

Cape Shoalwater (Willapa Bay)

By George Worthylake



Cape Shoalwater Lighthouse circa 1930 looking northeast. The small structure at left is apparently some sort of a lookout. Perhaps to watch vessels crossing the dangerous bar. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

ohn Meares was an independent British fur trader commanding the East India Company ship *Felice Adventurer*. While exploring the Washington coast in 1788, he attempted to enter a bay sheltered by a cape. He wrote in his log, "We shoaled our water gradually to six fathoms. We immediately hauled off the shore until we deepened our water to sixteen fathoms" [Ed. a fathom is six feet]. With this attempt, he named both the cape and the bay 'Shoalwater.'

When Meares discovered it, Cape Shoalwater was an uninhabited, windswept hook of land. An occasional band of local Indians camped there during the summer searching for clams, crabs, and berries. The bar across the bay entrance could, at times, be dangerous, but the harbor was deep enough for the oceangoing vessels of the 19th century. Thanks to the hook of the Cape, the bay was well sheltered from northwest weather.

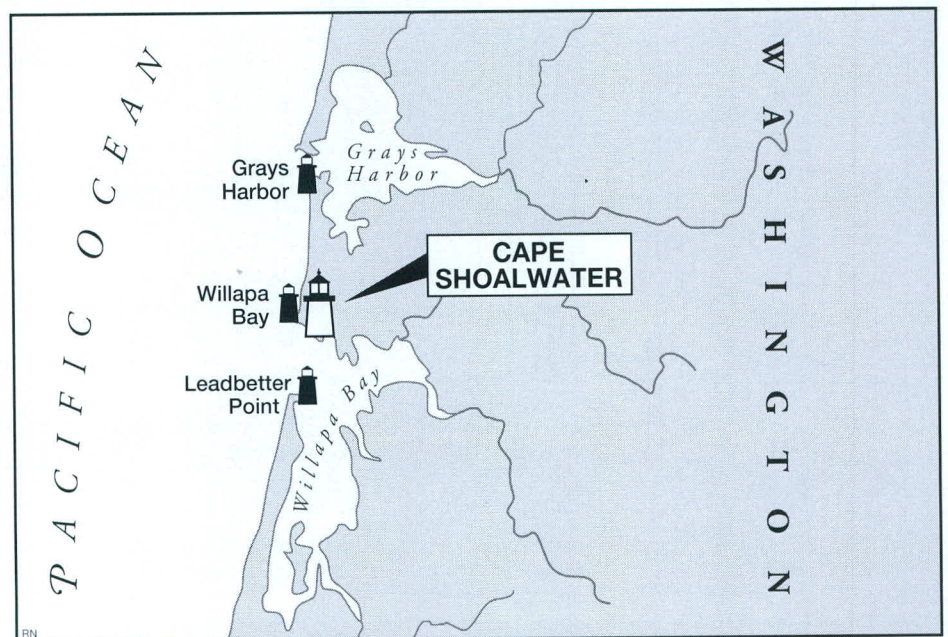
In 1854 the government decided the cape was a perfect location to establish a military reservation. The property was acquired from a local band of Indians. The military presence provided a sense of security leading to the establishment of the town of North Cove. A thriving salmon cannery and oyster harvesting business soon followed. The rapidly growing city of San Francisco was the final destination for most of these goods.

As commerce increased, local merchants demanded buoys and a lighthouse to help vessels navigate the harbor. The Lighthouse Service was planning eight lighthouses for the west coast, including one for Cape Shoalwater. This group of lighthouses would be the second set of eight built on the west coast, and would follow the same design as the first: small 1½ story Cape Cod style houses with a tower through the middle.

With the help of local Indians and their canoes, supplies were landed at the cape in the spring of 1858. The lighthouse was completed and lit October 1 of that year. The 4th order Fresnel lens displayed a fixed white light, interrupted by a flash every two minutes. It has been reported that a lack of oil for the lamp



Cape Shoalwater Lighthouse looking south, note the multi windowed 'look out tower.' The dunes are beginning to erode at right. USLHS photo 1910.



caused the light house to close in 1859, but other historical information indicates a drop in commerce caused the Service to close the station. In 1861, the lighthouse was relighted — apparently commerce picked.

Cape Shoalwater proved to be a less than ideal location for a lighthouse. Keepers were constantly battling blowing sand and erosion. As early as the 1860's, erosion near the lighthouse caused the Lighthouses Service to construct a protective bulkhead.

Over the years, many keepers tended the light; very few stayed long. October 1, 1880, Keeper Sidney Smith wrote in his log: "Mr. John Gelbin was placed on duty as Assistant Light Keeper. Goodby Mitchell you infernal thief and Bummer."

Keeper Smith also wrote on September 1, 1881 that his neighbor brought some cattle to the station to be shipped out, "Shipped the cattle on board the scow and started to go to the vessel, but

towed the scow under and dumped all of the cattle (38) in the water just outside the point, south of the boat house [Ed. probably the Life Saving Service Station]. The cattle all swam first to the point, and then from the point directly across the cove to the boat house, don't think that there was any lost."

On July 31, 1883, he wrote, "Two sailboats and the steamer in today all loaded down with Camp Meeting people. Camp Meeting to be held at Ocean Park for the first time and this will be my last full month at this station, thank the Lord."

The following entries were made in the station log by Keeper M. A. Stream:

August 28, 1893 - Sent for the Doctor this morning, Baby being very sick. Doctor staid all night. Dr. pronounced the children's sickness Scarlet Fever.

August 29 - Doctor left at 5 O'clock [apparently the baby died]

September 4 - Pulled up to

South Bend in small boat in the company of Capt. Brown. Left South Bend to go to Fernhill Cemetary to buy a lot.

September 11 - I am going to leave the station today to go up to Willapa with the body of my stepdaughter to bury it in the Fernhill Cemetary. Will be gone for two days. Went out to the graveyard this morning and exhumed the body. Had to work alone at it, as none of the Life Crew [Ed. Life Saving Station] would help me. Left at 3 p.m. on the Mail Boat for South Bend with it.

In the 1890's the local population started referring to Shoalwater Bay as Willapa Bay, feeling the word "Shoalwater" would discourage vessels from entering the bay. Eventually the Lighthouse Service followed suit. At first, the Light List stated "Cape Shoalwater (Willapa Bay) Lighthouse" then, after a few years,



Cape Shoalwater from the beach, looking east. The 'look out' tower has been replaced. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1930.



The lighthouse is seriously endangered by erosion in this photo with most of the foundation exposed. The small structure at left appears to have been moved back from the eroding dunes. Photo courtesy of Ainsley Dixon, late 1930's.

“Willapa Bay (Cape Shoalwater) Lighthouse.”

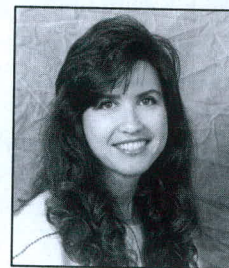
In the 20th century erosion badly affected most of the cape until, in 1939, the ocean was practically at the front door of the lighthouse. In 1940, the Coast Guard removed all salvageable material and with water hoses helped Mother Nature undermine the ocean side of the structure until it fell into the surf.

For 82 years the Cape Shoalwater (Willapa Bay) Lighthouse showed vessels the way into the Bay and helped mariners navigate the Washington coast. It witnessed a fluctuating economy built on salmon, oysters, and lumber. Coastal steamers and mail boats called at the bay, and for several summers, religious Camp Meeting people called the area home . . . and it seems like only yesterday.

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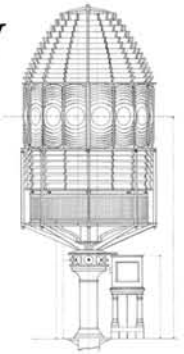


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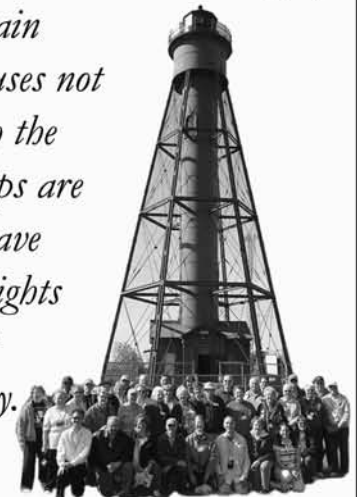
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