Potential Sale of lighthouse begs answers

By Peter Pochna

Comments?



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The government gave Squirrel Point Lighthouse to a man for free. Now, an offer to sell the property for $500,000 raises a sea of questions.



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Instead of being included in the Maine Lights ...
Photo by: Mark & Patti Hatch

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The mystery of Maine's Squirrel Point Lighthouse is not easily solved. The facts wallow in a fog of unusual real estate transactions, obscure congressional actions and spicy small-town rumors.

People in Arrowsic, Maine and around the state have spent much of the past few weeks scrambling for answers. They feel the century old beacon may be in jeopardy. They worry that somebody might be using it improperly to make a lot of money.

Here are some of the questions that have emerged:

* How did a Yarmouth, Maine real estate dealer, Michael Trenholm, receive a spectacular, if slightly run-down lighthouse for free from the U.S. Coast Guard?

* How did Trenholm get the lighthouse at a time when all other eligible Maine lighthouses were being placed in a strict historic preservation program to protect them from exploitation and abuse?

* Why did Trenholm offer the property for sale this month for $500,000, and what did he mean to do with the money?

The controversy has arrived just as Maine appeared to have tucked its lighthouses into an innovative preservation program that would protect them forever.

The Maine Lights Program concluded last month with 28 lighthouses placed in the hands of nonprofit groups committed to preservation and governed by strict preservation laws.

The Squirrel Point Lighthouse was specifically, and mysteriously, left out of the program. That the light may be in peril angers many lighthouse enthusiasts who worked for years to ensure that such a thing wouldn't happen.

"Something here seems quite flawed, "said Peter Ralston, a co-founder of the Island Institute which administered the Maine Lights Program. "It raises real moral, ethical and legal questions. Its offensive to me and to everything represented by the Maine Lights Program."

Squirrel Point Light was built on the shore of the Kennebec River in 1896. For a century it has lighted the way for warships navigating the river's bends on their way to and from Bath Iron Works.

The property consists of a light tower, a two story keepers house, a boat house, a barn and five acres of land. It can be reached only by water or by a three-quarter mile walk from the nearest road.

It huddles in a grassy, windblown clearing above swirling waters of the Kennebec River like an old fisherman in need of an overcoat. It still casts its light clearly across the river but with a lichen-covered roof and collapsed wooden deck, it appears vulnerable.

Mark Trenholm first saw the lighthouse while on a bird-watching expedition up the Kennebec in 1993.

Trenholm is 72, lives in Yarmouth and is semi-retired from a career in real estate and investments.

A day after that river trip five years ago, he asked the Coast Guard about the lighthouse.

"It was a beautiful property that needed some TLC," said Trenholm.

Within six months he had a lease for the property. IN 1996, an Act of Congress gave the lighthouse free of charge to Trenholm's nonprofit organization, Squirrel Point Associates, Inc. He received the deed for the land in February of 1998.

Trenholm's timing was perfect. The Coast Guard was looking for ways to get rid of lighthouse because it could not afford to maintain them.

But his timing is also part of the mystery of the Squirrel Point Light. Because while Trenholm was trying to get Squirrel Point, Ralston and others were trying to place lighthouses in the Maine Lights Program - the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 1995 - also includes a section that specifically gives Squirrel Point to Trenholm.

Trenholm said that to get the lighthouse he did what anybody else could have done: pester the Coast Guard.

"It was up to the Coast Guard. They just put it on the floor of the Senate. There was nothing improper. It seems ridiculous that anybody thinks that there is," Trenholm said.

Ted Dernago, who oversees real estate transactions for the Coast Guard out of Providence Rhode Island and was involved in the Squirrel Point transaction, could not be reached for comments. He is on a leave of absence.

The fact that Trenholm received the property didn't get much attention in 1996. Ralston said lighthouse preservationists were focused on saving all the other lighthouses. They assumed Squirrel Point Associates would protect its lighthouse.

It wasn't until a few weeks ago that people started to get worried about Squirrel Point. A memo from the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife that landed on the desk of an Arrowsic, Maine, selectman sparked the concern. The memorandum said Trenholm was selling the property and that the asking price was $500,000.

The state agency worried because it owns land next to the lighthouse. If a new owner wanted to build a road to the site, it would have to cross the departments' land.

Local residents worried because they are nearly as protective of their lighthouse as they are of their children. The island community near Bath, connected to the mainland by a bridge has 500 people and three lighthouses.

"The scene of the lighthouse on the river is what makes Arrowsic and Maine a special place," said Michael Kreindler, who is the director of a nonprofit that manages one of the areas other lights. "These things have to be kept intact. If they get watered down somehow, part of Maine is lost."

Kreindler said that if Squirrel Point is abused in any way, it would cast a cloud over all the hard work that has gone into making the Maine Lights program a national model for protecting lighthouses.

The relationship between Trenholm and the people of Arrowsic has been testy from the start. Trenholm said he has asked for help to restore the lighthouses and has received little. They say he has done a poor job caring for the property and has not welcomed their help.

Erica Wasilewski lives near the lighthouse and regularly strolls down the lighthouse path. "When I see his car there, I walk elsewhere,: Wasilewski said.

Word of the potential sale spread rapidly. A Bath real estate broker asked Maine's congressional delegation to investigate how Trenholm could receive a federal property for free and then sell it for $500,000.

The answer, from the office of Senator Olympia Snowe, is that he can't. Snowe sponsored the legislation that established the Maine Lights Program.

Even though Squirrel Point was not part of that program, it will receive the same protection as lighthouses in the program if it changes hands, said Dave Lackey, Snowe's spokesman.

"Senator Snowe would be very concerned about somebody that was given profiting from something that was given for the purpose of preservation," Lackey said.

After hearing about the uproar over the perspective sale, Trenholm said he does not plan to sell the lighthouse. He said he wants to continue to restore the property, and to eventually open it to education programs, particularly to the handicapped.

He said rumors of the sale were the result of "an overzealous Realtor."

But the real estate company Trenholm contacted about selling the property was far from enthusiastic about representing him.

"It is not the kind of situation we would responsibility represent," said Mike Whitney, the executive vice president of Landvest.

Even if the Squirrel Point Lighthouse is not for sale, much of the Squirrel Point Lighthouse mystery remains in a fog.

While Trenholm is required to take good care of the property, many people question if he is capable of the task.

The work is hard, because no road leads to the lighthouse. Materials needed to fix the deck, windows and other things must be brought by boat.

Trenholm himself said he has health problems that make the lighthouse seem like "a stone around my neck."

Ralston said that perhaps somebody else might be better equipped to care for the lighthouse.

"If Mr. Trenholm's nonprofit entity in not able to meet the standards of preservation, it should be transferred to a real community-based nonprofit that's committed to the project," Ralston said.

However, the situation at Squirrel Point is resolved, the lighthouse on the lonely clearing overlooking the Kennebec, now has a lot of people looking out for it.