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Working to save Wood Island Light
Lighthouse foundation organizing group to preserve landmark
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For 195 years, Wood Island Light has comforted weary mariners and helped guide them to the mouth of the Saco River. In turn, a group of grateful residents are coming together to help the weary lighthouse.
Friends of Wood Island Light, which aims to restore the light and open it for limited public use, met for the first time earlier this month, bringing a crowd of about 35 to the Biddeford Pool Fire Barn.
“I’d say we’re off to a very good start,” said the group’s chair, Brad Coupe of Biddeford Pool. “I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want to see a lighthouse saved.”
The Coast Guard in March leased Wood Island Light to the American Lighthouse Foundation (ALF), a Wells-based non-profit. ALF, as it has done with other New England lighthouses in need of restoration, then set about forming a local group to manage the beacon – and raise the money needed for its care.
“It’s really the local community’s lighthouse,” Tim Harrison, ALF’s president, said. “I think it will work out very well because we have a lot of enthusiastic people. There’s so much great history associated with that particular lighthouse.”
The granite tower that stands there now, about a quarter mile off Biddeford Pool, is a replacement for the original, which was rebuilt in 1839 and again in 1858. The light’s colorful – and somewhat turbulent – history shows a structure that has stubbornly clung to the island’s eastern point.
The tower was lucky to survive the 1870s: During that decade, according to legend, the island held a pub and distillery. One night, merry drunks set fire to the lighthouse. It somehow survived the blaze.
During World War II, a German submarine approached the light – and surrendered. The crew had tried to wave the white flag in Old Orchard Beach, but crew members went ashore (it was the dead of winter) and found the resort deserted. So they surrendered to the lightkeeper.
In the 1960s, the island was briefly considered as a site for a nuclear power plant. The Audubon Society gained control of the island instead. Today, visitors to the island land at a boathouse on the island’s western end, then journey to the lighthouse on a mile-long wooden path a over bird sanctuary.
“It’s kind of a neat little environment,” Coupe said. “They tell me there are deer out there, and the most majestic growth of poison ivy you can find in this area.”
The light was automated in 1986. Its solar-powered beam is visible in a 16-mile radius that includes Saco and Old Orchard Beach. That’s helpful in its preservation, because people who know a lighthouse,

Harrison said, are more likely to help its restoration. He estimated Wood Island Light will need at least $200,000 in repair work.

Yet despite its familiarity, the quarter mile of distance from the shore means few have seen the lighthouse up close. Even Coupe has never stepped foot on the island.

To increase knowledge of the island and assess needed repairs, the Friends group is planning a journey there on May 17. In doing so, they'll join in a long history of seafarers who found the lighthouse a welcoming sight.

"A lighthouse is built to save lives," Harrison said. "How can anybody think anything bad about a lighthouse?"