

CHAPTER XI

PORT ORFORD STATION

On the Southern Oregon Coast, Cape Blanco juts out into the Pacific creating the second westernmost point in the contiguous United States. It is thought that Martin de Aguilar sighted and named Cape Blanco in 1603; however, his travel itinerary had the name “Cape Blanco” already on it prior to his departure. There is no proof that Aguilar even reached Oregon on his exploratory cruise up the coast from Acapulco. However, explorers Heceta, Bodega, and Cook are all credited with sighting Cape Blanco in the 1770s. On 24 April 1792, George Vancouver observed Cape Blanco and renamed it Cape Orford, as its position and dark color “did not seem to intitle [sic] it to the appellation of Cape Blanco.”²⁴⁴ Vancouver named it Cape Orford after a friend, the Earl of Orford. However, the Cape Blanco label was persistent, and Cape Orford fell out of use, though the Orford name is still alive in the town of Port Orford (Figure 171).

Originally, Port Orford was called Ewing Harbor, named after a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey ship, the *Ewing*. However, like Cape Orford, the name did not stick, and the name Port Orford prevailed.²⁴⁵ The town of Port Orford had started life as two block houses built in defense against the local Indian population in 1851. It was a tenuous beginning for Port Orford, but with the discovery of gold in February 1852 in the

²⁴⁴McArthur, 139-40.

²⁴⁵Ibid., 682.

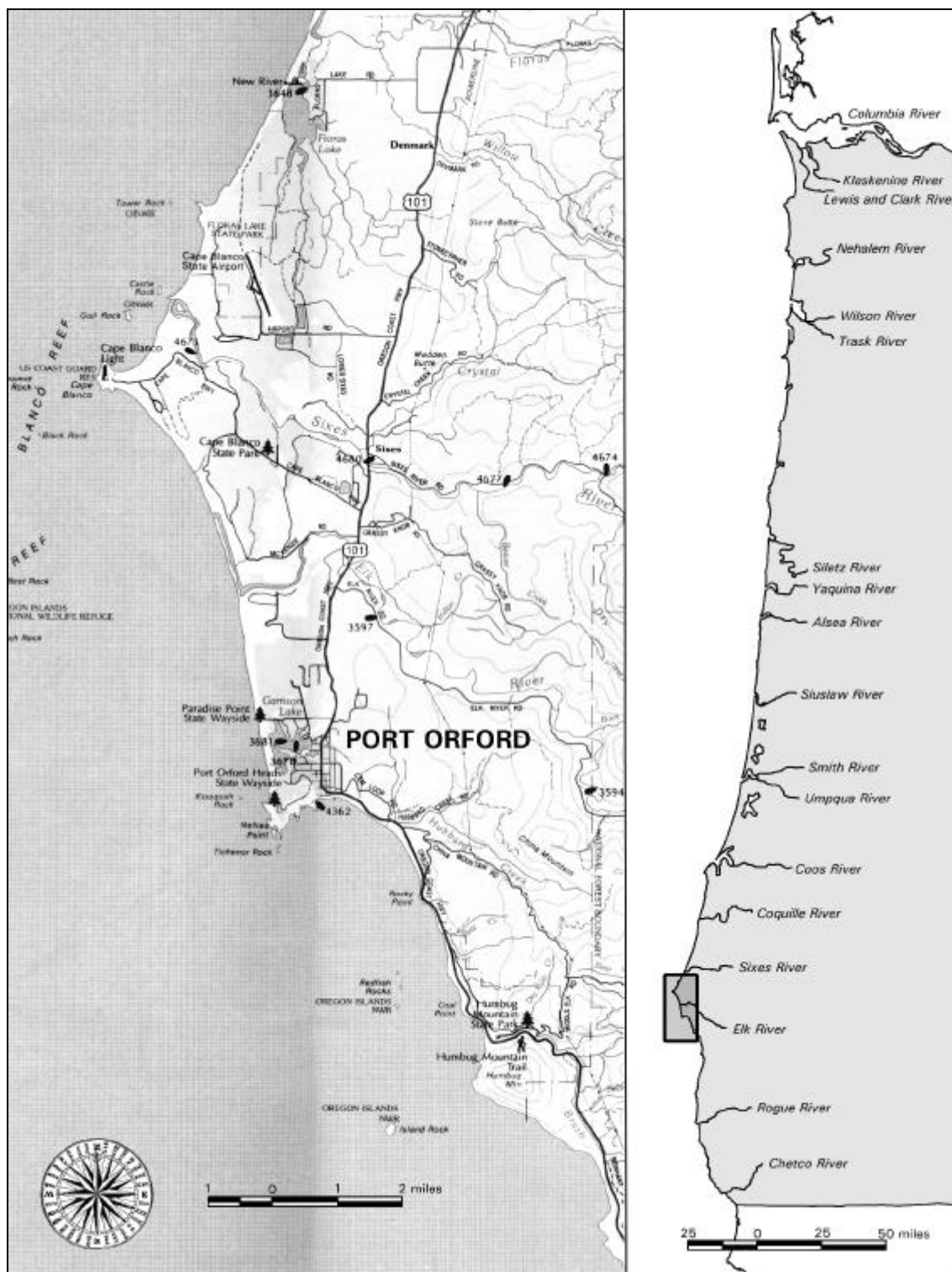


Figure 171. Location of Port Orford, Oregon, as Shown on a 1996 DeLorme Topographic Map.

Rogue River Valley and then at the mouth town of Port Orford solidified. The town became a supplier of lumber for the miners; the first lumber mill starting in 1853-54. Through the 1850s, Port Orford thrived and grew. Herman Francis Reinhart called it “a lively town of about a thousand inhabitants” which had “a garrison and fort and some troops stationed there, and many stores and hotells [sic] and saloons, and there was lots of business done by miners. . . .”²⁴⁶ The Port Orford post office was established on 27 March 1855.²⁴⁷ The native populace finally took a stand in 1855, but were suppressed and forced to relocate northward in 1856 to the Siletz Reservation. By the late 1850s, Asa M. Simpson had expanded his sawmill empire outward from Coos Bay to Port Orford.²⁴⁸

Through the Civil War, Port Orford continued to hang on. With the mines on the South Coast exhausted, there was no return of the prosperity of the 1850s. In 1868, a fire destroyed Port Orford leaving only two homes and a barn standing. The town rebuilt, relying on sawmills, sheep ranches, and farms for income. Hubert Howe Bancroft wrote about the town’s isolated location, “Port Orford is a little hamlet on the wrong side of the mountain with no reason on earth for being there.”²⁴⁹ Not until the completion of the Oregon Coast Highway in 1936 was Port Orford brought out of its landward isolation.

²⁴⁶Douthit, 9, 11, 38.

²⁴⁷McArthur, 682.

²⁴⁸Douthit, 9, 11.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 40.

The Cape Blanco headland is surrounded by dangerous reefs, thus mariners have traditionally given the place a wide berth. The U.S. Lighthouse Bureau allocated a lighthouse to the headland in 1867. Fifty acres were purchased initially on Cape Blanco, 245' above the ocean.²⁵⁰ The first batch of bricks for the tower was fired in 1868.²⁵¹ The drawings for the Cape Blanco Lighthouse were signed by Robert S. Williamson, the same engineer who designed the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse (1871). The lighthouse was illuminated on 20 December 1870, making it the third lighthouse on the Oregon Coast.²⁵² However, even after the erection of the lighthouse, shipwrecks still occurred on the rocky headland.

Port Orford gave its name to one of the best cedars known, the Port Orford cedar. Port Orford cedar grows only in a region between Coos Bay and Eureka, California, with its locus at Port Orford. A boom for the wood product in the 1920s and 1930s brought Port Orford back to life. Much of the cedar was exported, going to Japan and China where the wood was highly revered.²⁵³ It was found that Port Orford cedar was resistant to acid and made the perfect separator in automobile batteries. The new technology made the region one of the largest producers of battery separators in the world.²⁵⁴ Today, the cedar is threatened with a root disease and is no longer an economic factor.

²⁵⁰Stephen Dow Beckham, *Cape Blanco Lighthouse: Historical Investigations* (Coos Bay, OR: Bureau of Land Management, 1995), 10.

²⁵¹Donovan and Kachel, 8.3.

²⁵²Gibbs, *Oregon's Seacoast Lighthouses*, 37.

²⁵³Douthit, 12, 60.

²⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 61.

Port Orford Lifeboat Station

To attract more shipping and commerce, the town of Port Orford wanted a life-saving station to guard its harbor. As early as 1889, Oregon Senator John H. Mitchell requested, “an appropriation for the establishment of a life-saving station and providing for a life-saving crew at Port Orford.”²⁵⁵ On 3 March 1891, Congress authorized a life-saving station for Port Orford; however, location and property negotiations dragged the process on for decades.²⁵⁶ Finally, an appropriation of \$83,500, contained in the Treasury and Post Office Department Appropriation Act of 1932, was made for “establishing and equipping a Coast Guard station at or near Port Orford. . . .”²⁵⁷ Port Orford had waited 43 years for a station, longer than any other Oregon coastal community that received a station.

In July 1933, the *Curry County Reporter* gossiped about construction at the site and noted that the keeper’s dwelling and boathouse were well underway.²⁵⁸ The site chosen was a geographical feature known as “The Heads” (Figure 172) on the western edge of Port Orford. The prominent headland offered a wide view of the ocean and harbor at a vantage point 280' above the water. Contractors on the project were Ovid

²⁵⁵Congress, Senate, 51st Congress, 1st session, S 629, 1889.

²⁵⁶Elizabeth Carter and Point Orford Heritage Society, *National Register Nomination for Port Orford Coast Guard Station* (Salem, OR: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, 1998), 8.8-8.11.

²⁵⁷Congress, Senate, 72nd Congress, 1st session, 1 July 1932.

²⁵⁸Peggy Corson, “C.G. Station Has Scenic Location,” *Curry County Reporter*, 13 July 1933.

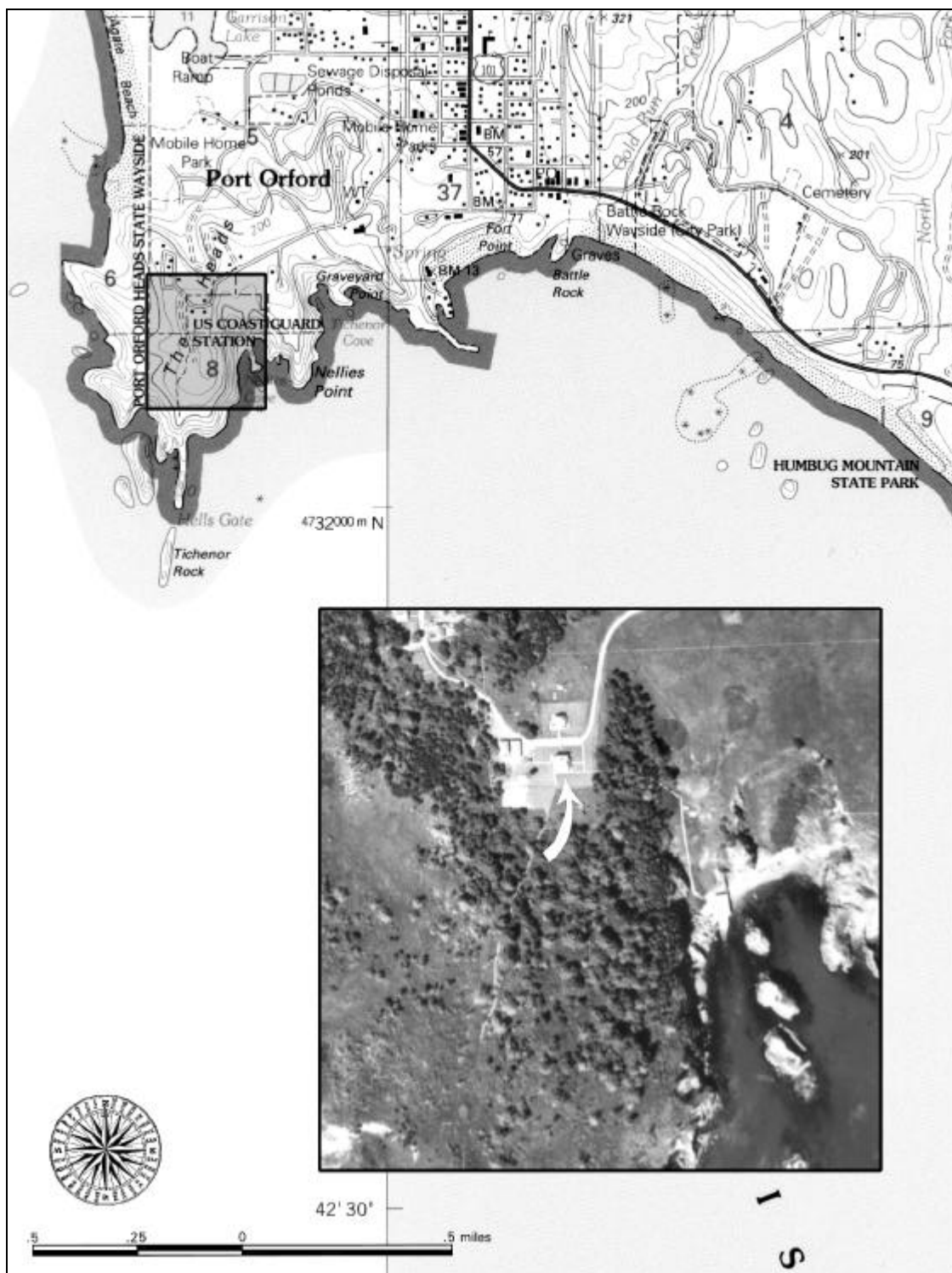


Figure 172. Aerial Photo of the Port Orford Station Area in 1939 Superimposed Over the Port Orford, Oregon, USGS Map (1996 Revision).

Olson and Julius Yuhasz.²⁵⁹ On 1 July 1934, the station was commissioned and put into service (Figure 173).²⁶⁰

The station house built at Port Orford is known as a late Chatham-type (Figure 174). The original Chatham-type was designed by Victor Mendleheff in 1914 for the life-saving station at Chatham, Massachusetts. It is not known who designed the Port Orford station, but the plans did not drift too far from the original Chatham design. At least 30 Chatham-type stations were built on both East and West Coasts marking the first time since the Marquette-type stations of a standard, nationwide architecture. Variations on the Chatham-type station continued to be constructed through the 1930s.²⁶¹ In the mid-1930s, the Coast Guard began to transition to the Roosevelt-type stations.

The station house was symmetrical, 45' wide and 30' deep, slightly larger than the early Chatham stations. The elevations were clad entirely in unpainted shingles pierced by six-over-six, double-hung windows. As had been the trend since 1900, Colonial Revival details became less prominent to the point where the symmetry of the front facade and classically detailed porch columns were the only Colonial elements remaining. The late Chatham-type station marks the bottom of this gradual decrease in ornament. With the Roosevelt-type station that follows the Chatham, there was a short-lived resurgence of Colonial decoration.

²⁵⁹Carter, 8.11.

²⁶⁰“Coast Guard Boats Arrive at Station,” *Curry County Reporter*, 5 July 1934.

²⁶¹Wick York, phone interview by author, transcript, Eugene, OR, 8 April 2000.



Figure 173. Port Orford Lifeboat Station, 1954. Source: National Archives (RG 26-DS Box 21 Folder 437).



Figure 174. Station House, Port Orford Lifeboat Station, Circa 1940. Source: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (Port Orford File).



Figure 175. Mess Room, Port Orford Lifeboat Station, Circa 1940.
Source: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (Port Orford File).

The Port Orford station house is elevated on a high concrete basement. The two-story building is capped with a hipped roof sporting two dormers. The front porch is nearly full-width with a concrete floor and metal pipe railing. The porch roof is hipped and supported by Classical, square posts. From the front porch there are two entries. The one on the right goes into the mess room (Figure 175), while the other door heads directly into the Officer in Charge's (OIC) office. Across the back of the building is the kitchen, spare bedroom, and OIC bedroom and bath (Figure 176). There is a back door in a vestibule off the kitchen. On the second floor is a large bedroom, four smaller bedrooms, and one bathroom (Figure 177). The attic is accessed by a pull-down stair and was designed for storage. During WWII, the attic was used as bunk space. The basement has rooms for storage, laundry, provisions, storm clothes, and coal.

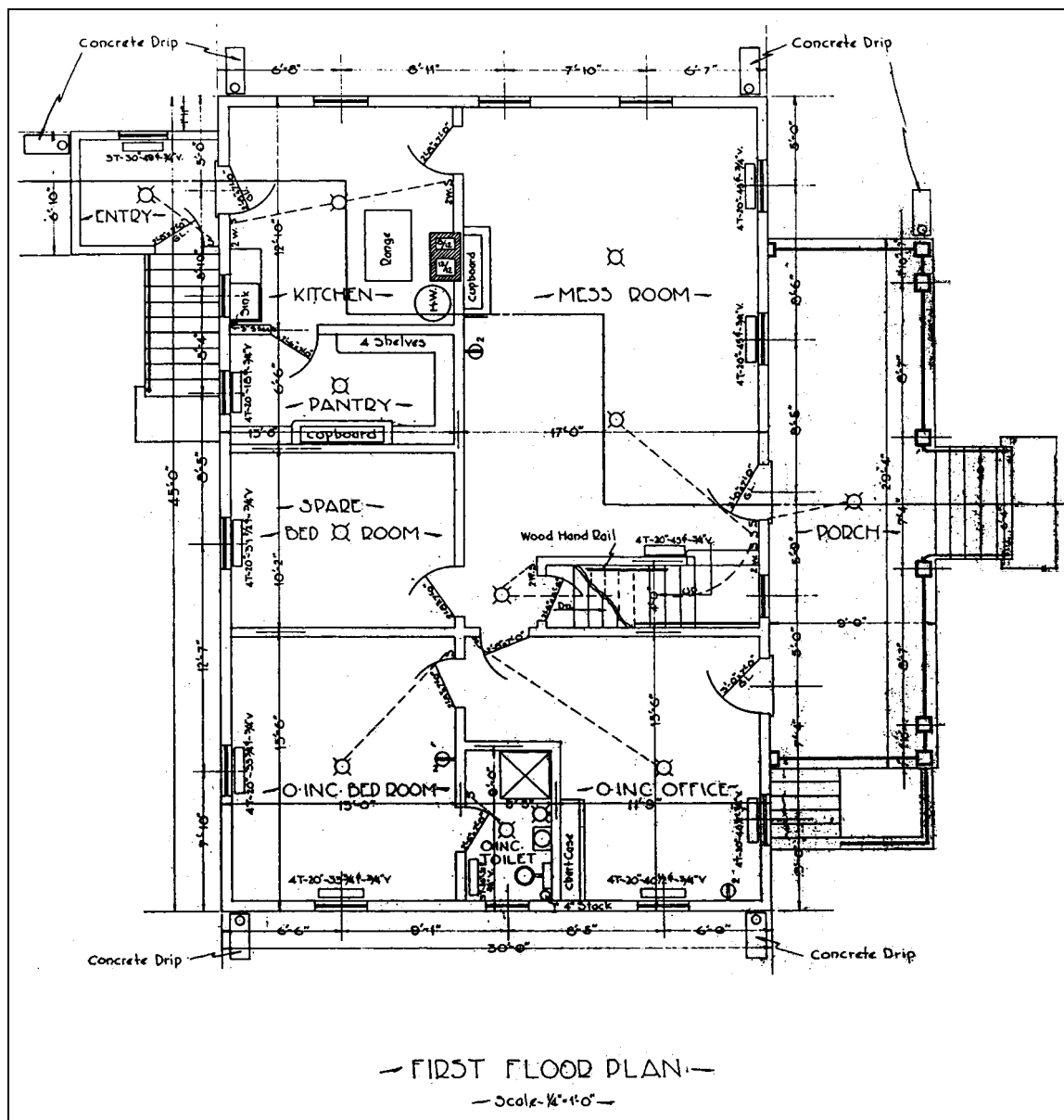


Figure 176. First Floor Plan, Port Orford Lifeboat Station. Source: State Historic Preservation Office (Port Orford File).

The keeper's house was built north of the station house. The building is 1-1/2 stories, topped with a gable roof and two large shed dormers (Figure 178). The plans for the building note that they were traced from the keeper's house built at Point Reyes, California. Like the station house, the structure is clad in shingles, pierced by six-over-six, double-hung windows. The plan is 34' wide by 27' deep with a living room, office, bedroom, kitchen, and toilet on the first floor. The second floor has two bedrooms, two large walk-in closets, and two store rooms. The basement has two fuel rooms and a laundry room.

To the west of the station house is a three-bay equipment building. Like the station house, it has a hipped roof and is clad in shingles. The building is 46' wide by 24' deep with a concrete floor. Each bay is closed by a paired door on large strap hinges. There are six, six-over-six, double-hung windows lighting the interior. Adjacent to the equipment building on the west side is a repair shop. Each end of the building holds two overhead doors. Three, six-over-six, double-hung windows are on the east and west walls. To the northwest of the repair shop was a shed-roofed, three-bay garage. It was built sometime between 1939 and 1949 and was not original to the complex. The equipment building and repair shop still stand, though all that remains of the three-bay garage are stone post pads and the concrete approach.

The boathouse had the most unusual siting of any Coast Guard boathouse in Oregon. It was situated on the water at Nellies Cove, 280' below the station house (Figure 179). The 532-step staircase used to reach the boathouse was known as "The Stairs of a Thousand Tears." Materials were brought in by an aerial cable strung between

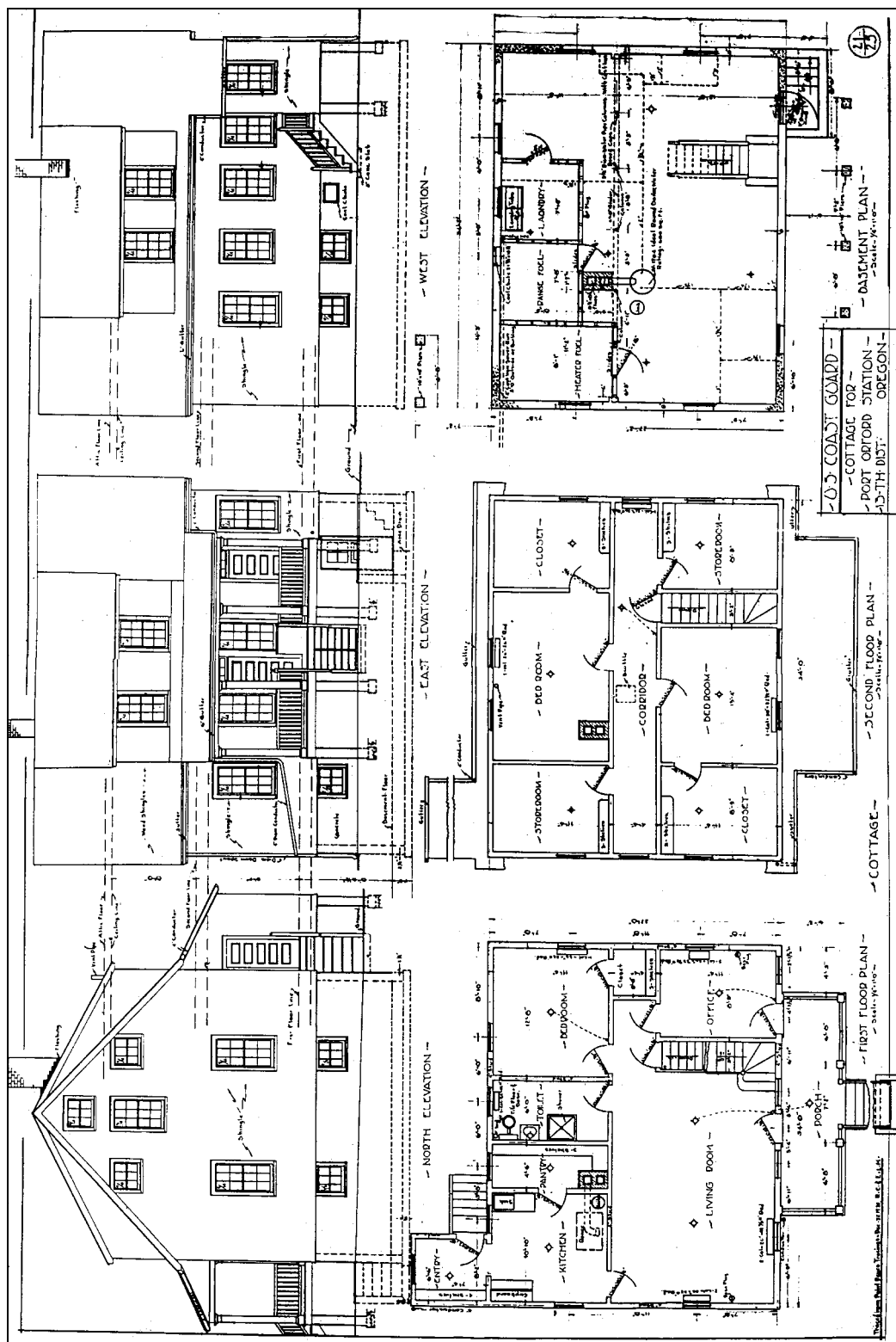


Figure 178. Keeper's Cottage, Port Orford Lifeboat Station. Source: Nautical Research Centre (#11-53).

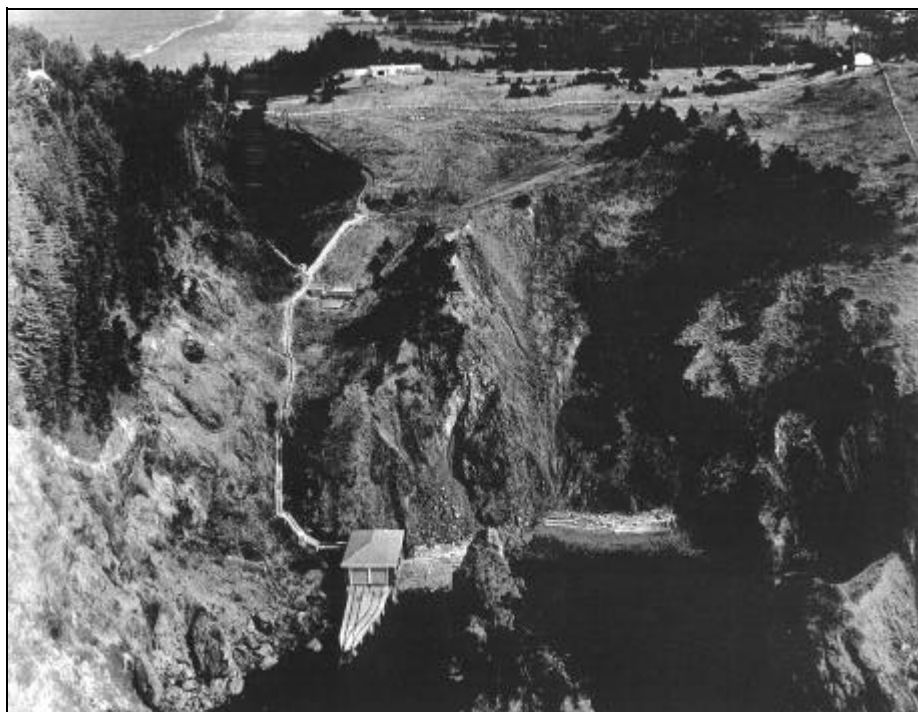


Figure 179. Boathouse in Nellies Cove, Port Orford Lifeboat Station, 1959. Source: National Archives (13CGD-081659-8).

the top of the headland and the jagged rocks, called the Three Sisters, in the middle of the cove.²⁶² The boathouse was 36' wide by 60' deep, was two bays wide, and was capped with a hipped roof. The building was clad in shingles and punctuated by four, six-over-six, double-hung windows on either side and one on the rear of the building. The boathouse was entered from a door on the back. The boatroom doors were metal roll-ups. Rails left each boat bay and joined together in a single set leading down the launchway and into the water. Apparently a storm damaged the boathouse and

²⁶²Peggy Corson, "C.G. Station Has Scenic Location," *Curry County Reporter*, 13 July 1933.

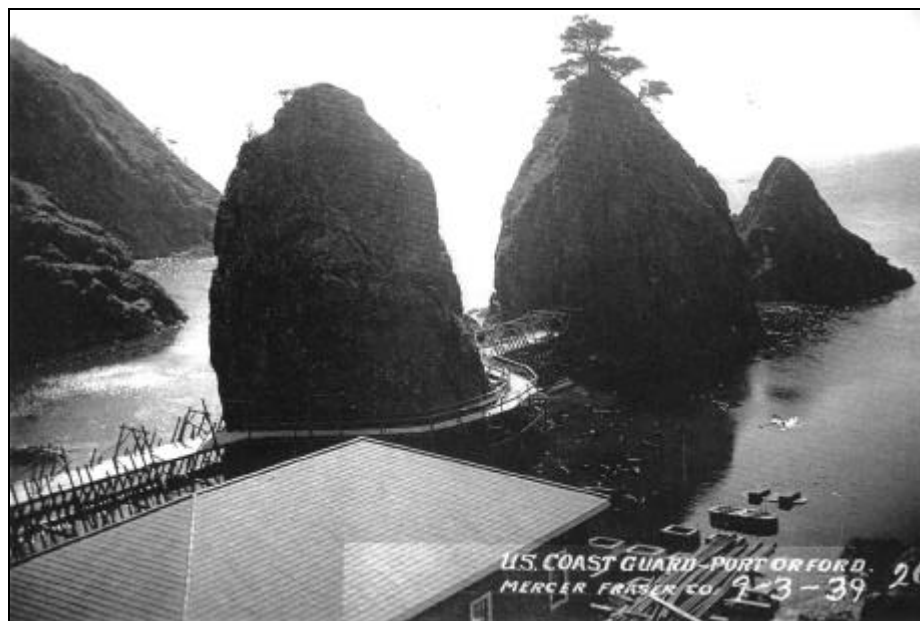


Figure 180. Boathouse Launchway and Breakwater Under Construction, 1939. Source: National Archives (RG 26-DS Box 21 Folder 437).

launchway extensively in 1939. As a consequence, enormous concrete breakwaters were built to divide Nellies Cove in two and give more protection to the boathouse (Figure 180). The launchway was also rebuilt at this time using concrete caissons for pilings. Unfortunately, the boathouse burned down in the 1970s and all that remains are the concrete caissons and remnants of the launchway.

Approximately one-third of the way down the staircase to the boathouse was a small pump house. It was used to pump water from a nearby spring up to the station's water tower located near the station house to the southwest. Next to the pump house was a concrete reservoir. Both the pump house and the reservoir still stand, though the pump house has been gutted and the reservoir has lost its roof.

A rail fence surrounded the entire Coast Guard reservation. Concrete walkways connected the station buildings. Monterrey pine and Port Orford cedar plantings delineated the compound and defined the walkways. A curbed drive meandered through the compound. A tennis court was built soon after 1939 southwest of the station house. The bell stand was located directly behind the station house to the west.

The lookout tower was located at the tip of The Heads. Historic photos indicate that this was probably a standard 37' steel lookout tower. The watch room had a hipped roof. There was a radio equipment room at its base. All that remains of the lookout tower are four concrete pads, one for each leg. The 50' signal flag tower stood north of the keeper's house. All that remains of the tower are its four concrete pads. Adjacent to the east of the station house stood a radio antenna. A large concrete pad and four anchor pads are all that remain, however.

To the northwest of the station was the location of the Port Orford Lifeboat Station's "Little America." Like most other stations along the Oregon Coast, married crewmen built small houses near the station. The small community was known as "Little America." By 1939, seven homes had been erected. Today, this group of homes still stands and continues to be referred to as "Little America" by the locals.

With the construction of the new Coast Guard facility at Bandon in 1939, the need for the services of the Port Orford Lifeboat Station soon decreased. Brookings received a Coast Guard station in 1964, further decreasing the need for the Port Orford station. In 1970, the Port Orford Lifeboat Station was decommissioned. Oregon State University used the buildings as an extension campus from 1970 to 1976. The entire

station complex was deeded to Oregon State Parks in 1976. Oregon State Parks in turn opened the site as the Port Orford Heads State Park.²⁶³ In 1996, the University of Oregon held a historic preservation field school at the station creating an interpretive plan for the site during the second week (Figure 181) and reconstructing dormer windows during the third week. In 1998, the standing elements of the station complex (five buildings and six structures) were added as a district to the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation

All of the standing buildings of the Port Orford Lifeboat Station have high integrity. The station house is almost as it was when the Coast Guard left in 1970. The keeper's house is used as a caretaker's residence for the park and is nearly intact. The equipment building and repair shop have good integrity and are in good condition. These four buildings need to be maintained. Any repair or restoration work performed on these buildings should be done according to the Secretary's *Standards*.

The 532-step staircase to the boathouse still remains in various states of decay. The upper portion was constructed of poured concrete and is in good condition. The lower portion was of wood and has fallen into disrepair. Approximately the last 100 steps are missing entirely. The railing along the whole length of the staircase is gone. In its original state, it is believed to be the longest staircase from station house to boathouse

²⁶³Carter, 8.12.

in the nation. The staircase would be a good restoration and reconstruction project as the and the staircase demonstrates just how difficult the Coast Guardsman's job was.

Many of the ancillary structures still exist at Port Orford. Walkways, curbing, plantings are mostly intact. "Little America" still has representative examples of early Coast Guard family housing. The large concrete breakwaters in Nellies Cove are in good condition. The lookout tower, water tower, radio antenna, and signal flag tower were all lost, though their concrete anchors are still in the ground where they stood. The bell stand is still in its original location, though the bell is missing. The tennis court is used as a parking lot for park visitors. The remains of the drill pole were found in the brush south of the former drill field. If the pole could be re-erected, it would be the only pre-WWII drill pole on the Oregon Coast.

The station house remains nearly unchanged since it was decommissioned in 1970. Hardware, cabinetry, and original signage are still extant. The Point Orford Heritage Society is just finishing up its first phase of rehabilitating the station house into a Coast Guard museum with a grand opening slated for 3 June 2000. The adaptive reuse of the station house into a museum devoted to the Coast Guard is highly compatible and appropriate.