

CHAPTER VII

UMPQUA RIVER STATIONS

European settlement on the Umpqua River was solidified in 1836 when representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company built Fort Umpqua near the site of present day Elkton. The presence of the fort encouraged settlement of the area by nonnatives. The fort was abandoned in 1852, but not before the area began to be populated by Americans.¹⁵¹ In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the settlements along the Umpqua River became major trading partners with the gold fields of California and Southern Oregon. The settlers knew there was a fortune to be made in supplying the miners with food and timber. The town of Scottsburg, about 30 miles up the Umpqua, thrived during the gold rush in California in 1849, and then again in 1852 with the gold rush in Southern Oregon.¹⁵² Only two, navigable rivers, the Columbia and the Umpqua, cut through the Coast Range and connect the Pacific to the Willamette Valley. Being the further south, the Umpqua was the quickest water route to the Southern Oregon mines from San Francisco or Portland. When the Pacific Coast was surveyed for aids to navigation, the only lighthouse recommended for Oregon was one for the Umpqua River.

¹⁵¹Joyce Ruff Abdill, ed., *Historic Douglas County, Oregon* (Roseburg, OR: Douglas County Historical Society, 1982), 12-13.

¹⁵²Sally Donovan and Marianne Kadas, *National Register Nomination for U.S. Coast Guard Station, Umpqua River, Administration and Equipment Building* (Salem, OR: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, 1992), 8.8.

The entrance to the Umpqua River is twisted by an enormous sand spit dangling from the north side of the mouth and projecting southward (Figure 103). The entrance to Coos Bay is configured similarly but on a larger scale. This “North Spit” forces the river southward in an attempt to find an outlet to the ocean. At least eight major shipwrecks occurred at the mouth of the Umpqua River between 1850 and 1857, several coming to rest on North Spit, before a lighthouse was erected. On 3 March 1851, Congress appropriated \$15,000 toward the construction of a light at the Umpqua River. Title for 33 acres on North Spit was obtained 1 October 1851, across the river from the small settlement at Winchester Bay. Funds continued to be appropriated over the years until enough was collected and construction was finally begun in 1855. Due to construction difficulties on the isolated Oregon Coast, the lighthouse was not illuminated until Fall 1857. Unfortunately, the lighthouse was built on the unstable sand of North Spit. In February 1861, the structure was undermined by a winter storm and collapsed soon after. Fortunately, the light was removed from the tower before the disaster.¹⁵³

For more than 30 years, pilots made do without a lighthouse. The Lighthouse Board argued in 1864 that a lighthouse at Cape Arago would serve the region better. This, of course, helped the economic situation of Coos Bay while hurting the economy of the Umpqua River Valley. Finally, Congress acted on 2 October 1888, by purchasing a large amount of stable land on the south side of the Umpqua on a low headland far back from the ocean and river. Construction began in 1891. Problems with contractors, cost

¹⁵³Gibbs, *Oregon's Seacoast Lighthouses*, 81-82, 88.

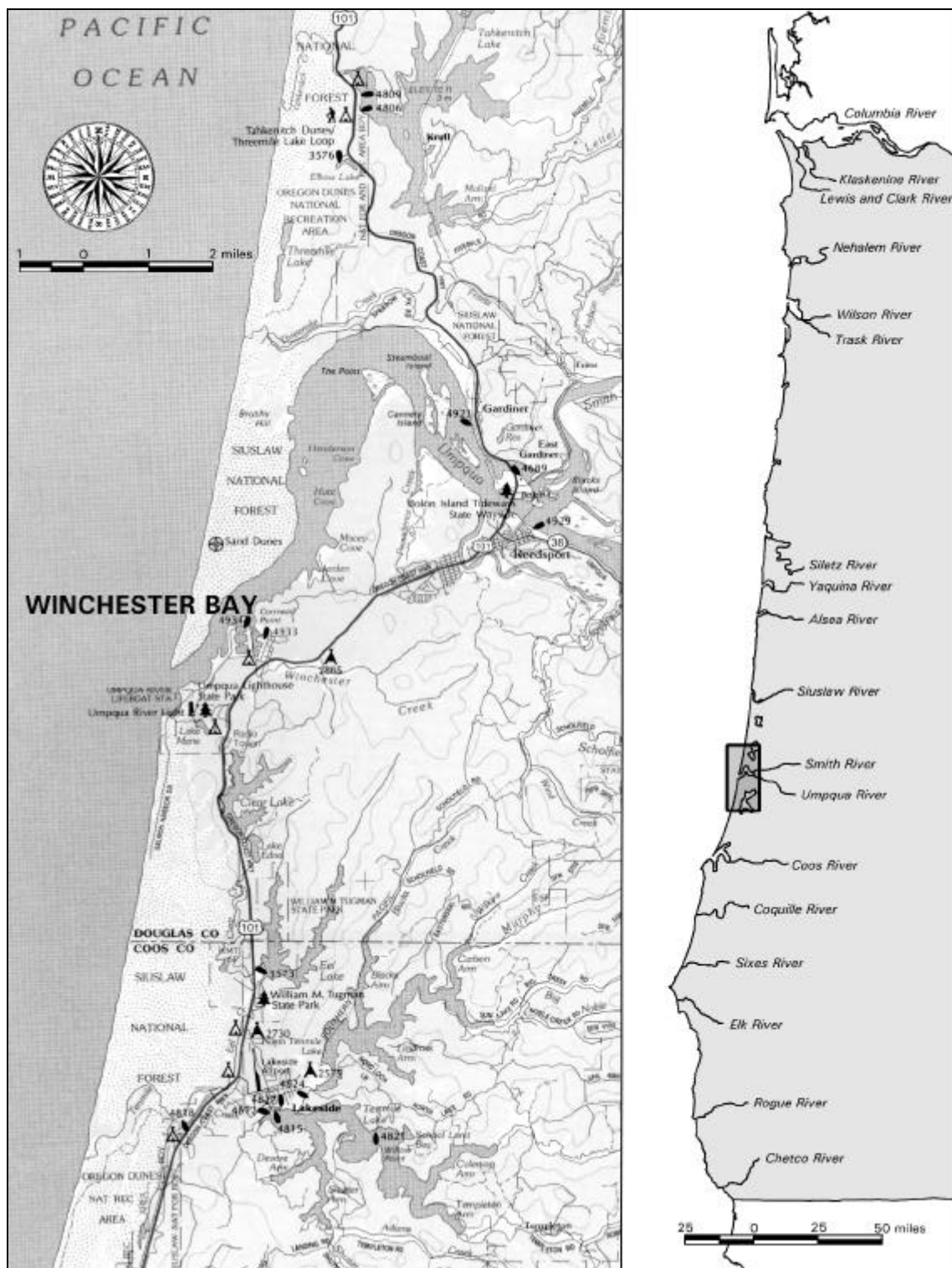


Figure 103. Location of Winchester Bay, Oregon, as Shown on a 1996 DeLorme Topographic Map.

overruns, and construction errors kept the light from being illuminated until 31 December 1894.¹⁵⁴

Umpqua River Life-Saving Station

After the Umpqua River Lighthouse collapsed in 1861, shipwrecks began to occur with increasing frequency. The 1870s saw a long string of tragic disasters. Besides pushing for a new lighthouse, the local populace also requested a life-saving station. Oregon Representative Binger Hermann requested an appropriation of \$8,000 in early 1888 to establish a life-saving station near the mouth of the Umpqua River.¹⁵⁵ The proposed station was rolled into House Resolution 8181, along with ten other life-saving stations, and approved on 17 July 1888; however, a limit of \$5000 was set per station.

A site for the station was selected to the southwest of Fort Umpqua on Army Hill,¹⁵⁶ northeast of the 1857 lighthouse (Figure 104). Conveniently, it was located on land owned by the U.S. Government since the 1850s.¹⁵⁷ The Umpqua River Life-Saving Station opened in September 1891, with a full-time crew of seven. It was not until 1 July 1893 that the station acquired an eighth surfman.¹⁵⁸ The station was built according to

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 82-85, 88.

¹⁵⁵Congress, House, 50th Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 1766, 1888.

¹⁵⁶This Fort Umpqua was not associated with the Fort Umpqua erected by the Hudson's Bay Company. The Fort Umpqua on North Spit was built in 1856 to mark the southern boundary of the Siletz Indian Reservation. It was dismantled in 1862.

¹⁵⁷Donovan and Kadas, 8.15.

¹⁵⁸U.S. Life-Saving Service, *1894 Annual Reports*, 13.

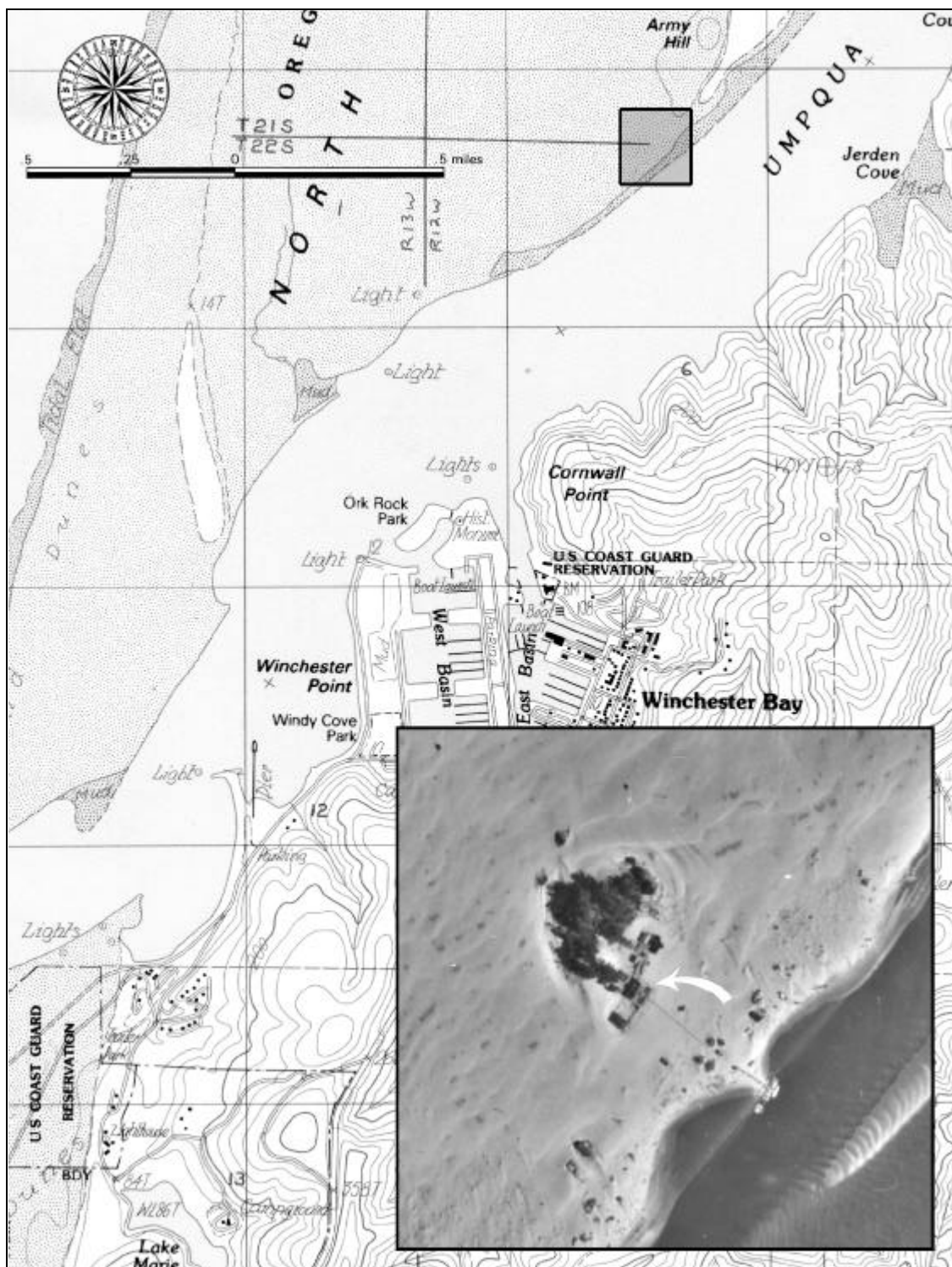


Figure 104. Aerial Photo of the Umpqua River Life-Saving Station Area in 1939 Superimposed Over the Winchester Bay, Oregon, USGS Map (1985 Revision).



Figure 105. Umpqua River Life-Saving Station, 1923. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

the standard Marquette plan with a Fort Point-type boathouse (Figure 105) as described in Chapter III. The station complex was located on a small area of stable soil, 1800' southwest of the base of Army Hill, adjacent to the river beach. In general, the 50' by 30' house was divided by a central hallway and stair with the right half reserved for the keeper and the left half for the crew. On the main floor, the keeper's living room, office, kitchen and pantry were to the right. On the left was the crew's living room and quarters. Upstairs, the right half contained bedrooms for the keeper and his family. On the left was the crew's locker room.

The boathouse was a Fort Point-type boathouse. The standard Fort Point boathouse is thoroughly described in Chapter III. The Umpqua River boathouse was located adjacent to the station house about 60' away to the southwest. The building was



Figure 106. Behind Umpqua River Life-Saving Station, 1923. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

one-story with two bays and measured 24' wide by 40' deep. One bay held a surfboat and the other bay a lifeboat. Unusual tracks or guides made from large timbers led from the boathouse to the river's edge about 400' away making for an easy launch. On the back was a lean-to added sometime after the station's construction.

There were many auxiliary structures on the station grounds. At the water's edge, there was a small wharf. The wreck pole stood next to the landing. In the area between the boathouse and station house was a garden surrounded by a solid board fence (Figure 106). At the corner of the garden closest to the front of the station house was an elaborate bell stand. The bell was used to summon the crew in an emergency. The front yard of the station house was also surrounded by a solid board fence. No other station in Oregon appears to have had a solid fence suggesting that drifting sands were especially a



Figure 107. Shop Building Behind Umpqua River Life-Saving Station, 1923. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

problem at Umpqua. A solid fence also extends from the back of the station house toward the hill connecting up to the station's flag pole and a structure with a pyramidal roof. Directly behind the station house was a gable roof structure with lean-to, most likely the shop building (Figure 107). Attached to the shop building on its northeast side was a paddock area enclosed by a picket fence. According to Figure 107, there were two horses contained within this corral, the earliest sign (1923) of station horses found in Oregon. Another gable roof structure stood northeast of the corral, probably a small barn for the horses. A small pyramidal roof building was next to the barn. Southwest of the shop building was a small gable roof building. Behind that was the ubiquitous water storage tank. Wooden boardwalks connected the buildings. The lookout tower was



Figure 108. Lookout at Umpqua River Life-Saving Station, 1923.
Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

located closer to the mouth of the Umpqua River about a mile away from the station house (Figure 108).

The Army Corps of Engineers had been working on making the Umpqua River safer and more accommodating to river traffic since they first surveyed it in 1870. The channel was deepened and obstructions removed upriver, but nothing was done at the mouth of the Umpqua. A 1896 survey showed that the expense was too great to build jetties at the entrance. Finally, commerce picked up enough to justify the cost. Work was begun around 1923, funded by the federal government and the Port of Umpqua. A jetty on the north side of the river was completed in 1927. A jetty on the south side of

the river was started in 1930 and completed in the late 1930s. The jetties made the river more navigable thus boosting commercial interests and the local economy.¹⁵⁹

Umpqua River Lifeboat Station

A new lifeboat station was erected in 1939 to replace the inadequate life-saving station house built nearly 50 years earlier in 1891. Work was begun on the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station by the general contractor, Lillebo Construction Company, in early 1939.¹⁶⁰ It was decided to locate the station next to the Umpqua River Lighthouse (1894). As mentioned earlier, the Lighthouse Board had learned its lesson and erected the new lighthouse on a stable shelf of land on the south side of the Umpqua River entrance (Figure 109). The lighthouse reserve was 190 acres and could easily accommodate a neighbor to the north of the lighthouse keeper's dwelling.

The new station was the second of the four Roosevelt-type stations to be built on the Oregon Coast (Figure 110). These stations followed a standard plan developed by the Coast Guard and were for the most part built during Franklin Roosevelt's administration (1933-45). Like the former Marquette station house at North Spit, the new station house was completely symmetrical across the front. Colonial Revival detailing was represented by multi-pane windows flanked by operable shutters, large Classical corner boards, Tuscan columns, eave returns, a water table with cap, and metal railings in Classical motifs. Even the restricted roof of the entry porch was rimmed with a balustrade. On the

¹⁵⁹Donovan and Kadas, 8.11.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 7.1.

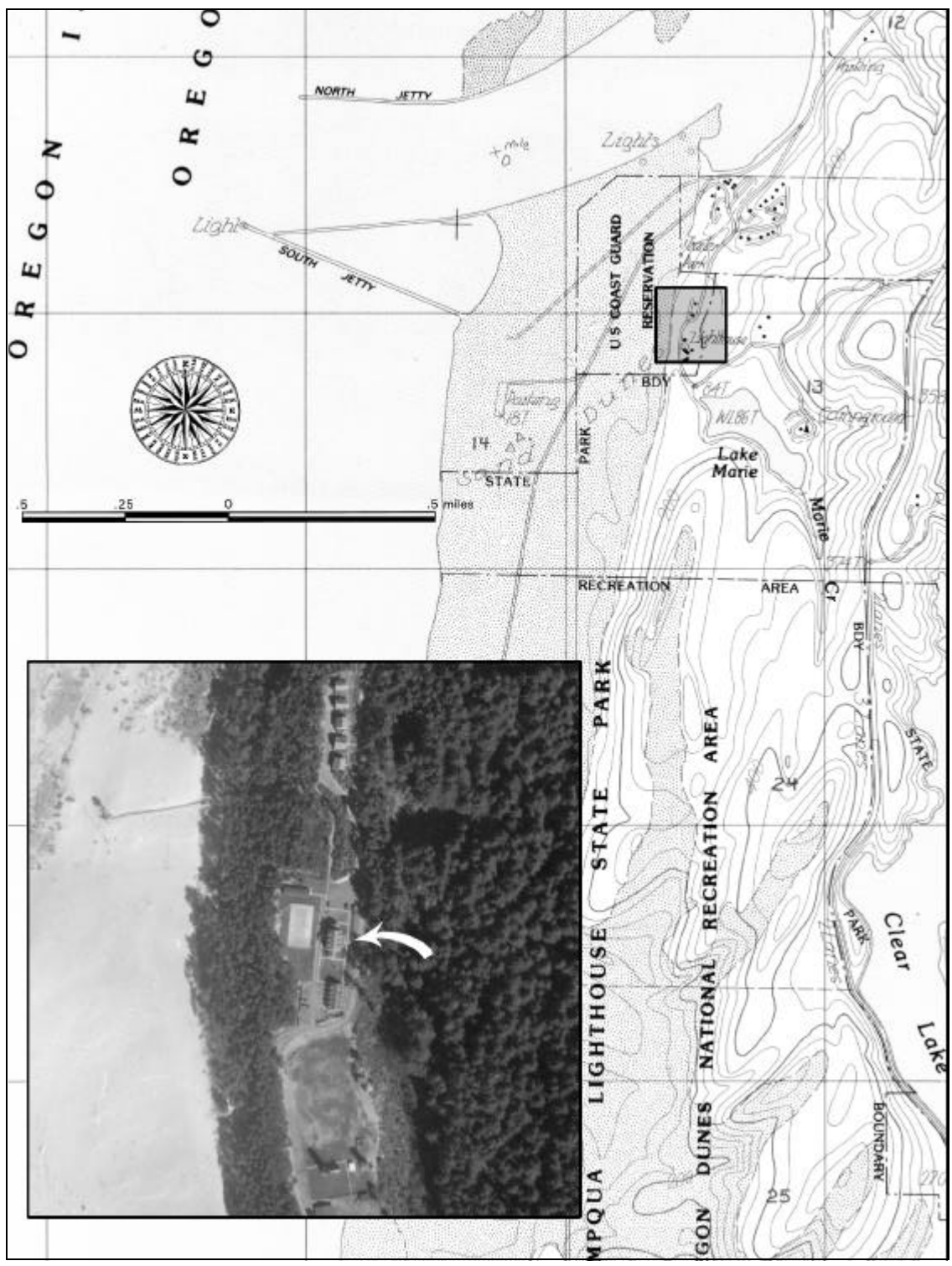


Figure 109. Aerial Photo of the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station Area in 1945 Superimposed Over the Winchester Bay, Oregon, USGS Map (1985 Revision).



Figure 110. Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, 1939. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

rear elevation was an entrance door sheltered by a gable hood supported by distinguished brackets. The building was painted white with green shutters and a red roof.

The building was a commodious 80' wide and 32' deep, designed to sleep 17 but could easily handle more. In fact, 18 men were stationed there in 1956 and many more during WWII.¹⁶¹ On the first floor was a central stair hall, dividing officer's quarters to the left from the crew's living space on the right (Figure 111). On the left was the Officer in Charge's (OIC) office, living room, bathroom, and bedroom. On the right was the crew's mess, kitchen, and day room. At the end of the stair hall was a spare bedroom. The second floor was divided symmetrically into four bedrooms for the crew (Figure 112). Each room was setup to sleep four with four beds and four built-in lockers. At the end of the stair hall was the crew's bathroom with two toilets, two sinks, and two

¹⁶¹Gerry Pratt, "Light Station Marks 99 Years of Duty on Oregon's Coast," *Oregonian*, January 1956.

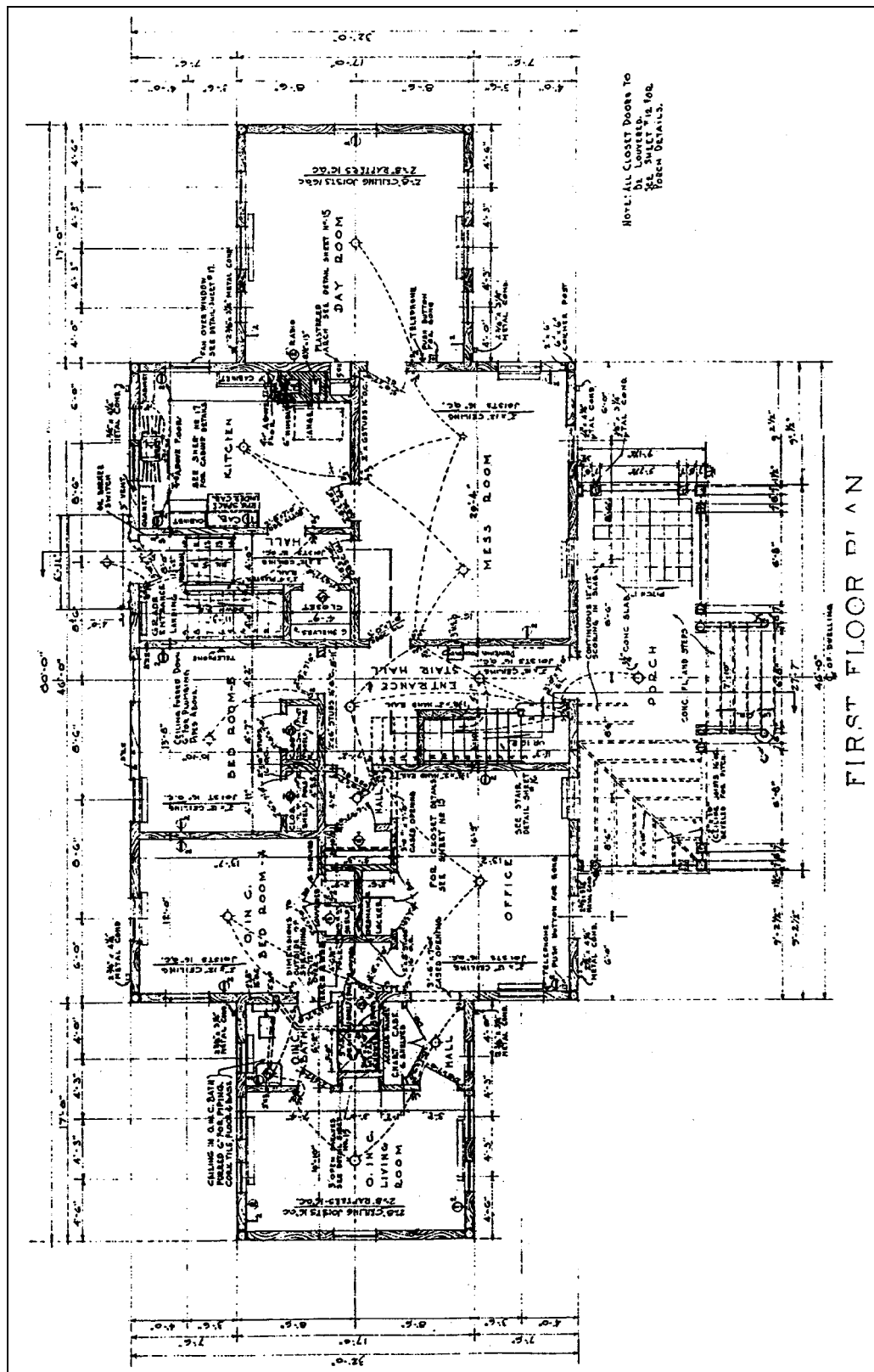


Figure 111. First Floor Plan, Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, Drawn October 1938. Source: Umpqua River Coast Guard Station National Register Nomination.

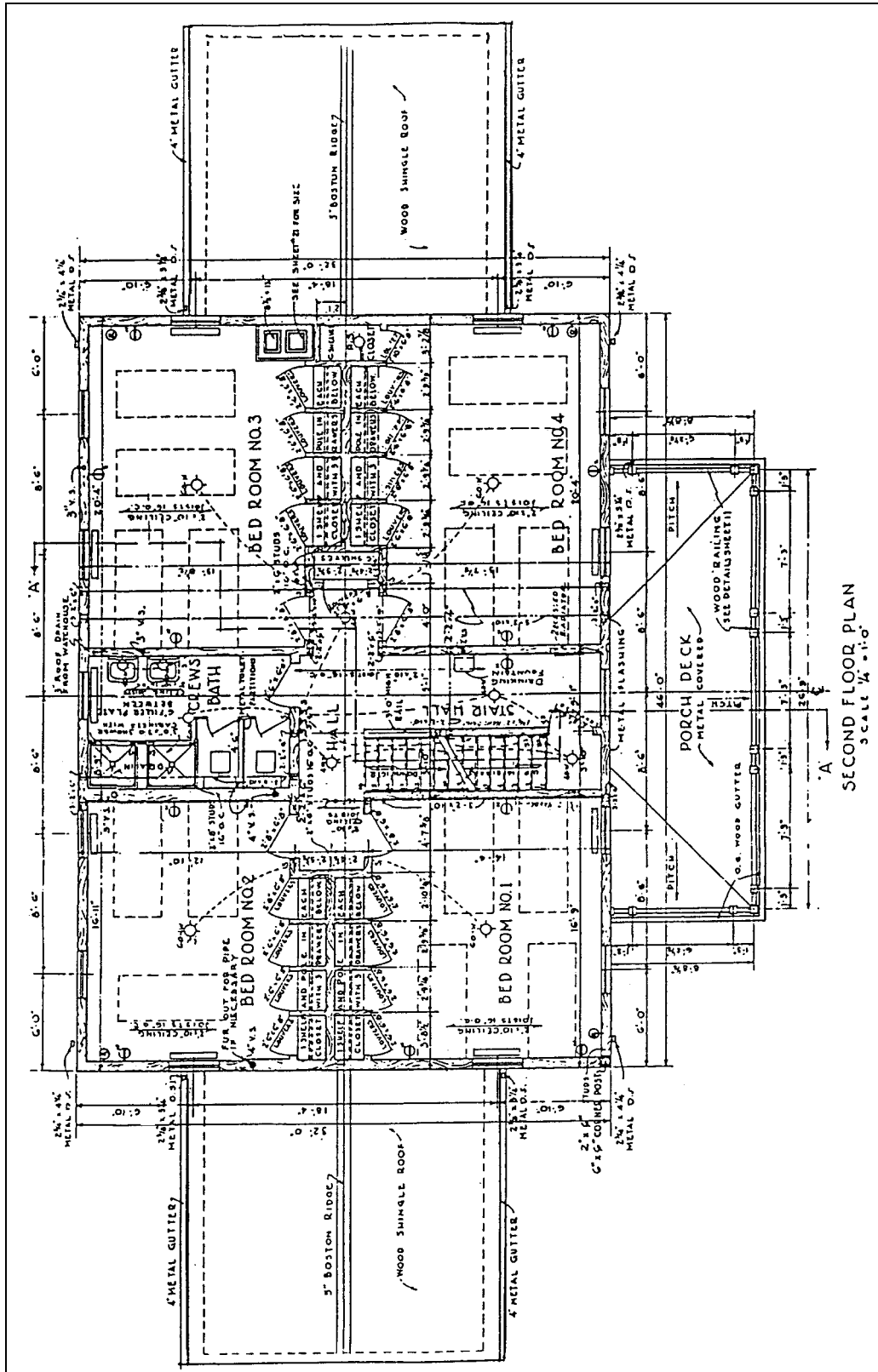


Figure 112. Second Floor Plan, Tillamook Bay Lifeboat Station, Revised Drawing May 1940. Source: Tillamook Bay Coast Guard Station National Register Nomination.



Figure 113. Equipment Building at Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, 1991. Source: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (Umpqua River Coast Guard Station File).

showers. In the stair hall, the staircase continued on to the attic which was divided into two large bunk rooms with lockers on the end walls. Six dormers, with arched windows, pierced the attic. Under the building was a full basement with a drill room, boiler room, storm clothes room, provision room, and laundry room.

A standard, five-bay equipment building was also built in 1939 to the north of the station (Figure 113). Stations starting in the 1930s all had what were called equipment buildings, which served as garages for vehicles and small boats, plus had storage space for equipment in the attic. The plan of the building was approximately 62' wide by 30' deep and built on a concrete foundation. The equipment building continued the Colonial Revival theme of the station house with its arched, multi-light windows in the dormers, eave returns at the gable ends, a lunette over the gable windows, and water table with cap. Each dormer was centered over a garage door that contained 10 lights over 15

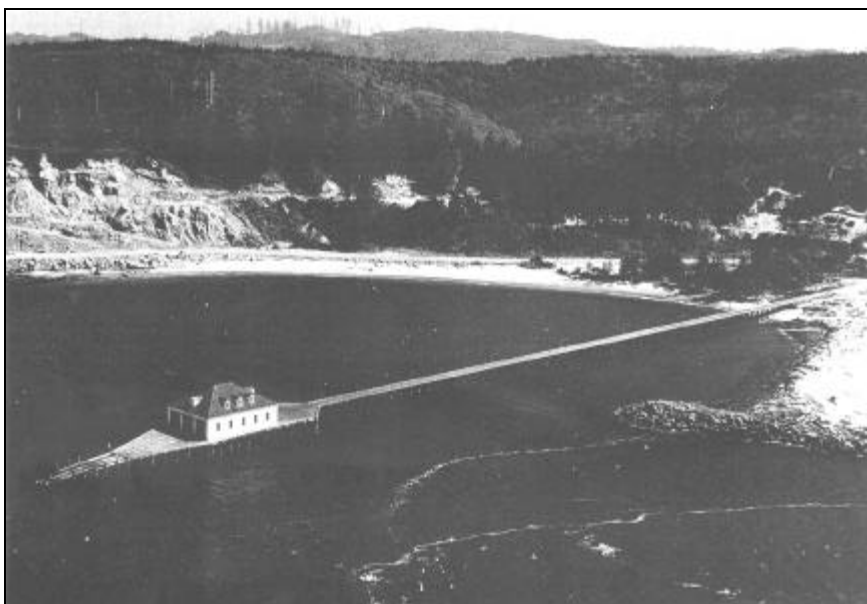


Figure 114. Boathouse at Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, 1962.
Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Umpqua River File).

panels. On the back side, there were five more dormers. The attic was divided into two dormitory rooms and a bathroom during WWII to house beach patrolmen.¹⁶² On the south elevation was an entrance door sheltered by a small gable hood supported by elegant brackets. The building was clad in shingles and finished with classical corner boards. It was painted in the same color scheme as the station house.

The boathouse for the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station was situated on the Umpqua River nine-tenths of a mile away to the north. The boathouse was built in 1939 at the same time as the station. It was constructed on pilings out in the river at the end of a nearly 800' long wharf (Figure 114). The wharf was wide enough and strong enough to accommodate vehicles. The boathouse was approximately 40' wide by 60' deep,

¹⁶²Donovan and Kadas, 7.5.

one-story, shingle-clad with a hip roof and loft area. The boathouse was three-bays wide, with overhead garage doors on the front and back of the building. Five windows on each side along with six gable dormers helped illuminate the space. The boathouse was the largest, pre-WWII Coast Guard boathouse on the Oregon Coast. Unfortunately, the boathouse was gutted by fire 20 March 1966.¹⁶³ The wharf still stands and is maintained by Douglas County for the use of the public as a crabbing pier.

A standard, 50' lookout tower was erected on the edge of the dunes, northwest of the station house in the 1939. The tower had a metal frame with a wooden watch house capped by a pyramidal roof. A watch was maintained 24 hours a day. The tower was demolished some time after 1966 and a new one was erected closer to the south jetty. A concrete tennis court was built behind the station house, which is still visible today. A four-sided, battered water tower was erected behind the lighthouse to the east. The area where the lighthouse keeper's dwellings once stood became the drill field where the wreck pole was set up for breeches buoy practice. The water tower disappeared between 1959 and 1966, along with the wreck pole.

As with most life-saving and lifeboat stations along the Oregon Coast, a small community of dwellings associated with the families of married surfmen sprung up near the station. A reference to a “. . . few cabins at the bottom of the hill . . . assigned to married crewmen . . .” is the only reference to the family housing at Umpqua.¹⁶⁴ On the 1945 aerial, there are five small dwellings visible to the north of the station on the road

¹⁶³“Sunday Night Blaze Destroys Umpqua River Coast Guard Boathouse Near Winchester Bay,” *Coos Bay World*, 21 March 1966.

¹⁶⁴Donovan and Kadas, 8.16.



Figure 115. Umpqua River Lifeboat Station with Station Buildings at the Bottom and “Little America” at the Top, 1945. Source: University of Oregon Map Library (53VV16PI-M516-PS 26 Sept 45 5M-167).

leading up to the station (Figure 115). Most logically, this was the family housing. The homes no longer stand at their former location, but they may have been taken elsewhere given Oregon’s history for moving buildings.

After only 20 years, plans were already afoot in 1959 to dispose of the buildings and boathouse of the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station.¹⁶⁵ In 1968, the Coast Guard moved out of the station buildings and into their new home to the north in Salmon Harbor on Winchester Bay. Starting in 1971 when the old station buildings were declared surplus, the Douglas County Parks Department began an effort to acquire the station from the

¹⁶⁵Photo caption, station disposition plan, Umpqua River File, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters.

Coast Guard.¹⁶⁶ Douglas County finally received the buildings and 4.7 acres in 1976, and set to work rehabilitating the station house into a local museum. On 19 June 1980, the former station house was opened to the public.¹⁶⁷

Preservation

The Umpqua River Life-Saving Station built in 1891 on North Spit was abandoned in 1939 when new quarters were built for them adjacent to the Umpqua River Lighthouse. There are reportedly no above ground remains of the old life-saving station. Like the North Spit at Coos Bay, this area has restricted access due to wildlife conservation concerns and is inaccessible by vehicle. A water approach by boat would be the best means to investigate the old station site; however, the author was not able to make such a journey.

Fortunately, the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station is still quite intact when compared to the life-saving station (Figure 116). The boathouse was lost in 1966, but the 1939 station house and equipment building still stand thanks to Douglas County Parks. After Douglas County acquired it in 1976, they began the work of turning the station house into a local history museum. They retained all of the exterior features, right down to the operable shutters (Figure 117). Inside the station house, the mess room, OIC office, and day room were converted into exhibit rooms without harming the finishes. The histories of the Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard on the Umpqua River are on

¹⁶⁶Larry Bacon, "Station's Fate Uncertain," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 3 February 1975.

¹⁶⁷Donovan and Kadas, 7.5.



Figure 116. Station House at Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, 1991. Source: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (Umpqua River Coast Guard Station File).



Figure 117. Rear Elevation of the Station House at Umpqua River, 1991. Source: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (Umpqua River Coast Guard Station File).

display in the mess room. The other two rooms have exhibits on the county's maritime history, settlement, logging, and Native Americans. The day-to-day operation of the museum is done by Douglas County Parks Department volunteers.¹⁶⁸

To accommodate the 1970s rehabilitation, the OIC bedroom and spare bedroom were joined by removing the wall between them to create a visitor's lobby and information area. The OIC living room was divided to create men's and women's restrooms, with the former OIC bathroom and hallway serving as anterooms. The kitchen is still used as a kitchen; however, the cabinetry dates to a 1958 remodel.¹⁶⁹ Rooms on the second floor and in the attic were left basically unaltered. Only one room on the second floor is used and only as a meeting room once a week. In the basement is a for-profit gift shop. Douglas County leases the space to the business, and fortunately, the basement features remain mostly unaltered.¹⁷⁰

Much of the interior woodwork has been retained throughout the building; however, all of the door hardware has been removed. The ceiling on the first floor and in the hallway of the second floor was lowered to accommodate a sprinkler system. The plumbing for the fire suppression system was left exposed in the finished attic area. The original linoleum is in relatively good condition throughout most of the building; however, a foam-backed carpet has been glued to it in the public areas and in the upstairs hallway.

¹⁶⁸Ed St. John, phone interview by author, transcript, Eugene, OR, 24 May 2000.

¹⁶⁹Photo caption, kitchen remodel, Umpqua River File, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters.

¹⁷⁰Ed St. John, 24 May 2000.

Unlike the adaptive reuse of the station house at Point Adams, the Umpqua River station has had to also accommodate the disabled public. The most difficult problem encountered when rehabilitating the Roosevelt-type stations is conforming to the American Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The ADA is civil rights legislation that requires less-able people be given access through the removal of architectural barriers. The station design conforms to the basic tenant of Classical Revival government architecture which dictates that the building be elevated and that the public must ascend stairs to get inside. This design feature has been a curse to government buildings across the country. In situations where the historic architecture would be severely compromised, leeway can often be given and the disabled accommodated through documentation of the inaccessible areas. Since the entire museum was unattainable to the disabled, something had to be done to allow all people into the building. To welcome the less-able into the station house, a door was cut into the south elevation at a window location to provide for ramp access to the first floor. This entrance acts as the principal entrance to the museum. Another door has been cut into the north elevation at another window location to allow an access ramp into the basement. Due to fortuitous ground elevation changes, the two ramps are not too obtrusive. Shifting the visitor's entrance to the rear corner was an awkward compromise, as the building was designed to be entered from front and center, but accommodations and a choice had to be made. Because of its symmetry and decorative features, the front elevation of a Roosevelt-type station should never be altered.

The five-bay equipment building is in excellent shape. Four- and five-bay equipment buildings were built at all of the Roosevelt-type stations. A five-bay equipment building still stands at Tillamook Bay Lifeboat Station; however, the building at Tillamook has had its garage doors replaced. An exposed sprinkler system was installed by Douglas County during the rehabilitation of the station between 1976 and 1980. Douglas County Parks uses the building today as a maintenance shop. Outside the equipment building sits a 36' motor lifeboat rehabilitated by a local Boy Scout troop in the late 1970s.

In 1992, both the station house and equipment building were listed on the National Register. These buildings should continue to be maintained as described in the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards* in Appendix C. Other than minor paint problems, the only maintenance issue observed was that the plantings should be kept further from the building, or at least kept well-trimmed, particularly the shore pine on the southeast corner. Further alterations to the original fabric of the building should not be performed, but if required by the County, they must be done in compliance with the *Standards*.