The Yaquina Head Light also known as Cape Foulweather Lighthouse was first lite in 1873. The lighthouse stands on the Oregon Coast between the mouth of the Yaquina River and Newport at Yaquina Head. Made of brick the conical tower was built in France in 1868 and shipped to Oregon. The lighthouse was automated in 1966 and remains active to date. A two story keepers’ dwelling and adjoining oil house were constructed at the time of the original tower. Later in 1923, a one-story keepers’ house was added a short distance to the east. In 1938, a one-story building replaced the original dwelling but both dwellings and all outbuildings were demolished in 1984.

Originally operated by one keeper, eventually the U.S. Lighthouse Service had three keepers maintain the operation, a Head Keeper as well as a First and Second Assistant. There is some controversy over the operation of the lighthouse and the oversight of the U.S. Lighthouse Service around the period between 1876 and 1925. In 1939, the U.S Coast Guard took over management of the light. During World War II seventeen servicemen were stationed at Yaquina Head to keep a look out for enemy ships.

The lighthouse still uses its original 1868 French-made, 1st order, Fixed Fensnel lens, visible nineteen miles out to sea. The light characteristic of two seconds on, two seconds off, two seconds on and 14 seconds off remains active to this day.

The lighthouse lantern is operated by the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service monitors offshore bird rookeries and wildlife. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife manages the intertidal animals, and the Oregon Department of State Lands is responsible for the intertidal lands.

The lighthouse sits atop a basalt rock outcropping some one hundred and fifty feet above the ocean and is surrounded on the north and south sides by rocky tide pools that reside below steep cliffs. The tide pools eventually make way to sand beaches, which extend for a quarter mile to the north then end at another outcropping and extend into beaches of Newport to the south. A small dock a the bottom of the cliff to the direct west of the lighthouse allows access from the sea however most times of year this is a dangerous entry due to the rocky landscape that extends from the foot of the cliff. Stairs provide access to the lighthouse from the dock; these were blocked off in 1938 and have fallen to complete disrepair since. There is currently no safe way to use the decaying and ruined dock and stairs.

To the direct east of the lighthouse a crescent shaped cove contains the opening to a cavern that extends several miles into the earth. The cavern has never been completely explored as it was closed off from any access in 1925 after a series of incidents left several individuals dead. The local inhabitants of Newport burned a large congregation of transient shanties, expelling the inhabitants and using the charred debris to close off the cave mouth that opens in the crescent shaped cove. The sandy cove is surrounded on all but one side by steep cliffs, which the lighthouse rests atop.

There has been some controversy over the lighthouse and some of its keepers in the past. One such keeper was Shadrack Wass. Charges were brought agains Mr. Wass in 1876 when a local from Newport Mr. Tolman Ellis accused Shadrack of causing a shipwreck as a result of failing to light the lighthouse beacon. Mr. Ellis stated that on his way for an early fishing trip he noticed that the light in the lighthouse was not light and that he saw Mr. Wass on the beach with several bodies laid out in a row. He further stated that he could see a portion of a downed ship on the sea less than a mile out. He went back to down to get the constable and upon returning the bodies were no longer on the beach and no traces of the downed ship could be seen. Mr. Wass was found at the lighthouse and was questioned. He accused Mr. Ellis of heavy drinking and stated that Mr. Ellis had always had it in for him.

After a rather short court case it was determined that Mr. Ellis was mistaken and probably trying to slander Mr. Wass. The charges were dropped and the matter was forgotten. Many in the area believe Mr. Ellis’s story however and began to shun Mr. Wass. It is believed that Shadrack Wass had been drinking and forgot to light the lighthouse beacon thus causing the ship to run afoul of rocks near the shore. It is believed that Wass attempted to find survivors and when he could not he removed the bodies of those he found and hide them so that he would not be held accountable. The ship sank and the remains were broken up by the violent storms that occurred in the following months. Shadrack denied these accusations of course. Eventually a new keeper was brought in and trained by Mr. Wass. Mr. Wass soon vanished after that, most of the locals believe he could not deal with the guilt of what he had done and so left the area after setting up his replacement.

It is to be noted that a camp of transients sprung up in 1876 after the alleged shipwreck and there are rumors that the two events are connected in some way. Other rumors in the area go as far as to say that Mr. Wass left the lighthouse to live this the other homeless denizens of the shantytown and that he was somehow responsible for its inception. The shantytown as the Newport locals called it, continued to grow year after year until 1925, which saw the people of Newport taking it upon them selves to oust the vagrants and destroy the ramshackle town.