

# a Story of Light

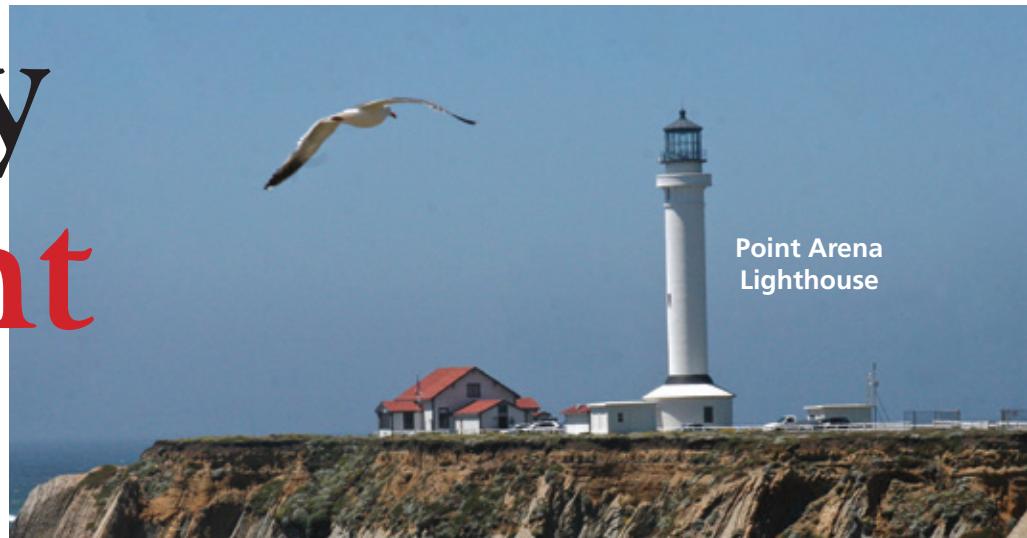
**Lighthouses are magical.** Throughout history, captivating stories recount the lives of stalwart light keepers, working through the night to guide passing ships.

Mendocino County is blessed with two excellent examples of working light stations, both awash in history, both accessible to visitors, both offering excellent accommodations and both run by dedicated volunteers and staff whose passion for lighthouses is infectious.

Point Cabrillo Light Station, two miles north of Mendocino, and the Point Arena Lighthouse, twenty-five miles to the south are repositories of lighthouse history, as well as the history of Native Peoples, early settlers, geography, sea life and wildlife. They are excellent locations for picnics, whale watching, photography, special events and weekend getaways. With planning, both can be visited in a single day, but each has so much to offer that a full day visiting each lighthouse and the surrounding areas would provide a more complete and fulfilling experience.

The lighthouses were established in separate years but for the same reason—to protect late 19th and early 20th century schooners. Ships carried timber southward to the San Francisco area, then returned north, stocked with goods for Mendocino County loggers and settlers. Shipwrecks were common. At the time, the “Dog Water Coast” claimed more ships than any other section of California coastline.

Hauntingly beautiful Fresnel (pronounced “Fra-NELL”) lenses, painstakingly constructed from hand-ground glass prisms were installed atop each lighthouse, rotating to capture and reflect lantern light, sending out unique, flashing “signature” beams identifiable by passing vessels. An exquisite First Order Fresnel lens at the Point Arena Light Station, now viewable inside the Station’s



Point Arena  
Lighthouse

Fog Signal Building Museum weighs 4,700 pounds. Point Cabrillo’s rotating lens is one of only three working Fresnel lenses in the United States.

The daily routine of lighthouse keepers and their families was a grueling affair, requiring much from the keepers and their assistants who resided in homes adjacent to the lighthouses. To keep the light operational, light keepers hauled gallons of oil to the lantern rooms nightly. Lenses had to be free from soot and lantern wicks trimmed. To maintain bellowing fog signals, boilers were stoked with wood for ten hours of operation, the wood chopped and stacked by the keepers—up to 100 cords annually.

Light keeper journals documented weather, visitors, passing ships and supply inventory. Families raised their own food, whitewashed the buildings, tended animals and of course, raised children. Robert Louis Stevenson’s grandfather was an early Light Keeper who wrote that keepers were expected to be “sober and industrious, cleanly in person and linens and orderly in their families.” The first keeper at Point Cabrillo was told in no uncertain terms that this was a “married station.” He wasted no time and proposed to the blacksmith’s daughter, who lived in nearby Mendocino.

## Point Arena Lighthouse

The original Point Arena Lighthouse was erected in 1870, but the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 rendered it useless. The Lighthouse Keeper recounted the harrowing disaster. “A heavy blow first struck the tower... The tower quivered for a few seconds, went far over to the north, came back and

then swung north again.” The precious First Order Fresnel lens crashed to the ground. The coast was plunged into darkness. A temporary lighthouse was erected to keep ships sailing south with precious timber needed to rebuild San Francisco, and astonishingly, by 1908, another lighthouse was erected.

The 115-foot tower, featuring steel reinforced rods encased in 500 cubic yards of concrete became the blueprint for the majority of future lighthouses. Tours of the Lighthouse are available for a very nominal fee, commencing in the Fog Signal Building Museum, continuing up the 145 Lighthouse stairs and concluding within the Lantern Room, where knowledgeable guides and docents outline Lighthouse history, answer questions and point out geologic features. The view from the Lantern Room is nothing short of spectacular.

A wonderful gift shop is housed in the Fog Signal Building Museum. Self-guided tour booklets are available. The museum highlights the history of the first lighthouse, constructed by Egyptian Pharaohs, and documents the extensive renovation of the Point Arena Lighthouse, completed in 2010 with support from the California Historical and Cultural Endowment and generous community matching funds.

The site’s renovation included upgrades to the Lighthouse and the arduous removal and meticulous reassembly of the Fresnel lens and its permanent installation within the museum. A log of the “Century of Wrecks” from 1850 to 1950 underscores the profound role lighthouses played ensuring maritime safety. In 1941, Head Light Keeper Bill Owens observed Japanese submarines

in the waters off Point Arena. The Navy initially discounted his report, until the sub torpedoed a tanker. Five soldiers were killed, and years later the Navy acknowledged the presence of enemy vessels only yards from American soil.

The museum also contains a pictorial history of the Point Arena area, a list of the 22 principal keepers from 1886 to 1941 and many original light station features.

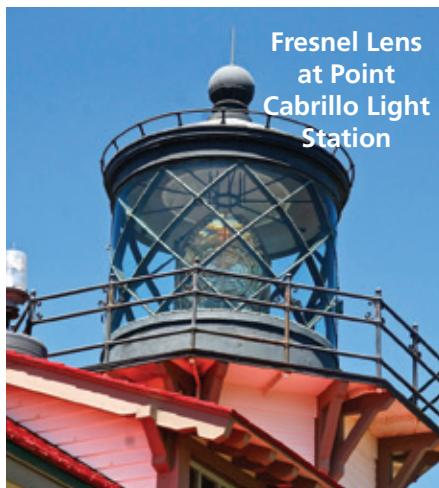
Six charming units, all with whitewater views have replaced the original Keeper's quarters. They are available for accommodation, some with pet-friendly and full-kitchen options. Each cottage is completely furnished with TempurPedic mattresses, wood burning or gas fireplaces, television and DVD's. The Assistant Keeper's House accommodates up to 6 people, and other cottages accommodate up to 2 persons.

Every full moon, Lighthouse docents offer a rare opportunity to visit the lighthouse by moonlight. Sip champagne or sparkling soda, enjoy snacks and keep an etched Champagne flute as your souvenir, along with memories of gazing upon the moonlit seascape from the Lantern Room. Reservations are required.

Lighthouse lectures take place on a regular basis and cover a variety of subjects from seabird migrations to climate change. Detailed information about upcoming events and accommodations is available on the Station's website.

### Point Cabrillo Light Station

The Point Cabrillo Light Station was first illuminated in 1909 following the San Francisco earthquake. It is now operated through a partnership between the Coast Guard, California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the non-profit Point Cabrillo Light Keepers Association. A gently



Fresnel Lens at Point Cabrillo Light Station

sloping, half mile paved road takes visitors to the Light Station from the main parking area, traversing portions of the 270-acre nature preserve, a blend of coastal prairie and ocean headlands.

Those with mobility issues may be dropped off at the Light Station parking area. Drivers may then return vehicles to the main parking lot and walk to the Light Station, as parking is extremely limited. The paved road ends in front of the charming Light Station, Museum and Gift Shop.

The Light Station didn't need to be a tall tower, as sea bluffs provided enough height for the signal to be seen by passing ships. The 107-year-old Third Order Fresnel Lens flashes every ten seconds. A motorized light bulb replaced the lens in 1937, but through a concerted community effort, the lens was returned to the Station and the beginning of an overall site-wide restoration began in 1999.

In the Light Station Museum, the story of the Frolic, one of the most important shipwrecks in California history, is displayed. A discovery of Chinese porcelain in Pomo

Indian home sites miles from the coast led archeologists on a ten-year study revealing little-known details of maritime commerce, slave and opium trading, and the North Coast's economic development. A 15-minute stroll along the headlands takes visitors to Frolic Beach, a family-friendly cove reached by a series of stairs.

Along with maintaining the Light Station, the Lightkeeper's Association restored the original Light Keeper's houses—excellent examples of Craftsman architecture. One of the homes is now a museum, furnished with period household items and décor from the period. The restored blacksmith's shop now houses a 250-gallon aquarium displaying local marine life and several exhibits about the many oceanic and land-based animals and plant life living near the Station.

The Head Light Keeper's house, now called the Lighthouse Inn is a beautiful 4-bedroom accommodation, decorated in period furnishings. The Assistant Keeper's home is a 3-bedroom house, both of which have state-of-the-art kitchens and fabulous views. Two one-bedroom cottages behind the Inn are wheelchair-accessible and pet-friendly. The Inn won the Governor's Award for Historic Preservation and the Outstanding Historic Preservation Project from the California Preservation Foundation in 2007.

On Saturday, September 24, the last tour of the Station's Fresnel lens for the season will take place. This is the final opportunity this year to climb into the Lantern Room and view to the stunning lens up close. Lens tours are offered only eight days each year. Tours are offered from 10:00 am until 4:00 pm. Tickets are \$5.00 per person, with fees supporting the lighthouse maintenance fund. Please note that children must be at least 42 inches tall to participate.

**Story & Photos by Carole Brodsky**



Point Cabrillo Light Station

#### Point Cabrillo Light Station

45300 Lighthouse Road,  
north of Mendocino Village  
(707) 937-6123  
www.pointcabrillo.org  
Open daily from 11:00 to 4:00.  
Adjacent State Park open sunrise to sunset.

#### Point Arena Lighthouse

45500 Lighthouse Road, north of Point Arena  
(877) 725-4448 or (707) 882-2809  
www.pointarenalighthouse.com  
Open daily, except Thanksgiving and Christmas.  
10:00-4:00 Memorial Day through Labor Day  
and until 3:00 in winter.