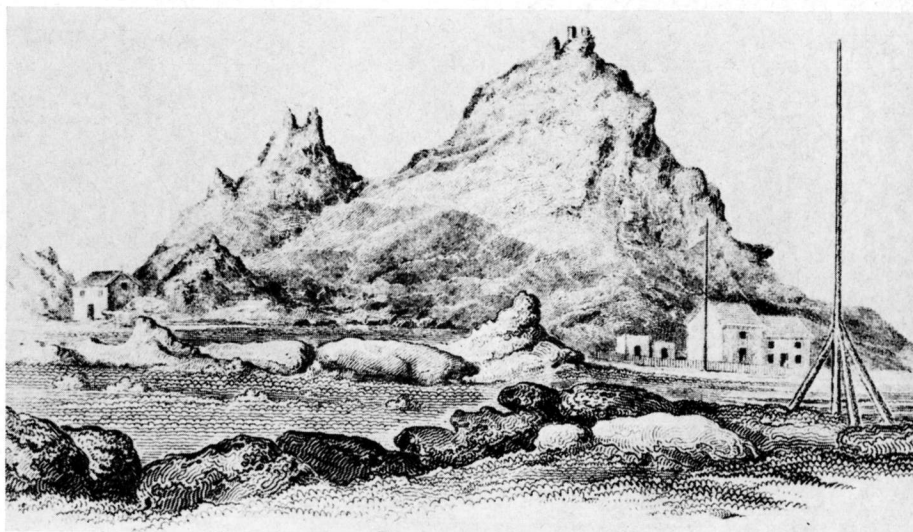




THESE ARE THE FARALLONS

Allyn G. Smith



ON CLEAR days from almost any high vantage point in the San Francisco Bay area, a small group of islands can be seen by looking due west. These are the Farallon Islands — “farallon” being an old Spanish nautical term for any jutting rock or ocean cliff of importance to navigation. Few who have seen these islands know that they are an offshore portion of the City and County of San Francisco, presently under the jurisdiction of the United States Coast Guard.

The Farallons have a fascinating history beginning early in the nineteenth century. For well over a hundred and fifty years these small, barren, almost forbidding chunks of granite played a significant part in the commercial life of the San Francisco Bay area. They play a different but equally important role today, being directly on the shipping lanes to Pacific ports.

There are seven main islands in the Farallon group. Largest, and the only inhabited one, is the Southeast Farallon, on which the lighthouse and much navigational and weather recording equipment is located. This island is about 27 miles west of Point Bonita and is roughly a mile long and half a mile wide. The Southeast Farallon is at times almost two islands, the eastern portion being cut by a deep surge channel subject to heavy wave action at high tide although passable on foot when the tide is low. The tallest point, on which the lighthouse has been built, is 350 feet above mean sea level. A Coast Guard station is located on a flat area toward the south end. There are no major docks or piers. Landings are made in small tenders operating from Coast Guard supply ships anchored offshore. When the weather is stormy and the waves are high, landing is a hazardous experience.

Top, air view of the Southeast Farallon. (Call-Bulletin photo, courtesy of San Francisco Public Library.)

Above, sketch of just-completed lighthouse by Lieutenant W. P. Trowbridge. (From an 1855 U. S. Coast Survey Report.)

