

POINT PINOS LOCATION MEMORANDUM

November 19, 2011

Subj: Site selection for the Pt. Pinos Lighthouse

The official literature gives three sites that were surveyed for the light at Pt. Pinos:

Site a: the actual site, about a quarter-mile from the end of the point.

Site b: a site in the dunes, now occupied by the golf course.

Site c: on the meadow at the extreme point, accessible only around low tide.

The alternatives weighed in choosing the site can be summarized as follows:

Site a: Primary advantage is its elevation, and availability of rocky substrate for the foundation. Disadvantage: quite a bit of clearing of pines required for the light to be visible.

Site b: Little, if any, clearing of trees required, but the rocky substratum base for the foundation might be "at a considerable depth."

Site c: The rocky point had a good foundation, but was cut off from the shore at high tide. Uncertainty existed as to how long it would withstand the force of the sea.

According to Jerry McCaffery's book, the major reason advanced for the actual site of the lighthouse is that it provided handy access to granite to quarry for the foundation and basement walls of the lighthouse. Exactly where the granite was, however, turns out to be not quite clear.

During a recent conversation involving Steve Honeggar, former PGMNH Director Paul Finnegan, and several lighthouse docents, it was mentioned that there is apparently little if any granite actually on the lighthouse site that could have been quarried for construction purposes when the lighthouse was built. Honeggar's opinion is that it is mostly all sand, and Finnegan recalled that several years ago Ed Clifton, a local geologist active at Point Lobos and the Aquarium, was involved in a survey of the site to determine if the geology at the site sustains the theory that on-site granite was quarried for construction purposes.

Since Clifton is a member of my aquarium shift, I asked him for his input on this question. He was not a member of the committee that actually did the survey, but those who did are colleagues of his, and he agreed to look into the records and provide some answers that will be useful for lighthouse docents.

Here is Ed Clifton's reply:

“The lighthouse was built on Pleistocene dune sand that in turn lies on top of a coastal marine terrace deposit that further buries the granite. The closest granite to the lighthouse is on the shoreline, but it may not have been of suitable quality for the building material. There is an exposed hill of granite at the current site of the Olympia Lodge, which isn't too far away but there is no evidence that it was ever quarried. The nearest old quarries that I could locate are up on a hill at the back of the Presidio.”

In view of the foregoing, I recommend that we discontinue citing the availability of quarry material on-site as a reason for the lighthouse location. Instead we should answer the frequently asked question, “Why was the lighthouse built so far from the water's edge?” by stressing the height above sea level, firm substrate, and secure location away from the danger of force of the sea.

Paul Knostman
Lighthouse docent