

Anacapa Island Light Station By Wayne Wheeler

The Anacapa Light Station, off southern California, was one of the last classical light stations constructed on the west coast. Both the Anacapa Island and Cape Decision (Alaska) light stations were established in 1932. The apparent need for a lighthouse on Anacapa Island was first realized when the vessel *Winfield Scott* wrecked on the island in 1853.

In 1854, members of the U. S. Coast Survey visited the island and reported that it was an ideal, but impossible site, on which to construct a light station, "It is inconceivable for a lighthouse to be constructed on this mass of volcanic rock ... perpendicular on every face, with an ascent inaccessible by any natural means ..."

None-the-less, an Executive Order, dated September 11, 1854, reserved the entire narrow island of 700 acres for government purposes. Seventy-eight years passed before the light station was constructed.

Anacapa Island is a thin spine of land, some four-and-a-half miles long and a half-

mile wide at its widest point. It consists of three separate landforms.

In 1868, the Lighthouse Board requested funds to establish a light station on the island. Congress did provide funds for several lighthouses in that era, but elected to have one established at Point Hueneme in 1874, in lieu of a station on Anacapa Island, which was much more difficult to construct.

As the century drew to a close, coastal shipping, especially the lumber trade, dramatically increased. With the increased vessel traffic came more shipwrecks, many occurred on the Channel Islands. In 1909, the Lighthouse Board wrote, "Anacapa Island is one of the most difficult points on the Southern California coast to pass in foggy or otherwise thick weather and is regarded as the most important point for a light station on any of the Channel Islands It is estimated that a light and fog signal station can be established here for \$100,000, and the Board recommends that an appropriation of that amount be made therefore." Congress,

however, wasn't forthcoming with the appropriation, so in 1911 an unmanned acetylene light was erected on Anacapa Island on the south side of the easterly entrance to the Santa Barbara Channel. The aid displayed a flashing white light every 15 seconds. The focal plane was 185 feet above sea level. The light needed servicing only twice a year. As an additional safeguard the Service established a whistle buoy about 1/2 mile off the eastern end of the island

In spite of these measures, mariners pressured the government to establish a light station on the island. The American Association of Masters, Mates and Pilots claimed that 90 percent of all vessel traffic navigating up and down the West Coast passed inside of the Channel Islands of the Santa Barbara Channel.

On February 28, 1921 the steamer *Liebre* grounded on the east end of Anacapa Island directly under the automated light, sustaining \$40,000 in damages.

In 1928, the Bureau of Lighthouses, which

took over from the Lighthouse Board in 1910, allotted funds for a fog signal and radio beacon on Anacapa Island along with the necessary improvements for a light station. The Bureau's report in 1929 estimated that it would cost \$186,000 to construct the station. The first bid awarded was to construct the landing facilities and road. The low bidder was the Roth Construction Company who got the job with their bid of \$28,950. However, when the Commerce Department lawyers checked into the Roth Company they learned that the company had only constructed small buildings in San Francisco and had been given incompetency reports for work done for the War Department. It was also determined that they had no financial resources, no experience in heavy rockwork and no floating equipment. The Commerce Department suggested that the Lighthouse Service would be better off accepting the next lowest bid of \$37,000. However, Superintendent Harry Rhodes wired the Commissioner of Lighthouses in February that the Roth bid had been accepted and that Roth had secured a bond from the

U.S. Fidelity & Guaranty Company. Roth was instructed to begin work immediately.

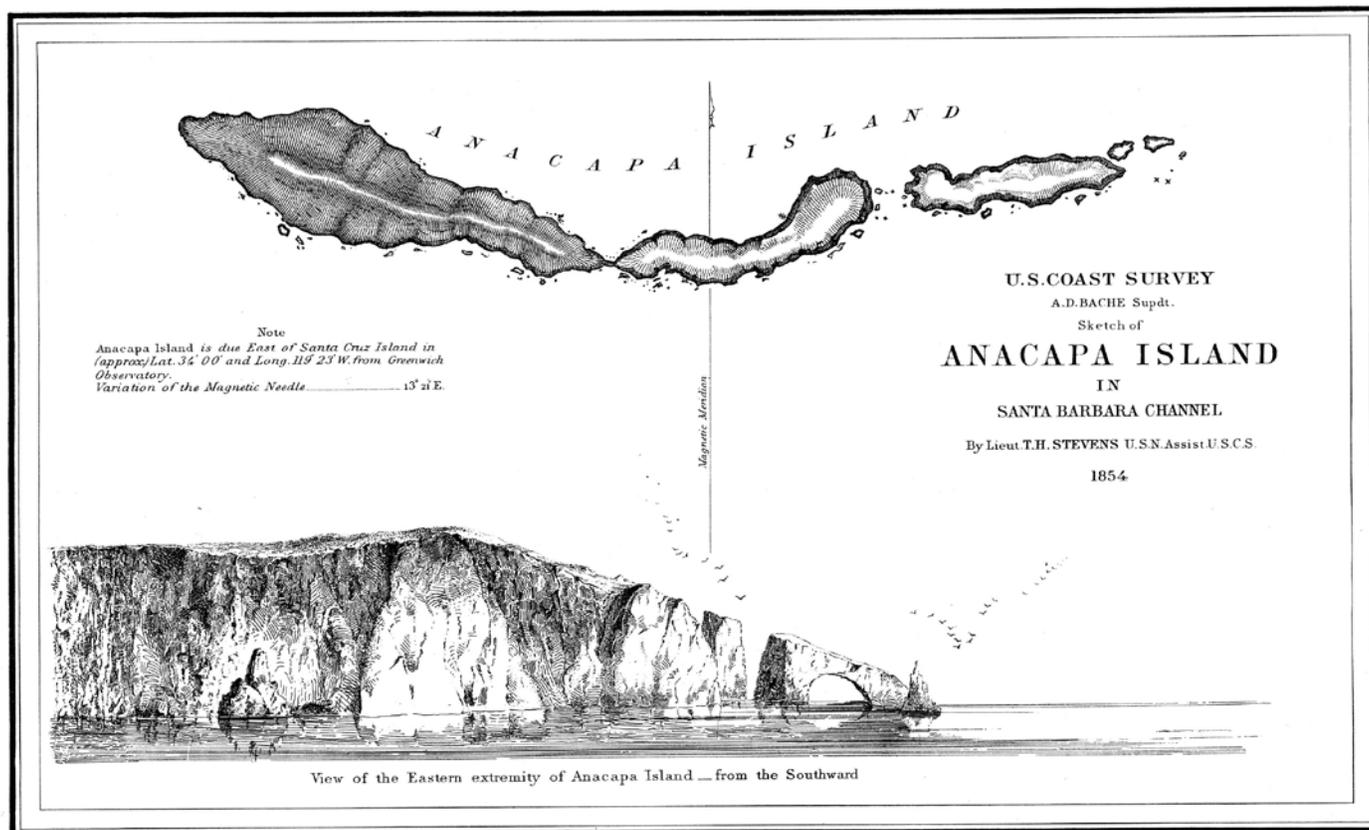
One aspect of the construction project, that of crushing rock on the island, still hadn't been started by the end of April, 1930. The Roth Company was warned that they would be fined for continued delays. By May, Roth still had not landed a crew on the island. The records show,

... on the morning of May 15th, Mr. I.C. Roth, of the Roth Construction Company, with six men, started from Point Magu for Anacapa Island in a 50-foot launch for the purpose of landing supplies and inaugurating the work on the island. It appears that after landing three men on the island the small dory used for landing purposes was swamped and lost, and that the launch itself was disabled and carried away from the island by the strong wind and heavy seas which prevailed at the time. The party in the launch was adrift for a day and a night, having drifted ten miles south of the island. They finally made

temporary repairs to the engine and returned to the mainland, from which point they telephoned the Coast Guard at San Pedro, and a Coast Guard boat was sent ... to rescue the three men who had been marooned on the island for more than 36 hours without food, water or shelter. The damage to Roth's launch has not yet been repaired, but, in the meantime he has chartered a Japanese fishing boat and landed a few supplies and a small amount of material and equipment on the island.

In June, Roth had only eight men on the island, no boat of his own and no hoist. His men had to land everything by a small derrick erected by the Lighthouse Service back in 1911 which was being used to hoist acetylene tanks up 128 feet to the unmanned light.

In spite of warnings that all material had to be inspected, Roth delivered sand, cement and galvanized pipe without it first being inspected. After five days of transferring the materials, the government's inspector on the island, Mr. Lang, rejected the pipe



Opposite page – Anacapa Light Station tower shortly after construction, probably 1932-33.

Above – An 1854 Coast Survey drawing of Anacapa Island by James Whistler, the painter of Whistler's Mother fame. Legend has it that he was almost fired for including birds in the drawing.

and cement as not being up to government specifications. On top of this the workmen were complaining that they hadn't been paid, the water was inadequate, the quality of food was poor and the housing inadequate.

An inspection by the California State Division of Housing and Sanitation agreed with the complaints and ordered Roth to install a floor in the kitchen tent, provide bathing water and make other improvements. When Roth applied for the first payment under the contract in July, when the job was to be 30 percent complete, a government inspection found no progress. Finally, in August, steps were taken to cancel the contract. Since bondsmen on federal contracts are responsible for the full amount of the bond, U.S. Fidelity & Guaranty Company could supply no funds to cover payrolls. By November Roth was in the Ventura County Jail serving time for various violations of labor laws. It's amazing, that Harry Rhodes, the Superintendent of the 12th Lighthouse District, awarded Roth the contract after being informed of his prior violations and lack of financial backing, lack of experience and equipment. Superintendent Rhodes, in charge of California's aids to navigation from 1912 to 1939, was usually a meticulous administrator (see "The District Inspector" in *The Keeper's Log*, Volume XV, No. 4, Summer 1999).

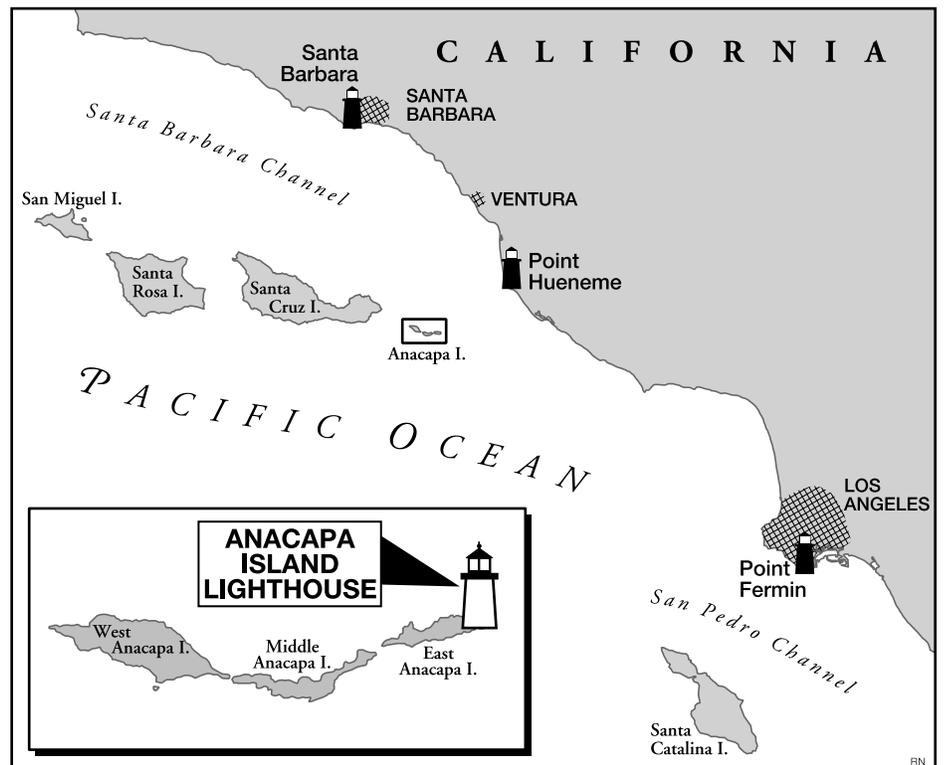
Before the contract went out for bids a second time certain revisions were made. One was the construction of a 30,000 square foot concrete rain-collecting basin behind the proposed water cistern.

The Carpenter Brothers of Beverly Hills, CA submitted the successful bid of \$36,490 and commenced work in December, 1930. Work progressed smoothly. Two gasoline powered derricks were constructed; one on a lower level 55 feet above the water. It had a 40-foot-long boom and a five-ton capacity and was used to transfer cargo from vessels to the platform. A second derrick was constructed at the top of the cliff. It was equipped with a 50-foot-long boom and had a four-ton capacity. It was used to lift cargo from the lower platform to the top of the cliff.

Once this project was completed bids were requested to construct the buildings of the station. M.W. Lippman of Los Angeles submitted a bid of \$74,595 to construct the station within four months. His bid was \$15,000 below the next lowest bid. The project included construction of the light-



The lower and upper landings at Anacapa Island with one of the dwellings at upper left. U. S. Lighthouse Society archives, early 1930s.





The *Lighthouse Service Bulletin* of July 1, 1932 notes,

... This new light, fog signal, and radio beacon station was placed in commission March 25, 1932 ... replaced the unattended 375mm flashing beacon established in 1912. Because of its location, Anacapa Island Lighthouse is a valuable aid for both trans-Pacific and coast-wise vessel traffic. It marks the southern entrance to the Santa Barbara Channel. Erection of this station was started in May 1930 ... There was only one place on the island available for use as a landing, and here the rocky cliffs are over 100 feet high and almost vertical. Rock at this place was blasted away to form what is known as the upper and lower landings.. When construction work was started, the Lighthouse Service, in cooperation with the Coast Guard Service established a temporary radiotelephone on the island which proved to be of great value on many occasions as an aid to saving lives and property, as well as enabling the district office to keep in daily touch with the work and personnel on the island.

The regular station launch, placed in service with the commissioning of the station, was a 26-foot cabin type launch, used by the keepers to reach a point on the mainland 18

Being hoisted "aboard" circa 1933. Note the station launch tied up to a mooring buoy, lower right. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

house tower, a powerhouse, an oil house and fog signal building – all of reinforced concrete. The contract also required them to build four dwellings, tank house and a general service building, all of frame and stucco construction with terra cotta tile roofs (save the tank house).

Lippman's bid was accepted in April, 1931, but almost a year later, the project was not quite complete. Although Lippman blamed the weather, it had been perfect from the awarding of the bid until the first rains arrived in December, seven months after the bid was awarded. His bid was clearly too low and the time limit far too short to allow completion in four months. It probably would have taken four months on the mainland just to construct the dwellings, let alone the rest of the structures. Additionally, Lippman had an altercation with his partner, McWilliams. At one point he arrived on the island with a local sheriff to oust McWilliams.

Lippman and his workers often ignored the government inspector requiring work to be redone. Finally, the station was finished and the light went into operation. Although the fog signal building had been completed, the foghorns had not been purchased. Funds were eventually allotted and the horns arrived late in 1931. The two-tone diaphone horn produced a three second blast every 30 seconds.



Anacapa Light Station. Looking west with Middle and West Anacapa Islands in the background. From left – power house, work shops, four dwellings and at extreme right the top area of the landing.

miles distant, where mail and supplies were obtained. This launch was equipped with sufficient food and water for several days' subsistence for four persons, a medicine chest and a number of blankets. As very often upon return to the island it was found impracticable to make a landing and the launch was required to remain at sea, on the lee side of the island for one or more days and nights. The launch was equipped with a special hoisting gear so that it could be hoisted up to the lower platform. When the seas allowed, the vessel was maneuvered under the hoist hook. A seaman on board grabbed the lowered hook and inserted it into a mid-ship eye, while another man secured lines from the boat's bow and stern to the landing platform. Then the powerful hoist lifted the 7,000-pound boat up 50 feet and onto a custom made cradle on the lower landing.

Separate quarters of a modified Spanish type were provided for each of the four keepers, all quarters being fully equipped with electrical service, lights and modern plumbing. Separate buildings provided for power, oil and water storage. The light tower, fog signal building and the service building which contains the garage, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop and a general store room, are all detached buildings.

In December 1932, during its first year of operation, a vicious storm struck the island light station. Head Keeper Frederick Cobb reported, "Squally weather ... December 9 and 10. No station launch to Ventura ... wind east to northeast gale, estimated 75 to 80 mph. Telephone house shifting on its foundation, necessary to shore with timbers. Both our antenna blown down. Some tile blown from roofs of buildings. Green seas broke over sea wall on lower landing ... windows on all buildings, including lantern room, encrusted with salt..."

The vessel *SS Golden Sun* reported in 1933 that the fog signal at Anacapa was one of the best signals it had ever experienced. However, the *SS Lightburne* reported that when in the area in heavy fog they mistook the fog signal at Point Hueneme (one, 4-second blast every 26 seconds) for the Anacapa signal (one, 3-second blast every 27 seconds). Thinking they were hearing the Anacapa signal the ship changed course to the northeast to pass Anacapa on the starboard (right) side. Luckily about that time the fog lifted and they realized the



Anacapa Light Station looking east toward the tower. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo, circa 1933.

mistake and took corrective action. Because the characteristics of the signals was so close the Point Hueneme signal was changed. Another navigational faux pas occurred when the vessel *Beulah Port* grounded on the south side of Anacapa Island less than 1,000 yards from the fog signal. The keeper reported that the signal was sounding, but somehow the crew did not hear it. The ship was badly damaged.

In November 1934, the keeper's wife was badly injured in a fall. Communication was established with the battleship *USS California*, then operating in the vicinity. A boat from the battleship was able to remove her from the island and took her to a hospital on shore where she recovered. It was reported that her life had been saved by the prompt action of the battleship crew.

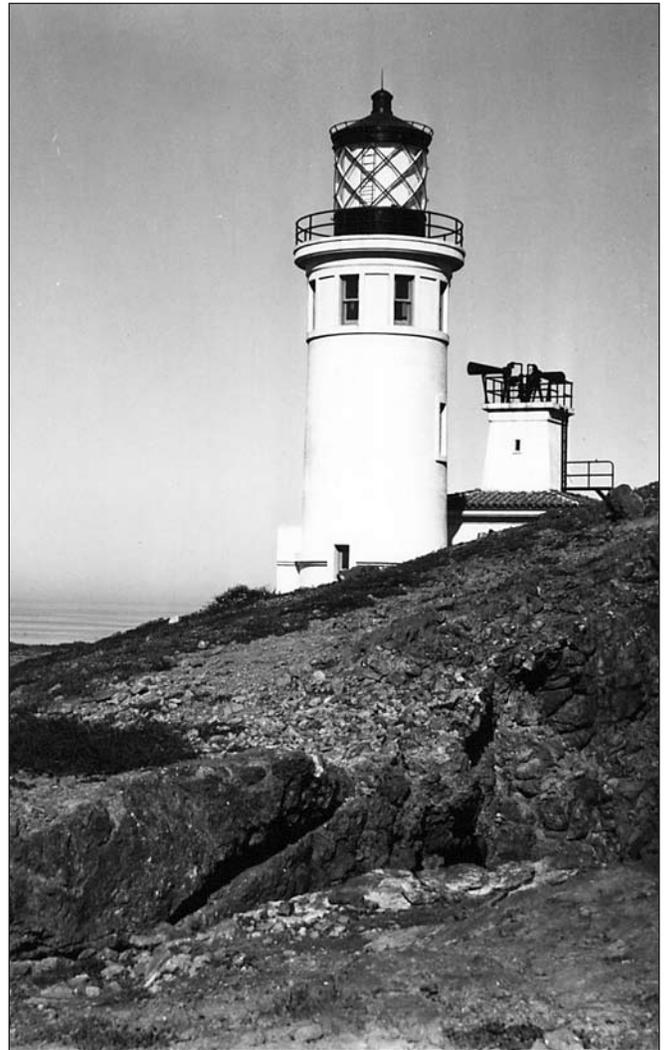
During WWII Anacapa's light was extinguished, but the crew remained on board as the light station became a coastal lookout station. Other lookout stations were established throughout the Channel Islands and a fleet of small patrol boats scoured the area, relieved crews and brought supplies to the islands. The coast lookout stations were discontinued in July 1945.

In 1962, the Coast Guard decided to automate the Anacapa station. A major reason for the change was due to the missile firings from Point Magu. The practice

required the crew and their dependents to seek shelter in confined spaces during launch periods. This was understandably unnerving for the dependents.

In 1980, the Coast Guard and National Park Service entered into an agreement to allow NPS personnel to use the station buildings and include the island as a component of the Channel Islands National Monument. Before the station could be occupied, major repairs were made as the buildings had been neglected for eight years.

Today, the NPS provides vessel transportation to the island. Picnicking is allowed and there is a 1.5-mile self-guided nature trail. Visitors must stay on marked trails and take any refuse off the island. There are latrines, but no source of water. Due to the volume, and the potential damage to hearing, of the electronic fog signal, the lighthouse compound is off-limits. For more information on visiting Anacapa, consult the National Park Service's website at: www.nps.gov/chis/homepage.htm. You can also write or call the staff at: Channel Islands National Park, 1901 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, California 93001, visitor center phone (805) 658-573.



The Anacapa Light Station tower and fog signal building. Both photos from the Society's archives.

