POINT WILSON

U.S. LIGHTHOUSE SOCIETY

A Short History

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Point Wilson Lighthouse

By Daryl C. McClary

Point Wilson Lighthouse in 2008. USLHS archive photo.

The Point Wilson Lighthouse, marking the entrance to Admiralty Inlet, was built by the Lighthouse Service. At 51 feet above the water, the lens is the highest of all the lighthouses on Puget Sound. The 1914 lighthouse replaced an earlier wooden lighthouse which was constructed in 1879. The Point Wilson Lighthouse, located in Fort Worden State Park near Port Townsend, is on the National Register of Historic Places and the Washington State Heritage Register. It is one of the most important navigational aids in Washington, a link connecting Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Entering Puget Sound

Point Wilson is situated on the Olympic Peninsula at the most northeastern point of Jefferson County, approximately two miles north of Port Townsend. This low, broad sand-spit, extending over a half-mile into the water, marks the entrance to Admiralty Inlet from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Here, the main shipping channel narrows and makes a sharp turn to the south into Puget Sound. Nearby shoals, heavy rip-tides, and persistent fogs influenced the placing of a lighthouse on Point Wilson in 1879.
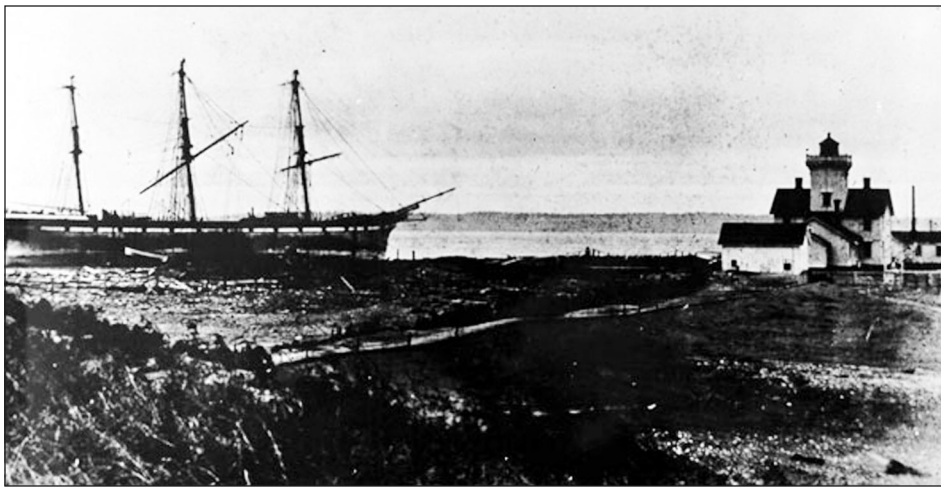
The Chimacum Indians named this point Kam-kam-ho; the

S'Klallum Indians called it Kam-Kum. Captain George Vancouver (1758-1798) of the British Navy named Point Wilson on June 6, 1792, in honor of a colleague, Captain George Wilson.

Safe Harbor at Port Townsend

Founded in 1851, Port Townsend was perfectly situated for sailing ships. At a time when commerce and travel in the Pacific Northwest were almost entirely waterborne, it was the first safe harbor encountered on Puget Sound. In 1854 the Treasury Department moved Washington Territory's Port of Entry into the United States from Olympia to Port Townsend. Sailing ships usually stopped for at least a few hours, both entering and leaving Puget Sound, to clear customs and await favorable winds and tides for continuing their voyage. Port Townsend residents believed their city was destined to become the San Francisco of the Pacific Northwest.
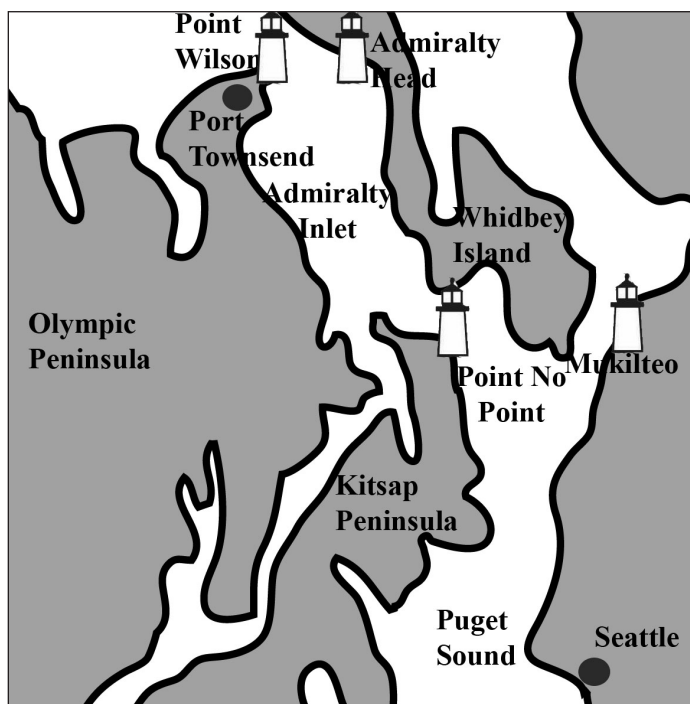
In 1855 Alfred A. Plummer (1822-1883), one of Port Townsend's founders, had a large log building in the town converted into a block-house, named Fort Plummer, for the defense of the new settlement during the Indian War (1855-1856). As captain of the local militia, known as the Port Townsend Guards, Plummer also had a small fortified guard-house built at the point. The outpost, named Fort Wilson, was Port Townsend's early warning system, guarding against surprise attacks by

The original Point Wilson Lighthouse, 1879. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

A Thriving Port

Meanwhile, in Port Townsend ships arrived daily from all over the world, stopping for customs inspection, supplies, refitting, and to load and unload passengers and goods. In 1865 frequent and persistent fogs prompted Captain J. W. Seldon to donate a ship's bell to the new St. Paul Episcopal Church in Port Townsend with the condition the bell be rung during foggy periods. Even though the Customs House had been moved to Port Angeles in 1862, sailing vessels continued to use Port Townsend as their major off-loading point. In 1866 the Customs House was moved back to Port Townsend and remained there until 1911, when the Treasury Department moved the Puget Sound Customs District Headquarters to Seattle.

roving bands of hostile Indians. The primitive fort was abandoned when hostilities ended, and it fell into disrepair.

Marine surveys of Washington's inland waterways, commissioned by the Lighthouse Board in the 1850s, recommended the entrance to Admiralty Inlet be marked with two lighthouses: on Whidbey Island to the east and on Point Wilson to the west. In 1856 Congress appropriated only enough money to build one lighthouse. The Lighthouse Board decided Whidbey Island was best suited to help sailing vessels clear the shallow waters around Point Wilson for the south turn into Admiralty Inlet and Port Townsend. On January 21, 1861, the first lighthouse was established on the 90-foot bluff at Admiralty Head. Eighteen years later a lighthouse with a fog signal was established at Point Wilson.

As vessel traffic increased, shipping interests and the citizens of Port Townsend continued lobbying the Lighthouse Board for a light and fog signal to mark the western shore of Admiralty Inlet and the entrance into Port Townsend's harbor. Eventually Congress appropriated funds to establish a light station on Point Wilson. In 1879 the side-wheeler S. S. *Shubruck*, a 140-foot lighthouse tender, delivered building materials to the point, and construction of the light station began immediately.

The First Lighthouse

The first lighthouse was a square wooden tower built on the roof of the two-story, Cape Cod-style keepers' quarters. In addition, the Lighthouse Service built a fog signal building, housing a boiler and 12-inch steam-powered fog whistle. A fixed fourth-order Fresnel lens, used mainly for shoals, reefs, and harbor entrance lights, was installed in the tower's lantern room. This Fresnel lens directs the light rays into a horizontal beam. A fourth-order Fresnel lens is approximately 2 feet, 4 inches high, and has an inside diameter of 1 foot, 8 inches. The light at Point Wilson, illuminated by a kerosene lamp, showed a fixed white light visible for nine miles from any point along a sweeping 270 degrees of horizon.

The new Point Wilson Light Station was commissioned on December 15, 1879. That night, Laurence Nessel, lighthouse keeper at Admiralty Head, four miles across the inlet, saw the beacon and noted in his log "Light at Point Wilson in operation for first time."

The Lighthouse Service appointed David M. Littlefield (1840-1913), a local resident, to be Point Wilson's first light station keeper, for which he was paid $800 per year. Littlefield, a Civil War veteran, arrived in Port Townsend in 1867 as a farmer. In 1869 he married Maria C. Hastings (1850-1912), the eldest daughter of Loren B. Hastings (1814-1881), one of Port Townsend's founders.

In 1884, after four years on Point Wilson, Littlefield left the Lighthouse Service, settling in Port Townsend. Over his years there, he served the community as the sheriff of Jefferson County, mayor, city councilman, and collector of customs. In 1887 the Littlefields built a house at 1839 Washington Street, overlooking Port Townsend's harbor. It is located within the Port Townsend Historic

Map shows location of Point Wilson Lighthouse in relationship to other lighthouses in the Puget Sound region and the city of Seattle.

Point Wilson, 1897. University of Washington special collections.

sion caused by winter storms, strong currents, and extreme wave action. The Lighthouse Service dumped 1,542 tons of large quarry rocks and riprap on the north side of the point, creating a 1,200-foot breakwater to protect the lighthouse and outbuildings. The damaged areas were refilled with sand and gravel. The Lighthouse Service also installed a backup boiler and fog whistle at the station.

In February 1905, the Point Wilson Light Station was connected to Port Townsend's freshwater supply through Fort Worden. Before, the station keepers had to depend on collecting rainwater from the sheds and buildings for the household and for the boilers. During seasons when rainfall was light, barrels of water had to be brought to the station in barges.

A New Lighthouse

As maritime traffic increased around Puget Sound and through Admiralty Inlet, the importance of the Point Wilson Light Station grew. In 1910 the newly created Bureau of Lighthouses finally received appropriations to build much-needed lighthouses in Puget Sound. The Lighthouse Service decided to replace the aging wooden tower on Point Wilson, and in 1914 it built a 46-foot-tall octagonal concrete and masonry tower with an attached fog signal building just east of the original structure on the most exposed part of the point.

District, listed on the National Park Service's Register of Historic Places (listing No. 76001883).

Mishap of the *David Hoadley*

On December 15, 1880, the 948-ton bark *David Hoadley* ran aground at North Beach on Point Wilson, not far from the lighthouse. The vessel, traveling inbound from San Francisco to Port Gamble in ballast, was driven onto the shoal during a gale. The crew was able to escape over the side of the ship and make it ashore. All efforts to save the *Hoadley* failed. Her hull was too badly damaged. After salvaging the hardware, tackle, and other useable materials, the hull was abandoned on the beach, becoming a local landmark for several years.

The Lighthouse Service tender *Manzanita* arrived at Point Wilson in 1894 to repair the boiler for the steam-powered fog whistle. The ship also brought a new fourth-order Fresnel lens with a revolving apparatus, which was installed in the lantern room. The new lens was an FVF style (fixed varied with flash) which produced a steady white light varied by a red flash every 20 seconds.

Triangle of Fire

In 1896 the federal government started work on the construction of Fort Worden on the high bluffs above the Point Wilson Light Station. Activated in 1902, the imposing fortification was the third of three major Coast Artillery forts built around the turn of the century to protect Puget Sound. Along with Fort Casey at Admiralty Head and Fort Flagler on Marrowstone Island, just south of Port Townsend, the three forts formed a "triangle of fire" that would rain death on any enemy vessels attempting to enter Admiralty Inlet.

By 1904 the Point Wilson Light Station was threatened by ero-

The new lighthouse under construction in 1913. USLHS archive photo.

The original Point Wilson Lighthouse (foreground) with the new lighthouse in the background, 1914. USLHS archive photo.

The fourth-order Fresnel lens was removed from the old tower and installed in the new lighthouse.

The new lens, with its focal plane at the height of 51 feet, was the tallest on Puget Sound. Electricity had arrived at Point Wilson in 1907, and the incandescent oil vapor lamp illuminating the lantern was replaced with a 120-watt electric bulb. The steam-powered fog whistle was retired from service, replaced by a new chime diaphone foghorn, activated by compressed air. After the lighthouse became operational, the wooden tower was removed from the roof of the station keepers' residence. The house was remodeled and continued to be used as a home for the families stationed there.

Tragedy at Point Wilson

At 12:04 a.m. on Friday, April 1, 1921, Point Wilson was the scene of a tragic accident when the 417-foot passenger liner S. S. *Governor*, traveling inbound to Seattle from San Francisco with 240 passengers and crew members, collided with the freighter S. S. *West Hartland*, departing Port Townsend for India. Although the night was clear, the *Governor*'s pilot mistook the *West Hartland*'s running lights for fixed lights on Marrowstone Point and failed to yield the right-of-way. The *West Hartland*'s bow struck the starboard side of the *Governor* amidships, ripping a 10-foot gash in her side. As the *Governor* began taking on water, *West Hartland*'s captain managed to keep the ships together and the hole plugged for several minutes while the *Governor*'s passengers and crew abandoned ship.

Point Wilson's station keeper William J. Thomas, hearing the ships' whistles and sounds of the collision, telephoned authorities in Port Townsend with the information, and rescue efforts were immediately organized. While most of the passengers manned the lifeboats, many were able to climb from the mortally wounded *Governor* onto the bow of the *West Hartland* before the vessels drifted apart. The *Governor*

sank within 30 minutes in 240 feet of water, one mile off Point Wilson, with a loss of eight lives. Escorted by the tugboat *Warrior*, the *West Hartland* steamed slowly to Seattle with all the survivors on board. The *Governor*'s pilot house, ripped off while sinking, was towed into Port Townsend's harbor the following morning.

War Years

On July 7, 1939, Congress eliminated the Bureau of Lighthouses and the U. S. Lighthouse Service, transferring the responsibility for lighthouses and aids to navigation to the U. S. Coast Guard. The civilian lighthouse keepers, allowed to remain in their jobs until retirement, were gradually replaced with Coast Guard personnel.

During World War II (1941-1945), the Point Wilson light was turned off, as a defense for nearby Fort Worden and Puget Sound area. Strategically located, Fort Worden was the headquarters of the Harbor Defense Command that monitored new underwater sonar and sensing devices and radar sites, and coordinated Canadian and U. S. defensive activities in the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound. Fort Worden was home to the 14th Coast Artillery Regiment of the regular army, the 248th Regiment of the Washington National Guard, the 2nd Amphibious Engineers, and miscellaneous Navy personnel.

Point Wilson during WWII. Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard Museum NW.

Fort Worden After the War

In June 1953, the Harbor Defense Command was deactivated and Fort Worden was officially closed, ending 51 years of military jurisdiction. On July 1, 1957, the state of Washington purchased Fort Worden for $127,533 for use as a diagnostic and treatment center for troubled youths.

Point Wilson Lighthouse, 2009. Admiralty Inlet Lighthouse is visible just across the inlet. USLHS archive photo by Chad Kaiser.

ting a signal used in locating a ship's position. Although Coast Guard personnel from Seattle maintained the optic and navigational aids, the *Point Bennett*'s crew was responsible for the station's general maintenance.

In February 1999, the *Point Bennett* was decommissioned, replaced in June 1999 by the new 87-foot cutter *Osprey* (WPB-87307) built at Bollinger Shipyard in Lockport, Louisiana. As recently as 2004 the Coast Guard continued to use the three government-owned houses at the Point Wilson Light Station to billet the *Osprey*'s 10-man crew.

On March 24, 1971, the Point Wilson Lighthouse was officially designated as an historic place by the Washington State Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and listed on the Washington Heritage Register (listing No. EO 003). This same year, the lighthouse was also placed on the National Register of Historic Places (listing No. 71000870) maintained by the National Park Service.

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission acquired most of Fort Worden on September 30, 1971, when the state closed the juvenile treatment center. The 433.53-acre Fort Worden State Park and Conference Center was opened and dedicated on August 18, 1973. Since that time, the Washington State Parks has made the fort's buildings available as conference facilities and recreation housing, and developed full-service camping and recreational facilities at the beach. On March 15, 1974, the National Park Service listed Fort Worden on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic District (listing No. 7400194) and a designated National Historic Landmark.

During the 1960s, the Coast Guard constructed additional housing on Point Wilson for the 10-man crew of the 82-foot patrol boat *Point Bennett* (WPB-82351) stationed in Port Townsend. In the 1970s the Coast Guard erected a 90-foot radar/radio signal tower east of the lighthouse, enabling the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service to monitor and guide ships in north Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. In November 1976, the Coast Guard automated the lighthouse and fog signal and installed a radio-beacon transmit-

Today, the Point Wilson Light Station is being lovingly restored by the U.S. Lighthouse Society who signed a license agreement with the U.S. Coast Guard. The goal is to open all the buildings to the public and interpret the lighthouse with museum style displays. There is also the opportunity for three separate lighthouse vacation rentals on site, one of which is open now. For more information on visiting Point Wilson, renting the vacation house there or supporting the project with a charitable donation, please contact Jeff at Society headquarters by email: jeff@uslhs.org, or by phone: (415) 362-7255.

POINT WILSON
LIGHTHOUSE

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today
or
Give the Gift of Membership!
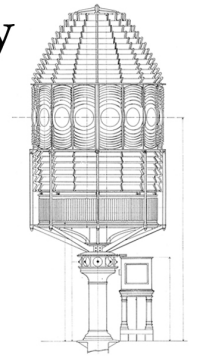
Restoration & Preservation

Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society continues to donate to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. and is proud to have received the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.
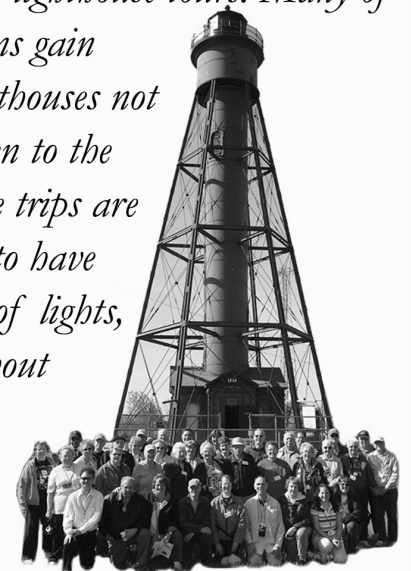
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