



## Lighthouse Keepers

Since 1853, lighthouse keepers have maintained the beacons that guided ships through the waters of the Golden Gate. Lighthouse keepers, or “wickies,” tended and cared for each light station. During the time when oil lamps and clockwork mechanisms were used to operate the lights, they trimmed wicks, replenished fuel, wound clockworks, and cleaned lenses and windows. Wickies were also responsible for operating the fog signal. Three lighthouses are within current park boundaries at Alcatraz, Fort Point, and Point Bonita.

The Alcatraz Lighthouse was first constructed in 1853, and rebuilt in 1909 after it was damaged in the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Lighthouse Keeper Underhill Van Wagner lived with his family in the keepers’ residence at the base of the lighthouse from 1856 to 1862. His annual salary was \$1,100. Benjamin F. Leeds served as Lighthouse Keeper from 1888 to 1905. During his service he erected a two-foot high wall around the keepers’ quarters, which he filled with soil and planted trees and flowers.



Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, George D. Cobb Fort Point Lighthouse Keeper Photographs, GOGA 19557

Portrait of George Douglas Cobb in his U.S. Lighthouse Service uniform. Cobb served at the Point Bonita Lighthouse in the 1890s before serving at the Fort Point Lighthouse from 1896 to 1934. In 1896, Cobb was awarded the Life Saving Service’s silver medal for heroism after he rescued three occupants of a capsized sailboat off Point Bonita.



Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, Cheryl Vosicka Photograph Collection, GOGA 18211



Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, Cheryl Vosicka Photograph Collection, GOGA 18211

Portraits of Niles C. Frey and his wife, Olga, during Frey’s time as the Point Bonita Lighthouse Keeper from 1896 to 1900. Frey appears in his U.S. Lighthouse Service uniform.

The first Point Bonita Lighthouse was built in 1855, but was built too high and the fog often kept its light cloaked from view. In 1877, the lighthouse was moved to a lower elevation. Niles C. Frey was one of three Point Bonita lighthouse keepers from 1896 to 1900. He lived in the keepers’ quarters with his wife, Olga, and daughter, Agnes. Life was isolated and lonely for the family, but Frey doted on Agnes and held her in his lap during meals. The family kept cows, horses, and chickens, and N.C. Frey drove the family’s horse and buggy along the seven-mile dirt road to Sausalito for supplies.

The second half of the 20th century brought much advancement in electrification. Lighthouses across the country were automated, making the job of lighthouse keeper obsolete. The keepers’ diligence in tending the guiding lights of the Golden Gate remains a special part of the GGNRA’s story.

Fort Point hosted three lighthouses built, respectively, in 1853, 1855, and 1864. The final lighthouse was built on the barbette tier (top level) of the fort. To access the light, the keepers climbed a spiral staircase inside Fort Point, until a bridge was built in 1876 that spanned the gap between the bluff and the barbette tier. In 1934, the lighthouse was decommissioned due to the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the last crew to serve at the Fort Point Light Station included George Douglas Cobb, Lighthouse Keeper; Mr. Jordan, 1st Assistant; and Leslie George McKay, 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant. All crew members were responsible for an eight-hour shift and they shared the station duties equally. Each man lived with his family in one of the keepers’ quarters just south of the fort.



Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, Cheryl Vosicka Photograph Collection, GOGA 18211

The lighthouse keepers’ quarters at Point Bonita, circa 1896 to 1900, with the Frey family on the front porch. Agnes recalled that her mother Olga had a difficult time at Point Bonita and a particularly hard time learning to bake bread. Once, when Olga was kneading dough, she became frustrated and threw the dough off the cliff only to realize that she had lost her ring in the dough. Luckily, N.C. Frey climbed down the cliff to find the dough and retrieved Olga’s ring.