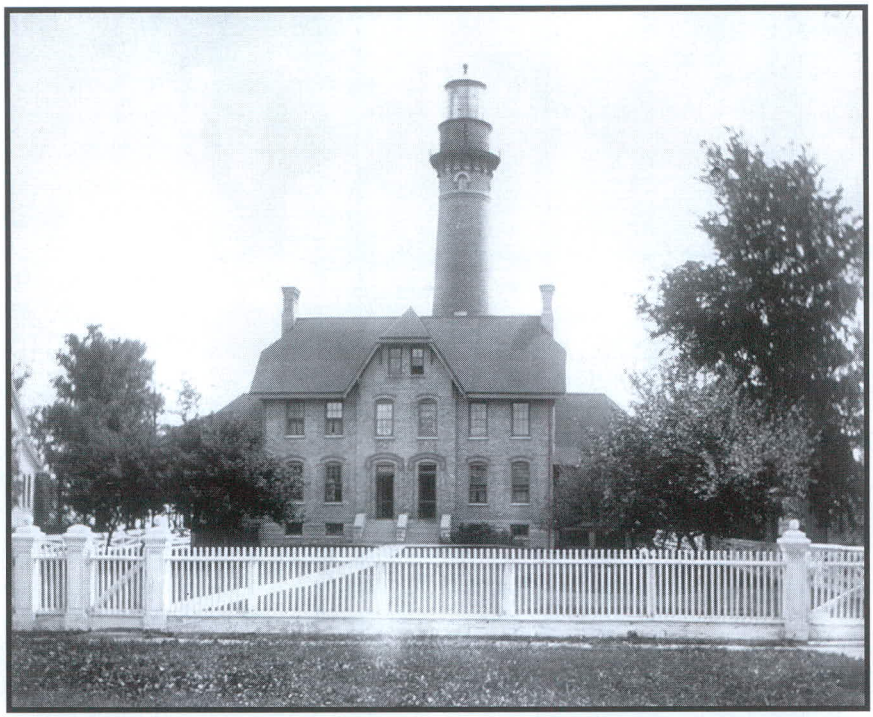
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LIGHT STATION MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC

Access and Programming

by Donald Terras



The author's Grosse Point Lighthouse which has scheduled tours of the tower and a museum in the left wing. USLHS photo.

All museums today face challenging problems with regard to public access and programming. But this is particularly the case in recent years with the growing number of light stations that are opening their doors as a kind of specialized maritime museum. The United States Lighthouse Society keeps an updated list of light stations that are open to the public, and the federal government's National Maritime Initiative program has identified many historic light station properties that are being used as museums — defined by the American Association of Museums as "an organized and permanent nonprofit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular basis." Most light stations would be classified as an historic site or landmark museum where the original buildings themselves are looked upon as artifacts to be preserved, exhibited, and interpreted.

Since the bicentennial celebration of the United States Lighthouse Service in 1989, there has been a lot of interest in preserving light stations, whenever possible, for adaptive use as museums. Since 1989, it has become increasingly evident that there are unique problems inherent with public access and programming at these facilities.

An informal, nationwide survey of 35 light station museums provides insight into the situation and reveals what their policies are regarding public access and programming. I hasten to add that, with few exceptions, light station museums are a relatively new breed and there is ongoing rapid change in their use as cultural and educational resources. Many of the people surveyed indicated their own programs were in a state of flux. Still, the information obtained from this survey might be of specific use to light station site managers and of general interest to the light station and museum communities. At the very least, it should generate interest in an area that will become increasingly important in the years ahead if light stations are to survive as a unique type of maritime museum.

For the sake of brevity, the information presented here will focus only on how other light station sites handle what appears to be the most difficult issue of public access — the light tower. As my friend Ken Black, from the Shore Village Museum in Maine, would say, "Lighthouses, like people, come in many different shapes and sizes" and in no place is this more apparent than the various designs of light towers. From the standpoint of historic site interpretation, public access to a light tower is important, and is at the heart of most light station tour programs. There are, however, some light station sites that completely restrict public access to the light tower. To compensate, these facilities have developed interpretive programs using artifact-based exhibits that focus on specific themes relative to light stations and/or maritime navigation. It is a more passive approach to visitor education, but can be

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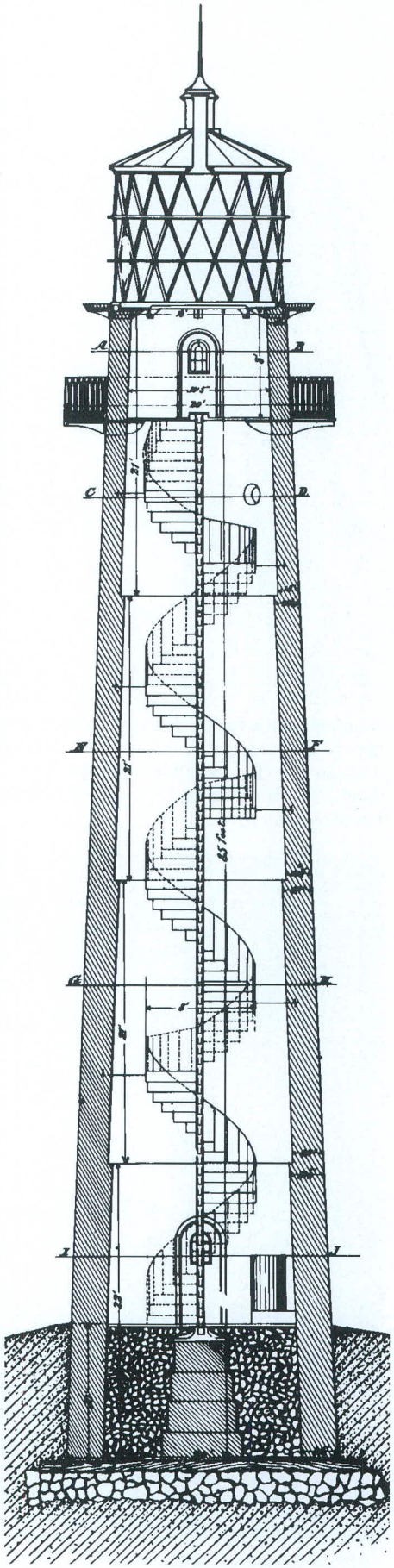
very effective if there is context to the exhibits. This type of interpretation can be costly, however, as it requires preparation in developing an exhibit "script" and acquiring the artifacts and graphics to be used if they are not already in the collections at the light station. In addition, the actual installment of the exhibit can be a time consuming and expensive process if professionally done. In some cases, light stations have produced videos that provide a visual tour through the light tower, giving visitors a sense of what the experience would be like. In addition, it's important to note that such videos help comply with requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act by providing physically challenged individuals a chance to experience what it might be like to tour the light tower without actually going up in it, provided there is handicapped access to the area where the video is viewed.

Not surprisingly, visitor safety and security were top priorities for light stations that do permit visitor access to a light tower. In our increasingly litigious society, providing public access to a light tower can be an insurance underwriter's nightmare. Also, in this era of undisciplined behavior, the security of valuable equipment or artifacts in the tower is potentially threatened. In short, the survey found that there are basically five main concerns involved when determining public safety and security in light towers, and they were addressed in the following manner.

1) Height of the light tower and the number of stairs an individual must climb.

Consideration for safety on the tower stairs was usually expressed in placing a restriction on the number of people that could tour the facility at any one time. This varied greatly in relation to visitation, with some light stations allowing a free-flow of visitors through the tower and others that permitted no more than five people at one time. Some light stations installed an additional railing on the tower's staircase for safety, and, in one circumstance, the managing organization was required by local government to sponsor fire drills to determine the best way a person might be evacuated should they become immobilized at the tower's top.

Signed waivers of liability were needed at a number of light station sites for a visitor to tour the light tower. However, in one circumstance, museum personnel had to provide stick-on paper labels printed with a waiver of liability to all people entering the tower. In addition, I found that most light stations have some regulation regarding children in the tower. This is largely because of the danger posed to a child not able to maneuver stairs, or who possibly could have an unknown fear of heights. In such circumstances a parent or guardian might need to carry the child, creating a more hazardous situation for both. Restrictions are usually based on a child's age, height, or having to be accompanied by an adult. Age limits were usually based on a child being no younger than five or six years old. Height limitations were expressed in terms of restricting access to the tower to anyone under 42 or 48 inches. Others simply required adult supervision of a child, defined by most staff as being under age 12 but, at one light station, was considered anyone under age 16.



Jupiter Inlet Tower in Florida.

2) Public access to an outer gallery.

Most light stations operated by local government or private historical agencies deal with this issue by simply not permitting access to a gallery or catwalk outside of a tower. The potential of a visitor getting hurt is usually the determining factor. Insurance companies may not provide a liability policy to organizations permitting access to a gallery, or their premiums would be prohibitively expensive. Light stations operated by federal or state agencies (governmental units that are self insured) are far more likely to permit access onto a gallery. Generally, in such situations, precautions have been taken to try and guarantee visitor protection. At some light stations this has resulted in the gallery being fitted with bars tall enough, and spaced closely enough, to restrict access over the top. As an added precaution these bars are sometimes covered with metal screen, creating a bird cage look. However, one light station on this survey found that all these precautions were not enough to prevent an individual from jumping off the tower through a nine-inch opening between bars and screen.

3) Weather conditions.

Adverse weather conditions were cited as another factor governing tower access. The presence of high velocity winds, rain, and lightning were the most common conditions for restricting public access to a light tower. In addition, high temperatures inside

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the tower were a concern when access to the lantern area was permitted. Temperatures in some lantern rooms can reach in excess of 100 degrees even with ventilation, and a long climb up stairs to an enclosed area reaching such temperatures is not pleasant, or healthy, for most people. Some light stations stopped visitor access under such conditions. Others did not, but these usually permitted access to the outer galleries for some relief from the heat.

4) Supervised vs. non-supervised tours.

Supervised tours were common for light towers containing optics that are still active as navigational aids, or that have their original lighting mechanism intact. These tours were either conducted by a guide or were arranged so that stationary guides were at critical intervals, such as the bottom of the light tower and/or in the watchroom at the tower's top. There was much less concern with visitor supervision at light stations that were not active and did not have any optical device in the lantern. At these sites visitors were given free access to the tower, in limited numbers, without guides being present.

5) Vandalism and/or theft.

The greatest deterrent to vandalism or theft is to restrict access to an area with valuable artifacts or equipment. Once again, this was the standard by which most light stations, still used as navigational aids, adhered. Concern for damage to the optic, particularly if it is a Fresnel lens, needed to be addressed before all others. Of course, restricting access to the lantern does not guarantee the lighting device will be protected. This point was forcibly impressed on several organizations operating light station museums whose optic had been shot out by a high powered rifle at long range. The only way to protect the lens from such tactics is to install bullet-proof glass in the lantern. This is an expensive process, but not nearly as costly as repairing a Fresnel lens. One light station reportedly had 19 prisms in its 1st Order Fresnel lens damaged by gunfire. Another is in the process of repairing a Fresnel lens that was damaged when an individual battered it with a brick. The cost for repairing such damage can vary considerably according to the number of prisms needing to be replaced. For reference, one of the individuals in the forefront of Fresnel lens repairs is Robert Vanderhook of Atlantic Industrial Optics in Georgetown, Delaware.

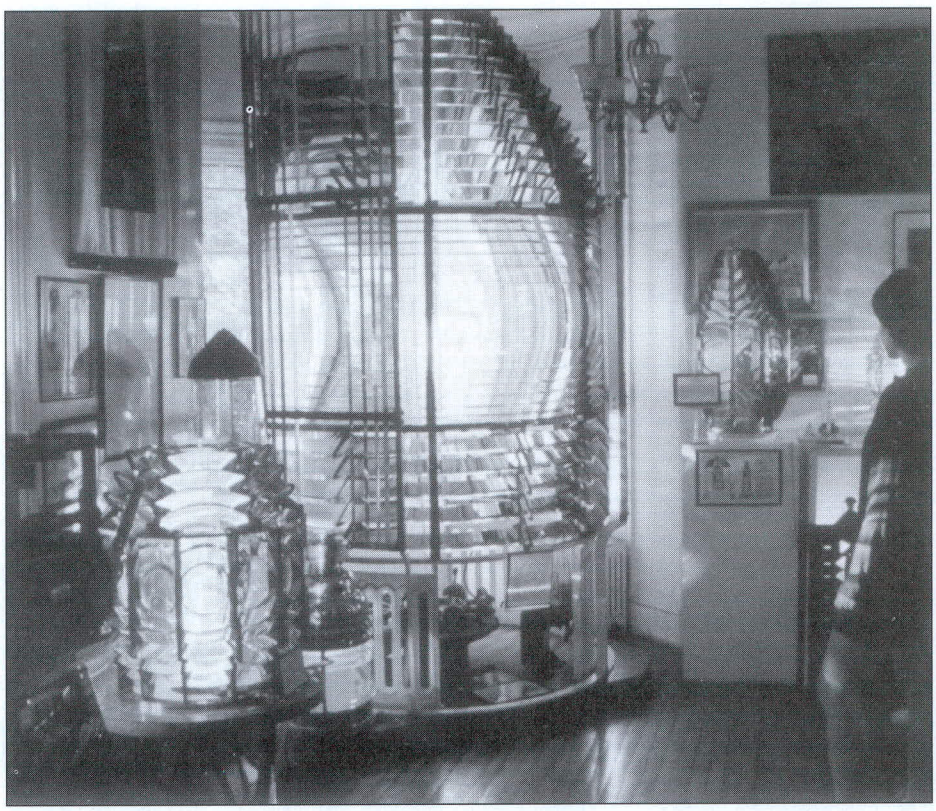


Although the walkway around the lantern is heavily screened, a man recently squeezed through the top opening and fell to his death. Photo courtesy of the Mid Atlantic Center for the Arts.

A current estimate for replacing a two and one-half foot length of prism from a 1st Order Fresnel lens is $12,000. Unfortunately, as good as the replacements may be, they cannot duplicate the green-tinted, French, St. Goban glass that is a hallmark feature of the original prisms from the last century. Engineers from the Disney Co. in Florida have apparently been working with light station preservation groups in the southeast to develop technology that will dramatically decrease the expense for replacing prisms. At any rate, care to prevent anything from damaging the lens in the first place is the best policy, and the survey turned up only two light stations with active Fresnel lenses that permitted visitor access to the lantern area. This was done, however, only with a guide present who permitted a handful of people at a time in the area.

A word about associations.

Recently, the federal government's Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) has given a big boost to light station preservation. Over the last six years, this Act made it possible for eligible groups to obtain funds to restore light stations listed on the National Register. During this time, a total of $4,020,000 in federal transportation

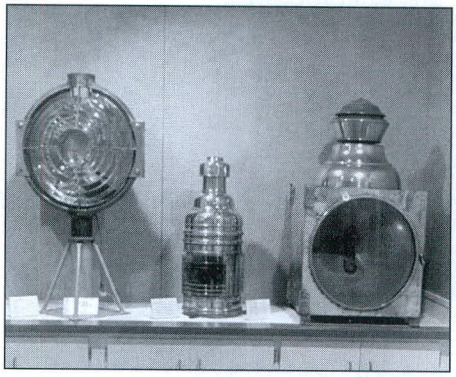


A few of the outstanding collection of lenses at the Shore Village Museum in Rockland, ME. Photo by Jim Wolfrum.

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dollars has been targeted towards fourteen light station restoration projects (NOTE: continuation of this Act is to be reviewed in 1997). This underscores the fact that the light station preservation movement has outpaced the light station museum movement and will continue to do so in the years ahead. The greatest liability here rests with groups who, due to outside pressure of one kind or another, have had to establish some pretty fast and loose associations to make the light station under their care accessible. Best intentions aside, this often leads to a situation where light stations open and close with no regularity in hours — a fact that must be particularly frustrating to the light station-going public. This is generally the result of fiscal constraints, and the survey upon which this report is based found few light station museums operating on more than a shoestring budget. There are exceptions of course, and the most reliable associations seem to include federal organizations like the National Park Service or state-supported park/historical organizations who have the financial resources and staff to provide consistent public access and programming at light station sites. Those not associated with such governmental units are sure to have their patience and dedication tested in years to come as the light station preservation/museum movement matures.

I hope this short report on public access and programming in light station museums might inspire organizations who manage these facilities to examine their own visitation policies, given the information presented here. Those who manage historic light station sites that are open to the public form a kind of specialized community and, after nearly two decades in the museum field, I've not come across anything like it. This set of conditions makes it possible to share our experiences for the benefit of all.



Part of the lens collection at the Montauk Point Lighthouse on Long Island.



The Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station is one of the nation's most complete light stations. In addition to the original buildings, a beautiful lens building was recently added. Photo by Ainsley Dixon.

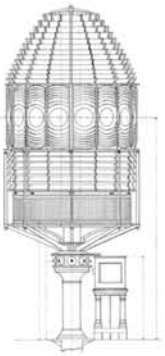
I'd like to thank the people who manage the following light stations that participated in this survey:

Au Sable, Michigan
Bald Head, North Carolina
Beavertail, Rhode Island
Big Sable Point, Michigan
Bodie Island, North Carolina
Boston, Massachusetts
Cape Florida, Florida
Cape May, New Jersey
Cape Meares, Oregon
Cape Hatteras, North Carolina
Cape Henry (old), Virginia
Devil's Island, Wisconsin
Fire Island, New York
Grosse Point, Illinois
Jupiter Inlet, Florida
Key West, Florida
Montauk Point, New York
Navesink, New Jersey
New Presque Isle., Michigan
Old Point Loma, California
Pigeon Point, California
Point Isabel, Texas
Point Pinos, California
Ponce Inlet, Florida
Portland Head, Maine
Raspberry Island, Wisconsin
St. Augustine, Florida
St. Simons, Georgia
Scituate, Massachusetts
Split Rock, Minnesota
Sodus, New York
South Manitou, Michigan
Whitefish Point, Michigan
Tybee Island, Georgia
White River, Michigan

Author Don Terras manages the Grose Point Lighthouse and is a visiting lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Northeastern Illinois University. He is a graduate of Museum Studies, University of Wisconsin, and holds a Master of Science Degree in Anthropology.

In 1995, Don published a beautiful hard cover book, *The Grosse Point Lighthouse*, about 'his' lighthouse. This well written, 112-page book is laced with historic black and white, and contemporary color, photographs. It is available through the Keeper's Locker for $35.00 plus $4.00 shipping and handling.

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Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

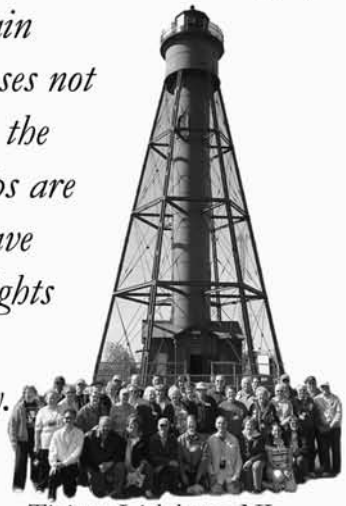
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