THE KEEPER'S LOG

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ELDRED ROCK LIGHTHOUSE
ALASKA'S OLDEST ORIGINAL LIGHTHOUSE

By Elinor DeWire

Gold! Its discovery in August 1896 along the Klondike River in Alaska set off the Klondike Gold Rush and spurred construction of coastal towns along the Inside Passage of British Columbia and Alaska. Eventually, the route north was marked with fog signals, buoys, and lighthouses, but not before tragedy and turmoil tainted the story. Death and disappointment came first, followed by struggle and uncertainty. Nowhere are those tales more vividly preserved than in the century-old Eldred Rock Lighthouse.

Today it shines a beacon over less turbulent times and is a favorite subject for camera-toting tourists aboard ferries and cruise ships. Fishing vessels pass it too, along with freighters and tankers and pleasure craft, all offering a subtle salute. Eldred Rock may not have gained a foothold on the Alaska license plate or state flag, but it's an emblem of America's Icebox and one of its most beloved pioneer structures.

The Eldred Rock tale really began a decade before the lighthouse was built, when gold fever inflamed the nation and the huge territory known as "Seward's Folly" became every fortune-hunter's dream. The stampede of manic prospectors heading for Alaska in 1897 numbered more than 100,000 as they responded to hyperbolic accounts of gold-glittering rivers and fast fortunes. Among the more absurd reports was a notice in a San Francisco newspaper that claimed the Yukon yielded "nuggets as big as potatoes."

The only access to the goldfields, other than to trek thousands of miles overland from the east, was by ship. San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Victoria, and Vancouver were the popular staging points. The shortest route to Alaska from any of these ports was via the Inside Passage, a twisting, thousand-plus mile course through Washington and British Columbia. The ports of Skagway and Dyea, at the north end of Lynn Canal, were the end of the water route. From there, prospectors climbed a steep ice-carved stairway to Chilkoot Pass and began their long walk to the Yukon River where a boat took them the final leg to the Klondike. Or, they could take the longer, but less arduous route through White Pass.

Much of the lighthouse construction in the Pacific Northwest at this time resulted because of increased shipping traffic associated with the gold rush and the many tragic shipwrecks that might have been avoided had navigational aids been in place earlier. Sailing or steaming north to Alaska was treacherous business. Much of the coastline was uncharted and notorious Pacific storms and fogs worried even the most seasoned mariners. On the one hand, the intricate waterways of the Inside Passage were protected from the full force of Pacific weather. But the labyrinthine route was fraught with perils—rocks and shoals, tiny islets, tricky currents, heavy fogs, and big tides. Additionally, the steep mountains flanking the waterways funneled storms and intensified winds.



Copying a style adopted for the pioneering lighthouses of Alaska, the octagonal wooden Eldred Rock Lighthouse went into service in Lynn Canal in the summer of 1906. The disastrous wreck of the *Clara Nevada*, nearly a decade earlier during the mad Klondike Gold Rush, was a grim incentive to build the lighthouse. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

One Lynn Canal shipwreck in particular was gruesome. The *Clara Nevada*, formerly a Coast & Geodetic Survey research ship, was refitted in 1897 for use by the Pacific & Alaska Transportation Company to haul passengers from Seattle to Skagway. The 150-foot-long ship was steam powered but had three

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masts and a full complement of sails in case her motive power failed. She was flippantly named to honor a popular western actress of the day to appeal to the rough-and-rowdy prospectors seeking passage to Alaska. Sailors, who often were superstitious about ship names, took offense and thought she was cursed.

The *Clara Nevada*'s first gold rush trip began January 26, 1898, with a crew of 40 and 165 passengers. The ship made it to Skagway but not without incident. She slammed another vessel as she departed Seattle and then rammed the wharf at Port Townsend, Washington. Newspapers described her crew as unruly drunkards. What the public didn't know was that the *Clara Nevada* had serious corrosion problems in her double hull, a fact that her owners kept quiet.

The ship dropped her passengers at Skagway, reloaded, and on the afternoon of February 5, 1898, headed south out of Chilkoot Inlet into Lynn Canal, aiming for the Inside Passage and Juneau. The exact number of passengers aboard is still unknown; estimates range from 25 to 150. Ship's manifests at this time were hurriedly prepared, or not at all—examples of overlooked details in the heated frenzy of gold seeking. Some of the *Clara Nevada*'s passengers may have been carrying gold, and a few sources mention an illegal cargo of dynamite. Steven C. Levi's new book, *The* Clara Nevada*: Gold, Greed, Murder and Alaska's Inside Passage*, says there were 165 passengers aboard and 15 tons of dynamite destined for a mining operation at Douglas, Alaska.

As darkness descended over Lynn Canal, the wind increased, aggravated by the canal's funnel effect, and a light snow began to fall. Within hours there were blizzard conditions and hurricane force Taku winds estimated at 90 mph blowing from the south and waves of 15 to 20 feet high roaring up the canal. The three-masted *Clara Nevada*, described by one writer as "a tired ship with an incompetent crew," probably ran her engines full throttle to make headway into the storm. Somehow, she steamed off course and hit a rock a few hundred yards north of Eldred Rock. Witnesses on shore reported a flash of light, which could have been the rumored dynamite or the ship's old boilers exploding as the corroded hull broke. Either way, the steamer's hull split open and she sank rapidly in just 20 feet of water. Newspapers reported that all aboard perished.



The ill-fated *Clara Nevada*. Photo courtesy of the Jim Gibbs collection.

The cause of the wreck still remains a mystery. Certainly, the vessel was in poor condition, and perhaps it was overloaded too, as were many ships pressed into service for the gold rush. Customs officers in Dyea, Alaska, were quoted as saying, "Nearly every vessel arriving here carried twice the passengers the law allowed…and many of them are condemned craft." The Collector of Customs in Skagway sent a ship to Eldred Rock to investigate the sinking. Much debris was found, some of it identified as belonging to the *Clara Nevada*. On Eldred Rock itself were paw prints, thought to be those of a dog that escaped the wreck and swam to shore.

There were other signs of life as well, evidence that has led some historians to believe there might have been foul play on the *Clara Nevada*. Despite reports that everyone aboard perished, two of the crew mysteriously reappeared. The captain of the ship supposedly was later discovered working on an Alaskan riverboat, and the ship's fireman showed up in the Nome goldfields. Author Steven Levi believes these men escaped in a skiff that was found tied up along shore and made off with the gold he believes the ship carried. Official accounts of the wreck, however, reported no survivors. The only body recovered was that of George Foster Beck, the ship's purser. Newspapers reported upwards of $300,000 in gold on



An aerial view of Eldred Rock shows the light station toward the end of its staffed years. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

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Eldred Rock's fourth-order clamshell lens was removed in 1973 and later loaned to the Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center in Haines, Alaska. Photo courtesy of Kraig Anderson.

board, none of it ever recovered.

Regardless of the controversy, public outcry over the incident was strong. Merchants and ship owners demanded a lighthouse be placed on Eldred Rock, a 2.4-acre obstacle in busy Lynn Canal. The rock had been named in 1880 by cartographer and geologist Marcus Baker for his wife, Sarah Eldred. The U.S. Lighthouse Board agreed that Eldred Rock was prime lighthouse real estate, but the federal government was financially burdened in the late 1890s with numerous projects and expenditures, including the Spanish-American war. In 1899 a lighthouse budget was earmarked for 11 dangerous sites in Alaska. Eldred Rock was among them but not at the top of the list, despite the *Clara Nevada* incident.

Fiscal promises seldom are timely. It was May 1905 until funds were available for Eldred Rock. An ambitious and naïve Lighthouse Board thought the light station could be completed before the next winter. As with many projects in Alaska, engineers in Washington, D.C., underestimated the weather conditions in the Pacific Northwest between October and April. Storms, fog, and winter winds stalled the work. It was June 1906 before the lighthouse went into service. In the meantime, a stake light had to suffice. The official "Notice to Mariners" put out by the Lighthouse Board in May 1905 said:

> Light to be established—About September 10, 1905, a temporary fixed white lens-lantern light, suspended from an arm on a stake, will be established on the eastern side of Eldred Rock, eastern side of Lynn Canal, about 7½ miles N. 170 W. true from Point Sherman light station. The light will be 40 feet above the sea and will illuminate 270° of the horizon, the dark sector covering Sullivan Island.

This temporary light served while construction of the current Eldred Rock Lighthouse began. Following a popular design for early Alaskan sentinels, the mostly wooden, 56-foot lighthouse had an octagonal shape with a pyramidal roof. Its 52-foot diameter and short light tower gave it a squat appearance. The bottom story was concrete, topped by a white wooden second story and gray wooden tower rising from the roof. The kerosene beacon, a fourth-order 2,100-candlepower flashing clamshell Fresnel lens made in Paris by Barbier, Benard, and Turenne, revolved using a weight system and sent its beams more than 15 miles over Lynn Canal from a focal plane of 91 feet above water. A red panel inside the lens helped create its signature red and white flash.

On the north side of the islet about 150 feet from the lighthouse was a single-story, rectangular boathouse with a derrick and tramway for bringing up supplies. The first-class fog signal, an automatic air siren, was housed in the base of the lighthouse and, surely, was the bane of the light's three keepers as they slept on the second floor above it. It was powered by gasoline compressors. The siren's shrill shrieks could be heard for several miles, depending on air density, and often bounced off the high fjord walls of the canal, producing a peculiar series of echoes.

Nils Adamson was appointed the first principal keeper of the all-male crew, which included assistant keepers Scottie Currie and M. Selander. Adamson had served at Desdemona Sands Lighthouse in the Columbia River off Astoria—a wooden sentinel on stilts standing on a sandbar in the river—before transferring to Eldred Rock. He understood the loneliness and tedium of lightkeeping on a water-bound site, but the new Alaska assignment would test his mettle and leave him emotionally drained. It was miles from civilization, whereas Desdemona Sands Lighthouse was within sight of a busy port city, and the weather at Eldred Rock was much worse than anything Adamson had experienced at his previous assignment. Interminable rain and fog, punctuated by heavy storms, was the order of business in Lynn Canal from October through May. Complicating matters, the three Eldred Rock keepers were required to tend several minor markers in the area, including Point Sherman Light Station, eight miles away. This meant launching the small station boat in all kinds of weather.

The flip side was that Lynn Canal enjoyed pleasant summer days with long periods of daylight. The keepers took advantage of the long days by growing vegetables of enormous size, fishing when the salmon ran thick and fat, and rowing to the shore to hunt. Though the lighthouse tender visited the lighthouse as regularly as possible, in winter



Eldred Rock's inaugural keepers, Nils Adamson (left) and first assistant Scottie Currie donned their wool dress uniforms for this 1909 photo. Though seasoned lightkeepers, they had no inkling of the tragic price the light station would exact from its first keepers. Photo courtesy of the Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center.

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the stops were less frequent, made risky by bad weather. It paid to have a good stock of provisions in the lighthouse pantry. The men feasted on elk, moose, bear, and fish, plus the garden fare they canned.

On March 1, 1908, a big storm swept up Lynn Canal. The keepers reported that the station shuddered briefly during the storm, perhaps from an earthquake. A mix of heavy rain, wet snow, and wind kept the lighthouse crew inside for hours. When the men finally emerged the next morning after the storm, to their surprise, the masts of a ship were seen protruding from the water on the north end of Eldred Rock. It was the *Clara Nevada*, eerily raised from her watery grave by large submarine storm currents. The ship remained visible only a few hours before another blow pushed her under.

A much worse incident in 1910 proved tragic for two of the keepers. On February 26 assistants Currie and Selander went to Point Sherman in the launch. The weather was quiet, with a few wispy snowflakes in the air. After tending the beacon and making some repairs, they stayed for the night. The next day the two men set out for home at about 4 p.m., after dark. They never arrived at Eldred Rock.



Like most lightkeepers, Scottie Currie was proud of his work and his brass-buttoned uniform. An undated portrait captured him half-smiling with one hand in his pocket. Not long afterward, he vanished from the U.S. Lighthouse Board record books, presumed drowned in Lynn Canal. Photo courtesy the Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center.

After three days, a distraught Adamson rowed out to a passing ship and beseeched the crew to alert authorities that his assistants were missing. Two days later, the station boat was located "with all gear gone excepting mast, sail & anchor." Adamson felt his assistants had somehow drowned: "I, myself, am unable to account for any accident that could have happened to them as there was no wind to speak of and a smooth sea & in my opinion they should have reached home easily by 8:00 p.m., though they had an ebb tide to contend with."

Adamson's anguish over the loss of his comrades eventually drove him to resign from his post. For almost a year after the incident, he searched for the two men whenever time allowed. At night, sleepless and haunted by the unexplained loss, he would rise and walk about the station calling their names. On January 5, 1911, he left Eldred Rock and returned to Astoria. Later, he was appointed to Cape Arago Lighthouse in Coos Bay, Oregon.

Keeper A. Jewett took over the lighthouse duties after Adamson, but only for year. A succession of short-term keepers followed. The isolation and weather may have been a factor in the frequent turnover of crew. Principal keeper R. McKelm and his assistant, W.A. Shoemaker, were praised in 1915 for rescuing two men in a disabled launch. They fed the castaways and let them rest at the lighthouse before transporting them 18 miles to Fort William H. Seward. Shoemaker hauled the broken-down launch behind the lighthouse boat. Meanwhile, McKelm stayed behind and endured a fierce three-day storm alone on the lighthouse.

Improvements were made in the 1920s with the addition of several wooden outbuildings for storage and tools. Principal Keeper N.C. Monsen was mentioned in the *Lighthouse Service Bulletin* in 1921 for towing a disabled boat more than eight miles up the canal for repairs. Yet, the light station remained isolated and was considered one of the nation's most difficult assignments. The claim was proven in the mid-1930s when a keeper died at the lighthouse because no help could reach Eldred Rock for 10 days during a stretch of severe weather. The tragedy spurred more modernization. In the late 1930s electric generators were installed, which allowed the installation of a radio tower for quicker communications and brought power to the beacon and quarters.

By World War II, with the U.S. Coast Guard now in charge of lighthouses, Eldred Rock Lighthouse finally had a few creature comforts and better communications with shore. Concerns about a mainland attack, especially after the Japanese assaults on Dutch Harbor, Attu, and Kiska in June 1942, resulted in additional staff at the lighthouse. Three Coast Guard watch-standers rotated eight-hour shifts to keep an eye on Lynn Canal 24 hours a day. There also were dogs at the lighthouse—Coast Guard-approved, four-footed keepers that provided companionship and did their own version of watch-standing.

Coast Guard lightkeepers—human, canine, and even feline—continued to staff the station after the war. Eldred Rock remained a "stag station" with all-male crews that rotated duty often, due to the tedium. An engineer was always assigned to the station to maintain the generators and fog signal compressors. Meals were the highlight of the day. The men took turns working as the station cook for a month at a time. As ship traffic increased into Skagway and Haines, including the ferries and their exuberant, waving passengers, and more modern conveniences came to the light station, the crew felt less isolated.

One Coast Guard keeper lamented the dearth of trees on Eldred Rock. When the lighthouse was built, all trees were cut down and none were planted until Gordon Huggins became the station engineer in



Skagway and Dyea at the northern end of Lynn Canal were the destination ports for Klondike ships and their gold-hungry passengers. This March 1898 image of Dyea shows the crowded wharf area and the hastily-built wooden shacks that handled incoming cargo and passengers. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

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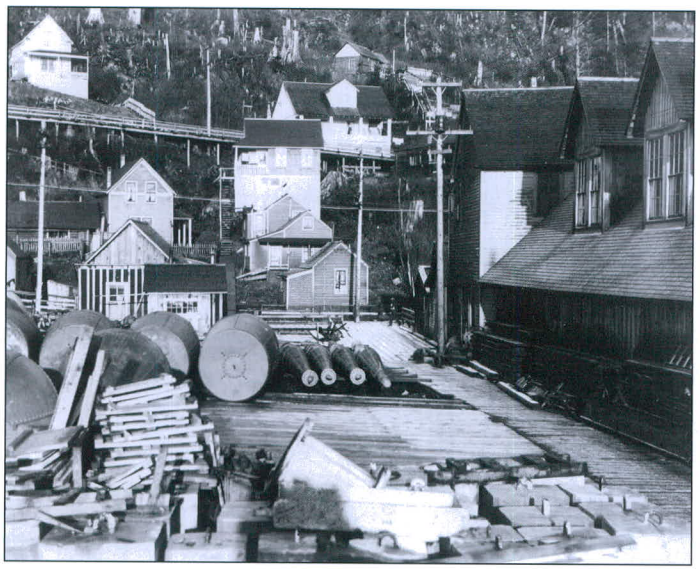




Dwarfed by the steep, high, snow-capped walls of Lynn Canal, Eldred Rock Lighthouse is an emblem of the continuing struggle to ensure safety on the Inside Passage of Alaska. The station's remoteness and quaint character are evident in this montage of photos, as are the mercurial moods of the water surrounding it.

Top: Photo by Peter Eberle.
Above: NOAA photo of the Lynn Canal.
Left: NOAA photo by Mandy Lindeberg.

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Ketchikan Lighthouse Depot, pictured in 1916, was a busy place in the early 1900s. Construction, maintenance, and provisioning of all Alaskan lighthouses, including Eldred Rock, were staged here. Distance complicated the work, however, as did the weather. Eldred Rock, some 400 miles from the depot, was fortunate to be one of the closer stations. Still, it was difficult to service between October and April when storms made landing at the rock nearly impossible. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

1962. He went ashore and dug up three trees, which he planted on Eldred Rock. One still survives. Huggins was reunited with the lighthouse and the lone tree a few years ago when he returned to Eldred Rock for a nostalgic visit.

During its final years as a manned station, Tom Schmidt was the officer-in-charge at Eldred Rock. He and his fellow keepers had plenty of entertainments, including a pool table and movie projector. Despite modernization, the station's water supply was still collected from rainwater on the roof and stored in the old wooden water tank. It was chlorinated by this time. Schmidt recalls that a dead bird was discovered in the tank one day and extra chlorine had to be added. The men conserved water by taking quick showers, and in winter they showered just one day a week. A special tank that pumped up seawater from the canal was used to flush toilets.

The station was automated in 1973. At that time, the fourth-order lens was removed and in 1976 it was given to the Alaska State Museum, which later loaned it to the Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center in Haines. It was replaced with a modern beacon and the radiobeacon and fog signal were decommissioned. Local residents, fishermen, and passing ships were sad to see the lighthouse automated. A newspaper reporter in Haines wrote: "A cold, lifeless lighthouse stands guard amidst the whims of wind and weather in Lynn Canal. The most important facet of this facility is gone: the human observer."

The lighthouse was admitted to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 and included in a 2004 list of available light stations under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act. A land dispute with the U.S. Forest Service held up proceedings for several years, however. The property issue eventually was solved, but Eldred Rock Lighthouse had to be taken off the availability list due to environmental problems, including lead paint. To date, the Coast Guard has not received funding to remediate the site. In June 2012, Eldred Rock was re-offered for public use under a license agreement.

This sparked the interest of the Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center. The Eldred Rock Lighthouse Committee formed with the museum's help and has been working to preserve the history of the light station. The committee hopes to take license of the site for public use. Should the lead abatement be completed and the station once again placed on the availability list, the museum will likely be the first and most enthusiastic applicant.

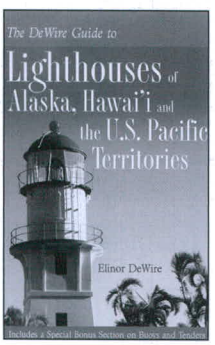
Cruise ships regularly pass Eldred Rock in summer, and ferries travel through Lynn Canal year-round. The lighthouse is one of the most popular photo opportunities for passengers. Its spectacular setting against the backdrop of snow-clad mountains is spellbinding and a reminder of the immensity of the Alaskan landscape. Despite its high-profile tourist visibility, landing on Eldred Rock is difficult and requires permission from the Coast Guard. This is a serious consideration for any licensee. About the only aspect of access that has changed since the lighthouse was established is a helicopter pad.

Lighthouse enthusiast Kraig Anderson visited Eldred Rock Lighthouse by helicopter in 2005, shortly after the Coast Guard spruced up the light station with paint and repairs to the water tank and boathouse. He noted that a helicopter pilot who had previously landed at the lighthouse on July 22, 1991, left the following handwritten message on an interior wall of the lighthouse: "Here lies peaceful tranquility we all yearn for, but loneliness that is unlike the social creature that is man." Anderson felt the message "succinctly captures what most of us would experience during a prolonged stay at Eldred Rock. The natural beauty and peacefulness of the setting are remarkable, but even with modern planes and ferries now passing the island at regular intervals, the isolation of the small rock would soon impact even a less sociable person."

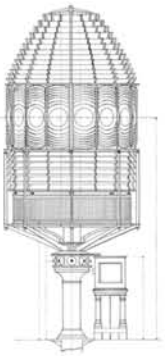
Sandra Shanklin of The Lighthouse People seems to agree. She says Eldred Rock is her favorite lighthouse—a great honor considering that she and her husband, Bob, claim to have seen every lighthouse in the United States. "It's my favorite for many reasons," Shanklin confesses—"its beauty and the beauty of the little island and mountains beyond, its one-of-a-kind octagonal shape, the cute little wooden cistern, still standing after all these years, the wonderful feel of safety from the seas, and the feeling that some of the occupants of early days still walk the island and the rooms of the lighthouse. It is my favorite also for the difficulty of getting there…"

A hard-to-reach prize, this lustrous jewel of Lynn Canal continues to shine a beacon on the history of Alaska and westward expansion. The Eldred Rock Lighthouse Committee believes it is the most significant lighthouse in Alaska. Without question, it is the sole survivor of territorial Alaska's halcyon days of gold fever, shipwreck, and rapid settlement. But at age 106 it's vulnerable. Like all old lighthouses that have outlived their function as homes for keepers, Eldred Rock needs a good modern-day steward.

(This article is based on a profile of Eldred Rock Lighthouse that appears in *The DeWire Guide to the Lighthouses of Alaska, Hawai'i and the U.S. Pacific Territories*. Published in September 2012 by Paradise Cay Publications.)



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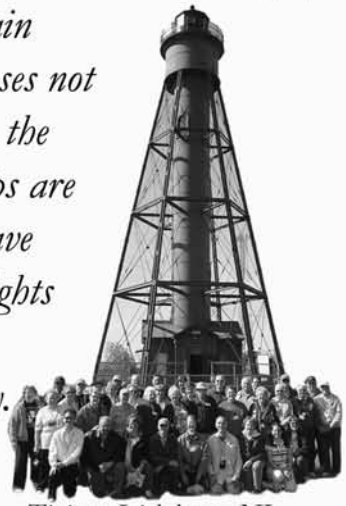
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