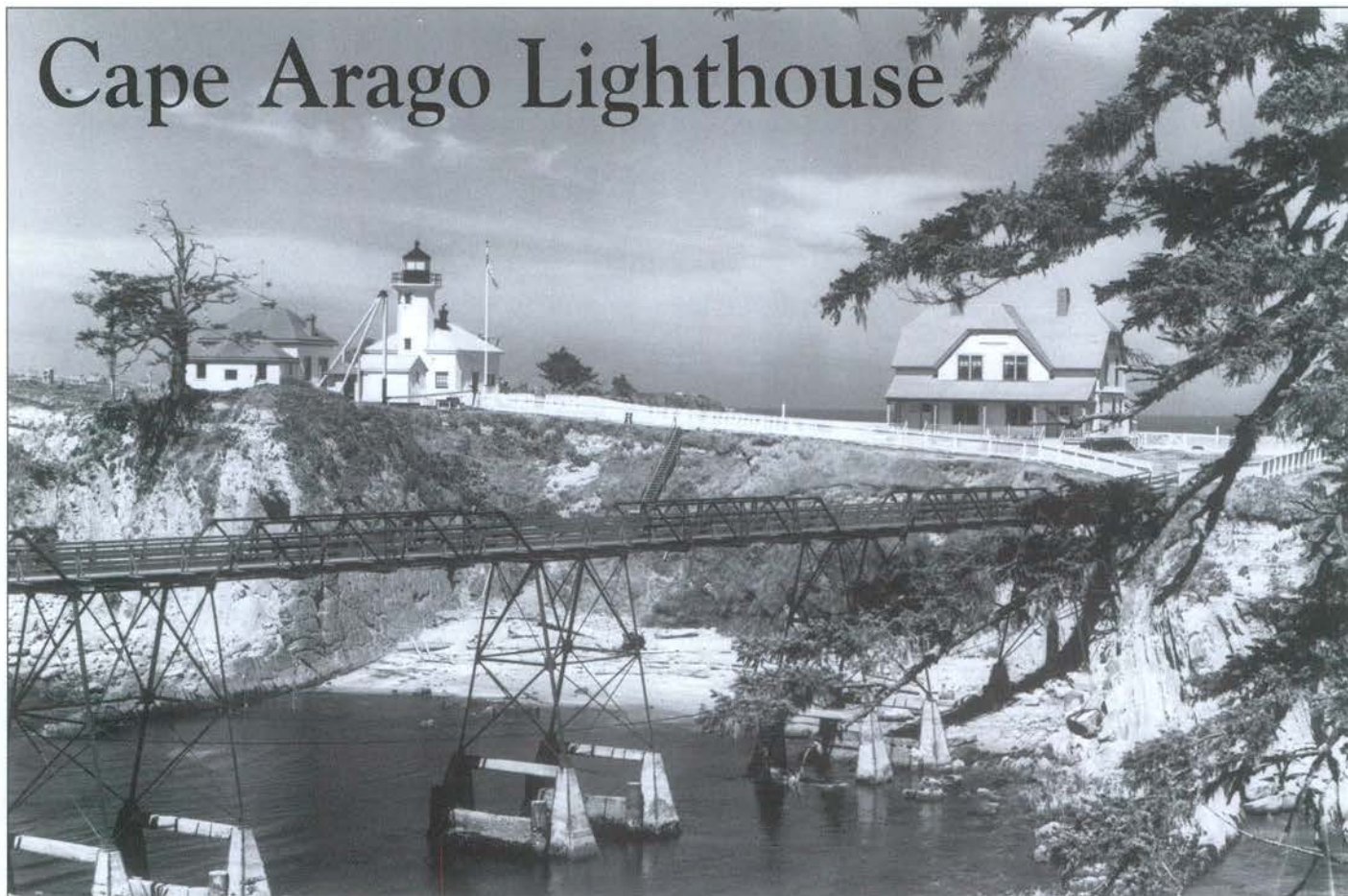


Cape Arago Lighthouse



Cape Arago, OR circa 1930. From left: fog signal building, 3rd lighthouse, 1896 keepers' duplex and bridge. USLHS photo.

By Dr. Stephen Beckham

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In January 3, 1852, a maritime disaster near the entrance to Coos Bay brought the first white residents to the estuary. The *Captain Lincoln*, a coastal steamer carrying U.S. Army personnel to the newly established Fort Orford on Oregon's southwest coast, foundered in a storm and beached on the North Spit of Coos Bay. Although the castaways from this ship camped for nearly five months near their lonely wreck, they eventually left the region. Not until 1853 did white settlers make permanent homes in the land of the Coos Indians.

In the 1850's Coos Bay emerged as an important harbor on Oregon's coast. Its sheltered roadstead and extensive timber and coal resources drew settlers and coastal commerce. The region's river valleys appealed to farmers and stock raisers. On May 19, 1855, the first cargo of coal, a load of 300 tons, passed over the Coos Bay bar. For the next sixty years, coal was a staple export of the harbor. In 1855-56 Henry H. Luse and Asa M. Simpson developed sawmills and shipyards on Coos Bay. Their exports of pilings, lumber, and shingles added to the region's commerce, and the steam tugs produced in their yards provided pilot service on the bar and bay for mariners braving the harbor entrance.

The entrance to the bay, its shifting channels and shoals, and the need for aids to navigation did not receive the attention of the U.S. government until September, 1861. That fall, James S. Lawson of the U.S. Coast Survey, wrote to his superiors in Washington, D.C.: "With the slight information which we

had been able to pick up, before sailing from San Francisco, I declined to risk the vessel by entering Coos Bay until some examination had been made of the bar and channel." Between 1861 and 1865 the Coast Survey carried out a careful analysis of the hydrography of the harbor. The crews from the vessel *Fauntleroy* made 14,094 soundings in the estuary, observed 1,506 angles, and covered an estimated 1564 square miles of the bay's surface.

While the Coast Survey was carrying out its investigations of Coos Bay, Congress funded permanent aids to navigation at the harbor entrance. On July 2, 1864, it passed an act for erecting a lighthouse on Cape Arago and appropriated \$15,000 for the project. The construction was carried out in 1866 and the light was first illuminated on November 1 of that year. Writing about the station in the *Coast Pilot* of 1869, George Davidson remarked:

This structure is on the narrow island; northwest of the extremity of the mainland

of Cape Gregory, and consists of an octagonal wrought iron tower and lantern, painted white, with the dome of the lantern painted red. As seen from seaward, the tower is projected against the dark spruce foliage, and is readily recognized in daytime. The keeper's dwelling is a one-and-a-half story wooden building situated on the southern extremity of the island, about three hundred and fifty yards from the tower.

The light, as first illuminated, was a fourth order Fresnel lens with a focal plane seventy-five feet above the sea.

This lighthouse became the first permanent beacon to assist mariners along the Oregon coast. Congress had earlier appropriated \$15,000 on March 3, 1851, for a lighthouse and fog signal at the mouth of the Umpqua. This appropriation was increased with \$15,000 more on August 3, 1854. The Umpqua Lighthouse was built in 1855-56 and first displayed its light in 1857. However, on February 8, 1861, a freshet in the Umpqua River undermined the brick tower and toppled the lighthouse into the estuary. The Umpqua bar remained without a lighthouse until 1894. In the meantime Congress had provided for a series of other stations along the coast: Cape Blanco (1870), Yaquina Bay (1872), Cape Foulweather (1873), and Tillamook Rock (1881).

Shortly after its construction, the lighthouse at Cape Gregory (known as the Cape Arago Lighthouse), became a popular destination for local tourists. One of the earliest recorded outings occurred in July, 1874, when several residents of Empire City, on the bay, set out for the lighthouse. One of the party wrote:

"At last we arrived at the cape and were met by Messrs. Roberts and Langlois, keepers of the lighthouse, and Mr. Bailey, of Empire, who had preceded us the day before. Suffice it to say, we were cordially welcomed by these gentlemen, whose characteristic kindness and hospitality were too well known to need comment. Most of the party were willing to rest upon arriving at the house; but it was not long before Mr. Bailey, who

seemed to be chief of the culinary department, announced dinner, and I think I never saw people relish victuals more than did our little party of 15 . . . After dinner, some visited the lighthouse; others strolled along the rocky shore in search of shells, and other quaint specimens of the sea; while others took a row out to sea."

Eloquent in his praise of the "lighthouse boys," this anonymous writer concluded: "Strong had been my desire to visit the lighthouse, but never had I conceived the beauty and grandeur of the scenes, presented to the eye, as I saw at Cape Arago."

Despite construction of the lighthouse, the volume of traffic over the Coos Bay bar and the lack of jetties meant that numerous vessels were lost in the nineteenth century. Many of the local residents looked to the keeper and his assistants at the lighthouse to provide life-saving service for those in distress at the harbor entrance. On several occasions in the 1860's and early 1870's the personnel of the station did provide that aid. In stormy weather, however, the crews at the lighthouse often found it impossible to launch their open boat in the wave-tossed inlet between the island and the mainland to go to the



The first Cape Arago Lighthouse constructed in 1866. The small structure under the tower is probably a watch room and the structure behind it, a storage shed. The keeper appears to be wearing a uniform hat, which dates the photo between 1884 and 1896. USLHS photo.

assistance of those aboard a stricken vessel. On February 5, 1876, the Coos Bay News proposed that a life-saving station be constructed at Charleston at the junction of South Slough and Coos Bay and that a telegraph wire be laid from there to the lighthouse. The writer suggested that the lighthouse keepers, seeing a vessel in distress, could telegraph a message to a life-saving crew on the lower bay and those men, in turn, could launch their boat and go to the rescue.

While the telegraph connections were not developed, the Lighthouse Service made substantial improvements to the station in 1876. Crews constructed a low bridge between the mainland and island so that at low tide and in fair weather the station personnel could more easily go ashore. The crews painted the dwelling, replaced the building's roof, renewed the kitchen floor, poured concrete in the cellar floor, constructed a plank walk from the keeper's dwelling to the lighthouse, built a new cistern, and replaced the Franklin Lamp in the lighthouse with a double-wick Funck Lamp.

Within two years, however, high seas tore out the low bridge, carried away the boathouse in the cove, and broke loose part of the tramway on the island, which was used for hoisting supplies from the cove to the dwelling and storehouses. In 1878, the government commissioned a U.S. Life Saving Service station for Coos Bay and located it at the Cape Arago Lighthouse. The service erected a one and one-half story, wood frame crew station on pilings in the beach cove on the east side of the lighthouse island. The station had a keeper but had to rely upon volunteer crews to man the life boat kept at the station. This meant that men from Empire City on Coos Bay had to row down the bay to Charleston, run through the forest over the trail to the lighthouse, cross to the island, then launch the lifeboat and row to the assistance of those wrecked or in danger on the Coos Bay bar.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service station remained at the lighthouse island from 1878 until 1891.

In 1891 the station moved to new quarters two and one-half miles north of the bar on the east side of the harbor's North Spit. For the first time in the station's existence, a full crew was recruited and hired in 1891.

The new site qualified as a first class life boat station with a lifeboat, surfboat, beach apparatus, shot lines, whip lines, and other equipment for assisting mariners in distress. Among the last duties of the men at Cape Arago Lighthouse, in official life-saving activities, was the rescue of fifteen passengers and part of the crew of the steamer *Arago* which wrecked on the south side of the harbor entrance on October 3, 1891. In the spring of 1916, the life-saving crews moved to yet another station, the site near Coos Head at Charleston, Oregon, occupied by the 1950's by the University of Oregon's Institute of Marine Biology. The former boathouse of the Life-Saving Service became the university's lecture hall. Laboratories and offices occupied the former crew quarters.

lighthouse island. Instead, the keeper found his boat caught in a storm. He was swept an estimated ninety miles north and out to sea along the coast before he was at last able to return to his station.

Perhaps Smart's trying experience contributed to the renewed efforts to improve the road from South Slough or Charleston to the lighthouse in 1883. That year the road was improved over much of its length by the construction of culverts and ditches and the grading of steep sections. The crews also cleared nearly an acre of the lighthouse reserve and sowed the field for pasture. They erected a new shed, measuring ten by twenty feet, and placed an estimated 400 feet of picket fence around the area. The area they were clearing was the ancient Coos Indian village of Baldiyasa — the "place where the south wind blows."

Further improvements on the mainland were made during the summer of 1886. Crews continued clearing the forest for pasture and burned enormous piles of logs and brush. They sowed more



The second Cape Arago Lighthouse and 1896 duplex. Note the Life Saving Service station in the cove, behind the bridge. USLHS Photo.

Many trials confronted the men serving at the Cape Arago Lighthouse. One of the most harrowing misadventures befell keeper C.F. Smart in late October, 1881. Hoping to travel to the station in short time from a visit to Empire City, Smart took his small boat out over the bar and attempted to sail directly south to the

than fifty pounds of grass seed and erected a new barn. High tides in November, 1855, destroyed the bridge between the island and the mainland, tore out the boathouse and boatways in the cove, and several damaged the station's boat house on South Slough. In February, 1886, the men built a new boat house near Charleston, including a room for sta-

bling their horses. Also in 1886 crews rebuilt the footbridge to the island. The Light-House Board Annual Report noted:

A temporary foot-bridge about 40 feet long was built across the lowest part of the opening between the island and the mainland, where the bridge as stated above had been. The foot-bridge enables the keepers to cross at stages below half tide, while before a boat was used for all crossings. The tramway for raising supplies from the beach to the bluff was entirely rebuilt.

The clearing of forest for pasture and other improvements led in June, 1886, to a decision that brought great public outcry in the Coos Bay area. From the mid-1850's until the summer of 1886, Gregory Point and nearby Sunset Bay had been the area's most popular beach, campground, and picnic area. Capt. R.S. Littlefield, an official of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, had made the unpopular decision to fence the lighthouse reserve and prohibit any public trespass on the property. Littlefield, pur-

suing the interests of national security, had in January, 1884, secured the withdrawal from public domain of 240 acres at Coos Head at the south side of the harbor entrance. The local press reported that the decision to reserve those lands was to provide rock for jetty purposes and to be the site of fortifications in case of war. Not until the late 1950's did the U.S. Navy finally occupy the property and erect a submarine detection station on the reserved acreage.

Littlefield's actions at the Cape Arago Lighthouse reserve were especially unpopular because the lighthouse lands then encompassed approximately thirty-five acres, including Sunset Bay and the mouth of Big Creek (present Sunset Bay State Park). The Coos Bay News of August 25, 1886, carried the story:

We have been informed that Mr. Smart, the Cape Arago light keeper, has received positive instructions not to allow any unauthorized persons to camp on the United States reservation. Smart is left no discretion in the matter, as he is threatened with discharge in the event of his failing to carry out these instructions. As the best camping places at the mouth of big creek are on the reservation, this will be very annoying to people in Coos and Douglas counties, who desire to avail themselves of the sea breeze and a dip in the ocean during the hot weather. Fortunately there is room for a number of camps on the claim of Henry Nicholls immediately south of the reservation, and we trust that Mr. Nicholls will not be quite so particular as the United States. Before next year steps should be taken to secure this portion of the reservation for the use of campers, as it is one of the most desirable summer resorts in the state.

In spite of local discontent the fencing and securing of the station was carried out in 1886. Barbed-wire fences were placed on the north, west, and south sides of the reservation and joined the fence which ran along the eastern boundary.

Throughout the 1880's, as in previous years, the low bridge to the island created considerable difficulties for the crews and families at the station. Finally, in 1889, the government

began accepting bids for the construction of a high bridge across the inlet to the station. The Light-House Board reported, however, that all were so exorbitant that none was accepted. In 1891 the Light-House Board secured funding for the construction of a cable tramway from the mainland to the island. The project was carried out during the summer and was completed on September 13, 1891. A cable 400 feet long of one inch diameter ran between framed towers or tram houses on the island and the mainland. The cable was anchored in concrete footings. The Light-House Board report for 1892 noted: "Upon the cable a trolley is operated by means of half-inch wire ropes passing over sheaves on each tower. Power is imparted from a winch worked by hand on the island."

A vivid description of the station in this era was recorded by George Davidson in the Pacific Coast Pilot of 1889:

"The structure consists of an octagonal wrought-iron truncated skeleton tower twenty-five feet high from the base to the focal plane. It is painted white and surmounted by lantern and dome painted black. As seen from seaward the tower is projected against the dark foliage and is not readily recognized in day-time at a distance of ten miles. The keeper's dwelling is a wood building of one and one-half stories, painted white with green shutters to the windows, and is situated on the southern extremity of the islet at the edge of the trees, about three hundred and fifty yards southeastward from the tower . . .

"The light is the fourth order of the system of Fresnel and was first exhibited November 1, 1886. It shows from sunset to sunrise a fixed white light varied by a white flash every two minutes . . .

"On the Light-house at Cape Gregory is located a life-saving station with all the usual apparatus in charge of a keeper. It has no permanent crew but depends on the services of volunteers to man the boat when it is needed.

"This station is situated on the southeast side of the narrow, rocky islet upon which the light house is built; it bears southeast half east (SE. 1/2 E.), distant three hundred and sixty yards from the light tower. This islet is separated from





Left – A view of the Cape Arago station from the north with open sea to the right. Note the stiff legged crane and Life Saving Service building in the cove. The 1st (abandoned) light tower can barely be seen at right alongside the 1898 fog signal building.

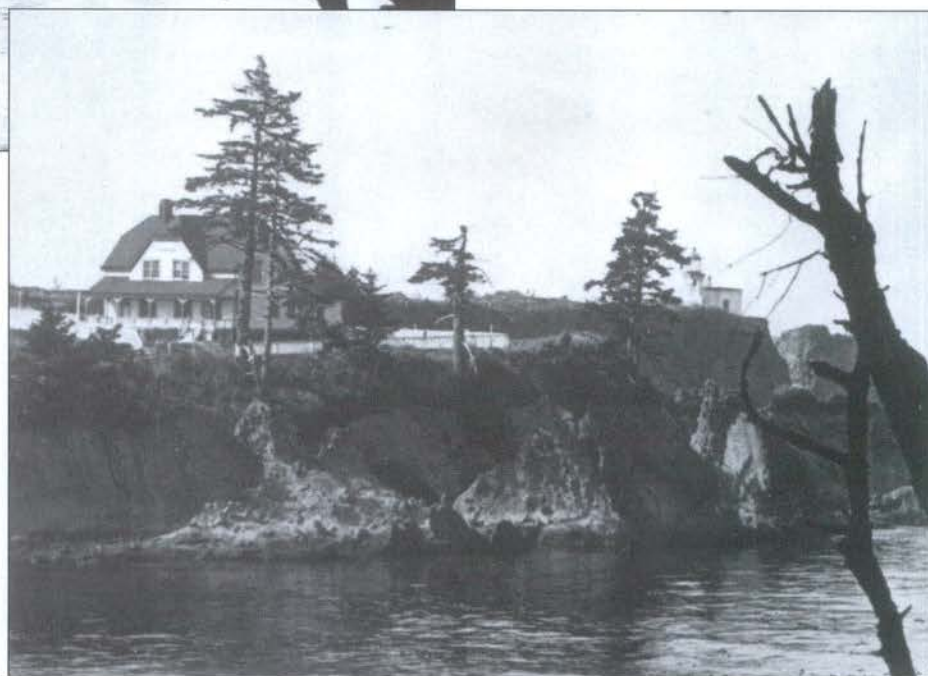
Below – A blowup of the photo at left, shows the old tower and fog signal building. USLHS photos.

the main land by a channel about one hundred yards in width at high water, but more than twenty yards wide at low water. This passage appears to be filled with sunken rocks, and it looks a very bad place from which to launch a boat in heavy weather.”

By 1893 the mounting commerce over the Coos Bay bar had led to increased pressure for adequate jetties. In 1880, William A. Luse, working under government contract, placed 1,384 feet of jetty at Rock Point inside the bar on lower Coos Bay. The massive wood cribs filled with brush and rock were ineffective in creating a scouring action to deepen the harbor entrance. Thus in the mid-1890's the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began erecting the Government Works on the North Spit and over a period of several years, built the North Jetty at the bar.

The needs of coastal vessels included a first class fog signal for the Cape Arago Lighthouse. In 1893, the Light-House Board estimated that one could be installed at the lighthouse for \$5,500. The Board also reviewed the condition of the keepers' quarters erected in 1866:

It was poorly built and ill adapted to accommodate the two keepers with their families; it is old and decayed and on the verge of collapse. If a fog signal is erected here, still another keeper will be needed and his family will need quarters.



The Light House Board noted that on March 3, 1891, Congress authorized the expenditure of \$50,000 to establish a lighthouse at the mouth of the Coquille River, eighteen miles to the south of the Cape Arago station. Since the Coquille Lighthouse would not cost anywhere near that amount, the Board sought permission to take \$15,500 to build new keepers' quarters and a fog signal at Cape Arago.

On August 18, 1894, Congress permitted the expenditure of the \$15,500 for varied improvements at the Cape Arago Lighthouse. The money enabled the Light House Board to obtain a new light tower, a fog signal building, a duplex building, a cistern, tramway, and fencing. Work on the station was carried out in 1896 but was delayed for four

months when a schooner carrying materials wrecked on the coast. The alterations at the station were the most significant since its construction in 1866. This included: (1) enclosing the iron lighthouse tower in brick and covering its exterior with stucco, (2) building a fog horn room of brick on the west or seaward side of the lighthouse on the tip of the island, (3) erecting a one and one-half story, wood frame duplex as quarters for several keepers and families, and (4) constructing new plank walkways and picket fences. Also in 1896, the Board built a new boat house at Charleston for the lighthouse crew and made many improvements in the road to the station. The latter changes involved laying out 224 feet of corduroy road, draining pools of water, and erecting two bridges.

Through much of the nineteenth century, the keepers at the lighthouse burned coal rather than wood to heat their quarters. In his geological reconnaissance of Oregon in the 1890's Joseph S. Diller visited the station and noted: "There is, however, one locality that should be mentioned on account of its geological rather than its economic importance. On the coast, about three-fourths of a mile east of Cape Arago, is a thin bed of coal, from which a number of tons were obtained for use at the Arago lighthouse. It is underestimated with a highly tilted series of shales and thin-bedded sandstones."



The original 1866 Cape Arago tower (encased in brick in 1896) shortly before it was blown up in 1936. *Oregon Journal* photo.

Through the history of the station in the nineteenth century, the difficult access to the island had threatened the lives of those who lived and worked at the lighthouse. On the morning of June 4, 1898, Thomas C. Wyman, his daughter, Joseph Younker of the Life-Saving Service, and a Mr. Caldwell started across the inlet in the cage hanging on the cable tramway. When about halfway across, the cable broke, plunging the four onto the rocks and into the surf sixty feet below. Wyman suffered exten-

sive injuries to his legs and had to have one amputated. The light tender *Columbine*, carrying supplies for the station, was lying off the island at the time of the accident and picked up the injured to carry them in over the bar and to the doctor in Empire City.

The falling of the cableway into the ocean led at least to the construction of a high footbridge between the island and the mainland. The bridge was completed on July 28, 1898, and has served as access to the island to the present. It has, of course, had several major repairs, including the pouring of additional concrete footings to support the piers and iron cylinders filled with concrete for the first high bridge of 1898.

Twice in the twentieth century the government has erected new lighthouses at Gregory Point. Construction crews completed in 1908 the second Cape Arago Lighthouse, a wood frame building on the eastern end of the island near the keepers' quarters. This building, possessing an octagonal tower, necessitated first the topping, and eventually the removal, of the heavy thickets of spruce trees atop the island. Undoubtedly, the clearing of the island hastened erosion, for its surface was

exposed to the buffeting of wind and rain with virtually no vegetation to hold the soil. In 1934 Jake Hillstrom, a Coos Bay contractor, erected the third lighthouse. This sturdy, concrete building rose on the original site of the second lighthouse. The wood frame building of 1908 was moved a short distance farther east where crews removed its tower; this old lighthouse served as the keepers offices until razed in the 1960's. The first lighthouse — at the western tip of the island — was blown up with dynamite in 1936.

Four keepers served long terms at the station in the twentieth century. These were William Denning, a keeper in the 1910's and early 1920's; Ralph Barker, 1923-39; Al Harris, 1939-53; and Art Shaffer, keeper from 1953 until the station was automated in the early 1960's.

The interests of the Coos Indians in the Cape Arago Lighthouse reserve have been consistent and strong. Their families occupied this site at the time of pioneer settlement in 1853; Indian women and children hid on nearby Squaw Island when, in 1856, the U.S. Army began the forced removal of the local Indians to the Umpqua Sub-agency and in 1859 to the Siletz Reservation. Some of the Coos Indians, including Caroline,



The 2nd Cape Arago tower and fog signal building looking north, keepers' duplex in the background. Circa 1908.

a woman who married Keeper Jake Evans, took allotments under the Dawes Act in the vicinity of the lighthouse. The ages-old presence of the Indians at Baldiyasa — their Cape Gregory village — was noticed by many of the visitors to the Cape Argo station in the nineteenth century. One tourist in August, 1891, noted for example:

“The firm, banded sandstone substratum has been tilted up at an angle of nearly 69 degrees. Over it the more recent formation has been laid horizontally, and above all the large shell mounds of the prehistoric Oregonian are piled many feet in thickness in some places.”

Many of the Coos Indians knew that members of their families, indeed grandparents and great grandparents of Indians living around the bay into the twentieth century, were buried in the old village on both the island and the mainland. Ultimately, following his drowning near the lighthouse in 1948, the family of Henry M. Brainard sought to place a marker within the reserve area in his memory. Enrolled members of the Coos tribe, the Brainards found endless resistance to their proposal. Finally, Marguerette Therrien Brainard, the widow, secured the assistance of Senator Wayne Morse who saw through Congress a measure which permitted the family in 1950 to erect the grave marker.

The Coos Indians persisted in their claims for the right to bury their dead in their cemetery. Pointing out that they had never settled for a single cent with the government for the taking of their aboriginal homeland — properties that were “appropriated” without compensation in spite of Oregon’s Organic Act which confirmed all Indian land titles in the territory — they at last found a sympathetic generation of Coast Guard personnel. One June 12, 1975, the Thirteenth District, U.S. Coast Guard, granted an Indian Burial Ground Easement, an irregular parcel of land south of the road and east of the H.F. Transmitter Site, to the Confederated Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Sislaw Indian Tribes.

Since the granting of the cemetery easement, the Confederated Tribes, whose tribal hall and reservation are



The enclosed original tower with first fog signal building (left) circa 1900. The two small structures are, probably, a privy and oil house. National Archives photo.

located in nearby Coos Bay, have held several reincarnates in the burial ground of Indian remains recovered from archaeological sites. Tribal members, including longtime chairman Russell Anderson, have also been buried in this cemetery. Each year in August the tribal members gather at Baldiyasa for their annual salmon bake and general meeting.

The Cape Argo Lighthouse has thus had an intensive amount of human activity in the historic period. Probably about fifty families have resided within the lighthouse reserve since 1866. Many of these families occupied the quarters on the island between 1866 and 1957. Since the razing of the old island quarters in 1957, other government workers and their dependents have lived in a concrete block four-plex on the mainland. Thousands of tourists visited this location during those decades when public access was permitted. In the 1930's the Historic Moderating Records Survey noted that five ledgers of nineteenth century visitor's registrations survived among the Cape Argo Lighthouse papers. More recently the site has been one of renewed Indian activities.

Above all else, the Cape Argo Lighthouse is a visible part of the government aids to transportation and commerce established along the Pacific Coast in the mid-nineteenth century. This station has played a key role in assisting navigation at the Coos Bay bar. Although most of the structures at the site have been razed, the scenic qualities of the location and its commanding view of the harbor entrance contribute to its special interest to the public. An anonymous tourist well summed up this location when in 1891 he wrote: “In its varied beauty, the many items of interest, and in the abundant opportunities it affords for healthful recreation and amusement, Cape Argo, as a pleasure resort, will compare favorably with any other point on the coast of Oregon.”



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Two photos of the 3rd Cape Arago Lighthouse. The one at left was taken by member Sandra Shanklin in 1988. The one below was taken around 1930 by Irving Conklin. Note the lantern in the 1988 photo at left has diagonal astragals (window bars) while the 1930 photo shows vertical astragals. We have no idea why, or when, the lantern was replaced.





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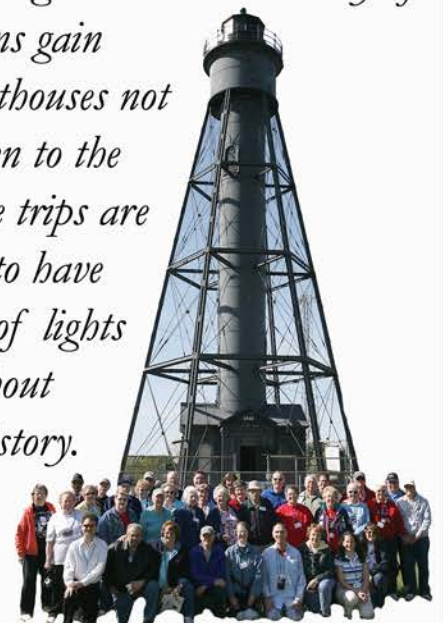
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