

The Lady Behind the Light

A Lighthouse Keeper's Passion Helped Launch the Natural History Museum

by Sarah Weston

In 1996, a piece of human scalp complete with hair brought together officials from the City of Santa Cruz, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and the National Park Service. Donated to the City in 1904 by one Laura Hecox, the artifact was determined to be a type of small scalplock interred with Hawaiian royalty at their funerals. It was then offered to the Maui/Lanai'i Islands Burial Council for appropriate disposition.

This peculiar gift was hardly the first from Ms. Hecox. Over the course of three decades she built a private collection containing examples of bird skins, petrified wood, pressed algae, Native American baskets, minerals, marine life and any number of historical items. The collection is a remarkable life's work, particularly for a 19th century woman working alone without any academic training. But more remarkable still is the fact that Hecox was not a naturalist by profession, but a lighthouse keeper.

Laura was a daughter of Adna and Margaret Hecox, he being a figure of note in local history himself. Together with four of her older siblings, Laura's parents came overland by covered wagon to California in 1846. Their companions were the Donner party, but fortunately the Hecoxes went their separate way before the ill-fated venture into the Sierras.

Adna became a farmer, a sawmill owner and carpenter. He also held various political offices, including the last mayor of Santa Cruz under Spanish rule. When the Santa Cruz lighthouse was built in 1868, he became the first of only three keepers it was ever to have.

The Lady Lighthouse Keeper

Laura was born in 1854, and so moved into the lighthouse as an inquisitive teenager. One account states that she suffered a bad fall as a child, and began her shoreline collections as part of her physical therapy. A local physician and naturalist gave her books to help identify her finds.

The old wooden lighthouse (located near the site of the present beacon on West Cliff Drive) had six rooms, and as Laura's collection grew one of them was turned over entirely to her books and acquisitions. By law, the lighthouse was open to the public during certain hours of the week, and her collection became a local attraction.

Adna died in 1883, and was succeeded by Laura. A woman in the post of lighthouse keeper was less unusual than it sounds; according to Coast Guard records there have been nearly 175 of them since 1830. It was one of the first non-clerical governmental positions open to women, with many taking over the posts from deceased husbands.

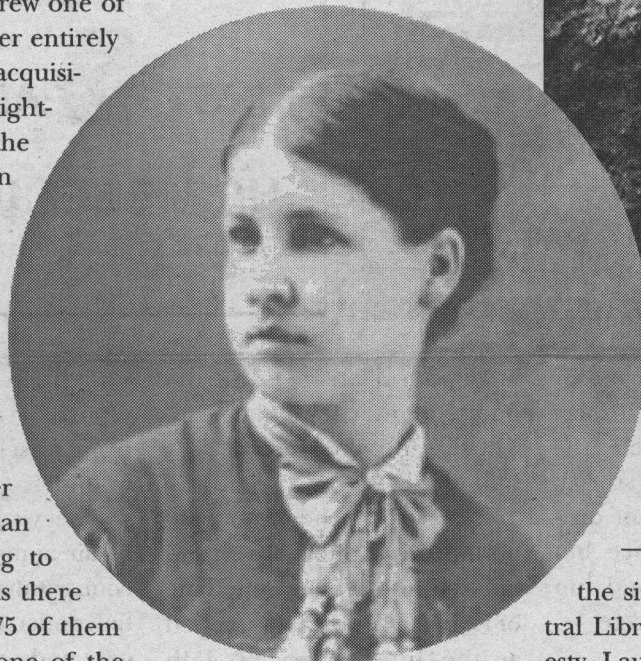
Laura was one of the longest-serving at 33 years, but the record tenure was more than half a century.

Laura lived alone in the lighthouse with her elderly mother, never marrying. In those days the lighthouse used an oil lamp which, given the many facets of the Fresnel lens, required several hours of cleaning daily. Laura was apparently a fastidious housekeeper, as her quarterly inspections always garnered praise for her cleanliness. But these duties, for which she was paid \$750 per year, left her suffi-

cient time for her real passion of studying and collecting.

A Passionate Collector

Laura saved articles on everything from coin collecting to raising snails. She cataloged her acquisitions tirelessly and exhibited them at the County fair and Public Library. Despite her lack of a college degree, she corresponded with prominent naturalists and belonged to several scientific societies. Her work was given



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an appreciative nod in a standard text on fossils. Her deepest love was mollusks, and there are at least two species named after her.

Laura had a "sweet, frank, intelligent face," and one visitor in 1880 said "Her useful and busy life, several miles from any town, will always rest in my mind as a pleasant contrast to the lives of many women I know, whom nothing short of London or Paris can furnish with occupation."

In 1904 she decided to deed her collection to Santa Cruz to form its first public museum. In August of 1905 the Hecox Museum was established in the basement of the new Carnegie Library, which was located on

the site of the present Central Library. With typical modesty, Laura stated in an opening speech that she did not feel that she was losing anything giving away her collection. Instead, she was merely taking everyone else into partnership in the enjoyment of it.

Laura stayed on as lighthouse keeper until 1917, when she retired at age 63. In 1939 the lighthouse was taken over by the Coast Guard and automated. After WWII, it was deemed unnecessary and sold for scrap. The present structure was built in 1967 by the parents of Mark Abbott, a young surfer who drowned there while surfing in 1965.

A Place of Its Own

The Hecox collection moved to the new Santa Cruz

High School in 1917. In 1932, it joined the collection of Indian artifacts of forester Humphrey Pilkington, which was on display at the Crafts House in Tyrrell Park in the Seabright neighborhood of Santa Cruz.

In 1947 this formally became the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History.

A Centennial celebration is currently underway to mark the acquisition of the Hecox collection and the founding of the Museum. This display includes the original collection, many still kept in the hardwood cabinet built for Laura by her father. There is also a model of the lighthouse she tended for so many years. The Museum is located at 1305 East Cliff Drive, and is open Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. ■