

Point Robinson Lighthouse

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

Point Robinson marks the half-way point between Seattle and Tacoma and is the most eastward point in the main shipping channel of Puget Sound. It was named in 1841 by the Charles Wilkes of the American Exploring Expedition in honor of Quartermaster John Robinson. Early sailors labeled this area a “fog net,” because fog often obscured the point creating a navigation hazard.

In 1884, the Lighthouse Service purchased 24 acres of land at the point to build a fog signal as an aid to navigation. At this time the point was very similar to what KVI Beach (Point Heyer) is today, a long sand spit stabilized by drift logs surrounding a salt marsh.

Construction of the fog signal began in June 1884 when the *S. S. Shubrick*, a 140-foot side-wheeler lighthouse tender, delivered building materials, and the fog signal machinery, which had originally been used at Point Adams lighthouse on the Oregon coast. The construction was completed in May 1885 and the facility was dedicated on July 1, 1885. Franklin Tucker was the first station keeper and was housed in the first of the two light keepers quarters, which was built in that year.

In 1887, a kerosene fixed red light on a 25 foot pole was added until a more permanent structure was built. Sailors approaching the light from the south complained that the red light was partially obscured by the keeper’s quarters, so, in 1894 an open tower was built. To stabilize the beach and the tidal mudflats a log bulkhead was built that cut the tide marsh in half and began the process of filling in the marsh. The first photograph is of the 31-foot light platform that was constructed to house the light. The bulkhead is visible in the foreground with a board walkway over it. The fog signal building is next to the tower, and the keepers quarters and boat shed are visible in the background..

After the fog signal was used continuously for 528 hours in 1897, and the keeper shoveled over 35 tons of coal to keep the signal operating, a second keeper was added in 1903, but the second keeper’s quarters were not built until four years later.



Point Robinson Light Tower 1894: courtesy U.S. Coast Guard Archives

Increased vessel traffic on Puget Sound led to the Lighthouse Service receiving appropriations to expand Sound lighthouses. In 1913 the existing Kerosene Shed was built, and in 1915 the current lighthouse was constructed. The same plans were used at both Point Robinson and Alki Point. The 38-foot tower was equipped with a fifth-order Fresnel lens manufactured in Paris by L. Sautter, Lemmonier, giving the light a 12-mile range; and the steam fog signal was replaced with a compressed air signal. The original photograph, taken in 1915, is of the newly constructed lighthouse with the new foghorns clearly visible projecting through the walls, and the marshy area between the lighthouse and the keeper's quarters has been filled. By 1917 the salt marsh completely disappears from drawings of the point and a road was constructed up the hillside to connect the point with the rest of Maury Island.



Point Robinson Lighthouse 1915: courtesy U.S. Coast Guard Archives

The U.S. Lighthouse Service was disbanded in 1939 and the U.S. Coast Guard took responsibility for the lighthouse. Jens Olaf Pedersen, a civilian keeper who served at Point Robinson from 1936 to 1954, was allowed to continue as a keeper until his retirement. His son Jens, who grew up at the lighthouse, still lives on Vashon. The fog signal was updated in 1946, and, in 1959, the U.S. Government surplused 12 acres of the site. When the parcel did not sell, the acreage was transferred to King County to be used as a park.

In 1978, the lighthouse was automated under the Coast Guard's LAMP (Lighthouse Automation and Modernization) Program, and the last Coast Guardsman, Jerry Bolstad, was stationed at Point Robinson in 1989.

That same year, a 100-foot radar tower was built at the point as part of the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Control System that functions to control ship traffic on Puget Sound much in the same way the air traffic control system works. In the

early 1990s two GPS WASS towers were constructed to give ships in the area an accurate GPS reading within 3 feet of their location.

In 1995 King County transferred operation of 11 parks, including Point Robinson, to the Vashon Park District. In the late 1990s Islanders became concerned about to possibility of the Point Robinson site being leased for a commercial operation, so the Friends of Point Robinson was formed. The Friends, under the leadership of Captain Joe Wubbold, worked with Vashon Park District to negotiate a 15-year lease for the site, develop a Master Plan to restore the site for public use, and change their name to The Keepers of Point Robinson.

The Vashon Park District obtained a free long-term lease of the property in 1997, and in 2003, the first of the two Keeper's Quarters were opened to the public as a weekly rental. In 2008 the second Keeper's Quarters was opened as well. That same year, the Fresnel lens was replaced with a replaceable beacon, but the Keepers convinced the Coast Guard to leave the original Fresnel lens in place.'



Point Robinson Lighthouse 2009: photograph by Terry Donnelly

The current photograph of the radar tower was taken in 2009 from the approximate location of the 1894 light platform with the Keepers Quarters in the background for reference. The beach has been pushed 20 yards to the east, straightened and bullheaded to make a straight line between the platform and the Keepers Quarters. What today appears as a typical untouched Puget Sound beach is actually the result of human engineering to modify and stabilize the original beach.

This current photograph shows the lighthouse with the fog horn holes plugged, the new automated fog horn on the left, the replacement light on the lamp room balcony railing, and the WASS, GPS and radar towers in the background. These modifications and changes are all consistent with the original purpose of the lighthouse as an aid to navigation.

Today you can tour the lighthouse, attend the annual Kite Day Festival, celebrate the mid-winter and mid-summer Low Tide Days Festivals, rent either one of the Keepers Quarters for a week, or just use the beach to watch Mount Rainier, passing ships, and the resident orca pods as they transit the point.

1894 Photograph – Courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard Archives

1915 Photograph – Courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard Archives

Current Photographs – Terry Donnelly