

*Jennifer Stock:*

We're talking with Peter White, author of *The Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate*, and we're talking about the human history on the Farallon Islands. There's an incredible history back in the day and Peter has done quite a bit of research and is sharing his stories with us today. So, thanks for staying with us, Peter. We were just talking about the egging wars, that period on the islands where there were lots of eggs being gathered and sold during the gold rush period. There was also a strong effort to build safer maritime passage along the coast as there were more and more ships coming in and out and lighthouses were being built up and down the coast. When was the first lighthouse built on the Farallon islands?

*Peter White:*

Well, the first lighthouse that was built in 1853 by a Baltimore construction company. The company was Gibbons & Kelly and Gibbons & Kelly was under contract to build a lighthouse and also keeper's quarters on the island and the keeper's quarters were a story and a half house with a parlor down stairs and sleeping rooms upstairs and a kitchen downstairs and this was made, this building was later known as "Stone House" because of its very solid construction and it was made from a rock quarry down on the island, but unfortunately Stone House was torn down in 1969. There were actually two lighthouses built on the islands and the first one was completed in August 1853. It was completed in every respect but one.

They did not have the Fresnel lens, the lens to use to concentrate the light. The lens was being manufactured in France. So, the lighthouse stood dark and unused for 18 months and finally the lens arrived. It was in 73 crates and the crates were rustled ashore, taken up to the top of the hill...

*Jennifer Stock:*

Oh my gosh.

*Peter White:*

...opened up, and assembly of the lens began even though the instructions didn't come with the lens. It was soon apparent that the first lighthouse, the...a lighthouse that had never shone a light was too small for the lens and so, there was nothing to do, but to tear down the first lighthouse and build a second lighthouse. The second lighthouse was completed in 1855 and showed light for the first time on January 1st, 1856.

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- Jennifer Stock:* The lighthouse was a Fresnel lens, which is the light is put out by oil. There's a flame going and then generated out with the Fresnel lens. How about sound? A lot of lighthouses now have, like, a whistle or some type of loud horn. Did they have anything, any type of technology then, for signaling to ships in the fog?
- Peter White:* Yes. They had a fog signal and in 1880 a steam operated coal-fired fog signal was built and it served on the island for over forty years and this was one of five fog signals that were on the island and the fog signals were discontinued in 1976 because of advances in navigational techniques, radar and so forth, but the 1880 fog signal wasn't the first fog signal on the island. On the marine terrace, there's a hole in the ground and beneath that hole is a sea cave and as the waves rush into the sea cave, air is expelled out of the hole as what is commonly known as a bull hole and in 1858 the lighthouse engineers decided to use this to their advantage.
- So, what they did is they bricked up the holes to a very small opening and they put a locomotive whistle on top and so, as the waves rushed into the cave, it would blow the locomotive whistle. Well, this contraption had certain disadvantages. For one thing, it didn't work very well in calm weather and so, it might be foggy and calm and the thing wasn't working well. On the other hand, it blared incessantly if it was rough. So, maybe windy and rough, but clear when it wasn't needed and it would be blaring away. So, finally this thing was destroyed in a storm in 1875. It was blown right off...the whistle was blown right off the top of the hole.
- Jennifer Stock:* Ingenious, though. Very good technology, using what you've got. How about the lighthouse keepers? How did they get lighthouse keepers out there? It probably wasn't a very attractive post for folks.
- Peter White:* Right. Well, when the...that was one of the first problems that the authorities had was getting men to go out and serve as lighthouse keepers. Now, the salaries for lighthouse keepers was set by Congress and Congress used this scale that was appropriate for the east coast, but here in San Francisco there were big bucks being made because of the gold rush and the mounts being offered to lighthouse keepers was less than what domestic servants were being offered and so, the local authorities pressed Congress to raise the salary of the keepers on the Farallones and other west coast stations, enough to entice men to go out to the islands and so, Congress agreed with them and did this.

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Now, the lighthouse station on the Farallones was one of the most isolated lighthouse stations in service, but because it was isolated didn't mean that life was always boring. There were, for instance, the shipwrecks. In these shipwrecks, sometimes the keepers were heroes. For instance, in 1868, keeper Jacob Casker rode from the south Farallones to the north islands to rescue crew members from the ship, Morning Light, which had struck the north islands...

*Jennifer Stock:* Wow.

*Peter White:* In 1871, an assistant keeper by the name of Frank Roper was drowned attempted to rescue shipwrecked sailors, but sometimes the lightkeepers weren't so heroic. For instance, in 1882 a ship called the Brammon struck the islands in a fog and it struck right at the fog signal and the signal wasn't in operation and the keepers were brought up on charges of negligence and in 1872 the entire force of keepers was dismissed when it was found that they were taking oil and intended for the light and selling it in San Francisco for their own profit. But mostly, life was quiet, family-oriented...one of the important days in the life of the keepers was boat day and this is when the tender came out bringing supplies and news of the outside world. In the early days, boat days was once every three months and in later years it was once every two weeks.

*Jennifer Stock:* So, they also had families with them out there? How many people would be out there during the lighthouse keeper time?

*Peter White:* There were four keepers and generally there were four families, of course, it varied from year to year. At one point there were enough children to have a school out there run by the San Francisco school district, but being isolated as they were, the keepers and their families had to be self-sufficient and sometimes, this was difficult. It was particularly difficult in times of medical emergency. So, their broken bones and illness. One time, all four keepers were sick and the light was kept operating with a great deal of difficulty. In 1901, the islands experienced a diphtheria epidemic and four of the children were seriously ill. So, the keepers tried to signal to passing ships for help and finally help did come, but not until after two of the children had died.

*Jennifer Stock:* So, there's quite a bit of isolation and ways that they had to figure out how to live and be self-sufficient in these remote islands and it must have been so frustrating for them. So, how long would they stay as keepers or did they have a say in the matter?

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*Peter White:* Well, when the keepers went to the Farallones, that was their station, their home and they were given periods of leave on the mainland, but during the keeper period, the early keeper period, that was, that's where they lived. That was...and they would stay there as long as their assignment to the islands would be. Some of them were promoted off the island and it was just like being in the bureaucracy where you were assigned different stations.

*Jennifer Stock:* Do you think the families all worked together because of this remote isolation or...what were the family relationships like between each other and the lighthouse keepers as well?

*Peter White:* Well, they may have worked together and gotten along. We do know however that they did have conflicts between them and these conflicts are recorded in the keeper's log and some of the official correspondence. Keepers sometimes accused each other of stealing from each other, accused them of...the other keepers of being drunk on duty and they would appeal to the lighthouse board in far-off Washington to resolve these issues and, of course, people on the mainland in Washington really didn't know what was going on and there was very little they could do about it.

*Jennifer Stock:* Are there any stories...you're mentioning some shipwrecks that happened...and are there any other stories of people coming to the islands to...somewhat like pirates or wanting to check things out and see if there was anything they can get during that time?

*Peter White:* Well, not pirates that I know of. There were, of course, shipwrecks. There were ten major shipwrecks on the Farallones and by major shipwreck, what I mean is an ocean-going vessel that is a complete loss as a result of striking the island. In addition to these ten there were fishing boats that were lost there and some vessels that hit the islands, but were only damaged. The first one was in 1858. The ship, Lucas, struck the islands and sank and there was a loss of 23 people and the last one was in 1944 when a troop carrier hit the islands on May 31st and it had 1600 people on board and many of these 1600 people ended up on the Farallones. It was probably the most people ever that had been on the island at any one time.

*Jennifer Stock:* How many people, again?

*Peter White:* There were 1600 people that were on this ship that needed to be rescued. Many of those were picked up from the ocean, but many, several hundred ended up also on the island.

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*Jennifer Stock:* Oh, wow. Now, how did they...with a lot of these shipwreck survivors, how did they eventually get back to the mainland of California? How did they signal for another, I mean, did they have to wait until these support boats would come out with supplies?

*Peter White:* No. What they would do is in the early days they would signal passing ships to try to take the survivors into San Francisco and that's really how they did it.

*Jennifer Stock:* During this time and also for prior time, there's a lot of construction of buildings that went on and survival mode...how did they get materials around, I mean, a lot of the stuff is really heavy, the islands are remote, there's no cars or anything. How did they move large objects like building the lighthouse for example, getting stuff all the way to the top of the hill. Was that all human labor of carrying pieces or...

*Peter White:* No, actually what they did is they had a series of pack animals. They had a mule and when he died, a donkey. The mule's name was Jack and when Jack died...the donkey, Jerry, and finally the last mule was named Patty and they had constructed a narrow gauge rail-line on the island. It was 3600 feet and it was used to move supplies from the landing to the houses that also..there was a spur that went off to the fog signals for...to supply the fog signal with coal and the railroad was mule-operated. The mule, Patty, knew that on boat day meant work day for Patty. So, whenever the mule would hear the tenders whistle it would run off and hide in the rocks until the keepers came back and put her to her work.

The mule died on the island in 1913. It's buried out there and there's a tombstone over the grave right at the east landing.

*Jennifer Stock:* Interesting. So, how long did the lighthouse keepers occupy the island? What time...what was the time when they were phased out?

*Peter White:* The lightkeepers were on the island for 117 years from the time the light was first online until it was automated in 1972. In 1939, the nature of the island community changed and that was the year that the lighthouse, which was a civilian organization, was expanded and the nation's lightkeepers were taken over by the US Coast Guard, which, of course, is a military organization and the Coast Guard was there with their families until 1966 and in 1966 the nature of the community again changed and this is when the Coast Guard decided not to maintain the families out there anymore.

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This was simply an economic decision and so, the children and wives left the island and then, finally, in 1972 the lighthouse was automated and the last keeper of the Farallon light, a coastguardsman by the name of Brent Franz left the island.

*Jennifer Stock:* Wow. So, once the lighthouse keepers left the island, was there any occupation from there on out?

*Peter White:* Well, three years before the Coast Guard left, in 1969, the islands were made a national wildlife refuge and put under the joint administration of the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Coast Guard. The Fish and Wildlife Service knew, of course, that the Coast Guard would be leaving the island and they believed there had to be a human presence on the island and so, they contracted with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, which is a scientific research organization located in Petaluma and under terms of the contract, the bird observatory is to maintain a research station on the island year-round and so, that's who's on the island today: biologists who engage in studies of marine mammals, birds, sharks, and other things.

*Jennifer Stock:* How did...there must have been some effort and some awareness about the importance of the islands for the birds and the mammals and the reason to designate it as a refuge. Was there any significant biological observations or work done prior to that to really designate the need for creating a refuge?

*Peter White:* The early visitors really almost all remarked on the wildlife there, the abundance of wildlife. It was just amazing when these Europeans first came there, the amount of the number of birds and marine mammals and so, the islands were an important wildlife area. It was known from the very beginning.

In the first designation as a preserve was done in 1909 by Theodore Roosevelt. He made the north islands a part of...and the middle Farallon, a part of the Farallon Reserve, and then, this was later, extended, as I said, to 1969 when the south islands were included.

*Jennifer Stock:* I didn't realize there were two different time periods there for the designation of that refuge. Now, what about in your book you talk about some Navy radio stations and a weather station. What time were these out there and what do they do?

*Peter White:* The weather station was put out there in 1902 and the weather observer had two jobs. One is to make and communicate weather

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observations and the other was to report what ships were headed to San Francisco so merchants and other people with an interest could prepare for their arrival. Now, they had to communicate, of course, to the mainland. So, in 1902, there was an undersea cable laid from the Farallones to Drake's Bay and later the weather service used a radio, but the weather station wasn't there very long. It was discontinued in ??

*Jennifer Stock:*

So, the radio station was for the weather or was that for Naval communications?

*Peter White:*

The first radio station was for the weather service and then in 1905 the Navy established a radio station on the island and this was a general purpose radio station. It was to relay messages from ships at sea to the Navy stations at Yuerba Buena and Murre Island and then in 1920, there was a second radio station, AV radio station, on the island. This wasn't a successor to the first station. This was in addition to the first station and the second station was a radio compass station and it was designed as a navigational aid and a sea captain that was in contact with a radio compass station would know its direction from him so he could draw a directional line on his chart and by being in contact with two or more radio compass stations at the same time, he would know that...where these directional lines intersected would be his position and so, this was a very important advance at a place like Northern California where fogs were common along the coast.

So, when the Navy radios were in operation, they had a chief radio operator and six other operators and many of these men had their wives along. So, now there were two communities on the Farallones: The light station, the light keepers, and their family and the Navy radio station with their families. Actually, they didn't post people and with children, but they did have their wives along.

*Jennifer Stock:*

That's pretty interesting. Were there any other occupants of the island from there on out or was it just simply PRBO in partnership with the refuge then had the biological station from there on out or were there any other communities that we missed talking about this history?

*Peter White:*

Not really. During the second world war the Navy operated a...what was called a radar beacon, and it was a special design. It would give more information than just a reflected pulse. It's what we call a transponder nowadays, very common technology, but back in those days it was a new advance and the fact that it was

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there was secret until after the war, but we pretty much covered the communities.

*Jennifer Stock:* Since the designation of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, and the partnership with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, what types of wildlife recovery took place or habitat restoration took place with that designation?

*Peter White:* Well, once the islands were left alone, where there was no disturbance of the animals, the islands began to heal themselves and many of the species that had been eliminated returned. For instance, in 1972, the elephant seal, which had been eliminated from the island returned as a breeder. Also, in the same year, the rhinoceros auklet, which is a seabird which had been eliminated from the island returned. In 1996, the first fur seal was born on the island after many years...after many years of hunting and in 2006, more than 90 fur seal pups were born and so, the islands have gone a long way in recovering and healing themselves.

The murre population, these are the birds that laid the eggs that were sold in San Francisco for food, the murre population had been less than 10,000 in the 1950's. In 2006, the murre population was up to 170,000.

*Jennifer Stock:* Wow, that's an amazing recovery just on their own. I can imagine there's just probably not having people trampling all over the island that just...habitat restoring itself. A lot of these birds are cavity nesters and need to have the soft ground to burrow into. So, I imagine that birds like Cassin's Auklets started to come back slowly as well.

*Peter White:* The Cassin's auklets did return and they had a population of well over 100,000 for a while, but their population has since gone down for reasons other than, probably, reasons other than human disturbance.

*Jennifer Stock:* Probably oceanographic conditions and foraging from what I understand. Now, when you had a chance to volunteer with the biologists, what type of work did you do?

*Peter White:* Well, my time on the island was in the fall and so, the research project that I engaged in most was monitoring the land bird migration. Many land bird-migrants stop at the Farallones during their migration and so, my job was to count, identify, census the birds as to species and number and to band as many as we could catch. I also helped with the elephant seals and doing other things

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such as taking water samples and weather observations and this sort of thing, sort of a spear-carrier for science.

*Jennifer Stock:* That's great. There's so much great research going on out there and hopefully I'll be able to interview some of the scientists from PRBO on a future show, but we're going to wrap it up a little bit. Is there any last thoughts about the Farallon Islands you'd want to share with listeners about your research and can you tell us where your book would be available for purchase?

*Peter White:* Well, the book is in some bookstores. It can be ordered through any bookstore and it's also available online on Amazon.

*Jennifer Stock:* I know that the local bookstore at Point Reyes carries that and, excuse me, the Point Reyes National Seashore visitors center also carries the book, *The Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate*. Peter, thanks so much for sharing your time. This is an incredible amount of information and time you've spent researching about this human history of such a remote, isolated place. So, thank you for joining us.

*Peter White:* Well, thank you for having me, Jennifer.

*Jennifer Stock:* The *Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate* is really an important and fascinating book, the only book telling the whole story of the Farallon Islands including an absorbing and remarkable human history. Most San Francisco historians really know nothing about. So, Peter really did a lot of digging and brought it all to a nice compendium for people to learn about and I think it's really important to learn from history about how to move forward in the future.

We can't make better decisions for the future unless we know the past and hearing some of the stories of how they, you know, planned the lighthouse too small and then they had to tear it down and rebuild, those are kind of examples, I think, we've learned along the way as well as just treating habitats. So, thanks again for joining us today on *Ocean Currents*. Looking at this history, human history, of the Farallon Islands and in the future we'll maybe talk about some more of the natural history. So, thanks again for joining us today.

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