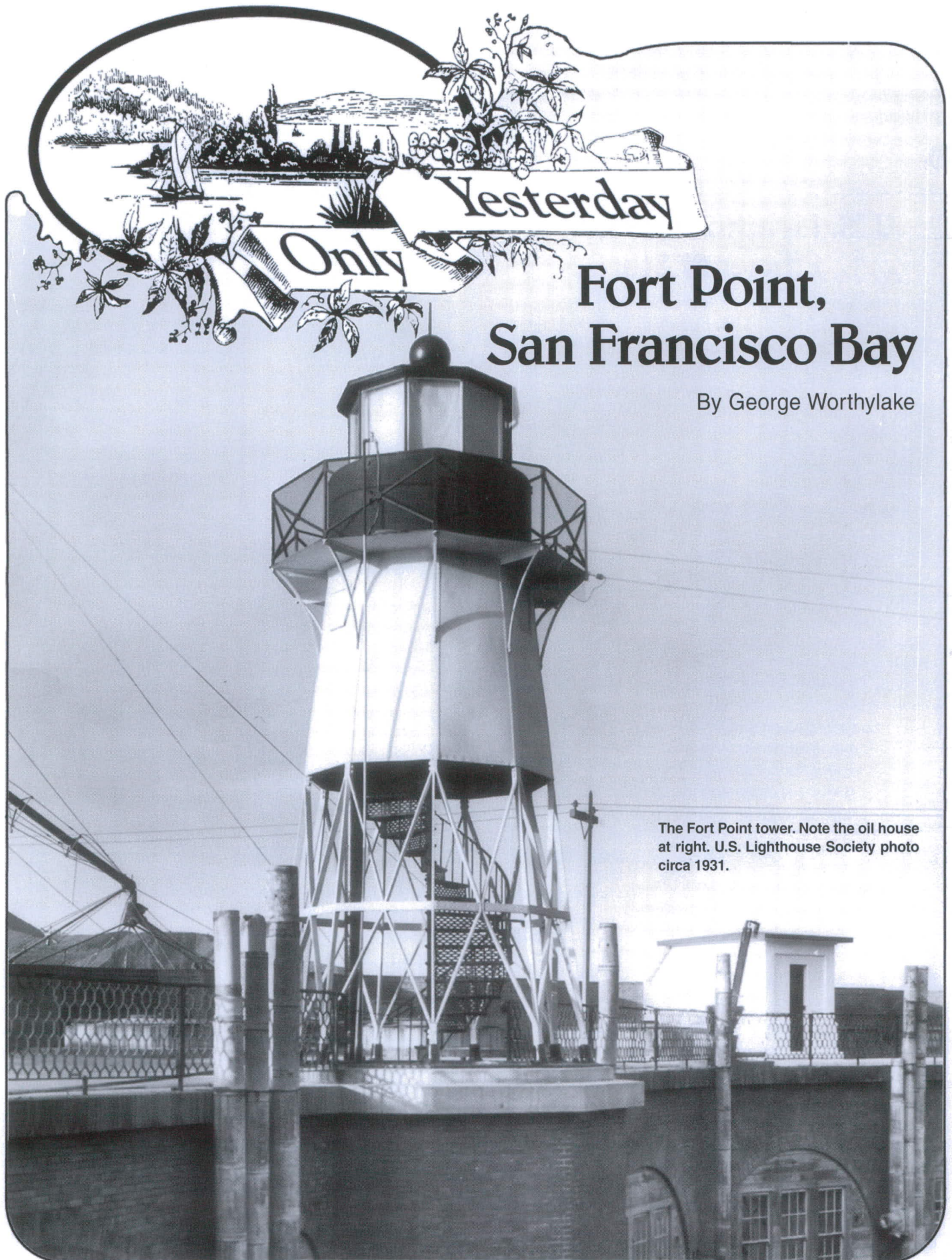




Fort Point, San Francisco Bay

By George Worthylake

The Fort Point tower. Note the oil house at right. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1931.



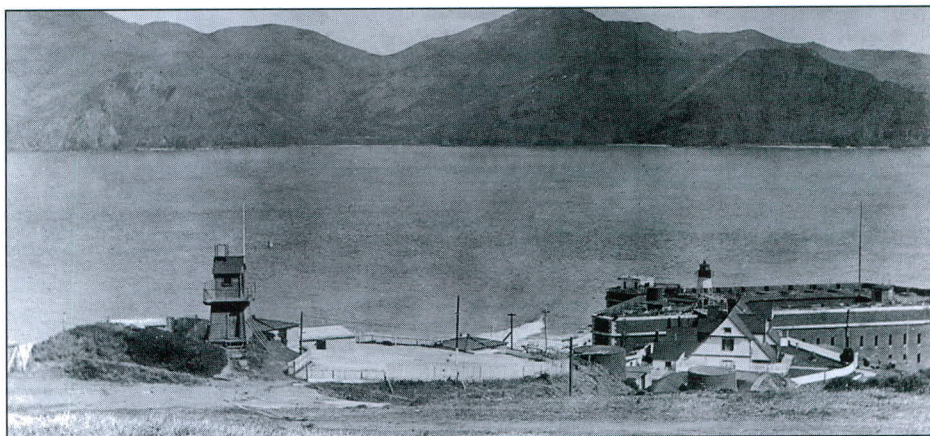
hen the first eight lighthouses for the west coast were authorized in 1850, three were designated for the San Francisco Bay area: the Farallon

Islands, Alcatraz and Fort Point. After some controversy, the contract was awarded to a Baltimore, Maryland firm and a ship set sail for the west coast.

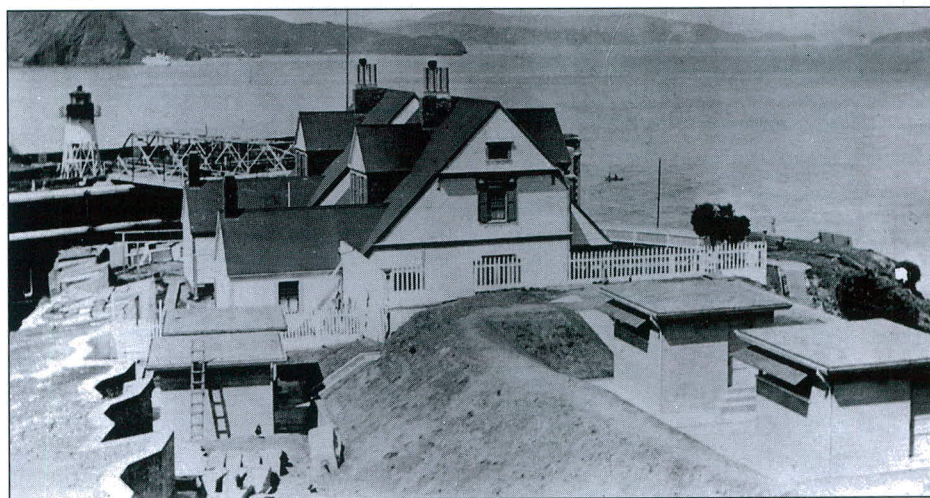
By 1852, work had started on the lighthouses. A single design of a Cape Cod-style building with a tower through the middle was selected. During construction of the lighthouses, the new Lighthouse Board assumed control and issued a change order to the contractor: he was not to install the old-style reflector system in the lantern rooms. The Board added that Fresnel lenses from France would be sent for use on the west coast. Additionally, a new lantern room design was to be used.

Several of the lighthouses already constructed had to have their lanterns rebuilt, but the lenses had not arrived even after this had been accomplished. Before the third order fixed lens for Fort Point arrived, the Army decided the lighthouse occupied a strategic point on the Golden Gate Strait, a perfect location for a fort. Thus, the lighthouse was torn down. A new, more modest lighthouse was constructed near the fort location. It consisted of a four-sided, truncated wooden tower, 36 feet high, located on a narrow ledge between the fort and the sea wall. The "new" Fort Point lighthouse went into operation in March 1855. The fifth order lens displayed a fixed white light. In addition to serving as a harbor light and one assisting the mariner through the Golden Gate Strait, the Fort Point light also lined up with the Alcatraz light, providing a range light which guided mariners through the San Francisco Bay Bar Channel several miles off shore.

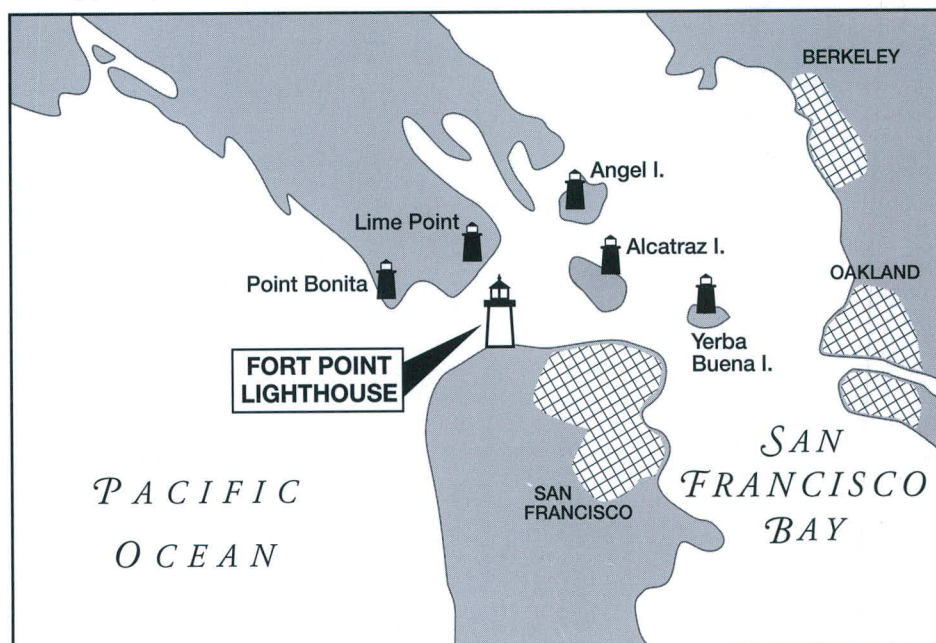
But the new location proved a poor choice as the seawall soon eroded, threatening the lighthouse and the fort. In 1863, the lighthouse had to be removed. The third Fort Point Lighthouse was finished in 1864. It consisted of an iron skeleton tower bolted to the parapet of the fort. A circular stone stairway in the fort lead to the parapet, and a circular cast-iron stairway lead from the parapet to the lantern room of the 27-foot high tower.



View of the Golden Gate shortly after the Fort Point Lighthouse tower was constructed on the parapets of the fort. The tower at left is the second Fort Point lighthouse. At far right across the Golden Gate, is the Lime Point Light Fog Signal Station constructed in 1881. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo, date unknown.



At far left is the third Fort Point tower located on the parapets of the fort. The two dwellings are for the first and second keepers. Note the bridge between the far dwelling and the parapet of the fort to provide access for the keepers. The two small buildings, lower left, are oil houses and the two at right probably a combination storage/wash house for each dwelling. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo, date unknown.



The new lens, a fourth order Fresnel, also displayed a fixed white light, varied by red flashes. The station was equipped with a fog bell (located on the side of the fort) which was struck by machinery every 10 seconds during foggy weather.

On a bluff back from the fort were two assistant keepers' dwellings. The head keeper's house was located at ground level at the east end of the fort. A bridge connected the bluff to the top of the fort parapet and allowed the assistants access to the tower. After kerosene was introduced as an illuminant, an oil house was constructed on the parapet near the tower.

Tending the light wasn't much of a problem, as the parapet was solid and wide and the climb to the lantern room was rather short. However, the fog signal was another story. The fog bell hung from the front of a small shack which was situated on a platform on the side of the fort. A crude ladder extended from the edge of the parapet to the top of the shack. Climbing down this ladder, especially in inclement weather, was risky business. When the fort test-fired its guns, some of which were located directly over the fog bell station, the reverberations affected the bell

to the extent that by 1869 it was battered.

Mariners complained that the bell was inadequate. Bells are best heard in sheltered areas, and the wind tends to drown or scatter the sound. Fog entering San Francisco Bay comes roaring through the Golden Gate, and any sound projected to seaward is swallowed up.

The District Inspector requested an improved fog signal for this location, a request supported by headquarters. However, Congress failed to appropriate funds for the improvement. In the meantime the vessel *Columbia* grounded nearby in 1882; the *City of Chester* went down in 1888; the *Alameda* and *La Mara* grounded nearby in 1900. Finally, in 1901, the *City of Rio de Janeiro* slammed into nearby Fort Point Ledge in heavy fog, sinking with the loss of life.

This last incident caused the government to act and in 1904 a compressed air reed trumpet was installed. In 1911 a new device, an air siren, replaced the trumpet. Later, a diaphone Type "C" replaced the siren.

One of the keepers at Fort Point was James Rankin. He served at the station for 41 years, beginning in 1878. His first station had been East Brother Island in northern San Fran-

cisco Bay. Rankin was fortunate to have been assigned to two sheltered stations relatively close to civilization. More than a lighthouse keeper, he was credited over the years with saving 19 people from the Golden Gate. His last rescue of a young boy occurred in 1918 when Rankin was in his 70s. When he retired the following year he received a letter of Commendation from the Commissioner of Lighthouses.

One of his more humorous rescues occurred one Sunday afternoon in the 1890s. A young couple decided to do some dancing, lost their footing and fell into the Golden Gate, a waterway with very swift currents. A fisherman nearby ran to the keeper's house and alerted Rankin, who rushed to the scene with a life preserver and ladder. Assistant Keeper Kunder also rose to the occasion and grabbed a garden hose to use as a rope.

Unfortunately he forgot the hose was still attached to the hose bib. As he reached the Golden Gate the length of hose ran taut, pulling Kunder off his feet and onto his back. By the time he had unfastened the hose and reached the seawall he saw that Rankin already had accomplished the rescue—begin-



The Fort Point Light Station. The principal keeper's house is in the foreground, the assistant's dwellings are up on the hill. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1908.

ning with the young man, as the lady was kept afloat by her hoop skirt. Rankin pulled the man ashore, removed his own clothes and dove back in to rescue the woman. The woman was unharmed but quite indignant, protesting that she had never seen a naked man other than her husband.

In 1934, the new Golden Gate Bridge towered over Fort Point and its lighthouse. The designers of the bridge created the southern anchorage to arch over the fort, showcasing it under a graceful span. The south offshore tower was furnished with a light and a small fog signal, thereby eliminating the need for the Fort Point Light Station. The assistants' dwellings on the rise behind the fort had to be removed for bridge construction, and the head keeper's dwelling was removed as well. The last keeper, George Cobb, closed up shop and was reassigned to the station up the coast.

For many years the Fort Point station acted in concert with the Alcatraz Light, guiding mariners through San Francisco's Bar channel and assisting mariners through the Golden Gate. Rankin's heroic rescues spotlight his years in service. Thousands of vessels, from small early morning fishing boats to pleasure craft, military ships and vessels of commerce headed homeward or to sea, seem to have passed the Fort Point Light Only Yesterday.



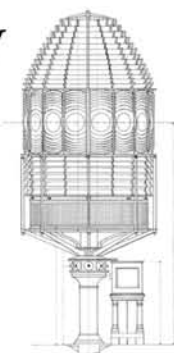
Above – The third Fort Point Lighthouse, oil house at right. Note the circular brick base supporting the tower. A circular staircase is located inside this caisson. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo 1908.

Below – Fort Point fort and lighthouse over topped by the Golden Gate Bridge. Photographer unknown





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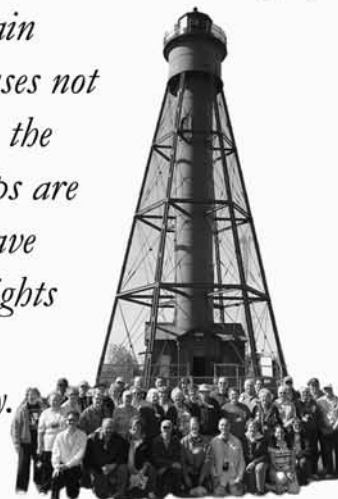
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