

Scotch Cap Light Station – Alaska

Based on the recollections of Frank Skidmore who was stationed at Scotch Cap during the 1940's.

The 1940 Scotch Cap Lighthouse. The lantern room of the original structure was used on the new building. The top of the original lighthouse can be seen to the left of the new tower. The wooden structure protruding to the left of the new lighthouse is probably a barracks erected during the war. A reaiobeacon antenna is right of the lighthouse. Note the men off-loading supplies on the beach. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

The Lighthouse Service began constructing light stations in Alaska in 1902. The Sentinel Island and Five Finger stations, of Southeastern Alaska, were the first to go into service on March 1, 1902. The third station completed was that at Scotch Cap on Unimak Island in the Aleutians. The station went into operation on June 18, 1903. A sister station, Cape Sarichef, on the north end of Unimak Pass was completed the following year.

In 1901 Congress authorized \$40,600 to construct a lighthouse and fog signal station at Scotch Cap on Unimak Island in the eastern end of the Aleutian Islands. The pass was the primary passage for vessels navigating between the North Pacific and the Bering Sea. The Scotch Cap and Sarichef Light Stations would assist vessels traveling through that pass.

Requests for proposals for the construction of the station were mailed out in 1901. The 1902 Report of the Lighthouse Board states, "Plans and specifications for construction of the structure were made and proposals were opened on March 22, 1902. All bids received were so excessive

that the station was built by hired labor, while material was bought by contract. The greater part of the material has been purchased. The steamer *Homer*... which was chartered on June 23, 1902 left Seattle on June 30, 1902 with necessary men and material."

In 1903 the Board reported, "The Steamer *Homer*... which left Seattle on June 30, 1902, with men and material for constructing the station, arrived at the site July 13, 1902, and discharged the cargo safely. The steamer made two other trips during the season... construction was discontinued for the year on November 27, 1902. The fog signal and tower were completed, with the exception of laying one of the concrete engine beds, placing hardware and lantern glass, and applying two coats of paint, inside and outside. The two oil houses were completed...the barn was completed with the exception of painting and putting in the stalls. The three dwellings were completed on the outside, with the exception of painting. The steamer *Homer* arrived at the station on May 10, 1903, with men and material for completing the station. The painting of the buildings and installation of the heating plants were

practically completed. The lens was set up and the light put in operation on June 18, 1903. Some work remains to be done on the fog signal machinery, and it is expected that the signal will be ready for use on July 15, 1903."

The next year's report mentioned that when they started the fog signal machinery, "... all three check valves were broken, making the signal useless. New valves were procured and the signal was made ready for use on September 16, 1903."

The Scotch Cap was an unaccompanied light station. The keepers selected for these remote stations were usually bachelors or widowers, who had to pass rigid physical examinations. They were contracted to remain on the stations for three years, then were allowed accumulated leave with full pay, which amounted to twelve months. Five keepers were assigned, with four on duty and one on leave, at all times. After the Coast Guard assumed control, a tour of duty at a remote light station like Scotch Cap was still unaccompanied but only for a period of one year. The men assigned accrued 30 days leave in addition to the regular 30 days earned each year.

The original characteristic of the Scotch Cap Light Station was fixed white from a 3rd order lens. The fog signal was an air whistle. Sometime in the 1920's it was changed to a diaphone and a radiobeacon was added. But in spite of these aids to navigation, ships still ran aground in the area. One, the Japanese freighter *Koshun Maru*, stranded right in front of the light station in 1930.

Late in 1942, the Russian freighter *Turksib*, traveling in a large convoy, became separated from the other ships due to bad weather. It stranded five miles east of Scotch Cap. The U.S. Naval vessel *ARS 18* was dispatched from Dutch Harbor and attempted to pull the Russian vessel off the beach. While attempting to pass a hawser (line) to the Russian vessel the *ARS 18* ran aground on an uncharted reef and was destroyed.

The *Turksib* succumbed to the heavy surf and, in no time, started breaking up. The Captain was decapitated as part of the bridge broke loose when the ship shifted due to the pounding surf. The chief engineer lost his life when he climbed the rigging with a light line (rope) around his waist and jumped to



The Scotch Cap Lighthouse shortly after completion in 1903. This octagonal design was also used for the Cape Sarichef Lighthouse located at the other end of Unimak Pass. Note the diagonal astragals of the lantern room. The Lighthouse Service started using this British design after the turn of the century. The dwellings were located several hundred yards away as seen on page 27. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

clear the ship in an attempt to swim ashore. When he was in the air the ship lurched away from him pulling him into the ship where he hit his head on the hull or deck. The bodies were recovered by the Scotch Cap crew and buried behind the light station. Years later, small gravestones were erected, but apparently no contact was ever made with the families in Russia.

Supplies from the *Turksib* were soon scattered for miles along the beach: jeeps, personnel carriers, parts and barrels and barrels of powered eggs. The huge brown bears of Unimak Island soon discovered the dried eggs. The light station personnel, during the trips to the wreck site, watched with awe as the bears exerted tremendous power in breaking into the barrels. They reared up on hind legs and came down with both forepaws, usually smashing the barrels on their first try. Many furious fights occurred among the bears as they fought each other over the food. The station personnel stated it wasn't unusual to see large sections of the bear's sides dripping with blood and with large areas of ripped hide showing through their coats. On one occasion the men counted 20 bears at one section of the beach.

In March, 1942, the Alaskan Steamship Company vessel S.S. *Mount McKinley* was sailing between Dutch Harbor and Seattle with a large group of construction workers. They were constructing a seaplane base and runway at Dutch Harbor, which was subsequently attacked by the Japanese.

As the ship approached Unimak Pass she lost her rudder. A Coast Guard vessel came to the rescue and began towing the *McKinley*. After a short while, heavy seas caused the towing line to part and it was decided that it was too rough to attempt another tow. The *McKinley* soon drifted onto the beach at Sennet Point, about six miles east of the Scotch Cap station. Everybody on board survived. They were eventually taken back to civilization by another Alaskan Steamship Company vessel.

One Scotch Cap crewmember remembered that the ship was still high and dry on the beach when he arrived in the spring of 1943. He stated that when it was calm, Scotch Cap and Cape Sarichef crewmen would meet at the steamship to play the grand piano still in the saloon.

In 1940 the Coast Guard replaced the original Scotch Cap Lighthouse with a

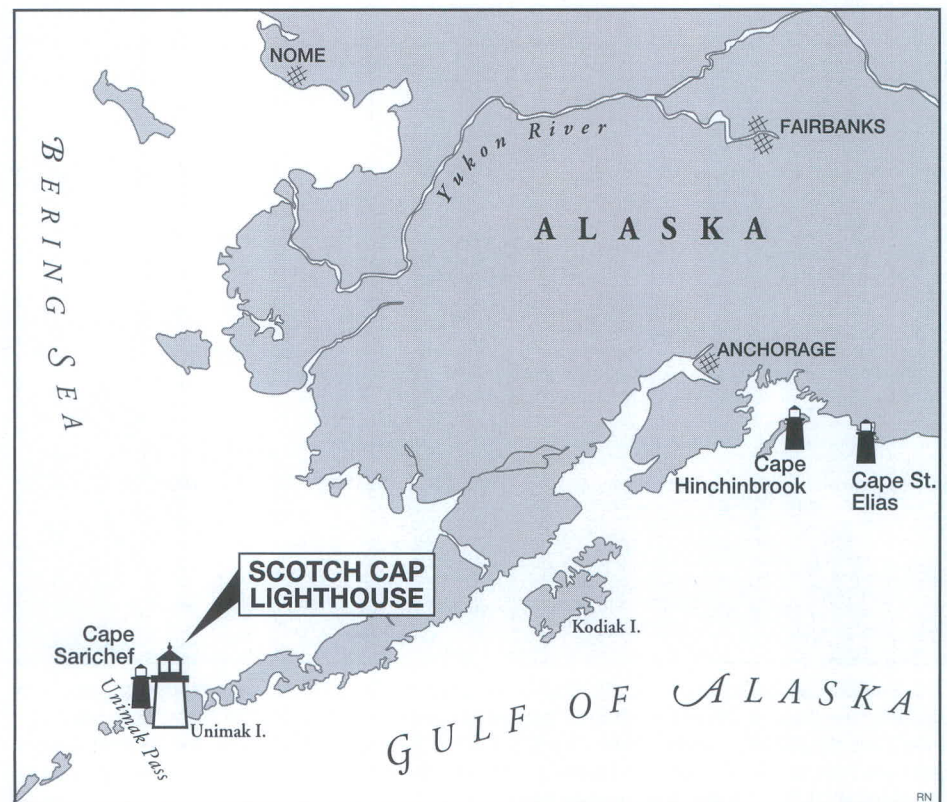
\$200,000 reinforced concrete structure, which housed the lens, fog signals and personnel. The three, old wooden houses were abandoned. The new, modern self-contained lighthouse was reported to be one of the most up-to-date lighthouses in the world. The old lantern room and 3rd order lens were transferred from the original structure, which was then destroyed. The new characteristic was a flashing white light every 15 seconds, visible for 15 miles. It also provided the mariner with a diaphone fog signal and radiobeacon. A radio direction finder station was installed in a small rectangular building on a bluff above the lighthouse. During World War II, this direction finding station was a valuable aid to the Aleutian operations.

The base of the new lighthouse was about 50 feet above high tide, an elevation that proved to be insufficient. On April 1, 1946 an undersea eruption occurred off the Aleutians, sending a tsunami as far away as Japan, Hawaii and the California coasts. It also came roaring in on Scotch Cap. At about 2 a.m. the huge wave crashed down on the lighthouse (the top being 100 feet above the sea), crushing the structure and pulling most of the reinforced concrete and all ancillary buildings out to sea. The five

men stationed at the lighthouse were killed, only parts of their bodies were discovered.

On the night the tidal wave struck, one of the personnel assigned to the direction finding station on the bluff visited the station to play cards. They quit around midnight and the crew urged him to stay over. Fortunately, he returned to his station, above the reach of the tsunami.

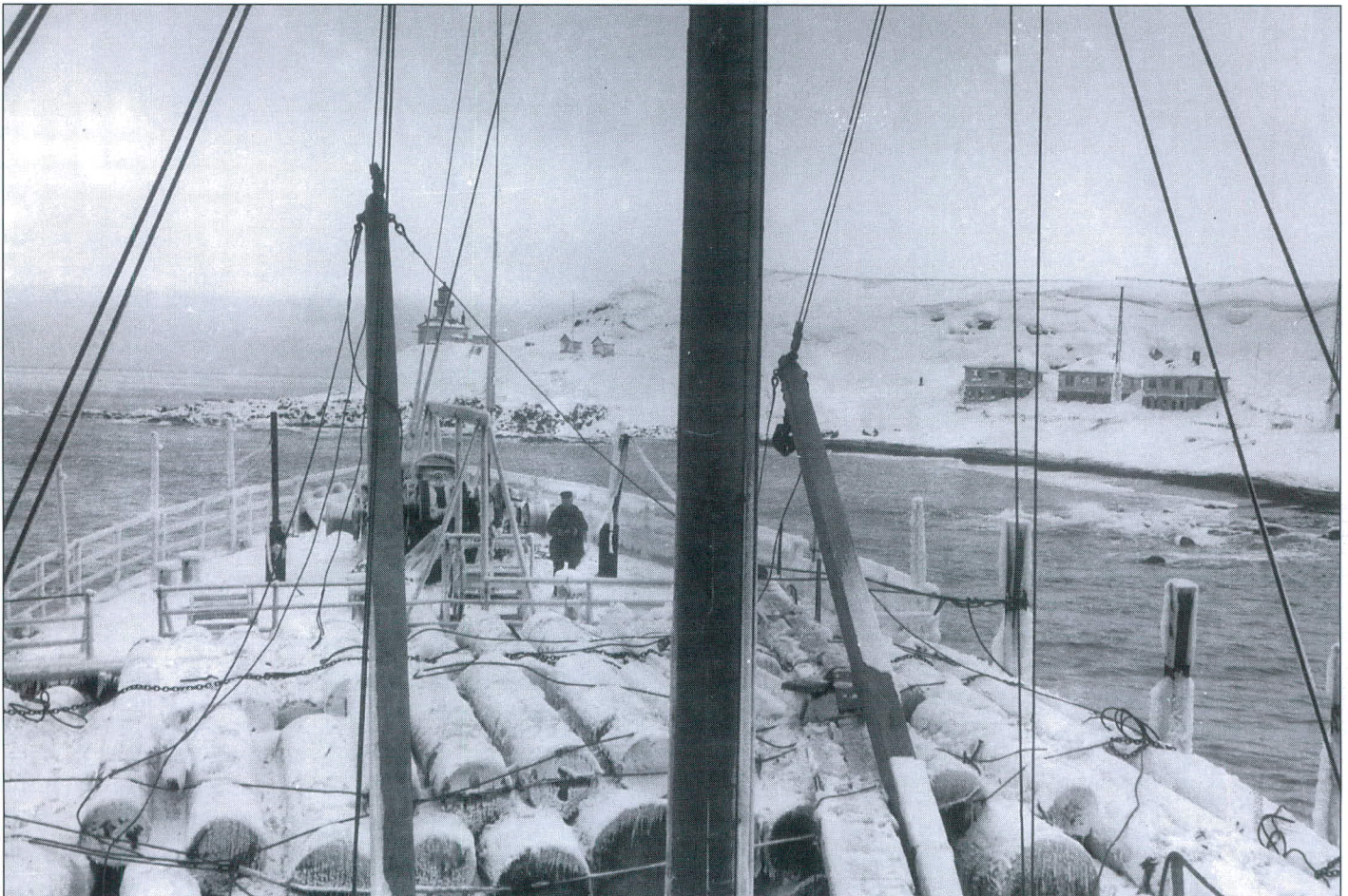
Scotch Cap was never rebuilt. A small unmanned and automated light was installed to help vessels navigate the Unimak Pass. For 43 years the Scotch Cap Lighthouse was a welcome sight to the thousands of mariners who navigated Unimak Pass, traveling from the North Pacific into the Bering Sea, and it seems like Only Yesterday.





Left – Only a portion of the foundation and some debris remain to mark the site of Scotch Cap Lighthouse. All five Coast Guard crew members lost their lives on April 1, 1946, when tons of water from a Tsunami swept over the lighthouse, collapsing the structure and sliding it into the sea.

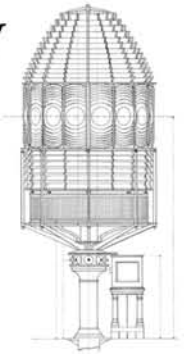
The 60-foot tall square concrete structure stood at an elevation of 92 feet above high water. It was constructed in 1940 replacing the original 1903 wooden structure. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



The Japanese vessel *Koshun Maru* aground at Scotch Cap in 1930. First assistant keeper Oscar Lindberg is standing on the bow. The Scotch Cap Lighthouse can be seen dead ahead. To the right of the lighthouse are two oil houses and off to the right are the three keepers' dwellings. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



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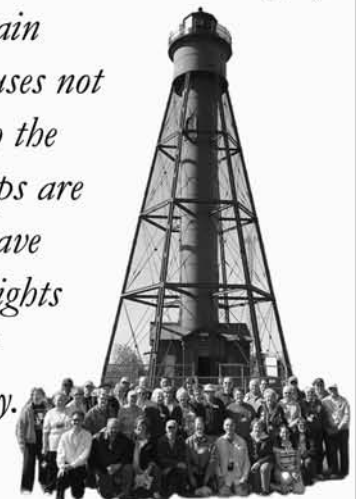
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