Lighthouses of the SB Channel

The rocky ledge runs far into the sea
And on its outer point, some miles away,
The lighthouse lifts its massive masonry.

Longfellow

Navigation Basics

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5:47 PM

To keep track of our exact position and to lay a safe course to the next destination, we, as skippers, apply our *navigation* skills. The tenets of navigation are pretty simple:

Don't Drown
Don't Sink
Don't Hit Anything
Don't Get Lost

Today we have a lot of technology to help us navigate safely. On board many vessels we have radar, depth sounders and GPS (global positioning system) along with our charts and compass . Before GPS became widely used, we used LORAN (LOng RAnge Navigation), radio beacons, and RDF (radio direction finding) to determine the position of our vessel. But before we had any of these "black boxes", we relied upon our "dead reckoning" skills which involve the use of a chart, a compass and a chronometer (a very accurate clock). In dead, reckoning we apply what we learned from those time-speed-distance problems we worked out as kids. And although the information found on a chart today has improved vastly over the years, the basics of plotting and maintaining a course by dead reckoning have been used for hundreds of years.

When approaching the coastline from the open sea, men have always looked for guideposts to lead them into a safe harbor. The use of lights along the shore go back to antiquity, beginning with those who lit fires on headlands and ending with today's lighthouses. Lighthouses in the US go back almost 300 years. The first was the Boston Lighthouse, circa 1716, but no lighthouses were erected on the west coast until the 1850's.

With the technical innovations available today, one might question just how much longer these coastal sentinels will continue to guide mariners home. Yet when returning home at night, there is something totally reassuring about the presence of the flashing light of our home port.
And there is still a certain nostalgia associated with lighthouses, especially for those of us with a love of boats. Today many lighthouses are museums and historic attractions that remind us of attendant peril in their surrounding waters.

Lighthouses coming North - or is it really West!

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Point Hueneme Lighthouse was established on December 15, 1874 to guide shipping through the Santa Barbara Channel, and included a fog signal to warn ships hampered by fog from July through October. The light shines from the north side of Santa Barbara Channel's east entrance and flashed white until 1889, when the signal was changed to fixed red. In 1892, the light displayed an occulting white signal. A new lens installed in 1899 displayed flashing white.

It is forty-eight-foot, square-shaped tower that rises from a one-story flat building. The light is only fifty-two feet above sea level, and in the past, encroaching seas and erosion forced the removal of some station buildings.

Records of the early Point Hueneme keepers were mediocre at best. Head Keeper Samuel Ensign and assistant keeper Korts were dismissed in 1878 for failing to maintain the station grounds (although the light was kept in good order). The first assistant keeper, Melvin Giles, was twice caught sleeping on his watch - but nevertheless was later promoted to head keeper at Pigeon Point.

The light is on the grounds of Port of Hueneme.and is maintained by the Coast Guard. In recent years, the Coast Guard has refurbished the building, and the lighthouse has been opened to the public. The Coast Guard Auxiliary offers tours of the tower, and the City of Oxnard, in conjunction with the Oxnard Harbor District, have created a Lighthouse Promenade along the port fencing that leads to the lighthouse.

Anacapa Island Lighthouse stands at the south side of Santa Barbara Channel's eastern entrance. Offering a commanding view 277 feet above the sea, the lighthouse is of modified Spanish architecture and was one of the last major sentinels constructed in America. Erected in 1952, the tower replaced a pyramidal skeleton structure established in 1912. Due to a rash of shipwrecks, agitation for a primary light goes back to 1868, but the cost of maintaining a manned light in such an isolated location stalled the effort.

Like her counterparts, Anacapa is now automated. Her island is part ot the Channel Islands National Monument whose only residents are a few park rangers. Ironically, the lighthouse served as the backdrop for a television production about an old lightkeeper who was forced to retire.

The **Santa Barbara Lighthouse** was one of the eight original West Coast lighthouses. The site, roughly two miles west of the harbor, was selected so that the light could serve the double purpose of a sea coast light and a harbor light. It's Cape Cod style was similar in design to most of the early west coast lighthouses with the tower projecting from it. It was activated in December, 1856. Albert Williams was the first principal keeper, but nine years later, bored with his duties, he turned the lighthouse over to his wife. For forty years Julia Williams kept the station shipshape, faithfully trimming the wicks and polishing the brass and the light's glass prisms. Additionally, she raised a family of three

boys and two girls who became her assistants. A legend in her time, she was finally laid to rest at the age of eighty-one.

In June, 1925 the lighthouse was jolted by a severe earthquake which demolished the structure. Keeper Weeks ushered everyone outside. Moments later, the tower and lantern came crashing down, followed soon by the walls of the small dwelling. The Fresnel lens was shattered, and the structure was a total loss.

In 1935, a mile east of Santa Barbara Point a small, twenty-four-foot secondary light was erected 142 feet above water.

The original **Point Conception** lighthouse, activated on February 1, 1856, was the Pacific's earliest and most essential ocean front navigational aids. But its location at the top of the headland was often obscured by fog, so in 1882 the station was rebuilt at a lower elevation.

The fifty-two-foot tower sits on a 200-foot headland on the north side of the west entrance to Santa Barbara Channel, sends flashing shafts of light above pounding breakers.

The first-order Fresnel lens was still revolving in the tower in 1999. With sixteen bull's-eye panels , the lens produces a two-second flash every thirty seconds. Sadly, due to the expense of repairs necessary to keep the Fresnel lens revolving, a modern beacon is now used at the lighthouse.

So isolated and lonely was an early keeper of the light that he wrote the district inspector: " . . . my situation here is truly distressing (and) my pay has not been forthcoming for four months."

And the following excerpt from a Coast Guard report on the Point Conception Lighthouse describes the mood each evening . "When the sun nears the swirling horizon and the sudden cold descends at dusk, ...[the keepers] begin to stir against the night. Loneliness comes down like a shade, and the light goes on."

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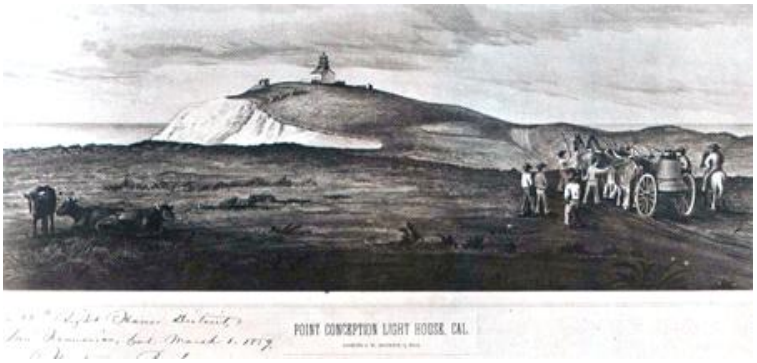

In 1878, the Lighthouse Board recommended that a second light be placed 13.5 miles northeast of Point Conception at **Point Arguello**. The light shines on a narrow, jagged outcropping which has become the graveyard of many ships. Mariners consider it one of the most dangerous areas along the entire coast.

In spite of the presence of both a lighthouse and RDF station on Point Arguello, the U.S Navy's worst navigational tragedy occurred at Honda Point just north of the lighthouse on September 8, 1923 because the commander chose to ignore the "new technology".

The lighthouse was replaced in 1934 by a pair of thirty-six inch revolving aero beacons mounted on top of a steel tower. The Coast Guard assumed responsibility for U.S. Lighthouses in 1939, and in 1967, the original dwellings associated with the lighthouse were razed and a new metal tower was installed.

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