



*Don Skiff took this beautiful image of Smith Island Lighthouse in 1948. A photo like this can never be taken again. The lighthouse has been lost to the dusty pages of time. Sadly, this is how it once was.*

# Washington State's Lost Smith Island Lighthouse

Smith Island is located near the eastern end of the Washington's Strait of Juan de Fuca.

At the time Smith Island Lighthouse was built in 1858 it stood approximately 200 feet from the edge of the sandy cliff.

Smith Island Lighthouse is one of small number of lighthouses that was actually attacked by Indians, although it was only a minor skirmish. No one at the lighthouse was injured although it was reported that one Indian was wounded.

As far as island life goes, and if you like isolation, living at this lighthouse for the most part was ideal for keepers and their families and at one time a number of sheep grazed on the island. One keeper introduced rabbits to the island, which turned out to be a big mistake and before long they multiplied so fast they became a major nuisance.

Erosion was always a problem at the lighthouse and by 1950 there was less than 50 feet between the edge of the bluff and the lighthouse. As erosion crept closer, the lighthouse was abandoned and the keepers were moved to other housing and a light on a skeleton pole replaced the light in the tower.

In 1964 lighthouse historian and author Jim Gibbs received permission from the Coast Guard to remove the lantern room from the lighthouse and install it on the Skunk Bay Lighthouse. Had he not done so, the lantern room would have eventually been destroyed. His actions saved a valuable part of history, as have his numerous books.

Eventually, bits and pieces of the old lighthouse toppled over the cliff. Part of the structure remained teetering on edge for a number of years until one day in 1998 what remained of the structure simply slid down the bluff and the lighthouse was lost forever.



*Smith Island Lighthouse Station as it appeared in 1949. The block building in the center was the watch shack, containing radio gear, generators and batteries. The tall poles were the radio beacon antennas used for navigation. All electric on the island at that time was D.C. from a bank of 18 large lead-acid truck batteries connected in series and recharged by gasoline powered generators. It was still a family station in those days. At that time there were three families, plus one single keeper who boarded with one of the families. Only one child was living on the island at that time. Don's wife, Pat, was pregnant at that time. The 83-foot cutter stationed at Port Townsend had to make an emergency run to take Pat to the hospital and the boats crew said they made the trip to Port Townsend in record time. By the 1950's families were no longer permitted to live on the island. Don said this was a good idea since the station was too isolated for most women and he recalled that he saw a lot of tears out there. Photograph by Don Skiff.*



*This image shows how serious the erosion problem was at Smith Island with pieces of the lighthouse structure seen scattered about.*



The Smith Island Lighthouse crew in 1948. Don Skiff is at the left. The man on the right is a civilian lighthouse keeper, a holdover from the U. S. Lighthouse Service, who retired about a year later. The other crewmember in the middle is not identified.



At one time Smith Island boasted a large sheep population. Whether they were cared for by the lighthouse keeper or someone else is unclear.



As erosion crept closer to the lighthouse, the structure was deemed unsafe and the keepers moved into more modern housing as shown at the right.



The Fresnel lens was still in the tower at Smith Island Lighthouse when this photo was taken in 1948. Photograph by Don Skiff.



The control room in the watch shack in 1949 showing timers and transmitters for the radio beacon. Photograph by Don Skiff.



Deer have a tendency to swim a lot and find new homes on islands as is evident by this deer that appears to be pretty tame on Smith Island. The lady was most likely the wife of the keeper.



In 1964, lighthouse historian, Jim Gibbs wanted to save the lighthouse. However, by that time it was too close to the edge of the cliff to move in the necessary heavy equipment to safely move the structure. So, with the government's permission, he was at least able to save the lantern room by removing it. This aerial view shows the lighthouse without its lantern room only a few feet from the edge.



Shortly after Don Skiff joined the Coast Guard in 1948 he was transferred to Smith Island as a Coast Guard keeper. In this photo taken by him visitors and family members prepare to debark the island via the 83-foot Coast Guard Cutter lying offshore. The planks shown were used to slide the 16-foot boat off the dock and into the water. At low tide the water line would be 50 feet from the dock. Notice the front of the old pickup truck that was on the island. The commanding officer is holding a mail sack and the sailors at the right are crewmembers from the cutter. Don's wife, Pat, is shown next to the little girl who is standing on fuel drum. The dog, which belonged to Pat Skiff, is Shang; short for Shanghai



Smith Island Lighthouse in 1949 as it appeared from the water. It was less than 50 feet from the edge of the bluff by this time.



Smith Island Lighthouse Station is shown here in its prime when it was in pristine condition. At this time it was a family station. DeWitt C. Dennison came to Smith Island as a keeper in 1880 and was later appointed head keeper upon the resignation of the head keeper. When DeWitt Dennison died at the lighthouse in 1891, his son Frank was appointed as his replacement. After Frank married, two of his children were born at the lighthouse. In 1905 Frank Dennison was transferred to Fairway Island Lighthouse in Alaska and in 1910 he was lost at sea.



The Minor Island Beacon and Fog Signal as shown here in 1948 was close enough to Smith Island that sometimes at low tide they were part of the same piece of land. But it was far enough that at night smaller boats would sometimes try to navigate between the islands. Since the spit was all sand, running aground there was seldom disastrous. But even sand, in a heavy sea, can cause a boat to break up from the pounding. The marine charts were clearly marked, but there are always seamen who test the margin of error. It was operated remotely from the watch shack at Smith Island Lighthouse Station. However, it had a diesel powered generator and electric compressor to operate the foghorn. It was a simple concrete building with no windows, only a air ventilation cover. The nameplate cast over the door is inscribed "USLHS - 1935" for United States Light-House Service. The sign says, "DANGER Naval Bombing Area." Naval aircraft from Whidby Island Air Station, five miles east, dropped unarmed bombs and sonar nearby, practicing for submarine hunting. The drums lying about are oil drums, mostly empty. Don Skiff was temporarily stranded here in 1948 while servicing the foghorn. A severe storm came up and he took refuge in the bunker style structure and recalled at the time being upset that emergency rations were not kept here. He eventually was able to launch the small lighthouse boat. In high seas as the small craft was tossed about in the open sea he miraculously made it back to Smith Island. Like many other keepers throughout history he had risked his life in keeping the foghorn sounding its warning blare so that others could be saved. Photograph by Don Skiff.



This scuffy top from a small tree served as the Christmas tree for the lighthouse crew in 1975. A Coast Guard helicopter delivered all gifts and care packages. Photograph by Chris Donner.



What is left of the Smith Island Lighthouse teeters on the brick of the bluff in the 1980's. Shortly after this photo was taken, the last remaining section of the structure finally toppled over the edge. Photograph courtesy Coast Guard Museum Northwest.



A new tractor for Smith Island Light Station being delivered from the Port Angeles Air Station by helicopter in 1975. Photo by Chris Donner.



This image shows that a large portion of the lighthouse structure, which is the building to the right, has already fallen over the bluff. In the background you will see the skeleton tower, which became the new Smith Island Lighthouse.



*Coast Guard lighthouse keepers created their own entertainment in 1975 while stationed on the island. As the west side of the island eroded and pipes were exposed the men attached a rope to a pipe. They then had some fun pretending they were Tarzan. This is Coast Guard lighthouse keeper Chris Donner swinging from the end of the rope. It is doubtful the commanding officer would have approved if he had known.*



*There is not much holding the lighthouse structure on the island in this 1975 photo taken by Coast Guard keeper Chris Donner. Notice that the entire foundation is exposed.*



*The generator room on Smith Island Light Station as it appeared in 1974. Photo by Chris Donner.*



*With its fluorescent lighting the kitchen at Smith Island Lighthouse Station appeared very institutional. But the sunsets through the kitchen window were spectacular. Photograph by Chris Donner.*

## Vacationing Days Of Yesteryear

Looking at this vintage photograph one can easily conjure up an old black and white movie, perhaps starring Humphrey Bogart. If there were a time machine, I'd go back in time and spend the night here. It looks so inviting. In those days, when people were traveling or on vacation they would often stay at small roadside cabins such as the Lighthouse Cabins in Otter Lake, New York. I wonder if we have any readers that ever spent the night there or can tell us more about this place.



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