

# LOG

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# Browns Point Lighthouse

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*All photos and illustrations are from the author's collection.*

## Introduction



This is the story of the Browns Point Lighthouse, which marks the hazardous shoal and north entrance to Tacoma's Commencement Bay. This lighthouse is one of the lesser known lights of Puget Sound, and yet it has a history that I think you will find interesting.

## Naming Point Brown

In 1877 Navy Lieutenant Ambrose Wyckoff, Commander of the schooner *Yukon*, made a hydrographic survey of upper Puget Sound and Commencement Bay. He named a point of land on his charts as Point Brown because it was the name used for that location by local residents in honor of an early settler.

## The First Light

In early 1887 the Lighthouse Board recommended that Point Brown be marked with a light because the shoal off the point was an important turning point for ships entering Commencement Bay. On December 12, 1887, an eight-day post lantern that displayed a white light at a height of 12 feet was erected on the shoal. The post light was placed about 50 yards off shore; the light could only be reached by rowboat at high tide.

The post lantern was hung from a metal bar at the top of the post and used a weatherproof lantern, which produced a bright fixed light. The post lantern had a large tank encircling the top of the lens that held enough fuel for eight days. The Point Brown post lantern was maintained by a contractor who rowed from Tacoma once a week to clean the lantern, replenish the fuel tank, and trim the wick.

In 1895 the Lighthouse Board determined that the Point Brown post lantern was not sufficient and recommended that the shoal should be marked with a lighthouse and fog signal. Requests were made to Congress for funding, but it was not until June 6, 1900, that Congress finally appropriated \$6,000 for the Lighthouse Service to purchase land and build the lighthouse,



**Above: An eight-day post lantern.**  
**Below: Post lantern on a post.**



total of \$3,000 in exchange for the property.

## The 1903 Lighthouse and Fog Bell

It was in 1903 that the Lighthouse Service erected a lighthouse and keeper's dwelling on Point Brown and eliminated the post lan-

tern. The lighthouse was composed of a two-story wood-frame tower that was 30 feet tall and built on pilings that was located just off the point. The lighthouse was accessible at low tide but required the use of a rowboat at high tide. In 1906 the government filled in the area between the lighthouse and shore with riprap stone and dirt, allowing the lighthouse keeper access to the tower at all times.

The keeper's dwelling was a one-and-a-half-story house located on a hill approximately 100 feet inland from the shoreline. Outbuildings at the site included an oil house, a pump house for fresh water, and a boathouse.

A fog bell was located near the top of the light tower in an open indent. The 1,200-pound bronze bell had been cast in 1855 at the Bernhard Foundry in Philadelphia. The bell had already been used at the Dungeness Spit Lighthouse from 1857 to 1873 and at the Point No Point Lighthouse from 1879 to 1900. The bell was struck by a sledge hammer attached to a Gamewell Fog Bell Apparatus. The Gamewell clockwork mechanism caused the bell to be rung every 20 seconds and had to be rewound every 45 minutes. The new Point Brown Lighthouse also had a lens lantern set in a small lantern on an outside shelf below the fog bell indent. The lens lantern had a tank above the top of the lens that held enough fuel for five days.

On October 21, 1903, Oscar V. Brown, the first keeper of the lighthouse, arrived at Point Brown on the lighthouse tender *Heather*. The new lighthouse was first lit on the night of October 26, 1903.

Brown joined the Lighthouse Service in 1890. He had served as a lighthouse keeper at Cape Flattery, New Dungeness, and Smith Island before being assigned to Point Brown. He trimmed the wicks and lit the lamp every night and when fog set in tended the Gamewell Fog Bell Striking Apparatus. If the striking apparatus broke down, Brown was forced to strike the bell with a small hand sledge hammer while his wife, Annie, monitored his timing with a watch.





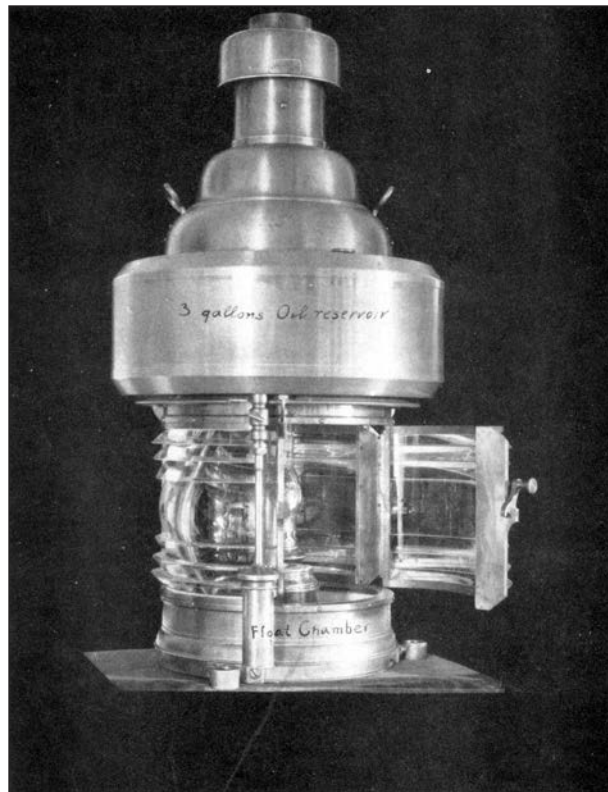
The 1903 lighthouse with the fog bell at top and lantern below.

Keeper Brown became so well known in the area that the local population soon began calling the point and lighthouse “Browns Point.” The new name stuck and that is the name by which it is now known.

Browns Point was finally supplied with electricity in 1922. The old lens lantern was replaced with an electric floodlight and the fog bell striker was modified so that it could be activated by an electric motor allowing both systems to be operated with switches from the lighthouse keeper's residence.



Gamewell fog-bell striker.



Heap five-day lens lantern.

## The 1933 Concrete Tower

In 1933 the wooden Lighthouse on Browns Point was replaced with a 9 ½ foot square, concrete tower standing 38 feet high. The new lighthouse was designed by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and was erected by Strangberg and Company of Seattle at a cost of \$2,300. The new optic, a fixed, 375 mm drum lens, used an electric light bulb and produced a 1,500-candlepower light visible for 12 miles. The lamp was controlled by timers giving three white flashes every 15 seconds. The beacon sat on the tower's flat roof, protected by a small square lantern. The total cost of construction with the new optics and

fog-signal was \$5,863. The fog bell was eliminated and replaced by a new foghorn, mounted high on the tower's west side, activated by an electric air compressor located on an upper floor of the new building. Later, the power of the lamp was increased to provide 11,000 candlepower.

On June 26, 1933, the old 1903 wooden tower was demolished and burned on the beach.

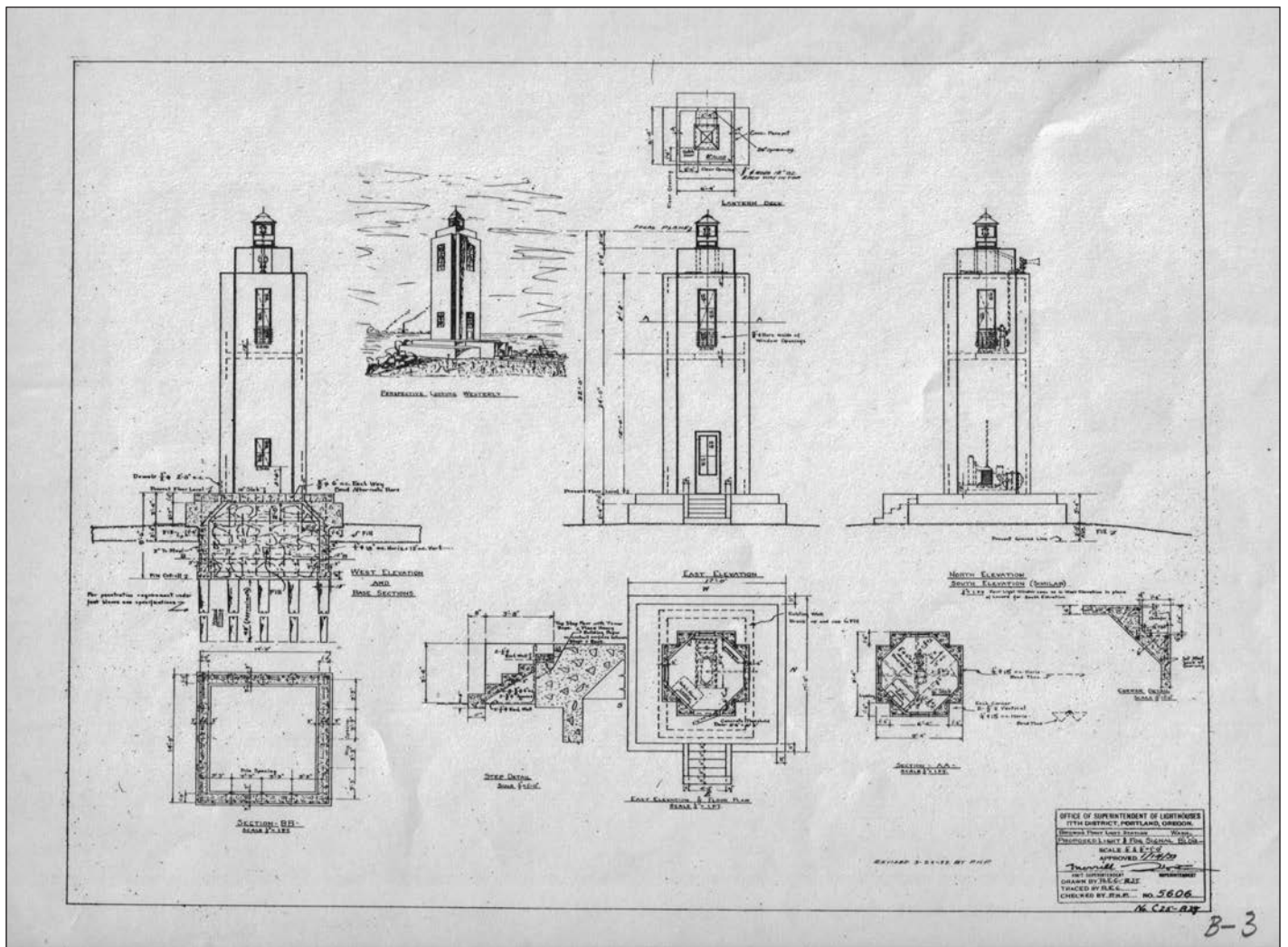
On July 31, 1939, Brown, age 70, retired from the Lighthouse Service after serving 49 years, 36 of them at Browns Point. The Coast Guard appointed “Shorty” Wood as the new station keeper at Browns Point. In 1944 Cyril Beaulieu, who had been with the Lighthouse Service since 1930, replaced Wood as station keeper. After Beaulieu

retired in 1956, Coast Guardsmen staffed Browns Point Light Station. Their responsibilities included tending the other minor lights and navigational aids in the area.

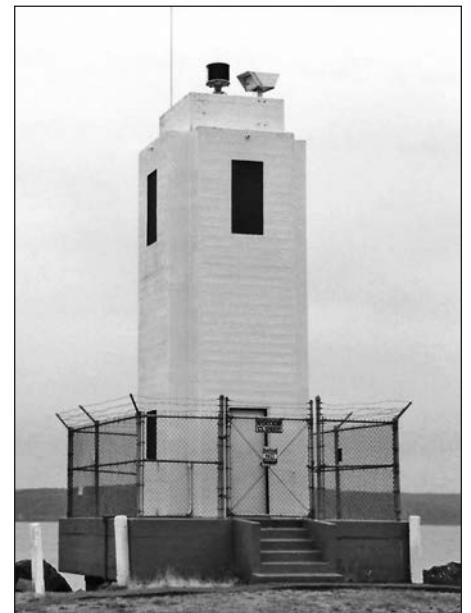
In 1963 the Coast Guard automated the lighthouse and closed the Browns Point Light Station. The Coast Guard granted Tacoma Metro Parks a long-term lease of the 7.2-acre light station for use by the public in 1964 and gave permission to use the buildings as museums. The Points Northeast Historical Society, a local volunteer group and nonprofit organization, agreed to help restore and renovate the light station's buildings.

## Later Improvements

The 1933 drum lens and lantern were removed and replaced in 1997 with a Vega VRB-25 marine rotating beacon. The new optic operates 24 hours a day from the top of the tower, flashing white once every five seconds. The old foghorn was also replaced with a new totally electric foghorn, sounding two two-second blasts every 30 seconds. In addition, mounted on top of the tower is an automatic fog sensor that detects moisture in the air and if fog is sensed turns on the foghorn. The foghorn sounds about 837 hours a year, one of the highest recorded usages on Puget Sound.



Above: The 1933 concrete tower with lantern on top.  
 Right: The Vega VRB-25 rotating beacon.  
 Far right: Browns Point Lighthouse today with VRB-25 and fog detector on top.



The original fog bell was sold to the College of Puget Sound (now the University of Puget Sound) in 1934, where it was used to announce the changing of classes. In 1984 the university donated the bell to the Fox Island Alliance Church. The Points Northeast Historical Society traced the original fog bell to the Fox Island Alliance Church. After some negotiation the church donated the historic bell to the society. Finally, on July 25, 2000, the fog bell was removed from the church and installed in the renovated pump house at the old lighthouse site.