Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 2006 <www.USLHS.org>

Scotch Cap Light Station, Alaska and the 1946 EARTHQUAKE

Based on the recollection of Frank Skidmore, who was stationed at Scotch Cap during the 1940s, and an account of the disaster by Don Rutherford.



The 1940 Scotch Cap Lighthouse. The lantern room of the original structure was used on the new building. The top of the original lighthouse can be seen to the left of the new tower. The wooden structure protruding to the left of the new lighthouse is probably a barracks erected during World War II. A rediobeacon antenna is right of the lighthouse. Note the men off-loading supplies on the beach. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

April 18, 2006 marks the centennial of the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake! The U. S. Lighthouse Society commemorates the historic event with the second in a series of articles about famous American lighthouses and the earthquakes they endured.

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The Lighthouse Service began constructing light stations in Alaska in 1902. The Sentinel Island and Five Finger stations of Southeast Alaska were the first to go into service on March 1, 1902. The third station completed was that at the Scotch Cap on Unimak Island in the Aleutians. The station went into operation on June 18, 1903. A sister station, Cape Sarichef, on the north end of the Unimak Pass was completed the following year.

In 1901 Congress authorized $40,600 to construct a lighthouse and fog signal station at Scotch Cap on Unimak Island in the eastern end of the Aleutian Islands. The pass was the primary passage for vessels navigating between the North Pacific and the Bearing Sea. The Scotch Cap and Sarichef Light Stations would assist vessels traveling through that pass.

Requests for proposals for the construction of the station were mailed out in 1901. The 1902 Report of the Lighthouse Board states, "plans and specifications for construction of the structure were made and proposals were opened on March 22, 1902. All bids were so excessive that the station was built by hired labor, while material was bought by contract. The greater part of the material has been purchased. The steamer Homer...which was charted on June 23, 1902, left Seattle on June 30, 1902 with men and material."

In 1903 the Board reported: "the steamer Homer...which left Seattle on June 30, 1902, with men and material for constructing the station arrived at the site July 13, 1902, and discharged the cargo safely. The steamer made two other trips during the season...construction was discontinued for the year on November 27, 1902. The fog signal and tower were completed, with the exception of laying one of the concrete engine beds, placing hardware and lantern glass, and applying two coats of paint inside and out. The two oil houses were completed ...the barn was completed with the exception of painting and putting in the stalls. The three dwellings were completed on the outside, with the exception of painting. The steamer Homer arrived at the station on May 10, 1903, with men and material for completing the station. The painting of the buildings and installation of the heating plants were practically completed. The lens was set up and the light put in operation on June 18, 1903. Some work remains to be done on the fog signal machinery, and it is expected that the signal will be ready for use on July 15, 1903."

The next year's report mentioned that when they started the fog signal machinery, "...all three check values were broken, making the signal useless. New valves were procured and the signal was made ready for use on September 16, 1903."

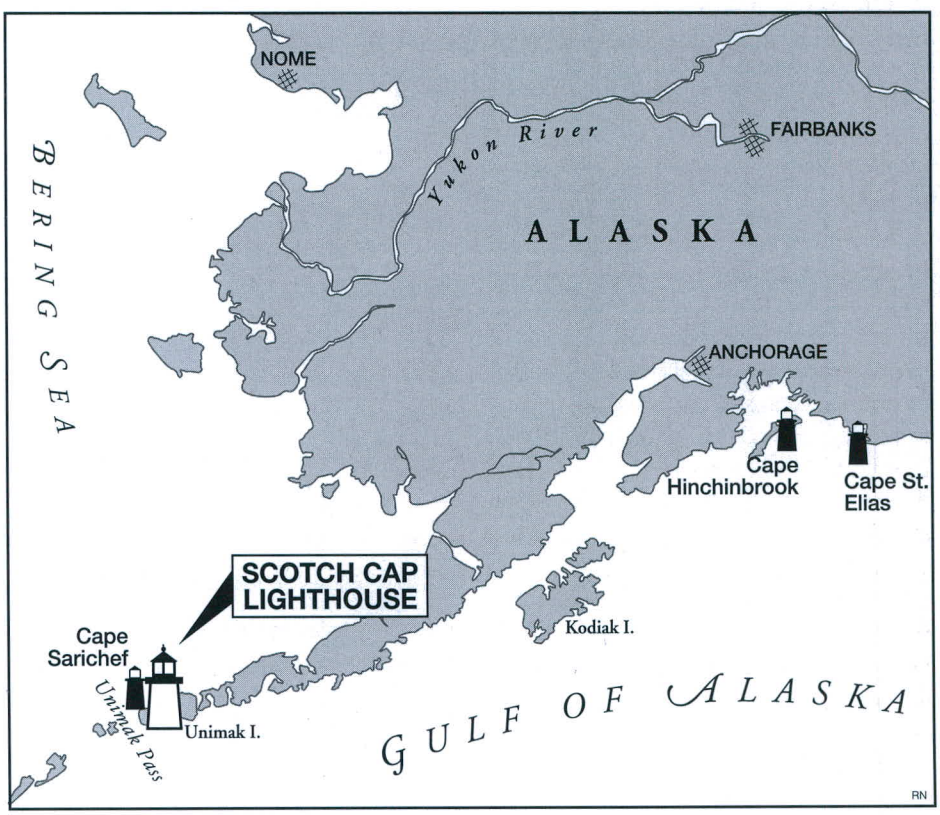
The Scotch Cap was an unaccompanied light station. The keepers selected for these remote stations were usually bachelors or widowers, who had to pass rigid physical examinations. They were contracted to remain on the stations for three years, then were allowed to accumulate leave with full pay, which amounted to twelve moths. Five keepers were assigned, with four on duty and one on leave, at all times. After the Coast Guard assumed control, a tour of duty at a remote light station like Scotch Cap was still unaccompanied but only for a period of one year. The men assigned accrued 30 days leave in addition to the 30 days earned each year.

The original characteristic of the Scotch Cap Light Station was fixed white from a 3rd order Fresnel lens. The fog signal was an air whistle. Sometime in the 1920's it was changed to a diaphone and radiobeacon was added. But in spite of these aids to navigation, ships still ran aground in the area. One, the Japanese freighter *Koshun Maru*, stranded right in front of the light station in 1930.

Late in 1942, the Russian freighter *Turksib*, traveling in large convoy, became separated from the other ships due to bad weather. It stranded five miles east of Scotch Cap. The U.S. Naval vessel ARS 18 was dispatched from Dutch Harbor and attempted to pull the Russian vessel off the beach. While attempting to pass a hawser (line) to the Russian vessel the ARS 18 ran aground on an uncharted reef and was destroyed.

The *Turksib* succumbed to the heavy surf and, in no time, started breaking up. The Captain was decapitated as part of the bridge broke loose when the ship shifted due to the pounding surf. The chief engineer lost his life when he climbed the rigging with a light line (rope) around his waist and jumped to clear the ship in an attempt to swim ashore. When he was in the air the ship lurched away pulling him into the ship where he hit his head on the hull or the deck. The bodies were recovered by the Scotch Cap crew and buried behind the light station. Years later, small gravestones were erected, but apparently no contact was ever made with the families in Russia.

Supplies from the *Turksib* were soon scattered for miles along the beach: jeeps, personal carriers, parts and barrels and barrels of powdered eggs. The huge brown bears of Unimak Island soon discovered the dried eggs. The light



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station personnel during the trip to the wreck site watched with awe as the bears exerted tremendous power breaking into the barrels. They reared up on hind legs and came down with both forepaws, usually smashing the barrels on their first try. Many furious fights occurred among the bears as they fought each other over the food. The station personnel stated it wasn't unusual to see large sections of the bear's sides dripping with blood and with large areas of ripped hide showing through their coats. On one occasion the men counted 20 bears at one section of the beach.

In March 1942, the Alaskan Steamship Company vessel S.S. *Mount McKinley* was sailing between Dutch Harbor and Seattle with a large group of construction workers. They were constructing a seaplane base and runway at Dutch Harbor, which was subsequently attacked by the Japanese.

As the ship approached Unimak Pass she lost her rudder. A Coast Guard vessel came to the rescue and began towing the *McKinley*. After a short while, heavy seas caused the towing line to part and it was decided that it was too rough to attempt another tow. The *McKinley* soon drifted onto the beach at Sennet Point, about six miles from the Scotch Cap station. Everybody on board survived. They were eventually taken back to civilization by another Alaskan Steamship Company vessel.

One Scotch Cap crewmember remembered that the ship was still high and dry on the beach when he arrived in the spring of 1943. He stated that when it was calm, Scotch Cap and Cape Sarichef crewmen would meet at the steamship to play the grand piano still in the saloon.

In 1940 the Coast Guard replaced the original Scotch Cap Lighthouse with a $200,000 reinforced concrete structure, which housed the lens, fog signal and personnel. The three, old wooden houses were abandoned. The new, modern self-contained lighthouse was reported to be one of the most up-to-date lighthouses in the world. The old lantern room and 3rd order Fresnel lens were transferred from the original structure, which was then destroyed. The new characteristic was a flashing white light every 15 seconds, visible for 15 miles. It also provided the mariner with a diaphone fog signal and radiobeacon. A radio direction finder station was installed in a small rectangular building on a bluff above the lighthouse. During World War II, this direction finding station was a valuable aid to the Aleutian operations.

The base of the new light house was about 50 feet above high tide, an elevation that proved to be insufficient.

The Disaster at Scotch Cap

When a watch keeper at the Coast Guard radio-direction-finding station on the bleak Unimak Island in the Aleutians reported for the midwatch on the last day of March in 1946, he looked forward to another dark, dull Aleutian night. Instead, it proved to be a death watch. At 1:30 a.m., a sustained earthquake rocked the headland known as Scotch Cap. The nervous watch keeper noted the event in the log and checked by radio telephone with his opposite number at Scotch Cap Lighthouse at the foot of the headland. Even though the temblor lasted for almost a minute, no damage occurred at either installation.

It was another story 70 miles to the southeast, out in the Pacific. Twenty–seven minutes later a massive segment of the wall of the Aleutian Trench collapsed and roared down to the bottom, more than 20,000 feet below the surface. Above the collapsed wall, a series of seismic waves or tsunamis raced outward across the Pacific at hundreds of miles per hour. A few moments later, another jolt, shorter but much sharper, rocked Scotch Cap. Again there was no damage at either the direction-finding-station or the lighthouse.

Twenty-one minutes after the second temblor, the first tsunami approached Scotch Cap. As the wave moved into the shallow water near shore, it slowed dramatically and reared up into a near vertical wall of water later estimated at over 100 feet high. Millions of tons of seething seawater exploded as the wave engulfed the headland, destroying everything in its path. The water surged up and over the high cliffs behind the lighthouse and swirled around the buildings of the direction-finding station, flooding the engine room that housed the generators.

The off-watch crew rushed out of their quarters and into the operations room where the commanding officer ordered them to higher ground. He knew that more giant waves might follow. As they left the building and looked seaward, they cried "The light—the Scotch Cap Light! It's gone out."

Not only had the light gone out, the fog signal and the radio beacon were both mute.



The Scotch Cap Lighthouse shortly after completion in 1903. This octagonal design was also used for the Cape Sarichef Lighthouse located at the other end of Unimak Pass. Note the diagonal astragals of the lantern room. The Lighthouse Service started using this British design after the turn of the century. The dwellings were located several hundred yards away as seen on the next page. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

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Attempts to raise the light station by telephone and radio failed. The commanding officer groped his way in the dark to the edge of the cliff and looked down. All was pitch dark. It was a long night for all hands.

At last, with the coming of daylight, the Coast Guardsmen made their way to the cliff top and peered down. Below, they saw only a concrete platform and a few pieces of broken concrete—all that remained of the Scotch Cap Light Station. That April Fool's morning, a numbing message from the direction-finding station on Unimak clattered out from teletype machines at other Coast Guard installations...

"TIDAL WAVE PRECEIVED BY EARTHQUAKE COMPLETELY DESTROYED SCOTCH CAP LIGHT STATION WITH LOSS OF ALL HANDS <stop> TOP OF WAVE STRUCK THIS UNIT CAUSING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE BUT NO LOSS OF LIFE <stop> ENGINE ROOM FLOODED OUT BUT EXPECT TO MAINTAIN EMERGENCY POWER IF NO FURTHER DAMAGE EXPERIENCED <stop> WILL SEARCH FOR BODIES OF SCOTCH CAP PERSONNEL AS SOON AS POSSIBLE <stop> REQUEST INSTRUCTIONS <stop>"

A search for the five Coast Guard keepers found nothing—no bodies, no clothes, no papers, only a piece of human intestine. The five men had vanished. Several days later the sea cast up the bodies of Jack Colvin, Dewey Dykstra, Anthony Pettit, Leonard Pickering, and Paul Ness on the beach, identifiable only by their dental records.

A short time after the disaster, a temporary unwatched light of 300-candlepower with the same characteristics as the destroyed lighthouse was installed on a small white house, and a temporary radio beacon was installed at the direction-finding station.

By 1950, a new lighthouse had been built higher on the bluff above the remains of the wrecked light. It was a flat-roofed, rectangular, concrete building with a short metal tower that supported a 240,000 candlepower aero beacon, 116 feet above the sea and visible 17 miles seaward. The station also had a diaphone fog signal. Automated in 1971, a skeletal tower replaced the 1950's structure and the fog signal was discontinued.

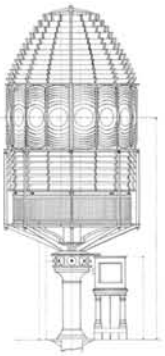


Only a portion of the foundation and some debris remain to mark the site of Scotch Cap Lighthouse. All five Coast Guard crew members lost their lives on April 1, 1946, when tons of water from a Tsunami swept over the lighthouse, collapsing the structure and sliding it into the sea. The 60-foot tall square concrete structure stood at an elevation of 92 feet above high water. It was constructed in 1940 replacing the original 1903 wooden structure. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



The Japanese vessel *Koshun Maru* aground at Scotch Cap in 1930. First assistant keeper Oscar Lindberg is standing on the bow. The Scotch Cap Lighthouse can be seen dead ahead. To the right of the lighthouse are two oil houses and off to the right are the three keepers' dwellings. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

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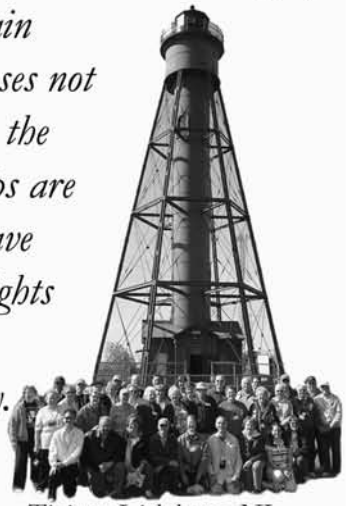
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