

Victor Smith's Lighthouse Legacy

By Ted Nelson

In July 1861, Victor Smith arrived in Port Townsend, Washington Territory, the Port of Entry for the Puget Sound Customs District.

He came as the district's new collector of customs, appointed by President Abraham Lincoln on the advice of Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase. As collector of customs, Smith's principle duties would be documenting vessels entering the port and collecting duties on behalf of the United States. In his role he could also remove and appoint keepers to the light stations within his district that included Cape Flattery, New Dungeness, Smith Island, and Admiralty Head. He would also be in charge of the district's revenue cutters. These Revenue Cutter Service ships guarded against smugglers from Canada. They also watched the movements of British ships along the Strait of Juan de Fuca because of Britain's sympathy with the South's Civil War cause.

Smith's appointment was not because of a familiarity with maritime matters. As a newspaperman in Cincinnati, Ohio, he became a close friend of Salmon Chase who had served in the U.S. Senate and as the state's governor. Smith and Chase shared strong anti-slavery views and worked together in the political arena. Both men were often critical of Abraham Lincoln, and Chase had unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for president in 1860. Despite their differences, Lincoln named Chase as his secretary of treasury in 1861. Smith's appointment followed.

Smith came to Port Townsend with his pregnant wife, Caroline, and their three young children. They had sailed from New York to Panama; crossed the isthmus by railroad; sailed to Portland, Oregon; then traveled by canoe and wagon to Olympia, Washington's territorial capital. They completed their trip down Puget Sound and Admiralty Inlet in a small sailboat. Smith's father, George, and his sisters, Mary and Ellen later joined the family.

After his arrival, Smith removed William Winsor as keeper at the Cape Flattery Light Station and appointed his father, George, as principal keeper. The station, marking the



The Cape Flattery Light Station shortly after completion with keepers and workmen. Note the unpainted rubble stone wall of the combination dwelling-lighthouse. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, stood on windswept Tatoosh Island off Cape Flattery, the most northwesterly point in the then United States. Completed in 1857, it consisted of a Cape Cod-style dwelling with a 65-foot-tall tower rising from its center. There was a fog bell and the tower held a first order Fresnel lens.

A lighthouse inspector visited the station soon after the appointment. In his report he described George Smith as a "peevish old man, under whose charge the light is rapidly going to destruction." He wrote that, "the light is in deplorable condition. He (Smith) has with him two assistants who are as ignorant as he is." The inspector also noted that, "Under the Victor Smith administration, the business of this office seems to have been orally conducted, for nothing appears in the files to show that Winsor was regularly removed or that G.K. Smith was regularly appointed." Despite the report, George Smith remained as Cape Flattery's principal keeper.

With Victor Smith's appointment as collector of customs, Secretary Chase also appointed Smith as a special agent of the

treasury. In this capacity, Smith came with a hidden mission. He was to move the port of entry away from Port Townsend.

The genesis for this mission lay with Isaac Stevens, Washington's first territorial governor. In the early 1850s, while negotiating Indian treaties, Stevens traveled along Puget Sound, Admiralty Inlet, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. He became convinced that the territory should have a major port and naval installation. Later, as the territory's delegate to Congress, he introduced a bill providing for a study to determine the location for such a port. However, Stevens and others had already decided that it should be at a bay lying behind Ediz Hook, about thirty miles west of Port Townsend, on the Strait of Juan de Fuca. A lieutenant in the U.S. Topographical Engineers described the bay as "The first attempt of nature on this coast to form a good harbor." Officers of the Revenue Cutter Service favored the location because it was closer than Port Townsend to British ports on Canada's Vancouver Island.

The bay was known as Port Angeles, a name given by Spanish explorers in 1791. It

was also known as False Dungeness Bay, in reference to the bay behind New Dungeness Spit about fifteen miles to the east. Referencing France's great seaport, some called the bay the "Cherbourg of the Pacific." In anticipation of the "study's" outcome, investors in the Cherbourg Land Company began quietly acquiring property along Port Angeles's shores. Victor Smith was among them.

Six months after his arrival, rumors spread in Port Townsend that Smith was trying to move the port of entry to Port Angeles. Smith responded in a letter to Olympia's *Overland Press*. He wrote that he was seeking "a good harbor, fresh water, and provisions for school, church and other improvements desirable in a place of residence." He added that he had made no recommendations for the removal of the customs house. The truth, however, was that two months earlier Smith had stated in a report to the Treasury Department that, "the collection of huts known as Port Townsend is not a good harbor." He wrote, "I recommend that the port of entry be transferred from Port Townsend to Port Angeles."

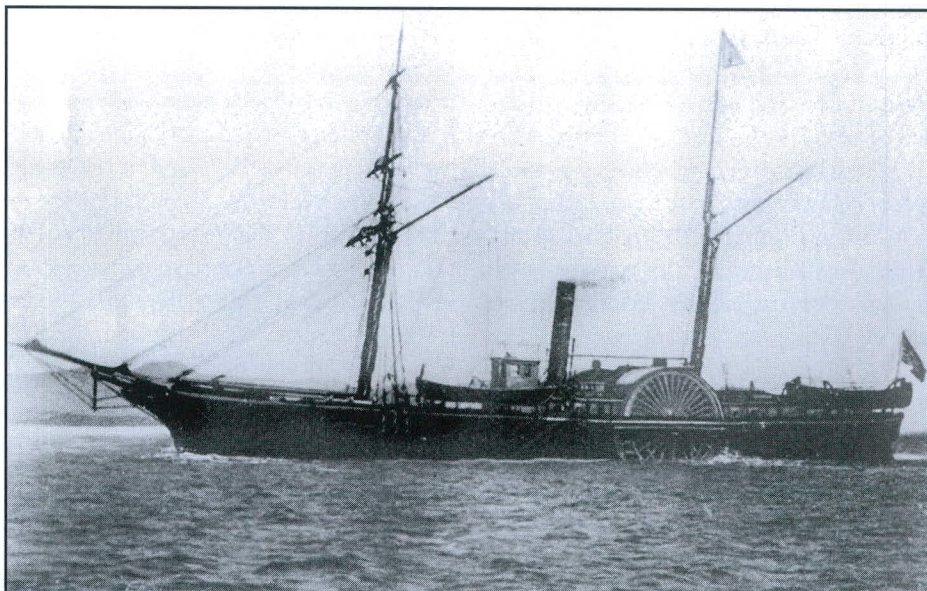
In May 1862, Smith left Port Townsend. Many thought he was gone for good. A local newspaper editorial stated, "Poor Victor has gone, unwept, unhonored [sic], and unhung [sic]." However, Smith had been called to the nation's capitol, and Lieutenant J.H. Merryman from the revenue cutter *Joe Lane* was assigned to act on Smith's behalf during his absence. When Smith returned to Port Townsend in August, he carried a copy of a congressional act signed by President Lincoln authorizing the port of entry to be moved to Port Angeles. Smith arrived on board the sidewheel steamer *Shubrick*.

The *Shubrick* had become the West Coast's first lighthouse tender in 1858. While the vessel was being constructed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Lighthouse Board was establishing the light stations at Cape Flattery, New Dungeness, and Smith Island. In seeking congressional approval for these lighthouses, the board noted that "Indian hostilities" could delay their completion. For protection, the *Shubrick* carried five guns. At the outset of the Civil War, the vessel was assigned as a revenue cutter to patrol coastal waters.

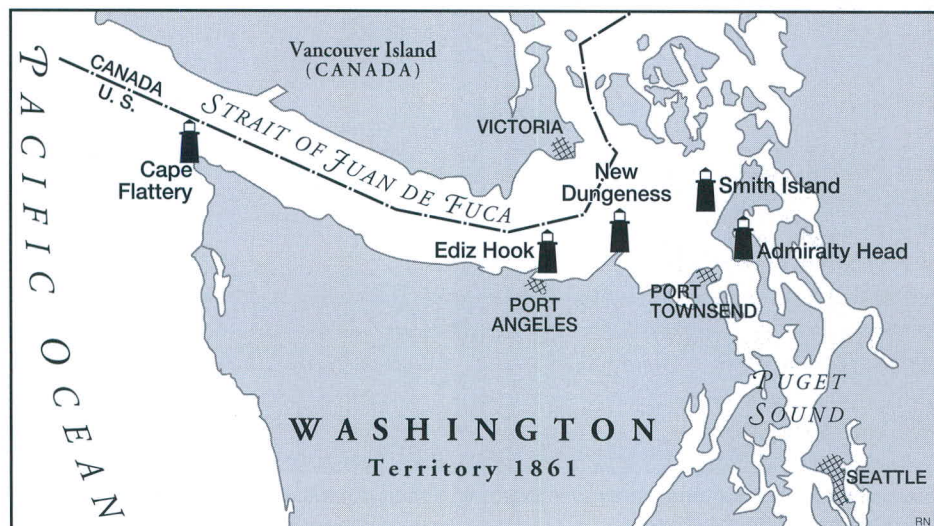
When the *Shubrick* arrived at Port Townsend, Smith strode to the customs house. He found Lieutenant Merryman inside behind a locked door. During Smith's absence, Merryman and a clerk poured over the customs records. Like the

inspector at Cape Flattery, they found irregularities along with accounting discrepancies. Merryman reported his findings to Secretary Chase citing "evidence of fraud and official misconduct of the most glaring nature." But Merryman had received no response. Shouting from behind the door, Merryman told Smith that he would relinquish his responsibilities only under force.

Force was what Smith had in mind. He sent an armed detail of marines to gain entry, but they too were rebuffed. Then, though the *Shubrick's* guns had never been used against hostile Indians, Smith ordered them loaded and trained on the customs house. When citizens were warned away from the line of fire, Merryman gave in. As later described by then Ter-



The U. S. Lighthouse Service side-wheel tender *Shubrick*. Named after the first chairman of the Lighthouse Board, Admiral William Shubrick, she was the first vessel constructed for the Lighthouse service as well as the first Lighthouse Service vessel on the west coast. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



ritorial Governor William Pickering, "Smith immediately had all the contents of the customs house tumbled helter-skelter into packing boxes and barrels and carried them aboard the *Shubrick*" for transfer to Port Angeles.

Following the *Shubrick* incident, Smith was called into district court at Olympia. He was charged with several counts of embezzlement and other crimes including intent to kill. A number of Port Townsend residents sailed to Olympia aboard a schooner to view the proceedings in a circus-like atmosphere. However, on orders from Washington Smith was released, and another special agent of the treasury was sent to investigate the charges. The agent exonerated Smith, and by late fall 1862,

Smith, Caroline, and their now four children were becoming settled at Port Angeles where only a few settlers cabins stood.

Concurrently with the signing of the authorization to move the customs house, Lincoln issued an executive order reserving five square miles at Port Angeles for a town site and a military reservation. The reservation included a site for a lighthouse. Rear-Admiral W.B. Shubrick, Chairman of the Lighthouse Board, in his 1863 report, stated that Congress had made an appropriation "for the establishment of a light at Ediz Hook, False Dungeness Bay, Straits of Juan de Fuca, Washington Territory." He wrote "the engineer was instructed to take steps for the early exhibition of a suitable light." The report noted that there was a light near the end of the hook "maintained by private enterprise." This light, established by Smith, consisted of an iron grill holding an open fire. The handful of settlers, who had come to Port Angeles in the 1850s, maintained the light with cordwood cut from the forest edging the bay.

While planning for the lighthouse proceeded, Smith carried on with his plans for the new port of entry. He built a customs house and a residence for his family near a stream flowing into the bay. The home contained all of the family's material goods including fine china, silver, and Caroline's piano that had been brought around the Horn.

But Port Townsend's residents would not give up their fight with Smith. They deluged Lincoln and Chase with letters and testimonials decrying the moving of the port of entry and demanding Smith's removal. In May 1863, Lincoln sent a letter to Chase. Lincoln admitted that the charges against Smith had not been proven, but he wrote, "the degree of dissatisfaction with him there is too great for him to be retained." Chase reluctantly dismissed Smith as collector of customs but reappointed him as a special agent of the treasury.

As a special agent, Smith was able to remain in Port Angeles. For the town's few residents, little seemed to change except that the usually free flowing stream near the customs house went strangely dry. As later learned, the stream had been blocked by a slide. In December 1863, while Smith was again in the nation's capitol, heavy rains broke the slide loose releasing a flood of water. A Victoria, British Columbia, newspaper reported that the "Customs House, a fine two story struc-

ture, stood exactly in the path of the vast torrent and was overturned and swept away in a moment." A deputy customs collector and a customs inspector were drowned. Two other buildings were destroyed, and the Smith's home was severely damaged. Caroline's heroic efforts saved the lives of the children and a housekeeper.

Chairman Shubrick's report of 1864 stated that, "Difficulties have arisen to delay the construction of the permanent work" on the Ediz Hook Lighthouse. He cited the "remarkable freshet" and "the destruction of the town." He noted that, "for a time it was believed that some other place would be selected as a port of entry." But the port of entry remained at Port Angeles, and work on the lighthouse resumed.

A new customs house was built, and Smith continued his efforts to create a thriving port and community. He had eight hundred lots laid out within the reservation. Sale of the lots would bring new settlers, and the expected \$50,000 from their sale would contribute to Chase's efforts to finance the Civil War. But the auction held on the customs house steps in May 1864, produced less than \$5,000. The government's surveying cost had been \$37,000. It was another blow to Smith's plans.

The Ediz Hook Lighthouse was finally completed in April 1865, and Smith arranged for his father, the "peevish old man" from Cape Flattery, to be the principal keeper. Victor Smith's sister, Mary, became the assistant. The keepers moved into a wood-framed, two-story house. The tower at its top held a fifth order Fresnel lens.

In the meantime, Victor Smith was again called to the nation's capitol where Caroline and their children joined him. On the return trip, Smith was entrusted with \$3,000,000 in currency for delivery to San Francisco. With the money locked in the safe of the Golden Rule, the steamship ran aground off Nicaragua. The crew and passengers, including Caroline and the children, got safely ashore. Rescued by a passing ship, they continued on. Smith stayed with the grounded vessel to ensure the safe's recovery. When found and opened, the currency was gone. There was no indication that Smith was involved in the loss. Rumors later implicated the ship's captain and another passenger in the theft.

Smith made his way across the Isthmus of Panama and sailed north to San Francisco. In July 1865, he boarded the Brother Jonathon for the trip home. Near St. George Reef, off Crescent City, California, the ship struck rocks and

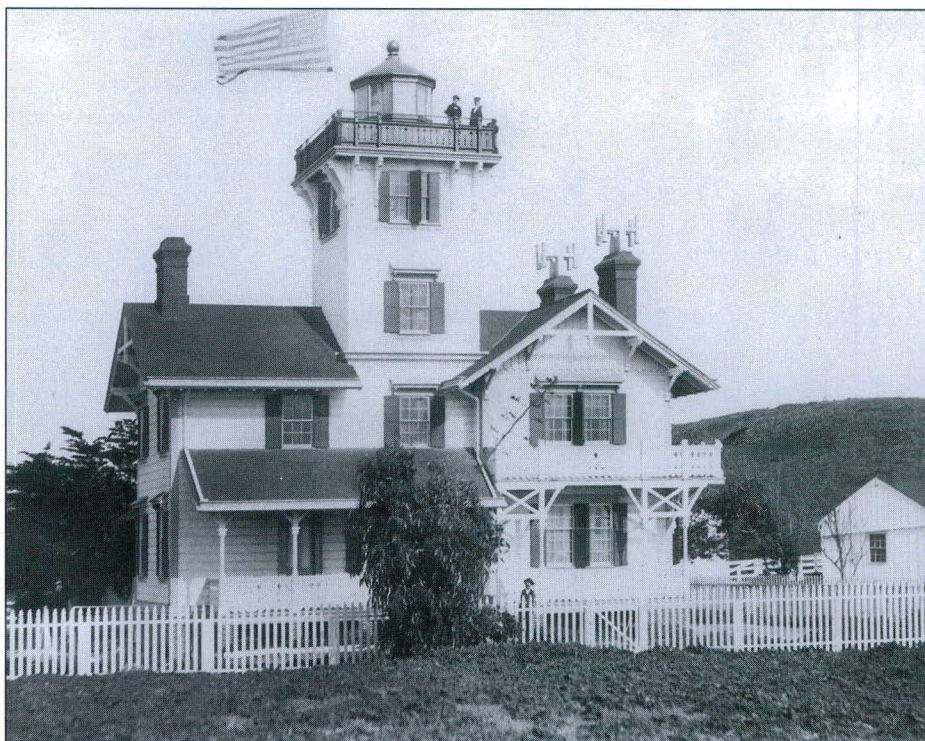


The first Ediz Hook Lighthouse shortly after completion in 1856, oil house and privy at right. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

sank. Smith and almost two hundred passengers drowned. With his death, Port Angeles lost its champion. A year later, Port Townsend residents prevailed on Congress to return the port of entry to Port Townsend.

The Ediz Hook Lighthouse continued to aid navigators along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. But few ships rounded the light to enter the nearly empty harbor at Port Angeles. More tragedy befell the Smith family when Caroline's Port Angeles home burned. She and the children moved into a small house near the lighthouse. From her new home, she regularly played an organ, Smith's last gift to her. Its melancholy chords could be heard from ships passing the lighthouse.

When George Smith retired, Mary became the principal keeper at Ediz Hook and her sister Ellen became her assistant. In 1874, Mary and Ellen moved to Southern California where they became the first keepers at San Pedro's Point Fermin Lighthouse. It wasn't until the 1890s that Port Angeles began to become the city envisioned by Victor Smith. There is a footnote to Victor Smith's lighthouse legacy. The wreck of the Brother Jonathon led to the eventual construction of the St. George Reef Lighthouse. Established in 1892, after ten years of construction and \$715,000, its light finally shone where the Brother Jonathon lay.



Point Fermin Lighthouse (at San Pedro, CA) where Mary and Ellen Smith relocated to become the station's first keepers in 1874.

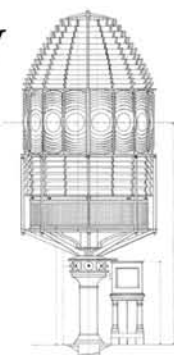


Ediz Hook Light Station showing the 4,000 pound fog bell. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

Ted Nelson, and his wife Sharlene, are authors of three fine lighthouse books that are essential guides for exploring west coast lighthouses. They provide both the history, location maps and instructions. They are: *The Umbrella Guide to Washington Lighthouses*, *The Umbrella Guide to Oregon Lighthouses*, and *The Umbrella Guide to California Lighthouses*. Presently they are all out of print, but the Nelsons hope to republish them someday. They may be available at used book dealers, or on Amazon or Ebay.



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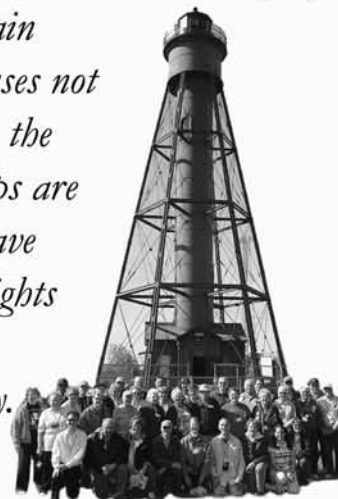
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