



Keeping the Light on for the Next Century!

Greens Ledge Lighthouse

BY JIM FRAYER, ROWAYTON

...
One of the first images we conjure up when thinking about any seaside New England location is usually a Lighthouse, so it is not surprising that Darien and Rowayton, Connecticut, a place residents describe as a picturesque New England seaside gem, is getting behind a campaign to save and restore their lighthouse. The Greens Ledge Light Preservation Society founded by Brendan McGee and Tim Pettee, both Rowayton residents, is closing in on its initial goal to raise \$2 million to restore and preserve the historical landmark a mile offshore. Sound Watch News was lucky enough to get a tour to hear about the efforts.

...
HISTORIC ATTRACTION

What is it about lighthouses and why preserve them? Let's get a little historical background. The first lighthouse in North America was built in 1673 in Boston Harbor. The colonies quickly recognized economic development, and in some cases their very survival, hinged on their ability to build and expand trade. Those towns and villages with good harbors were going to be the centers of commerce for the new nation. It was imperative for colonial and foreign ships to safely navigate our ports. Cities quickly realized navigational aids to facilitate the growing maritime traffic were essential. Lighthouses became the gateways to commercial centers. They were financed through "light dues" collected by the local customs house and were based on the tonnage carried by vessels using the ports.

Congress passed the Lighthouse Establishment Act in 1789, only the ninth law to be passed in the new Congress. This law provided for the Federal government to assume responsibility for all the colonial lighthouse in this new nation, of which there were twelve at the time. Alexander Hamilton, as Secretary of the Treasury, was in charge, and

recognized the importance of navigation in competing on a global basis. Indeed, some of the very first public works projects were lighthouses. In fact, one was Connecticut's first lighthouse erected in New London in 1791.

The rich maritime heritage of New England would never have been possible without lighthouses to guide ships laden with cargo to our cities and towns. Lighthouses in various shapes and sizes were the guide posts that enabled trade to flourish. There are nearly 150 lighthouses guarding approximately 6,000 miles of rocky coastline in New England.

...
THE GREENS LEDGE HISTORY

In the second half of the 19th Century, Norwalk's economy was booming from shipbuilding, manufacturing, and commercial fishing. Similar to other New England ports this growth was made possible through commercial shipping. To facilitate this vibrant trade, Norwalk's first lighthouse was built on Sheffield Island in 1826. By the end of the century it became apparent more lighthouses were needed to support the safe

passage of the increasing number of ships. The location selected was known as Greens Ledge reef, a jagged stretch of rock protruding off Sheffield island just below the surface, which lies approximately a mile south of Rowayton in Long Island Sound. In 1899, Congress appropriated \$60,000 to fund a "Spark Plug" lighthouse constructed of cast iron and concrete. The design, whose name was derived from its resemblance to an automotive spark plug, is an example of pre-fabricated construction developed by the country's Lighthouse Board. This design became the model for 41 lighthouses between 1873 and 1910. This type lighthouse played a significant role in protecting shipping lanes along the northeast coast from New York to Boston. There are currently only 33 "Spark Plug" lighthouses remaining, most in poor condition and vulnerable to storms and turbulent seas. One of those was the Old Orchard Shoal Lighthouse off Staten Island which was demolished in Super Storm Sandy.

Work began in 1901 with a foundation consisting of a cast iron cylinder or caisson, fabricated along the shore at the site of the current Norwalk Yacht Club. The iron cylinder, which resembles an inverted bell, was floated by barge and lowered into approximately ten feet of water at the end of Greens Ledge reef on May 21, 1901.

The foundation was partially filled with concrete and lined with bricks. Six months later, on February 15, 1902, the light was lit and has remained illuminated for the last 117 years without interruption. Not long after the lighthouse was completed, the foundation settled in the muddy bottom and started to lean slightly. When listing reached 4 degrees, 1,500 tons of rocks were added around the structure to stabilize it. An interesting fact: the rocks were quarried from the foundation of Radio City Music Hall!

Greens Ledge Lighthouse became the beacon welcoming mariners to Norwalk, both visitors and those living in the towns and villages on the shore of Long Island Sound. It had become a historical monument as well as an aid to navigation.

According to the *"Lighthouse Preservation Handbook"* [Lighthouses] "helped to instill confidence in ship captains as well as foreign governments, symbolically implying that the United States was a responsible world power." With this brief history one can easily understand the important role these edifices have played in the development of our country.

By the 1970s most Lighthouses were no longer manned by a "keeper." The operation of beacons and fog horns were automated and more advanced navigation technology became available. The cast iron and concrete sentinels subjected to the constant battering of the weather began to deteriorate. In the late 1980s, in an effort to help maintain their cultural, historic, and educational value, the **National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000** initiated a process for the transfer of "excess" historic lighthouses no longer needed by the Coast Guard. Greens Ledge Lighthouse, in need of significant repairs and refurbishing, was on that list. The acquisition of the light house at virtually no cost seemed like a win-win situation. However, the cost of preservation and maintenance proved to be too expensive for many small seaside towns. But in Rowayton native Brendan McGee's mind (owner of Brendan's 101) this could present an avenue to preserve the



Foundation damage from sea and wind



Greens Ledge Light 1916

● ● ●
Greens Ledge Lighthouse became the beacon welcoming mariners to Norwalk, both visitors and those living in the towns and villages on the shore of Long Island Sound. It had become a historical monument as well as an aid to navigation.
 ● ● ●



Barrier with stone from Radio City Music Hall

iconic lighthouse he grew up gazing at on summer days.

By this time the Lighthouse had been added to the National Register of Historic places; however, the category in which it appeared was "deteriorated." It was clear after a hundred years of battling the elements the lighthouse was nearing the end of its life.

On May 15, 2015 the National Park Service, working with the General Services Administration (GSA), began soliciting bids for the private purchase of Greens Ledge Lighthouse. McGee immediately began talking to anyone who would listen to explore how to raise the money to save the lighthouse.

Meanwhile during that summer, while enjoying a family outing on their boat, fellow Rowaytonite Tim Pettee was cruising around the lighthouse. Looking up, his daughter Lizzy asked her father what this lighthouse was called? Greens Ledge, he replied. Moments later, after a quick Google search, she discovered it was to be auctioned in two or three weeks, and how can a father refuse a daughter? Neither McGee nor Pettee realized the other was bidding for the property (even though Pettee only lives about 150 yards down the street from Brendan's store).

In August of 2016 the GSA invited bidders out to inspect the lighthouse. McGee had always imagined preserving the lighthouse for public access and he was concerned that someone would purchase it for commercial use (although the offer to purchase precluded any commercial use of the site). Brendan had done his homework and knew there was considerable work to do. It was the prime reason the city of Norwalk was not interested in assuming ownership and the expense that came with it. Although Pettee had the ability to finance the purchase, he was apprehensive about the amount of the work that the "deteriorated" lighthouse would require.

While on their inspection, McGee and Pettee recognized each other as one would notice a neighbor you had never formally met. McGee, who is not shy, introduced himself and said to Pettee, "wouldn't it be



Structural stabilization complete!

a shame if some captain if industry came to buy this as a getaway for him and his friends?" Pettee had no intention of running it as a commercial entity...No B&B, No Conference Center! As they began to talk they realized that together they might indeed save the lighthouse for the community.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

Up until this point people had taken for granted that the Lighthouse would always be in their back yards. After all the Coast Guard was taking care of these things. Pettee and McGee knew differently. They now assumed the responsibility for what our government had decided was no longer a priority. Although the Coast Guard would maintain a light and fog horn signal on the site it might be literally a light on a tower.

In September 2016 Tim Pettee, Brendan McGee, Shannon Holloway, and Alex Pettee finalized the formation of the Greens Ledge Light Preservation Society, a 501c3 nonprofit, and on May 17, 2017 the Society finalized the acquisition of the Greens Ledge Lighthouse for \$150,000 funded through a founding contribution from the Pettee Family.

The primary objective of the Society is to preserve the lighthouse for generations. As restoration continues, there will be a program for limited access to the Light for major donors and on a periodic basis for the general public.

When asked about how they planned to bring visitors out to the island, Alex Pettee explained the plan to "outsourcing" some of the tourist amenities. For example, discussions with the Maritime Aquarium are underway to include Greens Ledge Light as part of their "Lighthouse Cruise" which would begin with Peck's light, on to Sheffield, and finally a tour of Greens Ledge. Alex believes they could host 50 to 60 visitors on such a cruise.

McGee and the Pettees are also talking to The University of Connecticut about establishing a science lab on the site that would measure water quality as well as observe weather conditions on the sound. Although technical issues need to be addressed, cameras could be used to observe wildlife from seals to ospreys. The Coast Guard will continue to maintain the light and the fog horn warning systems.

Alex Pettee discussed the costs of the renovations needed. Before the acquisition they had done their research and spoke to other parties that had purchased lighthouses through similar programs. They discovered that restoration of offshore facilities would be two to three times more expensive. Experienced contractors to do the work would also be limited. A structural engineer was employed to assess the cost of restoring the structural integrity to the building. The initial budget developed called for \$1.5 million to \$2 million which they knew would grow.

Fundraising began immediately with a goal of \$2 million earmarked for restoration work, interior updates, and docking facilities (to accommodate public access). The Society was set up to oversee the preservation of the lighthouse and calling for the community to

invest in that task. Initial fundraising was overwhelming, as Tim Pettee gleefully states, "Damn if people didn't respond!"

To date, stabilization of the building is complete. The cast iron and concrete foundation has been repaired and strengthened, new concrete installed on walkways and new railings (fabricated to match the original design) are in place on the outside of the lighthouse. Fresh paint on the outside will be completed during the fall (weather permitting). The permits for a fifty-foot long by ten-foot wide dock have been secured and the dock should be in place by summer of 2020.

Plans for the interior basement and six floors are also well underway. The small island has no electricity so all power will be solar at this point, but there are opportunities to experiment with other power generating ideas such as wind and tide. Fresh water will be provided by desalinization equipment and supplemented by water delivered by boat. The basement has several cisterns for fresh water and gray water as well as a sewage holding tank (which will need to be emptied by marine pump out vessel). The basement will contain most of the equipment to operate the lighthouse.

CAN I BE A PART OF IT?

Although many people look out on Long Island Sound and see an iconic fixture in their own backyard, others see the historical monument to the deep maritime heritage of New England and our country. The McGee and the Pettee families have taken a bold step to make sure we will not lose this symbol. Everyone can be part of this effort by supporting the Greens Ledge Light Preservation Society. For more information go to www.savegreensledge.org

E
I
T

CORBIN

D
I
S
T
R
I
C
T



COMING SOON

to Downtown Darien

www.thecorbindistrict.com

