Statement Of Significance

Summary
The Point Bonita Historic District, located at the entrance to the San Francisco Bay from the Pacific Ocean, includes both the Point Bonita Light Station and the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station. On September 3, 1991, the Point Bonita Light Station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The light station meets the “registration requirements for its property type. It contains an intact lighthouse tower (in this case with intact lens as well) and an associated fog-signal building. The architectural integrity of the station's historic buildings is high and their condition is good. The tower and fog-signal building, clustered together at the end of the rocky point, give cohesiveness to the station site. This is heightened by the building's separation from the main access path by a pedestrian suspension bridge. This bridge, existing in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge, provides an element of grace and whimsy to the light station. Point Bonita is the only lighthouse in the United States (perhaps the world) approached by a suspension bridge.” (National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1991.) Established in 1855 to mark the entrance to San Francisco Bay and to warn of local navigational hazards, the Point Bonita Light Station meets the requirements for registration as defined in the multiple property submission "Light Stations in California." The period of significance was listed on the National Register nomination form as 1855 to 1940.

For the purposes of including the broader site development and landscape features associated with the aids to navigation and humanitarian operations, the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station has been included as part of the Historic District. A draft nomination for the Point Bonita Life-saving Station was completed in 1978 but never finalized. The life-saving station was initially developed in 1899 under the authority of the U.S. Life-Saving Service which complemented the work of the U.S. Lighthouse Board. By the end of the period of significance, the function of the life-saving station had evolved from supplying humanitarian assistance to providing housing for lighthouse staff.

This CLI proposes expanding the end of the period of significance to 1966, which reflects the work of an operating light station complex, encompassing the initial construction of the light station and the last major investment in the station, reflecting the modernization of equipment and the duties of Coast Guard staff. This period also incorporates the period of significance proposed in the draft 1978 National Register nomination form for the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station, 1899 to 1930, which encompasses the development of the life-saving station.

The 1991 nomination established the significance of the site under Criteria A and C. Under Criterion A (historic events or broad patterns of history), the district is linked to the historic growth of commercial shipping along the West Coast and “California’s critical reliance on maritime transportation and the aids that made navigation possible,” under National Register Criterion A. Under Criterion C (embodies distinctive characteristic of type, period, method of construction, or the work of a master), the light station retains the general form of a formal late nineteenth/early twentieth century light complex reflected in the architecturally distinctive late nineteenth century lighthouse tower and early twentieth century fog-signal building. In addition, the draft 1978 nomination for the Point Bonita Life-Saving Station found the station to be significant under Criterion D (has yielded, or may likely yield information important in prehistory or history). The district was identified as being significant on a state level under historic Theme V: Developing the American Economy, under sub-theme “Shipping and Transportation by Water; Ships, Boats, Lighthouses and Other Structures” and Theme II: Creating Social Institutions, under sub-theme; “Social and Humanitarian Movements; Emergency Aid and Health Care.”

Context
Shipping and Transportation by Water
In spite of very few natural harbors suitable for shipping, California's strategic location on the Pacific Ocean opened the West to maritime trade and exploration and established California as a dominant commercial influence. Following the initial exploration of the California coast by Spanish and English explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the 1849 Gold Rush provided a major impetus for maritime transportation to California, as the transcontinental railroad would not be completed for another twenty years.

Following the discovery of gold near Sutter's Mill in 1848, people in the East wanted to reach California before the gold ran out. However, the established route around Cape Horn took five to eight months, making a short cut through Panama enticing. The route from New York City to Panama then from Panama to San Francisco reduced the travel time to three to five months. A lack of natural protected harbors between San Francisco and San Diego prevented an immediate increase in southern maritime activity. The resulting maritime economy was primarily a northern California phenomenon and San Francisco, with its superior natural harbor, served as the port city for all maritime activity north and south of the Golden Gate.

With increased travel to San Francisco Bay, a light was essential for the safety of the arriving ships. As stated in the Multiple Property Documentation Form … "the Gold Rush of 1849 had produced a virtual maritime stampede to San Francisco Bay. Unfortunately, the Bay was completely unmarked when the first shiploads began to arrive. San Francisco Bay, despite its calm appearance, is in many ways a nautical nightmare.

Since 1775 when the first European vessel, Ayala's pacquebot San Carlos, entered San Francisco Bay, hundreds of vessels have come to grief on its rocky shores, wide sandy beaches or in its fast currents and swirling fog. The north shore of the Golden Gate was, and is, a heavily used area for vessel traffic. Swift currents and other hazards combined with the large volume of shipping to litter its shores with shipwrecks. High on the list of dangers are the fierce currents that sweep in and out of the narrow entrance to wide San Francisco Bay. As the tide changes, or as the flowing water is deflected by the several points of land that jut into the channel, confusing and dangerous back eddies are formed. The high cliffs that line the Marin County shore are unforgiving to grounded vessels. Point Bonita especially, and also Point Diablo and Lime Point protrude into the water, Deep water close to shore makes casting the lead an insufficient warning method. Thick fogs blanked the area both summer and winter. Sailing craft close to the cliffs are somewhat in the wind shadow form the prevailing north-westerlies, but vessels are given no lee at all from the more dangerous southerly winds than accompany winter storms. From the beginning, it appeared that the establishment of navigational aids would be necessary to assure safe passage in and out of the Bay." (Light Stations of California: Multiple Property Documentation Form, 1990)

The historic record indicates that at least ten vessels have wrecked along the shores of the Point Bonita Historic District, and that documentation is complete enough to ascertain the location of six of these shipwrecks with sufficient accuracy to list them as contributing features to the District under the theme of "Shipping and Transportation by Water: Ships, Boats, Lighthouses and other Structures."

Shipping along the West Coast continued to increase throughout the rest of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of U.S. expansion, the development of western crops and products for domestic sale and increased international trade, boosted by the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914. Major forces behind the expanding shipping business included: trade agreements in Asia, treaties with the Hawaiian Islands, coastal transportation of prospectors to the Alaskan gold rush and other passengers

along the coast and around the world and export of products from California including, redwood lumber, grain and beef.

Architecturally, the initial light stations built along the West Coast were adaptations of the lighthouse layouts and styles found in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States. The first West Coast lighthouses, built of imported brick, were constructed in the Cape Cod style. Over time, these plans were modified to fit the unique climatic, topographical and geographical conditions of the Pacific Coast. Plans were developed for five geographic conditions: high capes and headlands, low coastal plains and beaches, harbor entrances, islands and coastal mesas and tables. The light towers built closer to shore have a more typical New England and Mid-Atlantic shape; tall, slender and cylindrical. The "California" light towers, generally on higher elevations, are squat with powerful lenses. The 1855 lighthouse tower was designed in the Cape Cod-style

"In lieu of the standard plan of a tower within a Cape Code-style house used for the other early West Coast lighthouses, at Point Bonita, the Lighthouse Board chose a separate site for each of the structures. The tower stood at an elevation of 260 feet near the edge of a cliff which had a steep drop down to the ocean below, while the house stood about 440 yards inland to the southeast, at a lower elevation. The two structures were most likely separated because of the practice of maximizing visibility by placing towers at the highest point of the land, in this case a spot of land not large enough for a house and a tower. This decision would later prove to be the lighthouse tower's undoing, as its light proved to be too high to be seen through the frequent low clouds that rolled in through the Golden Gate." (National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1991)

It became evident that the fog experienced on the Pacific Coast occurred at a higher elevation than the ocean fogs of the East. Even when lower elevations remained clear, the light would be obscured by fog at the 300-foot level. A new type of lighthouse tower was needed with a lower focal plane and authorities decided that a new tower and fog-signal would be constructed on the tip of the Point at a much lower elevation. The lens and tower were moved from the original 1855 lighthouse tower to the lower location in 1877. The resulting combination of lighthouse tower and lantern room from two different periods produced a unique style among California lighthouses.

Social and Humanitarian Movements
As maritime trade increased, so did the demand for assistance. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries large sections of the United States' coasts were sparsely populated. The crews of ships running aground could expect little, if any help. If the sailors managed to reach the shore following a shipwreck in the winter, often died from exposure on the largely uninhabited shores.

Although the need for a life-saving service was recognized, no established organization or equipment was made available for decades. Storms repeatedly battered the East Coast, leading to the loss of life and an increase in public outcry. Congress continually funded stations, but did not provide for a full-time crew.

Finally in 1871, Sumner Kimball was appointed the chief of the Treasury Department's Revenue Cutter Service. Kimball succeeded in gaining an appropriation of $200,000 and Congressional authorization for the Secretary of the Treasury to employ crews at the stations. In 1874, the stations were expanded from the New Jersey and Massachusetts coasts to include the coast of Maine and ten locations south of Cape Henry, Virginia. The following year, stations were built on the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia peninsula, the Great Lakes, and Florida. Eventually, stations were constructed on the Gulf Coast and the West Coast, as well as one station in Nome, Alaska. The life-saving station at Point Bonita was constructed in

1899.

In 1878, the life-saving stations were organized as the U.S. Life-Saving Service, a separate agency in the Treasury Department. Sumner I. Kimball was chosen to serve as the General Superintendent of the Service. The stations were manned by full-time crews, comprised of a keeper and a crew of six or eight "surfmen," during the active season when wrecks were most likely to occur. By the twentieth century, the active season was year-round and some stations were staffed with more than ten men.

The first stations consisted of a single building measuring 42 x 18 feet. These early stations were strictly utilitarian, but by the 1880s, the stations usually included two or three structures. The main building contained the offices, boat house, and berthing area for the crew and usually had a lookout tower on the roof. Outlying buildings consisted of housing to support the crew who were required to live at the stations during shipping season.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service had two means of rescuing people from stranded ships; by boat and by a strong line. The Service used two types of boats: 1) a 700-1,000 pound surfboat pulled by six surfmen with 12-18 foot oars, or 2) a two to four ton lifeboat. The surfboat could be pulled on a cart by crewmen to a site near a wreck and then launched directly into the surf from the beach. The lifeboat could be fitted with sails for work further offshore and during heavy weather.

When a ship wrecked closer to shore and the seas were too rough for boats, a strong line was launched up to 600 yards from the beach to the wrecked vessel using a small cannon. The projectile carried a small messenger line from which the shipwrecked sailors were able to retrieve the strong line. Once the line was secure, a life car could be pulled back and forth between the wreck and the shore.

The crews performed amazing rescues, but the majority of their time was spent conducting practice drills with the rescue equipment, general station maintenance, and patrol and lookout duty. During the day, surfmen was assigned to scan the nearby water areas from the lookout tower. At night, duty was divided into three watches to patrol the beach until morning.

Before the turn of the century, there were very few recreational boaters and most assistance cases were for commercial ships. With the advent of steam powered ships and improved navigational technology, ships were in less danger and small gasoline powered boats were increasingly rescued. In an effort to modernize the stations to meet these new demands, recruit new members and streamline the bureaucracy, the U.S. Coast Guard was created on January 28, 1915 by combining the U.S. Life-Saving Service and the U.S. Revenue Cutter System. During its forty-four years of existence, the U.S. Life-Saving Service rescued 28,121 vessels and 178,741 individuals.