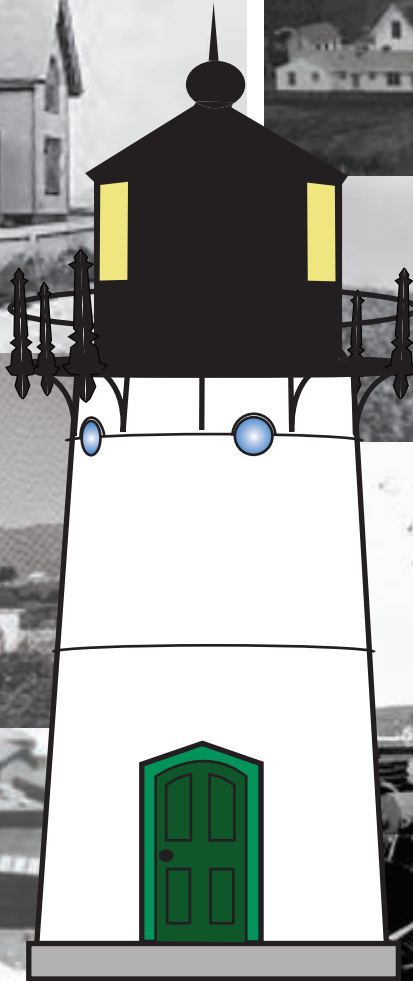
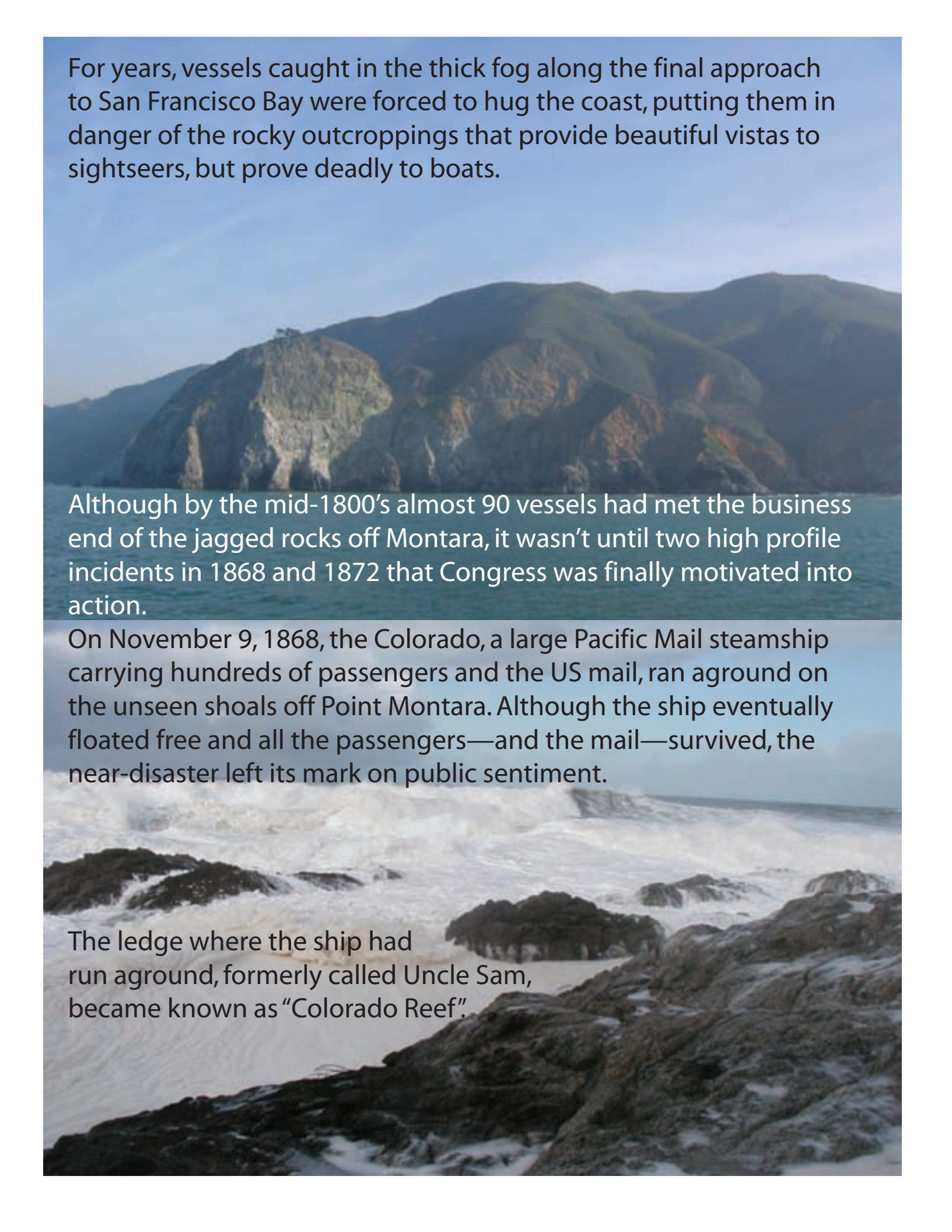


# Point Montara Lighthouse History





For years, vessels caught in the thick fog along the final approach to San Francisco Bay were forced to hug the coast, putting them in danger of the rocky outcroppings that provide beautiful vistas to sightseers, but prove deadly to boats.

Although by the mid-1800's almost 90 vessels had met the business end of the jagged rocks off Montara, it wasn't until two high profile incidents in 1868 and 1872 that Congress was finally motivated into action.

On November 9, 1868, the Colorado, a large Pacific Mail steamship carrying hundreds of passengers and the US mail, ran aground on the unseen shoals off Point Montara. Although the ship eventually floated free and all the passengers—and the mail—survived, the near-disaster left its mark on public sentiment.

The ledge where the ship had run aground, formerly called Uncle Sam, became known as "Colorado Reef".

Four years later another ship caught on Colorado Reef was not as lucky. On October 17, 1872, the British sailing ship *Aculeo* collided with the rocks after being lost for more than three days in blinding fog. As the ship cracked open and filled with water, the crew made its escape on lifeboats. For over a week, the abandoned ship was pounded by waves before a salvage crew could get to it.



The next March, Congress appropriated \$15,000 for a fog signal at Point Montara, to be positioned at the end of a rocky bluff 70 feet above the ocean. Earlier signals had been installed to the south, at Ano Nuevo, and to the north at Yerba Buena Island.

Operational March 1, 1875, the signal was a 12-inch steam whistle whose five-second blast could be heard up to 15 miles away.

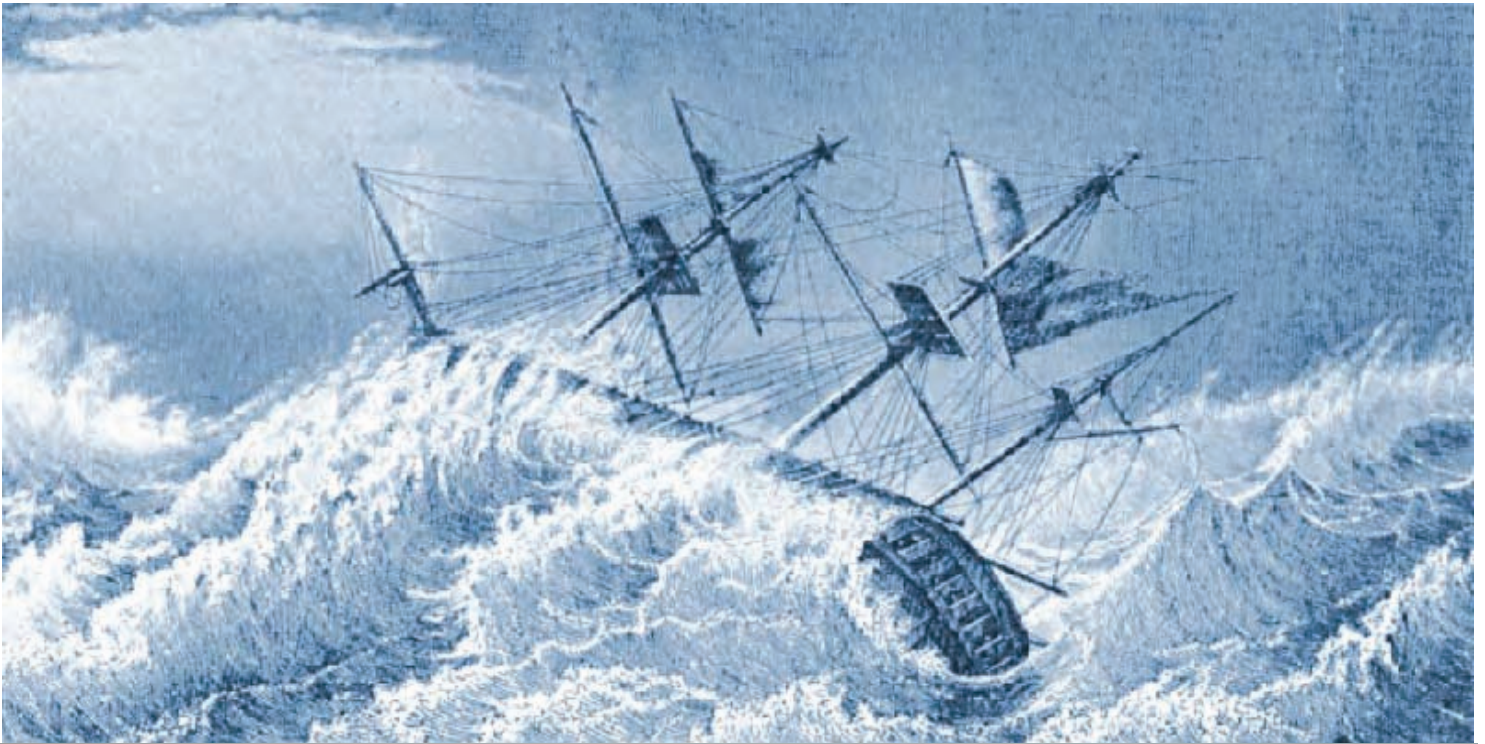
The whistle didn't come cheap—it took between 150,000 and 200,000 pounds of coal to fuel it every year, depending on the number of foggy days.



At the same time a two-story keeper's dwelling was built in the Victorian Gothic style common to the day and reminiscent of many New England keeper's dwellings.

1875:

March 1: 12" steam signal began operation- 5 second blast every 30 seconds  
Water: was forced from the creek by hydraulic ram to the signal house  
to a reservoir that held 2,000 gallons.



However, the fog signal wasn't enough to prevent continuing disasters along that stretch of coast. Four years to the day after the Aculeo was impaled on Colorado Reef, a three-masted Welsh ship, Rydal Hall, crashed in the fog onto Frenchman's Reef. Only 21 members of the 30-man crew survived, and none of the cargo did. Salvage was impossible—the broken ship languished almost a month on the rocks before cracking apart, meanwhile spilling tons of coal into the water and onto the beach. Further wrecks of ships carrying railroad iron and lumber littered the rocky coast as more vessels met their ends against the rocks.

The captain of one schooner, the Ada May, mistook the Montara fog signal for the one at Point Bonita to the north, and thought he was entering the Golden Gate when he pummeled onto the rocks at Montara.

1880:

Construction: A duplicate signal was added. The Fog Signal Building was enlarged, machinery repaired, and both boilers were covered in asbestos.

1884:

Construction: A barn and stable were built



1887:

Construction: A new type of a return-flue boiler was set up and connected with the old engine, after which the steam-drum and pipes were covered with felting. The old condemned boiler was sold at auction. During last January, while the new signal was in operation, the whistle-bell was badly cracked and became useless. A new one was cast in San Francisco and went to the station. Twice during the year the air-chamber of the hydraulic ram, by which the station is supplied with water, burst, and new ones with the necessary belts and washers were supplied.

1888: A new boiler was connected with the fog-signal apparatus. The fog-signal shed was enlarged. A new out-house was built and a subdivision fence was put in. The 12-inch steam whistle was in operation about 933 hours, consuming 197,957 pounds of coal.

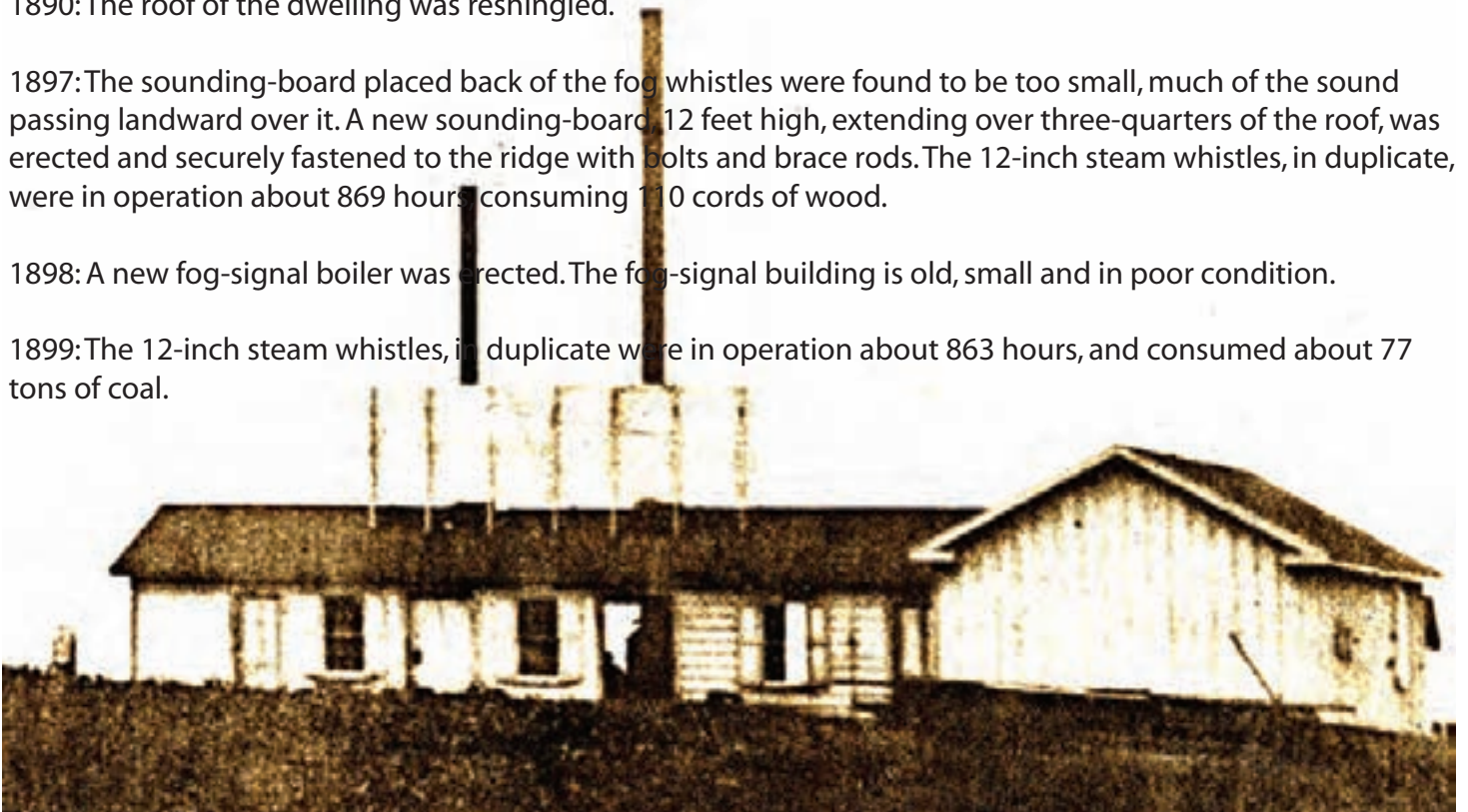
1889: The worn-out hydraulic ram was replaced by a new one.

1890: The roof of the dwelling was reshingled.

1897: The sounding-board placed back of the fog whistles were found to be too small, much of the sound passing landward over it. A new sounding-board, 12 feet high, extending over three-quarters of the roof, was erected and securely fastened to the ridge with bolts and brace rods. The 12-inch steam whistles, in duplicate, were in operation about 869 hours, consuming 110 cords of wood.

1898: A new fog-signal boiler was erected. The fog-signal building is old, small and in poor condition.

1899: The 12-inch steam whistles, in duplicate were in operation about 863 hours, and consumed about 77 tons of coal.



In 1900, the government installed a kerosene lantern on a post near the fog whistle, and the red beam could be seen for twelve miles. Two years later, the original fog signal was replaced by a one and a half story, wood-framed structure. Its design was typical of other fog-signal buildings of the period, and, except for a few minor cosmetic changes, it looks the same today as it did when it was built.



1900: A fixed red post lantern, with a range of 12 miles, was installed. The post lantern was a minor light about one foot in diameter and two feet high. It was powered by kerosene. The light was first shown November 26, 1900. The addition of this light enabled Point Montara to be termed a light station although it was still mainly a fog signal station with a minor light. To improve and increase the water supply, a new hydraulic ram was purchased and the old one was taken down and repaired and both were set up on masonry foundations. A frame structure covered with shingles was built, enclosing both tanks to protect them from the weather. Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 1,035 hours and consumed 93 tons of coal.

1901: Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 1,128 hours and consumed 11 tons of coal and 84 cords of wood.

1902: The fog-signal building, being old and dilapidated, was pulled down and rebuilt with concrete foundations. A new coal house was also built. A sewer of vitrified pipe about 300 feet long was laid from the dwelling to the face of the bluff. An iron-pipe flagstaff was erected.

1904: Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 939 hours and consumed 13 tons of coal and 101 cords of wood.

1905: A new fog-signal boiler replaced the old one. Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 538 hours and consumed 37 cords of wood.

1906: Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 735 hours and consumed 107 cords of wood.

1907: Duplicate 12-inch steam whistles were in operation 1,544 hours and consumed 152 cords of wood. A 15,000 gallon wood water tank was installed.



Finally, in 1914, the kerosene lantern was upgraded to a fourth-order Fresnel lens set atop a wooden framework tower. Its 1700 candlepower light flashed in 2 ½ second intervals. The candlepower was increased to 25,000 in 1919,



1912: Lamp changed from oil wick to incandescent oil vapor lamp (IOV).

1914: A fourth order Fresnel lens was installed in a wooden pyramid tower. The light displayed an occulting white characteristic (2.5 second light-2.5 second eclipse) and had 1,700 candle power. Point Montara was now, truly, a lighthouse. Fresnel lenses were invented by the Frenchman Augustine Fresnel in 1822 and until the turn of the century were mainly manufactured in France. They were classed by order, first through sixth. The first order was the largest, some 6 feet in diameter and over 14 feet high.

1916: The candlepower was increased to 2,900. The light could be seen 14 miles at sea.

1919: The usual track of steamers bound to and from San Francisco along this part of the coast during a fog stay between 3 and 4 miles off the station. This station is one of the most important in the approach to SF Harbor. It therefore became necessary to install a more efficient fog-signal apparatus and, owing to its importance as a coast light, the efficiency of the light was increased by changing from incandescent oil-vapor to electric incandescence. A 500-watt, 120 volt, type C, Mazda light was installed increasing candlepower from 2,900 to 25,000.



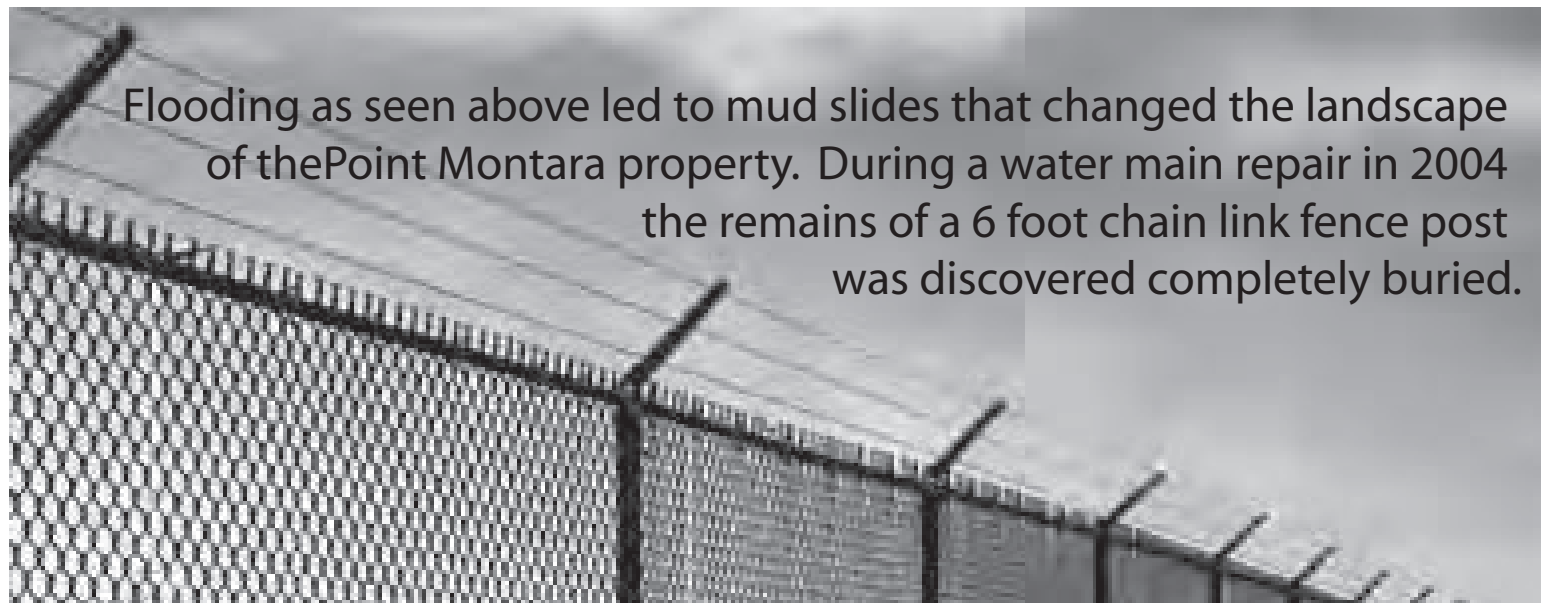


Between 1914 - 1920 the stretch of Ocean Shore railroad tracks between 14th and 16th street was washed out by a flooded Montara Creek.



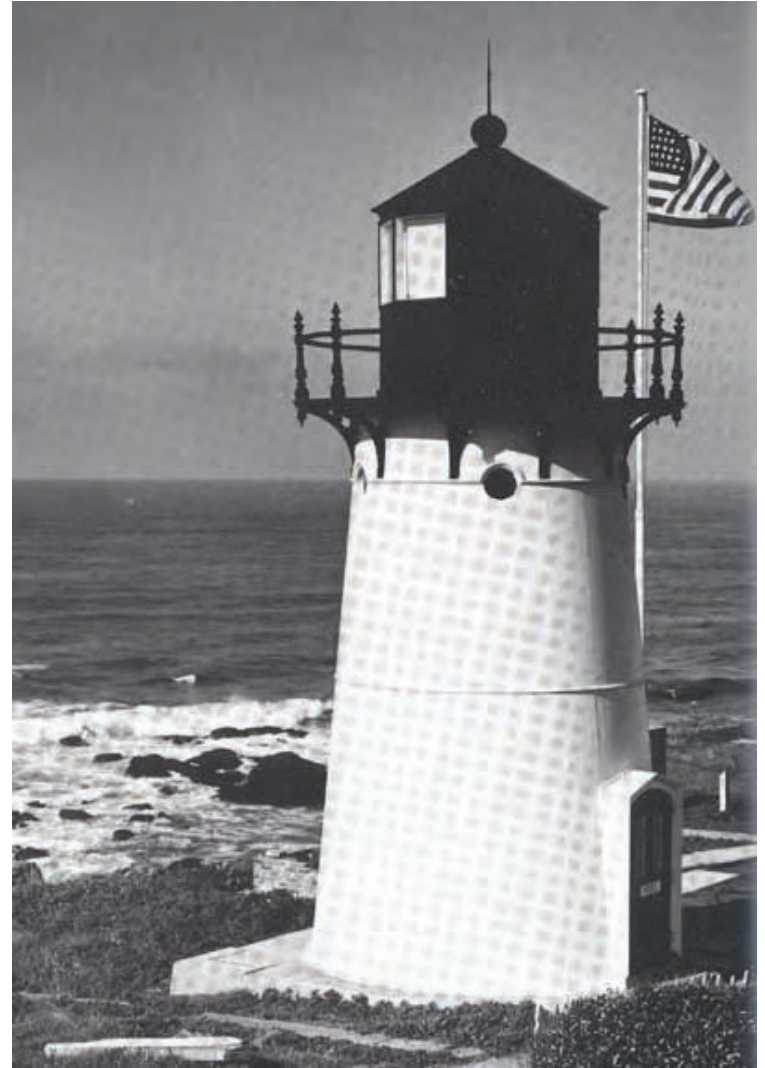
Courtesy of Frank Bezek

from Montara A Pictorial History by Michael Smookler



Flooding as seen above led to mud slides that changed the landscape of the Point Montara property. During a water main repair in 2004 the remains of a 6 foot chain link fence post was discovered completely buried.

The biggest change came in 1928 with the installation of a new lighthouse tower. While its conical shape is similar to other California lighthouses, the bolted, metal-sided frame is unique in the state. In 2008 an explanation for the tower's individuality came to light with the discovery of it's origins.



The 1928 Point Montara Lighthouse tower first saw service from 1881 to 1922 at Mayo Beach on Cape Cod. For years, it was believed that the Mayo Beach tower had been destroyed after the light was discontinued in 1922, but while conducting research for a lighthouse book, Colleen MacNeney came across a 1928 photograph of a tower in Yerba Buena, California with the following inscription: "This tower formerly used at Mayo Beach, 2d District." This discovery prompted MacNeney to dig deeper, and she eventually found correspondence in the National Archives that proved that between 1922 and 1928 the Mayo Beach tower made it's way from Massachusetts to Yerba Buena Island and then to Point Montara. Standing only 30 feet high, the lighthouse is short by most standards, but good for keeping the beam beneath the fog.

## The Tale of the Tower

The first lighthouse at the eastern end of Mayo's Beach, Wellfleet, MA consisted of a short wooden tower and octagonal lantern on the roof of a brick dwelling.



*The keeper complained that "The very wretched manner in which the house was built renders it almost uninhabitable; the walls always and the roof continually leaky."*

*...the house, which had no foundation, was set two feet below the surface of the beach. This caused the cellar to be continually flooded with seawater.*

A new cast iron tower and brick and clapboard keeper's house were built in 1881, and the old buildings were removed.

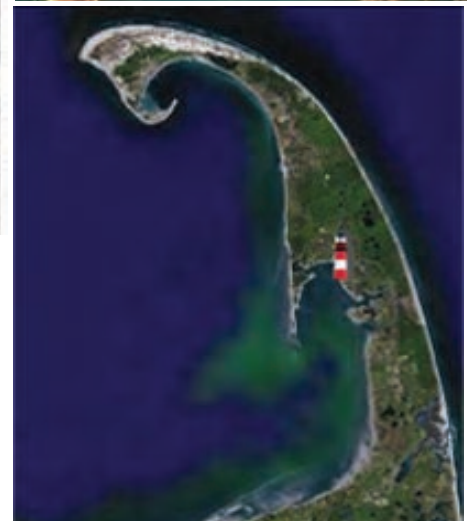
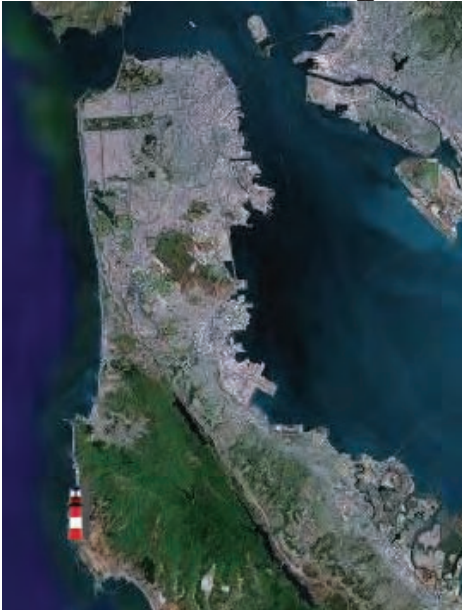


The kerosene-fueled lighthouse remained in service until it was discontinued on March 10, 1922.

The light station property was sold at auction on August 1, 1923, to Capt. Harry Capron. For many years, the general belief was that the lighthouse was destroyed after it was discontinued.



As it turns out, the tower somehow made its way 3000 miles to California between 1923 and 1928, where it replaced an earlier (1914) tower at Point Montara Light Station. It remains in use today.



The house and the 1907 oil house remain at Mayo's Beach, kept in pristine condition by the present owners. If you visit, be sure to respect the privacy of the owners.

When we travel and scan archival lighthouse photos at various locations, including the files of the Coast Guard Historian's Office, we waste a lot of time showing each other wonderful photos of lighthouses of the past. But none of us see all the photos as we are busy scanning, filing, etc. Colleen scanned the photo that started all of this but no one looked at it closely until late Fall, when Bob was working on a "flipbook" of "Lighthouses of California". He was puzzled by the writing on the photo and called me. When I saw it I said: "Oh my gosh"! I knew we had found a fact that had been lost to historians.

As far as anyone knew, the Mayo's Beach, Mass. Lighthouse had been destroyed and the Point Montara Cal. Lighthouse had been newly built with no connection, but this photo said they were one and the same. Colleen was headed to D.C. in Jan. to "catsit" for another researcher and we asked her to check the facts at the Coast Guard and the National Archives.

Below is the story she sent "Lighthouse Digest"  
Travels with The Lighthouse People (or Adventures in Cat Sitting)  
By Colleen MacNeney

The Lighthouse People, Bob and Sandra Shanklin, are my parents. Since they've started their quest to digitize and secure any and all archival lighthouse photos in the United States, I have volunteered to join them when I can. On one journey last year to the U.S. Coast Guard Historian's office in Washington D.C., unbeknownst to me, we stumbled upon an interesting notation on a photograph I was scanning. The photograph was in the Point Montara, California, Lighthouse file. It was a black and white photo, showing an old tower in need of repair with this handwritten notation underneath it: "This tower formerly used at Mayo Beach, 2d District.", and dated "1928" from the back. I thought it was an interesting old photograph. However after we got home, Bob and Sandra thought this notation odd as they had never heard of this bit of information before. So on my next adventure to Washington D.C., my new quest was to find out if indeed the Point Montara, CA. Lighthouse came from Mayo's Beach, MA. I was there to be a companion for Kadisa, the cat who lives with Lighthouse Authors/Researchers Candace and Mary Louise Clifford, but of course she didn't mind if I did some research during the day. Before going back to the Coast Guard to see the photo again, being iced in for several days, I looked at all the information I could find on various Lighthouse sites. Everything I found about the Point Montara Lighthouse said it was a new tower that was built in 1928. A 30' high, conical, cast iron tower. What I found about Mayo's Beach Lighthouse was that it was a 30' high conical cast iron tower that was discontinued in 1922, sold at auction in 1923, and the tower was torn down or removed in 1939.

This information did not indicate that the notation on the suspect photo was correct - the dates did not match. So off I went back to the Coast Guard Historian's Office to revisit said photograph. Upon pulling the Point Montara file again, I found the photograph had these additional quotations: "See 18th's letter of 4-27-28 (493-E)", "Filed 5-17-28", and on the back "Cast iron tower for Pt. Montara," and stamped "Lighthouse Superintendent Dec 17 1927 Sanfrancisco". Hmmm, very interesting!

Next I searched through the Bulletins of the Lighthouse Bureau and the Annual Reports from 1921 to 1930, looking for any information or cost reports regarding the transfer of the tower from Mayo's Point to Point Montara, or the cost of building the new Point Montara Lighthouse. Nothing! No cost reports, no annual reports, no notations in the bulletins! So after consulting with Kadisa (the researcher cat), I was off to The National Archives to see if I could find the letter that the photograph notations referred to and anything else that would prove or disprove the transfer. By now it was my last day in town, and the Clifford's were back from their own adventure. Thank goodness I ran into Candace at the Archives! It's very confusing trying to figure out what documents you want, when the pull times are, rules, etc., so she helped me immensely by pointing me in the right directions. I was able to get three pull times and six groups of document files. (A little note aside: As I was looking through books, web sites, photographs, and documents, I found three different ways to write Mayos Beach. I had to know, is it "Mayo Beach," "Mayos Beach," or "Mayo's Beach"? According to the document at the National Archives, "STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS, File No. 45, TITLE PAPERS, OF Mayo's Beach..." It is Mayo's Beach.)

Now back to my main paper chase:

- Site files (1790-1939), nothing.
- Lighthouse Station Logs (1872-1947), nothing.
- Clippings from annual reports (1800-1939), nothing.
- Bulletins of the Lighthouse Bureau (1912-1939), nothing.
- Lighthouse Station Logs (1872-1947), nothing.

Where is the information I need? Then finally, STEE-RIKE!  
In Correspondence files (1911-1939), yes!!!

The elusive letter "493-E" noted on the original photograph with an attached note.

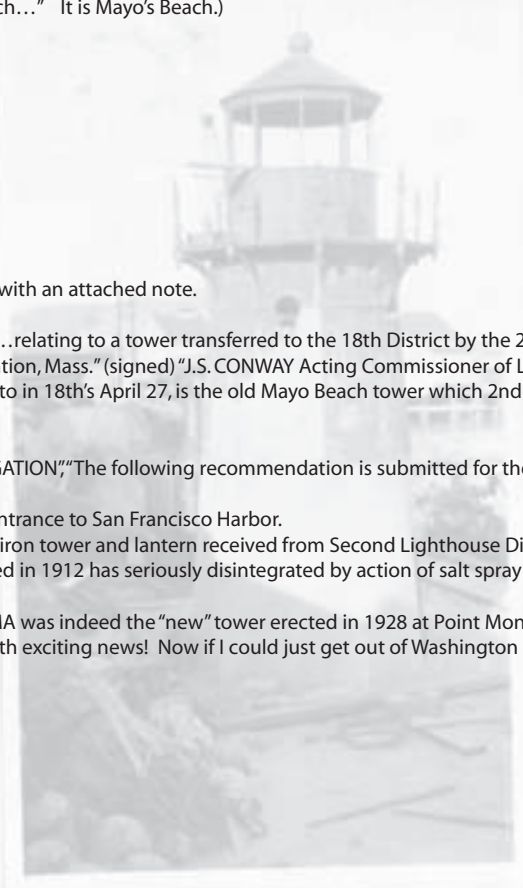
493-E: "Plans and specs. for standard towers," "May 5, 1928," "...relating to a tower transferred to the 18th District by the 2d Superintendent.", "It appears that the tower is the one which was formerly in service at Mayo Beach Beach Lightstation, Mass." (signed) "J.S. CONWAY Acting Commissioner of Lighthouses"  
Attached handwritten note: "May 4/28," "The tower referred to in 18th's April 27, is the old Mayo Beach tower which 2nd transferred to here in 1925." (cannot read signed initials)  
And then one more bit of proof!

Correspondence 493-A:

"May 25th, 1928;" "RECOMMENDATION AS TO AIDS TO NAVIGATION;" "The following recommendation is submitted for the consideration of the Bureau:

1. Name of aid: Point Montara Light Station
2. Locality: Seacoast, Pacific Coast, California; adjacent to entrance to San Francisco Harbor.
3. Proposed action: Erect cast iron tower and lantern (cast iron tower and lantern received from Second Lighthouse District in June 1925, transferred as Surplus Property).
4. Necessity: The present light structural steel tower erected in 1912 has seriously disintegrated by action of salt spray so that is impracticable to keep in proper state of repair."

SCORE!!! Proof positive that the tower from Mayo's Beach, MA was indeed the "new" tower erected in 1928 at Point Montara, CA.  
Kadisa was very happy for me, and I could now go home with exciting news! Now if I could just get out of Washington D.C. before the next ice storm...  
My name is Colleen, and I'm a Lighthouse People, too.

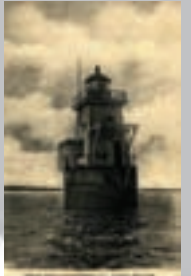


*This tower formerly used at Mayo Beach,  
2d District.*

*Filed 5-17-28*

*See 18's letter of 4-27-28 (493-E)*

# The Paper Trail



Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse, NY

STATE OF Massachusetts.  
 Title Papers  
 May's Beach, in Middlesex County, 1825  
 by Bill from Justice Taylor who says 22 Sept 1857, &c.

493A  
 RECEIPT FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE LIGHT HOUSE  
 San Francisco, Calif., May 23rd 1925  
 The following recommendations are submitted for the consideration of the Bureau:  
 1. Name of aid: Point Moriera Light Station  
 2. Locality: Seacoast, Pacific Coast, California; adjacent to entrance to San Francisco Harbor.  
 3. Proposed action: Erect east iron tower and lantern (east iron tower and lantern received from Salsout Lighthouse District in June 1925, transferred as Surplus Property).  
 4. Necessity: The present light structural steel tower erected in 1912 has seriously disintegrated by action of salt spray so that it is impracticable to keep up in proper state of repair.  
 5. Total estimated cost: \$1075.00 exclusive of cost east of tower.  
 6. Appropriation: General Expenses, Lighthouses Service, 1925.  
 7. Payment: To be made from funds allotted.  
 8. Maintenance estimated, annual cost: No change.  
 9. Authority is also requested to purchase the material needed, and not now on hand, of an estimated cost of \$ 394.00, in accordance with law and regulations, and to do the work by contract without bond, \$ ..... hired labor and depot fees \$ 481.00; crew of vessel \$ ..... This method of performance being considered the cheapest and most advantageous in the service.  
 10. The reasons for requesting authority to do this work partly or wholly by hired labor rather than contract are: This station, while contiguous to San Francisco, is a difficult station to approach on account of road going over two ridges of mountains and it is more advantageous and economical to the government to have the work done by field foremen and small field party.  
 11. Additional description and information: The present light structural steel tower and fourth order lantern erected in 1912 is seriously disintegrating so that it is impossible to keep the tower weather tight and is beyond economical repair. Twenty-foot, cylindrical, sectional east iron tower and 18-sided fourth order east iron lantern and parapet received from Second Lighthouse District in June 1925 through Transfer of Surplus Property, has been cleaned, fitted and delivered to site of work on low concrete foundation. All materials for concrete foundation wall and for the completion of the assembly of tower, such as plate glass, lantern and other sundry items, have been hauled to the station and a small field party is now at the station taking down the old tower, putting concrete ring foundation, wall and assembling the east iron sectional tower and lantern in same location, as the old lantern. The old lantern has been temporarily placed on skids and pushed just westward of its former location and present light will be maintained and when new tower has been erected, the present lens glasswork and pedestal will be transferred to lantern of new tower.

186  
 1360  
 - The tower referred to in 1875  
 Apr 27, is the old Beacon Point  
 tower which was transferred to San  
 Francisco in 1875. It was made from etc.  
 etc. The last drawing showing the  
 design for which is attached.  
 I can not locate this drawing.  
 Group which is 18 1/2 inches, 4 pages  
 of new format.  
 - Round design 3 1/2 to 4 inches of the  
 same form as the one of 1875  
 etc. etc. etc.



Mayo's Beach Lighthouse, MA  
 tower removed 1923 transferred  
 in 1925.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
 BUREAU OF LIGHTHOUSES  
 Washington, D.C.  
 JUN 1 1925  
 Approved by the Superintendent of Lighthouses, approved as recommended, except as noted. You will do the work and report its status, until completed, in your Monthly Report of Operations.  
 L. A. PLUMMER  
 Commissioner



Great Beds Light Station, NJ

493E  
 DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
 BUREAU OF LIGHTHOUSES  
 Washington, D.C.  
 MAY 3, 1925  
 Superintendent of Lighthouses,  
 States Island, New York.  
 1. You will find a letter submitted, dated April 27, 1925, from the Superintendent of the 18th Lighthouse District, and its enclosure, a photograph, relating to a tower transferred to the 18th District by the 2d Superintendent.  
 2. It appears that the tower is the one which was formerly in service at May's Beach Light Station, Mass., and is from the State of the lower formerly in use at Cold Spring Light Station, N. Y., which in turn may have been based on the plans for Great Beds Light Station, N. Y.  
 3. If you have the detailed drawings or tracings from which the tower was made, the Bureau requests that you send two sets thereof to this office, and specifications thereon. The return of the photograph is requested.  
 L. S. CONROY  
 Acting Commissioner of Lighthouses.  
 Office, Superintendent of Lighthouses,  
 States Island, N. Y., May 11, 1925.  
 2. Enclosed are blueprints in duplicate of tracing sheet and this office is of the opinion that the light shown at this location is the same one referred to in Bureau's letter. The only drawing of this tower was an old paper drawing and a tracing was made of same so that the office could be furnished to the Bureau.  
 3. It may be stated that towers of this type are now in use at Four Mile Point and Seal's Point. Also there is one of this type at Isle La Motte.



Maxfield Point Lighthouse, VT  
 est. 1879 Tower destroyed  
 sometime after 1917

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Four Mile Point Lighthouse, NY  
 1880 Tower discontinued 1928



Isle La Motte Lighthouse, VT built 1880



Ten Pound Island Lighthouse, MA  
 built 1881

Point Montara saw some changes during World War II, when it was used to house military units, including the K-9 Corps and a mobile artillery unit. Very little information is available about the Anti Aircraft Training Center at Point Montara.





This pre-1960s overview shows how almost all the buildings erected during World War II had been removed. Around 1960-61 a new duplex facility was built between the original keeper's house and the Fog Signal Building.





The new building was barely used for a decade when the entire station was automated and the buildings were abandoned. In 1970, the fog horn was replaced by an off-shore horn buoy.

1963: The 4th order optic was replaced by the present aero beacon (DCB 10) with a flashing white characteristic every 5 seconds.

Station automated.



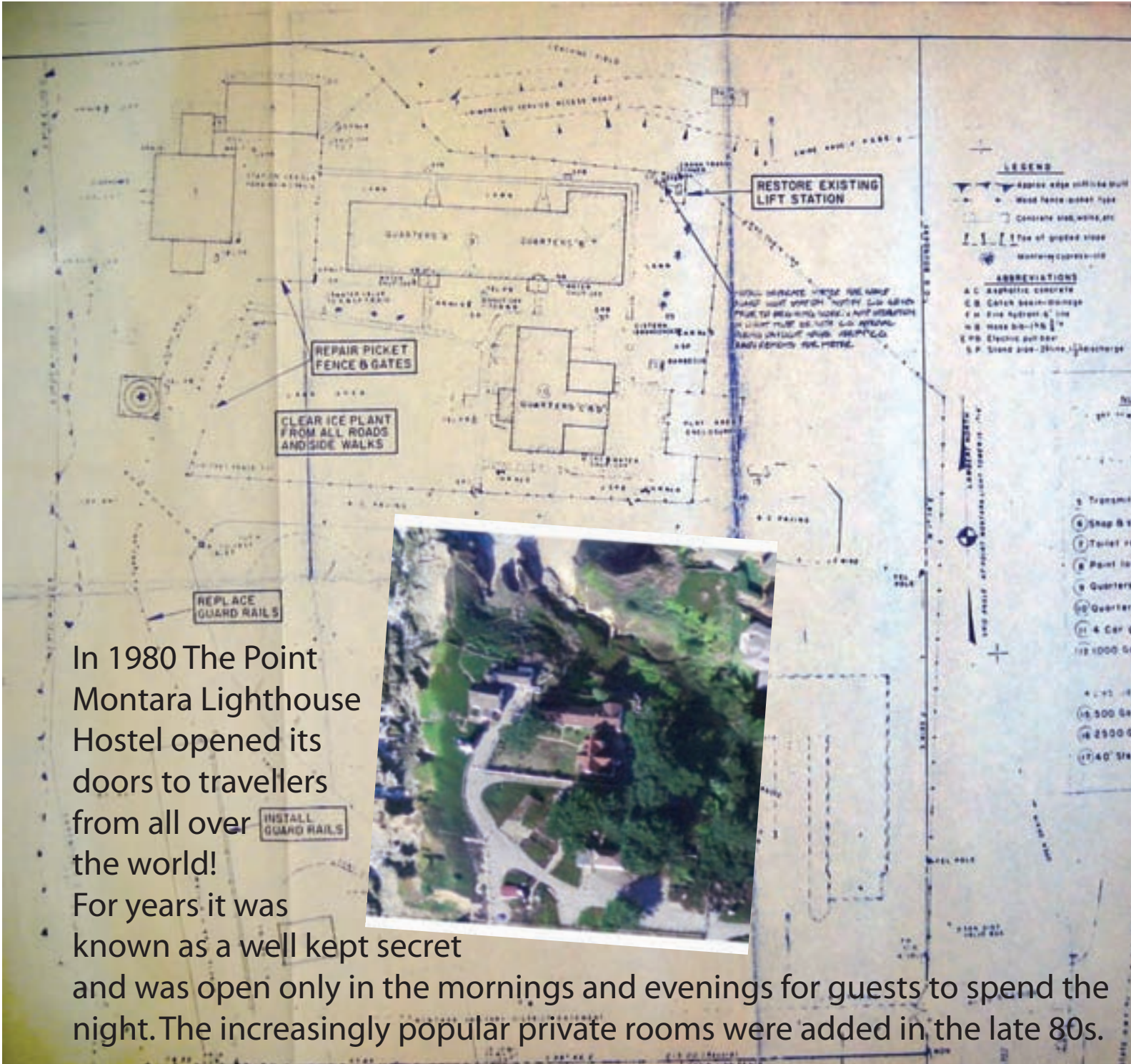


As lighthouses along the California coast were automated, the keeper's cottages had little value and the Coast Guard decided to tear down most of the dwellings. Fortunately, the State of California developed a plan in 1975 to transform five vacant lighthouses into youth hostels, with Point Montara as a prime candidate. Not surprisingly, red tape slowed down the project, with the Coast Guard offering only a short-term lease and the state hesitant to invest much money without a long-term lease. Eventually they reached an agreement on a long-term lease, and in 1978 the California legislature appropriated \$1.9 million for renovation of abandoned lighthouses.



After almost a decade of harsh weather, vandalism and neglect, the buildings at Point Montara needed a great deal of work to make them useable again. The restoration and conversion of both Point Montara and nearby Pigeon Point Lighthouse were conducted simultaneously and ended up needing more funds than the state had allotted.

Various organizations offered financial assistance: American Youth Hostels (AYH) staff and volunteers provided \$45,000 worth of labor; the California Department of Parks and Recreation contributed more than \$100,000; the California Coastal Conservancy donated money, and even local businesses and banks made contributions.



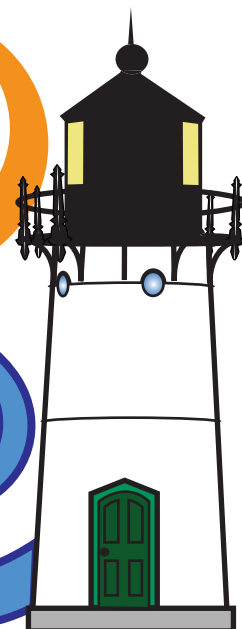
In 1980 The Point Montara Lighthouse Hostel opened its doors to travellers from all over the world!

For years it was known as a well kept secret and was open only in the mornings and evenings for guests to spend the night. The increasingly popular private rooms were added in the late 80s.



Today, HI-USA Point Montara Lighthouse is rated one of the best hostels in the world! It features two kitchens, a dining room, dorms, family and private rooms for the guests are located in Coast Guard housing built adjacent to the original dwelling, and the fog signal building. The hostel has 50-beds and provides affordable, short-term overnight accommodations for over 10,300 educational and recreational travelers each year. Additionally, the lighthouse has over 10,500 visitors annually. It is based at a State Park Historic site located on 5 acres of Federal property.

***HI-Pt. Montara Lighthouse is administered by HI-USA Golden Gate Council. Hostelling International - USA is a non-profit organization guided by its mission "to help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling." Our vision is for guests to become caring global citizens who are catalysts for intercultural exchange and understanding and stewards of the earth. As a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, we are dedicated to promoting intercultural understanding, environmental stewardship, and world peace through travel.*** Donations are greatly appreciated!



[www.norcalhostels.org](http://www.norcalhostels.org)