

# PACIFIC COAST LIGHTHOUSE VETERAN Peter C. Nelson

*As recalled by Capt. Peter Nelson, carrying the kerosene to light the tower at Point Sur Lighthouse was quite a hike at this rugged, yet picturesque, light station. Look closely and you will see that the large First Order Fresnel lens in the tower was covered to protect it from the harmful rays of the sun. The lens is eighteen feet tall, with the optic portion being almost eight feet tall and over six feet in diameter. In 1978 the lens was removed from the tower and placed on display at the Allen J. Knight Maritime Museum. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)*

**By Timothy Harrison**







*Capt. Peter C. Nelson served in the U. S. Lighthouse Service from 1892 to 1931. He served as a keeper at Point Sur Lighthouse, Ballast Point Lighthouse, Point Diablo Day Beacon, Lime Point Lighthouse and Point Pinos Lighthouse. (Photograph courtesy Susan L. Jones Cota.)*

The January 3, 1931 edition of the San Francisco Examiner made a big deal about Capt. Peter C. Nelson being transferred after nearly 30 years as the lighthouse keeper at California's Lime Point Lighthouse. Since he had served for so long at Lime Point Lighthouse, the newspaper said he had one of the loneliest jobs in the world, but he would be continuing his dedicated work at the Point Pinos Lighthouse. The newspaper said those that knew him at Lime Point considered him a "Straight Shooter."

By the time he was transferred from Lime Point Lighthouse to Point Pinos Lighthouse in Monterey, California, Nelson had already served for 39 years in the U. S. Lighthouse Service. He had enlisted in 1892 and was appointed a 3rd assistant keeper at Point Sur Lighthouse.

The fact that the newspaper had described his job as one of the loneliest jobs in the world amazed him, since he never felt lonely and always had plenty of family members and friends around him. He was quoted as saying, "They must have been thinking about those other lighthouse keepers stationed way out to sea."



*Capt. Peter C. Nelson, with his daughter Myrtle and an unidentified woman at Lime Point Lighthouse Station, California.*

*Because of the thick heavy fog often in the area, Lime Point was built as a fog signal station. The small 300mm beacon behind them served as the light for the station to warn mariners of the area. (Photograph courtesy of Susan L. Jones Cota.)*

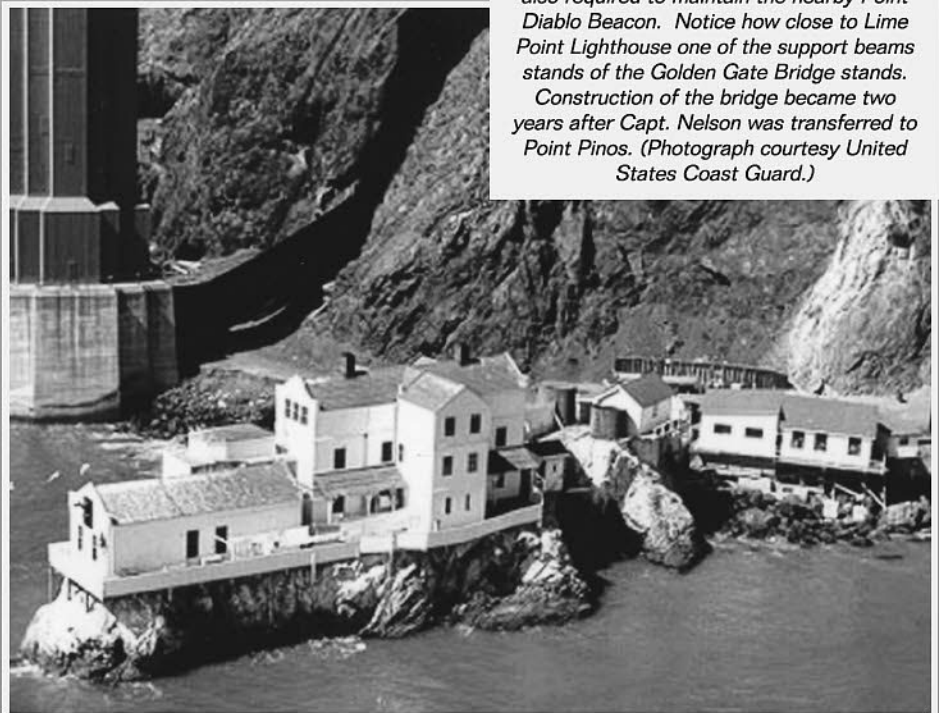


*This unidentified couple posed in front of the lens that once served as the light for California's Lime Point Lighthouse in 1927. (Photograph courtesy of Susan L. Jones Cota.)*

*California's Lime Point Lighthouse and Fog Signal Station where Capt. Peter C. Nelson served at for nearly 30 years until being transferred in 1931 to Point Pinos*

*Lighthouse. Lime Point was built as a fog signal station and began operation in 1883. Because of all machinery, water tanks and coal required to operate the fog signal, large buildings had been built to accommodate the equipment as well as housing for the tow keepers that were assigned to the station. In 1900 a small 300 mm lens lantern was added to the station. The keeper was also required to maintain the nearby Point Diablo Beacon. Notice how close to Lime Point Lighthouse one of the support beams stands of the Golden Gate Bridge stands.*

*Construction of the bridge became two years after Capt. Nelson was transferred to Point Pinos. (Photograph courtesy United States Coast Guard.)*





In 1963, for his 92nd birthday, the Masonic Grand Lodge of California honored Nelson, when he was awarded a gold pin honoring his half-century of membership in Amity-Seal Rock Lodge No. 370, F. & A. M, which he was the oldest of its 555 members. As proud as he was of the award, he was also proud of the fact that he was the oldest living veteran, at that time, of the United States Lighthouse Service.

While stationed at Lime Point Lighthouse in 1906 he and his family watched in horror and sick hearts as San Francisco burned from the many fires caused by the great earthquake. He recalled how the water in San Francisco Bay turn a muddy brown from the force of the earthquake and tons of debris floated by the lighthouse.

His early years as a lighthouse keeper were filled with excitement that was due more to family matters than lighthouse keeping. Both of his children were born at Point Sur Lighthouse. Dr. J.L.D. Roberts, a famous old doctor who tended to the coast people, brought both his son, Ernest, and daughter, Myrtle, into the world in the assistant keeper's house at Point Sur Lighthouse Station. The doctor, who was used to covering rugged terrain, had no trouble getting to the lighthouse in time for the births. When the steamer Los Angeles wrecked on the rocks by the lighthouse, it was also Doctor Roberts who came and spent two days and nights caring for the injured as the keeper's homes were turned into a makeshift hospital.

"It was at Lime Point Lighthouse," Nelson said, "where you really see the ships, especially, since we were so up close." He continued by saying, "But, it's the Pacific Grove Lighthouse, (referring to the Point Pinos Lighthouse) that's the cream of the lighthouse crop of the Pacific Coast."

As well as having served at Point Sur, Lime Point, and Point Pinos Lighthouses, Nelson had also been a keeper at gingerbread style Ballast Point Lighthouse that once stood at Ballast Point in San Diego Harbor.

In a December, 1937 interview about his retirement that was about to take place on January 1, 1938, he said he had seen lots of changes and innovations at the lighthouses. He recalled at Point Sur Lighthouse how he had to haul the



*The families of the some of the lighthouse keepers gathered at Point Sur Lighthouse for some music in the late 1800s. Keeper Peter C. Nelson is shown to the far right holding an accordion. He was also an expert harmonica player. The name of the other lighthouse keeper, shown sitting next to the lady holding a guitar, is unknown. (Photograph courtesy Susan L. Jones Cota.)*



*Although this photo is slightly faded with time, lighthouse keeper Peter C. Nelson and his wife Ida Belle are standing in front of the Point Pinos Lighthouse where they were stationed. (Photograph courtesy Susan L. Jones Cota.)*



*The massive Lime Point Lighthouse and Fog Signal Station near Sausalito, California at the entrance to San Francisco Harbor. Part of the station has since been demolished and the rest of it is now a decaying and forgotten monument to other era. Capt. Peter C. Nelson was stationed here for nearly 30 years. During his tenure the station was in pristine condition. Today, the station is owned by the National Park Service, which has no current plans to save or preserve the structure. (Photograph courtesy National Archives.)*



*Lime Point Lighthouse and Fog Signal Station as it appeared jutting out into San Francisco Harbor before the Golden Gate Bridge was built. (Photograph courtesy Susan L. Jones Cota.)*



kerosene by hand up to the peak where the lighthouse was located. He said, "But it wasn't so much the fuel, but the task of watching the light that was tough in those day. The kerosene lights had a habit of going out or getting ailments that would smoke up the lenses and cause hours of work cleaning them." He continued by saying, "Now there is seldom a failure in the electrically operated lights, but there is always a chance that something might happen, so the keeper must always be ever alert just the same."

One amusing story that was passed down by his children related to the Great San Francisco Earthquake. It seems he still made his children walk the six miles to school, and of course nobody was there.

He found it amusing how the newspapers never paid much attention to his duties as a lighthouse keeper, until that is, when he was transferred from Lime Point Lighthouse to Point Pinos and then again at his retirement. And after his retirement, it seemed people would always ask him questions about lighthouse life. The main thing he would tell them is that it was a good life and he was proud of the Lighthouse Service that he served so faithfully.

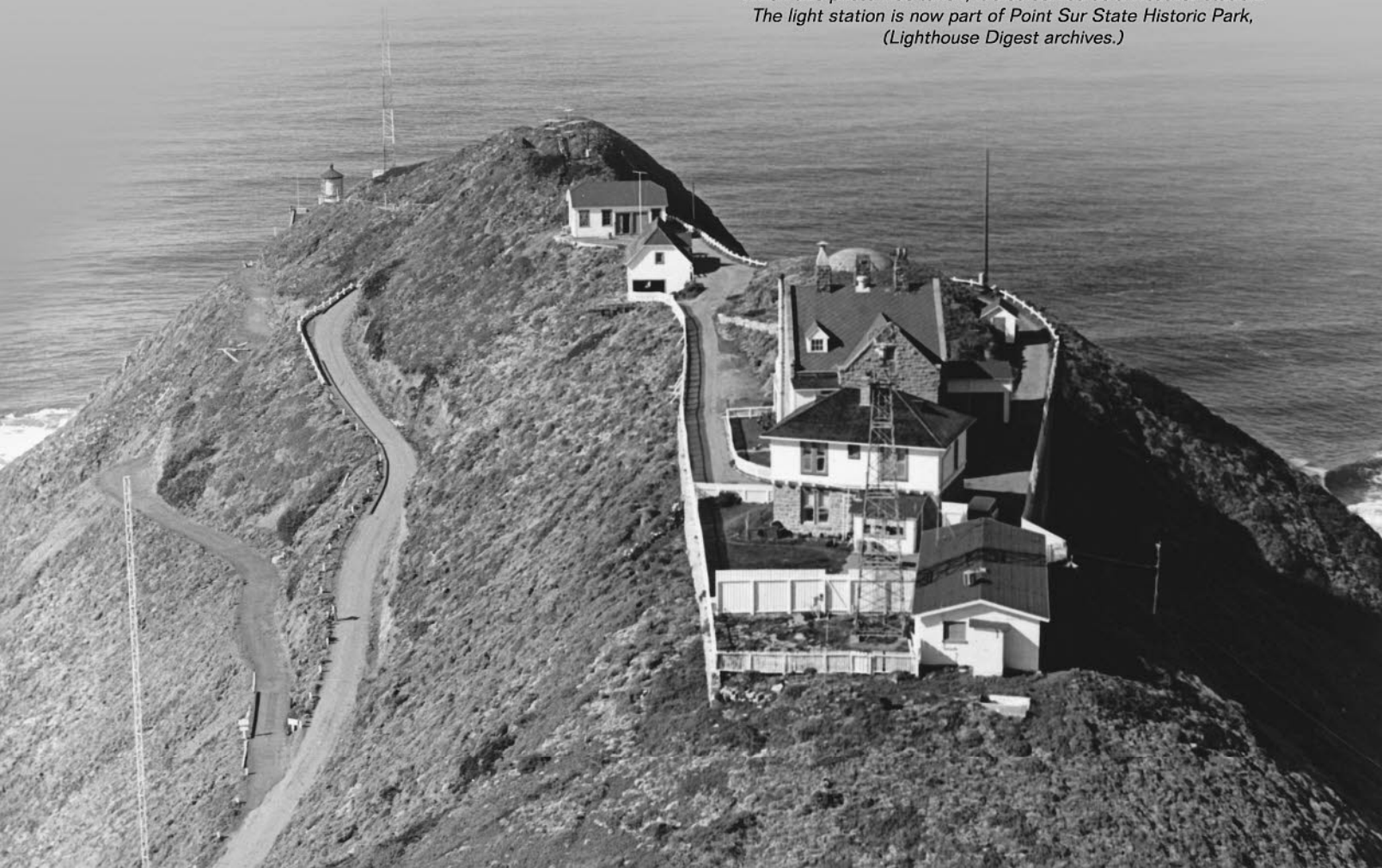
When Nelson died in April of 1964, at the age of 93, his wife Ida Belle had preceded him in death. His daughter, Myrtle, a sister, four grandchildren, five great grandchildren, and one great great grandchild survived him. On his death, the newspapers mentioned how many lighthouses were now automated and required infrequent visits, unlike the days of Capt. Peter C. Nelson, who had been a "Legendary figure in the history of Pacific Coast Lighthouses."



*The assistant keeper's house at California's Point Sur Lighthouse is quite an impressive structure. Two of the men on the porch are dressed in lighthouse keeper uniforms. The interior of the house has been altered many times over the years. Originally, the structure had three separate living quarters but two families had to share one staircase. Peter Nelson started his lighthouse career in 1892 as a 3rd assistant keeper and he served here for 10 years. Nelson's two children were born in this house. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)*

***More photos on next page...***

*An impressive view of California's Point Sur Lighthouse Station. When this photo was taken, it also served as a weather station. The light station is now part of Point Sur State Historic Park, (Lighthouse Digest archives.)*







As well as his duties at Lime Point Lighthouse, keeper Peter Nelson also maintained the Point Diablo Beacon, which was mounted atop a small building that house a fog signal. Located about a mile west of the Lime Point Lighthouse, it was a difficult location to get to. It is now owned by the National Park Service. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)



During his long and illustrious career, Capt. Peter C. Nelson spent less than a year at Ballast Point Lighthouse. The beautiful lighthouse located at Ballast Point in San Diego, CA was demolished in 1961 to make room for a submarine base. (Photograph courtesy of Kenrick A. Claflin & Son Nautical Antiques.)



Capt. Peter C. Nelson at the fountain at Point Pinos Lighthouse, in Monterey, California, where he was the lighthouse keeper in the early 1930s. (Photograph courtesy Susan L. Jones Cota.)



From the appearance of this vintage post card of Point Pinos Lighthouse, it's no wonder, that lighthouse keeper Peter Nelson said this station was the cream of the crop of lighthouse stations on the Pacific coast. Look closely in the left lower section of the image and you'll see the fountain that is shown in the other image with Capt. Nelson standing next to it. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)



Emily Fish, one of California's more famous female lighthouse keepers, served at Point Pinos Lighthouse from 1893 to 1914. She died in at the age of 88 in 1931, about the same time that Capt. Peter C. Nelson arrived at the lighthouse to be the keeper. Point Pinos Lighthouse is now open as a museum. (Photograph by Tom Cisar.)