

The Molokai Light

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
Kalaupapa National Historical Park



An Iconic Light

For over one-hundred years the Molokai Light has shone over the people of Kalaupapa peninsula. More than just a guide for ships Honolulu bound, the lighthouse inspires the art, music, and daily lives of the people living on the isolated peninsula. Today, the Molokai Light is as iconic of the Kalaupapa Settlement as the towering sea cliffs which isolate it from “Topside” Molokai.

Need for a Lighthouse

The Kalaupapa peninsula was an ideal location for a navigational aid because the land jutted out to sea for a considerable distance, nearly two miles, from the otherwise incurving and very steep north coast of Molokai.

The need for a primary seacoast light on north Molokai was emphasized in the Hawaiian Investigation report of 1902:

“The great bulk of the Pacific coast commerce passes through the channel between the islands of Oahu and Molokai. Hundreds of vessels now pass through this channel, and the number is rapidly increasing, and there are, with the single exception of the lighthouse at Diamond Head, no light-houses on the exposed points of either of these islands.”

Construction Begins

Hansen’s Disease was greatly feared by the public and many lawmakers opposed a lighthouse being so close to the settlement. Despite the many concerns, Congress appropriated \$60,000 to build the lighthouse in 1908. The lighthouse was completed on time and under budget by only \$23.00.

The tower is more than 120 feet tall with 189 steps, making it the tallest lighthouse in the Hawaiian Islands. The lantern and lens may have been some of the most significant cargo ever to arrive at Kalaupapa. Made by Chance Brothers and Company in England, both lamp and lens were ordered by the Lighthouse Board in September 1907.

The original lens is a second order Fresnel Lens. There are 26 sections, each weighing approximately 264 pounds. Each piece is hand cut, ground glass fitted at a precise angle into a section of the optic, and each section is fitted exactly into a framework of bronze. An engraved number on each section of the lens indicates the relation of pieces to each other.

The lighthouse lamp was lit for the first time thirty minutes before sunset on September 1, 1909 by Lightkeeper James Keanu. The Molokai Light shone more than 21 miles out to sea.



The second-order Fresnel Lens is six feet in diameter.



The Lonely Lightkeepers

Isolation is not unique for lighthouses and their keepers, but at Kalaupapa there were hundreds of Hansen's Disease patients living only a mile and a half away. However, contact with them was prohibited.

Light keepers and their families were strictly confined to the lighthouse area. Any time they, or their guests, arrived at or left the station permits and permissions from the Hawaiian Department of Health were required.

Many of the Hansen's Disease patients, who had also been isolated, knew the lightkeepers were the ones who felt lonely and longed for companionship. Patients would sometimes sneak over to talk to them. One patient-resident, Rose Lelepali, recalls, "they

were so lonesome we would sneak up to the light station and talk story with them. There were still great restrictions and we were not supposed to visit the light keepers, but the men were thankful for the company."

People from the settlement rode their horses or walked up to see the light tower; it was a place to go, something to do, a sight to share. As the tallest lighthouse in the islands it was a source of pride. Many men in the settlement were enthusiastic baseball players and formed several teams. Men from the lighthouse joined in the games.

Despite strict policies of separation, people living at Kalaupapa found ways to share the companionship and human contact needed by all people.

Kalaupapa's Light

Many patients enjoyed going to the airport at night to watch the light and bask in the feeling it created. For Rose Lelepali, the light was part of her life.

Each night it swept across the cliffs and black lava rocks from which she fished. It rhythmically lit up her bedroom, "like a full moon's beam." It was a light that had shown through the darkness of the settlement from the time Rose arrived as a patient. Rose recalls "To see that lens; to see the source of the light was something I will always remember."

Patient-resident Richard Marks once said: "Every one of our people... can remember this light looking over us... That light has been very special to the people here. It has been here longer than any living person has. You could always look out and see it sweeping across the cliff. It is the Kalaupapa Light."



A Kalaupapa resident stands at the base of the lighthouse.