

# RESTORING *a Bay Icon*

story and photographs by Ann Levelle

*During the ten-year renovation  
of Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse,  
volunteers have spent countless hours working  
to restore the screwpile light.*

In the late 90s, some friends of mine had a bet going each spring to see who would be the first to sail farther than just the mouth of the Severn River. To be exact, the first boat south of Thomas Point light was the winner (of a 12 pack of beer, the gold standard for such bets). Back then I was new to boating and I sort of saw Thomas Point as the edge of the world—or at least of the Bay. It was the farthest thing on the southern horizon when

my travels usually consisted of heading to Kent Island and back or generally piddling around the mouth of the Severn. And, with help from my friends' contest, it became an icon to me before I had a clue that it was an icon to everyone else on the Bay. But soon enough I learned that I wasn't the only one to revere the lighthouse. Another friend,



John Biddah



RIGHT: *Keast & Hood's Craig Swift working on the lighthouse gutters.* BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *the 1986 photo that appeared in CBM, taken just before the Thomas Point was automated; an exhibit ready to be hung in Thomas Point; and the after picture of the Coast Guard room, restored to look like the photo above.*



PRECEDING PAGES: *Two views of Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.*

who happened to be a pilot boat captain and knew the Bay like the back of his hand, told me that it was the most photographed lighthouse on the Bay. Now I have no way of telling if that's true or not, but it sure wouldn't surprise me. The light is just a few miles south of Annapolis, so the boat traffic is not unlike that of I-95—except that at speeds between 4 and 15 knots, the drivers can take all the pictures they want of the Bay's most famous beacon without having to detour off to a scenic overlook.

And until recently, sailing past the light and taking pictures was the closest you could get to Thomas Point light. There were no tours, no exhibits detailing its past, telling the stories of its keepers . . . just the lighthouse, standing sentinel over the shoal extending from the South River, its powerful lens spinning endlessly.

Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse (its official name) was the last manned lighthouse on

the Bay, manned by Coast Guard personnel until 1986, when it became automated. And from then on the beacon, fog signal and structure were maintained by the Coast Guard, but only to keep it functioning and safe. Then, in 2002, the federal government decided it was time to clean house a bit, offering to give away nearly 300 lighthouses around the country to anyone willing to maintain them and, where practical, open them to the public for tours.

With Thomas Point, it took two years and a lot of negotiations, but in 2004, the light was handed over to an ownership consortium comprising the City of Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, the Annapolis Maritime Museum and the U.S. Lighthouse Society. This half government, half non-profit group took control in May 2004 and has been working for the last 10 years to renovate the lighthouse as close as it can to historic accuracy, with the help of countless volunteers.

I finally got my chance to see the lighthouse up close for the first time in 2012 when Henry Gonzalez, the Thomas Point lighthouse manager and vice president of the U.S. Lighthouse Society, invited me to come take a look at some of the renovations that he and his band of volunteers were finishing up. Gonzalez had been basing the renovations of the "Coast Guard" room on the first floor of the light—on a picture from *CBM's* September 1986 article, "Thomas Point is Manned No More." The



Bob Griener



John Bidziah



picture in question [see page 24] is of the last Coast Guard officers to man the light, taken not long before the light was automated. The picture is of two officers just relaxing and watching TV (a *Three's Company* re-run, maybe?) in front of their radio/control center. But for Gonzalez it was an enormously valuable piece of the historical record, and he took great strides to design the room based on that photo.

While I was of course interested in seeing the renovations, what I was most excited about was that I was finally getting to visit Thomas Point. Renovations I've seen. I've toured the Drum Point and Hooper Strait lights, seen my fair share of restored keepers' houses. But being out on the last screwpile light in its original location, seeing the view from the upper deck and getting a glimpse of what it life was like for the keepers who lived there was a much more exhilarating prospect. Little did I know how very impressed I'd be by the preservation of the lighthouse and what an appreciation I'd have for the tedious efforts involved.

**O**n a sweltering June afternoon I met up with Gonzalez on Back Creek in Annapolis and was introduced to Captain Howard Lewis, who would be taking us out to the light. Lewis, or "Captain Howard," as all the lighthouse folks call him, turned out to be a local icon all his own. While riding out to the light on his workboat, *Audacious*, he impressed me with the kind of Annapolis history that only a lifelong resident would know (as it turns out, the house in which he has lived his entire life is just a few doors down from my own and he was able to give me quite the background on it and its tenants). Lewis, whose great-grandfather was a keeper at Thomas Point in 1903, is the go-to captain for all things lighthouse. He has made countless trips there, lugging equipment, supplies, people—and earlier that week—a giant, metal, government-issue desk. Once at the light, he helps maintain the dock and just about anything else he can work on.

Our half-hour ride out to the lighthouse was uneventful, save fascinating tales from both Lewis and Gonzalez, who rattled off lighthouse facts and stories at lightning speed. When we reached the light, Lewis sidled *Audacious* up to the dock along side the light's pilings. This dock was built in 2006, funded by a grant from the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network as part of

the major renovations to the light to get it ready for tour groups.

From the dock we climbed a short staircase up to the storage deck area beneath the lighthouse, where a group of volunteers was taking a lunch break—relaxing in the shade of the lighthouse, gulping down bottles of water or Gatorade (and a beer or two), getting refueled for the hot afternoon ahead of them. This group



*Keast & Hood's Chris Johnson and Trisha Miazga painting the outhouse (above) and Matt Daw painting the upper deck railing; and (below) the lighthouse's lower deck.*





of nine structural engineers from Washington, D.C. firm Keast & Hood Co. was out for the day to work on general restoration projects like scraping paint, painting siding and railings, and working on clearing and securing rain gutters. The firm had been hired some years ago to do some structural and corrosion repairs on the wrought-iron screw-piles and supports underneath the lighthouse, and has since made an annual field trip from D.C. for its engineers to volunteer doing general repairs and preservation maintenance. And the group was not shy about getting involved. Two of the young engineers were eagerly preparing to repel down the outside of the lighthouse to scrape flaking paint from the siding of the outhouse (where they would subsequently hang for hours precariously over the water in uncomfortable harnesses).

After introductions, I took a quick peek around the lower deck, paying particular atten-

## The Thomas Point Timeline

- 1824** The original Thomas Point Light, a land structure, is built on the peninsula between the Severn and South rivers.
- 1840** The first light is torn down and another erected in its place.
- 1875** The current Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse is erected a mile and a quarter offshore, atop the actual shoal.
- 1878** An ice breaker is installed 90 feet north of light after the light's piling is damaged by ice.
- 1886** Riprap is added around the lighthouse.
- 1939** The U.S. Coast Guard takes over manning Thomas Point Light from the U.S. Lighthouse Service.
- 1971** Thomas Point graces the cover of the premiere issue of *Chesapeake Bay Magazine* (and every subsequent May cover until 1992).
- 1986** The Coast Guard automates the light, removing the Fresnel lens and replacing it with an acrylic, solar-powered lens.
- 1999** Thomas Point light is designated a National Historic Landmark.
- 2002** U.S. government sets out to give away Thomas Point (and 300 other lights around the country) to agencies or people who will properly maintain them and open them to the public.
- 2004** City of Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, Annapolis Maritime Museum and the U.S. Lighthouse Society acquire Thomas Point Light. The Lighthouse Society takes custody of the light through a 99-year lease from Annapolis.
- 2006** A new dock is built.
- 2007** Tours of Thomas Point light start.

tion to the gargantuan spiders that had spun masterpiece webs in the outer supports of the maze of screw piles and support beams underneath the house. Then Gonzalez swung into full tour guide mode, first telling me how this lower deck had been severely damaged by Isabel in 2003, and repaired by the Coast Guard after the Lighthouse Society took over in 2004. (The society has, for lack of a better term, full guardianship of the lighthouse on a 99-year lease from Annapolis and Anne Arundel County.)

Next we made our way up a wrought iron ladder and through a trap door to the deck that wraps around the main floor of the light. Inside were four rooms, three of them in various processes of renovations. The entry room and kitchen had been stripped of their flooring and plywood walls and were in the process of being restored to look as they had in the early 1900s when the U.S. Lighthouse Service was in charge of the lighthouse. The Coast Guard room was also being restored, but to its state in the late 80s when the Coast Guard manned the light.

The first door we walked into was the entry room, which was in serious disarray. Because it was a volunteer workday, everyone's gear, tools, coolers, you name it, was being kept there for the day. So there was not much to see here at the time . . . or so I thought. Gonzalez began by showing me a schematic of the lighthouse rooms and other exhibit items already up for

display on the wall, including the oldest known photo of the lighthouse from 1885, which he said was very helpful in doing the exterior renovations. Then he started moving gear out of the way to show me the floor. They had had to remove the carpet and two layers of tile to get down to the wood, or, more accurately, the thick layer of adhesive tar covering most of it. Having spent untold hours on my hands and knees scraping that type of tar off of my living room and kitchen floor, I knew how unbelievably awful it is to remove.

As I was commiserating on that subject with Gonzalez, in came volunteer Hobie Statzer, who told me about a couple that had been volunteering together with their preteen daughter and son. "That's *their* floor," he said. "They removed the tiles and are working on removing the tar . . . she [the mom] worked all day on that one spot over there, and it's crystal clean now."

Statzer, retired now from the Air Force, and who was a photographer during the Vietnam War, lives in Woodbridge, Va., and is one of Thomas Point's regular volunteer restorers. Though "volunteer" is an inadequate term for him: he seems to have been instrumental in just about every project at the lighthouse.

We moved next to the "Coast Guard room," which Gonzalez and his team had been working hard to finish before the first public tour of the season. Having just hauled in the huge government-issue gray desk, they hadn't quite put the room together yet, but the pieces were all there, ready to be assembled for the summer tour season that was going to start the next day. Gonzalez showed me the page from the 1986 issue that he had enlarged and framed to show visitors a comparison, and pointed out a few of the other items he'd acquired, like the wall clocks



John Bledahl



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: **Henry Gonzalez and the actual Thomas Point light; Craig Swift (left) and Leslie Morris from Keast & Hood, Co. working in the entry room; and Hobie Statzer (left) and Tony Pasek collaborating on a sanding project.**

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Members of Keast & Hood hard at work on various projects.**



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and television, and a Navy-issue radio from the right time period. “We’ve got everything except the chair,” he said.

Because the room was still in disarray, we moved on to the kitchen, also undergoing a major makeover. During the lighthouse’s 137-year life, Gonzalez told me, rooms were often changed and repurposed, and the Coast Guard, in particular, frequently changed the configuration. “But the kitchen was always the kitchen,” he said. In there,

the floors were mostly re-finished, and the walls and ceiling had been painted after removing plywood paneling. It was a more finished version of the entry room. “After we removed the plywood panels on the walls and ceiling,” Gonzalez said, “we found anywhere from 15 to 20 coats of paint—and most of them were lead paint. It took us two years of labor—hard, sweat labor—to remove those 15 to 20 coats.” Then he showed me the pantry, where some of the coats still awaited removal.

Because of all the lead paint, some

of the volunteers signed up to take a course in lead abatement and, Statzer says, the instructor came out for free and tested the paint. “Places that we thought were lead-free were very high in lead content. You can’t look at anything and know if it’s lead or not,” he said. “That’s one of our biggest problems out here.”

The kitchen update included adding back a full window (the Coast Guard had at some point converted it to a half-window); and removing a stove, cabinets and other installations. They also restored a large cabinet that now holds huge batteries for the Coast Guard’s systems (the Coast Guard still does all the maintenance on the Thomas Point, which remains an active aid to navigation. After taking a quick peek into the equipment room (the only first-floor room not being renovated; it held a large water tank, lumber, tools, paint, supplies, workbench, etc., for renovations and maintenance), we headed up the tiny spiral staircase to the upper floor. The staircase was a little tight, but the upper floor itself was open and airy, bright light flooding in through the six dormer windows. These rooms, Gonzalez told me, had many purposes over the decades—sometimes as bedrooms, sometimes as storage and, most importantly under the lighthouse service, as the “Watch Room.” In the days before electricity, the keeper on watch would spend the night, climbing the ladder every few hours to make sure the light was burning bright. Now this floor houses several informational exhibits about the keepers’ duties—measuring and pouring oil, keeping records, manning the fog horn, etc. There is also information here about the former Fresnel lens that was replaced when the light was automated. (That lens is now in the commander’s office at the Baltimore Coast Guard Station.) This floor now also has a compartment dedicated to NOAA’s weather station equipment, housed inside a clear plexiglass enclosure so visitors can see inside.

**A**t last it was time for the grand finale of the tour. We climbed the tiny ladder and popped out in a tiny room with the spinning light in the center. And while the view from the 360-degree windows was delightful (well, except for the obscured windows of the red sectors), it was nothing like the view from the deck beyond. Getting out there was a bit of a contortion act: I simultaneously needed to bend nearly in half and step over a high threshold onto the deck. (Full disclosure: on the public tour, the farthest you're allowed is about halfway up the ladder to peek at the light before you have to come back down.) But once I made it outside, all that was forgotten. I circled around the deck, carefully taking in the view until I found a spot that wasn't covered in either bird poop or the black paint that Keast & Hood's Matt Daw was now slathering on the railings.

Then I stood and took it all in. It was a hot and hazy summer day, the Bay Bridge barely visible through a thick blue cloud of heat, but the view was still no less than spectacular. Close by, every boat that came within zoom-lens distance slowed to a crawl to take pictures, or wave to us at the top of the light. After staring off at the horizon for a few minutes (or maybe an hour, I can't be sure), I finally brought my gaze to the deck itself and adjacent dormer roofs, which were covered in bird-deterrent gear, wires, antennae, solar panels, bird and fish carcasses and bird poop. But none of the mechanical or scatological smatterings detracted from the spectacular scenery. I imagined that the lighthouse keepers spent quite a bit of time up here, taking a breather from the monotony and isolation of tending the light. I certainly could've stayed for hours watching the boat traffic go by. But my tour was over, and I needed to head back to shore and let Gonzalez and his crew get on with their work prepping the lighthouse for the public tour coming the next day.

**F**ast forward one year to another hot and humid day, and I was heading out to visit Thomas Point again,

this time to see the results of the work I'd seen the previous year. The Coast Guard room was beautiful—a spot-on recreation of Bob Grieser's photo from 1986: the surgical-scrub green walls, the government issue metal desk, clocks and TV made it look almost identical. The only blatant difference was the addition of the turn-of-the-century era furniture that is placed on the opposite side of the room and throughout the first floor. The kitchen, too, was up to museum quality standards with the addition of

a dining table and a bookshelf with books that would've been popular in the early 1900s. While the renovations are technically complete, the work here is never really done. Gonzalez, Statzer, "Captain Howard" and a host of other regular volunteers will be working for years to come to keep this Bay icon shining bright. ↓

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If you'd like to see Thomas Point up close for yourself, the U.S. Lighthouse Society holds tours twice a month during the summer. Visit [www.uslhs.org](http://www.uslhs.org) for information and tickets.