



by Shirley Nelson

CAPE BLANCO



ape Blanco was originally named by Spanish explorers in the 16th or early 17th century, although the origin is obscure. The cliff face is beige in color, but from a distance on a sunny day appears white.

Bird droppings and numerous fossil deposits contribute to the white color. In 1792 when Captain George Vancouver was exploring the west coast for England he named the headland Cape Orford in a honor of his friend, George, the third Earl of Orford and son of Sir Robert Walpole. But a town near the cape founded in 1851 was named Port Orford and the cape continued to be called Cape Blanco.

The Cape Blanco light station is situated on a grassy headland jutting one and half miles into the Pacific Ocean at Oregon's most westerly point. It's the oldest lighthouse in Oregon in continuous use. The focal plane of the lens of the 59 foot high lighthouse is 245 feet above sea level, the highest in the state.

Oregon's first lighthouse in the area was constructed in 1857 at the mouth of the Umpqua River, the busiest port of call on the south Oregon coast at the time. But it only stood for six years before collapsing from erosion. After that the mouth of the Umpqua River was dark for thirty years.

Instead of replacing the destroyed Umpqua River lighthouse, the govern-

ment elected to construct a new station at Cape Arago, just south of Coos Bay and Empire City; that area had become more commercially important than Umpqua River. The Cape Arago lighthouse, operational from late 1866, was constructed on a small, rocky islet which was subject to severe erosion, claiming the first structure. A second structure was built in 1909 and due to erosion, was replaced by the existing lighthouse in 1934.

The Cape Blanco light station was not established because of a port or river entrance, but to warn of the Blanco and Orford Reefs lying just to the west and to assist navigators in fixing their position as they plied the waters of Oregon.

The Cape is exposed on three sides to strong northwest summer winds and severe southwest storms in the winter with some of the highest wind speeds on the Oregon Coast. When it isn't windy, it is often very foggy. Oddly enough no fog signal was ever constructed at the Cape Blanco station.

The Cape Blanco station was constructed under the leadership of Col. R.S. Williamson, Engineer of the Thirteenth Lighthouse District, in 1870 and lighted for the first time on December 20, 1870. Construction took several months with all materials except bricks arriving by vessel to the beach, landed by small boat through the surf and then hoisted up the cliff. The first load of building material arrived in May 1870. They had been partially unloaded onto the beach when a gale struck. The heavy winds and surf drove the ship onto the beach with the loss of the remaining cargo. Other difficulties and delays occurred before the station could be completed.

The 1868 Report of the Lighthouse Board to Congress reported:

“Cape Blanco — A piece of land has been purchased as a site for a light station at this cape. It is hoped that the lighthouse will be built, and a first order light exhibited next year. The land purchased by the United States is bounded by a bluff bank, rising abruptly from the sea, and by a meridian line, and is inaccessible except by passing through the adjoining private property. Materials for making the burning brick are found on this property, and not on the land owned by the United States; consequently it has been necessary to purchase a right of way privilege of taking water, sand, clay and wood; a contract has also been entered into for making the bricks and for clearing the lighthouse site on the cape.”

The next year the report started, “The requisite preparations for the works to be erected at this station could not be made until the season was so far advanced as to render inexpedient any attempt to build them before next season. The amount of rainfall at Cape Blanco is excessive, being equaled at only two other points in the United States, where records have been

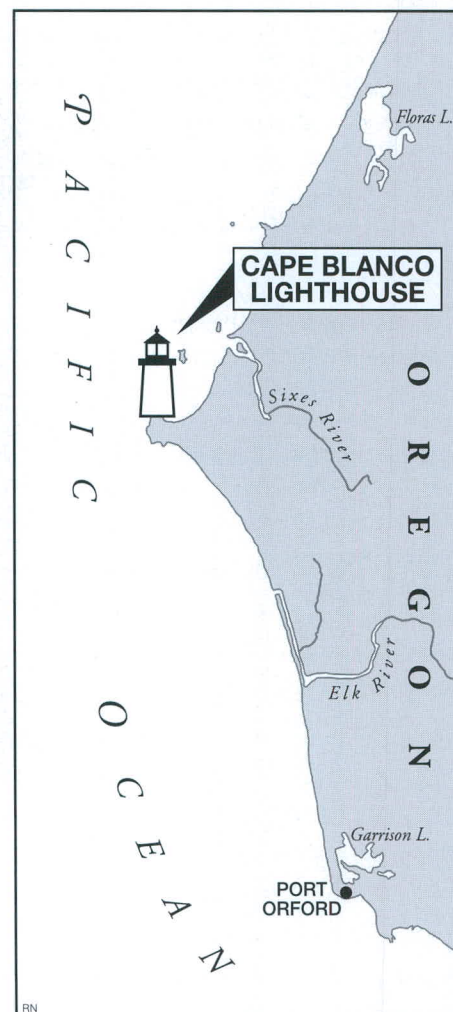
kept. Consequently, any work after the setting in of the rainy season, could only be prosecuted at very great disadvantage and resulting expense. Meanwhile the cape has been cleared of timber which has had the effect, it is said, to considerably diminish the amount of fog in that locality.

“An accurate survey of the lighthouse grounds has been made, the limits staked out, and the exact site of the tower selected. It was first thought that a focal plane at a height above the ground of eighteen feet would suffice, but the survey developed the fact that at this height the edges of the bluff would intercept the light, provided the tower was placed at the site selected in the center of the cape, which should be the case, in view of the fact that the faces of the bluff are gradually wasting away under the action of the sea. The height of the focal plane above ground will be established at 50 feet, which will obviate the whole difficulty.



Above — An aerial view of Cape Blanco from an old Post Card. The building to the right of the tower is a modern triplex constructed by the Coast Guard.

Opposite page — The Cape Blanco station circa 1930 showing the 1908 dwelling at right. Note the Palladian window design, a trademark of Carl W. Leick, architect of the 13th District. He used this design throughout Oregon and Washington. Leick is known for his design of the beautiful Falval Victorial and Episcopal Church in Astoria, two commissions he completed before joining the Lighthouse Service. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.



“Having every reason to believe that much money could be saved, if brick could be made at the cape instead of bringing them from San Francisco, at an enormous expense for transportation, an agreement was made with a person who lived in the vicinity, to furnish two hundred thousand brick, at the light-house site, for \$25 per thousand, about a third the cost for transportation alone from San Francisco. About eighty thousand of these brick, made last fall, were of fair quality, and were accepted and paid for. The second kiln burned this spring were not of good enough quality, and were rejected.”

In 1870 the Board reported to Congress: “The Light-house structures at this point are now in progress, and will be completed by December 15 of this year. The point can only be reached with materials and labor by sea, and after reaching the offing, they can only be landed under the most favorable circumstances of sea and weather through surf. Freights for this section were held at fabulous prices by owners of vessels, rendering it necessary to burn the brick on the ground, which was successfully done; but all other materials and provisions for the mechanics had to be sent by sea, and landed at great risk of loss of life and property.”

Before the light station was established, the cape was covered with a thick spruce forest. The trees were felled for three reasons: to increase visibility of the light to the north and south, to provide lumber for construction of station buildings and to reduce the danger of fire to the station. All 200,000 bricks used for the lighthouse were made from local clay deposits and were fired on the site. Williamson's high standards caused him to reject 20,000 of one of the initial firings.

The completed station cost \$100,000, a princely sum in those days. The eight sided, fixed 1st order lens was constructed in France at a cost of \$20,000. It provided a steady white light visible for 22 miles. The original lamp burned kerosene. Sometime in the late 1930's a revolving 2nd order lens replaced the original.



The Cape Blanco Keepers in their smocks and ready to do battle with dirt. James S. Hughes (left), James Langlois (center) and Otto Heins (right). Photo (circa 1905-06) from the Langlois Centennial Committee courtesy of Jim Brende.

KEEPERS

H. Burnap was the first Principal Keeper to move into the finished duplex dwelling and take charge of the station. He had been the last keeper at ill-fated Umpqua lighthouse. His assistants were J. Bond and Nathan Cook. The keepers who served the longest at Cape Blanco were James Langlois and James Hughes, both sons of local pioneer families. Langlois came as First Assistant in 1875 and became Principal Keeper in 1883. In 1888 James Hughes arrived as First Assistant. Both men were married and by the late 1890's the two families had a total of seven children. The Second Assistant, single, was also living in the duplex and an appeal was made for more housing. It took nearly ten years of requests to the lighthouse board before a second dwelling was added to the station.

Meanwhile, Hughes bought a dairy farm across the Sixes River from his father's ranch. He moved his wife and three daughters there and commuted to his lighthouse job. Hughes became Principal keeper when Langlois retired after 42 years of service. It was said Langlois never set foot in another lighthouse. But his son, Oscar, raised on the isolated station, joined the Lighthouse Service. He served at Cape Arago Lighthouse, where he married “the boss's daughter” and went on to The Coquille River Station where he served as Assistant Keeper and then Principal Keeper. James Hughes served at least 33 years before his retirement.

Mabel Bretherton was hired in 1903 as second assistant to Langlois and Hughes. Her husband was a keeper at Coquille River, thirty miles north. In 1905 she was transferred to Washington State's North Head Lighthouse.

DAILY LIFE AND VISITORS

The three keepers took turns working around the clock. During darkness, the light had to be kept burning at maximum brightness. Fifteen gallons of kerosene per night were carried up the watch level. Wicks had to be trimmed and vents high in the tower manipulated to maintain air flow. Sometime after 1911 a clockwork mechanism was installed so the light could be eclipsed to provide a flashing signal or characteristic. This change added the duty of winding the weight powered clockworks.

Day shift workers cleaned the lens, wearing aprons or smocks so their rough clothing would not scratch the prisms. They also cleaned and polished all parts of the lighthouse, including windows, floors, etc. Duties and instructions were detailed in a series of manuals issued by the Lighthouse Board.

In the mid-1930's a Second Order Fresnel lens was installed to replace the original one. The new eight-sided lens revolved by means of an electric motor, powered by a generator. The 120-volt, 75 rpm motor is still operating the same lens. It wasn't until the 1950's that electric lines came all the way out to the cape, making life brighter and easier for the people there.

Wives and children of married keepers were instructed in duties of tending the light in case one of them had to fill in for an ill or absent keeper. They had to keep everything shipshape at home, too, because inspectors paid quarterly unannounced visits to the lighthouse and government-owned residences. Cows, chickens and horses had to be tended and a garden maintained in summer. A pond on site contained fish and wild game was often available.

In addition to indoor and outdoor duties, the keepers and their families found various

ways to occupy themselves. The story is told that when a British steamer with a mixed cargo wrecked at nearby Floras Lake in 1895, a grand piano in a hermetically-sealed container came ashore. It was bought at the beach auction by James Langlois, First Keeper. A small rustic school, affectionately dubbed "Cape Blanco University", operated during summer months for about fifteen years, beginning in the 1880's.

The lonely, isolated routines were also eased by visits of the service tenders which brought supplies by sea and visits of picnickers and campers who came by land. In 1870 there was no road to the cape. Access to Port Orford, the nearest town, was by the beach at low tide, where travelers had to avoid storms and pockets of quicksand. In 1886 a road linked the station to a county road and more visitors began to arrive; more than 4,000 between 1896 and 1916.



Cape Blanco Light Station in 1871, shortly after it was completed, showing the felled spruce forest. Initially there were only two keepers who lived in this duplex with their families. A 2nd assistant was hired at the end of the century, he lived with the 1st assistant's family. In 1908 a second dwelling was constructed for the head keeper, and the 1st and 2nd keepers lived in the duplex. Edward Muybridge photo courtesy of the author. Muybridge took extensive photos of the west coast in the 19th century.

SHIPWRECKS AND OTHER DISASTERS

Between Humbug Mountain on the south and Blacklock Point on the north, at least three and possibly seven or more wrecks are known to have occurred in this area between 1830 and 1870. Four bodies were recovered from the *Friendship* north of Sixes River in 1860.

But building the lighthouse did not eliminate the dangers and wrecks. One of the keepers' duties was to scan the water frequently during daylight hours to watch for ships in distress. In case of a wreck, the keepers were ready to assist in any way they could.

From December 1870, when Cape Blanco Lighthouse was completed, until the 1950's, at least twenty disasters occurred in the same area, with a total loss of over 126 lives. The sidewheel steamer *Alaskan*, en route to San Francisco for repairs, foundered off Cape Blanco in early May 1889. The loss of thirty-one (some accounts say 30) lives might have been greater had the ship been on its regular run, carrying its usual complement of passengers. Heavy seas and winds caused damage and eventual destruction of the iron-hulled ship. Of the forty-seven men aboard, sixteen (some accounts say 17) finally reached safety. The casualties went down with the ship or were drowned while trying to escape in lifeboats or on floating wreckage.

Twenty-one people died and eighteen survived when the steamer *South Portland* wrecked on Blanco Reef in late October 1903 with a cargo of wheat. Contrary to most situations, Captain J.B. McIntyre was in the first boat off the stricken vessel. He was later charged with criminal negligence.

Perhaps the best-known wreck was that of the oil tanker *J.A. Chanslor* at the mouth of the Sixes River December 18, 1919. She was a well-built steel vessel with cabin areas furnished in hardwood. Fog and strong ocean currents caused the ship to ground and break-up. The captain, A. A. Sawyer and thirty-eight crewmen were swept overboard. Only the captain and two seamen survived. Captain Sawyer had his license suspended for two years because of "improper navigation".

For forty of fifty years, beginning in the 1880's, a particular kind of ship was built to handle the booming lumber industry.

Especially after the destructive San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, west coast lumber was in great demand. The wooden steam schooners were small, efficient and easily handled. They needed to be because they often had to navigate small coves and bays without docks to load lumber. Huge cargos of lumber were sometimes lost as ships were wrecked.

But not all shipwrecks ended tragically. Cargos and often ships were recovered or salvaged. People were rescued, sometimes dramatically. The twenty-six crew members of the steam schooner *Cottoneva* were removed by breeches buoy (an aerial cable system) when the ship crashed February 10, 1937. The ship was driven ashore at Port Orford by 75 miles-per-hour winds.



Mrs. Mabel Bretherton hired as 2nd assistant in 1903. Her husband had been the Coquille River keeper. Photo from the James Gibbs collection.

E. Stahlbaum, first mate of the lumber schooner *Willapa*, was a survivor and captain of the *Cottoneva*. He must have felt very nervous as stormy seas caused the *Willapa* to begin leaking at the seams December 2, 1941. All twenty-four men were struggling to stay afloat when picked up the next morning by a Coast Guard motor lifeboat. But the boat could not land at Port Orford due to the high waves. James Combs, a local fisherman, used his dory to make a dozen trips through 800 yards of rough water to take survivors ashore, two at a time.

One tanker, the *Larry Doheny*, was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in October 1942. It sank south of the lighthouse with a loss of six lives.

RECENT EVENTS

In 1980 the light was automated and grounds closed to the public. But in 1992 two local teenagers were able to get inside the lighthouse and smashed parts of the optic, causing several thousand dollars' damage. After a country-wide search, authorities asked Larry Hardin of Hardin Optical Company in nearby Bandon to do the repairs. He replicated the broken prisms which were completed and within two years the lens was repaired at a cost of \$80,000.

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Coast Guard and other organizations began to refurbish several Oregon lighthouses to make them accessible to the public. The Cape Blanco State Park staff opened the Cape Blanco lighthouse in the fall of 1994 on a trial basis. The effort proved so successful that it officially opened April 1, 1996. Tourists may visit, including a trip inside the lantern room, six hours a day, five days a week. Tour guides are mostly travelers or full-time RV people who get free campsites and hood-ups at the nearby park in exchange for their docent duties. A few local residents also help.

In 1995 two artists — also full time RV folks — took turns as tour guides and spent more than two months in the fall painting a mural on an 8' x 20' wall inside the greeting center where tourists gather before the five-at-a-time trip to the lighthouse property. The mural shows all nine remaining Oregon lighthouses. The couple returned in 1996 to paint a mural in another corner of the room; this one showing native American life at the cape before arrival of the white man.

The lighthouse and grounds are now jointly administered by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Bureau of Land Management (Department of the Interior), Oregon State Parks, two historic preservation groups and the Federated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

In its 126th year the lighthouse was visited by a group of architecture and historic preservation students studying with a University of Oregon summer program. Students and their leaders spent two weeks at the site studying history, construction and condition of the structure. They left thorough reports of their work and instructions for repairs and improvements.

Cape Blanco apparently got its name from a Spanish seafaring explorer in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, but the origin



of the name is obscure. The cliff face has a pale beige color and from a distance, on a sunny day, could look quite white. Bird droppings or plentiful fossil deposits can also contribute to the color.

The light house today has its original open, free-standing circular iron staircase. The light flashes automatically, twenty-four hours a day, at 20-second intervals (91.8 seconds on, 18.2 seconds dark). Its 1,000-watt incandescent bulb casts a light that can be seen 22 miles out to sea. If the bulb burns out, an identical one stands ready to take its place. An electric generator serves in case commercial power fails. Finally, as a further backup, a battery powered emergency beacon takes over.

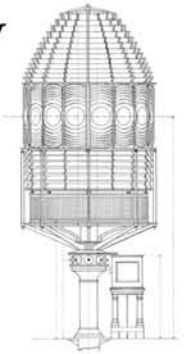
Unfortunately, the keepers' houses are long gone, as well as the barracks that housed Coast Guard employees after 1939. Gone, also are the oil house, water tower and other utility buildings. In addition to the lighthouse-workroom and greeting center there is a Coast Guard duplex officers' quarters (in disrepair) and buildings housing communications equipment.

Although today the mariner relies more on sophisticated and technical means of direction-finding and navigation, the Cape Blanco light is a constant reminder of our maritime history. As well as being the most western light in Oregon, it is also the farthest south. Eight other lighthouses still exist in a line going northward along the coast; four others are active and automated.

Cape Blanco tower circa 1930. Note that the roof vents have been changed from those in the 1871 photo and the entrance way has been enclosed. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.



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Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

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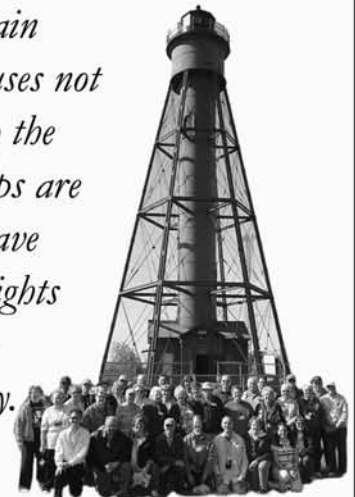
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