



By George Worthylake

Guard Island Light Station



Guard Island Light Station. From bottom – boat house, dwelling and lighthouse. Cellar of destroyed large dwelling left of remaining keeper's house. U. S. Coast Guard photo circa 1960.

In 1867, the United States acquired the territory of Alaska for \$7,200,000 (about 2 cents an acre) – a huge bargain. Two years after the acquisition, the Senate called for a review of the safety of the Pacific Northwest coasts, requiring the President to, "... detail an office to select from public lands such prominent points on the coasts of Oregon, Washington Territory, and Alaska ... in his judgment may be necessary for lighthouse purposes, in view of the future commercial necessity of the Pacific coasts and to reserve the same for the exclusive use of the United States."

A report prepared by George Davidson of the U.S. Coast Survey recommended six sites for lighthouses and several for buoys and day beacons. The minor aids were soon constructed, but not the lighthouses. For whatever reason, Congress failed to provide funding for any light station in Alaska for 30 years. Some have speculated that the delay may have been the result of Congress hoping that private enterprise would develop the land prior to committing federal funding. Then too, many members of Congress thought Alaska more of a liability than an asset (Seward's Folly), and finally, the commerce of the country was expanding in other areas which at the time may have been more in need of lighthouses than Alaska.

By 1886, there were 24 buoys in the waters of Alaska. The numbers increased by 1892 to 59 buoys and 12 day beacons. To service the aids to navigation a California-based tender sailed to Alaska each summer, a trip of 975 miles. The Alaskan Gold Rush of 1898 greatly increased vessel traffic into the territory and Congress responded.

In 1899, the Lighthouse Board reported, "Letters, petitions, and memorials have been received by the Board during the past few months from Chambers of Commerce of the Pacific coast, citizens and others interested in the navigation of Alaskan waters, urgently requesting immediate action in establishing lights and fog signals as aids to navigation in these waters, and also requesting a division of the present Thirteenth Lighthouse District, making two districts of it ... anticipating the needs of a new tender for use in these waters, Congress, at its last session, appropriated the sum of \$100,000 for the purpose of constructing one ... with regard to the aids to navigation proposed ... eleven stations (sites)



The original Guard Island tower constructed in 1903. It was replaced with a concrete building in 1924. Note the bell fog signal. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

have been selected and an approximate estimate of cost prepared which is the basis of the recommendation now made that \$300,000 be appropriated for lighthouses at Eldred Rock, Ralston Island, Point Retreat, Point Gardner, Cape Ommaney, Point Standhope, Fairway Island, Mary Island, Cape Fox, Cape Fanshaw and Guard Island." Many of these sites were changed and in 1900 the Board requested \$500,000 for the light stations, they received \$100,000. In 1901, the Board received funding to begin construction of ten stations. One of those stations was at Guard Island, about ten miles north of Ketchikan.

Between March 1, 1902 and October 18, 1904 eleven light stations were completed in Alaska, five more were finished in later years. The stations were all constructed of wood – not a good choice for an area of harsh winters. All, except Eldred Rock (established in 1906) had to be replaced in the 1930s with concrete structures in an Art Moderne style.

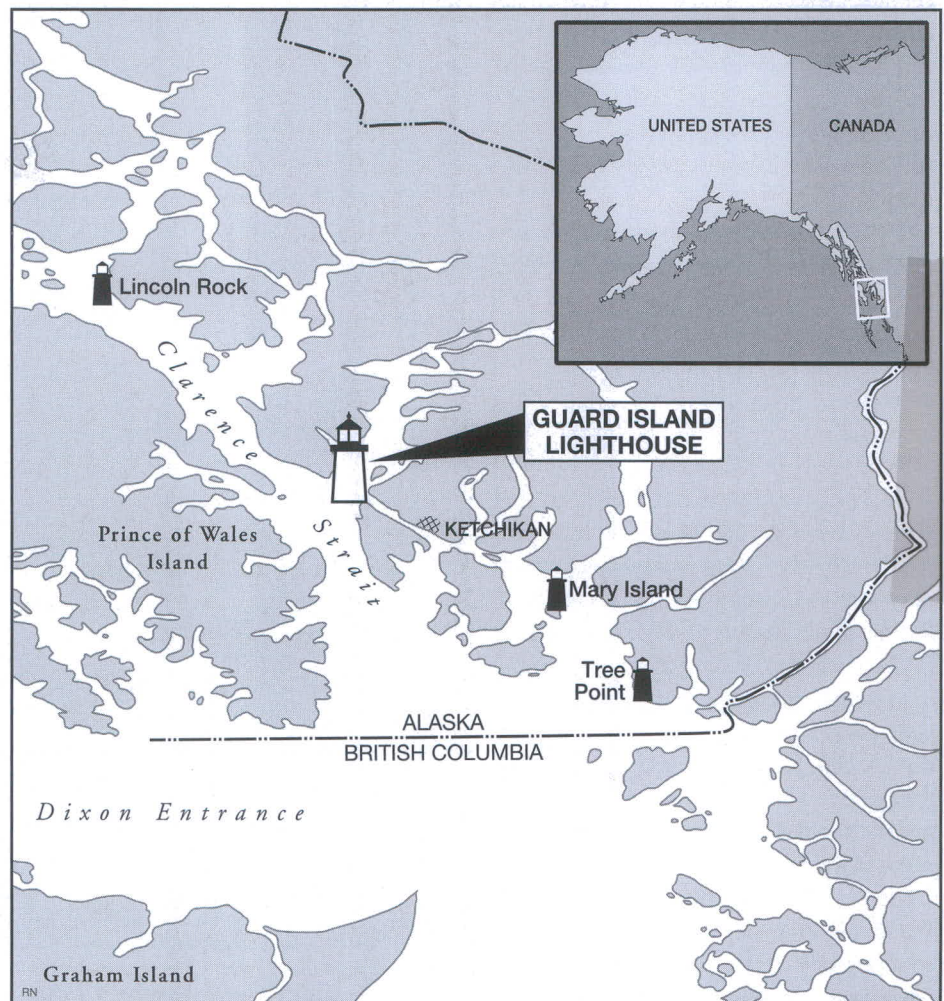
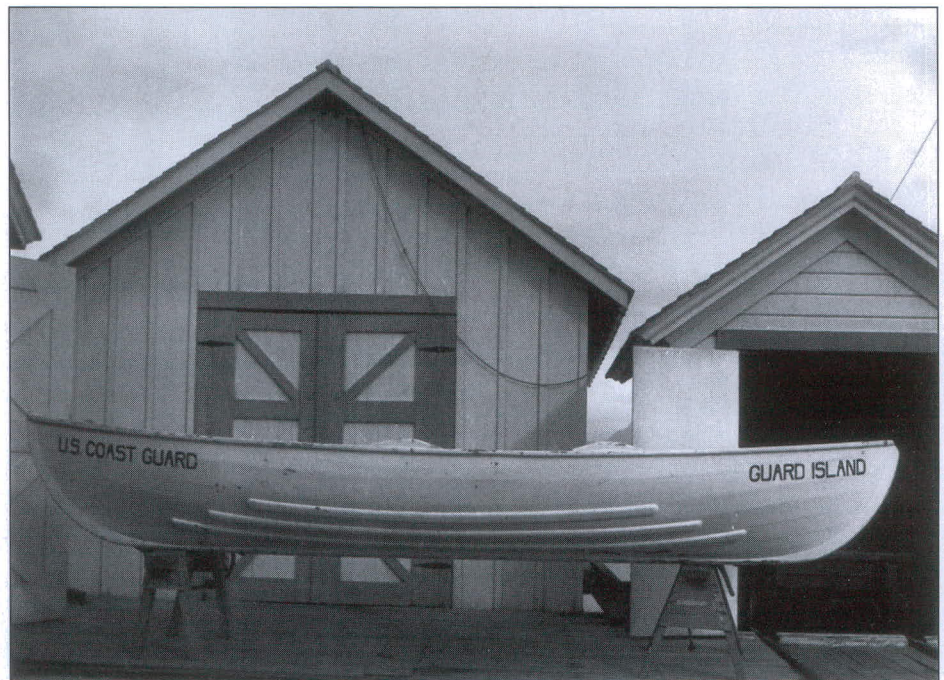
The original Guard Island Light Station was completed on September 15, 1904. The original lens was a lens lantern (a minor optic) which produced a fixed white light. A red sector showed a shoal area. The station also had a bell fog signal, struck by machinery every 20 seconds. A keeper's dwelling, oil house and boat house completed the station.

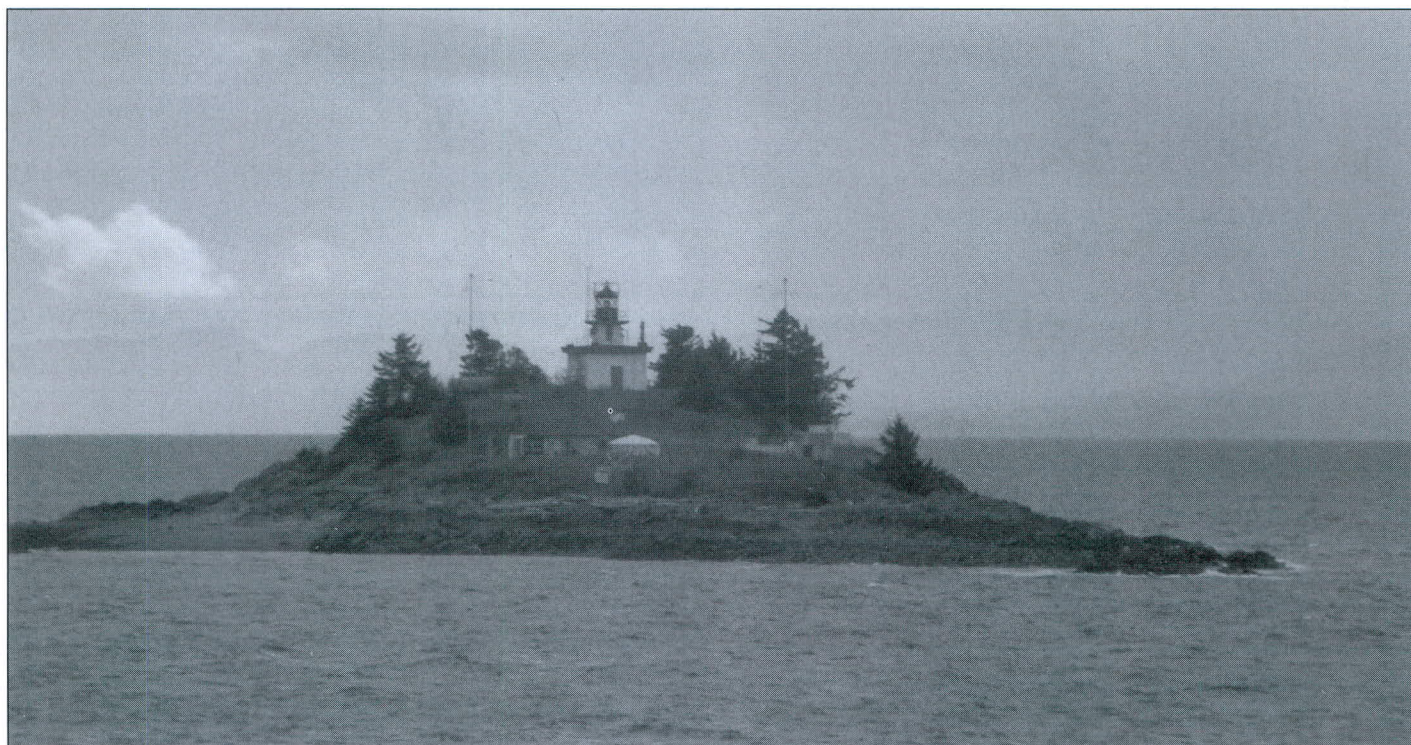
Like other Alaskan light stations, Guard Island deteriorated and had to be rebuilt in 1924. The new tower was constructed of reinforced concrete. It was a small single-story rectangle surmounted by a square tower. The optic was changed to a 300 mm lens which produced a group flashing white light every 6 seconds (2 flashes). A far more powerful diaphone air signal replaced the bell and produced a five second blast every 25 seconds. A second dwelling was added when the station was rebuilt.

After 1939, Coast Guard enlisted personnel began taking over for the civilian crew and a radio beacon was installed in that year. In 1969, the station was automated, a powerful DCB 24 aero-beacon was installed (range of 24 miles) and the crew was removed. Eventually, perhaps to discourage vandals, the two dwellings were destroyed.

For many years the Guard Island Light Station served as a valuable aid to navigation for fishing vessels and passenger ships alike as they plied the waters of Tongass Narrows, north of Ketchikan and it seems like . . . Only Yesterday!

Below – Guard Island Light Station launch in the Coast Guard era. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.





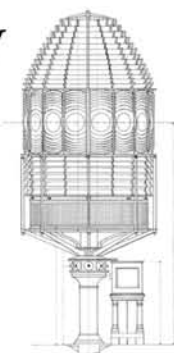
Guard Island as it appears today. Photographer unknown.



Guard Island when manned by Coast Guard personnel. Alaskan stations were unaccompanied (no families) and had four enlisted men assigned. U. S. Coast Guard photo, date unknown.



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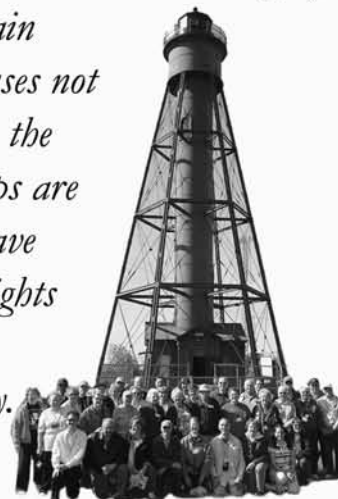
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