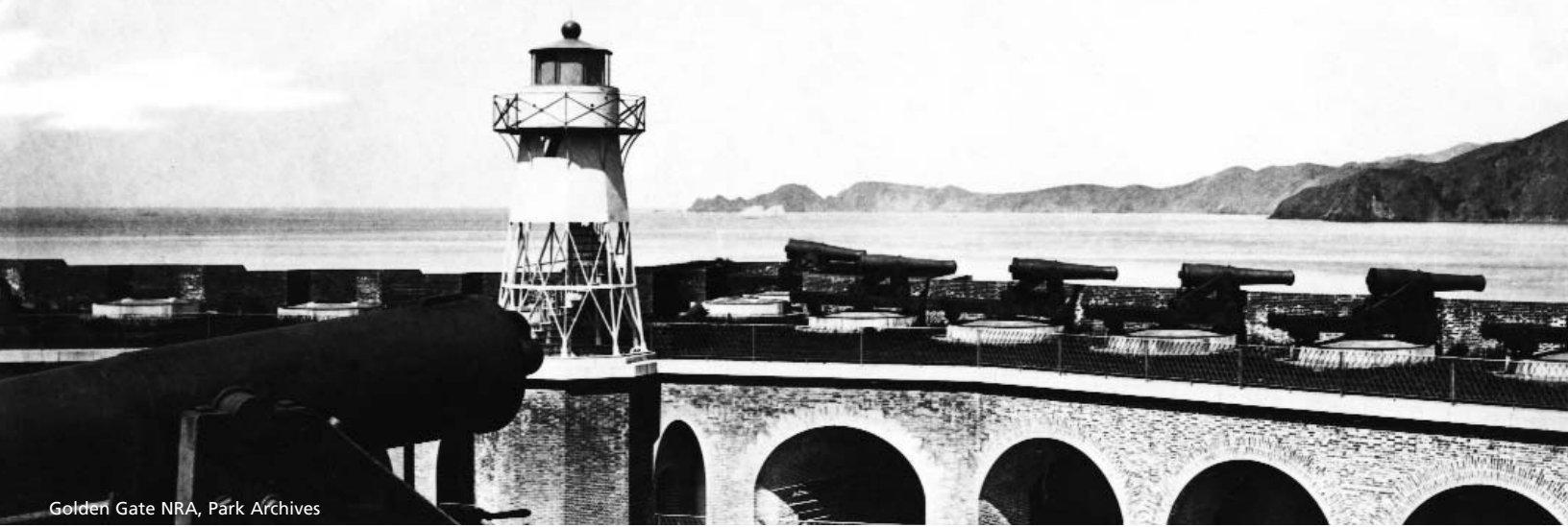


# The Lights of Fort Point

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

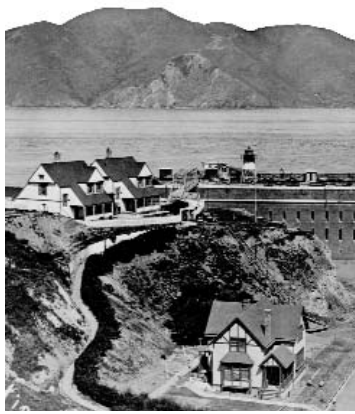
Fort Point National Historic Site



Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives

Over the past 150 years, three lighthouses have stood at this point. With its propensity for high winds and strong currents, as well as submerged shoals and frequent fog, Fort Point was an easy choice as one of the nine sites selected by Congress in 1850 for West Coast lighthouses. In the midst of the Gold Rush, San Francisco's harbor became one of the busiest in the world and navigating the hazardous Golden Gate took a heavy toll, littering the area with shipwrecks.

Today, many visitors may not recognize the steel lighthouse tower atop the fort for what it is... or was—a guiding light for mariners passing through the Golden Gate for nearly 70 years. Living beside the lighthouse and the fort were its keepers, a small community of families that had a starkly different lifestyle than the soldiers of the fort, one protecting merchant shipping and the other guarding against invading ships.



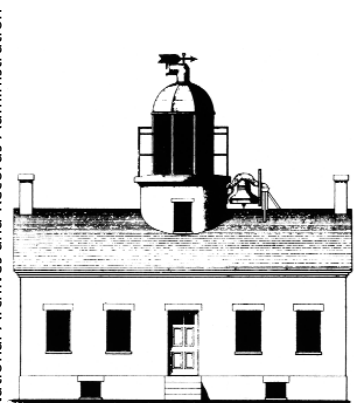
Fort Point light and keepers' houses.

## Lighting the Point

In December 1852, work began on the first of three lighthouses at Fort Point. The first lighthouse was built on the site of the old Spanish fort, Castillo de San Joaquin, on a 90-foot-high cliff. Completed by mid-1853, the light had yet to go into operation when it was torn down to cut away the underlying bluff to build the massive fort.

A second lighthouse was built beside the brick fort, and in March of 1855, sailors first saw a beacon shine from Fort Point. Mounted in a four-sided tower 52 feet above the water, the lantern had the smallest lens on the coast. This second lighthouse served until 1863 when construction of a new sea wall around the fort necessitated its removal.

The third lighthouse, which still stands today, was placed on a metal tower capping one of the fort's circular stairways. At 106 feet above sea level, the light could be seen by sailors along the entire horizon. A larger fourth-order Fresnel lens soon replaced the smaller original lens. The last keeper locked the door to the lighthouse on September 1, 1934, when the rising Golden Gate Bridge blocked the light and muffled the sound of the fog signal. The lighthouse was soon replaced with an automated light and fog signal installed on the south bridge pier.



First lighthouse.



Second lighthouse.



Third lighthouse, 1930s.

## Signals in the Mist



Fog bell on the side of the fort.

Lonely yet comforting, the sounds of fog horns bring a feeling of nostalgia to many San Franciscans. For those on ships negotiating the fog-shrouded Golden Gate, the fog signals meant security and safety. From the 1850s through 1904, a bell chimed from Fort Point when the fog was in. A clockwork mechanism rang the bell, and if the mechanism failed, the keepers or their spouses rang the bell manually, a task requiring them to risk their lives by climbing down a windswept ladder on the side of the fort only to stand below the fort's

cannon muzzles. In fact, by 1869, firing of the guns had badly battered both the fog bell and the keepers' nerves.

The bell was eventually replaced by a fog trumpet after San Francisco's largest maritime disaster. On a foggy morning in 1901, the *City of Rio de Janeiro* struck the rocks off Fort Point, taking over 100 lives as it slipped beneath the waves.

## Keepers of the Light

One could describe the life of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century lighthouse keeper as isolated and monotonous, but it was dangerous as well. Lighthouses were on islands or remote stretches of coast, surrounded by wind and waves. A trip to town or a visit from the lighthouse tender was a major event.

Keepers often passed the time by reading, raising livestock, and gardening. Often the keeper's family lived at the site and helped with the duties. One of the first roles for women in government service was as lighthouse keepers. Fort Point had five female assistant keepers between 1860 and 1870.



A hand-cranked tram lifted supplies to the keepers' houses.

At least two keepers were needed to operate the fort's lighthouse. Keepers scrubbed, dusted, and painted when not performing their main duty of tending the light's oil lamps. The lamps burned lard oil or kerosene, which keepers hauled up narrow stairs until 1910, when incandescent lamps were installed. They also constantly trimmed the lamp's wicks to keep the light bright and the lens clear of smoke. In addition, they wound and maintained the clockwork mechanisms that ran the light and fog bells. The light had to burn at all times, regardless of the weather. The keeper's job was not easy, and the loneliness and hard work were too much for many. The Fort Point lighthouse had seven keepers and 14 assistant keepers in its first ten years, eleven of whom resigned within a year.

## 150 Years of Bay Area Lighthouses

The San Francisco Bay lighthouse system became the most extensive on the West Coast, with 14 lights from the Golden Gate to the Sacramento Delta. The earliest of those lights started operating on Alcatraz Island over 150 years ago.

Three of the first nine lights are now in the Golden Gate National Parks—Alcatraz Island, Fort Point, and Point Bonita. All of the lighthouses around the bay have gone the way of those elsewhere in the world; they have become automated and no longer require keepers. And so is lost a way of life.

*As the steady lenses circle  
With frosty gleam of glass;  
And the clear bell chimes,  
And the oil brims over the lip of the burner,  
Quiet and still at his desk,  
The Lonely Light-Keeper  
Holds his vigil.*

From *The Light-Keeper II*  
by Robert Louis Stevenson



*James Rankin, the fort's best known light keeper, served here for over 40 years (1878 to 1919), living with his family in the keeper's house by the water. Rankin was a local hero known to have saved 18 lives; twice when he was in his mid-70s. In one of his best-known rescues, a couple was drinking and dancing on the sea wall when they fell into the sea. The lady's full skirt kept her afloat, but her husband was not so lucky. In order to swim out to save the couple, Rankin found it necessary to strip off all his clothes, causing the Victorian lady to hysterically scream, "I've never seen a naked man in my life except my husband!"*