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Bear Island lighthouse

There might not be a beacon, but lights will twinkle again

Story by Letitia Baldwin



Keeping the Bear Island Lighthouse was a dream come true for Terry and Nancy Stanley, when the opportunity arose back in the 50s. Up until then, the young couple had been unable to live together on a regular basis.

A third-class engine man in the U.S. Coast Guard, Stanley had been transferred from the Southwest Harbor base to a lightship in Rhode Island, after having been married for only one year.

So when the light station became available, Stanley and his wife jumped at the chance. "'Family lights', were sought after, then. It was a way to be together," he recalled.

Located outside of Northeast Harbor, the Bear Island lighthouse guarded the entrance to both the Eastern and Western Ways until it was decommissioned and replaced by a lighted buoy in 1981.

Five years later, the light station became the property of Acadia National Park under the boundary legislation, which established the permanent boundaries of all national parks throughout the U.S.



New occupants

And after lying vacant for eight years, Bear Island Lighthouse may soon be occupied again. Since late last year, the park has been reviewing about half a dozen proposals from individuals and non-profit organizations interested in leasing the property.

"No final decision has been made yet. The proposals are still being reviewed, but I would expect we will have a lease agreement by June," predicted Acadia National Park's superintendent, Jack Hauptman.

If and when a proposal is finally chosen, it would be the first time the park has ever leased one of its historical properties. "The revenue would help pay for the restoration of artifacts that we have within the park," Hauptman explained.

When the Bear Island Lighthouse became park property in 1987, it was found that extensive restoration work would have to be done on the historic building.

Funds were raised to finance the roofing of the light-keeper's house and the entrance to the light tower. That work was made possible partially by a Bicentennial Lighthouse Preservation grant, in addition to private donations raised by Friends of Acadia, a non-profit organization formed to help protect the park's resources.

Since the light station had been listed on the *National Register of Historic Places*, it qualified for a program permitting the rental of non-essential historic structures and agricultural lands to individuals and organizations.

Established in 1982, the program provides a means for the restoration and reuse of historic structures and land owned by the federal government. All revenue generated from the lease of such properties is used for historic preservation purposes.

Situated on 3.4 acres of land, the Bear Island light station consists of a two-story light tower, a 1-1/2-story lightkeeper's house, barn, oil house and boat house.

Prospective tenants must "have the financial resources to carry out the terms of the lease, the experience in rehabilitation work, the experience in managing properties with similar uses and the ability to assure the long-range success of the lease arrangements," according to the park.

In addition to paying rent, the tenants must also be prepared to make an investment of at least \$5,000 for further restoration work, which would be supervised by park technicians.

A permanent lease would not be granted. "Leases longer than 30 years are normally not satisfactory to the National Park Service, unless a proposal presents convincing evidence on why a long-term is necessary," states the park.

Unique way of life

The Bear Island Lighthouse was established in 1839 to guide traffic into Northeast Harbor. The light-keeper's house was built by the Coast Guard around 1889.

As keeper of the light station in 1959, Terry Stanley was responsible for lighting the acetylene-fueled beacon, shortly after sundown and extinguishing it after dawn the next day.



When the fog rolled in, the keeper was also charged with ringing a fog-warning bell, which used to stand in a white, pyramid-shaped structure on the southern side of the island.

"It worked like a Swiss clock," recalled Stanley. "You cranked weights up to the top of the tower and ring the bell every so many minutes."

When not tending the lighthouse, the keeper would scrape and paint the exterior of the buildings in the summer. During the winter, he would strip and varnish floors and do other work needed on the interior of the light station.

Back in the 50s, the Bear Island Lighthouse came with a life-saving dog named Cleo. "When we took her ashore, she didn't know what to make of all the cars," Stanley's wife remembered. "Of course, she had only seen boats up until then."



Lightkeeper Terry Stanley playing with the light station's dog named Cleo.

A spunky and energetic woman, Stanley's wife often ventured by herself, in a small outboard motor boat, to fetch the mail, groceries and other supplies in Northeast Harbor.

Once at the slip at Bear Island, she would nimbly leap out of the boat and hook and haul it up with a gasoline-powered winch from inside the boat house.

Back then, a tramway was used to haul the acetylene, propane gas and other supplies up the steep, rocky facade of the island.

The Lightkeeper's wife Nancy Stanley sits in the tramway carriage.



Cooking was a challenge at the light station. The kitchen was equipped with a huge refrigerator, but the freezer compartment could only hold one ice tray. "We ate an awful lot of macaroni and cheese, tuna casseroles and Spam," laughed Stanley's wife.

Despite the limited resources on the tiny island, she still found plenty of activities to fill her time. "I knitted and had fun making clothes with an old, peddle sewing machine. I also wrote a lot of letters, something you don't have time for these days."

In spite of the many hours spent on lighthouse duties, Stanley found time to lobster, fish for cod and haddock, then abundant, and carve wooden fish, birds and other creatures on the side.



Nancy Stanley shows off a wooden fish carved by her husband while he was keeper of the Bear Island Lighthouse in 1959.

"We just loved it out there," recalled Stanley's wife. She and her husband would spend their evenings playing cards, cribbage and watching television.

But looking back, Stanley believes lighthouse-keeping is best suited for a young couple. "Too much lugging and tugging," he remembered. "You could wear out a loaf of bread before you got it home."

That unique way of life is rapidly disappearing. Of the lighthouses gracing Maine's rocky coast, only one is still man-powered, and it is scheduled to be automated sometime this year.

Of lighthouses, the Island Institute's director Philip W. Conkling wrote: "Their physical presence speaks of absolute service to mankind, and their lights, beaming across a dark wilderness of sea, are widely recognized as beacons of care, integrity and perseverance."

Bear Island Lighthouse's beacon may never shine again, but lights will twinkle from within the historic building sometime in the near future.