

Stepping Stones Lighthouse: A Historical Treasure to Preserve

Learn about the importance of preserving the Stepping Stones Lighthouse.

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As every USMMA graduate knows, the Stepping Stones Lighthouse is not only a critical aid to navigation in a treacherous, boulder strewn area of Long Island Sound, but it is an icon for all midshipmen and alumni. Completed in 1876, its style among lighthouses is unique with its sturdy square keeper's dwelling topped with a mansard roof. It was the last Long Island lighthouse to be built of brick and stone. Time and the devilish storms that race into the Sound have together damaged the little light making it more vulnerable to the ravages of wind, rain, snow, and ice.

In 2006, the Coast Guard deemed the lighthouse in excess, and offered stewardship of the light to the Town of North Hempstead. An assessment was made of the necessary repairs, but the project languished. By 2012, the General Services Administration was seeking another steward and reached out to Pam Setchell, who has led the successful restoration of the Huntington Lighthouse.

Meanwhile, a number of Great Neck activists and historical buffs met with Setchell who told them that it is "essential that local groups from the surrounding communities wrap their arms" around the project. Interest in saving the lighthouse began to percolate throughout the community through word of mouth and newspaper articles.

Another positive factor adding to the mix was a new Town of North Hempstead Supervisor, Judi Bosworth who brought fresh enthusiasm to the project. And so it was that in the summer of 2014, the Town of North Hempstead, the Great Neck Park District, and the Great Neck Historical Society

forged a public/private partnership to restore and protect the light and defined appropriate tasks for all the entities. Since the initial partnership, the leadership of the City Island Maritime Museum has also committed to join forces in preservation efforts.

Already vital repairs have been made to the roof to protect it from further assaults this winter and plans are underway to construct a floating dock in time for next spring to insure a safe transfer of materials and workers. The interior of the building is gutted, but according to engineers who have inspected the building, the "bones are sound."

Lighthouses evoke a sense of mystery and drama and Stepping Stones is no exception. According to Coast Guard records, there have been extraordinary keepers who endured the rigors of the isolation of this light, took meticulous care of the building, and saved the lives of those who were endangered on its reefs. In the early twenties, keeper Stephen Holm is reported to have made two different saves, rescuing four men.

But there are tantalizing gaps in the records, even in the simple matter of listing all of the keepers. Strangely, we do not have the name of the last keeper who served before the automation

in 1965. We plan to reach out to the descendants of the keepers in hopes of adding details that will make the history of the light come alive. The keepers' names that are on record are: Finlay Fraser, 1877-1879; James G. Scott, 1879-1880; William McGloin, 1880-1886; Cornelius Douglass, 1886-1895; Elmer E. Gildersleeve, 1895-1903; Charles Redfern, 1903-1910; Ernest Bloom, 1910—at least 1915; Edward M. Grant, 1916—at least 1917; John E. Bergen, 1919; Stephen Holm, 1921-1923; Charles A. Rogers, 1930—at least 1934; Arthur M. Bettencourt, 1940; Neil Siegel, 1955.

There is also the mystery of what became of the lighthouse's bell. According to Robert Muller, who authored *Long Island's Lighthouses*, the bell was installed in 1908 and was struck by machinery every 15 seconds to help mariners in foggy conditions make safe passage. The original light was a fifth-order Fresnel lens, which was a fixed red, but in 1932, the light was changed to a fourth order-Fresnel lens with a fixed green light. The original lens is safely ensconced at the American Merchant Marine Museum.

Those of us who are working on adding to the lore of the light would love to hear from the alumni of USMMA as we know you must have anecdotes about the light. Perhaps some of you knew the later lighthouse keepers and can help us fill in the gaps as we retell Stepping Stones' stories to a new generation of lighthouse aficionados. Knocking down our light, leaving a pile of rubble and a light on a metal stanchion is just not an acceptable option to those who have admired it and been guided by it as they sail, swim, motor, or paddle its waters.

If you have stories to share, please write us at greatneckhistorical@gmail.com and if you leave a phone number, we will get back to you. For more information about the Stepping Stones Lighthouse, please visit www.greatneckhistorical.org