PETIT MANAN LIGHT STATION
SITE VISIT REPORT - August 18, 2004
Jeremy D'Entremont, American Lighthouse Foundation

Petit Manan Island is located approximately two miles off Petit Manan Point, south of the towns of Steuben and Milbridge, about 14 miles east of Bar Harbor. It is part of the Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge. The entire refuge contains 42 islands and about 7,300 total acres. Several species of birds nest on the island, including puffins and the endangered roseate tern. For this reason the island is closed from April 1 through August 31.

The island has several acres in all, but the property up for transfer consists of only .6 acres encompassing the lighthouse tower and helipad. All the other buildings and the island itself are owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Transportation to the island was provided by Coast Guard Aids to Navigation Team Southwest Harbor on a 55-foot aids to navigation boat. The group left from Southwest Harbor at about 8 a.m.



On the morning of the visit it was extremely foggy with very low visibility. This area is considered among the foggiest on the east coast, with fog about 20% of the time. We arrived near Petit Manan Island after a ride of a couple of hours.

To land on the island it was necessary to transfer to a small peapod boat. One of the crewmen said that Petit Manan is considered one of the most difficult lighthouses to access on the northern Maine coast.



The Coast Guard crew had quite a bit of difficulty reaching the island from the larger boat in the fog. Two of the crew were initially dropped off on some rocks that they believed were part of the island, but it turned out to be a smaller unconnected island. They were picked up later. With six people crowded into the peapod, the larger island was eventually found after at least 20 minutes of rowing, mainly by following the sound of the fog signal.



The old double boat ramp was washed out years ago, and there is now just a narrow single landing ramp. The peapod was nosed up to the ramp and we climbed ashore. This can only be done when the sea conditions are calm, and it often gets very rough here.



This sign is at the top of the ramp:



The boathouse is the property of U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS), as are all the other buildings on the island except for the lighthouse tower. There were no personnel from Fish and Wildlife present when we were there, and all the buildings were locked up.



The next structure you see on the way to the tower is the helipad. This is the only other structure that will be transferred along with the lighthouse.



The helipad appears to be in good condition. It is composed of 50 boards like these:



Each board is about a foot wide. The pad is held up by 7 wooden pieces seen here:



Another view of the helipad:



Here's what the lighthouse looked like as we approached in the fog. The 1854 granite tower is 119 feet tall.



This outbuilding is owned by USFWS.



The keeper’s house is used by USFWS during the spring and summer.



Looking up at the lighthouse.



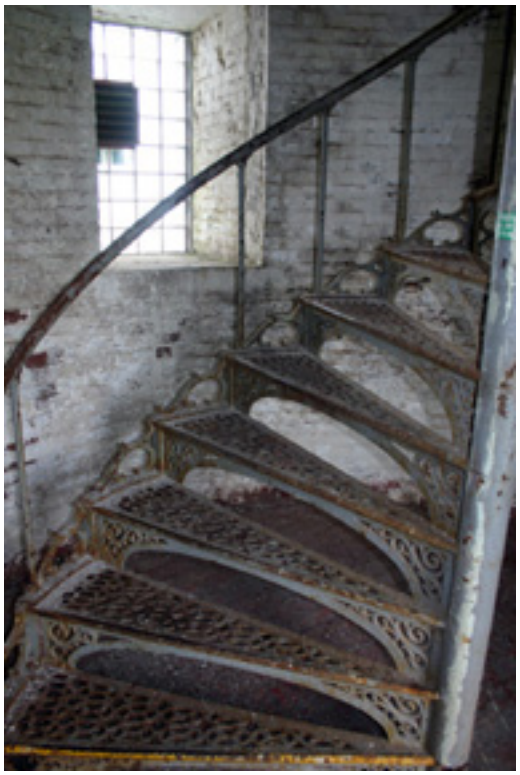
In this photo you can see the iron tie rods added for support in the 1880s.



The light was converted to solar power recently, and the array of solar panels stands close to the lighthouse.



Entry into the tower is through a modern steel door. The original cast iron stairway is still in place inside the tower.



When you enter the tower, you immediately notice how rusty the stairs are, and also the fact that there is white lead paint on the interior brick.



Another view looking up at the stairs:



There's an equipment room off to the left as you enter the tower. The interior walls are brick, but over the years some makeshift repointing and patching has been done.



Coast Guard aids to navigation related equipment is located in this room.



Here you can see some of the rust and cracked paint on the stairway. Also, the central cylinder of the stairway curves and bends slightly in places, possibly indicating structural problems.



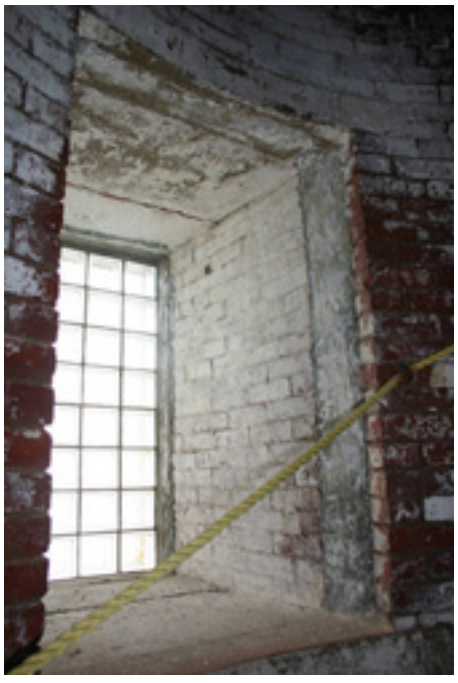
A rusty stair tread:



Here and there some of the ironwork on the stairs is broken:



The windows now have opaque glass blocks. In this photo you can also see that a rope serves as a railing.



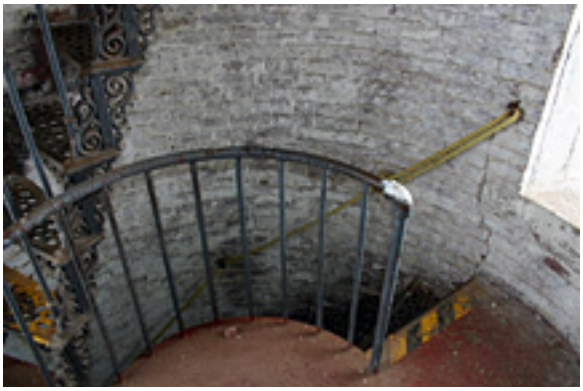
More rust and damage to a stair tread:



Some treads that were damaged in a 19th century accident were replaced in 1997.



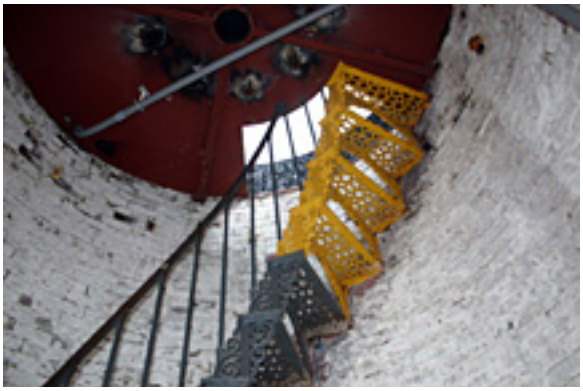
There is a small landing, then a steep set of stairs to the watchroom level.



The stairs to the watchroom:







The iron ceiling below the watchroom:



A wooden ladder leads to the lantern room:



The ladder is actually in two sections:



A door leads outside to the watchroom gallery. The tops of the iron tie rod supports can be seen here. It looks like the exterior at this level has painted fairly recently.





An exterior ladder leads from the watchroom gallery to the lantern room gallery.



The optic is now a VRB-25, with an additional emergency light above it.

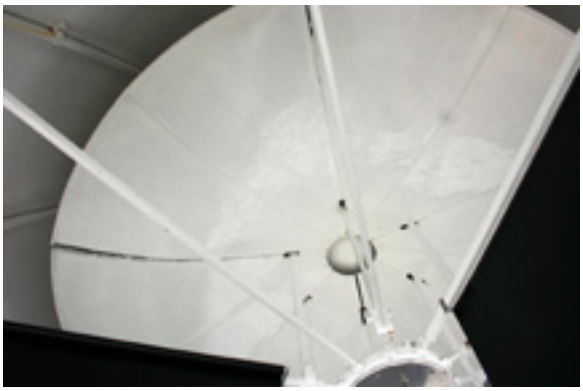


There’s lots of evidence of water ingress inside the lantern room. The sills like the ones in these photos were full of water.





Below the ceiling in the lantern room there’s a smaller ceiling that appears to be copper.



More evidence of water in the lantern room:



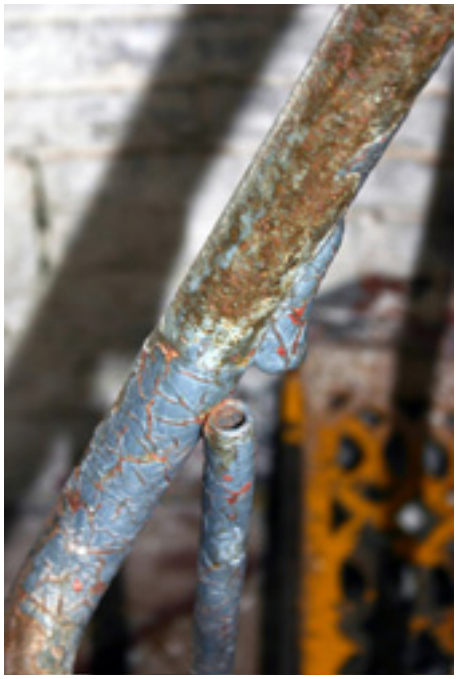
The remains of a second keeper’s house are visible from the top of the tower.



Heading back down the stairs, I noticed this crack in the brick:



Another problem with the ironwork on the stairs:



Green moss and white mold can be seen in places on the windowsills.





This stanchion at the bottom of the stairs is in rough condition.



The cable from the lightning rod can be seen here. According to Chief Sam Hill, the cable is properly grounded, but lightning did hit the tower and cause damage to the Coast Guard's equipment shortly after the light was solarized two years ago.



Another outbuilding owned by USFWS:



The fog signal building:



Here you can see the attached workroom on the left and the solar panels near the tower.



Some of the rubble left from a second keeper’s house:



This boardwalk leads from the boathouse to the lighthouse:



Another sign near the boathouse:



Overall, based on its appearance, the tower seems to be in excellent structural condition. But the interior is in need of work, especially the stairs, which are rusty and deteriorating in places. The lead paint should also be removed.

It's my understanding from talking to a Coast Guardsman from CEU Providence who was along for the trip that requests have been made since 2002 for funding to correct these problems. He said there's no way the project will be funded before 2006, which will be after the transfer process. It sounds like the burden of repairs and lead paint removal would fall completely on the new owner.

The access issues here are enormous. A small boat is needed to land, and it can only be done in calm sea conditions. We were lucky when we visited; even though it was foggy, it was very calm. But the fog is also an issue. The Coast Guard crew mistakenly landed people on the wrong island. It's very easy to become disoriented when you can't see a thing.

Getting back into the boat to leave, I ended up having to step into the water almost up to my knees. It's also very slippery. When we were leaving, one of the Coast Guard crewmen slipped on the ramp and fell into shallow water, getting soaked from his neck to his feet. He was OK, but he could easily have been hurt. And this was someone who works on an ATON team and is always accessing places like this.

Any organization managing this lighthouse would need 1) access to a boat ramp in a nearby town like Steuben or Milbridge, 2) a substantial boat to transport people and supplies from the mainland, and 3) a small boat similar to the Coast Guard's peapod to land on the ramp. Another possibility might be to work out a transportation arrangement with a local fisherman or charter boat operator, but that could get expensive.

The helicopter pad provides an alternative way to access the island, but obviously this would be at great expense. Using that means of access would probably be reserved for getting supplies to the island for major renovation. I know that when Campbell Construction did work on the island in 1997, they brought everything out by helicopter.

Besides the difficulty of landing, the island is closed for virtually the entire spring and summer. Emergency repairs might be allowed, but any major renovation would have be done in the fall. The sea conditions in this area that time of year are dicey at best.

I spoke with someone at the Milbridge Historical Society Museum, and she told me that their organization was not interested in applying for the lighthouse because of the access issues. The only other interested party who went on this trip was Craig Morrison of Historically Significant Structures, Inc., in Philadelphia. After examining the property and learning about the access issues, he said that he was almost sure his group would not submit an application.

I think the access issues and logistics involved with any work on the island would be very formidable, and it would be next to impossible to bring tours to the island. It's hard to see any advantage for an organization to take ownership of the lighthouse tower.