Fire Island Lighthouse

by Bill Bleyer

The Coast Guard last year decided to replace the light in the Fire Island Lighthouse with a more efficient system.

While saving money and time, the new light would have changed the landmark tower's appearance.

And that didn't thrill the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society, which has invested $5 million and countless hours of labor in restoring and maintaining the structure since the 1980s.

The situation worked out amicably, however, when the federal agency and nonprofit group signed an agreement in February under which the society assumed ownership and maintenance of the existing lighting mechanism and backup generator in the basement.

With the society assuming the estimated $8,000-a-year expense, the twin 24-inch rotating airport-type beacon lights will not be replaced with a single smaller strobe-type that does not rotate and cannot be seen as far away as the current lights, which are visible up to 23 miles away.

"The main issue was to maintain the historical characteristics of the light, which was the sweeping beam," that rotates every 7.5 seconds, said Thomas Roberts III, president of the the society that oversees and maintains the facility while the National Park Service, which owns the lighthouse, handles capital projects.

Roberts noted that when the Coast Guard installed the new stationary Vega light in the Montauk Point Lighthouse, preservationists and mariners complained about its appearance and reduced visibilty.

Coast Guard Chief Bosun's Mate Anthony Certa, head of the Aids to Navigation Team for Long Island, said his agency decided to give the lighting system to the society because "they are very well organized and established and they have been maintaining the structure."

He said the Vega light has been installed in many Long Island lighthouses because "it's a modern piece of equipment that we can get parts for. With the lantern that's in the Fire Island Lighthouse, they actually have to make parts for it when something breaks. It's very expensive to run and it wasn't going to be efficient for the Coast Guard any longer. There would have been cost savings with the Vega lantern but it's not as aesthetically pleasing as the older, wider beam." The rotating beacons were installed 20 years ago when the lighthouse was restored by the society and relit by the Coast Guard.

At no cost to the society, "the Coast Guard agreed to turn over to us all the equipment, which was all the switching apparatus, the light itself and some spare parts," Roberts said. The society eventually plans to purchase a backup pair of lights from the manufacturer for about $21,000.

The group's annual budget is about $250,000 so the additional cost "is a sizable number for us," Roberts said.

Each light fixture has a backup 1000-watt lightbulb ready to take its place automatically when it burns out.

The society has organized a group of volunteers who are graduates of the State University of New York Maritime College in the Bronx who have been trained to maintain the light by the Coast Guard.

The lighthouse will no longer be considered an official government aid to navigation and will be listed as a private aid to navigation.

While taking over the lighting system, the society is also developing a plan to return the original first-order Fresnel lens installed in the lighthouse in 1858 and removed in 1933 back to the site. Roberts said it would cost the group $500,000

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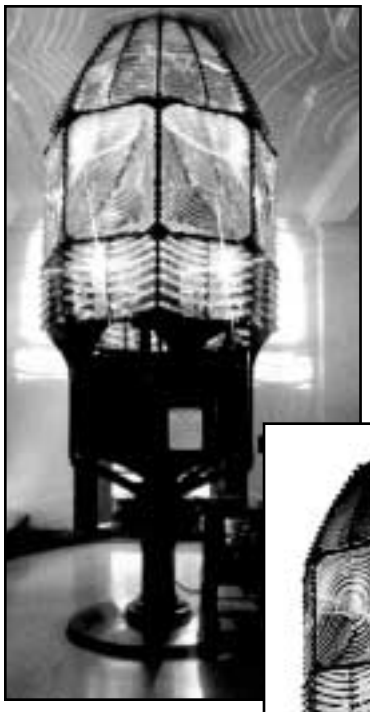
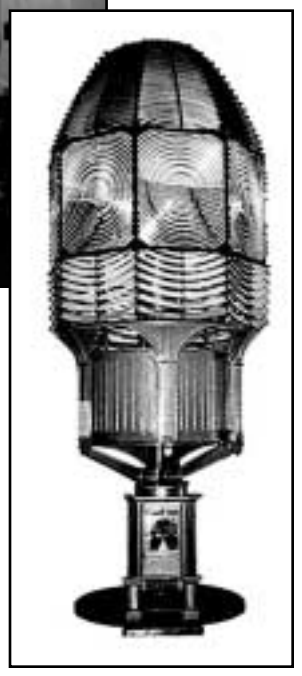
to built a replica of powerhouse that was erected to the west of the tower in 1894 and use it to display the lens that had been on display at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia but is now sitting in 11 creates in a warehouse in that city. The lens stands 16 feet high and its beam could be seen 21 to 24 miles.

National Park Service regional spokesman Phil Sheridan said the Interior Department changed its policy in the 1980s to generally no longer approve re-creation of demolished buildings at historic sites. "It's become much less common because it's not real" and can mislead visitors, he said.

But, the Park Service's regional office has encouraged the society to develop a plan for consideration, and the group is currently preparing an environmental assessment. Roberts said it would take about two years to raise funds and complete the project after park service approval to proceed.



A pair of these 24-inch rotating beacon lights remain in the Lighthouse.



A single, smaller, non-rotational strobe light will not be used.

The powerhouse was demolished in the early 1940s and a boathouse erected on the foundation. The society wants to move the boathouse back to its original location by the bay.

Bob LaRosa, society vice president, said the 50-foot by 25-foot building was erected to provide electricity for the light which was then illuminated by oil. Two steam generators were installed but were never used. They were removed a year later and sent to the Staten Island Lighthouse maintenance depot.

The generators "were an experiment that would've been used throughout the country for lighthouses that were on islands without electric cables," said the society's administrator, Dave Griese. He speculated that the lighthouse service determined that the generators would require too much maintenance and operation cost to be worth using. "It probably took less manpower to use the oil than shovel coal and get the steam going and keep it going all night," he said.

"It would do two things," LaRosa said of the powerhouse project. "It will give us a building big enough for the Fresnel lens and it will restore the historic landscape."

The exterior would be resemble the 1894 building with a curved metal roof and cupola but the interior would be climate-controlled modern display space. The building would have an elevator to make the balcony around the top of the lens accessible for the handicapped. There are no architectural plans still in existence for the powerhouse but there are photographs showing it from all four sides, which will allow its reconstruction. There are no images of the interior.

Roberts said the original first order Fresnel

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lens, which weighs 9,000 pounds and is still owned by the Coast Guard, could never be returned to the top of the tower because of its value, the high cost of maintaining it and the fact that the public would not be able to see it well if it was installed in the tower.

A plan proposed in 2001 by the park service's then Fire Island National Seashore superintendent to build a new visitor center in Patchogue with the lens as a centerpiece never got off the ground, and the society always felt the when should be displayed at the lighthouse.

There was heat damage to some of the glass panels in the lens from when it was displayed at the Franklin Institute and they would have to be replaced when the lens is reassembled.

According to the U.S. Lighthouse Society, there are other first order lenses on display and some are still in lantern rooms; some of those are operational and some not. Those on display include Destruction Island in Washington, St. George Reef at Crescent City, CA, Cape Mendocino at the Ferndale Fairgrounds, CA, Pt. Arena & Pt. Reyes (still in towers, but not operational), Farralon Island in San Francisco at the National Park Service Visitor Center, Pigeon Point (in lantern room, not operational), Point Sur (at Monterey Maritime Museum), Piedras Blancas, in faux lantern at Cambria, CA, Point Conception (operational in lantern, but generally off limits to public). On the East Coast, Seguin Island, ME (operational in lantern), Cape Charles, Virginia, in the Mariners' Museum; Currituck (in the lantern), Body Island (in the lantern), St. Augustine (operational in lantern), Cape Canaveral (in lens building at Ponce Inlet), Jupiter Inlet (in lantern and operational.

Two other Long Island lighthouses, Montauk and Shinnecock, also once had first order lens.

The Fire Island Light was an important landmark for transatlantic ships coming into New York Harbor at the turn of the 20th century. For many European immigrants, the lighthouse was their first glimpse of land.

According to the society, the first lighthouse on Fire Island was completed in 1826. It was a 74-foot high, octagonal pyramid made of Connecticut River blue split stone. The tower was built at the end of the island, adjacent to the inlet. The tower was not effective because of its lack of height. It was demolished with the stone reused to build the terrace for the present lighthouse. Today a circular ring of bricks and stone are all that remain of the original lighthouse. Due to the westward migration of sand along the beach, the inlet is now six miles west of the site.

In 1857 Congress appropriated $40,000 for the construction of a new 168-foot tower. It was lit for the first time on Nov. 1, 1858. The red brick tower was painted creamy yellow. The tower was changed to the present day-mark of alternating black and white bands in August 1891.

The Lighthouse was decommissioned on Dec. 31, 1973, and replaced by a "small flash tube optic" atop the Robert Moses State Park Water Tower.

In 1974, the Coast Guard gave the National Park Service a five-year permit to use the entire lighthouse property that totaled 82 acres. In 1979, the tract was declared by law to be within the boundaries of the Fire Island National Seashore. In 1982, the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society was formed. They successfully raised over 1.3 million dollars for the restoration and preservation of the Fire Island Lighthouse. In 1984, the Fire Island Lighthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Lighthouse was restored to its 1939 condition, which is when electricity was first installed. On Memorial Day, May 28, 1986, the Lighthouse was relit and reinstated as an official aid to navigation.

In December 1996 the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society through an agreement with the Park Service took over the maintenance and operation of the Fire Island Lighthouse and Keeper's Quarters'. ■