Devastating Fire Destroys Nearly Completed Absecon Keeper's House

by Rich and Elinor Veit

When we visited the construction site at Absecon Lighthouse on July 2nd, before the long July 4th weekend, workers were laying down the floor on the wrap-around porch of the keeper’s house. They were using fir wood, known for its durability and easy maintenance. They were also setting the bases for the pillars that, in groups of two or three, would surround the porch. We commented on how nice it looked. The keeper's dwelling was now 90% complete. The next time we visited the site, July 6th, the keeper's house was a smoldering ruin.

A backhoe, already at the construction site, was used to collapse unstable walls so fire fighters could continue to battle the smoldering fire.

Photo by Elinor Veit

Nearly completed keeper's house as it appeared on July 2, 1998

Photo by Elinor Veit

About 4:30 a.m. on July 6, 1998 a police officer on patrol discovered the blaze, and called it in to the emergency dispatcher. The Atlantic City Fire Company, located only a few blocks away, responded immediately. However, the fire had advanced so quickly that all the fire fighters could do was to pour water on the blaze so it would not spread to the lighthouse tower and the neighboring homes.

The fire marshal immediately labeled the fire as suspicious. There were no utilities connected in the structure at the time of...
Atlantic City Fire Department used a ladder truck to wet down the remains of the Lightkeeper’s house.

Photo by Elinor Veit

the fire. Sheet rock was due to be installed the following week. The fire sprinkler system had been installed, but not yet inspected and activated. The building was at its most vulnerable stage of construction. The fire was free to wreck havoc with the exposed wood framing. An investigation into the cause of the fire is being conducted by both state and city investigators.

Fortunately, the wind was blowing from the north, away from the lighthouse tower. Damage to the historic structure was minimal. The newly constructed passageway between the keeper's house and the tower sustained some damage, but most of it may be saved. Fortunately the heavy metal door between the passageway and the tower was closed.

Even though the structure was covered by insurance, the Inlet Public/Private Association (IPPA) is seeking donations from businesses and private citizens to keep the project running until they can rebuild the keeper's house and open it to the public. Once the lighthouse is open, money from admissions and sales at the museum shop are expected to cover operating expenses. However, even after the insurance money is made available, it will take months to raze the burnt out building and rebuild it. By that time winter is likely once more to interfere with the project. It is now hoped that the completed keeper’s house will be opened by March, 1999.

Work on the tower side of the site continued almost immediately after the fire. The scaffolding has been removed and the ground surrounding the lighthouse has been regraded. The IPPA hopes to repair the passageway and open the tower to the public for tours in the very near future.

Editors Note:
Rich and Elinor Veit have been faithfully monitoring the progress of the restoration of the Absecon Lighthouse and the reconstruction of the Keeper's house (the original was torn down in the 1930's). They have kept us updated since work began in the spring of 1997. Their articles and photos have appeared in Beam #29, #30, and #32.
Staten Island Selected Site Of National Lighthouse Museum

The former U.S. Lighthouse Service depot on Staten Island has been selected as the home of the new National Lighthouse Center and Museum.

Selection of the Staten Island site, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, capped a lengthy planning and site selection process that started with the formation of a National Lighthouse Center and Museum Steering Committee in March, 1997.

“The idea of a National Lighthouse Museum has been expressed since the early 1970’s,” said committee chairman Ralph Eshelman, a Maryland-based maritime history and heritage consultant. “Staten Island offered not only an historic site, but an outstanding location easily reached by large numbers of visitors.”

Negotiations now begin between committee members, representing a number of national, regional and local lighthouse preservation groups, and site and government representatives, to work out the details of the new museum, envisioned as a $20 million construction and exhibition project with a $20 million endowment.

The site, once the main national base of the Lighthouse Service (which was later absorbed by the Coast Guard), shares space with docks and terminals of the Staten Island Ferries, which carry millions of commuters and tourists each year. Restoration of the decaying Lighthouse Service buildings will be coordinated with adjoining Staten Island redevelopment projects. Borough president Guy Molinari has pledged $1.2 million toward immediate stabilization work on the structures, while New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and New York Governor George Pataki have offered $1.9 million each in city and state assistance.

Funding will be sought from government, foundation and corporate sources. The museum will serve as both an exhibit center interpreting the rich and colorful story of America’s lighthouses and an archives research and workshop center for the largely volunteer lighthouse preservation movement.

Fourteen sites expressed interest in hosting the museum when the project was announced last year, and the steering committee developed a comprehensive, numerically based rating system to augment careful proposal reviews. Six finalists eventually were selected for a detailed round of site visits, more extensive numerical ratings, and design and financial proposals.

“Any of the finalist sites could host a good museum, and the level of enthusiasm was nothing short of astounding,” Eshelman said. “Picking a final site was an extremely difficult and lengthy task, and we deeply appreciate the efforts of the volunteer and government groups at all the sites.”

Other finalists included Mackinaw City, Michigan; Point Judith, Rhode Island; Hull, Massachusetts; Rockland, Maine; and New London, Connecticut.

The selection process galvanized several communities to submit proposals that may result in the development of regional lighthouse museums. One is almost certain to be built by the Mackinaw City group. The National Lighthouse Museum Steering Committee supports their efforts.

NJLHS Donates Funds To Finns Point Lighthouse Preservation Group

by Rich & Elinor Veit

The June meeting of the New Jersey Lighthouse Society was held at Fort Mott State Park in Pennsville, NJ on June 27, 1998. It was also the annual picnic for the society, celebrated with an anniversary cake, watermelon and lemonade. The members told one another stories of their lighthouse adventures and shared photo albums. Finns Point Rear Range Lighthouse volunteers opened the lighthouse to our group. Many members also took advantage of the balmy weather to visit the lighthouse, tour Fort Mott or take the ferry to Fort Delaware.

Finns Point rear Range Light, January, 1933
Photo by R.C. Smith, U.S. Coast Guard
NJJHS presented a $500 check to the Friends of Finns Point Rear Range Lighthouse to help them with the ongoing preservation of the lighthouse. Finns Point Rear Range Lighthouse, like so many New Jersey lighthouses, came perilously close to being demolished after it was decommissioned in 1950.

The Finns Point Range Lights were established in 1877 as part of a series of range lights commissioned to guide mariners up the Delaware River to the numerous ports along the river. The original station consisted of a front range lighthouse on the shore of the Delaware River. It was a two-story wood frame structure with a lantern room attached. It served as both a lighthouse and the keeper's living quarters. The rear range lighthouse was the same 115 foot iron skeleton structure that exists today. It had a keeper's house next to the tower that was built similar in style to the front range lighthouse.

Finns Point Front Range Light, May 1928
Photo by Gideon W. Hitchens, U.S. Coast Guard

In 1938 the front range lighthouse was replaced by a skeleton tower and the rear range lighthouse was automated. The front range lighthouse was torn down a short time later. In 1950 the rear range lighthouse was decommissioned. It is now part of the Supawna Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. Because of neglect and vandalism the keeper's house was demolished in 1977. On August 30, 1978, the rear range lighthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Saving the Finns Point Lighthouse did not come easy. A group of concerned citizens headed by modest but determined Betty Husarik formed the "Save the Lighthouse Committee" and worked hard to get the lighthouse restored to its present condition and open to the public. It is now open April through October on the third Sunday of the month from 12:00-4:00 p.m.

Finns Point Rear Range Light
Photo by Elinor Veit

On April 21, 1985, after a $33,600 stabilization project was completed, Finns Point Lighthouse began receiving visitors on the third Sunday of each month, April through October. The schedule remains the same today, fourteen years later. There were sixteen volunteers then; today there are twice that number.

Since the lighthouse is located on property owned by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the group has benefited from their presence and interest in maintaining the appearance of the area and the safety for all who visit. Many improvements have been added since the early days; for example, a black cyclone fence surrounds the walkway at the top of the lighthouse.
where guests, even those with small children, can relax while enjoying a view of Salem County farmlands, wooded tracts, Pea Patch Island, Artificial Island, large tankers and cargo container ships moving up and down the Delaware River.

If you are interested in becoming a Finns Point Lighthouse volunteer, please contact Betty Husarik at (609) 678-2400. (Reprinted from the Pennsville Township Historical Society Newsletter, July/August, 1998 – used with permission).

What’s in a Light?

by Ernest W. Corts

On Saturday, June 27, 1998, the New Jersey Lighthouse Society held its quarterly meeting and annual picnic at Fort Mott State Park. During the meeting Tom Laverty, President, recognized the volunteers for their commitment to preserving the tower and educating the public on its history and importance. At the turn of the last century, many Salem Countians looked to the Delaware River for transportation of agricultural products, and also for fish, muskrats, and the like. Their annual income depended on getting these items to markets in large cities like Philadelphia and New York.

Three volunteers were present at the meeting to accept the generous donation of $500 from the New Jersey Lighthouse Society. Pat DiDomizio, Acting Assistant Manager of Supawna Refuge, spoke for the group. He indicated that this sum might be set aside for a project to offer a "view from the top" via ground level video to physically handicapped visitors.

Each season, an average of one thousand men, women and children enjoy a trip to the lighthouse. Most of them climb the 130 steps to the top. Ten of the original volunteer staff remain on active duty, Nina and Al Bradley, Teresa Fair, John Freas, Liz and Jim Gallagher, Doris and Bill Grell, Doris Humphreys and Betty Husarik.

In addition to the monthly open house visitors, the volunteers welcome school children from a wide area as they arrive on class trips each spring. Donna Linvin brought her third grade students in 1985 and has returned every year but two since then. What an easy, fun way to get a history lesson!

For all the visits we make to lighthouses – and it’s become very fashionable to do so today – you would think that we would pay closer attention to the light. You remember, the light in a lighthouse is the reason it was built in the first place! Sometimes we get caught-up in the aura of the location and we forget to see the light. Then again, sometimes it’s daylight and the light isn’t turned on! But, just a few hours either way and we can experience what makes a lighthouse extraordinarily special. Let me give you a nautical example. Mariners are to determine the approximate range at which a light may be sighted, at night, by using something called luminous range (nominal range in sea miles combined with prevailing visibility). The most common adopted meteorological visibility is 20 miles, equivalent to a transmission factor of 0.085.

In non-layman terms, this means that for a light to have a range of about 20 miles, in fair visibility, it would need to have an intensity of 100,000 candelas (candles).(So who uses candles?) If you were in an area where the meteorological visibility was perfect, that same light should be able to be sighted at over 30 miles, given proper elevation of the light and elevation of your eye. Hence, we have proper motivation for making tall towers and/or locating them on cliffs. It is a well known fact that along the Eastern seaboard particularly from New Jersey to Florida, lighthouses were constructed approximately 40 miles apart. They were also built to be very tall because of the flatness of the land. The concept was, if each lighthouse was designed to be seen at 20 miles and the lighthouses were built 40 miles apart, one would always be in sight. Let me offer a few words of caution for those of you who are now preparing your boats for nighttime observations. First, all ranges that you read in published documents by the Hydrographer of the Navy are approximations. Second, the transparency of the atmosphere is not what it used to be when most lights originally were built. Third, glare from other light sources can reduce the luminous range dramatically.

With all that in mind, I am reminded of one of the first times I noticed unique characteristics of a light. We were sailing out of Rockland, Maine, to Vinalhaven Island to view Browns Head Light. This light, consisting of a small white tower sitting on a short bluff, exhibits a very unique light. It is a fixed white light with a red sector in it. It was designed in this fashion to guide you towards the lighthouse from the mainland
and then away from the light through Fox Islands Thoroughfare. The thoroughfare is a small passage of water between Valn.haven and North Haven Islands. While leaving the light through the thoroughfare you see a different look to the light until you can locate Goose Rocks Light at the other end of the thoroughfare. Goose Rocks exhibits a flashing green light.

All this brings me to a discussion on light characters. Light characters can be broken down into three very broad classes of lights: fixed, rhythmic, and alternating.

Let's start with the basics. A fixed light is one showing continuously and steadily, like our front porch light upon arrival home late at night (Ed. Note - To borrow a phrase from Tom Bodett, "We'll leave the light on for you."). A rhythmic light is one showing an intermittent light at some regular period. Now get ready...a rhythmic light could be; occulting and group occulting, isophase, flashing and group flashing, quick, very quick, ultra quick, Morse code, and fixed and flashing.

An alternating light shows different colors alternately and could be: alternating continuous with a change of color, flashing and group flashing, occulting and group occulting, and fixed and flashing and fixed and group flashing. Some day I'll write about all these (did I write that)? Anyway, getting back to the basics, remember a fixed character light would be like your porch light. An example of a rhythmic character light would be Minot's Ledge Light in Massachusetts. It is a flashing white light that exhibits a (1+4+3) rhythmic pattern every 45 seconds. It is this rhythmic pattern that has made this light world renowned as the "I LOVE YOU" lighthouse. Finally, an alternating character light would be a light that is continuously lit (no darkness) with a change of color somewhere in the pattern. The New London Ledge light is this type of light. New London Ledge Light is an alternating, flashing (White, White, White, Red) light which repeats every 30 seconds.

Who would think that lighthouses were so technical? During my first few visits to lighthouses I really never gave much thought to the light. I thought they were all white and fixed, just like my front porch light. Little did I realize that one of them could be an isophase (a light in which all durations of light and darkness are clearly equal); with a nominal range on a clear night of 15 miles. Or perhaps one of them is an ultra quick light (a light that flashes repeatedly at a rate not less than 160 flashes per minute), with a nominal range of 5 miles. Who could count 160 flashes at 5 miles? Probably someone who has an extremely tall eye level and is standing on a cliff with no city lights in the background. Is there such a place or person? I don't know the answers to these deep questions. What I have come to know, is that there's a lot more to lighthouses than the buildings and surroundings. After all, what's in a light?
Lighthouse Museum & Center Steering Committee. Tom will be coordinating the activities of the National Committee with the Staten Island Group leading the formation of the National Lighthouse Museum. He'll also be helping Henry Stephenson, Project Director for the Staten Island Group with problems and concerns and assist in locating the proper people on the national level with the skills to make the National Lighthouse Museum on Staten Island a reality. The National Lighthouse Museum has recently created web site at http://lighthouse museum.org.

One of the first items that has come about is a National Lighthouse Museum kick off event planned for Saturday, October 17, at the former lighthouse depot site on Staten Island. Tentative plans call for a public event from 1:00-4:00 p.m. with exhibits by various lighthouse organizations, crafts, storytelling programs, fireboat demonstration, life saving boats, music and more. NJLHS members are invited to attend. Plans are still be formulated at this time. Because of the timing of newsletter production and mailing, final details will not be available in The Beam, but will be posted to the NJLHS web site as soon as available. Our web site is at njlhs.burlco.org – note – not "www".

Notes from Near and Far

PBS Lighthouse Series To Air

Public Broadcasting Stations will begin showing "Legendary Lighthouses," a series of six hour long specials on lighthouses beginning on October 5th. Check your local listings for time and stations.

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No Bidders for Barnegat Inlet Tower

The Coast Guard failed to get any responses from contractors interested in building a replacement tower to mark the north jetty in Barnegat Inlet.

Planning to build a 35 foot tower to replace the one that toppled over in January and hoping to have construction completed by fall, the Coast Guard by-passed the normal bidding process and established a 70 day timetable for completion of the tower.

Prospective bidders are being polled to ascertain the reason for the lack of bid responses.

The suggested location for the new tower is 138 feet from the base of the old one and on a route used by some of the larger vessels using the inlet. Some boaters felt that the new location might impede boat traffic.

Harbour Lights re-introduces Barnegat Sculpture

Harbour Lights has re-introduced its miniature of Barnegat Lighthouse. Originally introduced in early 1997 as part of its "Great Lighthouses of the World" collection, this re-sculpted version features some subtle design enhancements. This revised version measures 7" x 5" and is priced at $50 suggested retail. When a sculpture from the "Great Lighthouses of the World " collection is purchased, a portion of the proceeds is donated to the historical society or preservation group responsible for the care and restoration of the particular lighthouse.

Hereford Inlet Craft Fairs Most Successful

The 124-year-old Hereford Inlet Lighthouse in North Wildwood held the biggest fund-raising craft shows in its history this summer. More than 10,000 people attended the three craft shows in June, July and August. Proceeds went toward the restoration of the lighthouse. Among the 60 crafters was Walter Oliver of Middle Township who was visited by Kristian Delamore, the resort's first Miss North Wildwood, on the left.
Program Signals

by Yvonne Miller

As I reported at the June meeting, all our efforts to find a meeting place large enough to accommodate our group at Stony Point, New York were unsuccessful. So at the June 27th meeting I announced that the Fall meeting would be planned in the vicinity of the Absecon Lighthouse since the Grand Opening Ceremonies for the Lighthouse and keeper’s house were being planned for September 25th & 26th. We all know what happened to the Absecon keeper’s house in the wee hours of July 6th (if you still haven’t heard check out the lead article of this issue of The Beam).

In light of this, our meeting is being planned for Atlantic City on September 26, 1998. I have applied to use the Uptown School Complex. There will be a speaker and at this time the possibility of going up the tower of the lighthouse is strong.

The meeting will begin promptly at 11:00 a.m. with hospitality being served from 10:30 a.m. We will have memorabilia for sale from our society. Bill Gately will be available to sign his new book, Sentinels of the Shores, and the Inlet Public Private Association will have items for sale that would have been sold at the Light-keeper’s House. Start your holiday shopping in September! The Annual Lighthouse T-shirt and Sweatshirt Contest will be held. Nomination of officers for the coming year is also on the agenda for this meeting. Watch our web site (njlhs.burlco.org) for any updates or changes. If a change occurs, a notice will be sent to the membership.

DIRECTIONS TO THE UPTOWN COMPLEX: Take Rt. 30 (Whitehorse Pike) into Atlantic City, follow the sign for the Showboat. At the sign for Mediterranean Avenue turn left. Mediterranean turns into Melrose Avenue. The Uptown School Complex is on Vermont and Melrose Avenues. The school is on the left. Parking is available in the front and rear of the building.

WINTER MEETING: December 5, 1998 - Bingo Hall Heislerville, NJ and the East Point Lighthouse. At the time of the Maurice River Historical Society’s Open House on August 1 the lighthouse was still undergoing reconstruction but it is scheduled to be completed by our meeting date.

SUMMER MEETING RECAP: The facilities at Fort Mott were everything we expected and more. While we had a last minute change in location at the park, the site of our meeting and the weather was wonderful. A $500 check was presented to the Friends and Volunteers of the Finns Point Light. Our hosts, the New Jersey Park Service personnel were, as always, accommodating and hospitable. All the members took advantage of the park, ferry and lighthouse tours.

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Attention Lighthouse Groups!

Send us your articles, news and events. We are interested in anything dealing with New Jersey Lighthouses - hours, decent training, fundraisers, press releases, preservation news, historical information and photos. We will be happy to publish articles on your lighthouses history, your preservation efforts and other topics in similar vein. Our deadlines are flexible, because they revolve around our quarterly meeting dates, but in general are 6-8 weeks before the meeting. The Beam is published March, June, September and December. Even if we can't get your information into the next issue of the newsletter we maintain a web site which we update frequently. Very shortly, a calendar will added to the web site with links to various events.

Materials can be mailed to the Newsletter address below, or e-mailed to the editor Kim Ruth at kruth@burlco.lib.nj.us.

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Committees

- Activities Chair: Carole DiNapoli (732) 297-4280
- Historian: George Feiser (609) 628-2210
- Hospitality Chair: Betty Smith (609) 546-7810
- Membership Chair: Mary Beth Doherty (973) 966-5573
- Newsletter Editor: Kim M. Ruth (609) 386-4296
- e-mail: kruth@burlco.lib.nj.us
- Program Chair: Yvonne Miller (609) 654-2451
- Publicity Chair: Richard & Elonor Veit (609) 652-1876
- Ways & Means: Al Smith (609) 546-7810

Society Address: NJLHS, Inc.
P.O. Box 4228
Brick, NJ 08723

Newsletter Address: The Beam
425 Summer Avenue
Beverly, NJ 08010

Web Site: http://njlhs.burlco.org
E-mail address: njlhs@burlco.org