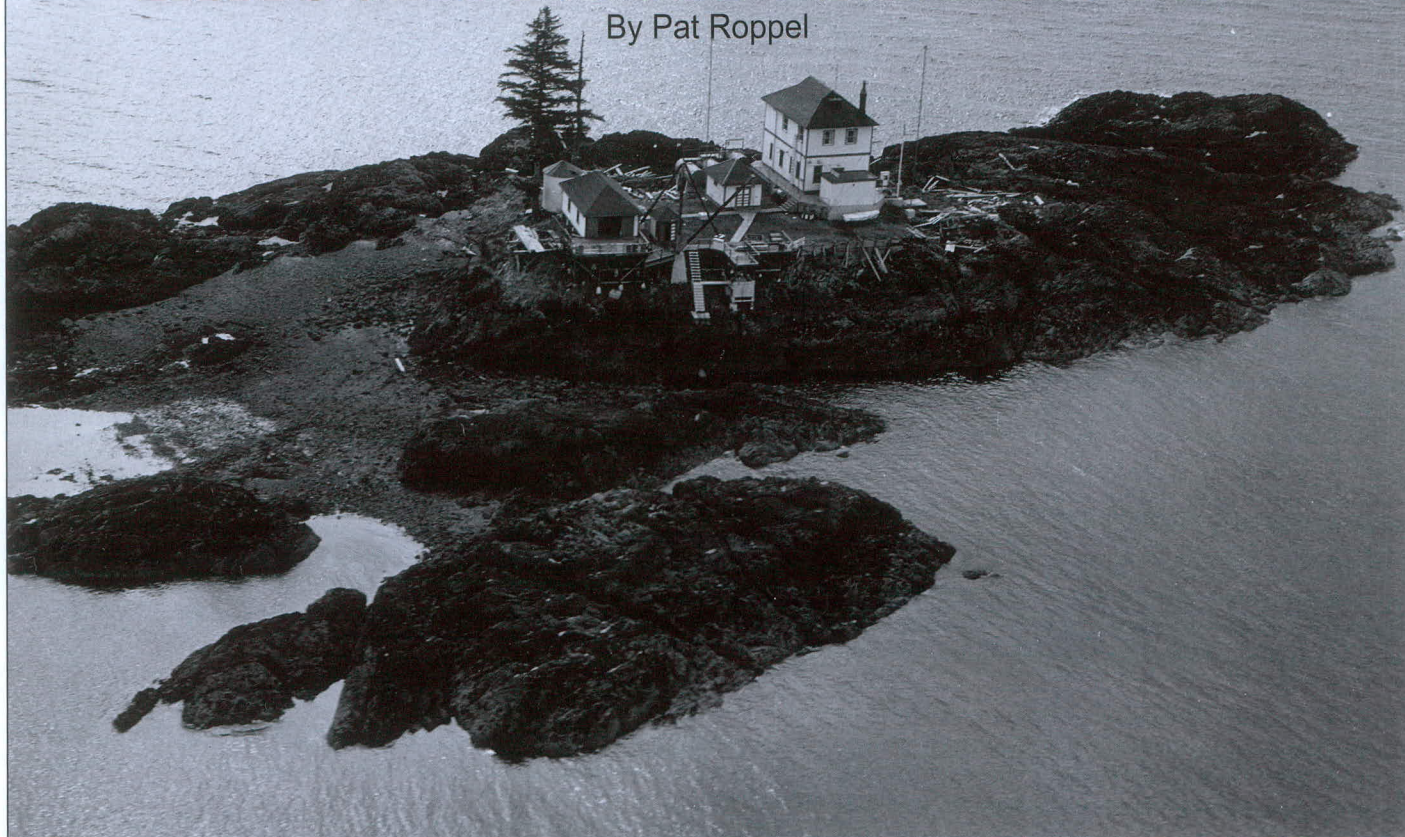


Lincoln Rock Lighthouse

By Pat Roppel



A 1961 view of the Lincoln Island navigational facility before it was demolished. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.

Rocks, reefs, and small islands out in the middle of what appears to be open waters of southeast Alaska were a constant worry to mariners ever since boats began to navigate through the Inland Passage. One such place is Lincoln Rock in Clarence Strait off the west coast of Etolin Island. The Alaska ferries go by Lincoln Rock on its west side, and many of us who were here before the 1970s saw the 35-foot, white, square tower on a house located on a small island. Both Lincoln Rock and Lincoln Island were named in 1886 by the Navy's Lieutenant Commander A. S. Snow during that season's coast survey. He named it, no surprise, for President Abraham Lincoln. Nearby is Abraham Island.

Clarence Strait is the main Alaskan waterway from and to Dixon Entrance. If a ship captain wanted to avoid open waters of the Pacific Ocean seeking more protected waters, he could head up or down Clarence Strait.

Navigational aids started as early as the Russian times near Sitka. After the purchase of Alaska from Russia, the U.S. Lighthouse Service assumed responsibility for navigational aids. On July 1, 1901, President Wil-

liam McKinley, by executive order, reserved Lincoln Rock for lighthouse purposes. At that time the rock, submerged at high water, was marked by a nun buoy. In fog and low visibility, floating buoys are not the easiest thing to see. Those were the days when there were no such things as radar and GPS. Captains navigated by line-of-sight, compasses, and charts, some of which, at that time, were not accurate.

Lighthouse construction on Lincoln Rock started in 1902. This proved to be one of the more difficult lighthouses in Alaska to construct. As is usual with government projects, a bid was advertised, and the only bidder received the award in March. En route to the site, the steamer and barge lost the lumber. With a new load of lumber, the contractor finally landed gear in May. A camp was set up about two miles away on the Etolin Island shore. Twenty men worked until August when construction stopped because southeasterly storms were rolling in one after another.

The main accomplishment of this crew was the concrete foundation that resembled a ship with bow and stern. This 92-foot-long and 35-foot-wide cistern was a catchment

basin to provide water for the lighthouse keepers and to run some of the equipment.

Then in June 1903, the contract was annulled after it was discovered the contractor, reported only by the name Caskeek, used substandard materials. Abandoning the contract method, the Lighthouse Service hired its own laborers, and the project was completed in the late fall of 1903. The lantern first shined on Clarence Strait on December 1.

The lighthouse building was two stories and built entirely of wood with the light 58 feet above the sea. The lighthouse keeper and his assistant lived on the second floor. The lower level housed the engine room for air compressors, had a coal-burning furnace, and was used for fuel storage. In addition to the light, there was a fog signal, a Daboll trumpet, on the northerly end of the structure. Can you imagine how noisy this must have been? On a small island where you could not get away from the engine noises, the pounding surf, let along the fog horn every three seconds!

Anyone who has been out on Clarence Strait when a screaming southeasterly wind is



Undated close-up photo of the Lincoln Rock Lighthouse. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.

blowing knows how big the waves and swells can be. These waves submerged Lincoln Rock at high tide. During the construction of the lighthouse, a cutwater was placed on the south end of the pier to split the sea waves and prevent them from breaking against the lighthouse. That engineer's idea didn't work.

In 1904, shortly after the station opened, part of the platform where supplies were unloaded was carried away by high seas.

A big storm on Sunday, November 28, 1909, again damaged the station. Waves swept completely over the lighthouse, smashing in the wooden south side and washing away supplies, coal, and the station's two boats. Think of the terror the men must have felt as this was happening. After the storm, the men hung out signs of distress knowing that the *Jefferson* would soon be steaming by on her regular run. To the disappointment of Anton Hove, the head keeper, and his assistant, the ship passed by. Hove finally hailed the Army ship *Peterson*, which took them to Wrangell to report the damage to the authorities. I have never found out if he or his assistant returned to Lincoln Rock or said loudly, "Enough!"

The Lighthouse Service announced that temporary repairs would be made at once. With appropriations from Congress, the station would be rebuilt in the spring of 1910 with the lower floor above the cistern, which was constructed entirely of concrete. This did not happen before another storm hit on April

4, 1910. The wooden lighthouse was severely damaged, and the seas rolled into the lower floor, leaving a badly scared crew trapped on the second floor. Being lighthouse keepers on Lincoln Rock must have been one of the worst jobs in southeast Alaska!

Finally a year later in March 1911, Congress authorized construction of a new lighthouse. The Lighthouse Service chose to establish a fog-signal station on Lincoln Island

about 2,200 feet north of the former site. The new station followed the same plans with the exception that the light was installed on a tower located atop the Lincoln Rock foundation. The light was converted to an acetylene operation. It was relit on October 10, 1911. Total cost was \$24,774.

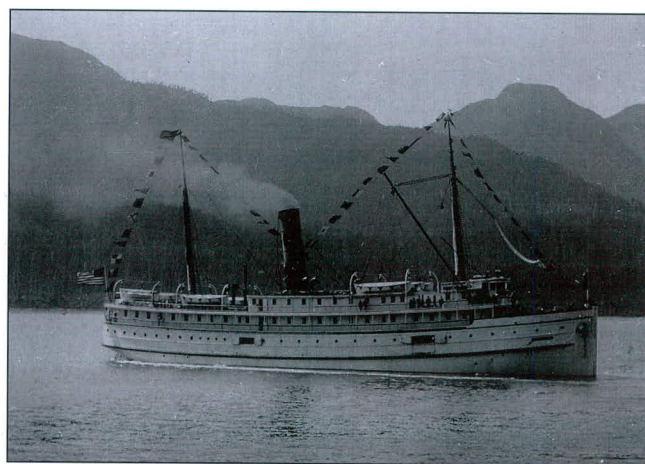
By 1939 a major change came. The U.S. Coast Guard took over navigation aids in Alaskan waters. Four Coast Guard men were assigned to each lighthouse. Electricity became the way to keep the light shining.

Banks of batteries and larger and larger generators were installed over the years. Unlike most lighthouses in Alaska, Lincoln Rock was never equipped with a radio beacon.

In 1947 still another larger generator was installed, and the old kerosene air-driven fog signal was removed. A submarine cable provided power from Lincoln Island to Lincoln Rock, where the fog horn was then installed.

In 1961 crews enlarged the main building on Lincoln Island. The four keepers made sure the light was always shining, and they assessed the weather and condition of the seas.

By the late 1960s, the Coast Guard decided to automate and unman lighthouses. Lincoln Rock lighthouse was decommissioned on March



The *Jefferson* passed by without noticing the distress signs from the lighthouse keeper. Photo from author's collection.

20, 1968. The Coast Guard said the reason for automation was that one of the original functions of the staff was reporting the local weather. That was not a Coast Guard responsibility. A long-range, battery-operated light was left on Lincoln Rock, making it a minor aid to navigation.

As for the facilities on the bigger Lincoln Island, these were demolished. Today, as mariners sail by, there is nothing on the island except concrete foundations.

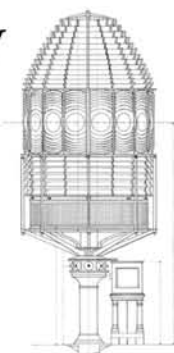
Many of us remember nostalgically listening to the marine forecast on AM radio and hearing "Guard Island, sea 4, swell 3; Five Finger Light, sea 2, swell 1, Lincoln Rock, sea 8, swell 5." These reports provided a more immediate knowledge to make a decision whether to set out on the larger straits or do the wiser thing: remain hunkered down at home or in a dog hole.



Another undated photo of the lighthouse. Lighthouse Society archives.



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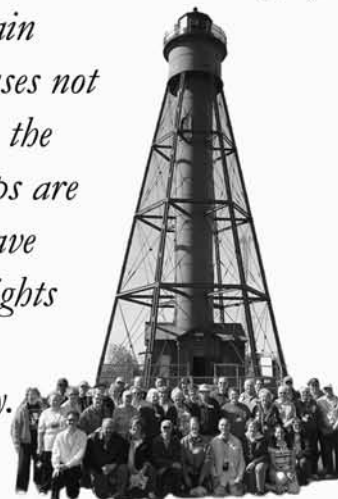
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