Saving Plum Island







By Natalie Arnold

An important piece of Wisconsin's maritime history is quietly crumbling. For decades the lighthouse structures on Plum Island in Door County guided ships safely through Wisconsin's dangerous channel that sailors referred to as Port des Morts-- "Death's Door." It is how Door County got its name.

Now the 100-year-old buildings are facing their own demise because of lots and lots of red tape.

There's actually a plan in place to save Plum Island, but something very big stands in the way: The federal government.

It was the most beautiful sight for the sorest of sailors' eyes-- sailors navigating one of Lake Michigan's most dangerous passages, where rough waters and rugged shoals gave the channel its ominous name.

Death's Door is just off the tip of Wisconsin's peninsula. Plum Island, with its lighthouse structures and U.S. Coast Guard crew, made it possible for ships to cross safely.

Yet today the island is at its own death's door. "There's quite a bit of damage inside the building," Jim McGinnis of the Coast Guard showed us. "You're seeing something that could potentially crumble."

The Coast Guard abandoned Plum Island for Washington Island twelve years ago. It still maintains the lights, which are now automated.

"This is where the sense of immediacy comes," McGinnis says as we approach the outbuildings. They are all deteriorating.

The rescue station's boathouse-- "There's some signs of rotting around the window frames," he points out.

The Coasties home and watchtower-- "The floor is kind of separating slightly from the wall."

The lighthouse quarters-- "It is falling apart, and that is the danger."

Nature is taking over.

But what's the problem? Why are these buildings left to fall apart, history left to die? The answer doesn't lie on the grounds of Plum Island, it lies in it, festering in the ground.

"You can see the retention basin for the fuel," McGinnis points out. There is diesel fuel contamination on the island. There may also be lead from paint in the soil, too.

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According to federal law, the Coast Guard needs to clean it up before anyone can restore the buildings.

"Unfortunately it probably isn't that simple, and it's probably going to be very costly," Tim Sweet, a lighthouse preservation advocate, said.

Adding insult to injury is that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Door County Maritime Museum are both ready to take over and take care of the island. They've been ready for close to three years.

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But, "The United States Coast Guard needs funding," the museum's Jerry Waite said.

The federal budget and federal bureaucracy continue to stand in the way. Those who want to save Plum Island say they need to convince Washington to care.

"It's very important that we save these things. You just can't let them go. If you let them go, then what are you saying about history?" said the museum's Brian Kelsey.

There is some good news. The Coast Guard finally conducted a land survey this year to determine how big the mess is. Now they need to figure out how much the cleanup will cost.

More good news. Plum Island supporters have Congressman Mark Green on their side. In a letter dated August 21st, he said he firmly believes the Coast Guard can pay for the cleanup with its current funding level.

- Click here for the complete text of Congressman Green's letter

The ultimate goal is to open Plum Island to the public, eventually with guided tours to let everyone see the lighthouse and buildings-- the island that guided so many sailors safely to port.