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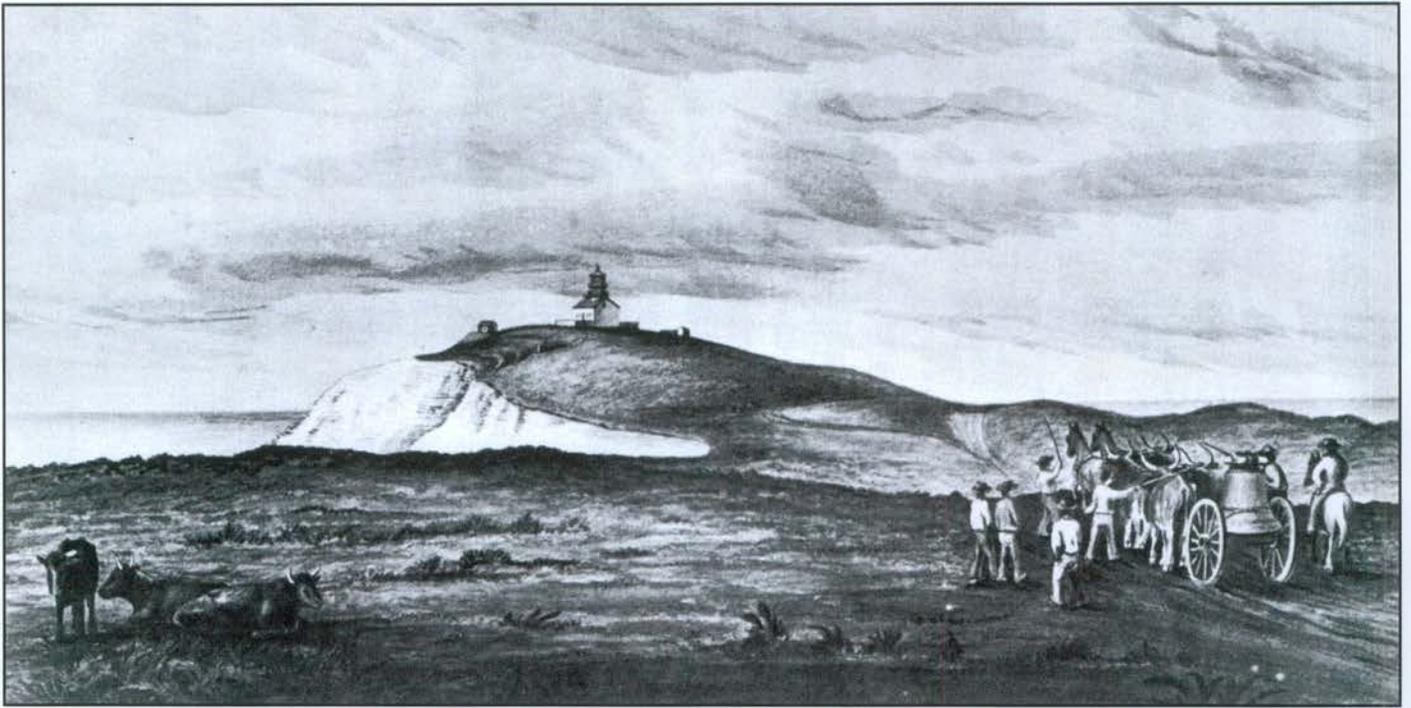
THE KEEPER'S

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Drawing by Hartman Bache of the workers hauling the fog bell to the Point Conception Lighthouse in the 1850s.

Point Conception Light Station

By Wayne C. Wheeler



One third of the way up the California coast from Mexico, the shoreline curves west and then makes an abrupt 90-degree turn north. Early on, this point of land – this cape, was termed the Cape Horn of the Pacific. One 19th century mariner, sailing north in the relative calm of the Santa Barbara Channel, responded to a new seaman who thought the sailing conditions idyllic, "It may be fine now, but when we get north of Conception we'll catch hell!"

On October 18, 1542, Juan Cabrillo, sailing along the California coast in search of glory and gold, encountered heavy winds when rounding Point Conception and was forced to turn back to San Miguel Island, where he died. His second in command, Bartolome Ferrello, assumed command and again tried to round the point, but he was also unsuccessful.

The point was originally named Punta de la Limpia Conception by the explorer Vizcaino in 1602. He was the next Spanish sailor to venture into Pacific waters along the California coast.

California remained a quiet territory until the stampede caused by the Gold Rush impelled

thousands of vessels to ply the dangerous and unmarked waters of the West Coast, many coming to grief on the rocky shoreline. In short order Congress recognized the need for aids to navigation to protect the numerous vessels and the substantial commerce of the area. On September 28, 1850, an Act was passed to establish eight lighthouses (seven in California and one in Washington territory) and several buoys. However, some inappropriate dealings with the awarding of the contract, and a subsequent Senate Select Committee investigation, delayed construction for several years and it wasn't until 1854 that the Alcatraz Lighthouse became the first to shine its light on the Pacific Coast.

Earlier in the 1850s, Coast and Geodetic Engineer Hartman Bache was dispatched to select sites for the first West Coast light stations. One of those sites was Point Conception, a critical turning point of the California coast. Even today Point Conception is a long way from civilization. The station is 10 miles from Highway 1 across a private ranch road, ten miles from Lompac to the north and 50 miles to the larger city of Santa Barbara to the south.

In 1853, contractors Gibbons and Kelly, of Baltimore, MD, arrived on the West Coast aboard their vessel *Oriole* and dispatched

crews to begin construction at the preselected sites. The original Point Conception structure, a brick light tower rising through a 1-story dwelling, was completed by mid-summer 1854. It was situated on a promontory 215 feet above sea level, and like the sites at Point Bonita to the north and San Diego to the south, the elevation would eventually prove to be inadequate.

After completion, Major Bache was assigned to inspect the work of the contractor. When he arrived at Point Conception he found that much of the mortar had already wasted away from between the bricks, the wind had blown away some of the gutter-troughs and, most importantly, the lantern room was too small to support the 1st order lens due to arrive in the near future from France. Actually, this last discrepancy was not the fault of the contractor. The original plans were developed in 1850, two years before the Lighthouse Board was placed in charge of our aids to navigation system. Those plans called for the installation of the old-fashioned Argand lamp and reflector system. The new Board issued a change order requiring all lighthouses to be fitted with Fresnel lenses, a system developed in 1822, but ignored by our government until 1852, when the Board took charge.

Hartman Bache reported in 1855 - "Landed at Point Conception on the morning of the 31st ultimo. Mr. Merrill, with the workmen, materials for rebuilding the tower, and the main parts of the frame of the lantern, arrived on Monday the week previous, the 20th. It required three days for the crew of the schooner, assisted by the workmen, to land the freight through the surf [in a nearby cove] ... The floors of the dwelling were already shored up, and the tower pulled down quite to the foundation: the new materials in part hauled to the site; the old material in course of preparation for re-use, and one slope of the roof of the dwelling nearly shingled. The work had been somewhat retarded by the indisposition of one of the masons, caused by exposure to water in landing the materials. The only changes in the plan already forwarded to the Board were in removing the tower a few inches back from the center of the building in order to give room for opening the front door; to retain the old walls of the cistern, as they are required as foundations of the walls carried up through the house, and for extending the cistern to the northwesterly corner of the cellar. Personal examination fully confirmed the report of Mr. Merrill of the character of the materials and workmanship

employed in the construction.

"The rebuilding of the tower was to commence on the third, with a fair prospect, considering the adverse conditions under which the operations must be carried on, of completing the work at an early day. Among these may be mentioned the hauling of materials, even to the sand and water used in the building, over roads at points deep with sand, and of considerable acclivity, requiring the employment of four mule trains to draw even a fourth of the usual load, and the absence of all labor and materials at any price to meet a pressing emergency. Measurements were made of the dwelling. The height was ascertained by plummet and level. It is 215 feet. The focal plane [of the lens] will be 33 feet above the ground, thus making the whole height of that plane, above high water ... 248 feet.

"I left Point Conception on the morning of the third; a letter from Mr. Merrill of the 14th, received, of course, since my return, says: 'The *General Pierce* arrived here on the 11th and has just finished landing her freight for this place ... The freight was landed as well as could be. Some of the boxes had to be opened on board on account of the weight of them; but I have taken all possible care that nothing shall be lost or damaged.' On the 19th he writes, 'we now

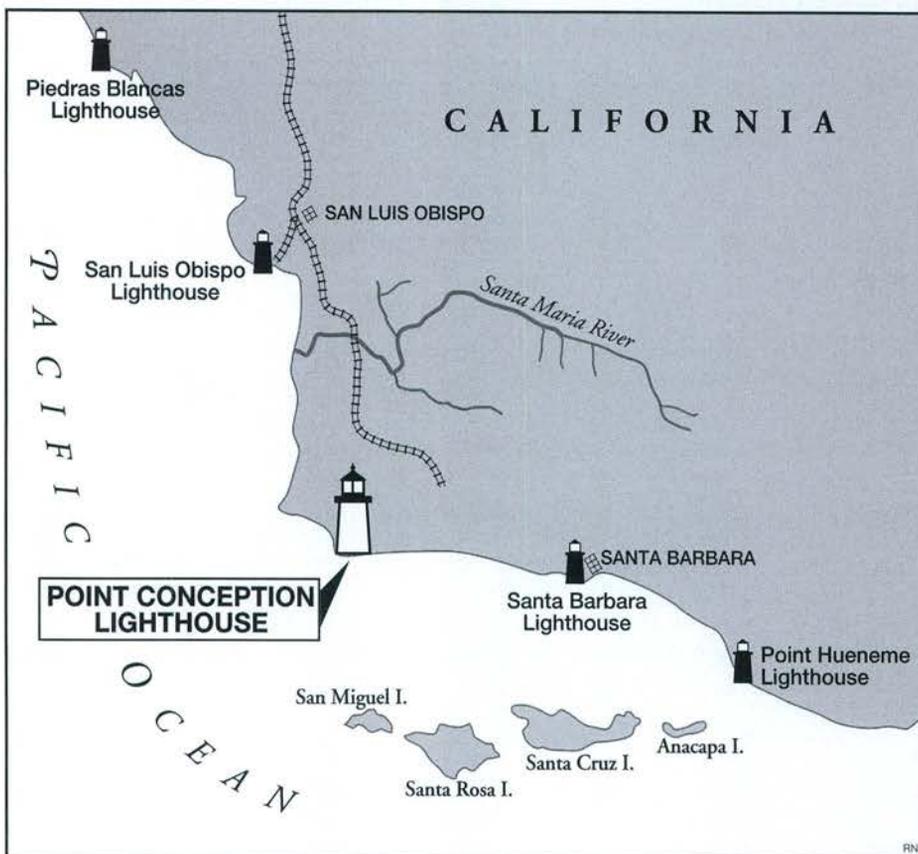
have the brick work of the tower nearly up to the second floor, and are now in a condition to make pretty good progress ... The last freight was landed at the tower landing a considerable distance from the house. I was compelled to send some thirty miles to get additional teams to do the hauling, as that part of the freight must be removed before the full of the moon, when the tide is highest and would reach it where it lies on the beach. The Spaniards will not agree to do the work unless I pay them down as fast as the work is done. I am therefore compelled to send to you for four hundred dollars. With that amount and what I have of my own I can get along and pay all the hauling, my expenses, etc.'

Arrangements have been made with the Pacific M.M.S. Company by which the fund required by Mr. Merrill will be landed at the Point, by the steamer *Republic*, which sails on Monday on her regular trip down the coast."

Mr. Franklin, in charge of the Point Loma Lighthouse project, wrote Bache that, "I will be ready to go up to Point Conception by the 1st of October ... I am soldering the dome [at Point Loma] and getting it ready so Mr. Smith can do the rest while I'm away."

Hartman Bache reported, "Seaviews [were] taken of Point Conception. Three, or at least some of the views, will be forwarded to the board as soon as the draftsman can be spared from other and more important work ... I now send a tracing of Point Conception lighthouse, with the lantern and lens apparatus of the 1st order. By some misconception on the part of the draftsman, the tower is not thrown back a few inches as reported. Neither is the cistern drawn properly. A drawing with these corrections, and a few others of trifling character, will be made on the return of the superintendent on the completion of the work, as I desire that the board should possess a correct drawing of every structure as it is finished for the archives."

He added the following appendix to his letter: "Sir: I would like to recommend the following appropriation, in addition to those named in my letter of the 24th for improving the road from Coxo, or landing, at Point Conception to the light-house, \$1,000." He also requested a Cornelius lard-lamp for the lighthouse and mentioned that all the glass chimneys for the lamps in use broke when cooled and, "There must be some defect in the materials ..."



When construction was complete, the Lighthouse Service appointed George Parkinson as the keeper on September 6, 1854. When he arrived, the lens had not yet been delivered and the house was full of local Indians who were using it as a hunting lodge. There has been a report that they also considered it a sacred area, a point where the spirits of deceased Indians left for the afterlife. In any event, they were a gentle tribe and when ordered by the keeper to leave they did so with no resistance.

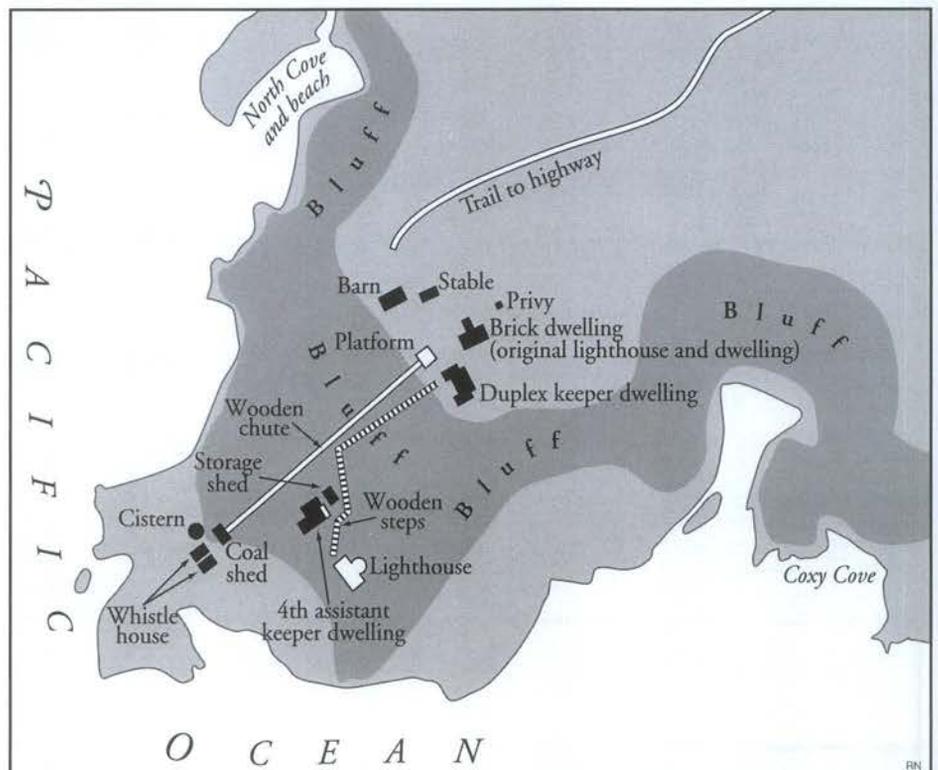
Parkinson served for some time before the lighthouse was reconstructed and the lens arrived. He also served for some time without pay, in spite of writing his Congressman. He stated that he kept busy just recovering pieces of the house, which tended to blow away. Before the lighthouse was operational he was finally paid at a rate of \$700 a year. This was later increased to \$1,000.

On September 11, the *General Pierce* arrived and, with calm seas, landed the lens, lamp and assorted equipment through the surf. Even so, some of the items were lost, and others damaged by salt water. The keeper and workmen cleaned the parts and started to assemble the lens with hopes of lighting it by Christmas, 1855. The job took longer than expected and when informed of the delay, Major Bache published a notice to mariners in the *Alta Californian* that Point Conception wouldn't be lighted until February 1, 1856. And, with a good effort, that date proved correct. Two weeks later the captain of the steamer *Golden Gate* reported that he had observed the beam from the 1st order lens some 42 miles away. It must have been the loom of the light from the lens since the nominal range was about 24 miles.

Keeper Parkinson was unhappy with his assignment and called the location "... this dreadful promontory of desolation." He wrote to the District Inspector, "Point Conception lies some sixty-five miles by land from the little village of Santa Barbara, nearest point at which supplies can be obtained, the road to which place is only passable at very low water and that in consequence of the difficulty of transportation, the freight on goods amounts to more than my pay, and price rates at Santa Barbara are one-hundred percent over San Francisco rates. How to convey my wood and water here I know not, the former being five or six miles off, the latter about 600 yards.



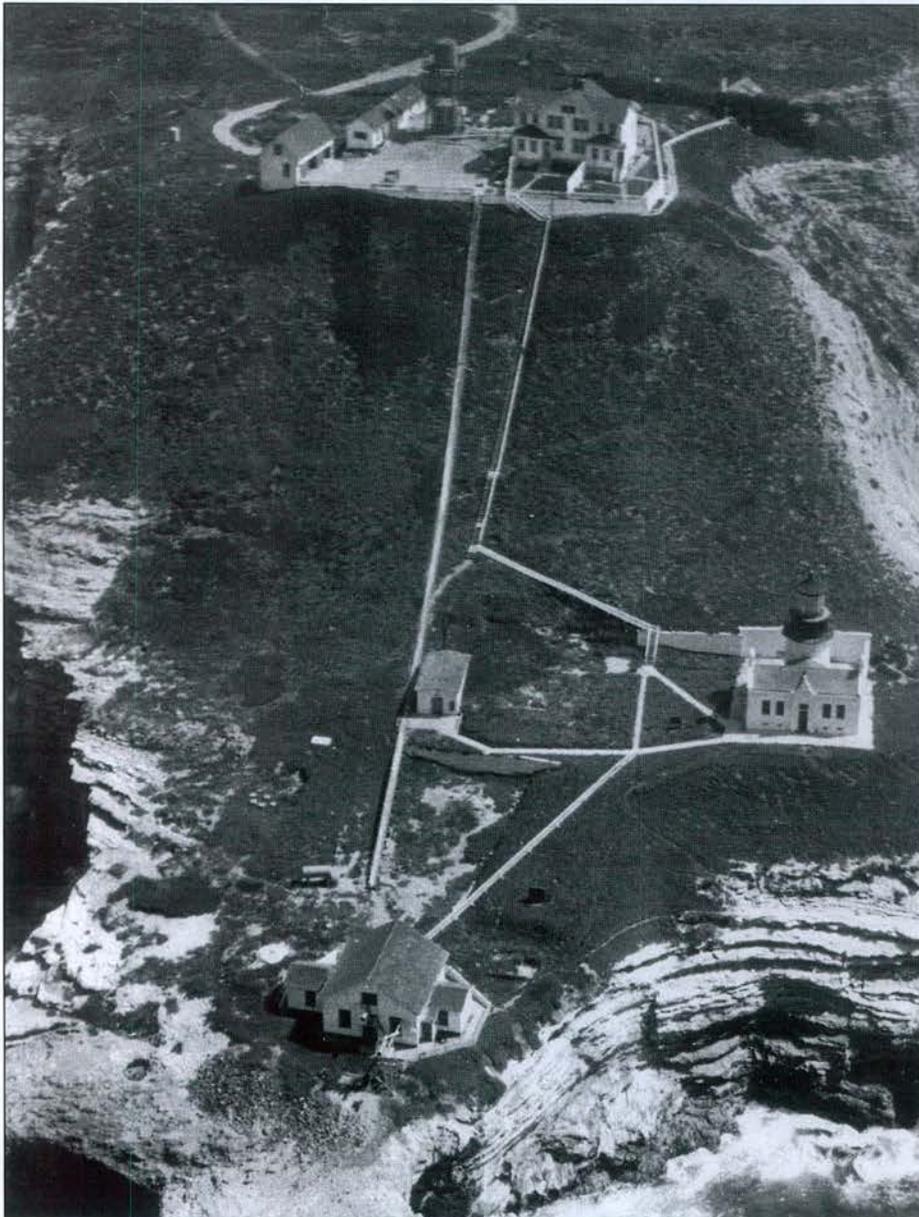
The original Point Conception Lighthouse circa 1897. In this era the tower had been removed from the dwelling and the hole roofed over. Note end of the tie rods at the end of the building just below the edge of the roof. The keeper, his wife and two daughters, center. Young boy (with curls) at left. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



That my situation here is truly distressing admits not of any doubt, cut off as I am from all communications and without means to live on. My pay has not been forthcoming in over four months."

Parkinson was fired in August and Keeper Meacham was appointed on August 6, also at a rate of \$1000 a year.

Below – The new duplex at the top of the hill with a barn, storage buildings and a water tank at left. At lower right, the 1881 lighthouse with fog signal building at bottom. 1950s photo courtesy of Dixie Cumings.



Above – Dwelling and water tank at crest of hill, lighthouse lower left. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1930.

In 1875 the corner of the dwelling settled and cracks appeared in the structure. It was becoming apparent that the location was not ideal. Being at too high an elevation, the light was occasionally obscured by the low layers of fog prevalent along the coast.

Shortly after the station was established, a bell fog signal was installed. Bell fog signals work well in sheltered areas like bays, along rivers or in areas of coves and islands like the coast of Maine. They do not, however, have carrying power against the strong winds experienced along the West Coast. In 1871 an appropriation was approved by Congress to establish a 1st class steam fog signal at Point Conception. The structure was completed in 1872 and the machinery installed. The District Inspector reported in the Annual Report, "Owing to the ignorance on the part of the light-house keeper, the latter [machinery] soon needed repairs. The pipes connecting the hydraulic ram with the cistern were not laid according to directions from the district engineer, and will have to be re-laid. The cistern and watershed, said to be damaged by the recent earthquakes, will require an additional coat of cement. An abundant supply of water from an adjoining spring furnishes all that is required for the lighthouse and fog signal.

Water was a major problem for the light stations along the West Coast as it usually only rains for three or four months of the year. Most light stations employed a system of funneling rainwater off roofs and into a cistern located in the cellar or ground. Occasionally the Service was lucky in locating a spring near a light station.

In 1874 an additional dwelling was constructed. The addition of a steam fog signal required four keepers. Also in that year a dispute over title to the land occurred.

In 1875 the Lighthouse Board reported, "The old dwelling at this station is in bad condition, and the best plan is to pull it down, leaving the tower by itself, and to build for the accommodation for the keepers two more cottages similar to the one built last year. This being a first order light and having a steam fog signal, four keepers are required. One corner of the house has settled, making a serious crack. As the tower is in the center of the house, the latter having been built around it, when the walls of the house are removed the tower will be isolated and complete in itself. An appropriation of \$12,000 is asked for the

purpose of building the new dwellings. The tenure by which the government holds the 160 acres of land at this point has been a matter of correspondence during some years past. A portion of this is of no value to the Government for lighthouse purposes, and can be abandoned without detriment to the public service. Negotiations are now in progress ..."

Not receiving Congressional approval, the Service reiterated the request in 1876. The land dispute continued, with the Government only requesting 30 acres of the 160-acre parcel.

In 1880, the Lighthouse Service again reported that the original dwelling and tower were in poor condition, but took another tack and reported, "... Plans and estimates for rebuilding the tower, on a lower point on the bluff, were prepared, and Congress was asked for an appropriation of \$38,000 for the purposes of rebuilding the structures; and also for \$10,000 in order to secure title to the land on which the station is located, which, under a recent decision of the honorable Secretary of the Interior, does not belong to the United States ... This station is one of the oldest established on this coast and is also one of

the most important. All sailing vessels and steamers change course when off this point, either in going up or down the coast, and the extinguish[ing] of the light and stoppage of the fog signal would make navigation on this part of the coast exceedingly hazardous. It is hoped that Congress, at its next session, will make an immediately available appropriation of the amount required to put this station in efficient condition, as well as for the purpose of purchasing the necessary site, and the right-of-way thereto. The amount required for these purposes is \$48,000. Wooden supports are placed against the tower to hold it up. Unless an appropriation be soon made, the light must be discontinued. The revolving machinery of the lens apparatus was thoroughly overhauled and repaired, a new set of chariot wheels was furnished. The lantern was extensively repaired; and a new battery and new galvanized-iron wire, for connections between the various structures, was sent to the station [this was for a call-bell system to be established between the various buildings of the station]. The cottage dwelling requires painting inside and outside; otherwise it is in good condition."



Fog signal at left, 3rd assistant keeper house center, lighthouse right. The left ribbon descending the hill is the supply chute used to send coal, and other supplies, down to the fog signal building and assistant's dwelling.



Completed in 1881, the new Point Conception lighthouse had the original 1st order lens installed. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo circa 1930.

Congress approved \$40,000 of the \$48,000 requested by the Lighthouse Board. \$10,000 was set aside to purchase the property from the local Rancho and plans for rebuilding the lighthouse at a lower level were made and approved by the Board. The Board reported, "... arrangements were made for the purchase of all necessary building materials, for the transportation of them to El Coxo Landing [some distance south of the station], and for hauling them from thence to the light station. When the metal work and lantern for the new tower were finished according to plans and specifications, they were carefully boxed and taken to the buoy depot at Yerba Buena Island for storage. Nearly all the building material was purchased, shipped and safely landed through the surf at El Coxo, and a portion of it was hauled from El Coxo to the station. The overseer and a number of the mechanics and laborers were sent

to the station in June, and the work on the new tower and oil house was commenced. It is expected that the light will be exhibited from the new tower by the middle of November next. As the steam fog signal needed immediate and extensive repair, it was found necessary to order a new boiler and establish a duplicate fog signal, for the old boiler and machinery may give out at any time ... One of the sets of machinery and whistles used at Point Reyes [before whistles were substituted for sirens] will be used as the duplicate signal.. The old fuel house will be fitted up for the reception of the duplicate signal, and a new fuel house will be built, with a storage capacity for 100 tons of coal ... The old brick dwelling will be repaired, and two new rooms will be added to it, making it sufficient for the accommodation of two families. A new four room cottage will also be built, and the old cottage will be repaired ... a store-house will be built at El Coxo Landing,

in which the supplies for the station can be stored when landed from the tender. When this work is completed, this station will be in a more efficient condition than ever before ..."

The 1882 *Report to Congress from the Lighthouse Board* stated, "The new tower, with the oil-room and keeper's watch room at its front, was built and is ready to receive the new lantern. The cottage under the bluff, with the necessary outbuilding for the assistant keeper, was finished. The old coal-shed was prepared for the reception of the duplicate boiler and engine, and a new coal-shed built. A new wooden building for the temporary storage of oil was built at the top of the bluff, and a pipe line laid, through which the oil could be run to the brick storehouse at the foot of the tower. The building used temporarily as overseer's quarters was moved to the vicinity of the new cottage for use as a wood-shed and store house.

The old dwelling had a wooden addition of two rooms made at its rear ... was strengthened by two 1-inch iron tie-rods, 38 feet long, running from end wall-to-end wall and anchored outside to plates of flat 1-inch iron, each two feet long and six inches wide. A flight of steps was carried from the top of the bluff to the new tower ...” The District also reported other improvements to buildings, the cistern, water system and the construction of a coal chute from the top of the bluff to the lower coal house. A plat was made of the reservation, showing the boundaries and location of all buildings and improvements.

“In the middle of May a lampist and two mechanics left San Francisco for the station, taking with them the new fourth order lens for temporary use and glass for the new lantern. The fourth order lens was placed in the new tower and a light from it exhibited. The 1st order lens was then dismantled from the top of the old dwelling, on which a temporary platform was placed for the fourth order [lens]. The first order lens was then remounted on the new tower. The light was initially exhibited June 20. The working force then dismantled the iron work of the old lantern ...”

In 1883 the Board reported that the workmen had taken down the old tower to the level of the roof of the dwelling and the hole was covered over. The fog signal building received a new cement floor and the floor of one of the dwellings was bricked. Four hundred feet of fence was installed along the bluff and to prevent the washing away of the bluff under the long [280 step] staircase to the lower level, a brick drain and retaining wall were constructed. The report concluded, “The station is now in excellent condition.”

In 1892 the Board reported, “... the coal chute leading from the top of the hill to the signal houses was entirely rebuilt ... the barn was rebuilt. The old oil house was fitted up as a dwelling for single keepers. A fence was built around the keeper's dwelling to prevent the blowing out of sand, which has been a source of annoyance for many years ... An examination of the spring water used showed the presence of sulphuretted hydrogen. This, if in sufficient quantity, would account for the condition of the boilers [to say nothing for the condition of the keepers].”

The water system was a continual problem throughout the 1890s and a considerable amount of effort was exerted to set the problems right. In 1902 a new fog signal building was constructed and a windmill built to pump water from the spring at a lower level up to the dwellings. In 1904 Congress appropriated \$9,000 to construct a new duplex dwelling and \$15,000 for a new oil house. The duplex was completed in 1906 and described as, “... a frame structure two stories high, and contains six rooms and a bath for each occupying keeper.” The oil house was completed the following year.

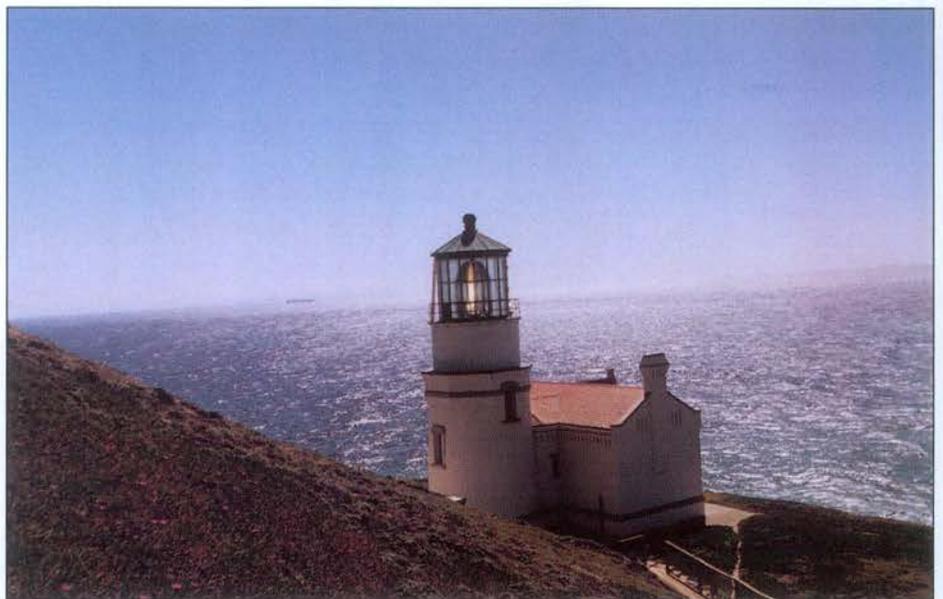
A 1946 *Saturday Evening Post* article on the Point Conception Light Station mentioned that, even at that late date, the keepers had no electric lights, telephone or neighbors. The illuminate at the time was an Incandescent Oil Vapor (I.O.V.) lamp. It was replaced by an electric lamp when the station was electrified in 1948.

Point Conception Light Station was automated and personnel removed on February 15, 1973. By that date most of the older buildings had been removed. The light is still operational and periodically maintained by a crew from the Coast Guard's Channel Island Station. They still must cross the Bixby ranch to reach the station, which is off limits to the public.

The characteristic of the light has been changed from two flashes every 30 seconds to one flash every 30 seconds. The electronic fog signal operates continuously and produces one blast every 30 seconds.

September 8, 1923. Pacific Mail liner *Cuba* went ashore in a fog on a sand bar west of Point Bennett San Miguel Island at 4:30am. Two boat loads of passengers and a crew were picked up by the U. S. torpedo boat *Reno*. Ens. Kelley sped the two life boats with 22 and 24 passengers respectively at 1:35pm Saturday and at 2:00pm the wreck was located. The fog that caused the *Cuba* to strike the rock or sand bar, also saved the lives of passengers and crew as shown by the story related by Commander Berry of the U. S. *Reno*, which picked up the survivors. They were scheduled to pass down the inside channel. However, the fog was so thick that he took the outer channel for safety. By that means the two life boats were sighted. The passengers were taken to San Pedro, CA, no lives were lost.

The dangerous operation of transferring the passengers that landed on San Miguel Island to the U. S. *Reno* was under the supervision of Commander Patterson... there was \$2,500,000 bullion on the *Cuba* which was saved in the salvage operations.



Although automated, the original 1st order lens is still in operation. Photo by Ainsley Dixon.

Excerpts from the Point Conception
Light Station Keeper's Log

T. L. Perry, Keeper, served there from
July 1872 - June 1895

March 30, 1895 - Worked in river, cleaned balconies, stairs and fog signal tubes. Fed mules, made a place for the water to run out of the (supply) chute, swept up coal shed and split kindling for fires. In afternoon cleaned up bar and carried up a board that had blown down the hill. At 9:30 a.m. Henry Rosendale, when requested by me to go to cleaning and washing of lantern windows, told me it was the man [keeper] that lights ups business [1st watch of the night] as him and the other boys had made arrangements to do it in that way. I told him that the windows needed washing and to go and do it. He refused but went and done it. Afterwards he called me an old stinker and an old son of a bitch and other names too filthy to be thought of, much less written in the log. Fact is I never heard such filthy expressions used by one man as those used by Henry Rosendale, my 2nd assistant.

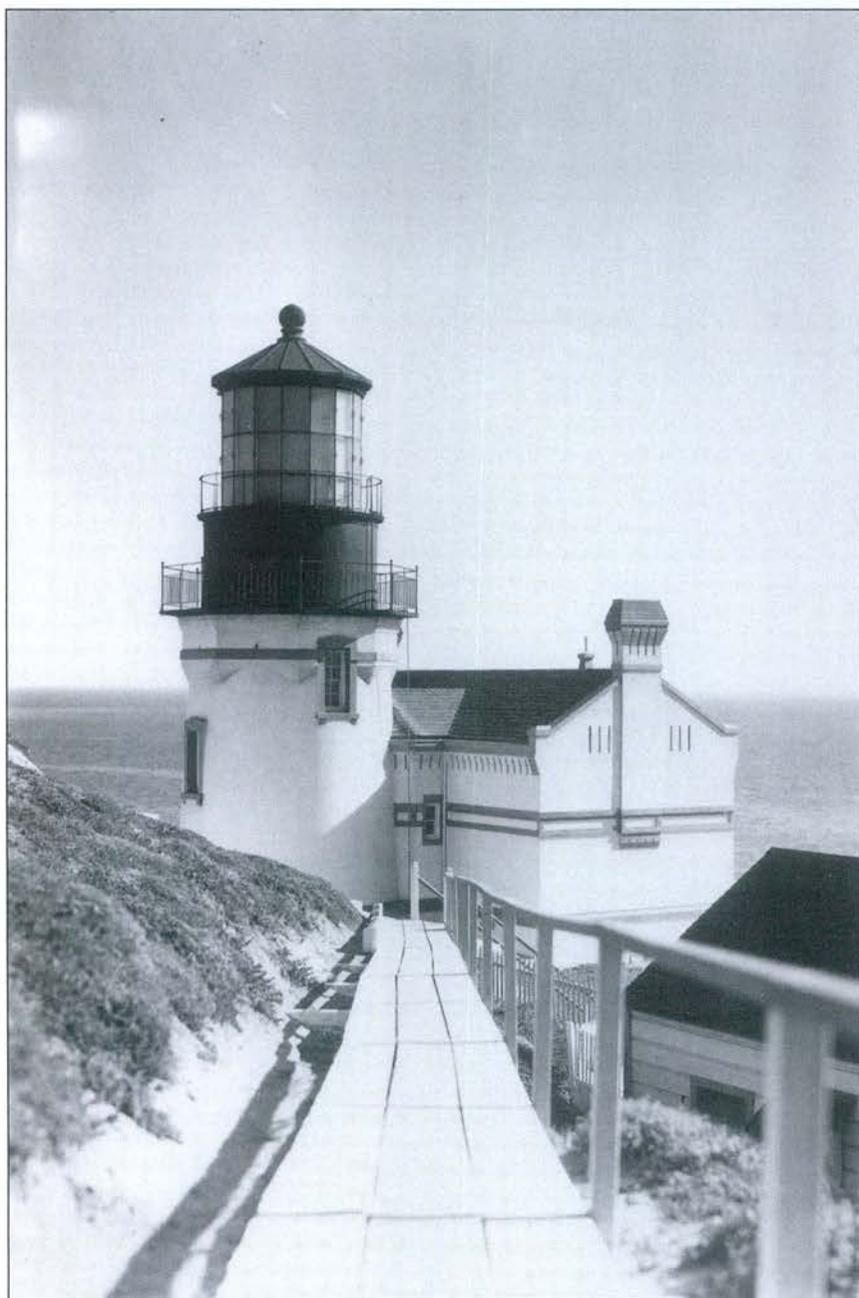
April 1, 1895 - Mr. Henry Bosen, 1st Asst, arrived and was assigned to duty. V.J. Lettler, 1st Asst resigned. Fed mules, 2nd asst cleaned up river. Keeper put post in fence and repaired fence. 2nd Asst built lime box, 3rd Asst hauled one load of coal. 1st Asst went to Gaviota for furniture and family.

April 21, 1895 - Keeper fed mules, cleaned up tower and went to whaling camp with buckboard for chickens.

May 10, 1895 - Keeper fed mules, wrote official letters, painted doors in sitting room, went to whale camp on business.

May 11, 1895 - Keeper ... left for Lompoc with official mail addressed to Inspector. 3rd Asst. writing out complaints against the keeper. 2nd Asst at fog signal 2 p.m. to sun down.

May 12, 1895 - Keeper returned at 6:30 p.m. from Lompoc. 3rd asst at fog signal from sunrise to 10 a.m.. At 10 a.m. he came up the hill telling me that the signal was alright. At 9 p.m. I looked at boiler and the safety valve was blowing off water, very low in the glass and over 90 lbs. of steam and a very strong fire on. If I had not discovered it in a very short time the boiler would have blown up or been rendered useless. I pumped in water, slacked the fires and blew off steam by hand.





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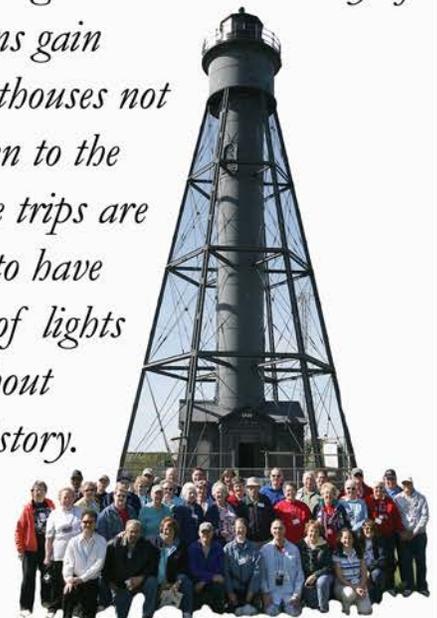
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Education



The Keeper's Log magazine celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2009. Receive this award-winning publication quarterly as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tincum Lighthouse, NJ