



Yaquina Head Light Station
Oregon Historical Society photo

Yaquina Head Lighthouse

By Jack Delaini

The author, Jack Delaini, is an Interpretive Specialist with the Bureau of Land Management at Salem, OR. He is presently working on developing land for a new Interpretive Center Complex at Yaquina Head which will orient visitors and highlight the many outstanding features of the area: flora, fauna and Pharos.

Jack was assisted in his research by Dr. Stephen Beckham, a Professor of History at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR. Interestingly enough, his grandfather was the first head keeper of the Eldred Rock Lighthouse (1904) in Lynn Canal, SE Alaska and later, keeper of the range light station at Coos Bay Oregon.

“Moderate to fresh breezes S. To S.E. these 24 hours last 12 hours some damp fog sea moderately smooth Keeper Capt. S. L. Wass died at 2 P.M.”

—February 9, 1886, keeper's log, Yaquina Head Lighthouse.

First things first, and if an assistant made this log entry, the daily weather report apparently had priority over the death of his boss. For all of the isolation of Nineteenth Century keepers at the Yaquina Head Light Station, they seem not to have had the inclination to express themselves a bit more than necessary, at least in their log. The log entries made during the eleven years of Keeper Wass's tenure were equally terse. If brevity truly is the soul of wit, these fellows were a clever lot indeed.

They were, in fact, a clever and resourceful line of folks who kept the light burning for decades at a site even more isolated than many.

In this article, the words of persons who worked or lived at the lighthouse, or were connected to it in some other way, tell much of its story. The concentration will, for the most part, be on the latter part of the Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth Century. Yaquina head's story is similar to a number of others, but we think there are enough wrinkles to keep it interesting.

The Formation of the Head

“. . . the steep sides of a densely-timbered mountain, at whose bases were high perpendicular precipices of volcanic rock, against which the ocean waves roared and lashed themselves with ceaseless fury.”

— U.S. Army Lt. Theodore Talbot (reconnaissance mission, September 3, 1849)

Yaquina Head was formed by one of the most spectacular events in the geologic history of the earth. Fifteen million years ago, in what is now southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon, molten lava spewed from fissures in the earth as much as 50 miles long and filled in low lying areas to depths of up to 15,000 feet. Then, as these basins filled to overflowing, the liquid rock continued to spill out and, following river beds, flowed towards the Pacific Ocean some 300 miles away.

Now Yaquina Head juts out into the Pacific almost a mile from the sandy beaches north and south. Although there is no way of knowing how much of the headland has eroded into the sea, what is left of it holds a wealth of resources. More than 400,000 visitors explore those resources each year. This virtually unique 100-acre site, three miles north of downtown Newport on the Oregon coast, is managed as an Outstanding Natural Area by the Bureau of Land Management, a Federal agency in the Department of the Interior.

The Earliest People at Yaquina Head

The human story at Yaquina Head also began long ago. The principal clue that humans had lived there came as the edge of a cliff, just yards from the lighthouse and eroding away under the relentless attack of the Pacific, revealed a thick layer of discarded sea shells, a “midden.” Evidence painstakingly excavated from the middens has confirmed that from about 4,000 years ago until about 2,000 years ago, Native Americans lived at Yaquina Head. These dates make the site the second oldest found on the Oregon coast.

The number and kinds of implements they left behind indicate that these Native Americans had a permanent settlement on the headland for perhaps as long as 20 centuries. At this time, the head may have been covered by a large, gently sloping sand dune. This would have allowed these people to reach the rocky beaches, 80-90 feet below the top of the headland, where they could easily gather the mussels and other seafoods upon which they subsisted. For unknown reasons, they abandoned the Head about 2,000 years ago, perhaps because shifts in weather and/or a rising sea level caused the dunes to disappear.

Early Explorers

“At the Northern extreme, the land formed a point, which I called Cape Foulweather, from the very bad weather that we, soon after, met with.”

—English Captain James Cook (log entry, March 7, 1778)

It was some 18 centuries later before there once again was a firm record of a human presence at or near Yaquina Head; Cook's Cape Foulweather is about 7 miles (12 km) north of Yaquina Head. If Capt. Cook saw Yaquina Head, he made no note in his log.

“they came very cautiously toward us nor would they come within pistol shot until one of them a very fine look[ing] fellow

had delivered a long oration accompanying it with actions and Gestures that would have graced a European orator. the subject of his discourse was designed to inform us that they had plenty of Fish and fresh water on shore at there habitations which they seemed to wish us to go and partake of.”

—Robert Haswell, August 9, 1788 (in his diary kept during the voyage of Capt. Robert Gray)

The Indians encountered by Gray's mariners probably lived just north of the several hundred Yaquina Indians who lived around the Yaquina Bay and River when other explorers and then settlers began to arrive in the early to mid-1800's. The Yaquina Indians traveled by foot or in ocean-going canoes carved from cedar logs, wore few clothes in spite of what can be a very inhospitable climate, and lived mostly on plants and seafood, especially salmon and shellfish. There is no evidence that these people were or were not descended from the ancient Yaquina Head villagers who had lived nearby some 2,000-4,000 years earlier. Incorporated into the Siletz Reservation in 1856, the Yaquina were subjected to enforced “civilization” programs by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. By 1900, their traditional lifeways and language had virtually vanished.



Yaquina Head and the cobble beach in 1915, looking northwest. Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

Settlers Begin To Arrive

"Should it be satisfactorily ascertained that ships may come in with safety, this harbor will become exceedingly valuable. . . . Descending some sandstone bluffs, we followed several miles along the sea beach, until a high rocky point projecting a half a mile into the ocean interrupted further travel."

—U.S. Army Lt. Theodore Talbot (September, 1849)

The harbor was Yaquina Bay, the sandstone bluffs were the future site of the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse, and the high rocky point was Yaquina Head. By the 1860's, a substantial number of settlers—some pushing the Oregon Trail to its absolute limit while others arrived via boat—had discovered Yaquina Bay. Once there, a few tried farming the narrow valley of the Yaquina River, but more turned to fishing, lumbering and harvesting the then abundant oysters. The establishment of the Siletz Indian Reservation blocked settlement for a time, but here, as elsewhere, the settlers and their government representatives managed to find ways to circumvent the supposed boundaries of the reservation and eventually took over almost all of the prime farming and other lands.

In 1856, the first commercial vessel entered Yaquina Bay, and some of the local entrepreneurs thought the Bay had potential as a major port. However, improvements to the harbor, including range lights, were needed. In 1870, in response to numerous entreaties from inhabitants near the Bay, the federal government detailed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to Yaquina Bay to mount a reconnaissance for the range lights.

Finding A Lighthouse Site

Col. Robert Stockton Williamson, the engineer sent to do the reconnaissance, saw Yaquina Head as it was described (as "Cape Foulweather") by a mid-Nineteenth Century visitor, Alexander W. Chase of the U.S. Coast Survey:

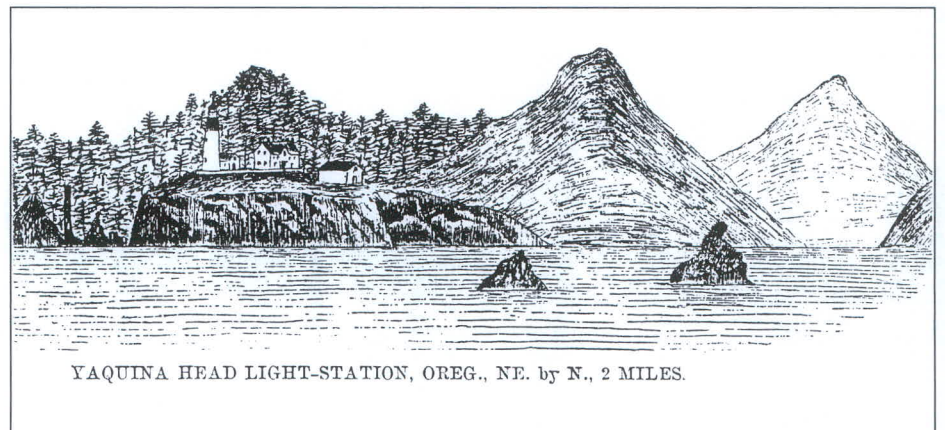
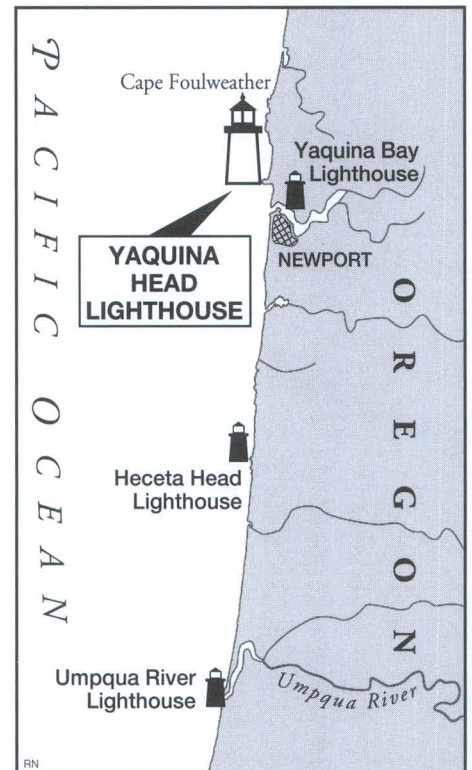
"Three and one-half miles to the north . . . is a remarkable cape, known as Cape Foulweather. It is perfectly bare of timber, extends one mile out from the beach, and consists of two conical hills;

the inner one four hundred and seven, the outer three hundred and sixty feet above the low water mark; and terminates in a tongue or point of rocks, with one large detached islet lying off its extreme end. This cape being a very prominent landmark and unlike any other on the coast line, will identify the position of Yaquina entrance at once, if the mountains are not visible"

The commercial potential of Yaquina Bay suggested a coastal light would be needed in addition to range lights for the harbor. Therefore, during his survey, Col. Williamson also assessed Yaquina Head, which he also called "Cape Foulweather," as a potential lighthouse site:

"With regard to a first order light at Cape Foulweather I must state that the point 3 1/2 miles to the north of the entrance to Yaquina bay, and usually known as Cape Foulweather (the inhabitants so call it) has been recently named by Prof. Davidson in his 'Coast Pilot, 1869' 'Yaquina Point,' and the bluff headland to the north, about 5 1/2 miles in extent 'Cape Foulweather.' Many years ago a lighthouse reservation of 20 acres was made at 'a point five miles north of Cape Foulweather,' meaning the head land mentioned in the 'Coast Pilot' of Prof. Davidson. Subsequently, at my instigation, a similar reservation was made at 'Cape Foulweather' meaning the 'Yaquina Point' of Prof. Davidson. I think it necessary to mention these facts to avoid mistakes, for the L.H. reservation at 'Cape Foulweather' and 'a point 5 miles above Cape Foulweather' are in fact the 'Yaquina Point' and 'Cape Foulweather' of the Coast Pilot."

This interchange of names has caused a great deal of confusion. Until about 1890 what is known today as Yaquina Head was generally called "Cape Foulweather"; the real Cape Foulweather, named by Captain Cook in 1778, was too far (8 1/2 miles) from Newport in the early settlement days to be worthy of naming. Official Light House Board reports as early as 1874 referred to "Cape Foulweather Light Station, Yaquina Head," and for a number of years, that is what the station was called officially. The confusion over the names has led to a local myth which says that the lighthouse was misplaced, that it was supposed to have been built at Cape Foulweather but the contractor unloaded



materials on Yaquina Head my mistake. (See the sidebar for further information about the myth.)

Williamson continued:

"The question now arises at which of these two points the proposed 1st order L.H. should be located. I went twice to the lower Cape [Yaquina Head] . . . [and found] that the southern point [Yaquina Head] is a little more westerly than the other. I selected a site for a L.H. there, estimated to be 120 feet above the sea by aneroid barometer, and from which spot I took the bearings. . ."

"I attempted to go to the northern point [Cape Foulweather], but failed. It can only be approached at low water and the tide did not suit. The trail leads along the beach for 3.5 miles, when it enters dence underbrush and timber; it requires a whole day, with favorable tide, to go from the lower cape to the upper headland and back. I was therefore forced to give up the attempt to visit it."

"The lower cape being so near Yaquina bay, with a good road to it, with water and grass, and a good prospect of land[ing] supplies under it, protected as it is against the prevailing N.W. winds of summer, is evidently the best site for the proposed 1st order L.H. The only objection to it being the close proximity of the harbor lights but 3 1/2 miles to the SE. Works authorized as necessary [are] in progress but not yet completed."

"With regards to Foulweather, when I go to the bay, I will go to there and to the upper point also, and find out all about them, and take a level along and actually level to find the height of the proposed sites. I told you how difficult it was to get there. I will have to start at daylight, and at the exact stage of the tide in order to go there and back in one day; and there is no habitation after passing the lower point. I am convinced in my own mind that the difficulties of building at the upper point will decide the question."

Thus, after much survey work, the Light House Board was advised by its field representative, Col. Williamson, to site the light station at Yaquina Head rather than farther north at the other headland, now called properly Cape Foulweather.

Building the Light Station

Eventually, more pressure built to improve the harbor further when it was discovered that the Yaquina Bay light, just 3 1/2 miles south of Yaquina Head, was ineffective—it could not be seen to north because its light was blocked by Yaquina Head. (See the sidebar for further information on the development and history of the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse.)

"Cape Foulweather, sea-coast of Oregon. An estimate was submitted last year for a sea-coast light at this point. A reservation of the necessary land has been made. This being one of the outlying points on the Pacific coast upon which a first-class light must be placed, sooner or later, and in consideration of the commerce of that coast, the estimate is renewed this year."

—Light-House Board report (1870)

As part of their request to the congress for funds with which to build the light-house, Army engineers had to estimate the costs of the light station in 1872. Just for fun, the Bureau of Land Management estimated them again in 1993 dollars; here's the comparison:

	1872 dollars	1994 dollars
Tower	\$44,459	\$4,000,000
Lantern	3,300	40,000
Lens	7,000	40,000*
Dwelling	14,018	605,000

* this is the cost and installation of a modern aero-beacon. A new 1st order lens might cost as much as \$1 million.

Congress reported expenditures of \$66,371.44 in 1872 and \$24,537.14 in 1873 for the light station, so the actual costs ended up a \$90,908.58.

When all of the decisions had been made and the money had been appropriated, it was time to actually build the light station. Although Col. Williamson had earlier noted that building at Cape Foulweather would have caused "difficulties," it was definitely no picnic building on the site at Yaquina Head, either, as the passages quoted below will attest.

"Cape Foulweather, sea-coast of Oregon. Work has been seriously hindered by the difficulties connected with the transportation of materials. Since the commencement of work in the autumn of 1871 the lighters [small boats which

shuttled material to the beach from the supply ships] have been destroyed twice, and the schooner engaged in bringing materials from San Francisco has been obliged to discharge most of her freight at Newport, to be reshipped in milder weather, besides twice getting stuck on the bar at the mouth of Yaquina Bay, and being once partially wrecked. Part of the materials have been hauled from Newport."

Light-House Board (reports in 1872-3)

Yet another problem delayed the contractor:

"Cape Foulweather, sea-coast of Oregon. The keeper's dwelling was complete in September, 1872. Notwithstanding the delays connected with transportation, the light-house would have been completed and the light exhibited as early as January, 1873, but for the fact that a part of the lantern had been lost at sea in transportation from the East, a fact not discovered in time to prevent the delay. Duplicates of the missing pieces have at length been received, and the light will be exhibited on the 20th of August, 1873"

—Light-House Board report (1873)

"Cape Foulweather, Yaquina Head, Oregon. This station was completed, and the light exhibited for the first time on the night of August 20, 1873"

—Light-House Board report (1874)

The honor of lighting the lamp for the first time fell to Head Keeper Fayette S. Crosby, who held his post at Yaquina Head from January 7, 1873 to November 11, 1875 before moving on the light station at Cape Arago, Coos Bay, Oregon.

Yaquina Head Light Station: Facts & Figures

Yaquina Head's brick light tower is 93 feet tall, and the light is 81 feet 2 inches above the ground and 168 feet above mean sea level. Some 370,000 bricks were shipped from San Francisco for the tower's double walls. Fueled originally by lard oil, the light could (and can) be seen about 20 miles out to sea. If the tower were much higher, the fog would often obscure it; much lower and it couldn't be seen from far enough away.

Attached to the tower and connected to it by a short hallway is a small building containing two equally-sized rooms. The earliest reference (1877) to these two rooms in the lighthouse keepers' logs is to an "oil room and office," but which room was which was not noted. The lighthouse building plans call these the "oil and work" rooms. Over time, the uses of these rooms changed to fit the needs of the keepers.

Along with the light tower and attached oil and work building, several other structures were built in 1872-3: the keeper's dwelling, a barn and a privy. As the years went by, structures came and went. At one time or another, there were a dwelling for the assistants, chicken house, woodshed, pig pen, water cistern, and storehouse.

In 1885, the road between Yaquina Head and Newport, a distance of less than four miles, was still so poor (much of it was simply the sandy beach) that it was less effort to land supplies on the beach than bring them from town. A tramway 3 feet wide and 130 feet long

was built to haul material up Yaquina Head's 85 feet high south-side cliffs, using horses to do pulling.

Yaquina Head Light Station was one in the growing list of aids to navigation along the Pacific Coast. By 1902, the Light-House Board reported that the 13th District, reaching from the California-Oregon border to Alaska, had the following facilities, equipment and ships: 151 lighthouses and beacon lights, including 106 post lights; two lightships and two tenders:

- *Manzanita*, was a buoy tender used to supply and inspect stations (The *Manzanita* served from 1879 until sinking in the Columbia River in October, 1905)

- *Columbine* was used for construction and repairs at stations.

In 1922, the original keeper's house was replaced by a bungalow:

"I have completed the keeper's dwelling at the Lighthouse at Yaquina Head and fulfilled all of my obligations under the contract . . ."

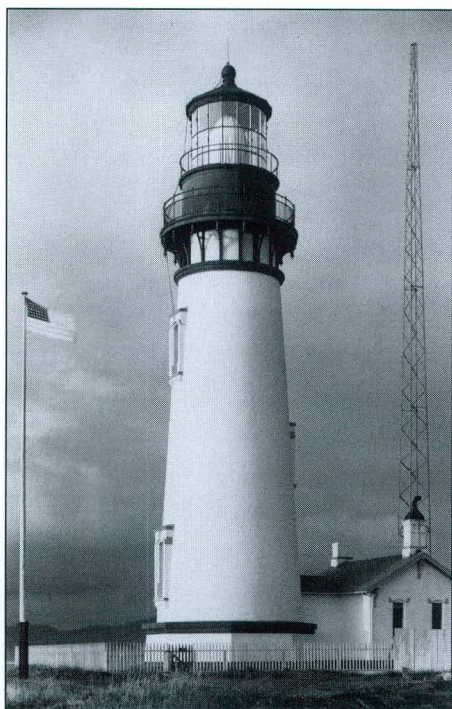
—Curtis Gardner, contractor, in a letter dated December 22, 1922

In September, 1937, the Service established the Yaquina Head Lt. Station Radiobeacon, and allocated \$2,750 to the project. This was the first time apparently that any type of signal other than the light was installed at Yaquina Head. Less than a year later, on August 9, 1938, R.R. Tinkham, Chief engineer of the Lighthouse Service, informed the Superintendent of Lighthouses, Portland, OR, of approval to erect a new house at Yaquina Head. Work was to commence by August 15, 1938. It is difficult to tell if this dwelling replaced the bungalow mentioned above or some other one(s):

"The plan for a simplified dwelling is being forwarded under separate cover. The estimated cost of this dwelling is well within the \$7,000 limit which the Bureau has been advised must be approximately the maximum amount that can be expended for a keeper's dwelling."



Yaquina Head Light Station circa 1915. The Keeper's fenced garden is in the foreground; near the lower left is a stairway to the "marine gardens." Photo courtesy of the author.

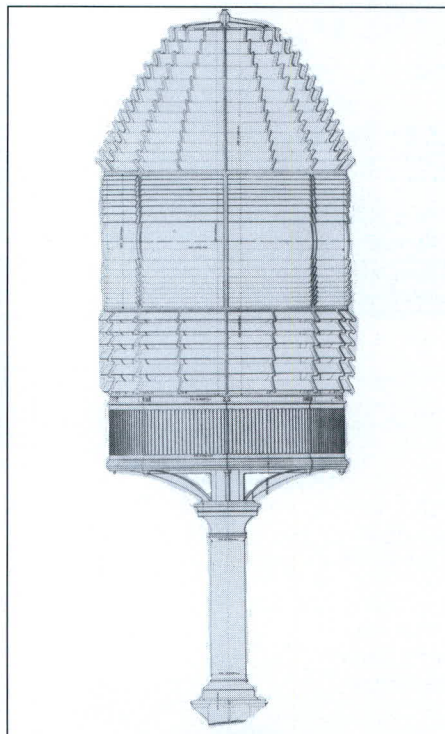


The new radiobeacon antenna in 1937. USLHS photo

When the light was automated in 1966, the last keeper left Yaquina Head. Maintenance of the lighthouse was done (and still is) by U.S. Coast Guard personnel from their station at Yaquina Bay. A few Coast Guardsmen lived in dwellings built in the 1930's, but by 1984, those houses had worn out and were torn down.

Currently, one of the rooms in the former "oil and work rooms" attached to the tower contains radio equipment used for communications by the Coast Guard while the other houses and emergency generator used to provide backup electrical power for the light in case of an outage. A battery provides backup power for a small emergency light in case the generator fails.

Today, there is also modern communications equipment on the headland atop 450 ft. tall "Communications Hill," one-half mile east of the lighthouse. These devices serve as additional navigational aids for today's mariners as well as aviators.



Fixed 1st order Fresnel lens

The Light

The first-order Fresnel lens at Yaquina Head was built in 1868 in Paris by H. Lepaute, Esq. It was shipped from France to Panama, transported across the isthmus, then shipped again to Oregon. The lens has 240 degree capability and 488 individual pieces of glass. The lantern probably had a four-wick concentric configuration but there is nothing in the records to verify this.

In 1887, like other light stations, Yaquina Head made the switch from lard oil to kerosene, then known as "mineral oil." Shortly thereafter, a "galvanized iron" oil house was built in which the fuel could be stored safely:

"Mr. C.D. McClure the Lampist and Machinst arrived at the station at 4 P.M. to change the lamps."

—September 28, 1887, keeper's log

"Keeper's assisting the lampist change the mineral oil lamps today"

—September 29, 1887, keeper's log

"2nd Asst. assisting the lampist. The keepers like the mineral oil lamp much better than the lard oil lamp"

—September 30, 1887, keeper's log

"Mr. Oliver hauled 425 brick today for foundation [sic] of Oil house"

—May 18, 1888, keeper's log



The large building at right is the barn. Note the water cistern to the right of the barn door, water was collected from the roof. Oregon Historical Society photo.



Above — The Yaquina Head station duplex in 1937. Note there are only two chimneys, as opposed to four in previous photos. The front porch has been 'crudely' enclosed with a single door in the middle.

Right — Taken sometime after the above photo. The front porch has been enclosed with siding and a door for each residence provided. Both photos courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.



"Mr. Reuberts the carpenter came over today to put the oil house together"

—May 27, 1888, keeper's log

"1st and 2nd Asst. keepers attending to visitors and getting 100 cases of mineral oil from the beach to the station"

—September 19, 1887, keeper's log

Years later, in 1933, the Lighthouse Service decided to extend electricity to the Yaquina Head Lighthouse, and called for service by June 1, 1933. The *Journal* newspaper (Newport, OR) noted that electricity would enable the Lighthouse Service to install a flashing light to replace the fixed light, the only one on the Pacific Coast. Electricity would also permit the installation of a radiobeacon at the lighthouse.

On August 1, 1933, the Lighthouses Service decided to wire the buildings and tower, change the illumination, and

increase the intensity of the light. The estimated cost was \$1,200, and R.R. Tinkham, Superintendent of Lighthouses, noted:

"Installation can be made more economically and to the best advantage of the government by the regular trained force of the district with assistance of temporary hired labor. Services of one electrician at \$7.00 per day and one helper at \$4.00 per day will be required for a period of about 45 days to complete the work. Commercial power is available at the site, and some equipment and material is now at hand. It is proposed to wire the tower, dwellings and other buildings for electric service, change illuminant of station light from I.O.V. to e.i. and install one 500 watt, P.s. 40 inside frosted incandescent electric lamp in the 1st order fixed lens, increasing the inten-

sity of the light to 23,000 candlepower (estimated) . . . Semi-automatic control to stand-by generating set and station light will be provided to furnish in case of failure of commercial power. The services of two assistant keepers will be dispensed with when above installation is completed."

Also in 1933, the Newport Chamber or Commerce, along with the Astoria Chamber of Commerce and the Trolling Boat Owners Association, petitioned the Superintendent of Lighthouses to establish a fog signal at the Yaquina Head Lighthouse. This request was apparently denied; there has never been a fog signal of any kind at Yaquina Head.

Until it was electrified in 1933, the light had been a fixed light. Today, the electric light flashes as a "group two" characteristic: two seconds on, two off, two seconds on, 14 off, then repeat.

The Elements

"the 31st was clear and fine again so ends the year 1878 at Cape Foulweather and the record shows it is not always foul weather"

—December 31, 1876

While the passage above from the keeper's log might indicate otherwise, one of the constants at Yaquina Head has been the weather—while it rarely snows on the central Oregon coast, it is almost always windy and often rainy as well, especially in the winter. The following quotations may be somewhat more typical:

"From 6 to 12 midnight heavy gale S.to S.W. light rain remainder of 24 hours fresh to moderate breeze S.W. to West during the first 6 hours the wind hurld small pebbles against the windows with such force that 18 or 20 panes of glass were broken in the Storm windows blew open some 40 feet of picket fence and a portion of shingles from the Oil house sea rough"

—March 2, 1879, keeper's log

". . . when there were big storms and the seas were rough, it would make a roar and shake the house ... The spray from the ocean, when the seas were rough, would spray clear up on the house."

—Marguerite (Booth) Canterbury, born at Yaquina Head light station on June 18, 1916

"I also remember that after a very, very bad storm I went out in the yard and all around were dead birds, because they had flown or been blown into the light and it killed them and they were laying in the yard."

—Kathleen (Booth) Labarre who lived at the station 1914-18 when her father, Fred Joseph Booth, worked as an assistant keeper; Marguerite and Kathleen are sisters

"I remember grandma telling us about when she would do her laundry. She had to have her laundry out early, or else her sheets would blow so hard that they were nothing but ribbons. So you got up real early and put your laundry out, and got in before 10:00 a.m."

—Virginia (Smith) Wilfolk, granddaughter of keeper William Smith, who served at Yaquina Head from ca. 1914-29

On February 18, 1927, a windstorm heavily damaged the barn at the lighthouse. The Journal (Newport, OR) reported:

"On the night of February 18th, the south end and roof of the barn at the Lighthouse took the air without giving

any notice as to where it was going or when it would return. . . . Should any one see this in the air please notify the department as they would be very glad to get in touch with it. It is also said that Henry Hill, 1st Assistant whose turn it was to sleep in all night imagined himself aboard ship and got up in the morning sea sick from the rocking of the large dwelling." While most light house keepers were accustomed to poor weather, their families often weren't:

"My mom used to tell me there was lots of fog there and so she got disillusioned about living there. And she wanted us to have more of a city life, because we were way out there on that point. She wanted us into a school area. My dad really liked it out there a lot, and when we moved my mother never missed it but my dad really missed it. It was very foggy all the time ."

—Marguerite (Booth) Canterbury, born at Yaquina Head light station on June 18, 1916

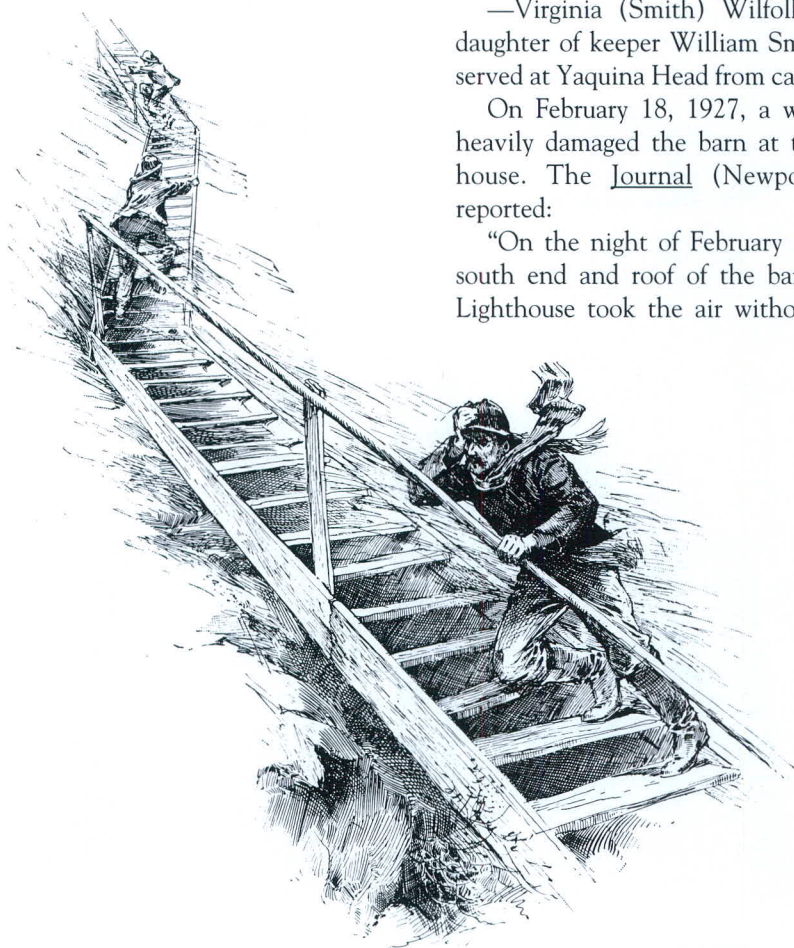
The weather often caused problems for mariners, and when it did, the crew at the light station sometimes pitched in to help:

"Keeper sent 2nd Asst. to Newport for assistance of a tug.

"The keepers gave the three men that got ashore necessary assistance done all in there power to make them comfortable"

—March 28, 1889, keeper's log

In this instance, a schooner trying to enter Yaquina Bay, three-and-a-half miles south of the light station, had lost its rudder and had to be tied to a buoy outside Yaquina Bay. The crew attempted to row into the harbor in two boats, three men in each. One of the boats capsized and its men were the one aided by the keepers; the other boat stayed at sea to be rescued the next day. It was not unusual for the keepers to spot a vessel in trouble and notify the Life-Saving Service crew in Newport (established there in 1896), or to render assistance to those in distress. (See "Shipwrecks" sidebar.) Many men switched from Life-Saving to Light-House Service employment as they got older, and a few also moved to the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey as an alternative Federal employment.





Light Station Routine

"Keepers mowing grass inside of yard. Had one visitor today."

—June 17, 1887, keeper's log

"Keepers painting the Bracketts and getting stage ready and mixing paint to paint tower."

—May 27, 1891, keeper's log

"Keepers whitewashing the garden fence and weeding the garden also today."

—June 8, 1887, keeper's log

"1st Asst. Killed two calves today."

—September 22, 1888, keeper's log

The quotations above give a sense of the mundane day-to-day existence at Yaquina Head, a routine which was similar in most respects to that of most any light station. In good weather, they painted the lighthouse, keeper's quarters, barns, fences and other outdoor structures; in poor weather, they stayed inside and painted.

"1st Asst. went Geese hunting"

—October 24, 1891, keeper's log

"2st Asst. went up north beach trout fishing"

—June 9, 1887, keeper's log

Yaquina Head keepers and their families hunted, fished and gardened to reduce their cost of living, but probably also to reduce the number of times they had to make the difficult trip to Newport, especially in the first few decades of the station's operation.

"Keepers polishing marble floor with sand and marble."

—January 5, 1887, keeper's log

The usual stuff to polish, of course, was brass; while the keeper's themselves (and their wives) may have hated the stuff, the Lighthouse Service seemed to have loved anything brass.

"...they never knew when and inspector was going to come. He came about four times each year. He would just come in the house like he belonged there and he would go all through it just to see if the women kept the houses up."

—1990, Philena Nelson, friend of the keeper's children when she was a resident of Newport (1916-18)

"The only thing I know is that [my mother] commented on how very strict the government inspectors were about keeping the place clean, and that it upset

her when they would come to inspect it, and she would never know when they were coming. And they would even run their hands over the top of the door jams to be sure that there was no dust."

—Kathleen (Booth) Labarre, who lived at the station (1914-18) when her father was an assistant keeper

Light-House Service inspectors arrived by ship off Yaquina Head any time, day or night. In the early years, they usually came ashore in small boats because of the lack of a decent road from Newport harbor and the danger presented by the bar at Yaquina Bay. Inspectors went through the lighthouse, work buildings and dwellings with equal care, the polished brass being one of their favorite targets.

"And because they had very little entertainment (there was no radio or television) they made their own entertainment. And I think, although I was never told, that is why on one occasion my father dressed in mother's clothes, my mother dressed in Herbert Higgins' uniform, and my sister dressed up. That was fun. Also for entertainment—for a treat—when the tides were right and the



Brass oil measures, funnels, rouge box and oil drip pan. Photo courtesy of Herb Kynor.

weather was not too bad, they'd take a row boat and do down to the rocks by the lighthouse and get mussels. Then they'd have big mussel feed. Now the kids didn't get in on this, but I remember the folks did after we went to bed. They had their mussels and drawn butter and things"

—Kathleen (Booth) Labarre, who lived at the station (1914–18) when her father was an assistant keeper

Well into the Twentieth Century, Yaquina Head was isolated enough that entertainment had to be improvised for the most part. In 1916 the *Yaquina Bay News* (Newport, OR) noted another diversion for at least one keeper:

"Assistant light house keeper Higgins was out gunning one day this week with his camera and succeeded in bagging a fine group of Ellis Vaber's cows."



Marguerite Canterbury's father, Fred Booth, wearing his wife's dress to entertain station families, 1918. Fred was the Assistant Keeper. The piano also provided entertainment. Maguerite was the only person born at the Yaquina Head station. Photo courtesy of M. Canterbury.

In general, the lighthouse keepers at Yaquina Head Light Station, like those elsewhere, lived somewhat a subsistence lifestyle. The crews and their families found simple pleasures in reading from the annual circulating library of the Lighthouse Service, visiting in Newport, going on outings, or participating in fra-

ternal lodges and other social events on Yaquina Bay. Trips to Newport included voting, participating in Decoration Day at the cemetery, and attending meetings of the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) and Oddfellows Lodge.

Members of the crews had sometimes served at other lighthouses and most expected to transfer to new stations if they were to advance in rank and salary. The frequent transfers helped foster a social system of friendships and correspondence among Lighthouse Service employees along the entire Pacific seaboard. The crews included numerous bachelor assistants as well as keepers with families. Over the decades, numerous children lived at the station but none apparently every perished by falling over cliffs or drowning in the nearby ocean.

Life and Death on the Head

The small community at Yaquina Head Light Station had some deaths but only one birth. Marguerite (Booth) Canterbury, daughter of Assistant Keeper Fred Joseph Booth, was born at Yaquina Head on June 18, 1916. As far as the records show, she is the only person to have been born at the station. In the late 1970's, Mrs. Canterbury was one of a handful of persons who were instrumental in halting the rock quarry operations at Yaquina Head and having it set aside instead as an Outstanding Natural Area administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Sadly, at least three deaths have been recorded at Yaquina Head. As noted in the very beginning of this article, "Capt. Keeper S.L. Wass died at the station on February 9, 1886, having served for over 10 years. Years later, in the 1920's Herbert Higgins, a long-time assistant keeper to William Smith was found dead in the light tower.

As Mrs. Virginia (Smith) Wilfolk recalled in a 1991 interview: "Mr. Higgins was one of the assistants out there during the time that my grandfather was keeper. He had been ill. This particular evening my grandparents had to go into Newport for some reason, and it was Mr. Higgins' duty to see to the light. He was

too ill to do this so another assistant, Frank Story, volunteered that he would do the lighting of the light that night."

"So my folks went to town and looked out—it was dark—there were no lights on in the lighthouse. So he [Mrs. Wilfolk's grandfather] loaded the family back up in the wagon and they went back out



Mr. Higgins died on a landing in the tower. USLHS photo.

to the lighthouse. They got out there and Frank had had a few too many to drink and had not gone up into the tower. Mr. Higgins was nowhere to be found in his quarters, so Grandpa went upstairs and found Mr. Higgins laying on the landing in the tower."

"Mr. Story had great guilt regarding this, and said that whenever he went into the tower after that he had a bulldog with him because he was afraid of Mr. Higgins' ghost that he said haunted him up there."

The only non-keeper fatality ever recorded for the site occurred in 1933 when an Albany (OR) College (now Lewis and Clark College) student named Nilo Lampi fell some 40 feet onto rocks and was killed. A biology student, he was collecting specimens when the edge of the cliff upon which he was standing gave way and plunged him to the rocks below.

Tourism: Yesterday and Today

“... Sea quite smooth Keepers painting the watchroom and working the road today Had two visitors today”

—April 28, 1877, keeper's log

This log entry is the first of many to mention visitors. As roads to and near the light station and coast improved, tourism increased dramatically. By August, 1904, Keeper Frank M. Plummer complained to the commander of the 13th District about conditions imposed by tourists at the lighthouse:

“I have to inform you that two men can't do the duties here properly and admit Visitors to Tower six days in week. We dont have rest enough. We only have five hours sleep each out of twenty four. Until the arrival of the 2nd asst I should like to have authority from you to admit Visitors to Tower on Sunday Tuesday and Thursday of each week leaving the other four days to do some of the duties and painting and get more rest and sleep and not be interrupted by Visitors”

Years later, the flow of tourists increased dramatically, as Henry Hill, first assistant at the station, noted on April 1, 1930, in a report to the Commissioner of Lighthouses:

“This station since the building of the Roosevelt Coast Highway has become the most popular on the coast. Sunday July 4th, 1926, I had over 3000 visitors and on a number of occasions on Sundays and holidays there have been over 2000 visitors go through the tower. I believe I am conservative in stating that we have 50,000 visitors a year counting those that come on closed days and those that come during closed hours. And [of] this number I would say 30,000 go through the tower.”

Visitors flooded to the Yaquina Head Lighthouse in 1932. The Journal (Newport, OR) reported:

“... during the season of 1932 just closing, over 15,000 people have visited and gone through the Yaquina Head Lighthouse which is a mile off the highway as a side trip, a few miles north of this city. And even last Sunday the number who called there was 132. There is no guesswork about these figures. They are

from the record which is faithfully kept at the lighthouse during the past year after some eastern lighthouse had boasted of having entertained 6,000 visitors in a year.”

Until 1980, the headland was privately owned and quarried for its rock (crushed and used mostly for road beds). The resultant destruction disturbed many persons who had emotional ties to Yaquina Head, and efforts began in the 1970's to preserve it. The Bureau of Land Management completed purchase of 100 acres, most of the headland, in 1980, and brought the site officially under government protection as the Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area (YHONA) in 1983.

The hundreds of thousands of visitors to YHONA, tourists and locals alike, find it has much else to offer in addition to the lighthouse. Just west of the tower is an observation deck from which, depending upon the time of year, migrating gray whales or nesting seabirds (murre, gulls, cormorants, pigeon guillemots and the occasional tufted puffin) can be watched. Harbor seals haul out by the dozens on a nearby island, and can be observed from a stairway which leads down to the beach and intertidal zone. This is probably the same beach, consisting of slippery, round basalt cobbles,

stones, on which some of the materials for the lighthouse were landed. Tide pool exploring is one of the most popular activities at Yaquina Head, and the variety of animals, sea urchins, sea anemones, hermit crabs, mussels, barnacles, sea stars, and the occasional large Pacific octopus—is still high in spite of the amount of use the area gets.

Just a couple of hundred yards south of the existing intertidal area is a four-acre site which is being converted into a brand new site for tide pooling. Since the floor of one of the quarries was only about eight feet above sea level and about 30 feet from the ocean, the BLM decided that its reclamation, required by law, would be as an entirely new tidal zone. This tidal zone will be barrier-free, i.e., accessible to persons with disabilities, even those confined to wheelchairs. A new paved access road will enable shuttle vehicles to transport visitors with disabilities to and from the tidal zone once it has opened to the public. The new tidal zone has been contoured, sculpted and otherwise detailed to resemble the sea floor of the natural tidal zone nearby. In June, 1994, the narrow barrier to the Pacific was removed and the ocean flowed onto the new “seabed.” Over time, nature will take advantage of all the new habitat and fill it with much the



Rugged Yaquina Head in 1985.

same collection of animals and plants now found in the natural tide pools just north.

The Newport area is rich in attractions. Four miles down Highway 101 is an Oregon State Park, one of 15 coastal state parks within easy reach of Newport, which is home to the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse mentioned earlier. If you miss the exit for the lighthouse, you'll find yourself crossing the picturesque Yaquina Bay Bridge, designed by famed engineer Conde McCullough in the 1930's. The bridge takes you to South Beach, home to two aquariums: the Oregon Coast Aquarium, a state-of-the-art facility highlighting sea life of the immediate coast, many species of which are the largest of their kind in the world; and the Mark O. Harfield Marine Science Center, a free facility which highlights the research efforts of the world renowned marine scientists of the Oregon State University.

The waterfront in Newport still has the look and feel of a working fishing port, which it has been since about the 1860s, inspite of the ubiquitous tourist shops and attractions. Just up the hill is the Coast Guard station which is regularly called upon to rescue unlucky or unskilled mariners. It is the successor to the U.S. Life Saving Service station which was first established across the bay in 1893. Those interested in learning more about the history of the Newport/Yaquina Bay area can do so at the Lincoln County Historical Society, just a block off the main highway, and close to both the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse and Bridge.

If you would like to keep abreast of developments at Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area, please write or call the following and ask to be added to the mailing list for "Yaquina Head Update," an informational publication sent out as events warrant:

"Yaquina Head Update"

Attn: Jack Delaini

Bureau of Land Management

1717 Fabry Road

Salem, OR 97306

Tel. No.: (503) 375-5690

Women Keepers at Yaquina Head



Booth family on the step of the tower circa 1918.

As far as the available records show, two women held temporary positions at the Yaquina Head Light Station. There is but a fleeting reference to one of the women, a "Miss Grub," but the other, Malinda Plummer, wife of keeper Frank Plummer, served a number of months intermittently as an assistant. She performed the same kinds of mundane labor as the male keepers, but does not appear to have had the opportunity for the kinds of heroic demonstrated elsewhere by some other female lighthouse keepers. (The most famous of these was Ida Lewis of Newport, Rhode Island. Miss Lewis was renown in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century for a number of single-handed rescues of capsized or otherwise helpless seafarers near her light.)

The following series of entries (original entries are unedited and in quotes; summaries are not in quotes) from the keepers' logs provide what little we know

about the role of these two women at the Yaquina Head Light Station:

August 16, 1888: "Mr. Rhuben H. Butler arrived to the Cape today to go on duty and he back out concluded that he did not want the place as he has got a better position"

August 17: "Mrs. M.J. Plummer went on duty as laborer today until a 2nd Asst. arrives at the station."

August 23: "Mrs. Plummer attending to visitors today." [She held the same duty on August 24-25 and following.]

On October 11, she scrubbed the marble floor, on the 13th, she weeded the brick sidewalks, and on the 15th, she cleaned the illuminating apparatus.

July 8, 1889: "Mrs. Plummer went on duty today in Mr. Jeffries place until he gets able to go on himself"

July 13: Mrs. M.J. Plummer will start in again to take Mr. Jeffries watch for him." [She served until October, 1889. William R. Jeffries had signed on as Second Assistant November 1, 1887, was promoted to First Assistant August 14, 1888, and died in May, 1890, having resigned his post on April 20 of that year.]

February 16, 1890: Mrs. Plummer left to go to Portland to visit her sister. "And Miss Grubb takes 1 assts watch and duties in Mrs. Plummer's absence" [Mrs. Plummer returned on March 11. No other reference to "Miss Grubb" is to be found in the logs.]

Malinda's husband, Frank M. Plummer, became first assistant at the station on April 23, 1878, and keeper of the station on April 12, 1886. According to the census of 1880, Frank was born in October, 1853, in Massachusetts, while Malinda had been born around 1860, in Oregon. Malinda J. Plummer was identified as a "third assistant" at the station in the 1880s in the U.S. Coast Guard's "Record of Lighthouse Keepers." By the census of 1900, the Plummers had been married for 22 years, but had no children. On August 30, 1907, Plummer wrote to tender his resignation, hoping it would become effective on September 30, 1907, but he ultimately served on until February 5, 1908. In all, Frank Plummer served for almost 30 years at the Yaquina Head Lighthouse.

Say That Again, Please



“reach'd the River above alluded to (called by the Indians *Econne*) and erected our Camp on the South Shore.”

—Alexander Roderick McLeod, June 18, 1826 (diary of his Hudson's Bay Company's coastal expedition)

This entry is one of the early efforts to record the name Yaquina. Despite its Spanish-looking modern spelling, we think “Yuh-quin-uh” is the correct pronunciation, but no one knows for sure. “Yaquina” must have been difficult for non-Indians to pronounce because it was spelled so many ways before the current spelling came into general use. It was the name the Yaquina Indians, the Native Americans who lived around the Yaquina Bay and River, gave to the bay, the river and themselves.

A number of other early explorers along the central Oregon coast attempted to transliterate the word, too. This chart summarizes some of these attempts in chronological order.

Transliteration	Date & Source
You-cone	1805-06: Lewis and Clark expedition
Econni	August 3, 1826: Alexander Roderick McLeod's diary
Yeaconne	August 5, 1826: McLeod's diary

Yacona	August 30, 1849: Diary of Lt. Theodore Talbot, U.S. Army reconnaissance officer
Yoquina	July 23, 1856: Diary of Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Oregon
Yoquena	July 26, 1856: Diary of Joel Palmer
Yah-quo-nah	July 15, 1857: Robert B. Metcalfe, Indian agent at the Siletz Agency
Aquina	August 20, 1858: James Nesmith, Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs
Zaquina	August 13, 1863: B.R. Biddle, agent at the Siletz reservation
Yaquina	June, 1866: David Newsom, assessing the development potential of the area

Other spellings have included “Iakon,” Jacon,” “Yakon,” “Yakonah,” “Youicomes,” “Youicone,” and “Youikkone.” As this all shows, there was clearly lots of difficulty in transliterating the Indian word, however it was originally pronounced. Today, no speakers of pure Yaquina dialect exist; the Yaquina language and culture died out over seventy years ago so we'll never know what the word really sounded like.

Shipwrecks

Nine persons were drowned this morning while crossing yaquina bay 7 bodies were found up to Neight
—Keeper's log, Yaquina Head Light Station, November 7, 1889

While the central Oregon coast has never approached other areas in terms of danger or numbers of ships lost to the sea, crossing the bar to enter Yaquina Bay had its fair share of risk. Over the years, the bar has claimed cargoes, ships and human lives.

There were at least 13 shipwrecks between 1865, when the *Doyle* with its load of oysters was lost, and 1900. Eight or more ships were lost after 1900, and by far the worst disaster of these was the loss of the *Francis H. Leggett*. The *Leggett* was caught in a gale in September, 1914. As the *Yaquina Bay News-Reporter* wrote:

“Fifty-eight persons at least and probably more, perished when the steamer schooner *Francis H. Leggett* sank in a 90—mile gale 60 miles south of the Columbia river and 30 miles northwest by north of Yaquina [Head] light, off the Oregon coast, shortly after 3 o'clock Friday afternoon. Other estimates place the number of dead at 70. Five women, a boy and a girl are among the missing. Two persons are known to have been rescued, after clinging several hours to wreckage tossed by a vicious sea.”

One survivor recalled that “The steamer labored incessantly and could make almost no headway. Little alarm was felt however, as the captain and crew told us the steamer would weather the gale and there was absolutely no panic, even when the final crash came.”

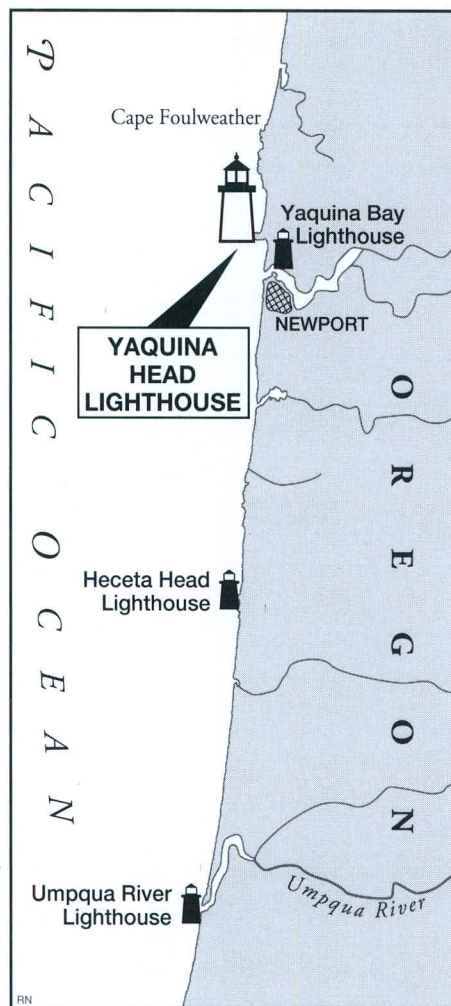
To help deal with such disasters, the Federal Government, in 1896, established a U.S. Life Saving Service station at Yaquina Bay. This station has continued to the present day except, of course, that it is now part of the U.S. Coast Guard

The Misplaced Lighthouse Myth

On a modern map, Yaquina Head is just three miles north of Yaquina Bay while Cape Foulweather, another prominent headland, is five miles further north up the coast. The first European to explore the Oregon coast, English Captain James Cook, had named "Cape Foulweather" on March 7, 1778, but either did not see or take notice of Yaquina Head. However, until about the 1890's, Yaquina Head was generally called "Cape Foulweather" by inhabitants of Newport and vicinity. The confusion of these two names appears to have led to "The Myth of the Misplaced Lighthouse," a myth which persists today in the Newport area.

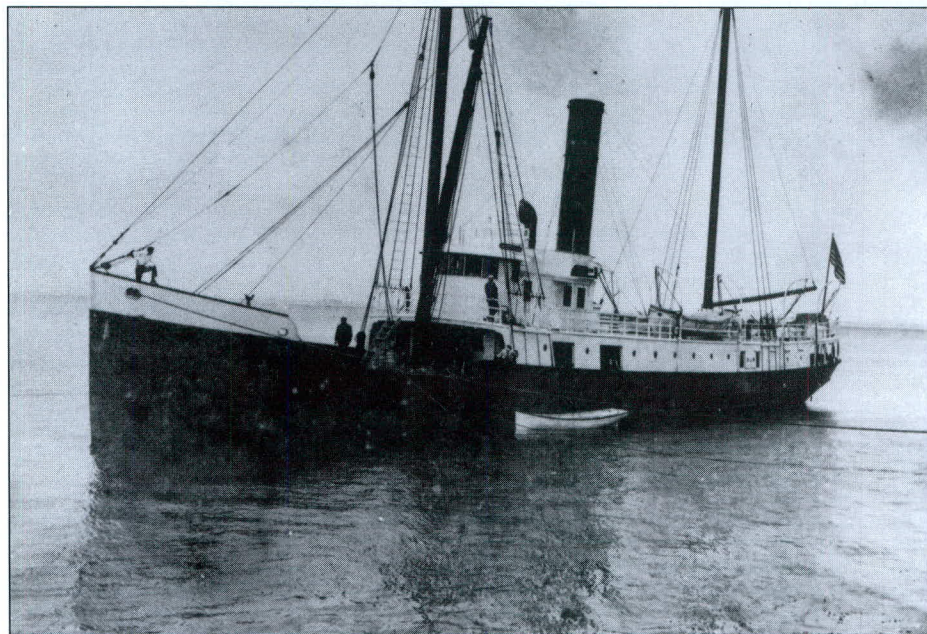
Simply stated, the myth says that the Yaquina Head lighthouse was built on the wrong headland: it should have been built at Cape Foulweather. To account for this "mistake," the myth explains that the contractor unloaded materials in error at Yaquina Head. Realizing his blunder, he decided to stay put and build the lighthouse where he was anyway because: 1) he was already there, and 2) he knew unloading materials and building on the real Cape Foulweather would have been even more difficult.

It is unknown where, when, why and by whom the "misplaced" myth was first promulgated, but it certainly became well entrenched over time. That the myth is indeed a myth can be shown via several lines of evidence. First of all, the Army engineers knew in the 1860s that a coastal light should be built somewhere near Newport so they reserved land on the tips of both Cape Foulweather and Yaquina Head for a light station. Second, the chief Army engineer given the responsibility for finding a site for the light station recommended Yaquina Head strongly over Cape Foulweather for a number of reasons: it was near Yaquina Bay; it had a "good road to it" (by 19th Century standards); it had water and grass for cattle; and it had a beach where supplies could be landed out of the wind in summer. Third, Army engineers inspected the construction effort and



were hardly likely to have looked the other way while the contractor built on the wrong spot. Fourth, much of the material for building the lighthouse was not off-loaded onto the beach at Yaquina Head, but rather was unloaded on the piers of Newport and then hauled by wagon to Agate Beach and on up the beach to the rudimentary road to the light station site. Finally, nowhere in any of the official records is there a hint that the lighthouse is in the wrong place; even though these papers refer to "Cape Foulweather," by careful reading of the descriptions it is clear that the place being referred to is in fact what we know today as Yaquina Head.

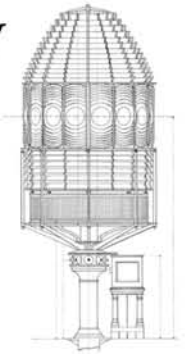
The name "Yaquina Head" seems finally to have taken hold, and Newport's coastal light is still lighting the way for seaborne travelers. Along with the other attractions of the headland, it serves as a magnet for landlubbing tourists as well, and is doing so right where it was supposed to have been all along!



The Lighthouse Service Tender Manzanita preparing to load a small boat to take supplies to the station. USLHS photo.



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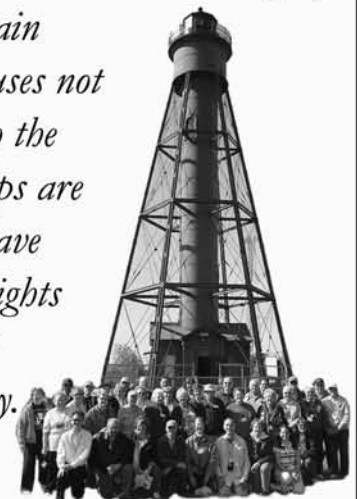
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