

LOG

THE KEEPERS

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TATOOSH ISLAND'S
CAPE FLATTERY LIGHT STATION
By Wayne Wheeler



Cape Flattery Light Station prior to 1900. New duplex dwelling at left, fog signal building at right of lighthouse showing chimneys and steam whistles. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Museum NW in Seattle.



ape Flattery is the most northwest point of the continental United States. It's a desolate and rigorous location and guards the southern entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Swirling, strong currents live here. The lofty mountains of Washington's Olympic Peninsula block storm clouds arriving from the northwest, causing the area to experience the heaviest rainfall in the country –100 inches a year. The warm Japanese Current sweeps by Cape Flattery and the on-shore breezes create heavy walls of fog during much of the year. This rugged coastline, with heavy ocean currents arriving from the northwest, has snagged a large proportion of ships, which have come to grief along our west coast over the years.

Although the Straits of Juan de Fuca generally run wide and deep, entering the Straits from the Pacific Ocean has proven to be a challenge, especially during the age of sail. In addition to the strong on-shore currents, heavy seas and thick fogs, the Strait is guarded on the south by Umatilla Reef, Tatoosh Island and Duncan Rock, an old black monster that lies out in the Strait directly in the path of arriving vessels.

Known to mariners as the "ship's graveyard," the mouth of the Straits of Juan de Fuca has claimed vessels ranging in size from fishing boats to large ocean-going ships. The number of vessels that went down in the vicinity of Cape Flattery will never be known, but as early as 1851, the *Una* was lost in the area. The following year, the *Lord Ragland* went down.

One of the major disasters was the wreck of the steamer *Pacific* in 1875 with the loss of 300 lives. In 1894, three vessels, the *Ivanhoe*, *Montserrat* and *Keweenaw* also came to grief in the area.

On September 27, 1894 the coal-laden vessel *Ivanhoe* left Seattle for San Francisco with 23 passengers. The vessel was towed down the Strait by the tug *Tyee*, and cast off. She fell in with the barkentine *Robert Sudden*. The following day a gale sprang up with weather so thick that the vessels lost sight of each other. When the gale subsided there was no trace of *Ivanhoe*. The resulting search found nothing, but several days later a life ring bearing the ship's name turned up in a bay to the north in British Columbia. Shortly after that, one of the ship's name boards was discovered on the beach by the wife of the Willapa (Cape Shoalwater) lighthouse keeper, 100 miles

south of where the life ring was recovered.

Later in 1894, two large colliers, loaded with coal, departed for San Francisco within hours of each other. The steamship *Montserrat* left from Nanaimo, British Columbia and the *Keweenaw* from Comox. There were 26 aboard the former and a crew of 31 aboard the latter.

On the afternoon of December 7, the vessel came within hailing distance of each other as observed by the keeper of the Cape Flattery Light Station. They were about ten miles offshore and the keeper observed both were taking heavy seas over their bows. As they disappeared from view the weather worsened, eventually becoming a gale. They were never seen again. In February 1895, name boards from each vessel were discovered at an Indian village in Canada's Queen Charlotte Island, some 800 miles to the north.

The entire vicinity of the Cape shows evidence of prehistoric upheaval. Rugged cliffs, ragged reefs and numerous sea caverns abound. There are miles of rocky shoreline with bluffs without a beach.

Yet, this inhospitable country has been home to the Makah Indian tribe since time immemorial. Even today these brave people hunt whales from canoes, the only tribe allowed to do so by our government. Although

not as warlike as the Haidas and Nootka tribes to the north, the Makahs were still a force to be reckoned with in the 19th century. They did not take kindly to the Bostons, as they called all white men.

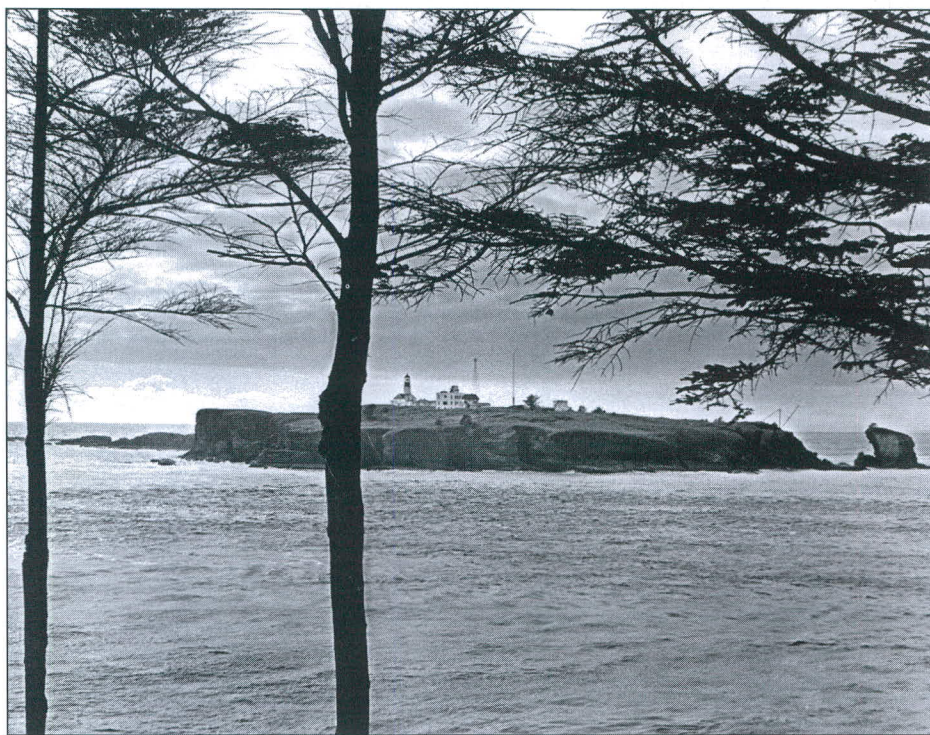
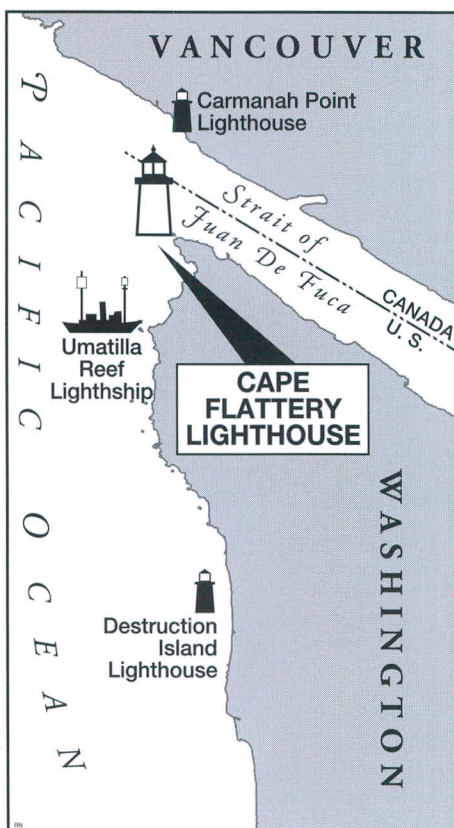
The first European to sight the area was the Portuguese explorer Martinez in 1774 and early charts called it Point Martinez. However, a few years later, Captain James Cook, during his last voyage aboard the *Resolution*, bestowed its present name – Cape Flattery.

Three quarters of a mile off Cape Flattery is Tatoosh Island, a name meaning Thunderbird in Makah. According to Indian legend, when this fierce bird opened its mouth, thunder roared and the flashing of its eye caused bolts of lightning.

On June 29, 1788, Captain John Mearns, an English explorer in command of the *Felice*, hove to off the island and wrote in his log; "The island itself appeared to be barren rock, almost inaccessible, and of no great extent; but the surface of it as far as we could see, was covered with inhabitants [Indians] who were gazing at our ship ... the Chief of this area, whose name is Tatooche, did us the favor of a visit, and so surly and forbidding a character we had not yet seen."

In the years 1849-50, surveyor Wm. McArthur sailed into the area aboard the Revenue Cutter *Ewing*. He wrote, "A light-house is much needed also at Cape Flattery and I would recommend that it be situated on Tatoochi Island, a small island almost touching the Northwest extremity of Cape Flattery ... to vessels bound from seaward a lighthouse on this island would be of much assistance. It would enable them to enter the straits, when the absence of a light would compel them to remain at sea until daylight. Once inside the strait vessels are comparatively secure. The advantage of having the lighthouse situated on the island instead of the extremity of the cape is that being so situated, it would serve as a guide to vessels seeking Neah or Scarborough harbor, a small but secure harbor of refuge four miles inside the strait. Strong contrary currents will cause navigators to seek the little harbor quite frequently."

His report was sent to A.D. Bache, Superintendent of the Coast Survey. Based on this report and earlier, similar recommendations, Congress was petitioned for funds to construct the station. \$39,000 was allocated in 1854 to construct both Cape Flattery Lighthouse on Tatoosh Island and the New Dungeness Light Station located well inside the Strait of Juan de Fuca.



Tatoosh Island and the Cape Flattery Light Station as seen from the mainland. 1978 photo courtesy of the *Seattle Times* newspaper.

The first eight west coast lighthouses had already been authorized by Congress, seven in California and one at the mouth of the Columbia River. Five of the second string of eight would be located in what are now the states of Oregon and Washington.

Once the funds were allocated, surveyor George Davidson landed on the island and selected the site for the lighthouse. He noted that the local Indians used the island, mostly in the summer, as a base from which to catch salmon and whales.

The local Indians had not changed their attitude about the white man. They viewed the incursion with scorn and alarm. To exacerbate matters, the following year a smallpox epidemic broke out in an Indian village near the Cape and killed about 500 members of the 1,000-member village. When a survey party landed at nearby Neah Bay, forty Indian canoes arrived, appearing to be traders. However, before the trading began, the survey party realized that they actually might be attacked. They hastily threw up defensive breastworks and the Indians departed. The survey party was eventually rescued by the vessel *Active*, which was in the area scouting other lighthouse sites in the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

In 1855, the Indians traded the island and land adjoining the Cape to the United States government for \$30,000. As further compensation, the President set aside 20,000 acres as a reservation for the tribe.

The 18-acre island resembles a low mesa, with steep sides – 100 foot high, all around. The only landing is a small beach on the east side.

Although the government had purchased the island, when the construction crew arrived they were not welcomed with open arms. The tribe had established a fishing village on the island and made hostile gestures to the workmen. To provide for their protection, they constructed a blockhouse of rough-hewn timbers before work began on the lighthouse. Notches were cut in the timbers from which guns could be fired if attacked. The construction crew had twenty guns at their disposal (which were never fired in anger). When construction finally began, at least one of the work crew was always posted as a lookout.

The Indians ignored the blockhouse and continued to come and go freely, fishing and

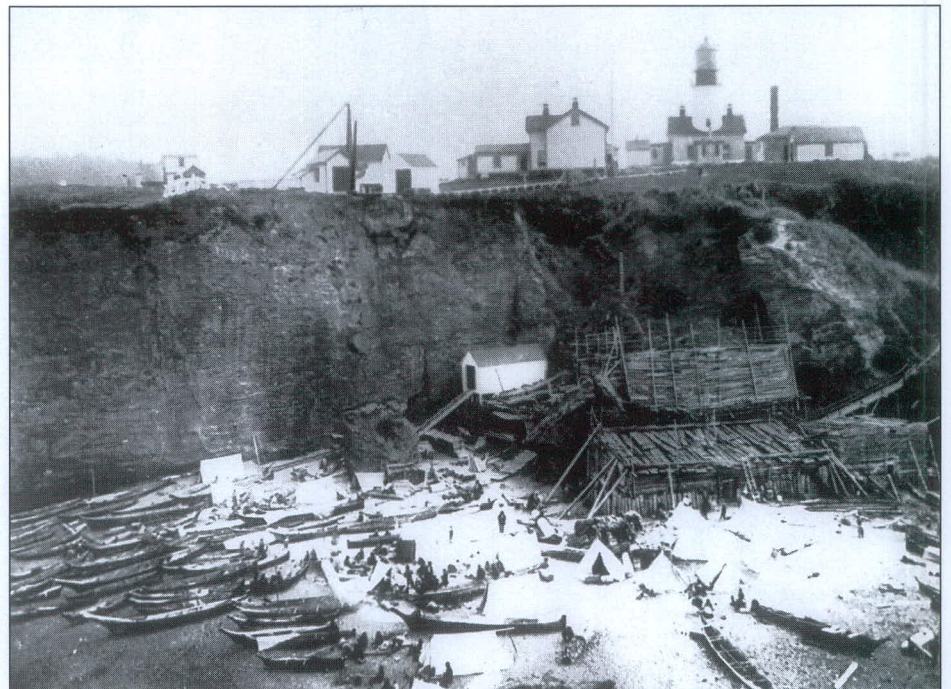
drying their catch of fish, or an occasional whale on the beach. When the opportunity presented itself, the Indians would steal tools or supplies. Because the Natives outnumbered the workmen – ten-to-one, workmen seldom confronted the Indians. The workmen put up with the shenanigans and sometimes, the awful stench from a slaughtered whale.

When the seas allowed, materials for the station were landed on the small beach and hauled up to the 100-foot-high plateau. Sandstone blocks were used for the base of the lighthouse. Like the previous west coast lighthouses, the design was a one-and-a-half story Cape Cod style dwelling with a 65-foot-tall cylindrical tower rising from the structure's center.

A first order Fresnel lens first displayed its light on December 28, 1857. The roll of keepers doesn't list who first tended the light; perhaps one of the construction crew maintained the light until a keeper could be located. The principal keeper, George Garrish, and three assistants, moved into the dwelling on March 1, 1858. At the time, the island had four, single, male keepers and 250 Indians. Three months after the station became operational, the keepers found it less than ideal. Difficult to heat, the walls were constantly damp (some wall areas actually grew moss) and the roof leaked. Wind blowing across

the top of the chimney backed smoke into the dwelling. Although Garrish originally was paid \$1,000 a year, in September of 1858 his pay was reduced to \$800 a year. Uncomfortable and isolated living conditions, coupled with the pay reduction, were possibly the factors, which caused Garrish and two assistants to resign in January 1860. His replacement, William Winsor, lasted only a year when he was "removed." He was replaced by George Smith in 1862, who was appointed by his son, the new Collector of Customs for Puget Sound. Shortly after he assumed his duties the visiting Lighthouse District Inspector reported, "The light is in deplorable condition. [The keeper] has with him two assistants who are as ignorant as he is. They have got the light [lens] out of order and are unable to repair it. He recommended that it be changed from an unaccompanied station to a family station so it would be, "... no longer at the mercy of the rollicking bachelors who have had possession since its establishment."

Scrolling through the list of keepers and assistant keepers shows very few keepers lasted very long on Tatoosh Island. Most names are followed by the words "removed, resigned or deserted." Very few "transferred" or "promoted" notations appear on the roll of keepers for the Cape Flattery Light Station.



Indians and their dugouts on the beach of Tatoosh Island drying fish on large drying frames (middle right). The station boat house is at the base of the cliff and above it the stiff-legged crane used to haul supplies. National Archives photo, undated.

In 1868, the visiting inspector noted, "The keeper's dwelling, which is of stone, was found, upon inspection, to be very damp, and the walls discolored by moisture, causing illness among the keepers. The walls have been thoroughly oiled and painted, an extra amount of fuel has been furnished the keepers for the purpose of drying the house, and the engineer of the district has been requested to devise a permanent remedy for the defect."

The high incidence of fog soon called for the erection of a fog signal building. Initially, a bell signal was installed. However, with the prevailing, and often strong, on-shore winds, it was impossible to hear the bell at any distance to seaward. Funds for a steam whistle fog signal were allocated in 1871, but delivering the materials to Tatoosh Island proved to be difficult. The Annual Report for that year states, "A first class steam fog whistle, with large fuel house, a cistern holding 33,000 gallons, and a water shed of 3,000 feet, were completed June 6, 1872. The machinery and materials for this work were ready for shipment from Portland six weeks before transportation could be secured to any point in the Strait of [Juan de] Fuca or Puget Sound, and in the end, delivery at Tatoosh Island could not be obtained. They were shipped to Port Townsend, Washington

Territory. Although efforts were made to secure transportation in Puget Sound, the only vessel that could be had was one with mail and other contracts which could not be interfered with. One cargo was delivered safely on the island early in October 1871, but the time consumed by the steamer, and other work, made the second trip so late that only the cargo could, with great risk, be discharged at Tatoosh Island and the balance was landed at Neah Bay, on the mainland, November 1. This necessitated suspension of the work on the island, then well underway, until the next season. In order ... to complete the cistern in time to make sure of a sufficient supply of water for the [fog signal boilers] for the summer of 1872, work was carried on at intervals during February, March and April, but great difficulties were experienced by carrying freight by Indian canoes from Neah Bay. A party was sent May 1 from Portland which completed the work June 6. As no supply of water can be had until the next rainy season, the fog-whistle cannot be operated before that time [about November]. Much as this delay of twelve months is to be regretted, it could not have been avoided, [with] the dearth of vessels in the North Pacific and Strait of [Juan de] Fuca."

In 1873, district officials reported that the entire dwelling needed renewing. In addition,

the cistern needed rebuilding, a store-room was needed and a boat, boatway and tramway were deemed necessary to allow keepers to safely land supplies. The work was completed the following year. The tramway extended from the fog signal building and storehouse to the derrick which raised supplies from the beach below. A new duplex dwelling was also completed and occupied and was reported to be, "... a convenient and substantial building."

In 1878, the boathouse, completed just the year before, was carried away by a tidal wave and was rebuilt.

For several years, mariners complained about the efficiency of the fog signal. The 1881 Annual Report states, "... Many reports were made during the past year, by mariners, adverse to the efficiency of the fog-whistle. The escape of the steam is often visible when the signal cannot be heard. The approach to the Strait of [Juan de] Fuca should be marked by the best signal in use, it is recommended that the whistle be replaced by a first class steam siren, in duplicate, with steel boilers. An appropriation of \$10,000 is recommended for this improvement."

In 1884 the Signal Service was granted permission to erect a small wooden shed and a flagstaff from which to display storm signals. They had established their station the year before and the first weather observer was transported to the island by Indian canoe. Actually, for many years, mail, supplies and even fuel arrived at Tatoosh by Indian canoe. The keepers had an agreement with the local Indians to bring out wood for \$7 a cord. For mail and supplies, other than wood, they paid the Indians \$1 per trip if the seas were calm and \$2 per trip, if rough. If the Indians had trouble landing on the beach, because of surf, the charge increased to \$3. Although the district lighthouse tender periodically delivered supplies (sometimes only quarterly), the keepers relied on the Indians of Neah Bay for between-tender visits to furnish mail, food, people – even cows, and, on one occasion, a piano. The Indians made the seven-mile trip from Neah Bay about twice a week, weather permitting. Although deft at handling their canoes, the seas in the area can be very rough and the Indians often took tremendous chances. One Indian, named Old Doctor, lost three canoes on the rocks of Tatoosh Island. Sometimes the only way to get a sack



An 1872 photo of the workmen who constructed the fog signal building (at right) shortly after it was completed. Notice the granite of the lighthouse hasn't been painted yet. National Archives photo

of mail ashore was to paddle as close as possible and heave the mail sack to a keeper waiting on the rocks. In 1912 the Lighthouse Service Bulletin ran an article,

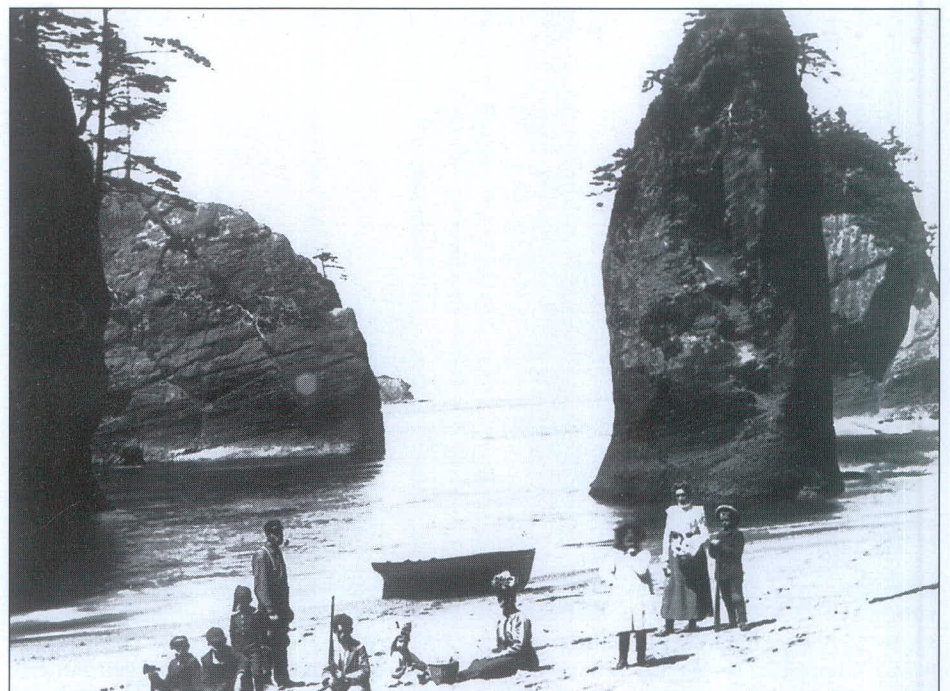
“Difficulty in Supplying Light Station. The difficulty of supplying Cape Flattery Light Station, located on Tatoosh Island, entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Wash., is well illustrated by the experience of the tender *Heather*, recently – 10 days being required to land the winter’s supply of coal for the four keepers and Weather Bureau observer. Owing to the many submerged rocks a boat can safely land only on the small exposed strip of sand beach of the island during the higher stages of tide. On three different dates during the early part of October, but one small boatload could be landed. On October 7 & 8, however, second Officer Carl Hagen and his boat’s crew completed the delivery. Time after time, their boat was swamped on the beach and all hands worked waist deep in the icy waters of the Pacific.

Although the District Inspector recommended the station be an accompanied station back in the 1860s, it wasn’t until 1885 that the keepers could bring their families to the Cape Flattery Light Station. That year, Captain Henry Ayers brought his wife and daughter, Jessie, with him when he was assigned as an assistant keeper to Keeper Alex Sampson. Apparently, Sampson was a favorite among the Makahs, other keepers and their families. He was described as “... a big man, slightly stooped, with iron gray hair and beard. He had the weathered face of a mariner who had spent years at sea.” After years of being the master of vessels, he constructed a house in what is now Port Angeles, which he retained while serving on Tatoosh Island. He retired as keeper in 1893.

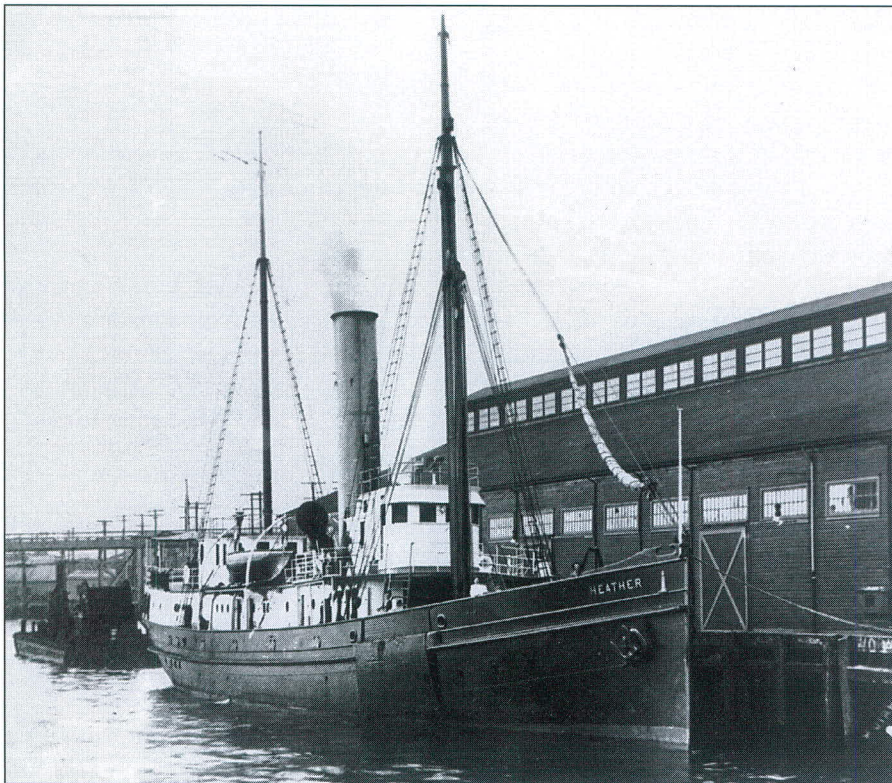
Because the mariners continued to complain that the fog signal was hard to hear, in 1891 the Service recommended it be relocated to West Island and requested an appropriation of \$17,000. The Service continued to request funds for the relocation of the signal for several years before giving up. In 1894 the Report noted, “The crowded condition of the double dwelling made it an urgent necessity to put the dwelling attached to the tower in a condition suitable for occupancy. This building, constructed in 1857, was built of stone. The woodwork, which was in an advanced state of decay, was entirely renewed, and the building is now habitable.”



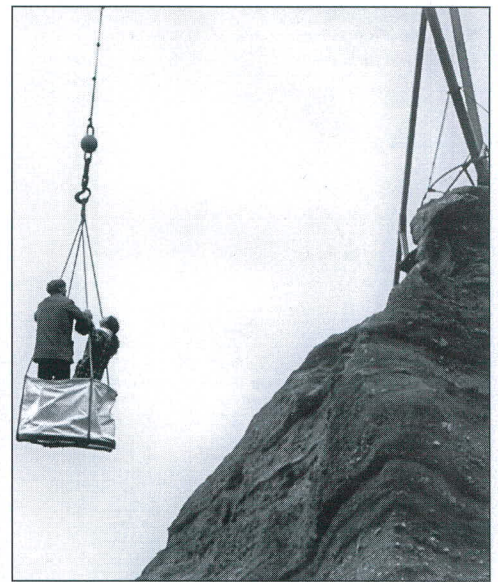
Keeper Cowen (seated) and his three assistants in 1900. National Archives photo.



A picnic on the north beach. Undated photo courtesy of the National Archives.



The tender *Heather* tied up at Seattle. The vessel furnished supplies to the Cape Flattery Light Station. She had a composite hull (steel and wood) and was constructed in 1903. She served until 1940 when transferred to the War Department. National Archives photo.



A Coast Guardsman and his spouse being hoisted in a canvas basket from a boat to the top of the bluff. They called it "riding the hook" and it was very much a part of life on the station. 1971 photo courtesy of the *Seattle Times*.

The fog signal building was reconstructed in 1897, but on Tatoosh Island – not on West or Middle Island as had been recommended for a number of years.

During the winter of 1908, diphtheria broke out on the island and four people became seriously ill. Fearing the disease would spread, the Service ordered the lighthouse tender to stand clear of the island until the crisis had passed. Over the years, 14 people died on the island from a variety of causes.

The station started out as an unaccompanied station with just four keepers. By the time the Coast Guard took over in 1939 there was as many as 24 people on the island, including children and Weather Service personnel. At one period there was even a school on the island and a post office, with the head keeper sworn in as an official Post Master.

Today the lighthouse is automated and most of the ancillary buildings have been torn down. The station is serviced by a local Coast Guard aids to navigation team via helicopter.

Right – Cape Flattery Lighthouse circa 1930 after the 1st order Fresnel lens was removed and a 4th order lens was installed. The smaller lens can be seen in the lantern room of the tower. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.





Excerpts from the Cape Flattery Log.

Oct. 2, 1875 - George Harris appointed 3rd assist.

Dec. 9, 1875 - Two canoes arrived with coal and the Indians commenced to hoist it.

Aug. 8, 1876 - 3rd Asst Geo. Harris – deserted.

Nov. 3, 1876 - While cleaning an oil butt we found about two quarts of rock salt, suppose to have been put there by one George Harris while acting as 3rd Asst. lighthouse keeper last winter. We detected him several times attempting to damage lighthouse property.

Aug. 2, 1878 - Keeper and wife attended an Indian dance at Neah Bay.

Aug. 29, 1889 - Mr. Nal's [the 2nd asst] boy fell into the LH cistern and was drowned. He must have been there more than an hour before he was missed. We done all we could and of no use. Mr. & Mrs. Nals and Mr. Doyle [the keeper] went to Neah Bay.

Oct. 27, 1900 - Nils Nelson, 2nd Asst Keeper and Mr. Frank Reif, the timer, left this morning for Neah Bay and have not yet returned, great anxiety is felt for their safety as it is very stormy.

Oct. 28, 1900 - The storm continues with no sign of the missing men.

Oct. 30, 1900 - Keeper went to Neah Bay to find some trace of the missing men and send off dispatches in regard to them.

Nov. 3, 1900 - Mr. J. Thomas, father-in-law of 2nd Asst Nelson arrived to take his family away. No hopes remain as to the escape of Mr. Nelson and Mr. Reif. *Columbine* arrived 8 p.m. to search the Vancouver shore for them.

Nov. 4, 1900 - Assisted in packing Mr. Nelson's effects. Mrs. Nelson left the station with her father, for Dungeness.

Nov. 25, 1900 - Mr. J. C. Fields of Port Angeles arrived to fill the place of the 3rd asst keeper, Mr. Thomas having been promoted 2nd asst keeper.

Aug. 7, 1908 - Tender *Heather* arrived with Mr. Mize and family (Weather Observer)

Aug. 9, 1908 - Dr. Woods pronounced Mr. Mize's little daughter sick with diphtheria.

Aug. 10, 1908 - Mr. Mize's daughter died. We dug a grave and made a coffin. They buried her on the island.

Aug. 12, 1908 - Mrs. Mize and son down with diphtheria.

Aug. 14, 1908 - Mr. Mize and Mr. Rassmusson down with diphtheria. Nurse coming on tonight's boat. 2nd Asst and wireless operator went to Neah Bay to meet boat and bring nurse to island.



Cape Flattery Light Station showing the modern quarters left, old duplex center (right of the water tower) and the radio beacon antenna at far right. Photo courtest of the U. S. Coast Guard, August 8, 1974.

THE KEEPERS OF CAPE FLATTERY.

The first four keepers of the Cape Flattery Light Station lasted only three months. They all resigned at the same time, citing low pay and isolation. The local Collector of Customs then appointed Franklin Tucker as keeper and also appointed two new assistants. They, also, only lasted three months resigning due to low pay and fear of the Indians.

Francis James was the next principal. One morning after breakfast, he became angry with an assistant keeper and threw hot coffee in his face. The men decided to settle their differences with a pistol duel. James Woodman, one of the assistant keepers tried to stop the duel, but they went ahead. Three times they loaded their pistols and blazed away at each other, but neither was shot. They finally shook hands. Woodman later admitted he removed the bullets from the shells. Keeper James was eventually dismissed for not keeping "a proper light."

Possibly the best remembered keeper at the light station was Alex Sampson, who served twice as principal keeper. His last tenure was from 1879 to 1893. Sampson was described as "... a big man, slightly stooped, with iron gray hair and beard, and the weathered face of a man who had spent a lifetime at sea."

He was born into a Massachusetts shipping family and spent many years at sea, serving as master of several large vessels. He was married but his wife left him when he sailed west, and he never remarried. Sampson gained the respect of the Makah Indians through his friendliness and helpfulness. When an Indian boy drowned, he built a coffin for the boy and lined it with flannel.

Kerosene was the regulation lamp fuel when Sampson served as keeper the second time. He once told visitors he had learned a few tricks while tending the light. "The inspectors don't know it, but I always add a dash of whale oil and lard t'make it gleam a little brighter."

Winter storms brought severe winds to Cape Flattery. Although the lighthouse was constructed of sandstone and brick, in high winds the tower vibrated "... in a manner calculated to terrify a person of weak nerves."

In 1883 the U.S. Signal Corps built a



Cape Flattery Light Station at left, Weather Station at right. Radio beacon antenna at left, just below the stiff-legged crane used to haul people and supplies up from the beach. British Columbia, Canada, in the background. Note the sheer cliffs of the island. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard, August 21, 1952.

weather station on the island. Their wooden buildings were lashed to the rock to keep them from blowing away.

Frank Beahan was on the original staff of the weather station. He married two years later and brought his bride to live on the island. Their daughters Hazel and Ruth, were born on the island.

After Keeper Sampson died in 1893, three other principal keepers served briefly until 1900, when John M. Cowen was assigned to the station. He entered the Service in 1894, and served in Oregon at Heceta Head and Coquille River Light Stations. When the Cowens moved to Tatoosh Island, the Beahan girls, who lived there until 1905, were delighted to have new playmates. Hazel remembered that, "In those days juvenile delinquency consisted of lowering a companion down the cliffs on a rope to rob gull's nests..."

About ten years after Cowen became keeper, his son Forest, was hired as an assistant keeper. On a Saturday in February 1911, Forest, two men from the wireless station, and a newlywed couple decided to go to Neah Bay. The weather was mild when they departed, but the seas were rough, and they were advised not to make the trip. Nevertheless, they launched a boat from the beach. As they

pulled through the surf the boat capsized and was pulled away from the island by a strong ebb tide. The elder Cowen witnessed the boat capsizing and the people clinging to its side. He launched the station boat and rescued two of the men, but was unable to save his son, the new bride or the third man.

In January 1921, a seventy-mile-per-hour gale struck the island. It wrecked chimneys and blew away rooftops. Mrs. Cowen later wrote, "It blew Mr. Cowen end-over-end for 300 feet. Only by clinging to the grass and crawling on his hands and knees was he able to avoid being blown from the island into the sea." Cowen's bull, however, was blown off the island and was written down in the lighthouse log as "lost at sea." The bull surprised them when he swam ashore and was "rewarded" with extra rations.

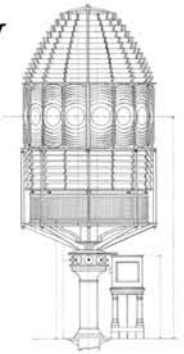
The preceding information on the Keepers of the Cape Flattery Light Station is from the *Umbrella Guide to Washington Lighthouses* by Ted and Sharlene Nelson with their permission. That guide can be ordered for \$12.95 plus shipping from the Lighthouse Gallery and Gifts (800) 320-2130.



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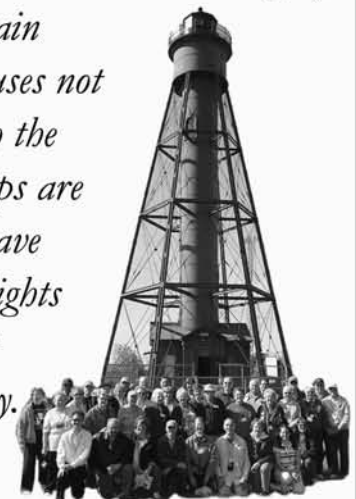
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