty-five pound block of ice onto the cat's back and send it screaming into the dusk.

Norman describes a long, hot, dusty trek in a farm wagon belonging to an acquaintance of the Smiths who lived at Compton to purchase fresh fruit from a Los Angeles orchard. Norman also tells of a chance encounter with the beautiful and spirited Señorita Rudecinda Sepulveda, daughter of Jose Diego Sepulveda, whose two-story adobe ranch house was located near the

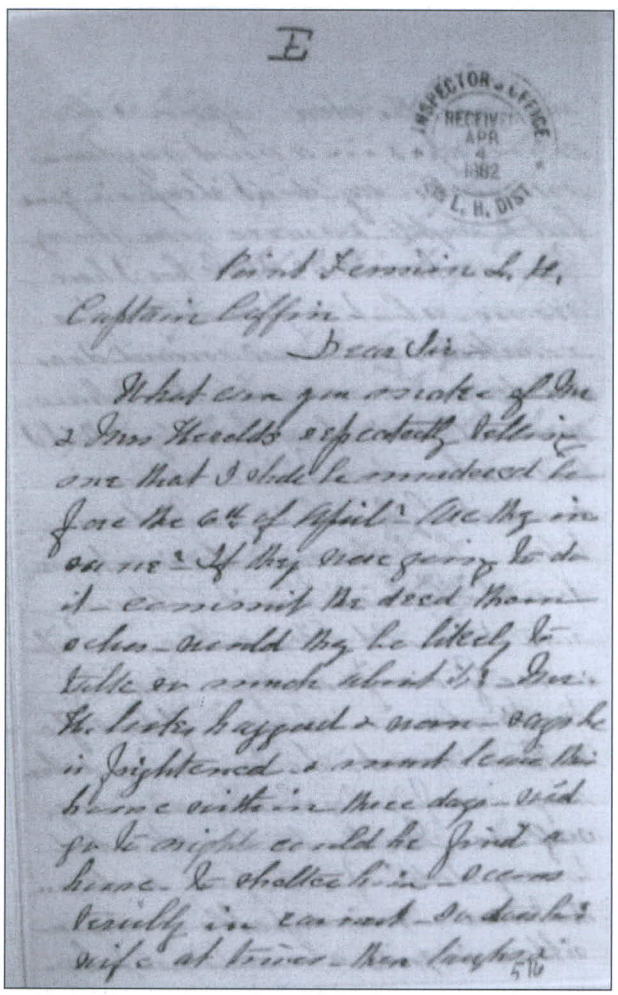
dusty trail from Los Angeles. Rudecinda, who would later be known in San Pedro for her good works as much as for her beauty, teased Norman by pretending not to speak English while showing off the finery her father had acquired for her from the merchant ships in the harbor. She finally revealed that she spoke fluent English and was well acquainted with his aunts at the lighthouse.

Unfortunately, Norman's visit to Point Fermin ended badly. There seems to have been a history of animosity, or jealousy, between his mother and his Aunt Mary. Old resentments surfaced, hurtful words were exchanged, and Norman departed.

In January 1882 Ella Smith resigned her post as assistant keeper and returned to Washington Territory, where sister Abbie Stork had died of stomach ulcers a year earlier at age 45. Later that year Ella would become Samuel Stork's second wife. Her departure from Point Fermin was the prelude to a nightmare for her sister Mary.

To replace Ella the U.S. Lighthouse Board appointed James Herald, who arrived with his Canadian-born wife Matilda and two daughters. Herald was a Civil War veteran whose right leg had been amputated after he was wounded while fighting for the Union at the second Battle of Bull Run (or Second Manassas). Veterans' preference legislation, first passed in 1865, gave hiring preference for federal agency positions to disabled Union Army veterans who were capable of performing their duties. Herald was not only willing to take on the assistant keeper position, which paid $600 a year, but eager to take over Mary's post as principal keeper at $800.

The Heralds wasted no time in pursuing their objective. While James Herald gathered ammunition for an assault on Mary's record as a conscientious light keeper, his wife sought to intimidate her with mysterious warnings and veiled threats. On March 30, 1882, three months after the Heralds' arrival, Mary began a letter to the 12th District Inspector, Cmdr. George W. Coffin, with a question: "Dear Sir—What can you make of Mr. & Mrs. Herald's repeatedly telling me that I should be murdered before the 6th of April, are they insane?" Continuing in the same informal tone, she observed, "Mr. H. looks haggard & worn—says he is frightened & must leave this house within three days—He'd go tonight could he find a house to shelter him—seems terribly in earnest, so does his wife at times—then laughs & ridicules the idea—Again will come up & in a most mysterious manner say, "don't sleep in your bed tonight. . . ."



Mary Smith's letter to Captain Coffin on March 30, 1882. "What can you make of Mr. and Mrs. Herald's repeatedly telling me that I should be murdered before the 6th of April, are they insane?" National Archives Records Administration.

The menace was supposedly from Nathanial Parsons, Mary's current hired hand. But Parsons was a trusted friend who was described by another old resident of the area as "a truthful honest inoffensive old man." Parsons himself gave a statement that said in part:

> "They have circulated false reports about us both. On one occasion Mrs. H raised and pursued me with an ax and Mr. H put his head out of a window and said he would put a ball through me and started back as if after his gun when I made my escape. Mr. H then drove his wife into the house with great anger, and for an hour their disputing and quarreling was terrific. Mr. Herald has frequently told me that he would get Miss Smith out of this place."

Mary told the Inspector of other warnings, or threats, from the Heralds. "I had accounted for her strange conduct," she wrote, "by her being a fortune teller, but she says she is not nor does she believe in it." She asked for ten days' leave of absence, recommending a substitute, and concluded, "I am sorry for it all but cannot see how I am responsible."

When she wrote to Cmdr. Coffin about the Heralds' strange behavior, Mary was aware that five days earlier James Herald had appeared before a justice of the peace in Wilmington to sign a statement containing accusations concerning her performance of her duties. She had seen a copy of the charges and had addressed them briefly in a letter to the inspector the day before, but had not yet prepared a sworn statement.

Herald's most serious allegations con-



Commander George W. Coffin. Photo courtesy *Lighthouse Digest Magazine*.

cerned sale or misappropriation of government property. He claimed that in January Mary had sold a ton of coal from the lighthouse allotment to a Wilmington merchant for twenty dollars. He also claimed she had sold the government horse to buy another which had since been lost—or perhaps also sold--and had directed Parsons, the hired hand, to brand a horse she owned and stabled at the lighthouse with the letters "L" and "H" with the intention of passing it off as the government horse.

Herald's other "charges" amounted to personal grievances at best. He complained that Mary had been unwilling to listen when he accused Parsons of cutting holes in the pipe leading to the cistern. He also claimed that Mary had denied him the use of the horse and buggy to go to Wilmington on the day he gave his sworn statement and had spit in his wife's face when she appeared with a borrowed team.

From the time Cmdr. Coffin learned of Herald's intent to file charges, which may have been as early as the inspection on March 25, he must have realized the matter would go before the U.S. Lighthouse Board. Mary, however, put off preparing a formal response to her assistant's challenge while she expressed her alarm, disbelief, and righteous indignation in one lengthy anecdotal letter after another, questioning the sanity of her attackers and seeking Cmdr. Coffin's protection. The first and longest, received by Cmdr. Coffin on March 29, began, "I invite the most thorough investigation of these charges all of which, with the exception of the coal transaction I can prove to be false, after which may I suggest that you remind Mr. Herald of the penalty the law may inflict for swearing to a lie. . . . I have been urged to prosecute them for slander, abusive threats, but prefer leaving it in your stronger hands. Furthermore, allow me to suggest that after these charges are proved false, allow the matter to rest as they are dangerous people."

She went on to express her dismay about the harm that might be done by the Heralds' wild and unfounded accusations against her and Nathaniel Parsons, her alleged accomplice with respect to the horse. Their slanders would be grist for the gossip mill in Wilmington; moreover, the Heralds had told her they were preparing letters of inquiry to send to other cities where she and Parsons had lived, spreading the tarnish to their reputations even farther. She also advised him that Mrs. Herald had said her husband's contacts in the Civil War veterans organizations back in Detroit were prepared to go over Cmdr. Coffin's head to save his position.

If Herald could be "peacefully transferred" to another station, she suggested, "I should be glad to remain here, I will stay a while then resign. Couldn't I be transferred to a new light near Seattle W.T. where I would be near my sister? The present keeper might like to come here."

Mary must have thought if she painted a vivid enough picture of "these strange people," Cmdr. Coffin would reject their allegations as ravings of sick minds and find a quiet, informal solution to her problem. Instead, her letters would become attachments to Cmdr. Coffin's report to the Chairman of the Lighthouse Board in Washington, D.C., where their panicky tone could not have helped her case.

In the formal response Mary finally provided, she admitted to having transacted with a local coal dealer to obtain soft coal in exchange for two tons of the government-issue hard coal that would not burn in the lighthouse stove. She said that in a similar situation another inspector, Cmdr. Snell, had instructed her to exchange coal for wood. When the ton of soft coal delivered to the lighthouse turned out to be of poor quality, she had again resorted to wood for fuel, using a supply she had acquired at a bargain when a local resident left town, and she had taken a credit against purchases of other provisions as a substitute for delivery of the remaining load of soft coal due her.

With respect to the horse, Mary said that the government horse had been "unsuited for the work" and that yet another inspector, Cmdr. Casey, had given her permission to sell it, "which I did, getting twenty-five or thirty dollars for the former and giving seventy-five for the one I bought which was used here 'til sometime in Dec. last. . . Then, it being lame, & I afraid to drive it, and as I had decided not to keep a man any longer, I bought a horse that I could drive, giving eighty dollars for it, not intending it for Gov. use." Since it was expensive to keep two horses at the lighthouse, she put the government horse out to pasture until she found out whether the new assistant keeper would want the care and use of it, which, as it turned out, he did not.

Mary denied Herald's other accusations as false, and his claim that she spit in his wife's face as "utterly false."

Mary's local acquaintances rallied to her support. Francis M. Buster, a Wilmington resident, said five or six stockmen had examined Mary's horse and concluded that no brands or marks could have been put on it within the past twelve months. He followed up a conversation with Cmdr. Coffin at the lighthouse with three letters in which he vouched for Mary's character and supported her account of the Heralds' bizarre behavior. After the hired man was driven off by the Heralds' hostility, Mr. Buster elected to stay at the lighthouse to see that she came to no harm. On March 27 he wrote to Cmdr. Coffin,

> "I wish also to say that myself and wife with many other friends of Miss Smith think it unsafe for her to stay alone without protection. So I am still here with her, while calling to mind the fact that you sayed [sic] while in conversation with you when riding from the L.H. to your place of landing that it was necessary that a man should be kept there."

He also indicated interest in assuming the assistant keeper position.

Cmdr. Coffin seems to have concluded that the situation at Point Fermin must be corrected promptly in a manner consistent with the U.S. Lighthouse Board's objectives and its customary procedures. One predominant objective was to manage the lighthouses in the most economical way possible, while another was to enhance the professionalism of their operations. He must also answer to a Board made up of men who shared his military background. Considerations of gender fairness would have no part in his analysis, and whatever sympathy he may have felt for Mary's distress was irrelevant.

In the letter he wrote to the Board on April 6, 1882, Cmdr. Coffin found Mary Smith culpable of selling government property—the coal—without authority, and of appropriating government property to her own use in that she sent the government horse to pasture while using government-supplied feed for her own horse. But he also said he could not recommend retaining James Herald as Assistant Keeper, "as he is not physically competent to perform



Above and facing page: Point Fermin Lighthouse after the 2002 restoration. Photo courtesy City of Los Angeles, Department of Recreation and Parks.

the outdoor duties of the station. He and his wife each have bad tempers and he being a cripple has no control over her. I am inclined to think her the first cause of ill feeling between the keepers and the final cause of this difficulty."

Cmdr. Coffin then suggested that Mary Smith "be wholly removed from the position of keeper or reduced to the grade of assistant as I feel confident that it will be impossible to obtain a male assistant willing to remain under her." He concluded that a man should be appointed as principal keeper, and suggested that the cost of the station would be reduced by appointing a man and wife as keepers with salaries set, as elsewhere, at $800 and $150 a year respectively. (Mary had received $800 and both Ella Smith and James Herald $600.)

Mary Smith and James Herald were removed from their positions effective April 17, 1882. There is no record of how Mary took the news, how she spent her last days at Point Fermin, or where she went immediately afterward. She was in the home of Samuel and Ella Stork at the time of the Washington state census in 1892; the Storks had a nine-year-old son named Victor and were living in Olympia, where Samuel was again in business as a merchant. Although we don't know a great deal about her later life, census reports indicate she lived until after 1910, often residing with members of her family although one census taker recorded that she had her "own income."

We can sympathize with Cmdr. Coffin as an administrator confronted with a bizarre personnel dispute and having to come up with a recommendation to his superiors. It seems likely, however, that Herald brought his grievances to Cmdr. Coffin's attention during the inspection on March 25th, and that it was Cmdr. Coffin who instructed him to prepare a sworn statement, which he did that same day before a Justice of the Peace. Cmdr. Coffin must have known that Herald's action would trigger a formal review.

Perhaps Cmdr. Coffin was reluctant to mediate an emotionally charged dispute between two vocal personalities, but his recommendations to the Board suggest he may have been biased from the beginning against one or both of them and wanted them gone. His preconceived notions about women in the lighthouse service may have led him to believe that a similar scenario would arise with any male assistant keeper appointed to serve under Mary's direction. He acknowledged that the whole matter might have been concocted by Herald's wife, yet he pushed his agenda by appealing to the Board's desire to save money. In suggesting the economies to be gained by appointing a couple to replace Mary Smith and James Herald, he gave the Board a reason to let them both go.

A cynic could say that because Mary Smith owed her position as lighthouse keeper to the patronage system, as exploited by Victor Smith, it was only poetic justice that she was winnowed out in the Board's efforts to put the service on a more professional ba-



sis. Others would call her naïve for reacting to formal charges with an appeal for special treatment from her commanding officer. Nevertheless, Mary Smith deserved better treatment than she received from the agency to which she had given diligent service for over ten years. Her "offenses," if true, were mild compared to other incidences of misconduct among members of the lighthouse service who had been hired under the patronage system and were winnowed out during the reform years. A warning or disciplinary action short of dismissal would have been more appropriate, given the sketchy nature of the complaints and lack of hard evidence against her.

Mary Smith should be remembered as a conscientious, brave and resourceful keeper who was sacrificed to the bureaucratic politics of her time. One may only hope that, in the decades remaining to her after the termination of her lighthouse career, she found other satisfying outlets for her talents.

Sources:

For the story of Victor Smith and his family at Port Angeles see "Victor Smith's Lighthouse Legacy," by Ted Nelson, *The Keeper's Log*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (Summer 2005). Two additional sources found online are: "Port Angeles—Thumbnail History," (File 8210 under "Cities and Towns") and "Victor Smith forcibly moves the U.S. Customs Port of Entry for Washington Territory from Port Townsend to Port Angeles on August 1, 1862," by Daryl C. McClary, September 21, 2005 (File 7474 under "Timeline Essays") at HistoryLink.org – the Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History <http://www.historylink.org/>, accessed July19, 2009 and Sept. 14, 2009.

Norman Smith's unpublished memoir, "Victory, the Story of Port Angeles by the Son of Victor Smith, Founder of this City" (Port Angeles 1950) is on file at the Port Angeles Main Library in Port Angeles, WA. The portion that includes his description of his visit to Point Fermin is on file at the Point Fermin Lighthouse Museum.

Information on James Herald and his family is from his Federal Military Pension file. He served in Co. I of the 1st Michigan Infantry Regiment from Sept. 13, 1861 to Feb. 20, 1863.

Point Fermin's log books and correspondence relating to James Herald's charges against Mary Smith are in Record Group 26, "Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, 1785-1988," at the National Archives (Washington, D.C.). Copies and transcriptions are on file at the Point Fermin Lighthouse Museum.

On U.S. Lighthouse Board policies, see "Personnel Problems Under the U.S. Light-House Board, 1852-1901," by Mary Louise and Candace Clifford, *The Keeper's Log*, Vol. XXV, No. 4 (Summer 2009), and Dennis Noble, Lighthouses and Keepers: the U.S. Lighthouse Service and its Legacy (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 85-93.