



Smith Island

Excerpted from an article by James Hermanson.



The keeper, his family, and an assistant at the rear of the Smith Island Light Station. Date unknown. Photo courtesy of the author.



viewed as a small spot across the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Port Townsend, Washington, Smith Island is approximately fifteen acres in area, a half mile in length and from a height of 55 feet at the west end drops to nearly sea level on the east end. At low tide it is connected to an islet known as Minor Island.

Smith Island was the site of one of the original 16 light stations constructed on the west coast in the 1850's and the site of the last Indian uprising in the area. For many years it was dependent on the town of Port Townsend for supplies. Through the years a number of sailing vessels grounded on its shoals. All were gotten off, although it was several months before the *Minnie A. Caine* was refloated in 1901.

The island had at least three names. The Spanish referred to it as "Islas de Bonilla" in honor of Antonio de Bonilla. In 1841 the Wilkes expedition named it "Blunt's Island" for midshipman Simon F. Blunt who did much of the surveying in the Straits. Smith Island, the name which has prevailed, was likely given by the Hudson's Bay Company and by 1858 it was in general use on nautical charts.

The construction of the lighthouse, in 1857, closely followed the construction of two others in the area, Cape Flattery and New Dungeness.

The original building, like most of the other early west coast light houses, was a thick walled, one and one half story, Cape Cod style house with a tower through the center. The overall dimensions were 25 by 35 feet.

Due to the fear of hostile Indians, construction workers built a blockhouse in which they could live during the lighthouse's construction. There were, however, no hostilities during this period.

The first keeper was John Vail. He had an assistant named Applegate. Shortly after the station was operational a friend of Vail's, James Swan (a northwest pioneer and historian) visited the station. He was impressed with the condition of the station and grounds stating that the house is "A model of neatness." Besides being a good housekeeper he thought Mrs. Vail, "...a lady of taste and charm during her lonely residence on the little island, has made a beautiful collection of marine curiosities."

Shortly after the station was completed, the so called "Battle of Smith Island" occurred. In the spring of 1859, residents of Port Townsend became fearful of an Indian attack when they heard reports of a Haida war canoe heading toward their community. The men armed themselves and captured the party of Indians – women, an old chief who was blind, and children. Although this party posed no threat, hysteria prevailed and they were jailed.

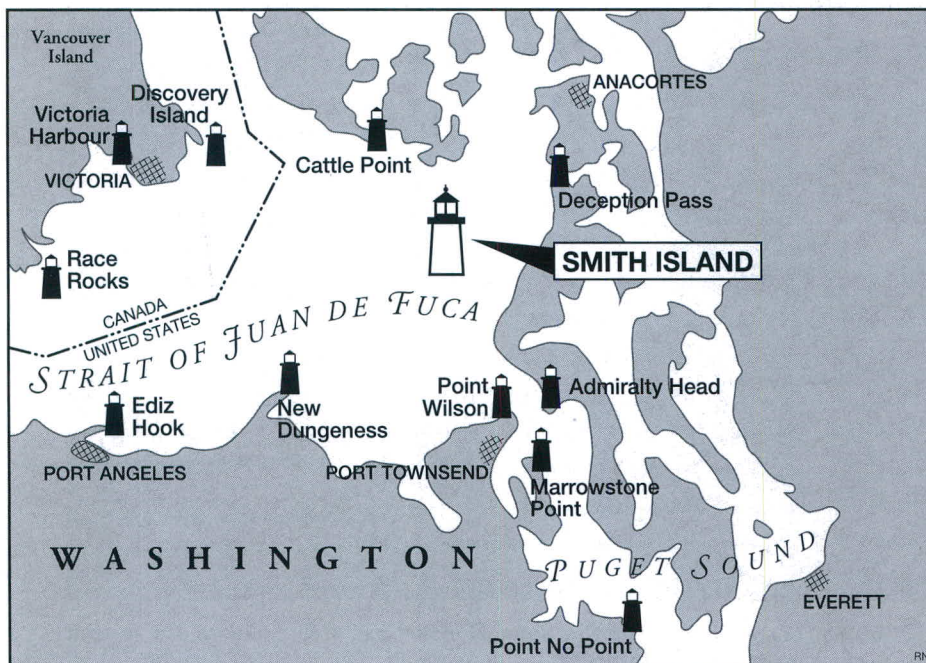
A local Indian agent freed them. Supposedly, they returned to their camp on the other side of the Strait of Juan De Fuca, at Victoria, and told of their ordeal. A war party set out to take revenge for the insult. The captain of the schooner *Carolina* observed a number of Haida craft bearing down on Smith Island and, as a precaution, he took the keeper and his wife off the island. Assistant Applegate stayed behind and locked himself in the tower for protection.

Within a day or two Applegate sent word that he had exchanged fire with Indians and was in need of help. In response, a Major Granville Haller, with soldiers and volunteers, occupied the island for a number of weeks, although no further violence occurred. This represented the last serious event with northern Indians.

The family who served at the station the longest were the Dennisons, who served for 25 years. DeWitt Dennison was appointed assistant keeper in 1880. He moved to Smith island from Seattle with his wife and six children. A year later he became keeper and his wife, Anna, became the assistant keeper. There was a short period in the 19th century where the Lighthouse Service paid wives to be assistants. The Service, however, reasoning they were present anyway, decided to save money by not paying the wives. If the keeper became incapacitated, the wife would be forced to keep the light going. At the time, DeWitt earned \$1,000 a year and his wife earned \$625.

Several entries made by Keeper Dennison are worth noting: March 22, 1882 – At 8:30 a.m. the house was discovered to be on fire, at the west end, by the chimney. It was soon put out, not doing very serious damage. It was found, upon examination, to have taken fire on the inside, next to the chimney, and must have been smoldering some time before it broke out.

November 14, 1882 – At 10:40 p.m. the lens ceased to revolve. I was obliged to remove small pieces of glass which had broken and joined the revolving shaft so it could not move. I called my daughter to keep the lens turning while I repaired the machinery. I did not get it repaired until 2:30 a.m.



May 10, 1888 – At 1 a.m., a small fishing sloop went ashore on the spit. There was one man on board who was nearly drowned, two holes were knocked in the bottom of the sloop. My son, Frank Dennison, helped repair it and got it off.

August 21, 1891 – Boat stolen with three oars. I have done all I can think of to recover it and hope to get it yet.

September 3, 1891 – My son returned this evening with the boat, the finder claimed \$20 finding fee reward. The boat was not injured and only had a little paint scratched off. My son went to Orcas Island for the boat.

October 27, 1891 – DeWitt Dennison, keeper of Smith Island Light Station died and was taken to Whidby Island and buried. Frank Dennison acting keeper.

Frank was officially appointed keeper, married, and had two children born at the lighthouse. On January 16, 1894 Frank wrote in his log: "Picked up a new boat adrift, one and a half mile NW of the island and found a dead man in the boat. There was no evidence of violence. Took boat and man to Port Townsend."

In 1905 Frank Dennison transferred to Fairway Island, a new station in Southeast Alaska. He left the service in 1908 and began boat building and fishing. He was lost at sea in 1910.

Back in 1858, the Smith Island lighthouse was equipped with a 4th order lens. This optic was replaced by a more powerful lens in 1885 and in the 1950's the Coast Guard abandoned the station, due to erosion, and placed a minor optic on a skeleton tower.

Originally the lighthouse was constructed some 200 feet from the edge of the cliff. Over the years, erosion by sea and wind ate away at the bluff until the edge reached the house. By 1952 the house was beginning to be undermined and the Coast Guard abandoned the building. Eventually most of the house fell down the cliff, today only a small sliver remains.

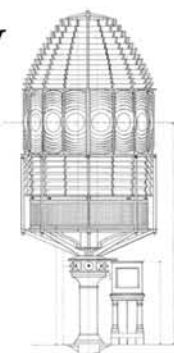
For many years a small lighthouse on a small island assisted mariners navigate the Strait of Juan de Fuca. It was the site of marriages and births, and even an Indian attack. Smith Island served for many years and was very much part of the maritime community of northwest Washington and it seems like...Only Yesterday!



Smith Island Lighthouse in the early 1980's. Only half of the structure remains today. Modern Coast Guard houses can be seen in the background. The tower is part of the Coast Guard Vessel Traffic System in Puget Sound. Photographer unknown.



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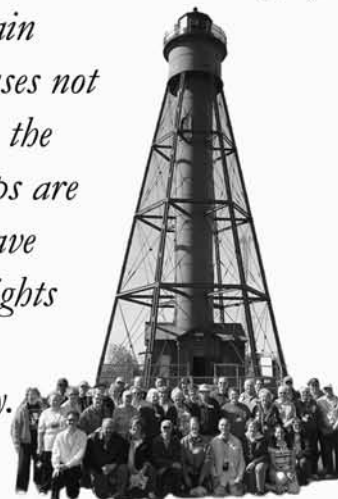
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