Frank Schubert 1915-2003

The End of an Era for American Lighthouses

By Jeremy D'Entremont

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Keeper Schubert looking out to sea from the Coney ...

The passing of Frank Schubert, believed to be the last living person who served as a lighthouse keeper under the old U. S. Lighthouse Service, truly marks the end of an era. "I and the rest of the Coast Guard are saddened by the loss of our last Lighthouse Service-era light keeper," says Rear Admiral Vivien S. Crea, Commander of the First Coast Guard District. "Frank Schubert devoted more than sixty years of his life to the safe keeping of others, and his service to this country is something we all respect and admire. His legacy will live on in Coast Guard history forever."



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Frank shipping out for World War II. Courtesy ...

In 2002 Schubert told a New York Daily News reporter that once he moved to the Coney Island Lighthouse he never wanted to live anywhere else. "I love it here," he said. "The privacy, the neighbors. Why would I leave? I love it so much." Frank Schubert didn't retire and didn't leave — he remained at the light he loved until the end of his years.



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Frank Schubert with his son Kenneth at Coney ...

He died at 88 on December 11, 2003, in the seven-room keeper's cottage at Coney Island Light Station, New York, where he had spent the past 43 years as a keeper and caretaker.



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Keeper Frank displays a sample of his marquetry ...

Frank Schubert's grandson Scott Schubert maintains a comprehensive web site about Coney Island Light Station and his grandfather at www.coneyislandlightstation.com, and much of the information that follows is from that site.



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Frank playing golf at the light station with his ...

Frank Schubert was born on September 13, 1915 on Staten Island, New York, as the middle child of seven children. His father was a carpenter, and young Frank learned all kinds of do-it-yourself skills as a boy. After high school, he got a job through the Works Progress Administration as a lifeguard and swimming instructor at a public pool. He showed an affinity for the water and exhibited strong lifesaving skills.



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Frank Schubert in front of Coney Island ...
Photo by: Jim Crowley

In 1937 he joined the civilian Lighthouse Service as a seaman on the tender Tulip. When the Coast Guard took over the nation's lighthouses in 1939, it was decided that civilians would no longer serve on tenders and lightships. Rather than join the Coast Guard, Schubert took a position as keeper of Old Orchard Shoal Light, a "sparkplug" type light in Lower New York Bay near Staten Island.

The long quiet stretches at Old Orchard Shoal led Schubert to take up a lifelong hobby - marquetry, which is defined as the "coverage of the entire surface of a board or piece of furniture with veneer, in the form of a skillfully applied design or picture." Schubert became an accomplished practitioner of this art. After about three years at Old Orchard Shoal, Schubert was transferred to New York's

Governor's Island where he tended several small aids to navigation around the island.



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Frank Schubert met President George H. W. Bush at ...



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Frank and his wife Marie (also known as Millie). ...

When the Coast Guard took over the operation of lighthouses, Lighthouse Service keepers were given the option of remaining civilians or joining the Coast Guard. Schubert chose to remain a civilian, but as it turned out he entered another branch of the military in 1942 when he was drafted to serve in World War II. Schubert told the authorities he was tired of being on and around boats, so he chose to go into the Army instead of the Navy. This strategy backfired as he was sent to Florida's Camp Gordon to work as a landing craft instructor. Later, he captained combat and utility boats in Japan and the Philippines.

Following his military service, Schubert returned to Governor's Island and remained there for another 16 years. He was then transferred to the lighthouse that would be the home for the rest of his life. Schubert, his wife Marie, and their three children, Francine, Thomas, and Kenneth, moved into the keeper's cottage at Coney Island Light Station at Norton's Point in the Seagate section of Brooklyn in July 1960.

Frank Schubert witnessed many changes and some unusual events in his decades at Coney Island. He once found an 18-foot whale stranded near the lighthouse. He saw boats run aground nearby, and was in fact credited with 15 rescues in the vicinity of the light station. In 1973 a cargo ship collided with a tanker offshore, and Schubert acted quickly to summon the help of Coast Guard and other emergency personnel. Sixteen seamen were lost in the explosion and fire, but 63 were rescued.

Schubert also saw the construction of new houses crowding in around his home, and was even startled to see nude bathers. Some of his neighbors weren't always happy with the foghorn that sounded every ten seconds, but as the keeper explained, "When there's a fog, it has to be done."

As the years passed, life for the extended Schubert family often revolved around the light station. Frank's son Kenneth was married there. Despite the closeness of New York City and its many entertainment offerings, Frank was happy staying close to home.

Coney Island Lighthouse was automated in 1989, but the Coast Guard retained Schubert as the resident caretaker. He told the New York Times, "I'm a relic. The Coast Guard wants me to stay on, and I surely don't want to leave... My plan is to stay as long as I live." He continued to maintain the grounds and kept a close eye on the light and fog signal, still climbing the 87 steps in the tower daily.

Master Chief Tony Gray, officer in charge of Aids to Navigation New York, says that the Coast Guard definitely considered Schubert a lighthouse keeper until the end of his life. "He'd call us if there were any problems," says Gray, "not only with the lighthouse but with the other aids in the area." Master Chief Gray said he spoke with Schubert three days before his death and that he "seemed like a 55-year-old man. He was a really nice guy."

As the years passed and the remaining employees of the Lighthouse Service passed into history, Frank Schubert increasingly got more attention. He even visited the White House in 1989 as the guest of President George H. W. Bush. Schubert said the president was "nuts about lighthouses."

Not all the attention was welcomed. After he was interviewed on a public radio program in 2002, Schubert was inundated with visitors. A Times article quoted him, "I've gotten discovered and now people won't leave me alone. People think there's something romantic about a lighthouse. It's just a lighthouse. I don't understand it, really." Reporters pretended to be handymen or relatives to get access. "The guy can't sit and have a cup of coffee without being bothered," said Petty Officer Frank Bari of the Coast Guard. "He doesn't mind talking now and then. But how would you feel?"

According to Frank's grandson Scott's web site, there's a flip side to the story. "Over the years the tower has had numerous visitors including class field trips, a busload of elderly women, writers, photographers, historians, lighthouse buffs, fishermen, police, military, and even wanderers looking for a tour," he says. "Generally, my grandfather has always been very cordial and accommodating."

When they were young, Schubert's children had their chores to do at the light station, like winding the clockwork mechanism that rotated the lens. Grandson Scott says that he and his cousins have followed suit, doing chores at the station like mowing the lawn, painting fences and providing tours to visitors since they were old enough to take the responsibility. "This is our way of giving back for all the memories and fun we've had over the years," says Scott.

On his web site, Scott Schubert summed up his feelings about his grandfather: "He is a great man that I am very proud of. He is definitely one of my heroes, and it's mainly because of the person he is every day. He is a war veteran and the last civilian lighthouse keeper in the United States, but I am more proud of him because of his qualities as a human being.

"He is honest, loyal, friendly, smart, curious, and humble. He has many talents but he got those talents through hard work and keeping his eyes, ears, and mind open. I greatly admire all of these qualities and his many accomplishments. His greatest, I think, is simply being himself and raising three fine children who in turn were also great parents."

Jim Crowley, author of the book Lighthouses of New York, adds, "All the guys in the harbor knew him. He did his job and he did it well. He was a real old-time New Yorker—they just don't make them like that anymore."

Frank Schubert's wife Marie died in 1986. He is survived by his brother, Peter; his three children, Francine Goldstein, Thomas and Kenneth; seven grandchildren and one great grandchild.

This story appeared in the March 2004 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, click here.