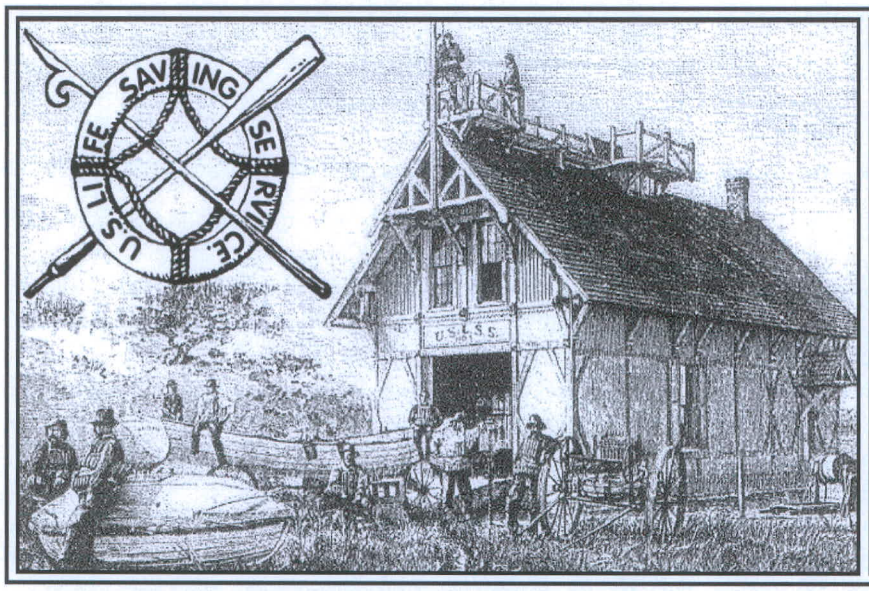
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life-Saving Service
1873 - 1915

YAQUINA BAY LIGHTHOUSE AND LIFE-SAVING STATION, 1871 - 1933

by George Collins, Newport, Oregon

Photos courtesy of Oregon Coast History Center except as noted.

A leopard cannot change its spots. In 1906, however, a federal agency was able to make a change in Oregon that had never been accomplished before—or since. It changed an old lighthouse in Newport, Yaquina Bay Lighthouse, into the Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station, which it remained for 27 years!

Now owned and maintained again as a lighthouse by Oregon State Parks and Recreation, this oldest building in Newport is unusual in other ways:

- It probably had the shortest life-span of any lighthouse operated by the U.S. Light-House Service, 34 months.
- A lighthouse at that location was never planned for Newport.
- It cost more than others its size, more than $17,000 vs. about $11,000.

This unusual tale begins in 1868, two years after homesteaders founded the town of Newport on the north shore of Yaquina Bay. The U.S. Coast Survey, assigned to investigate various sites along our coastlines, discovered that year that Yaquina Bay was deeper in places than was thought. That led some Newporters to believe their small city (population 63) could, with help from the U.S. government, become the "San Francisco of Oregon." The U.S. Light-House Board evaluated the situation and recommended placement of two range lights to help guide vessels safely into the large bay. Townsfolk enlisted U.S. Senator George Williams of Portland to successfully push through Congress a $20,000 appropriation for those lights. Installation of them fell to the Corps of Engineers officer assigned to the combined 12th/13th Light-house District, San Francisco, Colonel Robert Williamson, who had just finished building the light station at Cape Blanco, Oregon. The colonel discovered, however, that there was no suitable place for range lights in Yaquina Bay, except possibly along the top of a rocky hill at the north entrance to the bay. Since range lights need to be placed a good distance apart, there was no room for them there. So, with $20,000 to spend and time running out on the congressional appropriation, Colonel Williamson instead got approval for and designed a small lighthouse for the hill. The Light-House Board, meantime, had decided that it needed to expand operations along the West Coast and in March 1871 ordered the creation of a separate and distinct 13th Lighthouse District in Portland, Oregon. Corps of Engineers Major Henry M. Robert was assigned to head up the new district and therefore direct the building of the Yaquina lighthouse and, later, the big one at Yaquina Head, three-and-a-half miles north.

Bay lighthouse building began May



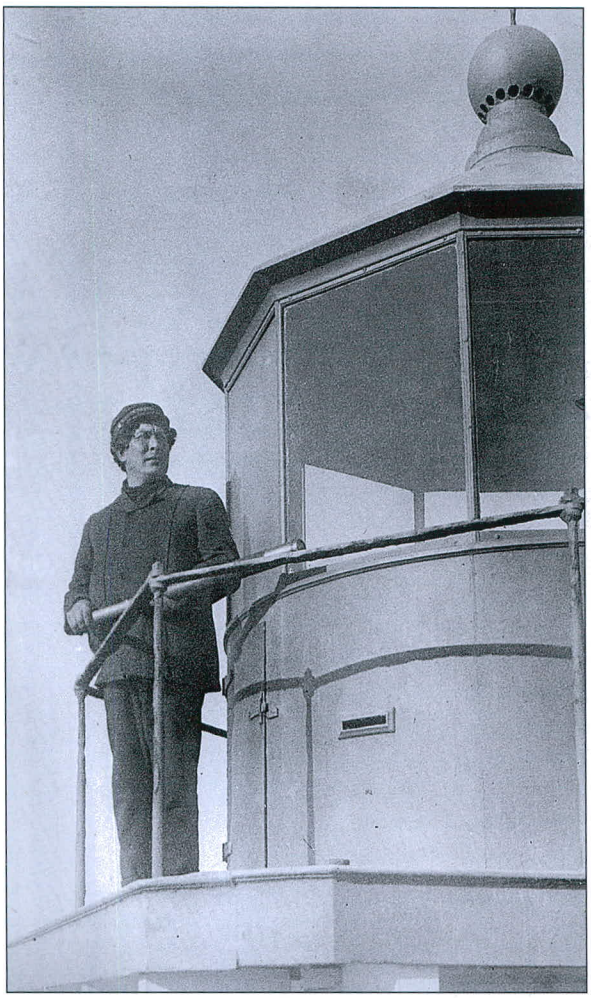
Bay lighthouse circa 1900, after it was an active lighthouse but before the Life-Saving Service took it over.

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1, 1871, and was completed without incident in November at a cost $17,067.67, including furniture. Everything was in place except a missing chimney for the fifth-order lard oil-fueled lamp in the fifth-order L. Sautter et Cie lens. A pair of chimneys were sent for from San Francisco. On December 1, Major Robert, in a letter to the Light-House Board, wrote, "I have the honor to report…the chimneys were received by the Light Keeper on the evening of 22 November, and the light was exhibited on the 23 of November."

From the onset, though, there were issues. Vessels approaching and leaving Yaquina Bay could do so only at high tide, and they had to maneuver around and past large rocks at the bay entrance. Captains dared not do this at night. Approaching ships had to anchor a good distance from the entrance until daylight. Thus, the lighthouse served no purpose other than to locate the Yaquina Bay entrance. The much stronger light at Yaquina Head could do that, and did, starting August 20, 1873.

This led the board to conclude the obvious in 1873, the beginning of a crippling nationwide recession; the Yaquina Bay light was "no longer necessary." It was discontinued on October 1 that year. It had been active for less than three years. The one and only keeper assigned to tend the light there, Charles Peirce, was moved 150 miles south with his wife and seven children for reassignment as keeper of the light station at Cape Blanco. The fifth-order lens was removed and shipped to San Francisco Bay in 1874 and installed in the lantern of the new Yerba Buena Lighthouse. Caretakers maintained the Bay lighthouse building for several years until it was taken over by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1880. It was used sparingly.



Life-Saving Surfman Joe Briggs on lookout at Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station, circa 1912.

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Newport's first life-saving station was established in 1896 just above a stretch of beach a good distance away from town, two miles south of Yaquina Bay, in an area called South Beach. It resembled many other stations of the period: a Marquette-type dwelling, office and kitchen for the keeper and his seven surfmen, a woodhouse, a privy, and a Fort Point-type "witch's hat" boathouse for a 26-foot Monomoy-type pulling surfboat and a 28-foot Dobbins-type pulling lifeboat. There also eventually were several small dwellings built for married surfmen and their wives.

As Newport's population grew and activity in Yaquina Bay increased, there was pressure by 1906 for having the station and its life-savers relocate nearer Newport. Heading up a campaign in January that year were the seven-member Newport Common Council and Mayor Sam Irvin, and William Matthews, publisher of Newport's newspaper, *The Yaquina News*. Matthews' son Crosby was a Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Service surfman. Lengthy letters were sent to Life-Saving Service General Superintendent Sumner I. Kimball.

"For a considerable length of time", wrote publisher Matthews, "it has been quite apparent…that the Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station is not properly located so that it can properly render the prompt and efficient service which cases of emergency so often require." His nearly three-page typewritten letter listed 15 reasons, all of which are favorable to the removal of the station to the north side of the bay, "and that after you made a careful investigation of the subject…you will be favorably impressed with the advisability and necessity of having the transfer made at the earliest moment possible."

The common council and Mayor Irvin stated, "Newport, on the North side of the Bay…is rapidly growing in favor….The State is increasing in wealth and population, this prospect gives reasonable grounds for stating, that within a very few years, Newport will become the most popular Seaside Resort on the Pacific coast North of San Francisco, Cal."

Yaquina Bay Lighthouse, unused for many years and in poor condition by 1906, was at a commanding location on the hill above the north entrance to Yaquina Bay and within a few hundred yards of the center of town where, by 1906, there was telegraph and telephone service. No such things existed in South Beach. There was ample room in the lighthouse for



Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station crew in a Dobbins lifeboat rowing to save three crewmen aboard the motor sloop *Condor*, November 21, 1912. The *Condor* ended up a total wreck.

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Rear view of Coast Guard Station Yaquina Bay, circa 1930. Note the radio transmission tower at the left, and ladders used by Coastguardsmen to climb up to and down from the lookout, the one-time lantern at the top of the Station. U.S. Coast Guard image.

an office and there was space to house and feed the surfmen. And the attached lighthouse tower could serve as a lookout. A short distance east of it was a dwelling built in the 1880s by the Corps of Engineers to house the builder of the jetties and his family, perfect for the Life-Saving Service keeper's household. There were ideal locations along the bayshore below for a boathouse for life-saving vessels and other equipment.

Superintendent Kimball, obviously influenced and impressed by the letters from Newport and advised about the existence and possible availability of the lighthouse, set wheels in motion. Those led to arrangements to have the lighthouse owner, by that time the War Department, transfer title of the lighthouse and its site to the Life-Saving Service. The War Department had taken over ownership in 1880 from the Treasury Department, the lighthouse builders, to enable its Army Corps of Engineers to begin construction of stone jetties at the bay entrance. The old lighthouse itself had been used for a while to house the supervisor of jetty construction, civilian James Polhemus, and his wife and a child.

Paperwork was completed within six months—a lightning pace by federal standards. Surfmen then made repairs and improvements to the lighthouse building inside and out, including painting and wallpapering. Formal relocation of station personnel from South Beach into the lighthouse took place on Wednesday, August 1, 1906. On hand for the event and, according to *The Yaquina Bay News*, "to advise on other matters" for two days were none other than the Life-Saving Service's most prestigious leaders: Superintendent Kimball and General Inspector of Life-Saving Stations Captain Charles H. McLellan.

Kimball and his traveling companion, the renowned co-designer of the Bebee-McLellan lifeboat, had arrived in Newport earlier that very day by steamship, courtesy of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. A brief entry in the log kept by a keeper of the Yaquina Head lighthouse, three-and-a half miles north of Newport, noted on August 1, "Light House Tender *Heather* arrived off Yaquina bar at 1 p.m. from the south." Two days later, on August 3rd, a lighthouse keeper wrote that the *Heather* "crossed out of Yaquina at 11 a.m. for Astoria [Oregon]" heading north, without doubt carrying Kimball and Captain McLellan to begin their journey back east aboard a Northern Pacific Railroad train from Portland, perhaps after pausing to inspect the Point Adams Life-Saving Station at the entrance to the Columbia River. The author also surmises that what had brought the two men to the West Coast about three-and-a-half months earlier from Washington, D.C., more than 3,000 miles distant, was to inspect the horrendous damage caused by the San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906. The quake had destroyed the Life-Saving Service warehouse in that city and badly damaged six life-saving stations, including one 130 miles north, at Arena Cove, California.

Nine years after it was transformed into the Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station, the the old lighthouse became Coast Guard Station Yaquina Bay. Surfmen became Coastguardsmen.



The first Yaquina Bay Life-Saving Station at South Beach, Newport, Oregon, circa 1900.

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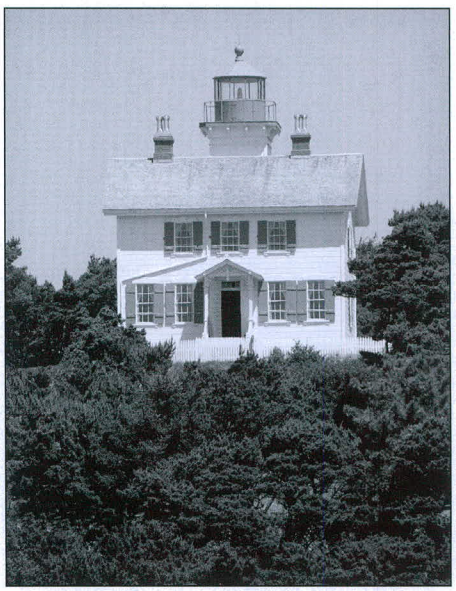


Yaquina Bay Life Saving Station in the old lighthouse, circa 1910.

This happened in 1915 when the Life-Saving Service merged with the Revenue Service to form the Coast Guard. Eighteen years after that, in 1933, the lighthouse became empty for the first time in 27 years. It was abandoned when the crew moved into a new life-saving station on Newport's bayfront, one that burned down 11 years later in a fire of undetermined origin, leading to locating Station Yaquina Bay where it is today, just west of the bayfront. The original 1896 life-saving station on the beach two miles south of Yaquina Bay eventually fell into disrepair and was sold to a private developer in the 1950s. Nothing of it remains, although the author was told by a county surveyor friend that a survey marker probably exists there…somewhere?

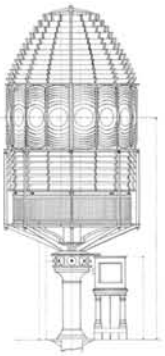
The old lighthouse and its site were acquired as an Oregon State Park in 1934. Eventually finding no reason to maintain the lighthouse over time, the Oregon State Highway Commission let it fall into disrepair and scheduled its demolition in 1946. Local citizens rallied in 1955 to save it, and the commission reversed its demolition decision, providing restoration funds and fully restoring it as a lighthouse in 1974. A borrowed (non-classical) lens was installed in the lighthouse lantern in 1996 and the lighthouse became a Coast Guard-approved "private aid to navigation." (The original fifth-order Fresnel lens sent to the Yerba Buena Lighthouse was replaced in 1907 and has since disappeared.)

Volunteers offer tours of the beautiful Yaquina Bay Lighthouse seven days a week. However, visitors are rarely—if ever—told it was Newport's Life-Saving Station for nearly three decades, 90% of its historically active lifetime! Few realize that many brave surfmen and Coastguardsmen lived in and served there *after* it was a lighthouse, the one and only lighthouse in the United States that, unlike a leopard with its spots, was able to be changed more than a century ago into it something quite different.



Yaquina Bay Lighthouse today. Photo by the author.

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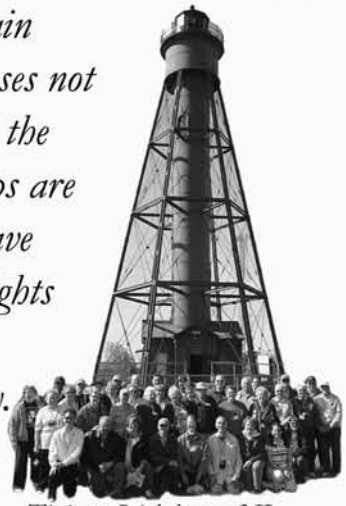
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