

# Willamette River Light Station, Oregon

By George Worthylake



Since settlers began populating Washington Territory – the present states of Oregon and Washington – the mighty Columbia River has been a major water highway for the transportation of goods. Much of the river between its mouth and Portland, Oregon is wide and runs deep. But there are shallows and a few islands to restrict navigation.

From the Lighthouse Service's earliest presence on the west coast, aids to navigation were provided on the Columbia River. One of the first group of lighthouses on the west coast was established at Cape Disappointment, on the north side of the entrance to the river. About the same time, eleven unlighted buoys were placed in the river. Eventually, the Service added more aids to assist mariners navigate the 115 miles from the river's mouth to Portland. By 1892 there were 38 river lights. The Board mentioned in that year, "The post lights in the Columbia and Willamette Rivers . . . are of great benefit to navigation, and night boats now run regularly on the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. They are much use during fog as the lights can be seen, except

in very dense fogs, at a distance of 100 yards or more . . . without their aid night boats could not run regularly . . ."

But it was evident that a manned light and fog signal station was needed at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers and \$6,000 was authorized, in February 1893, to construct one off the tip of Nigger Tom Island at Kelly Point. The 1896 Report of the Lighthouse Board mentioned, "The contractor for the erection of this station completed his work on October 30, 1895. The fog signal machinery was put in place, and everything was in readiness: the station went into commission December 31, 1895. Since that date it has been continually in service." Actually, the important aid at this station was the fog signal, warning vessels as they approached the bifurcation of the two rivers in thick weather.

The station consisted of a one-and-a-half story octagonal structure situated on a rectangular cluster of piles driven into the riverbed. The structure had a walkway on the roof with an area for a lantern room. But instead of the

classical lantern room on the top of the house, a lens lantern was hung from a post in front of the dwelling. A large fog bell, probably weighing 4,000 pounds, was struck by machinery every 10 seconds. A similar structure, with a lantern room, was erected near the mouth of the Columbia River in 1902.

In 1935, the station was discontinued and replaced by minor aids mounted on nearby pilings. In 1940, the Portland Merchants Exchange purchased the structure from the government. The structure was lifted onto a barge and transported to a new location at Kelly Point on the Willamette River. In the 1950s the Merchants Exchange constructed a new building and the old lighthouse was again abandoned . . . and a short time later was destroyed by fire.

For 40 years vessels plying the mighty Columbia River, approaching Portland in thick fog, listened for the sound of that bell, calling out every ten seconds, warning of the fork in the river and it seems like . . . Only Yesterday!



Above – The Willamette Light Station after it was relocated near Portland and used as a pilot office. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

Opposite Page – The Willamette Light Station is the same design used in Puget Sound for the Semiahmoo Light Station, except that structure had a lantern room. A small lens lantern is situated next to the flag pole in this photo. Photo courtesy Oregon Historical Society.

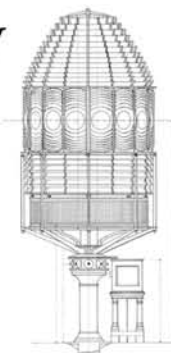




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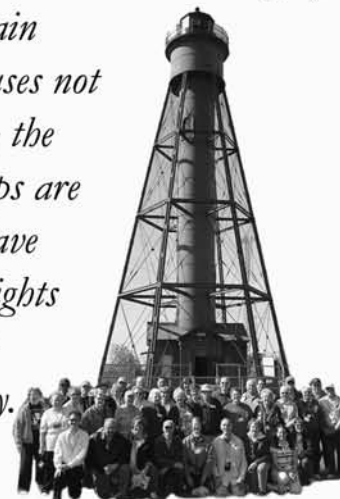
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