

# The Old Lighthouse at Point Loma

Cabrillo National Monument

National Park Service



## INTRODUCTION

Once called the "Star of the Silver Gate," the Old Point Loma Lighthouse functioned as the southern-most Pacific coast beacon of light in the United States from 1855 to 1891. It is one of eight original west coast lighthouses approved by Congress and built in the early 1850s, each with the same basic design: a Cape Cod style dwelling with a tower rising out of the structure.

The lighthouse sits atop Point Loma, 422 feet above sea level, overlooking the Pacific Ocean to the west and the entrance to San Diego Bay to the east. The light, at an elevation of 462 feet, was the highest navigational beacon in the United States during its 36 year period of operation as both a coastal light and harbor light for the San Diego area.

The need for west coast lighthouses became apparent when the California Gold Rush, statehood, and attendant settlement in the west caused a dramatic increase in sea traffic. The coastal area was treacherous to navigate, with steep, rocky cliffs, unpredictable currents, and few natural harbors. In the late 1850s, sea traffic and settlement continued to increase, and this provided the impetus to begin construction of eight additional lighthouses on the west coast, for a total of sixteen in all from Point Loma in the south to Cape Flattery at the northwest corner of Washington State.

## BUILDING THE LIGHTHOUSE

A site was chosen in 1851 and construction began on April 8, 1854. The work was performed by the Baltimore, Maryland partnership of Francis Kelly and Francis Gibbons. Materials were brought in from San Francisco on the schooner "Vaquero," and included lumber, cement, lime, and bricks. Sandstone (for the outer walls) and tiles (for the basement floor) were among the local materials used.

Construction was not a simple task and took longer than expected. Due to difficulties related to construction in a remote location with rugged terrain, and tower modifications to accommodate a new type of lens (discussed below), the

original construction estimate of \$15,000 eventually escalated to nearly \$30,000. Finally, the construction and lens installation complete, the wicks were lighted and the tower beamed its first light on the evening of November 15, 1855.

## THE LENS

The heart of the lighthouse is the lens. It is located in the tower and is protected from the elements by a roof and enclosed siding. At Point Loma, the type used was a fixed (non-rotating), 3rd order Fresnel (pronounced Fra-nel) lens, named after the French physicist who developed the apparatus in 1822. The Fresnel lens was first used in the United States in 1841 at Navesink Light Station, New Jersey, on the south shore of the entrance to New York Harbor. Ten years later, the lens was approved for use in all new lighthouses, having been demonstrated to be superior to the lenses then in use. The 3rd order (or 3rd largest of seven sizes) lens at Point Loma stood over five feet high and three feet wide. In the center, three concentric wicks produced a flame of 168 candlepower, fueled by burning whale oil, later lard oil, and finally kerosene. The lens focused, magnified, and directed this light source into an uninterrupted, horizontal sheet of light of about 19,000 candlepower, visible at sea more than 20 miles on a clear night.

A historically correct 3rd order lens is currently on display in the lighthouse tower, and a partial lens is in the Park Visitors Center. Since renovation of the lighthouse in 1985, the lamp has been lighted (electrically) at dusk each evening. It is visible from the bay side only, as a curtain prevents light from shining out to sea. This is done so that navigators at sea will not be confused by the light, which has not officially operated since 1891.

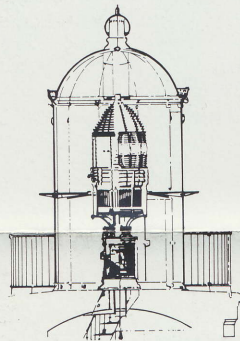
Why was the lighthouse taken out of service in 1891? Its distinction as the highest in the United States was its undoing. Low clouds, a common California coastline phenomenon, arrive onshore many evenings at an elevation of a few hundred feet, often obscuring the top of Point Loma from the view of mariners. The visibility below the clouds, however, is generally good. In addition, the lighthouse location was too far from both the bay entrance and ocean to make the installation of a fog horn or other navigational aid practical or effective. As a result, a new lighthouse was built at a lower elevation on the southern tip of Point Loma (at Pelican Point) and has operated continuously since 1891.

## STAFFING THE LIGHTHOUSE

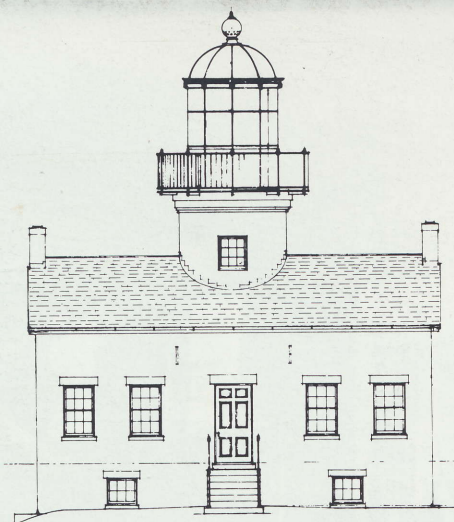
Eleven keepers served at the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. The first, James P. Keating, served just over four years. The last, Robert D. Israel, served for almost eighteen years, having been appointed assistant keeper two years before his promotion to keeper.

A third keeper, W.C. Price, stayed over six years, while the other eight remained on duty for much shorter periods, from a few months to a few years. The relatively high turnover of keepers was due, for the most part, to low pay. A principal keeper earned \$1,000 annually, while a first assistant keeper received \$650, and a second assistant \$500. During one period (1859-1861), the principal keeper's pay was reduced to \$800. Retaining a keeper was difficult enough, but it was even more difficult to keep assistants: 22 in 36 years.

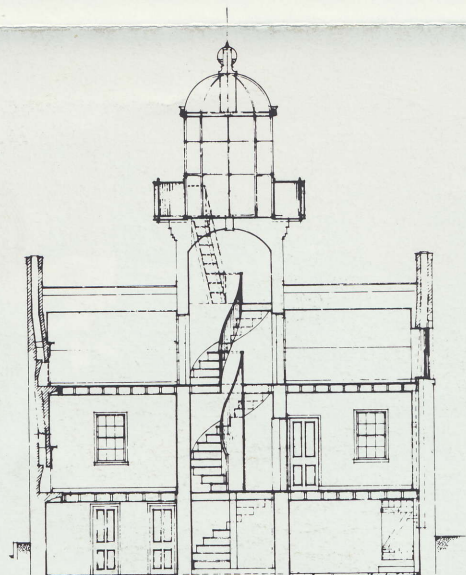
The duties of a keeper and assistant keeper were not difficult and were carefully spelled out in various instruction booklets. The work included cleaning and polishing the lens, cleaning and filling the lamp, removing all dust from the framework of the apparatus, and fitting and trimming the wicks. A linen apron was worn during this cleaning process to ensure the lens would not be scratched. The lighthouse staff also alternated watches and performed the most important function of all: keeping the light burning from sunset to sunrise.



*Third Order Lens, Fixed*



*Front Elevation*



*Interior Plan*

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## LIFE AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

Living at the lighthouse was a lonely existence, with some hardships. It was a ten mile trip to town by horse and wagon, over roads with many chuckholes. The keeper and his family had to deal with the wind, nearly always present, sometimes strong. Meager rainfall in the area rarely provided enough water for use at the lighthouse. Lonely hours were filled with reading, card games, crafts, and other relatively quiet pursuits. Mr. Israel's wife, Maria, attempted to grow a small garden of flowers and vegetables, but it met with only modest success. She also served for a time as assistant keeper in addition to her traditional duties of knitting, cooking, baking, and raising four children. In order to pass the time and earn extra money, she crafted wall hangings of shells gathered on the nearby beach. These were sold for ten dollars each. Two of Maria Israel's original wall hangings are currently on display in the lighthouse parlor.

Robert Israel moved his family to the new lighthouse location in 1891, and was the keeper there for nearly a year until his resignation, reportedly over a lack of water and a dispute involving lighthouse service costsaving

measures, which he felt were unsafe. But, perhaps at age 66, he was tiring of the job he had held for nearly 20 years.

## HISTORY AFTER 1891

After being taken out of service in 1891, the old lighthouse deteriorated rapidly due to vandalism and weathering. In 1913, the structure and surrounding one-half acre of land were set aside by President Wilson as Cabrillo National Monument, under the jurisdiction of the War Department. The plan for the site at that time was to demolish the structure and erect a 150 foot statue of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. That plan never materialized, and deterioration of the lighthouse continued until 1933, when the National Park Service assumed responsibility for the old tower. A restoration effort followed, and in 1935, a concessionaire moved into the building and became custodian of the Monument.

Because of military concerns about the light's strategic location overlooking the entrance to San Diego Bay, all visits to the Monument were halted during World War II, when the lighthouse building was used as a radio tower and later for storage. From 1935 to 1965, except for the period of World War II, the lighthouse functioned

as a visitor center, tea shop, bookstore, historic house, and Monument office. For a time, the lighthouse was listed in San Diego Chamber of Commerce literature as the "Old Spanish Lighthouse." This may have been a romantic portrayal, but was neither historically nor architecturally accurate. The closest connection to being Spanish was perhaps the tiles from the ruins of an old Spanish fort that were used in the cellar floorings.

## CURRENT INFORMATION

At present, the lighthouse building is open to the public during Monument hours. The tower is closed because of load limitation, and because a narrow, one-way stairway and ladder offer the only access to the lantern room. The four main rooms of the lighthouse are visible through glass windows in the entry hall and second floor landing areas. The lighthouse has been refurbished by park personnel with original and period pieces of the 1880s and is "...on display as a historic house whose object is to give the visitor an idea of the life and times of a nineteenth-century west coast lighthouse keeper and family."

Robert Clopine  
8/86

