

1899- 1966: Construction of the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station

Beginning in 1848, the U.S. government began funding life-saving equipment and stations along the East Coast, due to the increasing maritime traffic. However, these stations relied solely on volunteer crews who were typically ill-equipped and untrained. As storms continued to pound the East and the loss of life and goods rose, so did the public outcry for Congress to do more. Unfortunately, it was not until after a series of disastrous winter storms in 1870 and 1871 that appropriations were made for stations and crews nation-wide. Sumner Increase Kimball was appointed the chief of the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Division and under his command, more stations of the organization began to be established along the eastern seaboard, the Great Lakes, Gulf Coast and, finally, on the West Coast.

On June 20, 1874, life-saving stations were authorized in California at the entrance to the Golden Gate, near the Great Beach in Golden Gate Park, at Bolinas Bay and at Humboldt Bay. On June 18, 1878, the U.S. Life-Saving Service was officially established as a separate agency to aid in the rescue of shipwrecked passengers and crew on the East and West Coast, as well as the Great Lakes (20 Stat. L., 163).

These stations were not able to meet all the demands of increased maritime traffic and the hazardous water through the Golden Gate. While Congressman John A. Barham introduced H.R. 1980 on December 17, 1895 and Senator George C. Perkins put forth S. 2980 in April 1896 for the creation of a new life-saving station, Kimball began looking for the best site, based on local opinion, for the station. Kimball, in concurrence with the Inspector of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, Twelfth District, Major Thomas J. Blakeney, recommended a site at Potato Cove. At this location, the life-saving station would be protected from any storms from the south by a rocky shelf to the west and from the Pacific Ocean's westerly swells by the Four Fathom Bank, locally known as the "Potato Patch."

Eventually, the life-saving station would be built at Bonita Cove, near the lighthouse tower and military buildings, but Boathouse B, which included a launchway, was constructed at Potato Cove, closer to Rodeo Beach, approximately three-quarters of a mile north of the Point Bonita Historic District. The Inspector also recommended that the lighthouse wharf should be fitted with a derrick, to support a surfboat in the event that a larger boat could not be safely launched. The station would also require a telephone connection, linked with the life-saving stations to the south of the Golden Gate.

On March 18, 1899, the contract for the construction of the station was let to the Thomson Bridge Company, the lowest bidder of the thirteen submitted estimates. The contract, to be completed in ninety days, included the construction of Boathouse A (within the Point Bonita Historic District) and B (north of the Point Bonita Historic District), a residence, cisterns, fire shed, storage shed, garage and sidewalks. Construction started in the summer of 1899; however, high rough swells and refractory rock at the location of Boathouse A delayed the project. Even with a thirty day extension, the project was not completed, though Captain Fred M. Munger, the superintendent of construction, advised that the Thomson Bridge Company was not to blame, citing that the contractor received the orders to begin work one month after the contract had been signed, faced severe weather and poor roads and had an accident in which the contractor's foot was crushed. Finally, on September 8, 1899, Charles M. Colonell, the project supervisor, reported that the station was completed in accordance with the Life-Saving Service's plans and specifications.

During the construction of the station, a second contract was issued to P.G. MacIntyre, the sub-contractor for the construction of the residence, to build a redwood picket fence around the dwelling site to guard against dairy cattle grazed in Marin by tenant farmers and the U.S. Army and protect the crew and their

families from falling over the edge of the cliff into the ocean.

The rough seas, rocky slopes and the hazardous weather conditions at Point Bonita proved to make launching a boat extremely difficult at Boathouse A. It was not until November 1901 that Kimball authorized the construction of a platform, railing and boathouse siding that had been requested by Captain Munger two years earlier to improve the safety of Boathouse A (see photo: History #5).

The standard boats used at a life-saving station included the lifeboat and surfboat. The lifeboats were slow heavy boats that were strong and stable and could be launched directly into the water, usually along a set of rails. This would be a station's largest boat at 26 x 7 feet. The Dobbins lifeboat weighed less than half of the standard lifeboat. The surfboat was almost the same dimensions as the lifeboat but was much lighter and drew only six to seven inches. It was designed to be launched by the crew directly into the surf. Usually it was hauled on a cart down the shore to where it was needed and then launched. Both types of boats had buoyancy tanks. The lifeboats were self-righting and self-bailing; the surfboats were only self-bailing.

Boundaries between the life-saving station and the military station were further blurred when the army engineers at Fort Baker (formerly the Lime Point Military Reservation) began construction of large gun emplacements north of the Golden Gate at new locations to the west, toward the ocean. Here, the Corps of Engineers constructed five batteries: Battery Mendell (1901), Battery Alexander (1901), Battery Edwin Guthrie (1904), Battery Samuel Rathbone (1904) and Battery Patrick O'Rorke (1904). In support of the construction effort, the engineer's wharf and tramway were built in Bonita Cove to the ridge top near the old lighthouse tower—at the original terminus of Field Road. The engineers' housing was constructed immediately north of the life-saving station residential area and eventually completely removed.

This construction program required the subsequent construction of a garrison to house the units stationed at the batteries. The first detachment from Fort Baker arrived at the Point Bonita batteries in July 1903 and had to live in the magazines of Batteries Mendell and Alexander. The artillery detachment eventually occupied a series of temporary camps. Finally on July 16, 1904, the Secretary of War authorized construction of a permanent post for two companies of the Coast Artillery Corps on December 27, 1904; the War Department designated the new post "Fort Barry."

Confusion about the boundary of the lighthouse reservations persisted. A September 24, 1902 letter from Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Handbury, Corp of Engineers, Twelfth Lighthouse District, and J.B. Milton Commander, U.S. Navy, Twelfth Lighthouse District, to the Lighthouse Board in Washington D.C. reminded them that, in 1872, the Engineer Officers of the Twelfth District and Lime Point Military reservation were directed to recommend a reservation at Point Bonita. The 1872 recommendation was to set aside forty-four acres; however, it appears neither the Secretary of the Treasury nor the Secretary of War acted on this recommendation. Handbury's and Milton's recommendation for a boundary included "All the extreme southern part of Point Bonita lying south of a line joining the south west corner of the present Engineer wharf and point which shall be 120 feet from the north end of the tunnel through which the trail now runs leading to the fog-signal and light on the end of the Point, measured by said trail." The 1902 letter goes on to discuss the land on which "the light-house tower and the cisterns belonging to the Light-House Establishment are constructed" and right to access the property through Fort Baker Military Reservation by Lighthouse Board employees for transportation of Keepers, supplies and water and for maintenance.

According to the "6th Endorsement," on December 4, 1902, Major General Hughes assents to the U.S. Lighthouse Board request for the lighthouse reservation outlined in Handbury's and Milton's 1902 letter,

stating that the reservation could be “granted without prejudice to the military interest and is necessary for the light house service.” A letter was sent from Wm. Cary Sanger, Assistant Secretary of War to the Secretary of the Treasury on March 5, 1903 to “state that this Department concurs in the views therein expressed by General Hughes.” This agreement between the Department of the Treasury and the War Department established the first endorsed boundary of the lighthouse reservation after forty-eight years of use as a light station.

On February 14, 1903, the U.S. Lighthouse Service; along with the Coast and Geodetic Survey, the U.S. Shipping Commission, the Bureau of Navigation, the Bureau of Statistics, the National Bureau of Standards and the Steamboat Inspection Service, was transferred from the Department of the Treasury to the Department of Commerce and Labor (32 Stat. L., 825).

The U.S. Army also developed their own presence within the area with the construction of a number of fire control stations around the Point. The nearby Battery Alexander and Battery Mendell had a double concrete station on Point Bonita constructed in 1909, located on a rock shelf below the fog-signal building, accessed by a narrow flight of stairs. The station served as an emergency fire control and observation station, monitoring for enemy assault.

As part of the Coast Defense measures put into place by the U.S. Army, the original 1855 lighthouse tower was removed. The Army was concerned that the lighthouse tower, which had been used as a day marker since the construction of the 1877 lighthouse tower, could be used by an enemy to establish their location on the California coast.

While the Life-Saving Service had improved the safety at the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station, the conditions for launching remained problematic. In 1911, the decision was made to build a boathouse and launchway to the northeast of the Army’s Quarter Master’s Wharf (Engineer’s Wharf)—labeled as 1911 Marine Railway and Boathouse Remains on Site Map. The hillside behind the new site and two pinnacle rocks were cut to grade. The new boathouse was to be constructed in what was expected to be solid rock; however, the hillside turned out to be composed of decayed lime rock and clay. This type of rock is very hard when dry, and when wet or exposed to moisture, soft and crumbly, creating a potential rockslide hazard. However, the construction of the wood frame boathouse proceeded. On December 31, 1911, a large rock slide damaged the new boathouse, requiring \$600 just for the removal of rock debris and to stabilize and protect the boathouse. In early 1912, the boathouse was finally put into service, and Boathouse A and B were decommissioned; Boathouse A was used for storage, while Boathouse B was moved to Fort Barry for use as a school house.

On June 17, 1910, Congress replaced the U.S. Lighthouse Service with the Bureau of Lighthouses, which was staffed by civilians. The Bureau was under the Department Commerce and Labor and was given authorization to reorganize the lighthouse districts, but not to exceed nineteen, which were headed by a civilian inspector. The bureau would remain with the Commerce Department after the Department was again reorganized in 1913.

By June 1912, through modernization introduced as a result of the reorganization of the Lighthouse Bureau in the Department of Commerce and Labor, the power of Point Bonita light beacon was increased by seven fold, with a new light signature of a flash every twenty-five seconds and an eclipse for five seconds as opposed to the fixed light used since 1855. At this time, the coast defense searchlight was mounted between the fog-signal building and the fire control station as part of the coastal military defense (see photo: History #6).

In 1926, the light was strengthened once more to 40,000 candlepower when electricity was introduced to

the light station. The conversion from oil to electricity for the light beacon and the fog-signal decreased the need for maintenance and, subsequently, the necessity of four Keepers. In 1938, additional improvements were made to modernize the light station; a radio beacon tower was installed adjacent to the lighthouse tower's east façade.

Following the construction of the new boathouse at the life-saving station in 1912, the army built a road directly past the residence and along the hill to the Quartermaster's Wharf. This road provided an easier way to transport supplies to the boathouse. Then in 1914, the station received permission to connect to the military electricity system. In 1915, the Monomy surfboat, two power lifeboats and the surfboat were tied up at the Army's Quarter Master's Wharf.

At this time, a major shift occurred in the operation of the U.S. Life-Saving Service. On January 20, 1915, the operations of the U.S. Life-Saving Service and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service were combined to form the U.S. Coast Guard (38 Stat. L., 800). The joining of the two separate agencies was meant to streamline and improve government operations, and attract new servicemen.

Further improvements were made to the station in 1916 when a lean-to was added to the boathouse for the storage of the Dobbins lifeboat, which made launching the boat more efficient as needed. But by June 1916, it was reported that the launchway rails were spreading, which could allow one of the power lifeboats to drop into the cove, injuring the boat and crew. In December 1916, rains again threatened to cause a landslide behind the boathouse. On December 6, District Superintendent Wellander wrote that hydraulicing, a method to remove material by spraying water under high pressure at a rock face to remove the excess material behind the boathouse, could be completed when the hillside was already soaked, requiring less water. It is not clear whether this method was used; although few repairs or alterations were made to the boathouse over the next thirteen years.

However, overriding problems with boathouse and launch facilities were still not fixed. In 1923, ship owners, ship masters, and sea-faring men formally requested that the Coast Guard improve the condition of the life-saving station, protesting "the present lamentable and crippled condition" of the station, including a "lack of proper boats, lack of launching facilities and lack of other equipment" which created a station that was "utterly incapable of rendering any assistance to vessels in distress." (Historic Resource Study, 305; 1980) The letter took specific issue with the station the removal of two powerboats and the disrepair of the launchway. Suggestions were made for improvement including, construction of a jetty in the cove. Plans for construction of a new wharf were not funded until the following year.

On April 2, 1929, five years after the completion of the new wharf, the boathouse was destroyed as a result of a landslide. By December, J.J. Grodemen and Company had been selected to build a new boathouse. The unstable slope behind the boathouse continued to halt construction as new landslides occurred. In the summer and fall of 1930, following a landslide, 14,582 cubic yards of dirt were removed. In February 1931, additional material had to be removed following a second landslide. At this time, the launchway rails ended above the water line at low tide, compounding the already dangerous conditions during a boat launch.

The launchway was repaired in 1934, but by 1939 two studies had been completed regarding the relocation of the boathouse and launchway and the construction of a breakwater. The Acting Chief Engineer of the U.S. Coast Guard concluded that launching conditions at the site could not be improved. Additionally, it appears that the cost of relocating the boathouse and launchway was not a necessary expenditure since the Fort Point Station could respond to any calls of distress as quickly or within a few minutes of a Point Bonita lifeboat reaching an accident. Another landslide occurred in November, 1943. However, the discussion about whether to remove the life-saving station continued until 1946, when the

station was abandoned. The boathouse was finally destroyed by fire in 1948.

On July 7, 1939, the Bureau of Lighthouses was merged with the U.S. Coast Guard by Congress in order to streamline the federal government (53 Stat. L., 1432). The U.S. Coast Guard was transferred from the Department of the Treasury to the U.S. Navy as the nation entered World War II (Executive Order 8929). The agency was transferred back to the Treasury Department on January 1, 1946 (Executive Order 9666).

In 1950, a small watch room was added to the west end of the lighthouse tower. The watch room was removed by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1980 to restore the structure to the original 1877 appearance.

In 1939 and 1940, landslides destroyed the simple wood plank bridge that connected the lighthouse tower and fog-signal building to the rest of the station. The landslides combined with years of erosion produced an un-repairable chasm. In 1954, a suspension bridge was constructed to connect the lighthouse tower and fog-signal with the path along the Point.

In the early 1960s, the Light Keeper's residence and the 1899 life-saving Station Building were demolished, and the awnings, storm doors, and gallery deck around the lantern room were removed. The luminosity of the light was strengthened to 60,000 candlepower. Three wood frame residential buildings were constructed by the U.S. Coast Guard to house the Point Bonita Lighthouse Keepers.

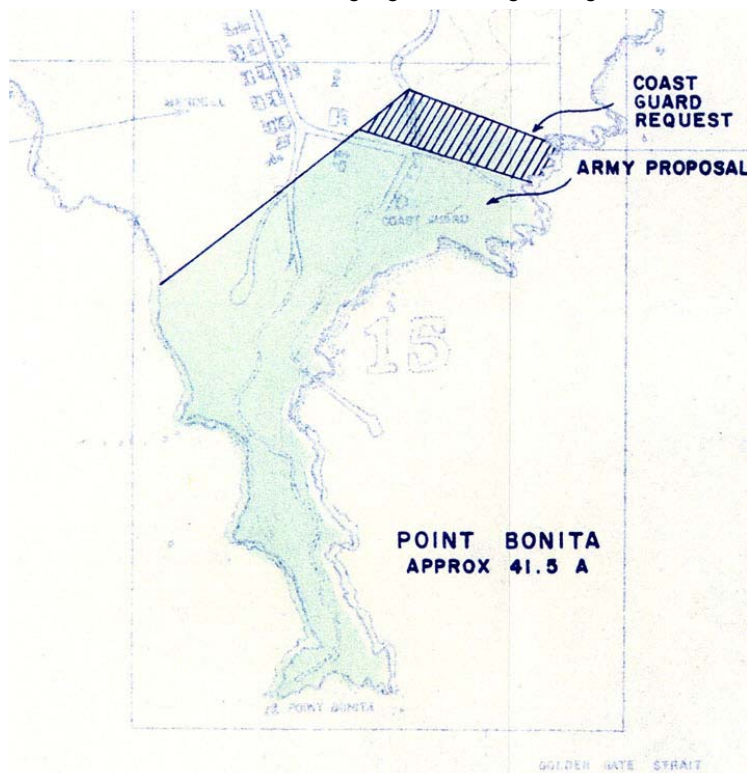
According to a letter from Donald Morrison, Acting Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard to the Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army on October 10, 1962, the U.S. Coast Guard petitioned the Army for the transfer of ownership of the land beneath four aids to navigation; Lime Point Light Station, Point Bonita Light Station, Point Diablo Light and Yellow Bluff Light and "rights of ingress and egress" to all four sites, located on Army property of Forts Baker, Barry and Cronkhite. The letter also requested an addition to the boundary for Point Bonita to include "approximately 350 feet of Conzelman Road for access purposes (see photo: History #7)."

New residences were completed at the life-saving station residential area to house the light Keepers. The combination of electricity to the light beacon and fog-signal building in 1926 and more efficient equipment made the unique way of life for Coast Guard light Keeper increasingly obsolete. Completion of the housing represents the last phase of Coast Guard development at the site before it became an un-staffed light station in 1980.

A letter from Stanley Resor, Secretary of the Army to Henry H. Fowler, Secretary of the Treasury, dated November 10, 1965, confirmed the transfer of a "a portion of the Fort Barry Military Reservation, California, identified as Point Bonita, consisting of approximately 39.0 acres of fee-owned land, together with certain Army-owned improvements and rights of ingress and egress through adjoining Army property" to the U.S. Coast Guard. On January 31, 1966, the U.S. Army transferred the property to the U.S. Coast Guard under Title 10 U.S. Code, Section 2571.



History #6: 1967 oblique aerial view (looking east) of the abandoned U.S. Army fire control station and searchlight enclosure in front of the 1903 fog-signal building and lighthouse tower. (U.S. Coast Guard, 12th District)



History #7: A detail of the 1962 "Tentative Coast Guard Reservation Limits" map, depicting the requested light reservation from the Army. (U.S. Coast Guard, 12th District)

1967-1997: National Park Service Management

On April 1, 1967, the U.S. Coast Guard was transferred to the newly created Department of Transportation (80 Stat. 931). The Department was created to consolidate highway, rail, air, and marine transportation.

An agreement was established between the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Park Service regarding the management and the eventual transfer of the property. On September 13, 1962, public law 87-657, 72 Stat. 538 established that “any land found excess to the needs of the Coast Guard will be incorporated into the Point Reyes National Seashore Tract.” (Proceedings of a Board of Survey, Number 12-133-73) This was revised with the creation of Golden Gate National Recreation Area on October 27, 1972; Public Law 92-589 stated that the property would be transferred to the new park unit if the property were declared excess.

In 1980, the Point Bonita Lighthouse became the last lighthouse in California to become automated, effectively ending the remote lifestyle of the Light Keeper and their families in California (see photo: History #8).

On July 21, 1982, an agreement was reached between the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Park Service. The U.S. Coast Guard retained ownership and rights of access at Point Bonita. The U.S. Coast Guard was also responsible for the maintenance of the aids to navigation. The National Park Service would “provide a continuous presence and protection” and was responsible for law enforcement and maintenance of the property. In 1984, the light station was opened for tours by the National Park Service. The Officer in Charge of the San Francisco Aids to Navigation Team (ANT) from the U.S. Coast Guard noted the poor condition of the lighthouse lantern room. In 1993, further assessment of the structure was conducted to determine how to renovate the structure. “The original plan was to stop the water from entering the lighthouse and let Civil Engineering Unit (CEU) Oakland do the overall renovation in a couple years. But further investigation indicated the need for more immediate repairs, using self help-funding and the ANT personnel.” (Historic Lighthouse Preservation Handbook, Case Study: Rehabilitation of Point Bonita Light Station, 1997: 8 The project eventually grew into a comprehensive exterior maintenance project that took six months and \$75,000 to complete) Following extensive research of the building including site visits to the contemporaneous Cape Disappointment Lighthouse, the gallery deck was restored, the awnings and exterior doors were replaced and the structure was repainted. See the Historic Lighthouse Preservation Handbook, Case Study: Rehabilitation of Point Bonita Light Station for additional information regarding the specifics of the restoration.

On November 25, 2002, President George W. Bush signed H.R. 5005 into law (P.L. 107-296), establishing the Department of Homeland Security. The Act brought together twenty-two agencies or parts of agencies from other departments, including Transportation, Justice, Commerce, Health and Human Services, under the control of the Department of Homeland Security. According to the act the U.S. Coast Guard was to be transferred from the Department of Transportation. On March 1, 2003, the U.S. Coast Guard was formally transferred to the Department of Homeland Security.