

UNDER THE GABLES

Volume XXIV, Number 3

Winter 2021



A Beacon of Butter:

The Point Reyes Lighthouse

JACK MASON MUSEUM OF WEST MARIN HISTORY

Inverness Way at Park Avenue, Inverness Phone 415-669-1099 www.jackmasonmuseum.org

NEW EXHIBIT: The Point Reyes Lighthouse of 1870

Celebrate a belated 2020 landmark - the 150th anniversary of the Point Reyes Lighthouse, protecting the California coastline. The exhibit will provide a look at the extensive complex of structures that supported the keepers and their work to operate the lighthouse between 1870 and 1975. December 12, 2021 through February 2022. At this time, no opening reception planned.

In Memory of Barbara Mason McClellan

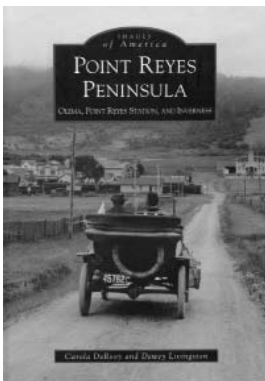
We received word that Barbara, our honorary Museum member since its inception, has died. The only child of Jack and Jean Mason, Barbara grew up in Inverness and the East Bay, where her father was an editor at the *Oakland Tribune*. Both her parents were children of West Marin dentists practicing here in the 1920s and '30s. Barbara was key in the creation of the new Inverness Library and Jack Mason Museum as she generously passed her parents' house, The Gables, to the Inverness Foundation for only a portion of its worth, and she allowed Jack's archive of West Marin history to go with it. Barbara was a big part of Point Reyes Station commerce, as generations of children and adults consider her tiny variety store, the Station House Gift Shop (she and her father had run the restaurant next door for about five years), to be a vital part of town. Thank you, Barbara!

RESEARCH IN THE MUSEUM ARCHIVES

The Archives are not open due to coronavirus. However, research questions can be emailed to research@jackmasonmuseum.org and we will do our best to help you with your questions and access to the needed information.

IS YOUR MEMBERSHIP UP TO DATE?

If you are not sure whether your dues (museum dues are separate from Inverness Foundation dues) are up to date, please leave a message on the Archives phone number 415-669-1099. We will check and get back to you. Dues and other contributions to the Museum are tax-deductible. You can renew your membership with a secure transaction on our website www.jackmasonmuseum.org. or by mailing your check to Box 94 Inverness, CA 94937.



"POINT REYES PENINSULA"

Copies signed by the authors, Carola DeRooy and Dewey Livingston are available at Museum Open Houses and from the Archives for only \$20.00. The proceeds benefit the Museum.

ON THE COVER:

The lighthouse was a popular tourist destination a century before the National Seashore. From the Smith Album, Jack Mason Museum.

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This edition of
Under the Gables
is written by Loretta Farley
and Dewey Livingston,
and designed by Dewey.

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A Beacon of Butter: **The Point Reyes Lighthouse**

By Loretta Farley

LAST YEAR SAW MANY milestones as the COVID pandemic gave us a new look at the world and changed many of our lifeways. And at one time, the Point Reyes Lighthouse, which celebrated its 150th anniversary on December 1, 2020, also gave a new look to the San Francisco Bay area and transformed the Point Reyes peninsula.

Gold!

The city of San Francisco was a quiet trading post, a sandy, fog bound and windswept peninsula once home to Ohlone people and then Spanish and Mexican soldiers and priests. The California mission system had pushed north to San Rafael and Marin County by 1817 and herds of mission cattle ranged out to Point Reyes, to be followed by Yankee ranchers. The abundant grass and mild climates of Point Reyes were ideal for cattle raising and milk production. As the ranch system developed, the gold rush advanced as hungry miners from Chile and China, the United States and Europe came through the port of San Francisco to seek their fortunes. The ranches of Point Reyes were ready to set the table. And the American government was interested in moving California gold back to Washington D.C.! Point Reyes ranches began packing butter and creating a secondary market in hogs for San Francisco markets.

In this mid-nineteenth century time, shipping was the main form of moving goods; small hay schooners and skiffs sailing across the bay as well as clipper ships coming around the Horn of South America with cargoes of miners. The entrance to the port of San Francisco was challenging; indeed, Spanish mariners had sailed past the foggy Gate



The Point Reyes Lighthouse in 1990. Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) photograph by Dewey Livingston.

for many years until it was finally seen by the overland expedition of Gaspar Portola in 1770. Offshore rock, winds, and low fog made for a treacherous entrance.

The Lighthouse Era begins

Lighthouses have two “jobs” – warning of dangerous ocean areas and providing guidance for navigation. They are always linked with fog signals; in the event the light may not be seen, the fog soundings can be timed and thus the mariner knows which location they are nearing. In addition, each lighthouse has a unique coloration or structure so the mariner can ‘daymark’ or determine their location from viewing the lighthouse architecture. Each lighthouse is designed to match the geography of an area – a tall tower on a flat coastline or a short tower on a raised headland area. Timing is everything: a mariner timed the flashes of light and the fog signal to determine locations.

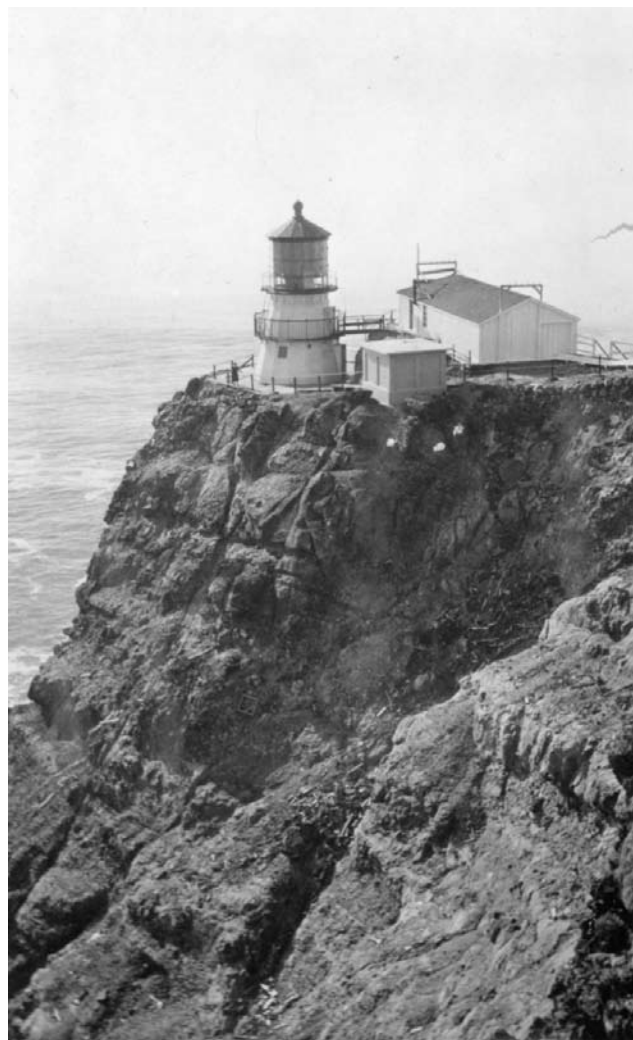
As California entered the Union in 1848, planning began for a system of lighthouses to warn of the rocky coasts dangers and guide ships safely into the port of San Francisco. Soon the bay was ringed with military reservations to watch over the growing population and the shipping lanes as tensions were raised by the American Civil War. The first western lighthouses were sited on military installations and funded by Congressional appropriations. Alcatraz Island saw the first west coast lighthouse in 1854, a tall spire reminiscent of the east coast towers followed by Point Bonita in 1855 on the Marin Headlands, a much smaller tower reached via tunnel and suspension bridge.

Point Bonita provided an excellent "blue print" for what NOT to do in building Point Reyes Lighthouse! It had been located on top of a cliff on the north side of the Golden gate to warn of the Potato Patch Shoals (named either for the mashed potato look of the water or the dumping of a cargo potatoes to get over the reef) and also had the first fog signal on the west coast, an Army cannon that had to be fired at regular intervals during foggy conditions. However, the low fogs obscured the light which could not be seen, and the long periods of foggy weather meant exhausted soldiers had to manually fire the cannons for hours and hours. The first Point Bonita Lighthouse was torn down and a site lower and thus under the fogs was selected to rebuild what is now the current location.

Point Reyes Lighthouse Begins Service

Construction of the first two west coast lighthouses were on public land but the site for Point Reyes was privately owned and thus it took some time to negotiate a sale and for Congress to appropriate funds. At that time, travel to the Headlands area came through Chimney Rock where supplies and materials were dropped off and then hauled over to the Lighthouse. Engineers had climbed along the rocky headland to find not only a lighthouse site but an even lower fog signal site. Thus a 314-step staircase was sculpted into the rock face of the Point Reyes Headlands to reach the Lighthouse.

Machinist Joseph Bien from San Francisco was hired to construct the three-tiered cast iron building. The work was delayed when parts of the interior light went missing in the shipping process. The Lighthouse, fog signal building and quarters



The Point Reyes Light Station as it appeared in the early 1920s. Courtesy Point Reyes National Seashore Archives.

for the four Lighthouse keepers and Weather Bureau were also built and the official first day of work for the Light was December 1, 1870. It would faithfully continue to 1975.

The Lighthouse

The three-level structure represented the most modern technology of its time. The Fresnel lens named for its French designer, Augustin Fresnel, was installed inside with an oil lamp, able to use 70-80 percent of light energy, a vast improvement over early Argand lamps. Those early devices were similar to mirrors where light was reflected outward with a range of about 10 miles. The Fresnel lens encapsulated the light source in a bell shape with a series of prisms and lenses to create a broad beam of light seen all the way to the curve of the horizon, 23 miles away. The most convenient source of lamp oil was pig fat or lard obtained

from local ranches though eventually the light was electrified. The fixed light source appeared to flash due to the rotation of the glass lens around it. The Fresnel lens was so effective that even during power failures Coast Guard operators placed a camp lantern inside and it was able to generate the same beam!

Keepers of the Light

Originally, four keepers maintained the lighthouse and operated the fog signal with an 8-hour shift, sometimes working longer during periods of dense fog when they shoveled coal into a furnace to boil water and emit bursts of steam. A Head Keeper worked with three assistants with some turnover as assistant keepers moved to different lighthouses and thus upward in the ranks. For some keepers, the duty was onerous while others enjoyed the solitude. Many of the keepers were retired merchant seamen who took on the job or "swallowed the anchor." Families accompanied some keepers with a variety of activities such as riding burlap sacks down the coal chutes and saddling up horses to ride to school at the nearby ranch! Keepers worked for the U.S. Life-Saving Service which eventually was folded into the modern Coast Guard we know today as guardians of the coasts. By the time the 1870 light was retired for a modern automated light only one keeper was on duty.

After 150 years, the Lighthouse mechanisms are



Baby son of the Weather Bureau Keeper Julius Smith, early 1920s. Smith Family Album, JMMWMH.

still operable though no longer called to service. As once the Lighthouse was the best and brightest technology of the nineteenth century, today the newest technology of GPS guides mariners across the ocean.



The Light Station's original keeper residence in 1870. Courtesy Point Reyes National Seashore Archives.

Point Reyes Lighthouse Renovated in 2019



POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE completed a fifteen-month rehabilitation project at the historic Point Reyes Lighthouse and reopened the site to visitors on November 8, 2019. The \$5.7 million dollar rehabilitation project was the most extensive rehabilitation done on this historic structure since it was commissioned in 1870.

This project was primarily funded by National Park Service funds that direct visitor use fees from throughout national park units to deferred maintenance and projects that provide a direct visitor benefit, as directed by the Federal Lands Recreation & Enhancement Act. This project took care of a substantial amount of deferred maintenance at one of the most highly visited areas in the park while preserving the park's most iconic structure.

Environmental conditions—such as salt air and spray, extreme wind, and moisture over the years—were the primary contributor to the lighthouse's deterioration. The lighthouse received an extensive "makeover" with improvements that included restoration of the lighthouse's lens and clockworks, replacement

of roofing, replacement of glazing assembly, repairing water and rust damage, blast cleaning of all cast and wrought iron components, and fresh paint. The rehabilitation improves the visitor experience by creating an accessible pathway from a new accessible parking area to the lighthouse overlook and visitor center and replacing fencing and railing throughout the entire area.

(Adapted from the PRNS website; NPS photos)



A time capsule was placed in the Point Reyes Lighthouse on August 15, 1929, by Chief Lighthouse Keeper Gerhardt Jaehne and second assistant H. W. Miller. The time capsule was uncovered during the Lighthouse Restoration Project in early October 2018.

A new time capsule was placed in the Point Reyes Lighthouse by the National Park Service on September 18, 2019.

The following is an excerpt from the history section of the National Park Service document *The History and Architecture of the Point Reyes Light Station* by Dewey Livingston and Dave Snow, 1990. The complete document, including footnotes not included here, can be found at local libraries.

K. THE KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT

The Point Reyes Light Station held a reputation for many years as one of the less desirable assignments on the west coast. A combination of wind, fog and darkness, the unrelenting fog signal, the immense set of stairs, not to mention isolation and poor wages, took a severe toll on the keepers and their assistants. Incidents of insanity, alcoholism, violence and insubordination plagued the station during its first half-century of operation. Not until modern conveniences arrived, such as better roads, transportation and electrical power, did the working conditions improve to any extent.

The station's staff included the principal keeper, usually a Lighthouse Service veteran, and three assistants, ranked as first, second and third assistant keepers. All were provided quarters, and many had families; until the Coast Guard took over the lighthouses, keepers were reportedly encouraged to come with families as a way to keep the men from boredom and isolation. Pay scales in 1887 ranged from \$800 per year for the principal keeper to \$600 for the first assistant and \$500 for the second and third assistants. Depending on the particular year, the service provided rations, although some reports complain of lack of government-provided rations. Marin County's historian pleaded for the keepers' well being in 1880:

When it is considered how these men have to live, far removed from society and neighbors, on a barren rock, subjected to the dangers and fatigues incident to their vocation, and the great responsibility which rests upon their shoulders, it would seem that the Government could well afford to be far more liberal in remunerating their services. The fate and destiny of valuable property and precious lives are in their hands

Seven years later the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented on a somewhat different situation:

This [wage] seems a mere pittance (in fact it is not lavish), but, considering all that the word "rations" includes, it might be worse. House rent and repairing, stove fixtures, fuel, coal-oil, beef, pork, flour, rice, beans, potatoes, onions, sugar, coffee and vinegar are among the articles furnished by Government, with a privilege of exchanging any of them in something else.



The isolated location of the Point Reyes Lighthouse proved difficult for many of the keepers through time. (JMMWMH)

Until 1929 the keepers worked double watches during the frequently foggy nights. With one man stationed at the light tower and the other manning the fog signal 100 feet below, both withstood battering winds and an unimaginable racket from the fog signal's constant blasts. A sleeping room provided a safe place to rest between watches or when the wind prevented passage up the stairs, an apparently common event, as mentioned in the *Chronicle*: "On the left [of the stairway] a guard rail insures comparative safety to the keepers, who, as it is in heavy gales, have occasionally to prostrate themselves during the passage, making the best of their way between gusts, so furious is the sweep of the wind."

Day-to-day life at the station consisted of tedious tasks such as polishing the lens, cleaning and painting, repair of facilities and instruments, or making trips to the landing, post office or local ranch for supplies. Depending on the disciplinary character of the principal keeper, the work could be performed under pressure or barely at all. As evidenced in the keepers log of 1872-1896, some keepers let the station fall into disrepair while others enforced a stricter work ethic and pushed their crews to make the place shine. For instance, when John C. Ryan took over the station in January 1888, he found it to be in extremely poor condition and put his assistants to work cleaning it up. Ryan crowded the keepers log with lists of tasks performed, many of which were cosmetic; the crew appeared to have worked harder than any other time in the light station's history. Apparently he pushed a bit too hard, as in 1889 one assistant went "crazy" and was taken to the authorities at



Hundreds of wooden stairs led to the Point Reyes Lighthouse (above, circa 1950) until they were replaced in 1960. At right, maintaining the light and facilities was a full time job, whatever the weather. Top photo by M. Woodbridge Williams, JMMWMH; right photo courtesy of Point Reyes National Seashore Archives.



Olema; this incident was followed by Ryan's dismissal from the service.

The life of a keeper figured in romantic interpretations worldwide during the pioneer era of the job. Point Reyes received fame as one of the remote outposts on the California coast, and although isolated, close enough to a big city to be visited and reported on. The *Chronicle's* writer in 1887 found himself fascinated with the personal aspects at Point Reyes:

It is a lonely vigil, disposing one to serious meditation. The various ways in which the different watchers beguile their time, the books they read, the impressions made upon them by the weird and awful nature of their surroundings, are matters of interest to the philosopher. The first assistant has embodied his emotions in verse. It was the writer's good fortune to hear these poems read by their author under peculiarly favorable circumstances, and to the little group of listeners their quaint charm will long remain an impressive memory inseparable from the scene.

Principal keeper E.G. Chamberlain, obviously depressed but in a poetic mood, wrote in the keepers log in September of 1885, "Fog fog and nothing but fog / had no mail

since 9th instant / getting short of provisions," and then quoted English poet William Cowper:

O solitude where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face,
Better dwell in the midst of alarms
Than reign in this horrible place.
Society friendship to love
Divinely bestowed upon man,
O had I the wings of a dove,
How soon would I taste you again.

While some keepers found poetic inspiration at the light station, others found loneliness, boredom and claustrophobia. Problems with alcoholism plagued the station, as described by the *Chronicle* writer:

Another local celebrity, in his way, was a late (and now happily deposed) keeper, notorious for his love of the flowing bowl. It is said that he even regaled himself, when out of whisky, with the alcohol furnished for cleaning lamps, and a familiar sight to the ranchman was this genial gentleman lying dead drunk by the roadside, while his horse, attached to the lighthouse wagon, grazed at will over the country. It was no unusual thing for him to be drunk for days at his station.

Apparently the fog signal caused most of the problems to keepers at the station. The signal building lay some 100 feet in elevation below the light, or another several hundred steps down the cliff. The steam apparatus was quirky and dangerous, requiring a great deal of maintenance and worry. The signal itself, whether siren or steam whistle, brought on numerous staff problems. The 1887 *Chronicle* article considered that the incessant sirens made "night and day alike hideous . . . the blast alone, which lasts five seconds and recurs every seventy seconds, is enough to



The fog signal, located hundreds of steps below the light tower, caused many a man to question what he was doing in this place. Jack Mason Museum photo.

drive any ordinary man mad, and must, it seems, exert a wearing effect upon even the hardened nerves of a keeper." The writer noted that after 176 hours of continuous operation, "the jaded attendants looked as if they had been on a protracted spree."

These difficulties wore on all the keepers, but no doubt brought the most problems to the principal keeper. Toogood wrote:

Keepers came and went frequently at Point Reyes light station during the nineteenth century, reflecting the nearly constant personnel problems plaguing that lonely spot. In March 1876 tensions flared between the principal keeper, William Wadsworth, and his second and third assistant keepers, who threatened him with violent language when he tried to put them on road repair. In 1875, however, Wadsworth had experienced his greatest trials with third assistant J. D. Parker, who threatened the safety of many navigators with his insubordination and neglectful duty. According to the keeper, Parker once shut down the fog signal, reporting clear weather when the Point was socked in with fog. Several times Parker failed to start the fog signal for hours after the fog rolled in, or didn't show up for his watch, or was late in reporting to duty. On one occasion Parker blew the fog whistle with little steam, only sounding it on five to fifteen minute intervals, so that when a steamboat signaled, he was unable to respond, although the station had plenty of water to operate the whistles at full pressure. On another occasion, he tampered with the fog signals' adjustments without authority, and on a consistent basis he refused to start his duty at the lighthouse one-half hour before sundown, although instructed several times to do so by keeper Wadsworth. Some days Parker would disappear from the station without explanation, and then return drunk, unable to go on watch. On Christmas eve, 1875, Parker attended a ball at a neighboring ranch, where he apparently burst into drunken song to entertain the guests, and to Keeper Wadsworth's disgust, vomited in front of the company.

Lighthouse personnel did have various diversions, although most required a ride of more than an hour distant. The towns of Olema and Nicasio held regular balls, which were sometimes attended by keepers. One assistant, John McFarland, attended many balls and visited the local towns and ranches frequently during the mid-1870s, according to the keepers log; he often stayed away for days, apparently with the blessing of his superior. Eventually the keeper noted in the log: "Grave charges were preferred against John A.F. McFarland by Misses Vienna Jewell and Fannie Perham." McFarland was suspended but reinstated after the charges were tabled. The nature of Mr. McFarland's transgressions will perhaps never be known; he soon left to take charge of the Point Montara lighthouse.

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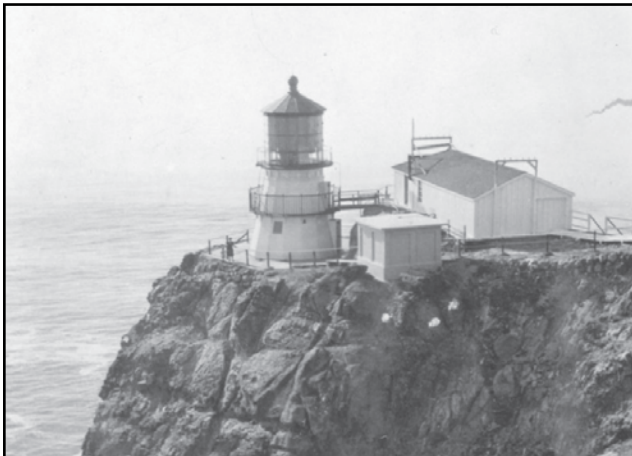
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www.invernessassociation.org

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**The Point Reyes
Lighthouse**

The exhibit can be enjoyed
during Inverness Library
hours.