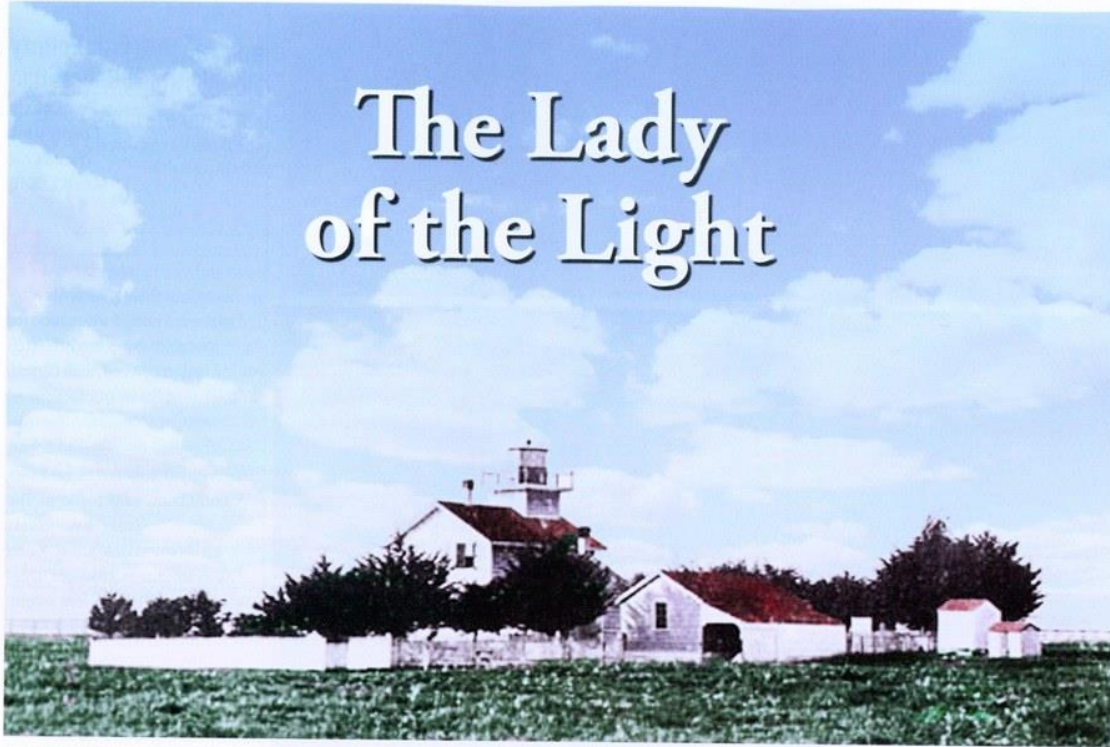


The Lady of the Light



Santa Cruz's pioneer marine biologist, 19th-century lighthouse keeper Laura Hecox

By Frank Perry

Had Laura Hecox been born in Santa Cruz in 1954 instead of 1854, she probably would have attended UCSC and majored in marine biology. But such opportunities were unavailable in nineteenth century Santa Cruz, which makes Laura Hecox's accomplishments as a naturalist and collector all the more impressive.

Laura's interest in the study of nature began when she was still quite young. According to one account, she suffered a bad fall as a little girl and hit her head. Recovery was slow, but one day, while sitting on the beach, another little girl brought her a shell. Fascinated by its shape, Laura began looking for more shells along the waterfront. Over the following years she amassed a vast collection. Learning to identify the shells and organize them proved to be good therapy, helping her to regain her mental faculties.

When Laura was fifteen, her father, Adna

Hecox, was appointed keeper of the newly-constructed government lighthouse at what soon became known as Lighthouse Point. From her upstairs bedroom, she had a bird's eye view of Monterey Bay. Each night, after the sun set over the glistening waves, the sound of the surf pounding against the cliffs and the sea lions barking on Seal Rock lulled her to sleep. If she was not already in love with the sea, she now became enamored with it. It would become not only her passion, but her career.

An account from the late 1870s reported that by then she had a fine collection of shells on display in the lighthouse living room, neatly organized in cabinets built out of cherry wood by her father.

When Adna's health began to decline, Laura assisted with running the lighthouse. After he died in 1883, Laura was appointed to replace him as keeper. She stayed at the post

for thirty-three years, faithfully keeping the great light burning each night, guiding mariners in and out of Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz was a busy port in the late 1800s, with schooners and steamers loading and unloading cargo and passengers on a daily basis. Back then, Santa Cruz had two (and for a time, three) wharves for this purpose.

Being a lighthouse keeper was the ultimate stay-at-home job, but that did not seem to bother Laura. She soon turned the lighthouse into a full-fledged museum, surrounding herself, floor to ceiling, with collections not just of marine life, but also of stuffed birds, Indian baskets, fossils, minerals, and a curious assortment of knickknacks. She couldn't travel much, but the world came to her in the form of curiosities and oddities

(Above) The Santa Cruz lighthouse as it was in the 1800s.

Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History. Hand-tint: WWD

Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History



(Above) Santa Cruz's pioneer marine biologist on the beach which she called "Fossil Place" below the lighthouse.

brought to her doorstep by friends, family members, and visitors.

The U. S. Lighthouse Service required that keepers open lighthouses on a regular basis for public inspection. Laura was happy to oblige, explaining to visitors the mechanism of the great light and Fresnel lens and showing them her museum.

Although hers was a one-person private museum, she did many of the same things curators of larger museums do today. She gave tours, corresponded with other collectors, joined scientific societies, cataloged her collections, wrote articles, provided displays for schools, traded specimens with other collectors, and did special exhibits at the Santa Cruz library and county fair.

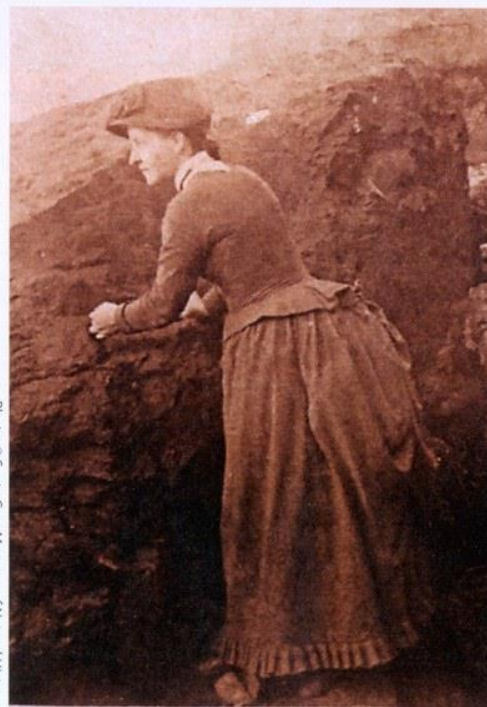
Laura's collections and record books paint a good general picture of her interests, but her scrapbooks open an even larger window into her psyche. Books were expensive in those days, so she made her own "books" by clipping newspaper articles about things that interested her, seeking to quench her thirst for knowledge. There are articles on archaeology, ethnology, architecture, history, ornithology, minerals, taxidermy, astronomy, botany, and stamp collections—to name just a few of the subjects.

Laura corresponded with many important scientists of the day and sometimes filled requests for specimens. Ralph Arnold, a paleontologist with the U.S. Geological Survey wrote that her "collection of specimens and interest in natural history have been in inspiration to all who have had the pleasure of her acquaintance." Arnold named a species of fossil snail after her in a publication by the Smithsonian.

In 1880 Professor A. G. Weatherby of the University of Cincinnati named a variety of banana slug after her. Now you can't get much more Santa Cruz than that!

"When I visit the rocky intertidal off Lighthouse Point and West Cliff Drive, I often think of Laura Hecox," says John Pearse, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, UCSC. "Like Ed Ricketts, she is one of my

Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History



(Above) During the late nineteenth century lighthouse keeper Hecox negotiated the slippery rocks below the lighthouse wearing buttoned leather-soled shoes and a floor-length dress.

{replay}



Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History

(Above) A group of visitors pose for a photo on the porch of the lighthouse. If you look closely you can see Laura standing on platform next to the light.

heros, a leader in the European-American exploration of our rich and diverse coast, sharing her knowledge and collections with other naturalists of her day."

It must have been difficult to negotiate the watery sand and algae-covered rocks with buttoned leather-soled shoes, a floor-length dress, and a bustle. Yet, that is exactly how she is dressed in photos taken on the beach in the 1880s.

Laura was not the only naturalist who called Santa Cruz home during the late nineteenth century. Charles Lewis Anderson, a local medical doctor, was also an expert on nature study, especially plants and seaweeds. The civic-minded Anderson served on both the Santa Cruz school board and the library board. When construction began on a new library for Santa Cruz (completed in 1904) he persuaded Laura to donate her collection to establish a museum in the library. "A library and a museum should go side by side," he wrote. He noted, especially, the value of her collection to young people. "Children are never too young to begin learning from nature's book,

and never too old to quit."

In August of 1905, after a year of preparations, the Hecox Museum opened in the library basement. At the opening reception, the quiet, unassuming lighthouse keeper made a short speech and said something quite remarkable. According to the newspaper "she did not feel that she was losing anything in giving the collection." Instead, she was "merely taking everyone else into partnership with her in the enjoyment of it."

Over the next century, that museum went through several moves and several name changes, becoming today's Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History in Seabright. Some of her collection is still on display. "She was well respected for her knowledge," according to Heather Moffat, Museum Executive Director. "Her passion for studying and collecting specimens led to the founding of an institution which has inspired generations of Santa Cruzans to explore the unique natural history of our region."

Laura Hecox retired from lighthouse keeping in 1916 and moved into a Live Oak cottage with her older brother. She died in 1919. Today—nearly a century later—residents and visitors to Santa Cruz continue to benefit from her love of nature, generosity, and foresight. We can all be partners with Laura in the enjoyment of her museum. ♣



Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) Hecox's original specimen case filled with her specimens and hand written labels is on display at Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History.



(Above) A nearly deserted Santa Cruz Point (now referred to as Lighthouse Point) except for the lighthouse as seen from the sea,

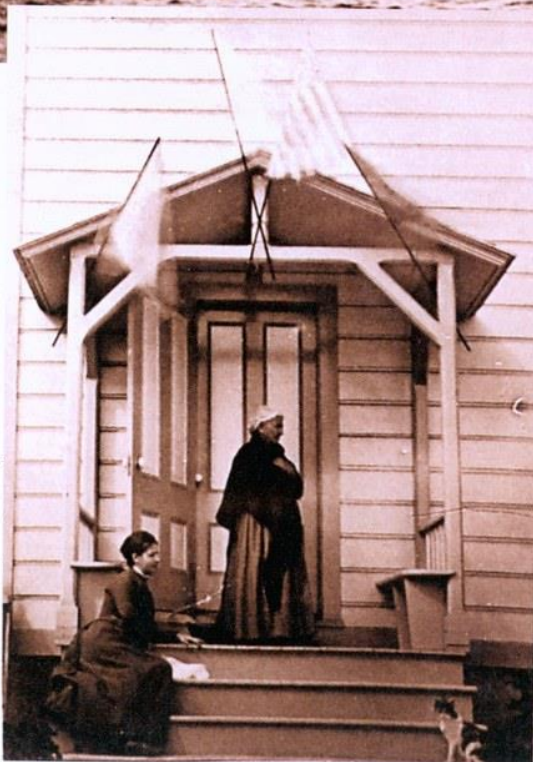


Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History

(Above) With flags flying, Hecox and her mother (plus cat) on the porch of the Santa Cruz lighthouse.

Discover The Exhibit

What:
The Santa Cruz Naturalist Exhibit
featuring the Laura Hecox Collection

When: New exhibit opens June 11

Where:
Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History
1305 East Cliff Drive
Santa Cruz, California

Contact:
(831) 420-6115
email info@santacruzmuseum.org

Hours of operation:
Tuesday-Friday 11a.m. - 4p.m.
Saturday-Sunday 10a.m. - 5p.m.
Closed Mondays.