

LOG

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Coney Island Light Station, New York

by Jeremy D'Entremont

Coney Island, now a peninsula attached to the mainland, was formerly the westernmost of the barrier islands off New York's Long Island. The island was named for its once teeming rabbit population; coney is an old word for rabbit.

A bill "to establish lights at the western end of Coney Island," known as Norton's Point (after a nineteenth-century politician who once ran a hotel at the point), was introduced in Congress in 1888. J. O. Coleman, New York City's commissioner of street cleaning, urged passage of the bill in a February 1889 letter to New York's representatives in Congress. Many vessels, wrote Coleman, including passenger steamers and the tugboats of his own department, had to navigate the narrow channel around Coney Island day and night.

"Life and property are in danger during the continuance of the present condition of things," wrote Coleman, "and it is most urgent that proper safeguards be established at once."

Congress concurred, and \$25,000 was appropriated for a light and fog signal in March 1889. The project was delayed when the owners of the property asked for \$6,500 for their land, which the government deemed an exorbitant price. The government had the land condemned, and they then purchased it for \$3,500.

A sixty-eight-foot-tall, square cast-iron skeletal tower with a central cylinder containing a spiral stairway was completed along with a keeper's house in 1890. A similar tower was built in the same year at Throgs Neck at the eastern end of the East River, but that tower no longer stands. The tower type is much more common in the Mid-Atlantic and South; the only similar extant lighthouse in the Northeast is at Marblehead, Massachusetts.

The design of the two-story keeper's house is much like the ones at Gould Island and Castle Hill light stations in Rhode Island, which were established around the same time.



Coney Island Light Station. Photo by the author.

The light went into operation on August 1, 1890, with a fourth-order Fresnel lens showing a flashing red light, 75 feet above the water. The light served as a guide for mariners passing through the Narrows to New York Harbor. It also served to mark the entrance to Gravesend Bay to the immediate north, and to guide garbage scows to their dumping grounds offshore. The station's first keeper was Thomas Higgenbotham, a native of Maryland.

The station was established to serve as the rear light in a range, but the front light remained in operation for only six years. The Lighthouse Board announced in 1896 that the site where the front beacon stood would be sold at public auction.

Life for the keepers and their families was mostly quiet, although the station was just a few miles from the bright lights and crowds of the Coney Island amusement park, which had its heyday in the early 1900s. When the light station was established, the buildings stood alone, with no neighbors in sight. Beginning in the late 1800s, a private community called Sea Gate took shape around the station. The government eventually had to

pay \$5,000 for a right-of-way through the community.

Among Sea Gate's residents was the future Nobel Prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer, who rented a room near the light station in the winter of 1935 for four dollars a week. "At night the wind howled," wrote Singer, "the bell of the lighthouse rang, the ocean stormed and foamed with a rage as old as eternity." Other Sea Gate residents have included songwriter Woody Guthrie and opera singer Beverly Sills.

Erosion took its toll at the light station, and a 600-foot stone wall was built in 1915 for protection. Just a few months later a storm undermined the wall. It was repaired, but in April 1918, the station's fog bell fell over the eroding bank. A new skeletal bell tower was erected with a 1,200-pound bell, and more riprap stone was added around the station to guard against further encroachment by the sea.

Adrien J. Boisvert, the keeper for the Coast Guard from 1944 to 1960, lived at the station with his wife, Alice, and their seven children. His daughter, Cecile Boisvert Chenette, shared her memories of the station



This portrait of Adrien J. Boisvert was taken when he was 30 years old. Boisvert was keeper at Coney Island Light Station 1944-60. Courtesy of Celestine Boisvert O'Connor and Cecile Boisvert Chenette.

in a 2001 article in *Lighthouse Digest*.

Cecile Boisvert Chenette recalled watching Coney Island fireworks from the lighthouse with her siblings, with a large bag of popcorn prepared by her mother. "We would go up the lighthouse stairs to the outside balcony on the top and sit there with our legs dangling over the railing and have the best time watching the fireworks," she wrote.

Cecile and the other children also helped with some of the lighthouse chores:

One of our jobs on the Coney Island station was to climb the stairs to the lighthouse each night before sunset. At the top of the lighthouse was a large brass crank handle attached to a cable that held a round weighted barrel. Every night we took turns cranking up the weight. During the night the weight would slowly descend and turn the lens, sending out a beacon of red flashing light. My parents gave me five cents for the job.

Cecile recalled seeing the ocean liner *Stockholm* pass the station after its collision with the *Andrea Doria* in July 1956. When they saw the front of the ship crumpled like aluminum foil, the family wondered how the ship stayed afloat. The *Ile de France*, carrying survivors from the *Andrea Doria*, passed by later. "We could hear the music softly playing across the still shimmering water, and we could see the survivors on the deck," Cecile wrote. "These people were so lucky to be saved, unlike the 46 who lost their lives. The music from the ship, the beautiful lights, and the cool summer breeze made it a night to remember."

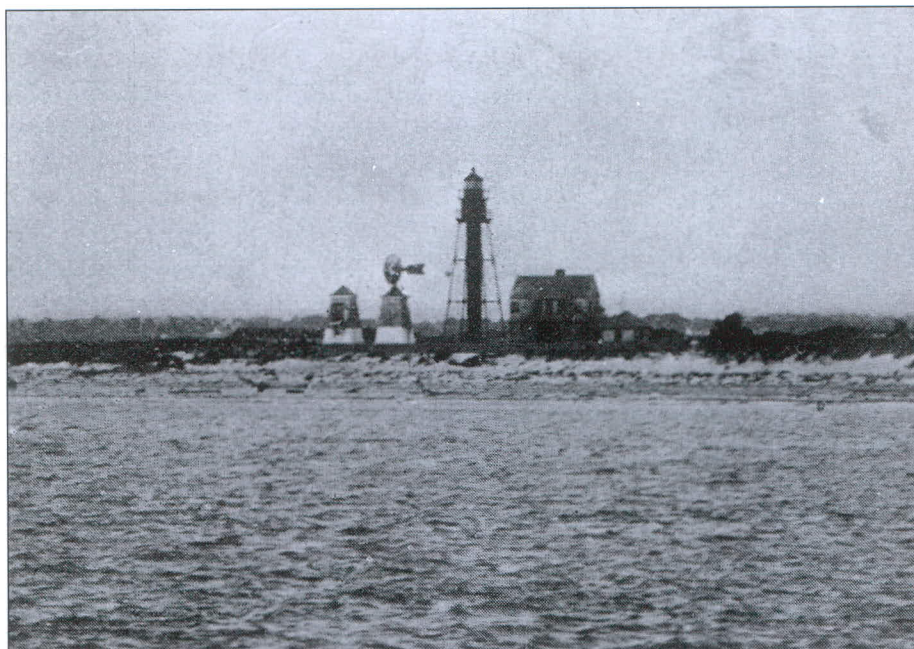
Cecile's sister, Celestine (Sally) Boisvert O'Connor, recalled the station's fog bell:

One of the duties my parents had was to watch out for fog so that they could turn on the fog bell. They were often awakened at night with the sound of distant ships' horns. I remember Dad putting a ladder up on the bell tower during a power outage in order to manually sound the bell with a hammer. He and my brother Adrien Jr. (Andy) would take turns doing this until the fog was gone. Eventually the bell was removed due to shorefront erosion and the fact that modern ships have new ways of establishing their location.

Coney Island's last lighthouse keeper, Frank Schubert, was born on September 13, 1915, on Staten Island, as the middle of seven children. His father was a carpenter, and young Frank learned all kinds of do-it-yourself skills as a boy. After high school, he got a job through the Works Progress Administration as a lifeguard and swimming instructor at a public pool. He showed an affinity for the water and exhibited strong lifesaving skills.

In 1937, Schubert joined the civilian Lighthouse Service as a seaman on the tender *Tulip*. When the Coast Guard took over the nation's lighthouses in 1939, it was decided that civilians would no longer serve on tenders and lightships.

Rather than join the Coast Guard, Schubert took a position as keeper of Old Orchard Shoal Lighthouse, an offshore station near Staten Island. After about three years at Old Orchard Shoal, Schubert was transferred to New York's Governors Island, where he tended several small aids to navigation around the island.



Early photo of Coney Island Light Station as seen from offshore. From the collection of Jeremy D'Entremont.



During the summer in Coney Island during the Boisvert family's stay, once a week there would be fireworks on the boardwalk. The Boisvert children had a great view from the top of the lighthouse. Courtesy of Celestine Boisvert O'Connor and Cecile Boisvert Chenette.



By the early 1900s, the light station was surrounded by a private community called Sea Gate. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

When the Coast Guard took over the operation of lighthouses, Lighthouse Service keepers were given the option of remaining civilians or joining the Coast Guard. Schubert chose to remain a civilian. As it turned out, he entered another branch of the military in 1942 when he was drafted to serve in World War II.

Schubert told the authorities he was tired of being on and around boats, so he chose to go into the army instead of the navy. The strategy backfired when he was sent to Florida's Camp Gordon to work as a landing craft instructor. Later, he captained combat and utility boats in Japan and the

Philippines.

Following his military service, Schubert returned to Governors Island and remained there for another 16 years. He was then transferred to the lighthouse that would be his home for the rest of his life. Schubert, his wife Marie, and their three children, Francine, Thomas, and Kenneth, moved into the keeper's cottage at Coney Island Light Station in July 1960.

Schubert witnessed many changes and some unusual events in his decades at Coney Island. He once found an 18-foot whale stranded near the lighthouse. He saw boats run aground nearby, and he was credited with 15 rescues in the vicinity of the station. In 1973, a cargo ship collided with a tanker offshore, and Schubert acted quickly to summon the help of the Coast Guard and other emergency personnel. Sixteen seamen were lost in the explosion and fire, but 63 were rescued.

Schubert also watched the construction of new houses crowding in around his home and was even startled to see nude bathers.

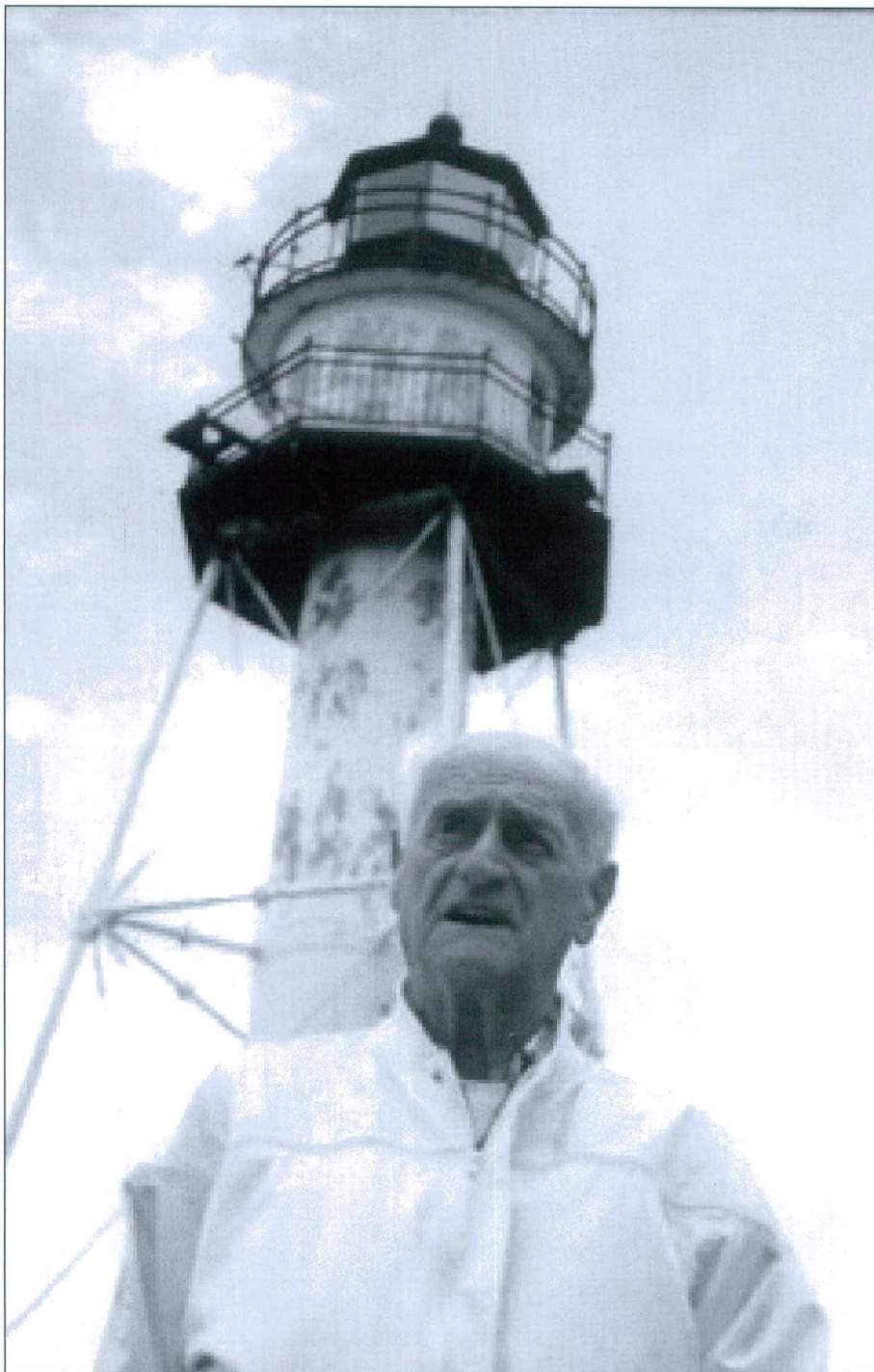
Some of his neighbors weren't always happy with the foghorn that sounded every ten seconds, but as the keeper explained, "When there's a fog, it has to be done."

As the years passed, life for the extended Schubert family often revolved around the light station. Frank's son Kenneth was married there. Despite the closeness of New York City and its many entertainment offerings, Frank was happy staying close to home. In 1986, he told a reporter that he and his wife hadn't seen a movie since 1946, adding, "We haven't taken a vacation in twenty years." Marie corrected him: "Twenty-five."

Coney Island Lighthouse was automated in 1989, but the Coast Guard retained Schubert as the resident caretaker. He told the *New York Times*, "I'm a relic. The Coast Guard wants me to stay on, and I surely don't want to leave. My plan is to stay as long as I live." He continued to maintain the grounds and kept a close eye on the light and fog signal, climbing the 87 steps in the tower daily.

As the years went by and the remaining employees of the Lighthouse Service passed into history, Frank Schubert increasingly got more attention. He visited the White House in 1989 as the guest of President George H. W. Bush. Schubert said the president was "nuts about lighthouses."

Not all the attention was welcomed. After



he was interviewed on a public radio program in 2002, Schubert was inundated with visitors. A *Times* article quoted him, "I've gotten discovered and now people won't leave me alone. People think there's something romantic about a lighthouse. It's just a lighthouse. I don't understand it, really."

Reporters pretended to be handymen or relatives to get access. "The guy can't sit and have a cup of coffee without being bothered," said Petty Officer Frank Bari of the Coast Guard. "He doesn't mind talking now and then. But how would you feel?" Still, Schubert was cordial and accommodating to countless visitors.

When Schubert's children were young, they had their chores to do at the light station, including the winding of the clockwork mechanism that rotated the lens. His grandson Scott Schubert has said that he and his cousins followed suit, doing chores at the station like mowing the lawn, painting fences, and providing tours to visitors since they were old enough to take the responsibility. "This is our way of giving back for all the memories and fun we've had over the years," said Scott, who now maintains a Web site about the light station and his grandfather <www.coneyislandlightstation.com>.

In 2002, Schubert told a *New York Daily News* reporter that once he moved to the Coney Island Lighthouse he never wanted to live anywhere else. "I love it here," he said. "The privacy, the neighbors. Why would I leave? I love it so much."

Frank Schubert didn't retire, and he didn't leave. He remained at the light he loved until the end of his years. He died at eighty-eight on December 11, 2003, in the seven-room keeper's cottage where he had spent 43 years as keeper and caretaker. The passing of Frank Schubert, believed to be the last living person who served as a lighthouse keeper under the old Lighthouse Service, truly marked the end of an era.

Master Chief Tony Gray of Coast Guard Aids to Navigation New York said that the Coast Guard considered Schubert a true lighthouse keeper until the end of his life. "He'd call us if there were any problems," said Gray, "not only with the lighthouse but with the other aids in the area." Master Chief Gray said he spoke with Schubert three days before his death and that he "seemed like a fifty-five-year-old man. He was a really nice guy."



Above: Frank Schubert (1915-2003) is regarded as the last Lighthouse Service keeper in the United States. Courtesy of the Schubert family.

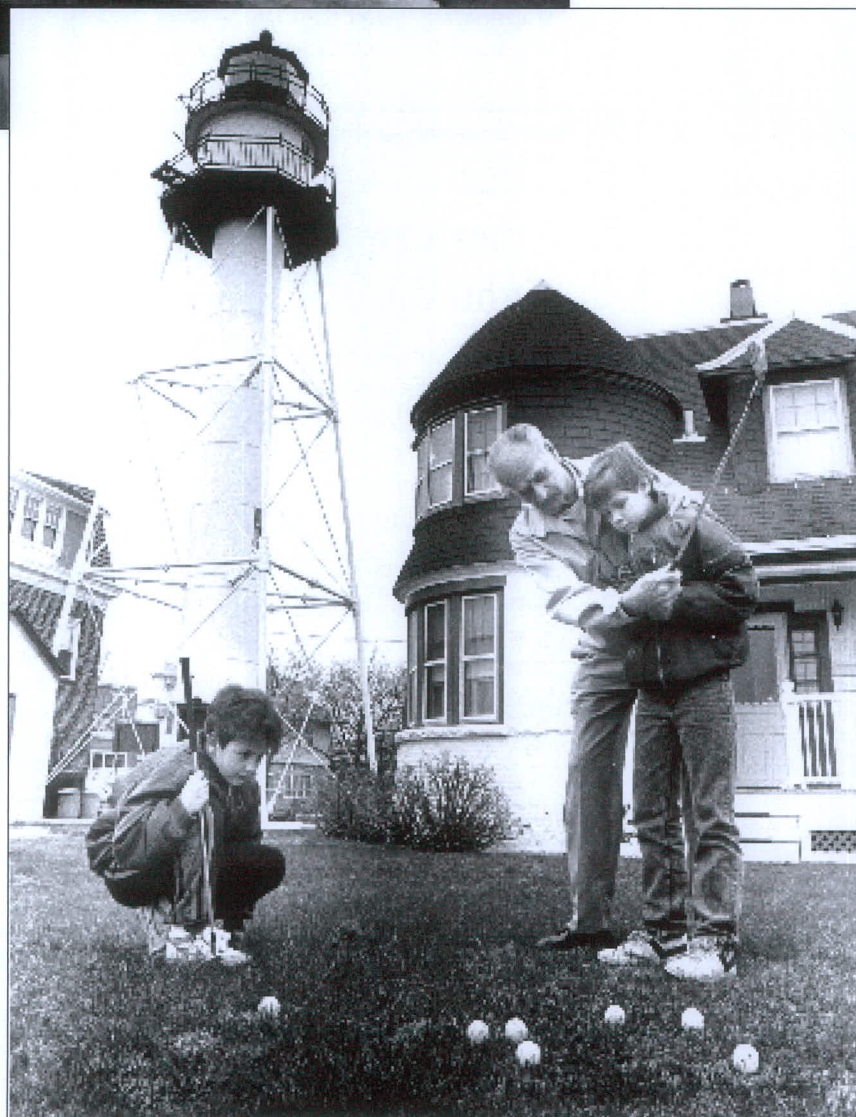
Left: Frank Schubert met President George H. W. Bush at the White House in 1989. Courtesy of the Schubert family.



Left: The long quiet stretches at Old Orchard Shoal Lighthouse led Keeper Frank Schubert to take up a lifelong hobby – marquetry, which is defined as the “coverage of the entire surface of a board or piece of furniture with veneer, in the form of a skillfully applied design or picture.” Schubert became an accomplished practitioner of this art. Here, Schubert displays a sample of his marquetry to grandsons Scott and Christopher. Courtesy of the Schubert family.

The lighthouse stands off Surf Avenue, between B47 and B48 streets in the gated community of Sea Gate. You can drive to the gate and explain that you'd like to photograph the lighthouse, but lighthouse hunters will not necessarily be granted entrance. You may photograph the lighthouse from the water; one possibility is to charter a cruise with Ray Mellett of Sewaren, New Jersey (973-953-7781).

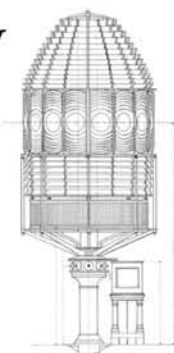
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Below: Frank Schubert playing golf at the light station with his grandsons. Courtesy of the Schubert family.



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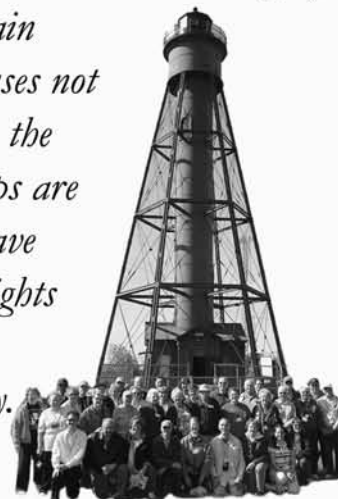
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