

SOMETHING NEW AT THE OLD POINT LOMA LIGHTHOUSE

by Debbie Stetz

All Photos by the Author

In the 1981 Point Loma Historic Structures Report, park Historian Ross Holland described the activity:

"From the historic record and the building itself, the architects learned a great deal and they began to restore the building to what they thought was its original condition. Rotten wood was replaced, the lean-to was rebuilt, the flooring was renewed throughout, and the metal lantern crowning the tower was reconstructed. Certain modern concessions were made because of the intended use of the building. Electric fixtures were installed, as was plumbing. Doors, door frames, and window sashes were made of metal for fire-protection purposes. The basement was completely refinished. And the wooden treads and risers in the tower stairway were replaced with metal."

That was the first major renovation of the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. And through the years, the National Park Service has carried out several other renovations, focusing on building maintenance and stabilization. But, according to the mission statement in the 1916 Organic Act establishing the park service, the National Park Service must protect and preserve natural and historic objects "by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." So in 1995, in celebration of the 150th birthday of the Old Point Loma Lighthouse, another sprucing up was in order, this time focusing upon the plain interiors.

Bill Brown, Staff Curator of Historic Furnishings at Harper's Ferry Center, in West Virginia, was brought in to carry out the job. He and his assistant, Andy Chamberlain, embarked on a search for materials to bring the interiors back to their heyday in the 1880s. After Bill and Andy completed their work last November, they invited the staff of Cabrillo National Monument to the

"unveiling." It was a thrilling moment as we seemed to step back in time, seeing the rooms as they would have appeared a century ago. As we walked through the rooms, Bill Brown explained how they achieved the effect. The following are excerpts from his recorded discussion:

"As you know, no one lived in the lighthouse after 1891, and it fell into disrepair. [The park service] rehabilitated it and stated in their report about this [wall] siding they found that the Army had put in. They pulled it, and [underneath] we find what was available in 1875 . . . When they reproduce wall paper now from an original, they will make an exact copy of the paper, and that's the 'document,' and then they make, shall we say, some adaptations where they print them in different colors. The paper you are going to see is a 'document.' It 'survives' from 1874-75. And I picked that because I didn't want to pick a paper that was high style. We're trying to do this as the place might have looked around 1884. And at that time, both boys

[of Captain Israel] were teenagers, and there was a niece living here; I believe she was around ten years old.

"So, you've got wallpapers in the two bedrooms, and those are bedroom papers in the upstairs — one from the 1860s and one from the 1870s. They are very similar in, shall I say, 'feeling.' The common thing about bedroom papers in those days is the small prints. They liked narrow strips, they liked restful [designs] — no big, bold designs. So, you are going to see two documents upstairs, and you are going to see a document in the parlor. The kitchen, we left white, which would have been white-washed. And when we set up things like this, we try to make the situation believable. In other words, if you had ten people in a family, and they lived in one room, you've got to explain where these people went to the bathroom, where they ate, and where they slept. And if you enter into a historic furnishing, and you can't answer those questions, then there's probably something wrong with the furnishings.



Point Loma Lighthouse parlor. Note the 'common as dirt' picture frames.

"So, again, we've set this up where you have the parents, two teenage boys, and a ten year old girl, living in these three rooms, essentially — four counting the kitchen. You're going to see some carpets, which are called in-grains. In-grain carpets start in the 18th century and by about 1830, they are manufacturing them in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia because they have set up jacquard looms. It's the first cheap — and by 'cheap', I mean cheap — commercial carpeting for America. And everybody buys it. What you're going to see is very, very middle class stuff. In-grain carpets start losing their popularity, because they start reproducing things called Brussels carpets, which are a little finer; and they come in during the 1850s and 60s. And in-grains are, generally speaking, then pushed to bedrooms, or as they said, 'non-public spaces.' In-grains were all made in strips, sewn together, and produced on jacquard looms. They stay, being offered, up until around 1910 in the Sears-Roebuck catalogs, and then they completely go out of favor when carpet companies like Bigelow start producing vast amounts of pile carpet.

"The furniture that you are going to see is here [as] a result of interviews that Kathy Mena did with the [1978] furnishing plan. One reference was a platform rocker and a Boston rocker; you're going to see that in the living room. There is a desk

for the lighthouse keeper to work on. And you're going to see a lot of wall hangings. And if you look at their frames, what you're going to see is the most common frame all over this country in the 1870s and 80s, which is a wooden frame with little maple leaves on it, or a white dot, that were just as common as dirt. We found so many of them [at flea markets], we started throwing them over our shoulders. But those simple prints were everywhere. And again we've gone for things that are very, very typical. So, why don't we step inside and I'll answer questions as we go through.

"You are going to see that all the woodwork is grained, and that is in the lighthouse regulations. They specified that all the wood in these lighthouses, if they weren't oak, would be grained, every bit of it; so if it wasn't oak, it's been regrained. So, what do we know positively about this room? We can say that it was grained, that it had wallpaper, and we know they had a Boston rocker. We know that Mrs. Israel did sewing and mending, and a lot of hand-work, and she did these two [seashell] frames. We've tried to set up various sewing materials of the period, and we also tried to set up the kinds of things that were very popular for women to do in the home, like handwork. This little book, knickknack shelf, is literally made out of sewing spools. So, we're not talking about any antiques, in that sense, [but] rather

inexpensive furniture. There's a daybed that's been covered to act as a sofa, [with] a lot of handwork pillows; that's the kind of thing we were trying to go with. A lot of seashells [as decoration], and a lot of things they were selling to the tourists.

"Now, when we get upstairs, there were references made that he had been in a regiment of mounted rifles and saw service in the Mexican War. There was a reference that when people came here, he would take his Mexican War mounted rifles coat out of a blanket chest upstairs [to show]. So we reproduced the mounted rifles coat and it's in the blanket chest upstairs, and you can see that. The other thing is that the blanket chest we got for upstairs is 1850s, [the time] when he came out here from Pennsylvania. So when you look at some of this painted furniture that is around, it's Pennsylvania furniture that could have been brought here when he came in the 1850s. You will see a small set of Pennsylvania chairs in the dining room. And another thing I should mention is that some of the furniture upstairs is called 'cottage furniture.' This was very popular in the 70s and 80s. It was inexpensive pine furniture and the effort went into painting it [with] all kinds of designs. It was very, very popular. A lot of the furniture in this era was offered by Montgomery Ward and Sears, and that's the kind of furniture that is in the house now. So, we are talking about very common, everyday kinds of things. And again, a lot of handwork on the part of the ladies.

"One of the things that was very popular in this era was a center table [in the living room]. This comes about with fluid lamps in the 1830s. It's the first time in history that a light that goes in 360 degrees [is available]. And everybody goes 'wow,' and they put it on a center table and everybody sits around it. So this becomes a very important way to arrange furniture in a room. And it stays this way until you start getting chandeliers hung in the center. Or even very simple lights, then they take the center table away. So this is the most common way to arrange a room, with kerosene [lamps] from 1855 to about 1875 or '80. We are trying to reflect a little bit earlier times; he's an older man, she's an older woman and they have a tendency to look back rather than to the latest styles.



Point Loma Kitchen with a period stove. The window at right shows the thickness of the walls.

"This platform rocker has the original upholstery on it. We saw a number of platform rockers [at flea markets], and when we found one with the original upholstery on it, we bought it. I date it somewhere between 1875 and '85. Andy and I purchased most of this furniture in two places; a huge antique flea market in Brimfield, Massachusetts, which lasts an entire week and you get about three thousand dealers. And one in Adamstown, Pennsylvania, with about fifteen hundred dealers. Generally speaking, if you are looking for things of this era and can't find it in those two places, you're probably not going to find it.

"The other things we tried to do, you might have noticed, [are] things like shell motifs, like [Mrs. Israel] could have made. You are going to see photographs here [that are] displayed in the way they were displayed in the 1870s and '80s. As a matter of fact, I want to assure you, there are less [photos and knick-knacks] on these walls than there probably really was.

"But again, if you look at all the uses of fabrics, you'll see stuff that is very common. One of the things that you are going to see in the bedroom [is the] cocoa or straw matting, [which] they put the in-

grain [carpets] on top of. In the summer, they took up the in-grains, and you had cocoa mats. We put some matting in the boys' room to show you what summer matting looked like. It gave the feeling that it was cooler — that's what they said. It didn't make things cooler, it 'looked' cooler. It was a ritual! Everybody did it! Spring cleaning and fall cleaning!

"Yes, that is a spittoon. Every traveler to America said that the Americans — men, women, and children — spit, chewed and smoked. They wore the carpets out in the Senate of the United States three times before the Civil War because of tobacco juice and snuff. And there are still snuff boxes on either sides of the speaker stands. So, it was an era that was heavily into tobacco. And while gentlemen generally didn't smoke in front of ladies, everyone spit and chewed. As a matter of fact, an ordinance in a lot of cities fined men if they were caught spitting on the sidewalks, because women's dresses drag on the sidewalks. So, you cannot get away from the fact in our twentieth century, and our feelings about smoking, that [Captain Israel] probably smoked cigars and chewed like everybody else. Sometimes they would cut about a one-foot square piece of canvas and put the spittoon on top

of that, so if you missed, you wouldn't hit the carpets. But we'll assume Mr. Israel was an accurate shot.

"That's tinsel art [on the wall and] was another thing that was very, very common. People are sort of amazed that they had tinsel, or what we call aluminum foil or tin foil. But that was a very popular ladies' home thing where you did this reverse painting on glass and crinkled this tin foil up behind it and put it up on the wall. So we are trying to show a lot of the crafts that ladies did at home. I'm not saying that we like it, but that's what they liked, and that is what is important, to not decorate. And I mean that, we don't 'decorate' this place; we're trying to show you how they would have done it, as best we can with the evidence we've got . . ."

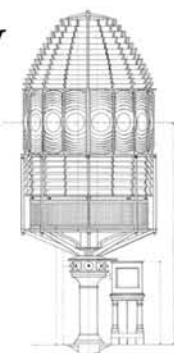
The staff of Cabrillo National Monument extends its thanks to Bill Brown and Andy Chamberlain for their outstanding work in recreating an 1880s home, with the additional challenge of being inside a lighthouse. It looks wonderful and truly feels like a step back in time. The lighthouse has gone through a number of renovations, but this last one is by far the most attractive. The Old Point Loma Lighthouse continues to "shine" in her old age!



The master bedroom with an in-grain carpet. Notice the fireplace.



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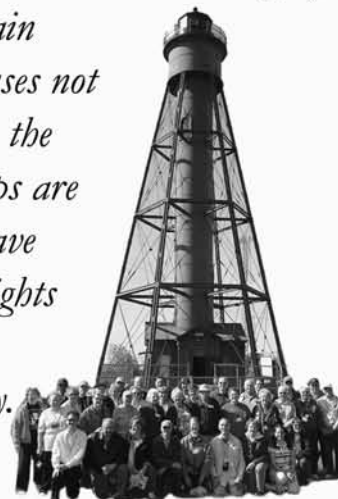
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