CHAPTER X

SIUSLAW RIVER STATION

The economic potential of the Siuslaw River was overlooked in the 1850s. In fact, the Siuslaw River did not even show up on the 1851 coastal survey report. Shipping finally started to come to the Siuslaw when Duncan and Company located a salmon cannery and sawmill near the mouth of the river in 1876.[227] However, not until the *Alexander Duncan* crossed the Siuslaw River bar in 1877, did the potential of the Siuslaw begin to be discussed outside of the immediate vicinity.[228] In 1880, with pressure from the Oregon Congressional delegation, Congress authorized the first survey of the Siuslaw through the Rivers and Harbors Act. In 1883, a beacon was placed at the river's mouth.[229]

In 1889, Congress appropriated $80,000 toward the construction of the Heceta Head Lighthouse eight miles to the north of the Siuslaw River. However, Lighthouse Board member Vice Admiral S.C. Rowan expressed mixed feelings about the Siuslaw River area when he wrote, "It does not appear that a harbor light is needed by the sparse

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[227]Alfred Lomax, "Berth of the Blues," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 19 June 1966.

[228]Gibbs, *Oregon's Seacoast Lighthouses*, 95.

[229]Alfred Lomax, "Berth of the Blues," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 19 June 1966.

commerce of this river. But it is quite evident that a coast light is required to divide the dark space between Cape Arago and Cape Foulweather."[230]

There is no doubt that Rowan's comments were unappreciated by the citizens of the small town of Florence (Figure 160) at the mouth of the Siuslaw. The Siuslaw River did not support as many settlements as the Umpqua or Columbia, though the Siuslaw was the only other river to penetrate through the Coast Range. The first American settlers had arrived in the area in the 1850s, but Hudson Bay Company trappers had been in the region 30 years earlier.[231] The first area residents were, of course, the Siuslaw Indians. Like other coastal settlements, the river was the road. Small coasting vessels brought supplies irregularly from San Francisco to the Siuslaw River towns of Florence, Cushman (formerly Acme), and Mapleton (formerly Seaton). Return cargoes were canned salmon, salt salmon, and miscellaneous produce from the farms of the region.[232]

The town of Florence slowly built up three miles from the mouth of the Siuslaw. How the town was named is unclear. Either Florence was named after A.B. Florence, who was a member of the state senate representing Lane County in the late-1850s, or the town was named after a wrecked French bark whose nameboard, *Florence*, washed up near the Siuslaw River in 1875.[233] By 1879, there was a post office, and by 1900, the population had reached 300.

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[230]Gibbs, *Oregon's Seacoast Lighthouses*, 96.

[231]Stephen Dow Beckham, *The Indians of Western Oregon* (Coos Bay, OR: Arago Books, 1977), 107.

[232]Alfred Lomax, "Berth of the Blues," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 19 June 1966.

[233]McArthur, 319.

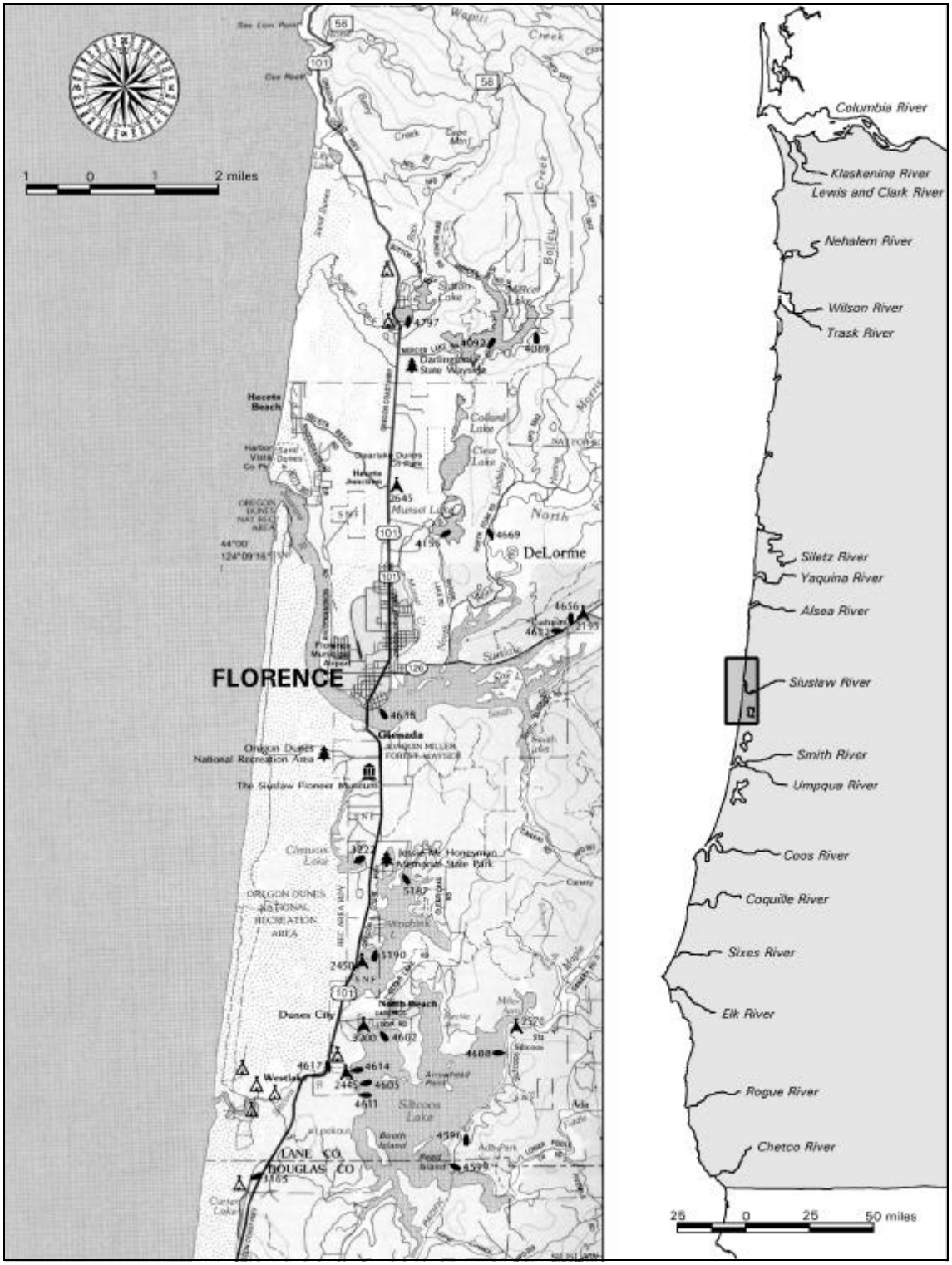

Figure 160. Location of Florence, Oregon, as Shown on a 1996 DeLorme Topographic Map.

It was hoped that a lighthouse would improve navigation in the area and perhaps bring more vessels to the nearby river. Property was acquired for the lighthouse and construction commenced in 1892. The building of the 56' tower was difficult due to its isolation. Construction materials came from San Francisco and Astoria, landed at Florence, and then came overland on a hastily built wagon road. The lens itself was brought in through the surf at Cape Cove below the construction site. Finally, on 30 March 1894, the lighthouse was lit, making it the tenth lighthouse on the Oregon Coast.

Simultaneously, other improvements were occurring to make the Siuslaw more navigable. Residents appealed to the Oregon Congressional delegation in 1890 and got a federal appropriation of $50,000 for harbor improvements. Unfortunately, the money did not go far. "When Captain Thomas W. Symonds of the United States Army Corps of Engineers reported that further expenditures for the benefit of this isolated river port were not justified, the usually peaceful village blazed into high-pitched anger and relieve its frustration by hoisting his shabby likeness at the end of a rope."[234] Residents were appeased when two jetties were started in 1892 on both sides of the entrance to the Siuslaw River. However, due to lack of funds and bad weather conditions, work on the jetties was stopped in 1901. Additional monies were secured through the Rivers and Harbors Act in 1910, and the project was finally finished in 1917.[235]

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[234]Alfred Lomax, "Berth of the Blues," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 19 June 1966.

[235]Donovan and Kachel, E.34.

Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station

One other maritime improvement was sought by the locals: a life-saving station. As early as 1889, Congress had been solicited for a life-saving station at the mouth of the Siuslaw.[236] However, like an automobile traffic signal, not enough shipwrecks had yet occurred to warrant it. In another request in 1893, Superintendent Kimball still did not back the proposal, as there had only been two accidents at the Siuslaw in 28 years of recorded shipping. However, two more wrecks suddenly occurred, one in 1894, and another in 1895. At those disasters, the Umpqua River crew had rowed 25 miles to render assistance. Kimball wrote, "While these statistics would not, in my judgment, imply a necessity for the establishment of the proposed station, yet, in view . . . of the increasing commerce at this point, I am now inclined to favor the proposition."[237] With such light advocacy, the station was shelved again by Congress.

Over the years, there were more attempts introduced by Oregon congressmen to obtain a life-saving station on the Siuslaw. Finally, a month after the Life-Saving Service became the Coast Guard, House Resolution 8904 passed on 4 March 1915 to establish a life-saving station at the mouth of the Siuslaw, not to exceed $12,000. It took several years to buy property and get the station built, but finally, it was reported on 21 September 1917 that the station would be opening soon (Figure 161).[238]

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[236]Congress, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 3903, 1889.

[237]Congress, House, 54th Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 23, 1896.

[238]"Open Station Before Long," *Florence The West*, 21 September 1917.

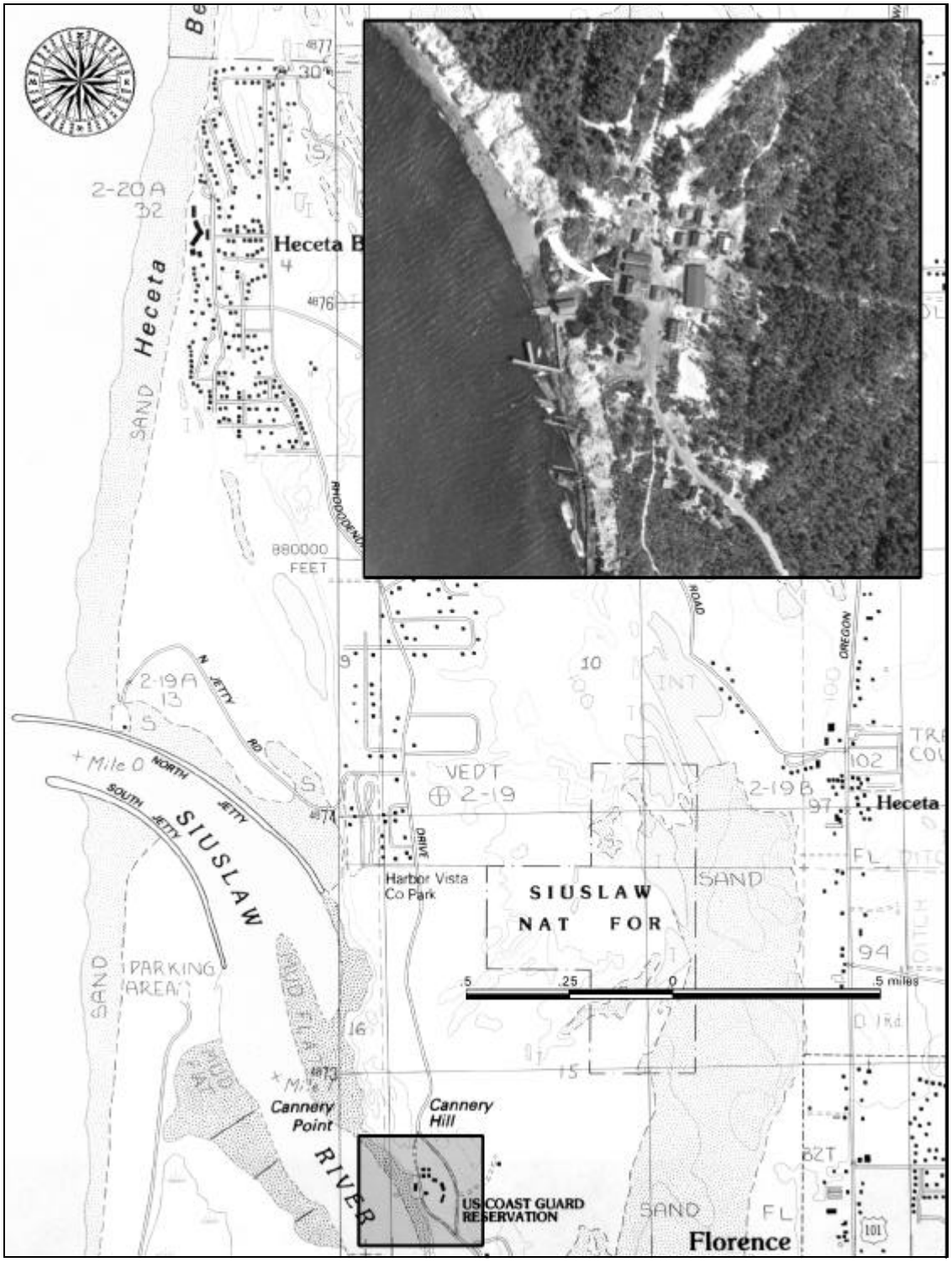

Figure 161. Aerial Photo of the Siuslaw River Station Area in 1945 Superimposed Over the Mercer Lake, Oregon, USGS Map (1984 Revision).

Figure 162. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, 1917. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Siuslaw River File).

Florence's paper, *The West*, reported, "It has been some twenty-five years since it was first suggested that a life saving station should be established at the mouth of the Siuslaw river. . . ."[239] Actually, the residents had struggled for 28 years to get the Coast Guard to build in their community. Only Port Orford worked longer to get a station. Captain Theodore Roberge came down from Cape Disappointment and was appointed keeper.[240] The crew was "shipped" in March 1918, five men from the Florence area and three from other locations.[241]

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[239]"Siuslaw Station Has Full Crew," *Florence The West*, 29 March 1918.

[240]"Station Keeper Arrives Here." *Florence The West,* 14 December 1917.

[241]"Siuslaw Station Has Full Crew," *Florence The West*, 29 March 1918.

The station built at the Siuslaw River is known as an early Chatham-type station (Figure 162). It was designed by Victor Mindeleff who had been designing stations for the Life-Saving Service, and then the Coast Guard, for 18 years prior to this station's design. Starting with the original Petersons Point design (1898) used at Tillamook Bay Life-Saving Station (1907), he had continued with Colonial Revival detailing and shingle surfaces through all of his 13 designs, including the Chatham-type. However, the Chatham station marked a sudden departure from the 1-1/2 story stations that had been the hallmark of the Life-Saving Service and brought the station to a full two stories in height. This aligned with the decade by decade trend of giving the crew more living space. At least 30 Chatham-type stations were built on both East and West Coasts marking the first time since the Marquette-type stations of a standard, nationwide architecture. Variations on the Chatham-type station continued to be constructed through the 1930s.[242] In fact, the 1934 station built at Port Orford is representative of the tail end of development of the Chatham-type in the United States. From that point on, the Coast Guard transitioned to the Roosevelt-type stations.

The station house was symmetrical, 39' 8" wide and 24' 6" deep, clad in shingles, with a hipped gable roof (Figure 163). The roof was surmounted by an integrated lookout tower nestled between two brick chimneys. Windows were double-hung, six-over-two, though in the tower, the windows were one-over-one for increased visibility (Figure 164). The hipped roof of the entry porch was supported by square, battered columns and connected to the building by a balustered rail. Mindeleff had gradually

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[242]Wick York, phone interview by author, transcript, Eugene, OR, 8 April 2000.

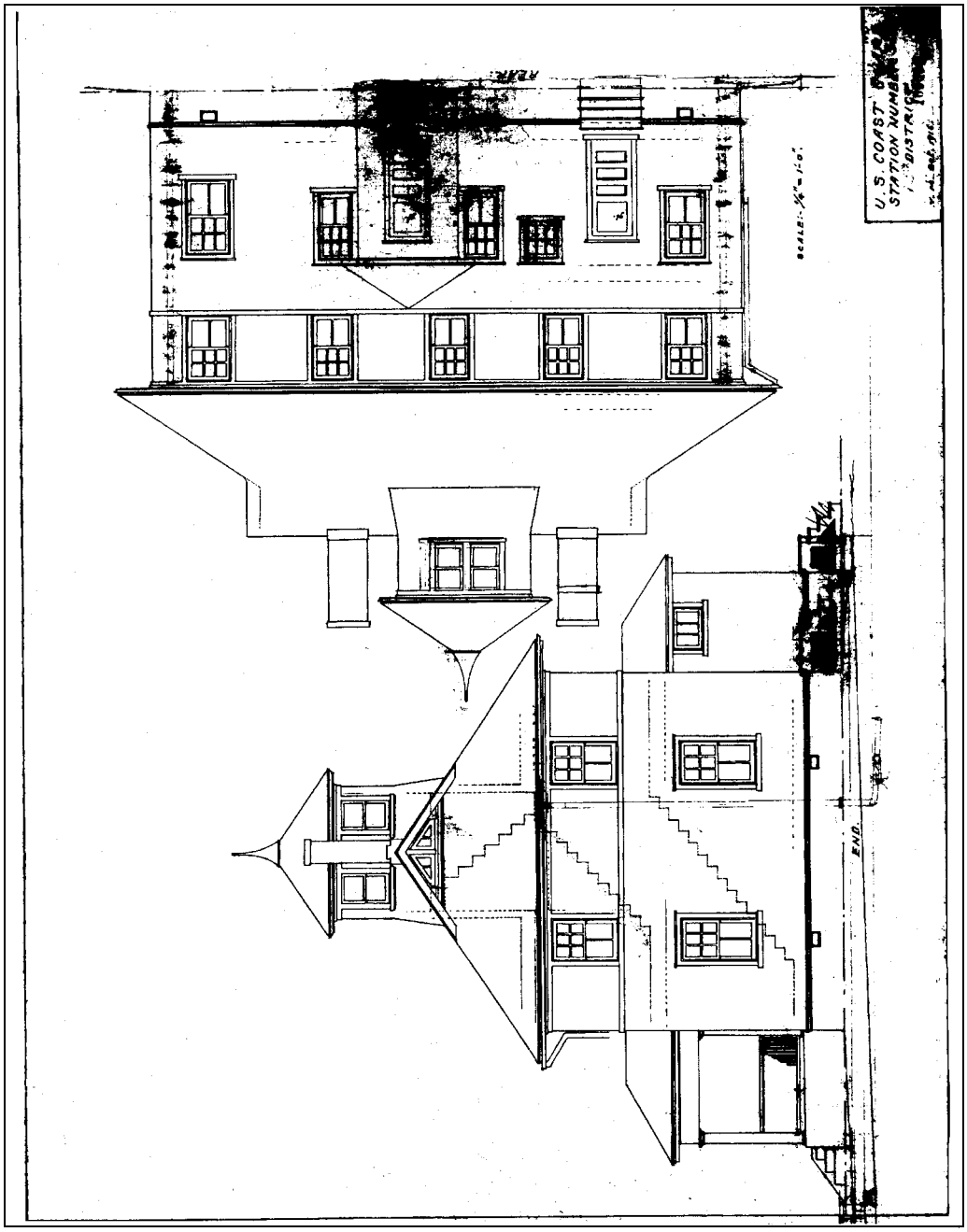

Figure 163. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, Side and Rear Elevation Drawings, October 1916.
Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

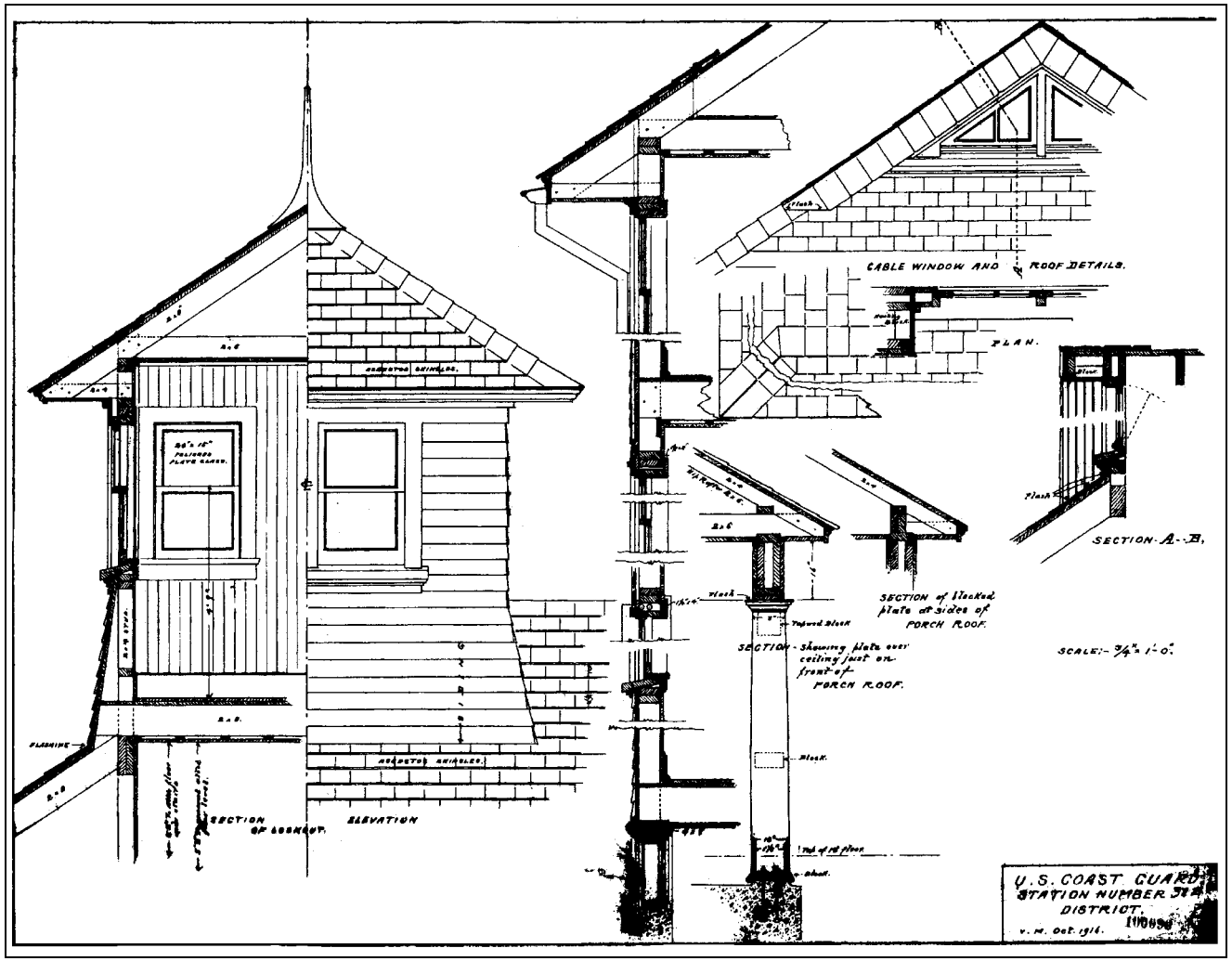

Figure 164. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, Monitor and Wall Section, October 1916. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

decreased the number of Colonial Revival details over the years to the point where the exterior Colonial elements were limited to the entry porch only.

Mindeleff tinkered with the Chatham-type plans continually. At first glance, the Chatham-type stations all look alike. But when compared in detail, there is tremendous variety. Wick York and Ralph Shanks have been working to categorize and inventory the Chathams around the country. The number of known Chatham stations is continuing to increase as more are discovered. Through their research, the variety in the design is just becoming evident. When comparing the Chatham station built at Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina, to the one built at the Siuslaw, two stations that were designed only a few months apart, there are distinct variations. The porch is wider on the one at Hatteras and supports three front entrance doors; the station at Siuslaw had a small porch and only one entrance. Hatteras had six-over-one windows; Siuslaw had six-over-two. In the gables, Hatteras had a four-pane, double-hung window; Siuslaw had two, triangular, hopper windows to fill each gable. On the rear elevation, Hatteras had an exterior door, whereas Siuslaw had a small ell containing a storm clothes room from which the surfmen could grab their gear on the way out the back door.

Inside the station, the storm clothes room of Hatteras was replaced with a second bathroom at Siuslaw (Figure 165). A spare bedroom at Hatteras was replaced by a kitchen and pantry at Siuslaw. The office at Hatteras was divided into two rooms at Siuslaw. Mindeleff seemed willing to reconfigure the station house in a multitude of ways, customizing it for the needs of different locales. Only in size and window placement did the two stations have a common first floor plan. Upstairs, the two plans

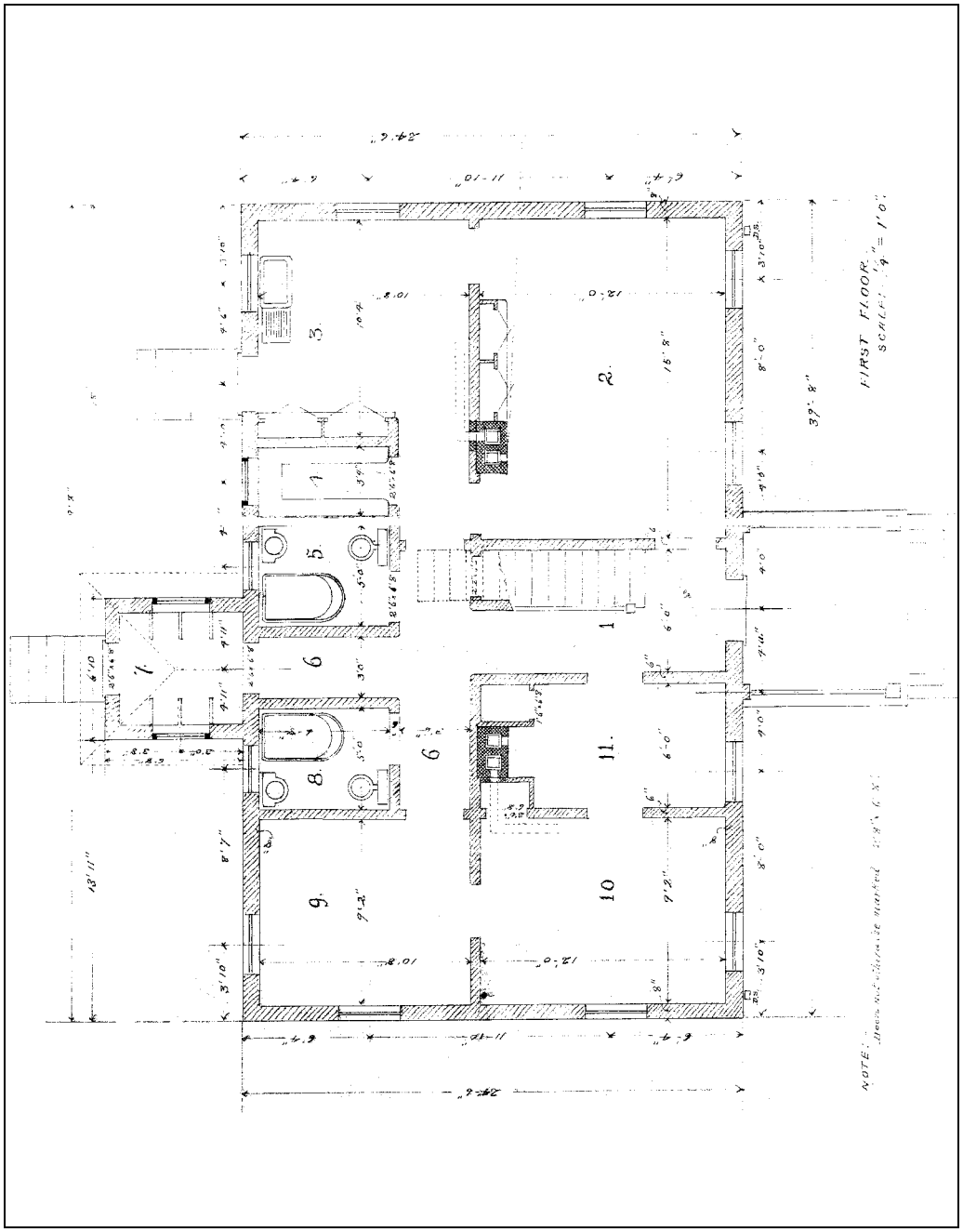

Figure 165. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, First Floor Plan, October 1916. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

become more similar (Figure 166). The floor was divided evenly into four bedrooms, two crewmen per room. The attic was used for storage, and in an emergency, bunk space. A steep staircase led from the attic to the lookout monitor. The entire structure was supported by a concrete foundation.

The Siuslaw plans called for asbestos roofing shingles, as fire danger in the isolated location was a concern; however, it is not known if this was implemented. There is a photo of one of the outbuildings with a barrel of water on the roof for fire fighting. Fire was always a danger at the stations, as boathouses at Umpqua River, Port Orford, Coquille River, and two at Yaquina Bay all burned down. Besides fighting fires in the community, there are several entries in the *Annual Report* of surfmen fighting fires in their own station complex.

According to historic photos, the station house remained virtually unaltered until at least 1939. In the 1945 aerial, the station house is shown to have lost its lookout and a large, two-story ell had been added to the rear to accommodate additional crew during the war. The station house was still standing in 1967, but by 1983 it had been replaced with a new operations center.

Figure 167 shows several of the outbuildings constructed at the station. Directly behind the station to the east was a one-story, hipped roof, shingle-covered shop building. Like the station house, the shop building still stood in 1967, but was gone by 1983, replaced by asphalt. Further to the east on a small hill was a wood frame water tower, ubiquitous at all Oregon stations. It was also still standing in 1967, but gone by 1983. Between the station house and the shop building was the bell stand. To the southeast of

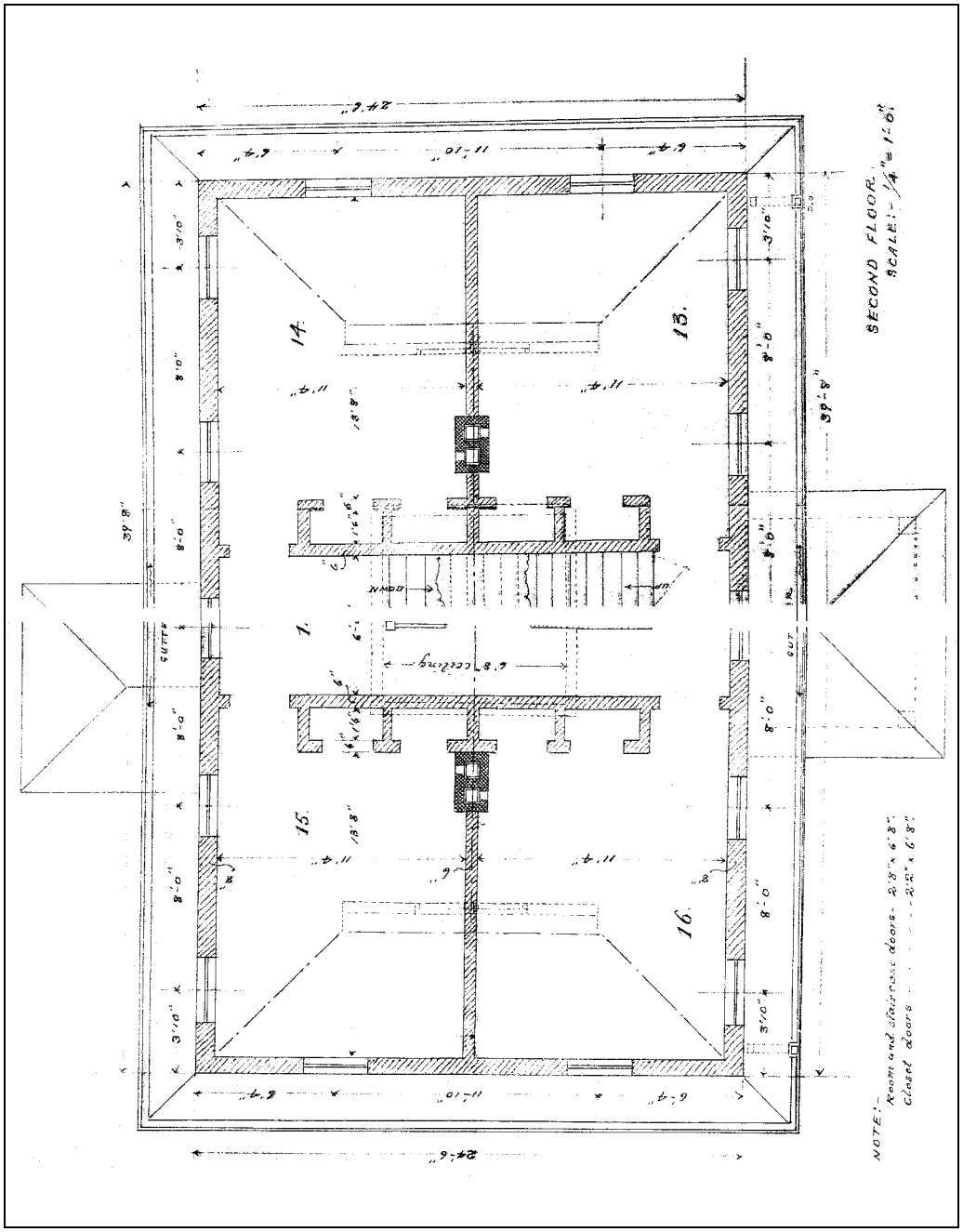

Figure 166. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, Second Floor Plan, October 1916. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

Figure 167. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station From North, 1923. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Siuslaw River File).

the station house was the wreck pole and drill field. The station's buildings were all connected by boardwalks. Rail fences divvied up the compound. Log retaining walls were built around the station house to level the yard. All of these auxiliary structures have disappeared over time.

To the north of the station house, and just visible at the right corner of Figure 167, was the home of one of the crew members. Reported *The West* in 1918, "Most of the men are married and will soon erect cottages near the station for homes for their families. They will make quite a little community in that part of the city limits of Florence."[243] This community was Siuslaw's "Little America," a development that cropped up at most stations in Oregon to house the families of the crew. There appears to have been at least

[243]"Siuslaw Station Has Full Crew," *Florence The West*, 29 March 1918.

five homes built to accommodate the wives and children, but by 1967, most of the homes were gone, replaced entirely by 1983 with standard Coast Guard family housing.

Due south of the station house, and just visible in the background of Figure 167, was the first boathouse. Also built in 1917, the boathouse continued the features of the station house with a hipped gable roof, six-over-two windows, and triangular window in the gable (Figure 168). The structure was 23' wide by 39' 6" deep, two-bays wide, and was built on a concrete foundation. Unfortunately, the boathouse was built to accommodate a surfboat and lifeboat only and was located inconveniently high above the river. The 1921 *Annual Report* mentions that a wharf and approach were constructed on the river to the west of the station house. A small surfboat house, pitched to the angle of the shore, was built next to the wharf. In 1924, plans were drawn for a replacement boathouse with launchway at the river's edge (Figure 169). The boathouse was similar to the older boathouse with two bays and a hipped gable roof. It was larger at 26' wide by 49' deep to accommodate motor lifeboats. All of the boathouses were gone by 1967, though soon after, a large, utilitarian boathouse was erected on the water.

Northwest of the station house was a lookout tower on Cannery Hill (Figure 170). The eight-sided tower was raised only about 8' above the ground, as Cannery Hill offered sufficient elevation. Shingle-clad with an eight-sided roof, it is the earliest lookout in Oregon known to have a stove for heat. The diminutive tower has disappeared over time, made obsolete by a metal-framed lookout tower on the north jetty to the northwest.

During WWII, many buildings sprung up around the station compound to accommodate additional crew for the beach patrols. A standard, four-bay equipment

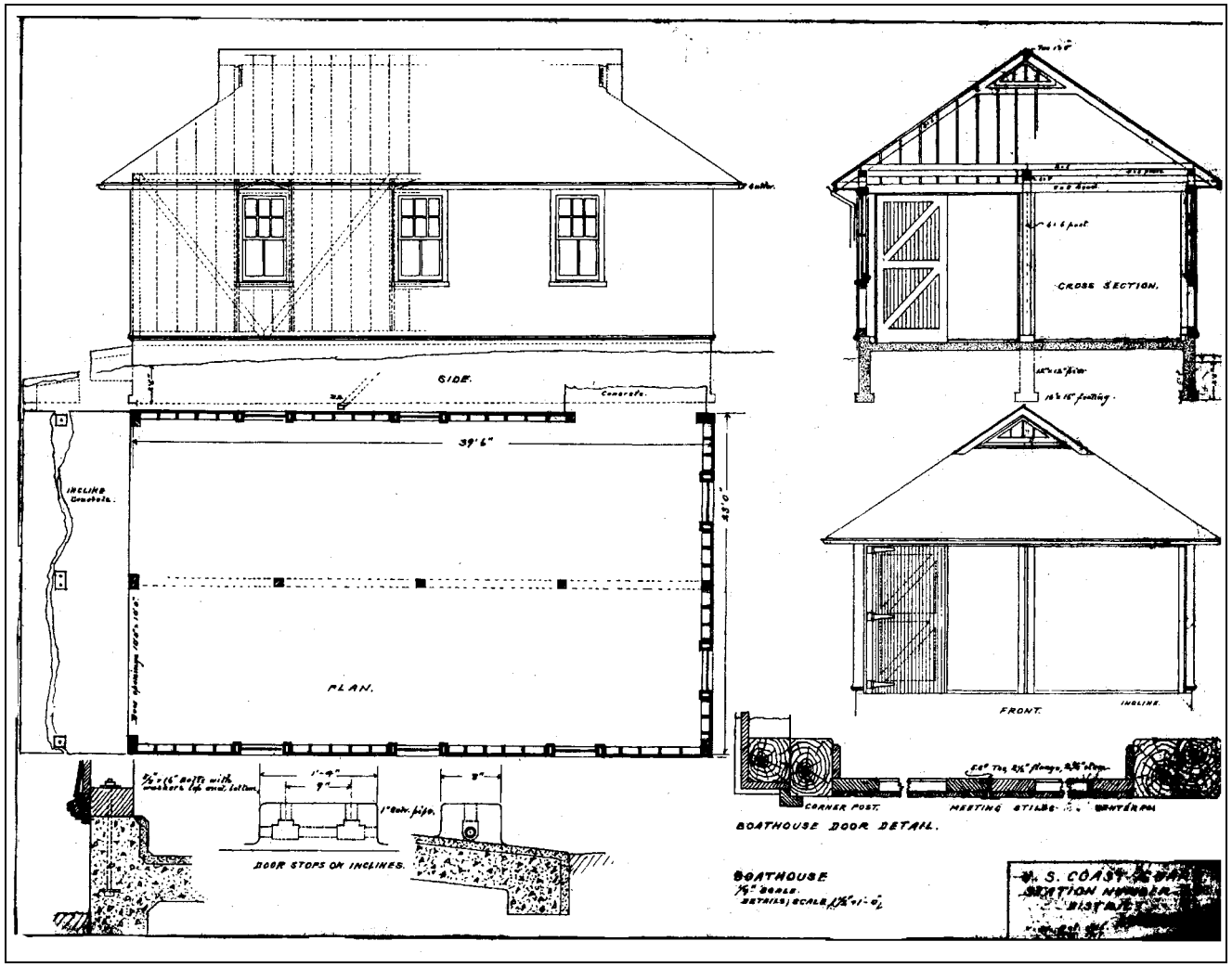

Figure 168. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, Boathouse Plan, October 1916. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

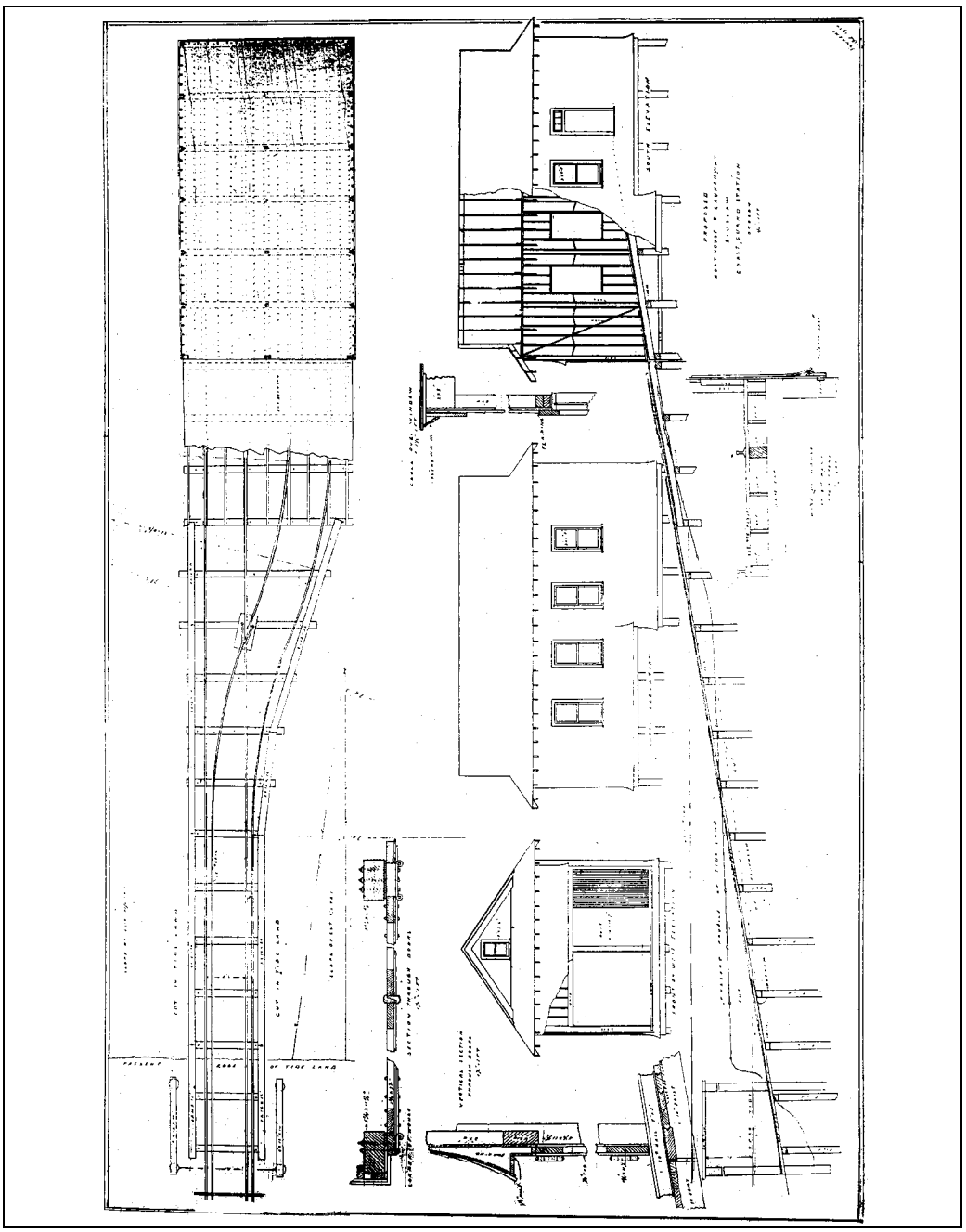

Figure 169. Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, Second Boathouse Plan, October 1924. Source: Nautical Research Centre (#12-229).

Figure 170. Lookout at Cannery Hill, Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station, 1923. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Siuslaw River File).

building was erected on the former drill field around 1940. Identical to those found at Point Adams and Coos Bay, it was built to serve as a garage for vehicles and small boats, plus have storage space for equipment in the attic. The plan of the building was approximately 50' wide by 30' deep and built on a concrete foundation. The equipment building has an incongruous Colonial Revival theme with its arched, multi-light windows in the dormers, eave returns at the gable ends, a lunette over the gable windows, and water table with cap. Each dormer was centered over a garage door that contained 10 lights over 15 panels. On the back side, there were four more dormers. On the north elevation was an entrance door sheltered by a small gable hood supported by elegant brackets. The building was clad in shingles and finished with classical corner boards.

Preservation

Of all the pre-WWII station sites on the Oregon Coast, the Siuslaw River Lifeboat Station is the least intact. All that remains today is the four-bay equipment building erected circa 1940. There is no longer a lookout on Cannery Hill. Though Coast Guard personnel sometimes monitor the river mouth from the campground on Cannery Hill, there is no Coast Guard building on the site. A post-WWII tower near the north jetty serves their lookout needs today.

The four-bay equipment building is still in active use by Coast Guard personnel. The two end bays have been closed off, one is used as an office and the other as a parts room. The garage doors in the two center bays have been replaced. The windows have all been replaced. The upstairs has been converted into a training room. However, the dormers, siding, and corner boards are all still intact. The WWII-era building should be retained, continue to be used, and not altered further.