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Retrofitting a Long Island Lighthouse for a Second Act

By Arielle Dollinger

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EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — The Cedar Island Lighthouse, a quaint, cubic structure of notably large granite blocks in Suffolk County’s Cedar Point Park, once appeared a fortress. From atop its stone tower, built in 1868, the lantern light led whaling ships and fishing boats home.

But the beacon went dark in 1934, when the lighthouse was decommissioned. Three decades later, a fire turned the pseudo-castle into a hollow shell. It has sat empty ever since.

Now, the group Friends of the Cedar Island Lighthouse and the Long Island chapter of the U.S. Lighthouse Society have plans to turn the county-owned structure into a two-room bed-and-breakfast.

“It’s sad to know from history what it was, and to realize what it can and will become again,” said Vince Mauceri, a board member of the Friends of the Cedar Island Lighthouse.

When Mr. Mauceri last saw the space, about a year and a half ago, it was “an absolute hollow shell,” with scaffolding and not much else, he recalled. Everything wooden had rotted. The roof damage is now extensive, visible even from a boat hundreds of feet away.

Last month, the Suffolk County Legislature approved \$500,000 for renovations of the exterior and barely-there roof of the lighthouse, and the Friends are working to raise more money. Work on the roof is scheduled to start in 2018.

Cedar Island would not be the first lighthouse in New York State to become an overnight venue. The Saugerties Lighthouse, which was built in 1869 from the same floor plan as the Cedar Island Lighthouse, rents rooms for \$250 per night.

“They’re in a position that this organization was years ago, where, you know, it takes a lot of initial fund-raising and effort to get to the point where you’re running a sustainable bed-and-breakfast,” said Patrick Landewe, 46, who has been the keeper of the Saugerties Lighthouse on the Hudson River for 12 years. And there is never quite enough money; Mr. Landewe still encourages donations.

At Saugerties, an L-shaped house hugs a square tower. A parlor area, kitchen and shared bathroom make up the first floor, Mr. Landewe said. Upstairs, there are two guest bedrooms, and a third room is used as for the display of artifacts.

Mr. Landewe, his wife, Anna, and their 3-year-old son, called “Cricket,” live in the first-floor keepers’ quarters, converted years ago from a formal sitting room. Access to the tower is off the second-floor hallway. Guests spending the weekend can climb a flight of stairs and then a ladder to reach the lantern room.

“An old building like this really needs to be lived in in order to be preserved,” Mr. Landewe said. “A leak stays a leak without somebody living there.”



The Saugerties Lighthouse, built in 1869 from the same floor plan as the Cedar Island Lighthouse, rents rooms for \$250 per night. Its light still serves as an aid to navigation.
Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

Mr. Landewe said his family likes living in the historic structure and especially enjoys the company of repeat guests.

“We like the pace of life on the river, and the views are stunning,” Mr. Landewe said. “Of course, maintaining this historic landmark requires a lot of time and effort, but it is a labor of love for both of us.”

The Saugerties light still serves as an aid to navigation. The United States Coast Guard maintains its beacon, along with those at five lighthouses on Long Island: Orient Point, Old Field Point, Montauk Point, Horton Point and Huntington Harbor, according to Chief Warrant Officer Manny Zambrana.

The Coast Guard is responsible only for maintaining the lights, said Charles Rowe, a spokesman for the Coast Guard in New York City. Most of the structures are owned by private individuals or nonprofits.

“I think that the vast majority of people see them simply as anachronism, you know, throwbacks to a bygone era,” Mr. Rowe said, but many remain aids to navigation, even to low-flying aircraft. “They are still extremely relevant even in this, the digital age.”

Mr. Rowe has a personal connection to the Saugerties Lighthouse: He spent a weekend there in the early 2000s.

“It’s a unique sort of thing,” said Mr. Rowe, 67, who grew up in Virginia and now lives on Staten Island. “Not too many people spend the night in lighthouses anymore.”

At Saugerties, the lighthouse is accessible on foot or by boat. Visitors can take a sandy trail that follows the shoreline on a narrow spit of land connecting the lighthouse to the mainland. Bridges and boardwalks take travelers over breaks in the sand. The half-mile trek runs through a nature preserve.

At high tide, water covers parts of the trail. Those who do not want to wade through ankle- or knee-deep water consult the tide table before heading into town. Mr. and Mrs. Landewe keep a supply of boots for visitors who want to head out to dinner while the tide is in.

“It just sort of adds to the charm of it,” Mr. Rowe said. “Certain number of hours per day, you’re isolated.”

The Cedar Island Lighthouse is accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicle or by boat.

“The first order of business is to stabilize it,” said Lee Skolnick, of Lee H. Skolnick Architecture and Design Partnership, whose firm was granted \$166,960 for the exterior work. “The biggest fear we have is that it deteriorates further.”

The goal, Mr. Skolnick said, is to adhere “as faithfully as possible to the original structure.”

“We’re just going to try to recreate it as it was in 1838,” said Mr. Skolnick, who has a house in nearby Sag Harbor. The original structure was built in 1838, and replaced 30 years later with the one that stands now.

Mr. Skolnick said a firm has not been selected for the interior, but he hopes it will be his.

“We could do something really fun, where, you know, you come to this historic building, you have certain expectations, then you walk inside and it’s not what you expected,” Mr. Skolnick said. “I’m hoping that, you know, we get the best of both worlds: We get the historic preservation, and then we get to do something really unusual inside that people will be excited to stay in.”

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