

Historic Civil Engineering Landmarks

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Pigeon Point Lighthouse



THE NIGHT of Monday, June 6, 1853 was foggy along the coast. The clipper ship *Carrier Pigeon* was 130 days out of Boston with a cargo of general merchandise for the California goldfields when with a shudder she ran aground on a headland then known as Whale Point, about 30 miles north of Santa Cruz.

There followed a drama typical of the pioneering days of California coastwise shipping.

As soon as word of the wreck reached San Francisco, the *Sea Bird*, a sailing ship with auxiliary steam engines, was dispatched with instructions to try to salvage the cargo. The crew was safe, staying temporarily at the whaling colony that gave the place its name.

The *Sea Bird* arrived on the ninth and began salvage work—but soon became a victim herself to the raging seas for which that coast was already famous.

HOLED and leaking badly, the rescue ship had to put herself aground at nearby Ano Nuevo to avoid sinking. In the next two weeks, vessels from up and down the coast converged on the two wrecks, scavenging for what they could before heavy seas finally destroyed the *Carrier Pigeon*.

So well-known did this maritime incident become that the point was renamed Pigeon Point.

Over the next 20 years there was growing agitation for the federal government to build a warning light at Pigeon Point. At the same time, while the small whaling industry declined, the cove to the south of Pigeon Point became the shipping point for lumber and produce from the Pescadero area. Shippers could not use standard docks because of the heavy, hazardous surf, so they loaded and unloaded from ships anchored in the cove using an aerial cableway.

Following a rash of wrecks in the late 1860s, in 1869 Congress finally appropriated money for a lighthouse

at Pigeon Point.

Bricks were shipped from Norfolk, Virginia, around Cape Horn, and laboriously unloaded using the rickety cableway in the rocky cove.

By September 1871 the first navigation aid was installed, a steam-operated fog signal with a 12-inch whistle. In 1872 the lighthouse was completed.

THE LIGHT'S nine-foot-diameter fresnel lens has a shadowy past. Built by Henri Le Paute of Paris in the 1850s, its first 20 years are in doubt. It is believed to have been installed at Cape Hatteras on the East Coast, and to have been removed during the Civil War to prevent its destruction by Confederate forces.

Buried in the sand for protection, it was rescued in 1868 and eventually sent to Pigeon Point. There the 1,008 pieces of glass were reassembled and the durable lens began a tour of duty that lasted a century. Illumination for the light first came from whale oil. Kerosene was later substituted, and then electricity to run the light which the old fresnel lens magnified to 800,000 candlepower in a beam seen 18 miles to sea.

In 1974 an automatic beacon was set up on a platform outside the lighthouse, replacing the historic lens.

Since the light was installed only one wreck has occurred on Pigeon Point.

The tower is 115 feet high, 28 feet in diameter at the base and 16' 3' at the top; walls taper from 6 feet to three feet thick. The original light was 148 feet above mean high tide.

(Second in a series, with thanks to the San Francisco chapter, American Society of Civil Engineers.)