THE KEEPER'S LOG

VOLUME XXV NUMBER ONE, 2008



- Point Vicente, California
- Finns Point Range Lights, Delaware River
- Memoir of an English Lighthouse Engineer V
- Aids to Navigation for Airplanes – Part II

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POINT VICENTE LIGHT STATION
California

By Kent Weymouth

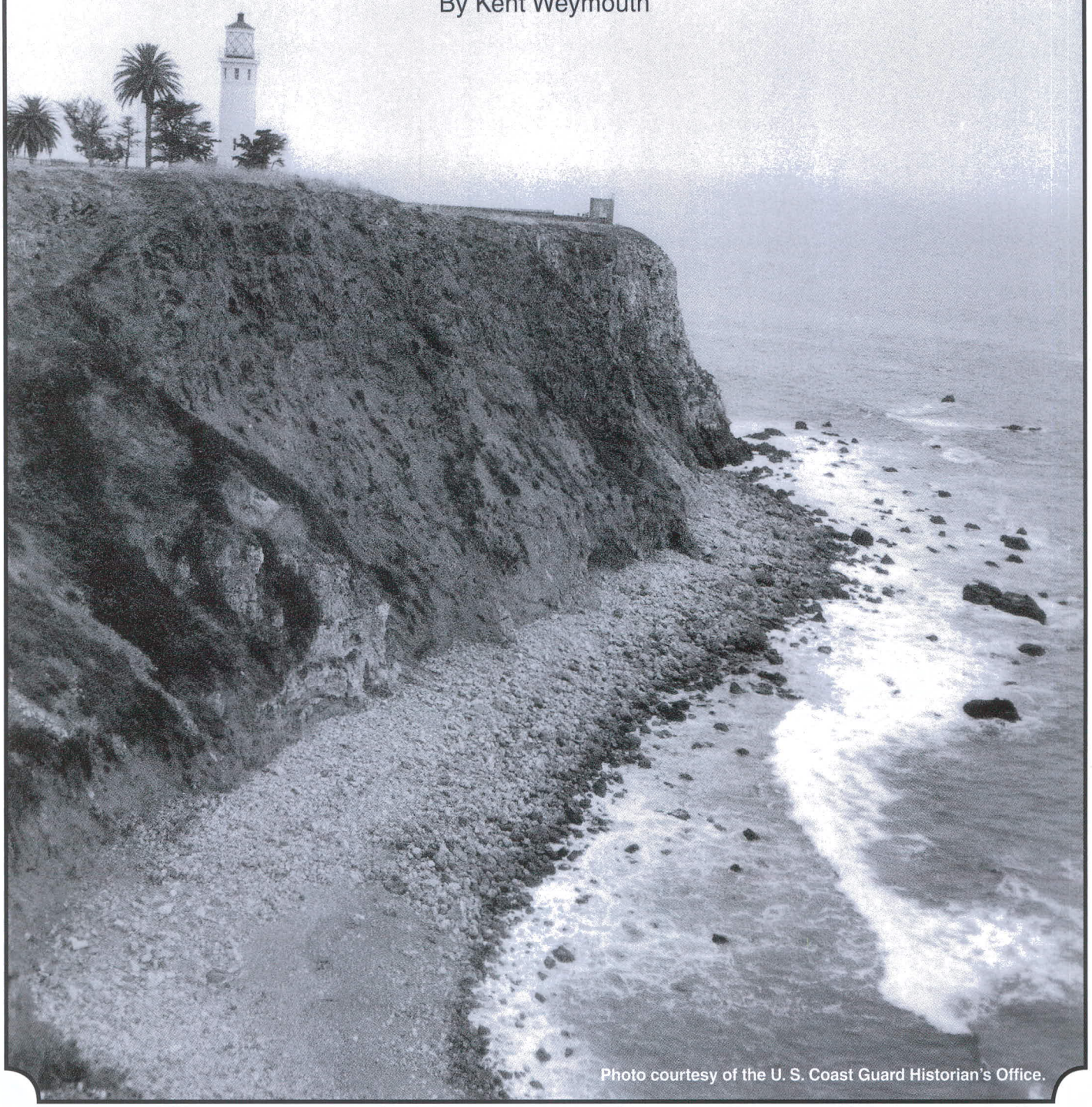


Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

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Researching Point Vicente for my book, *Lighthouses of the Golden State* I had the *Description of Point Vicente Light Station* conducted on February 19, 1927, for the Department of Commerce and Labor, and the annual reports from the Commissioner of Lighthouses to the Secretary of Commerce. These documents along with my personal visits to the station supplied me with its basic history.

The station property points to the southwest like a huge arrowhead jutting out into the Pacific. The reddish brown cliffs that offer home to the Point Vicente Light Station have many rocks at their base and many more located several hundred yards offshore. These conditions created a deadly hazard for ships.

The first request to build a lighthouse on the cliffs of Point Vicente in Palos Verdes was made in 1914. The estimated cost of the project was to be $90,000. The estimate included a 12.845 acre plot, the construction of the tower, and dwellings for two keepers, as well as a storage building, an oil house, the illuminating apparatus, fencing, piping for the water supply, and a fully outfitted fog signal with redundant equipment.

Two years later Congress appropriated $80,000 for the establishment of a light and fog signal at Point Vicente. By 1920, the United States attorney was still preparing preliminary data to enter into a condemnation suit for the property. When the land company made a satisfactory offer to the government, the action was dropped. Drawings for the tower, fog-signal building, and the two keeper's quarters had been completed, and approved long before July 29, 1921, when permission was finally granted to occupy the land. The site was fully acquired in 1922.

The annual traffic moving through the Los Angeles Harbor in 1925 was 27 million tons, valued at roughly $700 million. In order to protect the increasing traffic that was passing by the point, a fog signal was put into operation on June 20, 1925, preceding the installation of a light at Point Vicente. The original fog signal was a 10-inch chime that stood 28 inches tall, and was located on the edge of the cliff 128 feet above the water. The fog signal building was outfitted with a workbench and drawers for tools; it had a concrete floor and was built using a frame construction. To match the station's architecture, the building was finished with stucco and topped with a red tile roof.

When in use, the fog horn whistle sounded a one second blast followed by two seconds of silence, then a four second blast followed by 53 seconds of silence. Operated using compressed air; the mechanism had two 4'x 11' 9" receivers with a capacity of 150 cubic feet of air. These were filled using a Fairbanks Morse 4-cycle horizontal engine built in 1907, which had to be started by hand, and ran on distillate. Fifteen minutes was needed to fill the tanks with enough air to build up the 65lbs of pressure needed to sound the whistle. Under good conditions, the whistle could be heard for three miles. The nearby oil room which housed the distillate and the paint room were both constructed using reinforced concrete.

The station also had a garage/shop, and a combination carpenter shop and power house. The wood framed dwellings were east of the tower. Each assistant keeper's home had six rooms, a fireplace, stove, sink, and two table lamps; the head keeper had seven rooms. Artesian wells provided an ample water supply to the station, which was stored in a 12,000 gallon tank located on a hill at



Overall view of the complete Point Vicente Light Station. From left, barracks, garage in the foreground, fog signal building, storage building with the radio building directly in back of it, keepers' quarters "B" in front of the tower with keeper's dwelling "A" in rear. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

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Coastguardsman inspecting the fog signal horns. Note the proximity to the edge of the cliff. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

the back of the reservation. The lighthouse at Point Vicente was completed at a cost of $102,871.

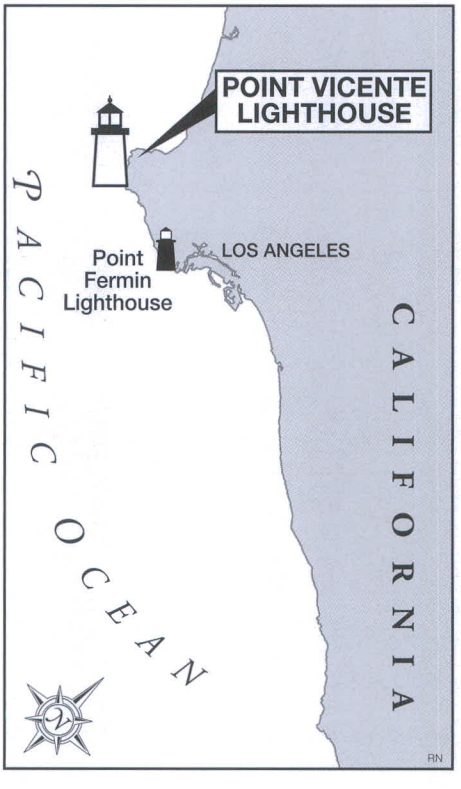
The station was built using the same Spanish revival architecture prevalent in the Rancho Palos Verdes area. When the light did shine for the first time on April 14th 1926, it was from a tower standing 67 feet tall. Galvanized iron railing surrounded the concrete balcony outside the lantern room, with a single door serving as the entrance. Inside the lantern room, placed directly on the floor, a low structural four-sided steel pedestal, with two glass doors on each side. On this pedestal was the third order Fresnel lens crafted by Barbier-Bernard & Turenne in Paris.

The station was constructed with an electrical infrastructure, using a 500 watt bulb that produced 800,000 candlepower. When the bulb was changed to 1,000 watts in 1929, it increased the candlepower to 1.1 million. The Fresnel lens had lived a previous life in the lighthouse in Sitka Alaska, where it was in service for 40 years. The new home for the lens had it resting at a focal plane of 185 feet. Under good conditions the light could be seen twenty miles at sea. The characteristic assigned to Point Vicente was; two white flashes every 20 seconds, the first flash was 0.3 seconds with an eclipse of 4.7 seconds, and the second flash of 0.3 seconds had an eclipse of 14.7 seconds. The inside of the lens is marked U.S.L.H.S 326 14720.

The rotating mechanism was driven by a worm gear, powered by an electric motor that took 40 seconds to complete one revolution. The lens sat on a heavy ball race, consisting of 16, 15/16" balls. Redundant motors allowed back up operation to come from either a generator or from the storage battery, thus reducing the possibility of a failure of all sources. A third alternative method of driving the lens consisted of a rotary air motor that had been installed and could be quickly connected to the drive mechanism if necessary.

During World War II, when the threat of Japanese attack was serious, a 25 watt light replaced the 1000 watt light in the Fresnel lens. Automated in 1973, Point Vicente is still an active military base, but uses electronic controls to monitor the rotation of the light and to activate the foghorn.

Point Vicente is also home to a remote controlled direction finder that sends perti-



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nent information to the Coast Guard on Terminal Island. From the island, rescue boats or helicopters can be directed to the assistance of mariners. The housing units now provide homes for the Commanding Officers from Integrated Support Command at San Pedro.

Tours of the Point Vicente Lighthouse are conducted every second Saturday of each month except March. In March, the Coast Guard and the Rancho Palos Verdes Interpretive Center hold a joint open house in conjunction with the annual Whale of a Day event (usually held on the first Saturday). For information, current and archival photos and official links to California's majestic lighthouses, visit <www.CaLights.net>.

During my research, one thing that did seem to reappear time and time again was a ghost story. The tale varied from one account to another, appearing in books, magazines and newspaper articles over the years. I have created my own version of the tale by taking different aspects of each version and adding my own take of the legend.



Above – Lighthouse Service keeper on the gallery looking over the station in the 1930s. The buildings from left: quarters "A," quarters "B," garage and the barracks. Note the recently planted palm trees. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.
Below – A more recent view of the station with fully-grown palms and shrubs. Photo courtesy of the author.



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The Lady of the Light

The light from the nearby tower pierced the night, illuminating the rain as it fell from the sky. The howling wind rang through the antennae wires as the rain pounded out the steady rhythm that had persisted all day and into the night. The unrelenting storm had made the stalwart young keeper work ever more diligently to complete his duties. It was after all, times like this that the station was most important to the men of the sea. After a long day of work, the young keeper ended his rounds with a trip to the foghorn. The horns were located precariously close to the edge of the cliff, and always had to be approached very carefully. During a storm, when a gust of wind could catch you off guard, the dangers increased. After the young keeper checked the horns, he returned to his quarters and his young wife.

Sometime around 2:00am the keeper woke with a start, the sound of the foghorn was mysteriously absent. He quickly dressed, and donned his rain gear. Waking to her husband's commotion, his young bride told him to be careful, gave him a light kiss and sent him off into the storm, and to the edge of the cliff where the foghorn stood.

Twenty minutes had passed. His wife sat patiently waiting for her man to return. Suddenly she heard a shriek from off in the distance. Her heart began to race; she had to find the source of the scream. Wearing only a sheer white robe, the young woman ran out of the house and into the rain. As she ran across the station to the foghorn, she peered to see if she could glimpse the outline of her husband. When she reached the edge of the cliff, she scanned the bluff; but her husband was nowhere to be seen. Struggling to find him in the rain, she came across his hat near the edge of the cliff; it was part of the rain gear she had given him the Christmas before.

A feeling of dread filled her soul. She dared not look, she could not look, but she was drawn as if by a mysterious power, toward the precarious edge of the cliff. As she peered down toward the ocean below, she saw her husband lying on the jagged rocks below. The young keeper had either been blown off the edge by a sudden gust of wind, or had a momentary loss of balance that had caused him to slip. But there was no denying he was gone, having fallen 130 feet to his death.

A scream passed her lips; it was as if all of the breath had escaped from her body. This pain was much too horrible to imagine. How could this be? What could life possibly hold now without her love? Consumed with grief, the beautiful young bride impulsively threw herself from the cliff, rejoining her own beloved husband in death.

Decades had passed at the station with nary a thought toward the tragedy. Looking out from the cross-hatched windows of his quarters, the young keeper stared at the beautiful vision dancing in the fleeting light from the tower as it flashed across the station. He was sure that his eyes were deceiving him. As he peered through the fog, the lady of the light seemed to appear and disappear right in front of his eyes. An eerie glow illuminated the lady's long white gown as it cascaded around her delicate frame. She appeared to hover just above the ground, flitting between the tower and the cliff as if she were in a terrible quandary.

The bright young officer knew a lightkeeper's life to be lonely and isolated, but he couldn't help think that he was losing his mind. He knew he saw something, of that he was sure. It appeared to be a woman, but clearly this woman was not flesh and blood, not like you or me. She was not tied to the ground, but light in spirit, moving in a fashion not like that of a human, but like a sprite or ghost or a lost soul.

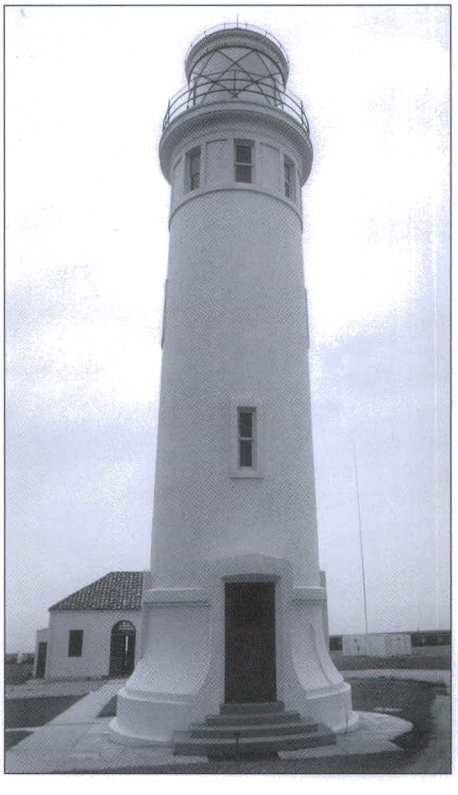
The young keeper had heard old timers spinning fanciful stories about the Lady of the Light, but he had never really believed there was a ghost. When other keepers and their families had talked of seeing the Lady he had shrugged it off, he was too sophisticated, too educated to believe in such foolish things. Even visitors to the station had spoken of seeing a Lady in White, and not just between the tower and the cliff where others had seen her, but also on the catwalk around the great light.

But he was an officer, a twentieth century man of science; did he really believe a ghostly apparition was dancing on the cliff before him? Could it be the fog playing tricks on his mind? After all, a fog had settled in around the station, and from his dwelling more than 350 feet away, he could barely see the tower, and not quite make out the cliff's edge. Could this all just be a dream? The cry of a nearby hoot owl and the buzzing of the wind as it blew through the antennae wires, made the hair on the back of his neck bristle. He was awake all right, dreams don't feel like this.

If the Lady of the Light was real, he must see her up close, to prove, if only to himself, that she was an unearthly being. Building up his courage, he left his quarters and headed toward the vision. When he reached the compound and got close enough to the tower to see it clearly, the lady seemed to vanish right before his eyes.

Despondent, he returned to his room. When he glanced once again from his window, he could see the lady once again as she danced in the moonlight between the tower and the sea. The explanation was clear; Point Vicente had a ghost, and she was trapped between worlds, there could be no other explanation.

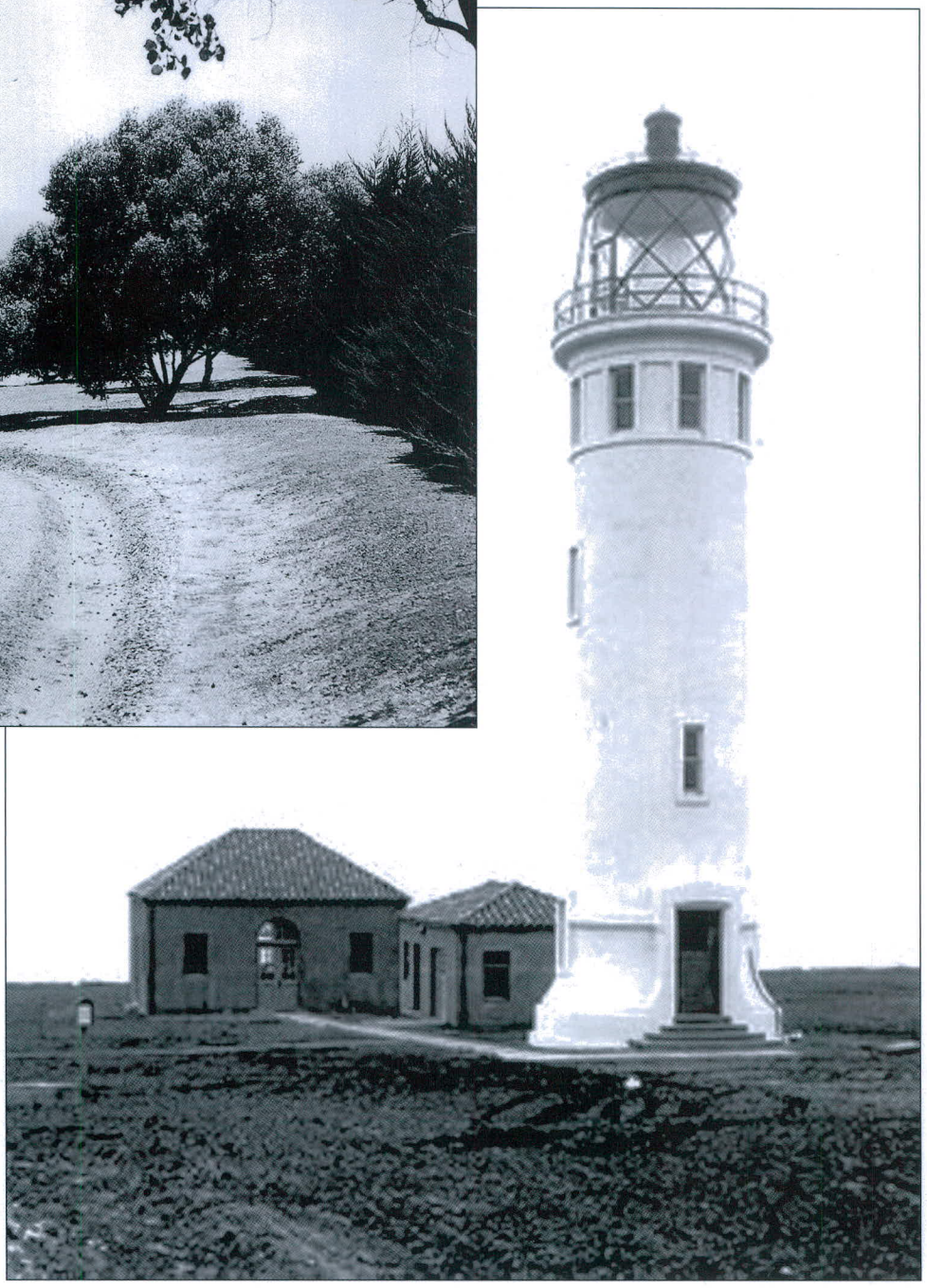
As it turns out, after the war, the property surrounding the station became more populated with residential housing. The light from the Fresnel lens shone too brightly into the hills of the peninsula, and more importantly into the eyes of drivers on the Pacific Coast Highway. To serve the community better, the windows in the lantern room facing the land were painted white to block the light. After several years, and several coats of paint, the uneven coverage on the windows along with areas of the paint that had been worn or scratched away, allowed light to pass through, creating strange shapes. It seems during a fog, when the lens would rotate, the light was refracted toward the ground, where the light could come together in just the right way, and the "Lady" would appear.



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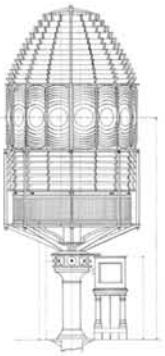


Above – Present day view of the tower. Photo courtesy of the author.



Right – The tower in 1925. Note the Fresnel lens in the lantern room and the interesting entry door to the gallery. Fog signal building on the left. The smaller building eventually housed the radio equipment. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

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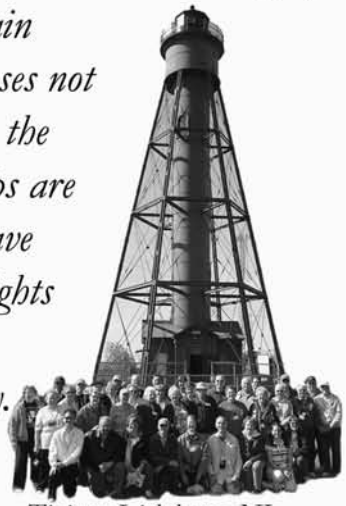
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