



Pt Reyes Lighthouse

Point Reyes peninsula, the windiest location on the Pacific Coast and the second foggiest place on the North American continent has been the scene of hundreds of shipwrecks dating from the Spanish Galleon, San Agustin in 1595 to the 27-foot sailboat, The Rosebud, in 2018. The dense fog, strong currents and rocky coastline, so near the major port of San Francisco, have spelled the doom of many ships and taken the lives of thousands of seagoing passengers.

In 1870 the Point Reyes Lighthouse was built to warn ships of impending danger and provide a beacon to help navigate the treacherous Northern California coast. The lighthouse's lens and mechanism were constructed in France in 1867 and shipped around Cape Horn to Drake's Bay. Situated 300 feet below the top of the cliff, the beacon had a "first order" (largest) Fresnel lens that refracted and magnified the lamp light through crystal prisms which could be seen 24 miles away, more than doubling the range of earlier reflective lenses. The rotation of the 36 inch wide, 8.5 ft diameter lens required a complex weight and gear system, not unlike many grandfather clocks, with a suspended weight supplying the force to turn the 6000 lb. mechanism.

Though many ships have foundered or sunk along the Marin coastline since the Pt. Reyes lighthouse was built, it has undoubtedly saved countless other vessels from suffering the same fate. Within 20 years a steam-powered siren, and later an electric powered foghorn, were installed lower on the cliff to warn vessels when the fog was too dense for the light to be seen. In the early days, a keeper and two or three assistants were responsible for lighting the lamp at sunset and maintaining the lens, lamp and rotating mechanism. An 1887 San Francisco Chronicle article detailed the lonely, arduous and often dangerous work and lives of the keepers who earned from \$500 - \$800 a year plus room and board.

The Pt. Reyes lighthouse was retired from service in 1975 when the U.S. Coast Guard installed an automated light and transferred ownership to the National Park Service. Sightseers can visit the site by following Sir Francis Drake Blvd. to its westernmost end and climbing down the 360 steps to the historic, 16-sided lighthouse.