

Table Bluff Light Station, CA



Table Bluff Light Station looking west. Keepers' duplex dwelling on the left, fog signal building seen through the gate, followed by a small barn and then top of the tower. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1930. The layout and buildings of this station are almost identical to those constructed at San Luis Obispo and Ballast Point, California, also in the 1890s.

The 1909 Coast Pilot describes Humboldt Bay as, "...the first important harbor north of San Francisco... a large amount of redwood lumber is exported to foreign [ports] and shipped to domestic ports; there is also a considerable amount of farm and dairy produce, most of which is shipped to San Francisco. Since the improvements by the Government this harbor can be used as a harbor of refuge in impending bad weather provided it can be made [entered] before the bar [channel] becomes impassible." An early Coast Pilot stated that the entrance was "...dangerous to strangers..."

One of the first eight lighthouses authorized for the West Coast was located on Humboldt Bay's north spit. The rapid growth of San Francisco, and the surrounding area, in the early 1850s, required an incredible amount of material to construct new buildings. Much of the material used was lumber and the lumber of choice was redwood. The redwood came from the north coast of California and the principal California port was Eureka in Humboldt Bay.

Humboldt Bay's first lighthouse was similar in construction to the other seven built in the 1850s (seven in California and one on the Columbia River in Washington Territory). The headquarter's design was a Cape Cod style, 1 1/2-story structure with a tower rising through the middle. The station became operational in December 1856. At some point the tower of the Humboldt Bay Lighthouse was extended to allow the light to be seen farther out to sea, up to 13 miles. But even this proved inadequate. Mariners complained that the light was often obscured by mist hanging over the surf at the shoreline. Within a few years the beach in the area began to erode and sand piled up around the lighthouse. In 1874, the keeper reported, "...the bank of sand on the beach west of the lighthouse has washed away ... the sea at high tide approached the lighthouse about 150 feet nearer than before. In 1876, the keeper wrote, "Water came over from the western beach ... came within 20 feet of the lighthouse."

Then in 1877, an earthquake caused cracks in the tower walls and the dwelling. Five years later another earthquake separated the south gable from the building. It was repaired with heavy braces. In the 1880s a storm caused the cellar to fill with water. Finally, the combination of a low elevation, occasional inundation, and damage due to earthquakes caused the Lighthouse Board to make plans to establish a new station on Humboldt Bay's south spit, on Table Bluff.

In 1890, Congress authorized $25,000 for the new station. On May 8, 1891 the District Inspector and Engineer visited Table Bluff and surveyed a location for the station, about four miles south of the original station on the north spit. The District approached the owner of the property and learned that he wanted $5,000 for the needed ten acres and a right of way to the property from the county road. The price was deemed exorbitant and measures were taken to acquire the land by condemnation (eminent domain). The Annual Report stated, "...meanwhile the Board is trying to effect a compromise, and thus get the title with the expenditure of less time and money than by awaiting the slow motion of the courts."

The following year the Board was successful in obtaining a compromise and the land and right of way was obtained for $2,226. The agreement also allowed the government the right to take water from a nearby spring.

Plans and specifications were made and the project advertised. Bids were opened on March 21, 1892 and a contract was made for the buildings for $16,949 and for the ironwork for $845. The Board reported, "Work on the buildings was begun in May, but little progress was made. The coal shed has been put up, and it will be used as quarters for the workmen. The materials was hauled to the site and a portion of the cellar walls was put up."

The 1893 Report states, "The reestablishment of this station on the new site at Table Bluff, commenced last [fiscal] year, was continued until October 5, 1892, when it was satisfactorily completed ... On October 31, the light was exhibited from the new station and the old station was abandoned. The new station at Table Bluff consists of a keeper's dwelling and tower combined, a double dwelling for the assistant keepers, a fog signal building containing two boilers and engines and a coal shed. The water supply is taken from a spring near the station and is forced into the tanks by a windmill and pumps, which are supplemented in times of calm by a hydraulic ram."

The old lighthouse remained, slowly deteriorating over the years. We understand that it was finally bulldozed sometime in the 1930s, as it became an attractive nuisance.

The elevation of the bluff raised the focal plane of the lens from 54 feet at the old station to 176 feet, allowing the light to be seen for 20 miles. The bluff was more stable than the sand of the north spit and far enough above the ocean so that mist wouldn't obscure the light, nor water inundate the station.

The new station was completed and went into operation in October 1892. The 4th order lens from the old station was used in the new tower. The station design was identical



Humboldt Bay's North Spit Lighthouse sometime in the 1920s. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

to two other California lighthouses constructed about the same time at San Luis Obispo and Ballast Point, San Diego. Even the layout of the buildings was similar.

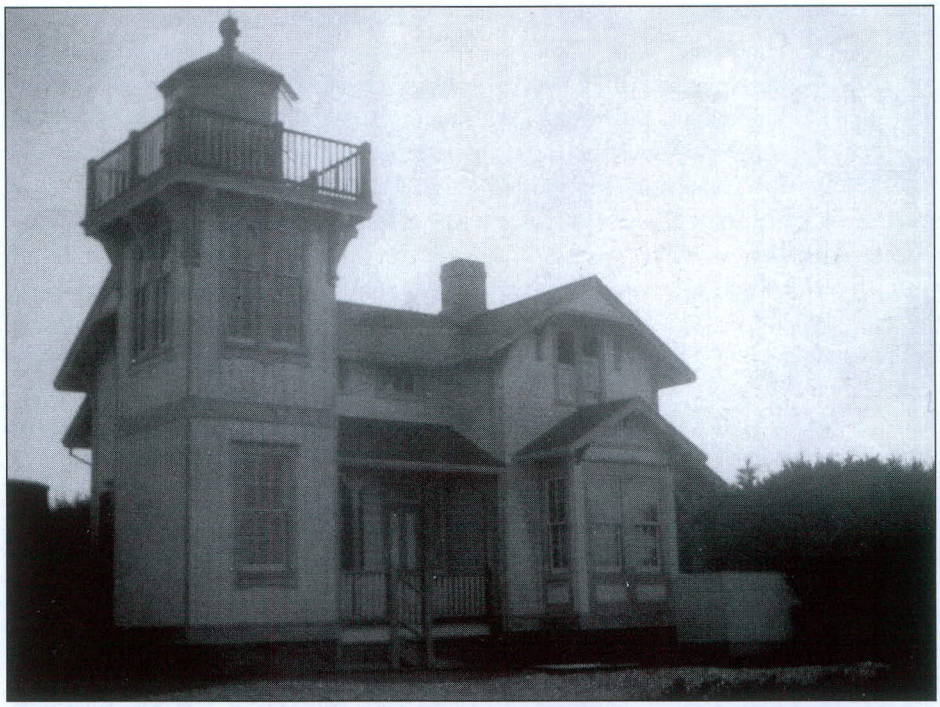
The new Humboldt Bay Light Station was a popular spot for visitors. A 1931 newspaper article reported, "Visitors are welcome at Table Bluff and may inspect the lighthouse ... on weekdays" However, weekends were restricted as, "...there was such a rush that keepers were unable to attend to their required duties."

During WWII the station was expanded to accommodate a Navy radio compass station, a Coast Guard beach patrol unit and a coastal lookout station.

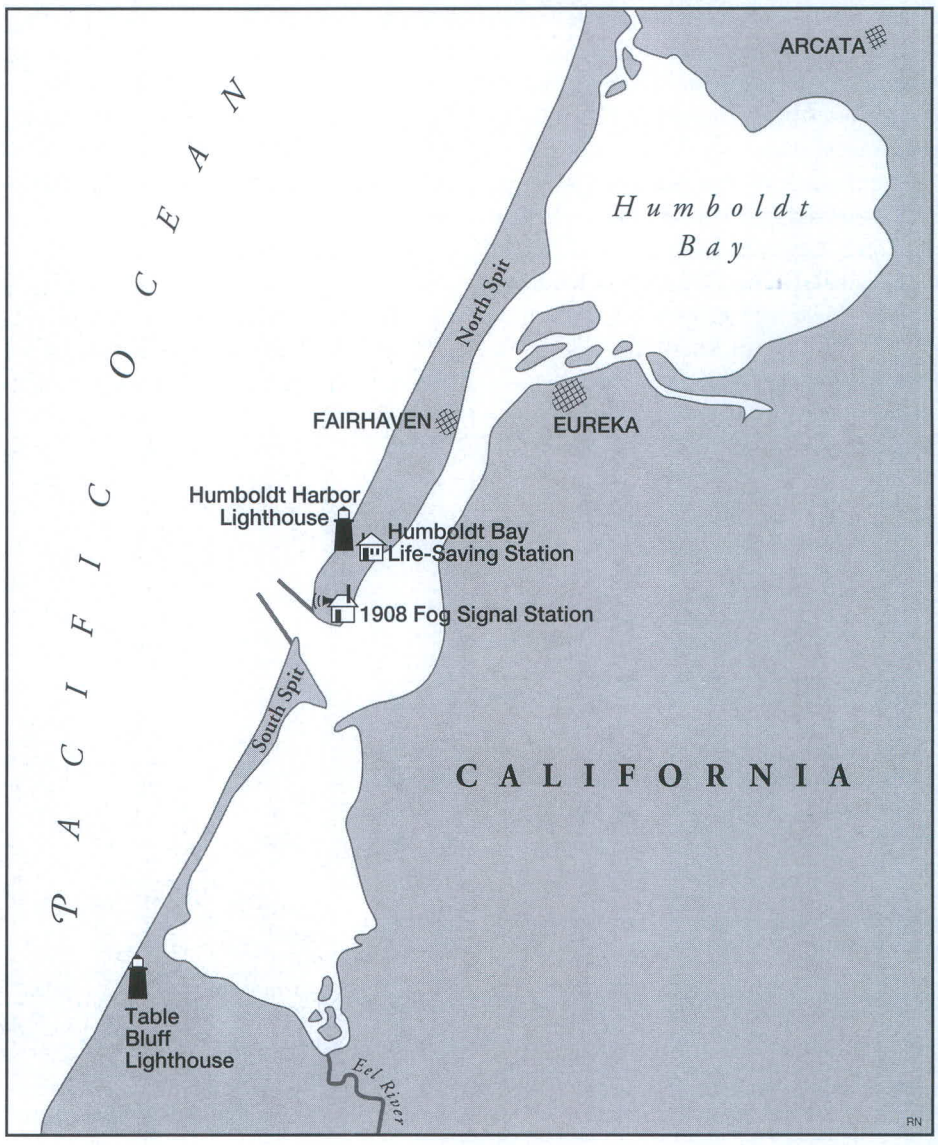
After the war the keeper's dwelling was razed, but the tower, which had been attached to the dwelling, was retained. The Coast Guard installed an automated optic in the tower in 1953. Although its 4th order lens ended up at the Cabrillo National Monument in San Diego, in the early 1980s it was returned to the Humboldt Bay Maritime Museum. In 1975, the Coast Guard discontinued the station and the property reverted to the Bureau of Land Management. That agency sold it to a foundation that works with people with substance abuse problems.

The old tower slowly deteriorated until a local lighthouse enthusiast named Ray Glavich took it upon himself to relocate the structure to Whidbey Island near Eureka. Glavich separated the lantern from the tower and cut the tower in half. He obtained the donated services of a trucking company and crane to transport the pieces of the tower to Eureka's Whidbey Island where the parts were reconstructed and/or restored. Today the tower sits at the end of a parking lot in the Whidbey Island Marina. The rest of the old station remains – duplex dwelling, fog signal building, oil house, barn and garage.

From 1856 to 1892 mariners set their course in the Humboldt Bay area on the light on the north spit. From 1892 they shifted navigator's eye to the south spit and the new Table Bluff Lighthouse until 1975 when that station was deemed no longer necessary for the needs of navigation. For 131 years, sailing vessels, and later, motorized ships, plied the Bar Channel and waters of Humboldt Bay under the watchful eye of a lighthouse, and it seems like Only Yesterday.



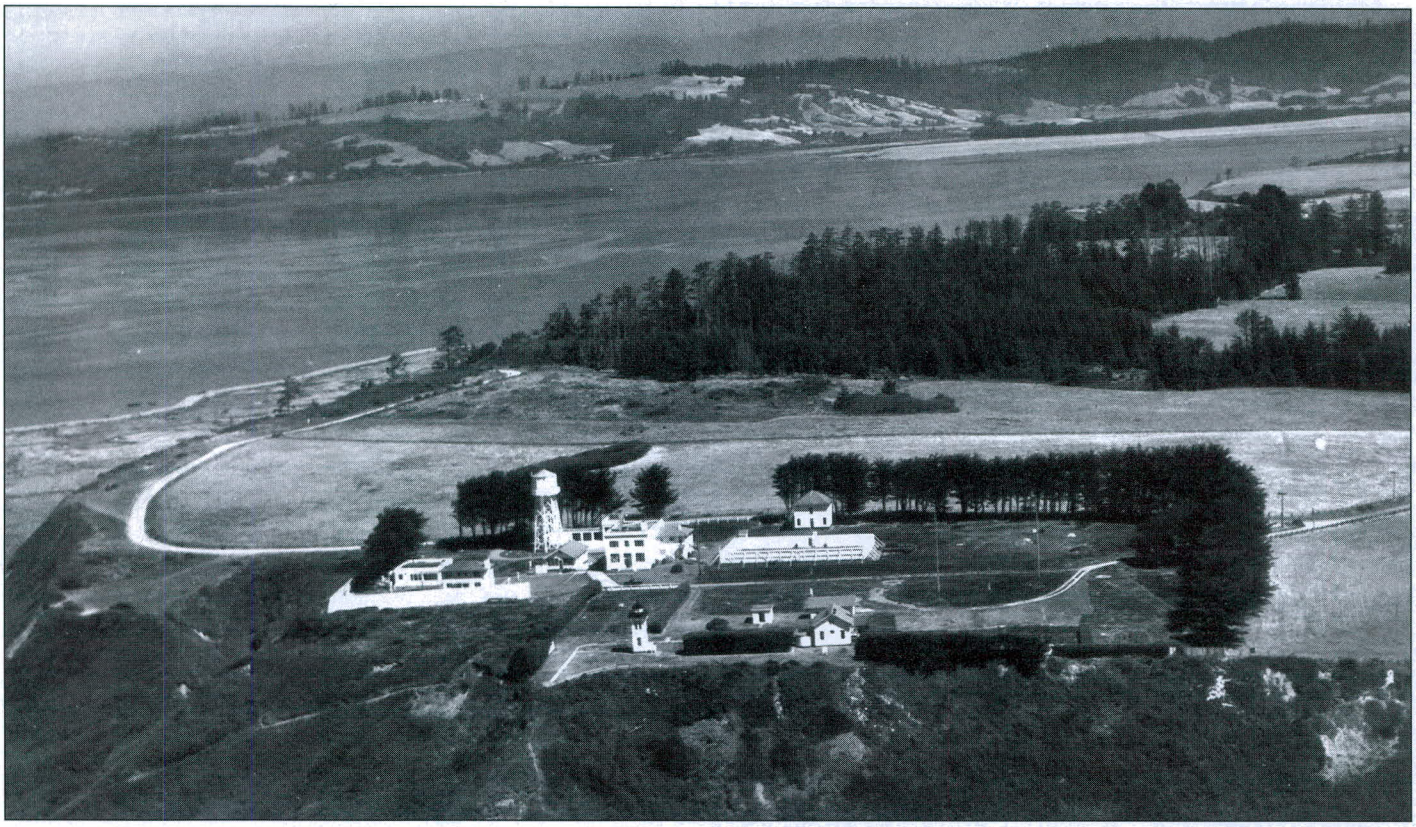
Combination head keeper's dwelling and tower. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1910.







Above – The Table Bluff tower being dismantled. After the lantern was removed the tower was cut in half in the area at the top of the ladder. Ray Glavich photo 1982.
Right – The reconstructed tower at the marina on Woodley Island, Eureka. Photographer unknown.



The Table Bluff Light Station circa 1970. The tower, sans dwelling at left, oil house and fog signal building. The duplex has been removed. Buildings in the background are World War II Navy structures. Lower Humboldt Bay in the far background. U. S. Coast Guard photo.