

LOG

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Point Cabrillo Light Station, California

By Bruce Rogerson and James Kimbrell

In terms of age Point Cabrillo Light Station is a mere youngster, having first been lit in June 1909. However, the location of the lighthouse on a fifty-foot bluff two miles north of Mendocino Village on the rugged coast of northern California is of great historic significance. Less than half a mile to the north lies Frolic Cove, the site of one of the most important ship wrecks on the Pacific Coast. Two miles to the south, at the mouth of Big River, is the site of the first lumber mill on the Mendocino Coast.

Point Cabrillo is named for Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the earliest European navigator and explorer to visit the Pacific Coast of California. One of his lieutenants is reported to have sailed this coast in 1542 and to have named Cape Mendocino after the Spanish Governor of New Spain or Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza. Early 19th Century Portuguese settlers and fishermen in nearby Fort Bragg, who claim Cabrillo as one their countrymen, may have given the name to the headland and subsequently to the Light Station.

Point Cabrillo has been a silent witness to a panoply of human history down through the ages: the early prehistoric peoples who arrived at the end of the Great Ice Age; the Mitom Pomo, who perhaps were witness to the billowing sails of great Spanish Manila Treasure Galleons off the coast in the 17th and 18th centuries; Aleut fur hunters in their skin baidarkas during the days of the Russian settlements in the early 1800s at Fort Ross, 60 miles to the south; or ragged parties of mountain men searching for the elusive beaver in the 1830s.

The indigenous Mitom Pomo people used the grassy, wind swept headlands as a summer gathering site, moving down from their winter villages in the coastal hills and forest around present day Willits in large family groups in the late spring and early summer each year. They camped on the coast at Buldam, near present day Mendocino and Big River, for several months gathering the bounty of the local waters and grasslands. Large shellfish middens found on the property evidence these visits and the diet and culture of these ancient people. These middens also show, by way of broken pottery chards and



Above – Point Cabrillo Lighthouse under construction in 1909.

Below – The finished lighthouse in late 1909. Photos courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



pieces of bottle glass, the Pomo's interaction with the wreck of the *Frolic* in 1850.

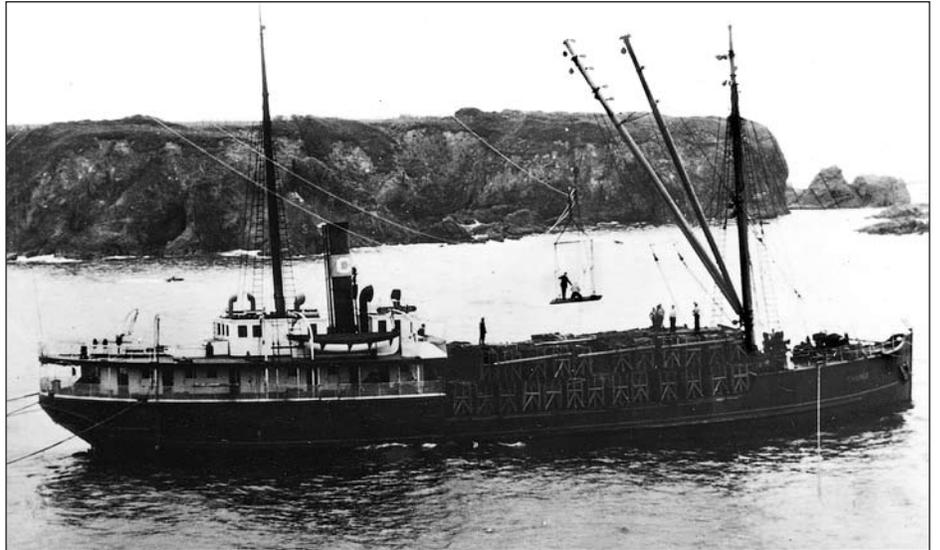
The *Frolic* was a two masted clipper brig built by Gardner Brothers of Baltimore in 1845, for the August Heard Co. of Boston. She was 97-feet overall, 24-foot beam and displaced 209 tons. She was built for speed to compete in the lucrative, and then legal, Opium trade from the West Coast of India to the South China Sea ports. She traded successfully under the command of Captain Edward Faucon from 1846 to 1849. However, the advent of steam powered vessels made the *Frolic*, which relied entirely on favorable winds, obsolescent and unable to compete profitably for her owners.

In 1850, her master and agents in China decided to find another trade for the *Frolic*. Gold had been discovered in 1849 in California and the Gold Rush was in full swing. The growing population of San Francisco and the foothills of California had a voracious demand for goods and materials of all kinds. So the *Frolic* loaded a mixed cargo of Chinese merchandise at South China ports including pottery, hardware, valuable silks and 6,108 bottles

of Edinburgh Ale for the thirsty miners. She sailed for California in June 1850.

On July 25, 1850 in the late evening under clear skies but with the land blanketed in low lying fog, the *Frolic* ran aground on the reef

which protects the bay at the north end of the present day Point Cabrillo. Her crew got off safely and some eventually made their way by long boat and overland to San Francisco. The Pomo people salvaged much of the valuable cargo.



Above – The ship *Caspar* loading lumber at the Caspar Mill, a mile north of the lighthouse. Below – Caspar Lumber Mill and the log holding pond. Some logs have just come down the chute into the pond. Photos courtesy of the National Maritime Museum.



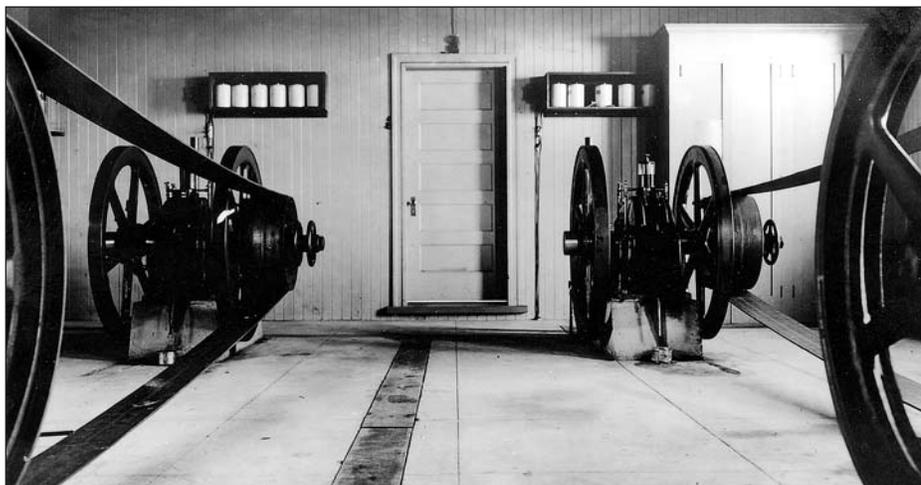


Construction of the station barn in 1909. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

The following year, Harry Meiggs, the owner of the dock to which the *Frolic* was bound, sent Jerome Ford to investigate the wreck. All the valuable cargo had already been removed; instead he discovered the vast stands of redwoods and douglas fir, and the small coves or “dog-holes” along the shore that might harbor a ship large enough to transport timber, which was very much in demand for the expansion of San Francisco in the midst of the Gold Rush fervor. A year later the first saw-

mill was shipped round Cape Horn from the East Coast, and after being transhipped in San Francisco, landed on the beach at Big River. More mills followed until every inlet and creek mouth had its small or large mill churning out sawn redwood and douglas fir planks for shipment to the growing metropolis of San Francisco.

For almost 100 years timber was king and provided lumber, ties, shingles, piling and more, produced by the sawmills dotting the Mendocino coast from Shelter Cove and Bear

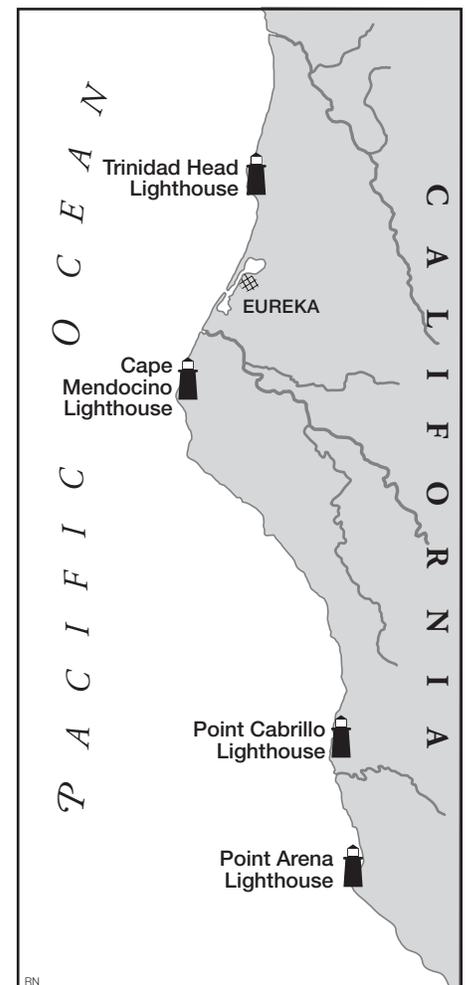


The original fog signal included duplicate engines and compressors. These oil-gas engines were built by Western Gas Engine Company of Los Angeles and the compressors by Dorr Engineering & Pump Company of San Francisco. Both were housed in the same building as the lighthouse tower, which was known then as the “fog signal building.” Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Harbor in the north to Gualala and Stewarts Point to the south. The ocean provided the highway to the markets of the U. S. A. and abroad for the redwood lumber products of the County. The schooners (both sail, and later, steam powered) provided the means of delivery, summer and winter through any kind of wind and weather the Pacific Ocean could throw at their hardy and skilled crews. The trade lasted almost a century, beginning in 1853 and ending sadly in the depression years of the 1930s, as the rail car and the road truck replaced the ubiquitous cargo vessels of the coast.

The sturdy schooners also carried passengers up and down the coast for many years; offering speedier and more comfortable journeys than could be had by stage-coach over the poor county roads before the advent of rail travel on the North Coast of California.

Following the establishment of U.S. jurisdiction over the Oregon Territories and California in the 1840's, the U.S. Treasury and





The smithy (blacksmith shop) during WWII with Quonset Hut attached to provide barracks for the USCG Detachment. Oil house is at left. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

the Lighthouse Board moved quickly to establish lighthouses as critical aids to navigation along the Pacific coast. Moving north from San Francisco Bay, lighthouses were constructed at Point Bonita, Point Reyes, Point Arena, Cape Mendocino, Humboldt Bay and Crescent City. Over the later half of the 19th Century there remained a long reach of the northern California coast unmarked by a beacon aiding coastal vessels for almost 100 miles from Point Arena to Cape Mendocino.

Although Point Cabrillo was surveyed as a possible lighthouse site as early as 1873 by the U.S. Lighthouse Service, no further progress was made until 1904. Following a spate of disastrous shipwrecks and resultant loss of life, petitions from local mill owners and ship owners became so numerous that on October 3, 1904, the U. S. Lighthouse Service Board finally recommended the establishment of a light and fog signal station at or near Point Cabrillo. In late January 1905, Senate Bill No. 6648, making an appropria-

tion of \$50,000 for establishment of the station, was introduced and finally approved on June 20, 1906.

Construction of the Point Cabrillo Light Station commenced in August, 1908. The original building contract was for \$21,000 and the 30.5-acre property was purchased from local rancher David Gordon for \$3,195. The contracted work was for five main buildings of the station, the lighthouse/fog signal building, three keeper's dwellings and the barn. At the same time the Army Corps of Engineers constructed additional improvements including the access roads, sewers and water systems, pump house, blacksmith/carpenter's shop and the three storage buildings at the rear of the houses.

By February, 1909 all the structures were complete, except for the storage buildings, and the first lightkeepers (Wilhelm Baumgartner, Head Keeper, George Bassett and Charles Below as assistants) moved in to help with the finish work. The Corps and lightkeepers fenced the property, mounted the fog signal equipment, erected the iron and bronze lantern room and installed the Third Order Fresnel lens.

The original light station included all of the structures you see today, except the pumphouse and water tank behind the keepers' houses. A barn, water tower and the original pump house have since been removed.

Even after the light station was opened, work continued correcting construction defects, improving the access roads, fencing the gardens of the houses and building a much needed oil house, all during the winter of 1909/1910.



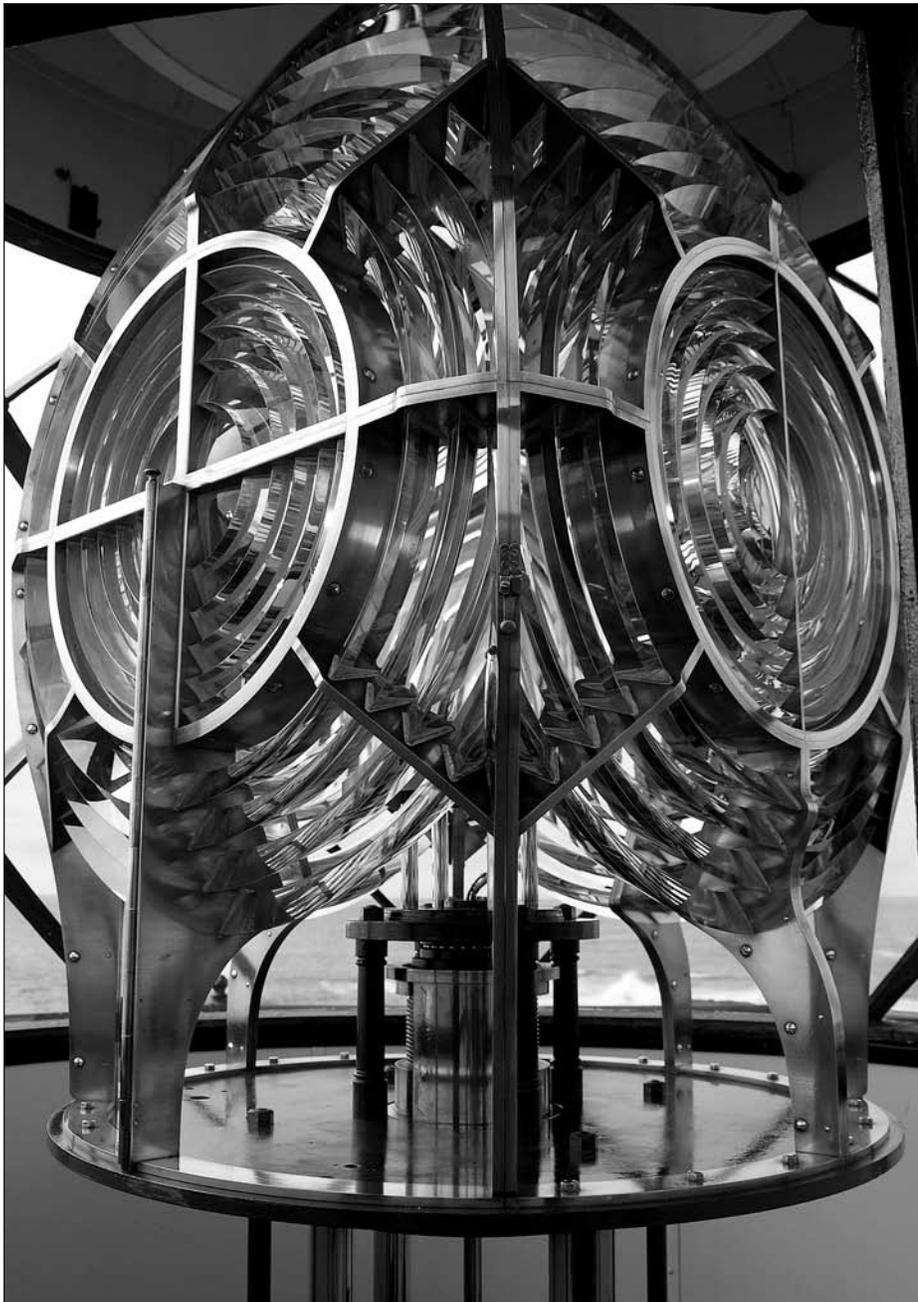
The oil house originally stored the kerosene oil for the lamps. It now contains the USCG VHF Repeater and Loran Monitoring Equipment. Note the antenna at left and on the roof. Photo courtesy of Bruce Rogerson.

The British-built Fresnel lens was first lit on June 10, 1909 by Wilhelm Baumgartner. It was manufactured in Birmingham, England by Chance Brothers and shipped round Cape Horn. It stands 32 feet above ground level (approximately 84 feet above sea level). The lens has a total of 90 glass prism pieces including the four bull's eyes. On a clear night the 10-second flash can be seen as far away as 14 miles and provides an important aid to coastal navigators. The total

lens structure weighs over 6,800 lbs.

The Fresnel lens was originally turned by means of a clockwork mechanism with a descending 92-lb. weight. This required rewinding by the keepers approximately every one and three-quarter hours. At some point in the early operation of the lighthouse, some ingenious keepers excavated another four or five feet of the concrete foundation, thus extending the time between rewinding to two hours. Evidence of this modification

was found during a pre-restoration survey of the lighthouse building. The source of light was a kerosene lamp with multiple concentric wicks. The original candle power of the lens was 650,000. In 1911 a pressurized kerosene lamp was installed, greatly simplifying the work of the keepers. In 1935, electricity arrived allowing installation of an electric motor to turn the lens and power the new electric lamp. These innovations greatly reduced the workload of the keepers who were also respon-



The Third Order Fresnel lens, manufactured by Chance Brothers in Birmingham, England. A somewhat unusual configuration with four bullseyes, similar to "clamshell" lenses. The restored lens has been returned to the lantern room and is an operating aid to navigation. Photo courtesy of Bruce Rogerson.



Volunteers dismantling the Fresnel lens for restoration in 1998. Photo courtesy of David Russell.

sible for all the maintenance of the station (painting, mechanical, metal work, carpentry etc.). Today the source of light is a Type P-2 changer with two 1000-watt bulbs.

The main structure was originally known as the fog signal building, as it housed the two single cylinder oil engines and a compressor that drove the fog signal siren. In 1935 one of the oil engine/compressor sets was removed and replaced by a more modern, and simpler to operate, electric motor compressor unit driving a new diaphone fog signal. These engines and compressors have long since been removed, and replaced by whistle buoys off Mendocino and Noyo Harbor. One of the old Fog Signal sets is believed to have been pushed over the bluff to the south of the Lighthouse in 1963. This was verified recently during a marine ecological survey by divers for Humboldt State University who photographed one of



Above – Volunter Pam Hurst working on the badly deteriorated lantern room. Photo courtesy of PCLK.

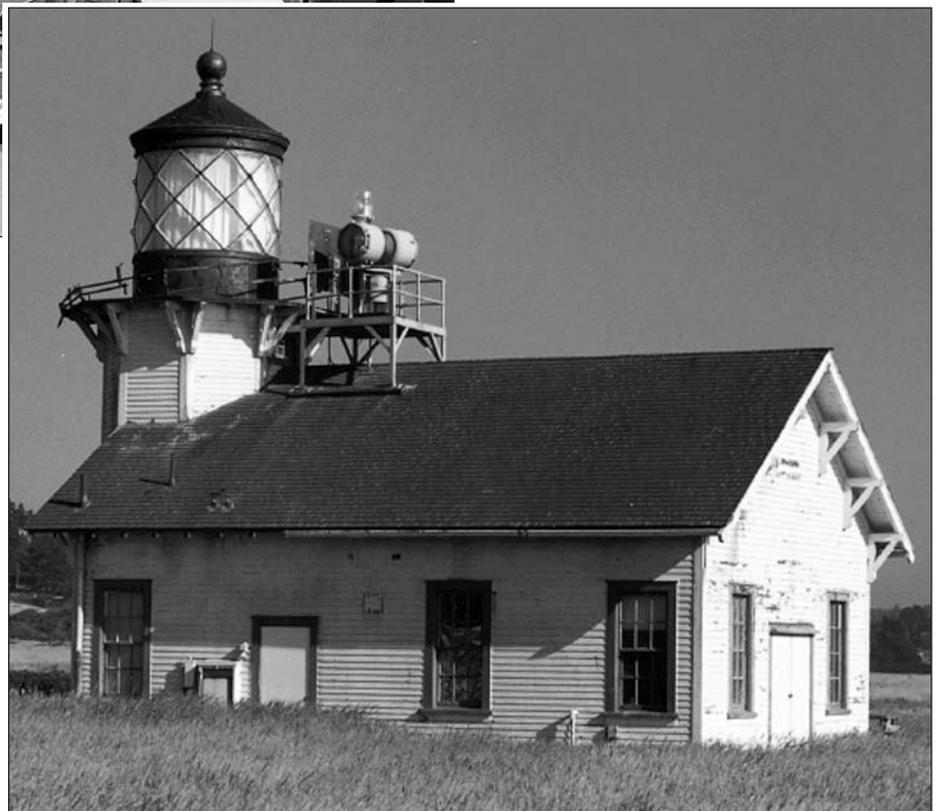
Left – The lantern room being removed in 1998 for restoration. Photo courtesy of David Russell.

Below – The lighthouse (fog signal) building prior to restoration. Note the fog signals have been removed and the DCB-224 aero beacon on the roof. Photo courtesy of PCLK.

the engine drive units underwater. The fog signal horns seen on the building today are replicas. It is said that in the right conditions, the fog signal at Point Cabrillo could be heard up to 10 miles away.

In 1972 the Fresnel lens was disengaged and replaced by a low maintenance automated DCB-224 aero marine beacon mounted on the roof of the building seaward of the lantern room. Following this change, the buildings were boarded up and abandoned leading to their gradual deterioration over the years due to fog, harsh winds, driving rain and salt spray on the headland.

Following the purchase of the preserve and light station properties by the California State Coastal Conservancy between 1988 and 1992, plans were developed to restore the lens



and light station buildings. The restoration of the lighthouse and lens began in 1998. In August 1999, after thousands of hours of labor by Preserve staff, volunteers, contractors and Coast Guard personnel, the newly restored Fresnel lens and lantern room were officially returned to active duty during Point Cabrillo's 90th Anniversary celebration.

The next stage of restoration was the fog signal building itself. The building appearance and color schemes you see today are as close as possible to those of the light station in 1935 when the lens was electrified. Work on the building exterior and interior was finished in the summer of 2001, and the light station's local history exhibits and gift shop now occupy the ground floor.

The Light Station

The Lighthouse: More properly the fog signal building and lantern room above, with

its finely restored Fresnel lens, is the main attraction at Point Cabrillo! However, there is more to offer in the completeness of this unique light station, which is the best example remaining of an early 20th Century American light station on the west coast.

Oil House: Immediately to the east of the lighthouse sits the concrete oil house with its distinctive flat red roof, red doors and white walls. The structure was built in 1910 originally with a large tank to hold the kerosene oil supply for the oil lamp in the Fresnel lens. Drums of oil were carted down by the keepers and rolled up a ramp on the north side of the building before being poured into the holding tank below. Kerosene was drawn off from the main tank into five gallon cans, which were hauled up the three flights of stairs daily to keep the fuel tank in the lantern room topped off. It was also used at various times for gasoline and paint storage. Today the oil house contains the USCG Loran Radio Direction

Finding equipment and other VHF Marine communications equipment.

The Smithy: The shingle sided and red roofed wooden building further east, still perched above the northern inlet, is the smithy. As its name implies, this was built to house the maintenance shop for the original keepers and contained a small smithy with forge, anvil and metal working tools used in the ongoing maintenance at the light station and a carpenter's shop. During the Second World War from 1942 to 1945, a Quonset hut abutted the smithy to provide accommodation for the USCG lookouts and radio operators stationed at Point Cabrillo. The Smithy was used as the galley for the Coast Guard Detachment. The small lookout building was located to the northwest of the lighthouse building and the concrete foundation can still be seen.

The fully restored Point Cabrillo Lighthouse. Note the dormer windows and replica fog signal trumpets. Photo courtesy of Bruce Rogerson.





Above – The restored east keeper's house. Photo courtesy of the PCLK.

Left – The east keeper's house circa 1940. The water tower has long since been removed. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Today the smithy houses the marine exhibits and aquarium at the light station.

Keepers Houses: The three 1900's craftsman style homes line the lower curve of Lighthouse Road leading down to the lighthouse and are the first part of the light station that is visible to the visitor. These dwellings were constructed at the same time as the lighthouse in 1908 and 1909 and were occupied by the keepers and their families, initially from the civilian U. S. Lighthouse Service (and later by the Coast Guard) until the late 1960s when automation of the light was completed. After being boarded up for some years, the buildings were reopened in the late 1970s to provide accommodation for the crews and their families from the USCG Cutter Point Ledge based at Noyo Harbor five miles to the north of the light station. In 1991 the USCG personnel were transferred to new housing in Fort Bragg as part of the title exchange between the USCG and The California State Coastal Conservancy for the light station land and property at Point Cabrillo.

Behind the homes are three outbuildings originally built to store coal used for heating and cooking in the houses, provide a workshop for each keeper and storage for garden tools and supplies. The buildings were converted to garages and storage in the 1930's. Now restored, they provide additional accommodations for handicapped overnight visitors and rest room facilities for visitors. A new pump house building has been added for the upgraded water system, all in the keeping with the style of the existing buildings.

The Barn: Until the 1980's, a large wooden barn stood out on the bluff to the south of the main light station connected to Lighthouse Road by a gravel drive. This was built at the same time as the lighthouse and was used for

equipment storage, and for horses and other animals kept from time to time by the early keepers and their families, including even a racehorse at one point. In the 1930's it was modified to accommodate vehicles and was used by the U.S. Air Force Radar Tracking Station personnel in the 1960's and 70's. The barn was, unfortunately, burned down by the local volunteer fire department as a training exercise in the early 1980s.

The People of Point Cabrillo

Wilhelm Baumgartner 1908 to 1923

Wilhelm Baumgartner was the first Head Keeper at Point Cabrillo Light Station and held that position until his death in 1923. He was born in Bavaria, Germany and immigrated to America in the late 1890s. He spent a short period in the U. S. Army and reputedly served as Bugler in the Spanish American War. On leaving the army he joined the U. S. Lighthouse Service as a civilian Junior Assistant Lightkeeper, rising with promotions to be the Senior Assistant Keeper at the remote St. George Reef Lighthouse, nine miles off the northern California coast at Crescent City. In early 1908, he requested the position of Head Keeper for the new light station to be built at Point Cabrillo. Later that year, he was notified that he had been promoted to that position.

On June 10, 1909 Baumgartner hosted an evening celebration at the lighthouse on a still, foggy evening. The lamp was lit, the wick trimmed, the ventilation adjusted, the clockwork turning mechanism wound up and engaged, sending its ten second flash out to the passing vessels along the dark coast for the first time. At the same time the oil engines below were fired up by the keepers, and as soon as



Above – William Baumgartner, the first head keeper at Point Cabrillo, 1908-1923. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Below – Keeper Baumgartner in front of the head keeper's dwelling. Photographer unknown.





Some of the people who spent part of their youth at Point Cabrillo. Left – the late Harry Miller, son of Keeper Miller, who grew up at Point Cabrillo in the 30s and 40s. Bruce Rogerson photo. Inset – Flora Gordon, daughter of Head Keeper Thomas Atkinson. Photo courtesy of the *Fort Bragg Advocate*. Right – Nancy Baker, a newlywed, and her dog in 1951. Photo courtesy of Nancy Baker.

the air compressor had provided sufficient air pressure, the great air horns on the roof of the fog signal building roared out their distinctive warning to approaching ships along the busy coast of Mendocino.

Head Keeper Baumgartner was a bachelor when he accepted the appointment to Point Cabrillo. Early on, the District Superintendent hinted to him that this station was considered a married light keeper's assignment because of the size of the keepers' houses and the proximity of the station to the local communities. By 1911 Baumgartner had found a wife, Lena Seman, the daughter of the first blacksmith in nearby Mendocino Village. Baumgartner had met Lena at her sister's house, in the neighboring community of Pine Grove, just east of the light station. They lived happily in the head keeper's house until his death in 1923. The annual salary for a civilian head keeper in those days was \$750. Combined with the fuel allowances and other stores provided by the USLHS, along with the productive vegetable gardens at Point Cabrillo, it made for a reasonably comfortable life for the couple.

Descendents of Lena Baumgartner's family still own the blacksmith's home in Mendocino, and they have followed events at the light station with interest. Miss Daniel Smith of Piedmont, CA is a grand niece of Mrs. Baumgartner and the late Jim Moore was a grand nephew.

His wife Eleanor Moore is a regular visitor to the lighthouse. Recently, the family donated the dress cap of the USLHS worn by Keeper Baumgartner. The cap is on display in the watch room at the entrance to the lighthouse building, along with the light station's Visitor's Log (1909-1967). The log was presented to Point Cabrillo by Buck and Frances Taylor of North Carolina. Buck was one of the last USCG Keepers at the station in the late 1960s and had safeguarded the log, as the light station was being closed up.

Flora Gordon (1939 to 1947)

Flora still lives in the area and has fond memories of Point Cabrillo from many years spent there as a child. Her father, Thomas Allen Atkinson, was head keeper at the light station from 1939 until his death in 1950. Flora along with her brothers, sisters, mother and father lived in the middle house, which was known as the head keeper's residence. She particularly remembers the wonderful garden her father tended at the middle house which produced fine crops of peas, string beans, potatoes, beets, tomatoes and corn.

She recounts, "All of us loved the freedom and space of our new house. We loved roaming the coastal bluffs. It was a wonderful station for a family. We raised pigs, chickens, and rab-

bits and even had a milk cow on the pasture. There was always fresh fish and just off the rocks abalone in abundance and crab. Dad and my brothers would take our 16-foot rowboat out to go fishing. Living at the light station was a special family time, I will always remember."

Flora courted her husband Ed, a local boy from Little River, down by the lighthouse on many an evening before they were married in 1947, shortly after she graduated high school in Mendocino.

In 1939, while Flora was living at Point Cabrillo, the light station transferred from the U. S. Lighthouse Service, with whom her father had served since he was a young man, to the U. S. Coast Guard. Shortly afterwards her father received a special commendation for how well the station looked and was maintained.

Harry Miller (1935 to 1946)

The late Harry Miller spent several hours in 2002 relating his experiences as a child growing up at Point Cabrillo to a group of volunteers and staff at the light station. Harry was already at the light station when the Atkinsons arrived in 1939, so he was a contemporary of Flora Gordon. His father was transferred from the Point Sur Lighthouse in 1935 to Point

Cabrillo as assistant keeper. Keepers Minor and Phelen were at the light station when his family arrived.

The lighthouse had just been electrified shortly before the Miller family arrived and the clockwork mechanism that turned the light had been retired but was kept as a backup for emergencies. An electric bulb hung down in the lens as the source of the light and an electric motor turned the lens. The oil engine and compressors still filled the fog signal room below although the new electric diaphone now sounded as a warning to shipping in fog. The keepers worked 6 days a week in four shifts on watch at the lighthouse. The nightshift keeper slept in the afternoon. At that time the light was lit only between dusk and dawn and during the day a dustsheet and canvas cover protected the lens. Harry remembered carrying his dad's lunch pail down to the lighthouse each day when he was not at school.

The buildings were heated by coal, at that time supplied by the Coast Guard and delivered by truck in jute sacks. These had to be dumped into the outbuildings at the back of the houses, which was a dirty job. The families lived off the produce from the gardens, which everyone tended, and shopping expeditions to town were only required every few weeks, particularly after they received their first refrigerators. The keepers' wives baked, and canned fruit or vegetables from the gardens.

Harry told of a happy childhood at Point Cabrillo with the whole light station property as his playground, with friends from the neighborhood including the Heard boys. Fishing off the rocks, planting abalone seedlings in the rock crevices at low tides, building a raft in the north cove from driftwood, finding a giant sunfish one year, 3 feet wide! At one point, Harry had a pet robin that would perch on his shoulder.

There was time for schooling at Mendocino Elementary and then at the high school in 1945. When he was 13, Harry found work on a Saturday at the Caspar Lumber Mill nearby, working with Henry Dahl, filling in for the men who did not show up for the Saturday shift (after too many beers on payday). The mill timekeeper, Mr. Tellgund, kept an eye on Harry to make sure he stayed safe and did not get into trouble. When the mill closed in 1950's, Tellgund gave his treasured watch to Harry.

Their neighbors up on old Highway 1 (now Point Cabrillo Drive) included the Logan

brothers in the old Kearn farmhouse, with the Brintzen Farm across the road. A Pomo Indian family lived in an old shack on the East Side of the road. The old Indian showed up one night hiding in a cupboard in one of the keepers' houses, scaring the family member who found him. It was never explained how he got there. Traces of the old Pine Grove community still existed, including the hotel, brewery and the racetrack.

Nancy Baker (1951 to 1954)

Nancy came to the celebration at the lighthouse in August 1999 to mark National Lighthouse Day. She arrived at Point Cabrillo in 1951 as the young bride of a Coast Guard Engineer. They lived in the east keeper's house. To supplement the rather meager Coast Guard pay at the time Nancy took full advantage of the productive vegetable garden in the tradition of the earlier families at the light station.

The houses were still heated with coal and hauling the coal from the outhouse at the back was a daily chore. The furniture was spartan and made, by prison work parties, from green wood, which bent and warped making it unstable. She adopted a dog left by one of the departing keepers and remembers that it liked to run down Lighthouse Road in front of her car.

The keepers tried to find other ways of supplementing their poor service pay in those days. The head keeper rented out the pasture for sheep grazing to a local farmer and for grazing horses. Nancy liked riding and tried to ride these horses, but found out to her cost that the mounts were former rodeo broncos and a bit wild!

Maintenance was never ending and everything on the station had to be spotless when inspection time came around. The inspectors wore white gloves, which they used to check for dust on the sills and ledges all around the station. Everyone pitched in back in those days to help get ready for the inspectors' arrival. Much cleaning and painting took place and problems, which could not be corrected in time, were covered up or camouflaged. On one occasion she and her husband helped the keepers at Point Arena clean up for an inspection after their gas stove blew up! On another inspection, the USCG Officer inspecting the station was very impressed by her new drapes fashioned out of bed sheets. Black marks during an inspection could lead to postings to

a less desirable light station and no one wanted that to happen, as they enjoyed life at Point Cabrillo so much.

Proximity to the local communities was another important plus for Point Cabrillo Light Station families. Nancy worked in both Fort Bragg and Mendocino as a secretary at the school district offices. She also attended square dance parties in town and other local events.

The big fog signals were still in operation then. Nancy remembers one very foggy summer when the Diaphone sounded continuously for 14 days and nights. When it finally stopped in the middle of the night, everyone was awakened by the sudden eerie silence.

Bill Owens (1952 to 1963)

Bill Owens came to Point Cabrillo in 1952 from Point Arena Light Station where he had been head keeper since 1937. At Point Arena, Bill and his wife Isabel had spotted the first Japanese submarine off the West Coast on December 11, 1941, following Pearl Harbor. Shortly after the submarine was spotted on the surface, the lumber schooner *Amelia* was torpedoed north of Fort Bragg.

At Point Cabrillo, he supervised a USCG staff of two assistant keepers to maintain and operate the light and foghorns at the station. He was the last civilian head keeper or officer in charge in the USCG service. Bill had started out in the civilian U. S. Lighthouse Service in 1931 and continued as civilian even after the Lighthouse Service was merged into the military USCG in 1939.

Bill, with his wife and five daughters, enjoyed life at Point Cabrillo, particularly the solitude, closeness to the ocean, the productive gardens and the proximity of the light station to schools, shops and friends. Diana Owens met her future husband, Ron, while at Point Cabrillo. In an article written for *The Keeper's Log* a few years ago, she related an incident out by the lighthouse one foggy evening. She and her beau were returning from a date by car and decided to say goodnight down by the light. As Ron was turning the car on the hard top, the foghorn went off with a great roar just above them. He was so taken aback that he stamped on the gas by mistake and the vehicle almost went off the bluff into the cove below!



Above – Keeper Bill Owens on duty in the lighthouse.

Below – Bill Owens at his retirement ceremony at Point Cabrillo on 1963 after 30 years of service. Photos courtesy of Cora Owens.



During Bill's tenure as head keeper, Point Cabrillo experienced the fiercest storm in many decades on February 8-9, 1960. Some accounts attribute the huge waves to a major earthquake in Alaska, but this is unlikely as no such event was recorded on those dates. It is much more likely that a series of major storm systems in the Gulf of Alaska and closer to the Pacific coast, generated the conditions experienced by the keepers and the families at Point Cabrillo. Bill Owens had warning of the advancing storm from radio weather reports and USCG alerts. As the winds increased and the seas rose he decided to evacuate the keepers usually on

duty in the lighthouse up the hill to the east house for safety. All of the families also moved to the east house which is the furthest from the ocean. Owens reported that when he looked down to see what was happening at the lighthouse he could watch the revolving light beam from the lens reflecting off the crests of the waves building up before they crashed onto the bluff, enveloping the fog signal building at times. All through the worst of the storm the lens continued to operate.

Next morning as the seas began to subside, the keepers ventured down to see how badly damaged the building was. The great seas had thrown huge boulders and tons of sand and pebbles onto the bluff. Some of the siding on the west side of the building was gone, ripped off by the wind and ocean; the doors were stove in and sand, gravel and

rocks littered the fog signal engine room. The heavy metal compressors and oil engines had been lifted off their mountings and immersed in seawater. It took a bulldozer to clear the bluff of debris, and several weeks to complete all the necessary repairs. But despite the damage below, the lens high in the lantern room remained in operating condition.

Bill Owens had completed over 30 years service with the U.S. Lighthouse Service and then with the U. S. Coast Guard when he retired in February 28, 1963. Bill and his wife lived in Little River five miles south of Point Cabrillo until his death in 1984.

Keeping the Light - Our Modern Lightkeepers

For sixty years of the twentieth century, the men of the U. S. Lighthouse Service (and later the Coast Guard), kept the light burning brightly at Point Cabrillo. Today, in our own small way, the tradition of those dedicated keepers of long ago is kept alive by a small band of volunteers — the members of U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 87, Mendocino, California. The men and women of the Flotilla give of their own time to maintain the lens and lantern room. Their work ensures that the lens operates efficiently for modern seafarers along our coast; the party boats, divers, fishermen and others on the high seas for business or pleasure, even in this modern age of GPS, radar and computer technology.

After completion of the purchase of the light station and surrounding land in the 1990's, the California State Coastal Conservancy, through a non-profit organization, the North Coast Interpretive Association (NCIA) and its successor Point Cabrillo Lightkeepers Association, developed ambitious plans to restore the lighthouse buildings and the Fresnel lens to their original working condition. After extensive research by the NCIA staff and local volunteers, in cooperation with USCG Aids to Navigation teams from Group Humboldt Bay and Group San Francisco, work commenced in the fall of 1998. The Fresnel lens was painstakingly dismantled panel by panel and restored to its former glory by a team of volunteers who put in hundreds of hours.

During this process, negotiations were continuing to permit the lens, which remained Federal property, to resume its original role as the official aid to navigation at Point Cabrillo, replacing the automated beacon mounted on the lighthouse roof. The stumbling block to this plan was that the Coast Guard no longer had the personnel or the budget to maintain an active Fresnel lens. In addition, as an aid to navigation, the light had to be maintained by a duly authorized Federal Agency. The solution to the impasse was the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the volunteer arm of the U. S. Coast Guard.

In May 1999 the 90-year-old Fresnel lens was relit. Under the direction of the Flotilla Aids to Navigation Staff Officer and the ATON Team at USCG Group Humboldt Bay, the Auxiliary performs the essential

maintenance on the lens and lantern room. This is a unique mission for the Coast Guard Auxiliary and Flotilla 87 is one of a small handful of Flotillas performing such duties in the United States.

Point Cabrillo Today

Visitors today to the Point Cabrillo Light Station and surrounding nature preserve can enjoy one of the most complete light stations on the west coast. The lighthouse building, containing the museum and gift shop, includes exhibits on the history of the lighthouse, the restoration process, local communities and the *Frolic* shipwreck story. The east assistant keepers house contains a period museum showing how the keeper's families lived in the 1930s, and the smithy houses a beautiful aquarium containing many of the species of marine fauna and flora found in the waters off the point.

Each spring the Point Cabrillo Lightkeepers Association offers educational programs for elementary school children, grades one through five, from local schools in northern California at the light station and nature preserve. The program includes local history, environmental conservation, the Pomo people and local flora and fauna of the coast and preserve. The program is entirely funded by visitor donations and financial support from the local community and volunteers at Point Cabrillo.

With completion of the restoration of the head keeper's house in 2006, visitors now have an opportunity to experience an overnight stay at Point Cabrillo in the beautiful Lighthouse Inn. The Inn offers its guests a fascinating blend of romance, history and tranquil comfort overlooking the ocean. The Inn has six beautifully appointed rooms, serves a five course breakfast and the innkeeper leads an evening tour of the lighthouse for guests. For full details, room rates and reservations check out the web site at <www.MendocinoLighthouse.PointCabrillo.org> or call 1-866-937-6124.

Top to bottom: One of the restored outbuildings, now used as overnight cottages. The restored dining room of the head keeper's dwelling, now the Lighthouse Inn, a bed and breakfast with six rooms. Inset: an old tobacco tin found in the wall during restoration. Photos courtesy of Bruce Rogerson. Exterior view of the head keeper's house. Rosalie Winesuff photo.

