

Drawing by Coppock 1989

Admiralty Head Lighthouse

By Sharlene P. Nelson

The Admiralty Head Lighthouse was lit in 1861 to guide sailing ships through Washington's Admiralty Inlet. It stood on a bluff on Whidbey Island at the eastern end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. When the sailing ship era came to a close, the light, then shining from the second Admiralty Head Lighthouse, was extinguished in 1922.

This second lighthouse, which is a museum and interpretive center for Washington's Fort Casey Park, is one of five United States lighthouses depicted on a U.S. Postal Service's stamp issue released in April 1990. The stamps commemorate the U.S. Coast Guard's Bicentennial and its present role in

administering the country's lighthouses. Admiralty Head and the other four lighthouses, West Quoddy, Maine; Sandy Hook, New Jersey; Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; American Shoals, Florida, were chosen for their regional diversity, architecture, esthetics (visual appearance), and history. The American Shoals stamp also shows a modern Coast Guard cutter.

In the 1850s when Washington was a new territory, ships sailed the Strait of Juan de Fuca on their way to and from Puget Sound. At the time few settlers lived along the miles of three-lined shores of Puget Sound, but loggers and mill workers were busy producing lumber for the San Francisco market. Three

lighthouses first marked the way into and along the strait, Cape Flattery, New Dungeness, and Smith Island. All were Cape Cod style house with a tower rising from the center, and were built from 1857 to 1858.

As more ships sailed this route, a light was needed at Admiralty Inlet. Though two sites, Point Wilson on the west shore and Admiralty Head on the east, were considered, Admiralty Head was the first to gain a lighthouse. Its location better served sailing vessels inbound to Puget Sound. After clearing New Dungeness with sails set for an easterly beat, the captain steered a course past Point Wilson to Admiralty Head, then turned south to Puget Sound.

The first lighthouse at Admiralty Head, a two-story wood structure, was completed in late 1860 and stood near the edge of an eighty-foot high bluff. It was the sixth lighthouse built in Washington Territory and the first wooden one. The *Coast Pilot* described it as “. . . a keeper's dwelling with a tower rising through the roof at one end; both are painted white, and the iron lantern surmounting the tower is painted red. The height of the tower from the base to the focal plane is forty-one feet.” On January 20, 1861, the lamp was lit in a fourth-order Fresnel lens.

William Robertson, the first keeper, was fifty-one and a “grey-grizzled sea dog,” as one writer affectionately described him. The description was appropriate. Robertson had earlier owned a ship and sailed it along the west coast transporting piles

from Washington Territory to California. When he was appointed keeper, Robertson, his wife, and five children moved from their log cabin on Whidbey Island to the lighthouse. In 1865 Robertson was replaced by Daniel Pearson.

Pearson, a newcomer to Washington Territory, moved west for his health from Lowell, Massachusetts. His two eldest daughters, Josephine and Georgia, accompanied him. Sadly, Josephine died six months after their arrival. A few months later Pearson and Georgia, who was appointed assistant keeper, moved into the lighthouse.

Their first year at the lighthouse was a busy one. Besides tending the light, Pearson and Georgia began raising chickens, pigs, and cows, to assure a supply of fresh eggs, milk, butter, and meat. When they were comfortably settled, Pearson sent for his wife and their two youngest children, Daniel O. and Flora, who arrived after a long sea voyage.

With two unattached young women living at the lighthouse, bachelors, young and old, began to call. One Sunday there were “fifteen horses with men's saddles on their backs hitched to the fence.” In 1866 Georgia was married. The wedding was held in the lighthouse parlor.

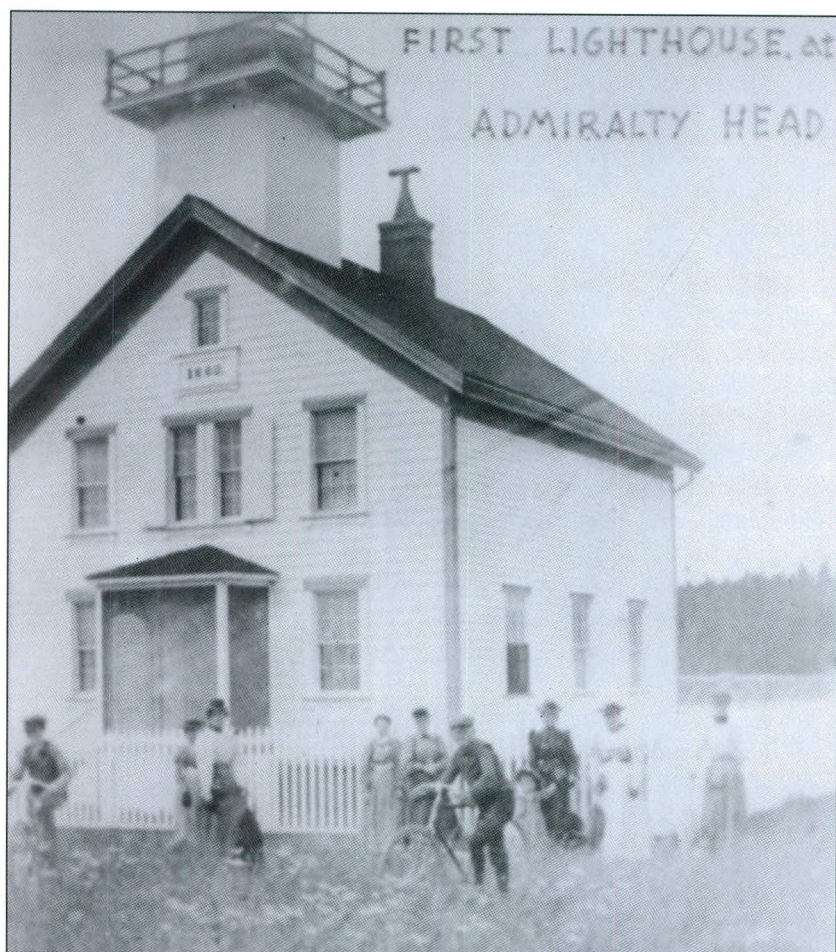
A few months later in May 1867, Flora was appointed assistant lighthouse keeper. She was seventeen at the time and was paid \$625 a year. Pearson received \$1000 a year.

Though many of the guests at the lighthouse were expected, sometimes there were unexpected guests. One day while Pearson and his wife went to Coupeville (about three miles north), Flora was alone at the lighthouse. Hearing a noise outside, she opened the door and watched twelve Indians pull their dugouts ashore. They climbed up the bluff and without saying a word, walked inside the lighthouse. There they squatted on the parlor floor with their backs leaning against the walls. Flora didn't speak their Chinook language, so she watched not saying a word while trying to mask her fear behind a broad smile. A half-hour later the Indians got up and left.

While Flora served as assistant keeper, she kept the light station log. Some of the entries had a light touch, some were detailed.

On August 28, 1874, she wrote, “Within the last two to three days, several barks have passed going up and down the Sound. This morning two came in quite close bound up but drifting — toward night a fresh breeze sprang up from the west and with the turning of the tide the two barks sailed up to the Sound — one was the *Aureola* — name discernible with the glass.”

Flora's entry on May 8, 1876, read, “Assistant Keeper lighthouse . . . arrived at Victoria in the p.m. and was married by Rev. Wm. Rose in the evening.” Flora married William B. Engle who was forty-six and a Whidbey Island pioneer. After honeymooning in San Francisco, the newlyweds returned to the lighthouse and Flora resumed her keeper's duties. In September, 1877, her first child, a boy, was born at the lighthouse.



The first Admiralty Head Lighthouse was constructed in 1860 and lighted January 20, 1861. It remained in service for forty years. Photo courtesy The Island County Historical Society.



Flora A.P. Engle and William Engle's wedding picture 1876. Flora continued her assistant keeper's duties after she was married. Photo courtesy The Island County Historical Society.

In October 1878 Pearson resigned from the lighthouse service, and with his wife moved to a farm on Whidbey Island. A month later Flora also resigned, and she and her family joined the Pearsons on their farm.

Laurence Nessel replaced Pearson. Nessel, who was born in France, was fifty years old and single. He continued entries in the lighthouse log, but his were brief, one line statements. One December 15, Nessel wrote, "Light at Point Wilson in operation the first time."

On April 15, 1880, Nessel noted that the Lighthouse tender *Shubrick* arrived, and "Mr. Wheeler, Lampist, visited this station today and changed the oil lamp for a kerosene lamp."

Nessel served at Admiralty Head for ten years when he was replaced by J.E. Evans. While Evans was keeper in the late 1890s, the government, fearing that hostile ships would enter Puget Sound, began purchasing adjoining lands to build Fort Casey, one of three forts built on Admiralty Inlet. Each fort was built on or near a lighthouse site. While the lighthouses, Admiralty Head, Point Wilson, and Marrowstone Point (1888) were placed to be observed by friendly

vessels, the forts' guns were placed to train on unfriendly vessels. The triangle of light established by the lighthouses also fit the "Triangle of Fire" required by the coastal guns.

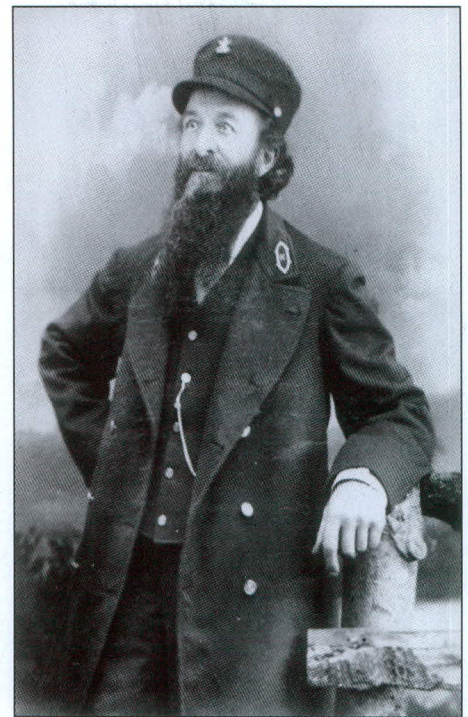
The forty-year old lighthouse stood in the way of the gun emplacements at Fort Casey and was moved away from the bluff. It served as noncommissioned officers' quarters, and for a brief time a temporary medical clinic was located in one room. In 1928 it was dismantled. Its timbers were used to build a home on Whidbey Island, and the old light tower served as the home's cupola.

Construction of the second Admiralty Head Lighthouse (the one pictured on the commemorative stamps) began in 1902 a short distance north of the original site and was done by the War Department. The light was first displayed on June 25, 1903, from a fourth-order Barbier and Bernard Fresnel lens made in France. Because of the new lighthouse's proximity to Fort Casey, it was also known locally as the Fort Casey Lighthouse.

The Spanish-style design of this lighthouse was unique among Washington's lighthouses. It was built with eighteen-inch thick walls covered with stucco. Downstairs there was a living room, a dining room and a kitchen. Upstairs there were three large bedrooms. Its service, however, was short-lived. Nineteen years after the light was lit, it was extinguished. Sailing vessels in Admiralty Inlet and elsewhere had become a rare sight, and the steam vessels that replaced them followed the western shore near Point Wilson.

In 1927 the lantern and lens were removed and placed on the reconstruction tower of New Dungeness Lighthouse. When New Dungeness was automated, the lens was moved to the Coast Guard Museum Northwest in Seattle, where it is presently on display.

The lighthouse stood vacant until World War II when Fort Casey was reactivated from caretaker status to an army training center for soldiers. The lighthouse was painted olive drab and became quarters for men assigned to a K-



Laurence Nessel served as principal keeper at the first Admiralty Head Lighthouse from 1878 to 1888. Photo 1888 courtesy The Island County Historical Society.

9 unit. The men patrolled at night with dogs. Unable to sleep during the day in the noisy barracks, they moved into the lighthouse.

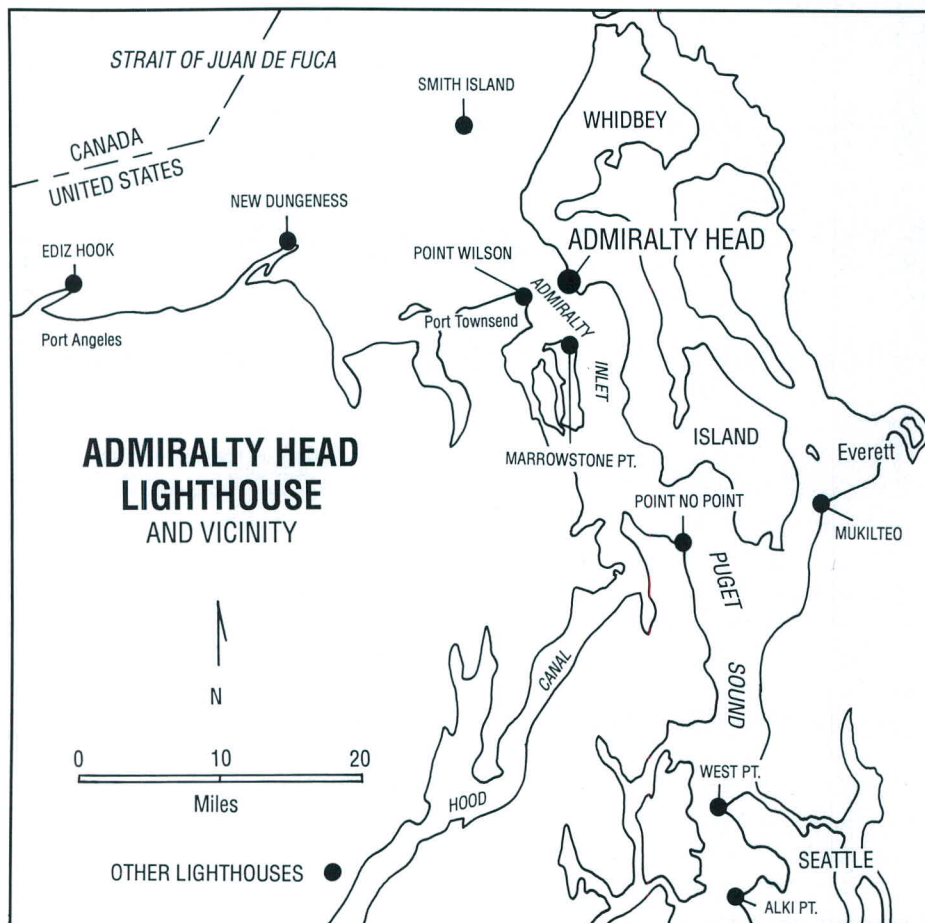
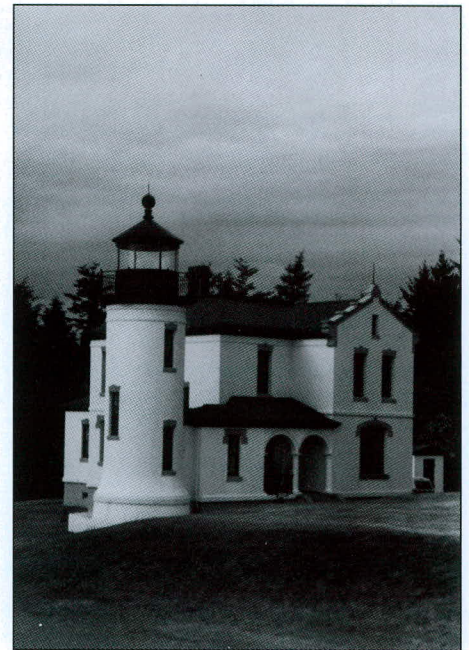
After the war the lighthouse again stood empty. In the early 1950s the Island County Historical Society intending to make the lighthouse a museum, began restoring it. In 1954 the lighthouse and Fort Casey were declared surplus property and were transferred to Washington to become a state park. While housing was being built for the park rangers, they lived on the lower floor of the lighthouse. And, with help from island residents, they continued the restoration project which included replacing the lantern.

Exhibits were installed in the downstairs rooms including a fourth-order Fresnel lens from Alki Point Lighthouse in Seattle. The lens was obtained from Alki Point when it was automated.

When other lighthouses in Washington fell victim to erosion or were dismantled, a new aid to navigation was erected in its place to continue to serve vessel traffic. The light at Admiralty Head, however, like the sailing vessels it served, was never seen again.



Above – The new Admiralty Head Lighthouse shortly after construction from an old Post Card dated 1907. Right – The restored Admiralty Head Lighthouse in 1984. Note that the replacement lantern has vertical astragals (bars between the glass storm panes) in lieu of the diagonal astragals of the original lantern. The gallery railing and ball vent closely resemble the originals. Photo by Fred Stanio.

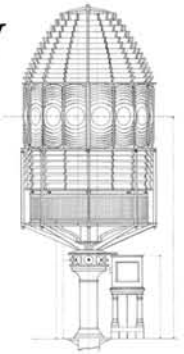


You can see the Admiralty Head Lighthouse at Fort Casey State Park. The park is open year around. However, the lighthouse is open only during the summer beginning in mid-May and ending Labor Day. Its hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Even when the lighthouse is closed, you can still walk around it.

The author Sharlene P. Nelson is author of the *Umbrella Guide to Washington Lighthouses*, available through the Keeper's Library.



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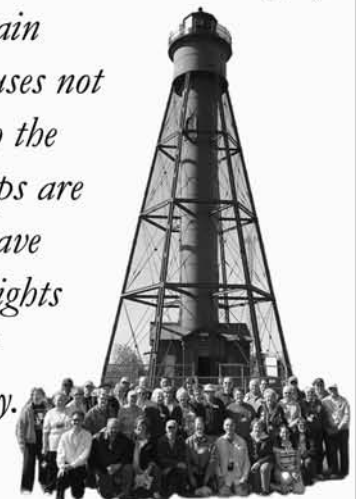
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