Restoration In Progress At Swan's Island, Maine

By Jeremy D'Entremont

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Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station in 2002.
Photo by: Jeremy D'Entremont

In 1604, when French explorer Samuel de Champlain charted the location we now know as Swan's Island-a few miles southeast of Mount Desert Island-he called it Brule-Cote, or "Burnt Coast." The 7,000-acre island was later named for Colonel James Swan, an early landowner who was also a participant in the Boston Tea Party. The island's Burnt Coat Harbor became a favored sheltered spot for mariners. Author and lightkeeper Robert Thayer Sterling wrote, "It was in this little place out of the wind and storm sailors found restfulness."



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U.S. Coast Guard personnel performed maintenance ...
Photo by: Donna Wiegle

To mark the entrance to Burnt Coat Harbor, a lighthouse was established at Hockamock Head in 1872. Two towers were originally erected to serve as range lights. The front range light was discontinued in 1884, but the rear range light, known as Burnt Coat Harbor Light, remains in service to the present day. The light was automated in 1975, and the town of Swan's Island has owned the station-including a keeper's house, an oil house, and a bellhouse- since 1994.



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Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station in the late ...

Some work on the buildings has been completed over the past decade. The International Masonry Institute performed considerable repairs to the lighthouse tower and the foundation of the keeper's house, and the town made other repairs to the front porch of the keeper's house, the bellhouse ramp, and the bellshouse itself. But with nobody living at the station and no regular maintenance, the property quickly deteriorated. Thanks to the concern of local citizens and the town's selectmen, the keeper's house is getting a much-needed facelift.



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A view of the new red shingle roof on the ...
Photo by: Donna Wiegle

A lighthouse committee was formed by the selectmen of Swan's Island in 2000, and two years later the town received a grant from the Virginia Wellington Cabot Foundation for an architectural assessment of the keeper's house. A thorough study of the building was completed by Bar Harbor architect Roc Caivano, and the town initiated a comprehensive restoration plan.



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Staging can be seen on the roof for a new chimney.
Photo by: Donna Wiegle

A $15,000 grant was received in April 2006 from the MBNA Foundation Conservation Grants Program. Combined with private donations and funds from the town, this allowed the work on the exterior of the keeper's house to begin in the summer of 2006. Mark Stanley was awarded the job of re-roofing the house and rebuilding the chimney. The entire roof had to be re-boarded, then covered with Hatteras Red asphalt shingles. The completed project left the house with a bright red roof similar to the one that people remember from years past.



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The first floor interior of the keeper's house. ...
Photo by: Donna Wiegle

A grant of $7,500 was also received this summer from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission's New Century Community Program for a survey of the windows in the keeper's house and their repair or replacement. The survey led to the discovery of problems with the building's foundation. "There are no good surprises in old house repair projects," says Fran Chetwynd of the town's lighthouse committee. Because the work will need to be done before window replacement, the New Century grant is being redirected to the foundation repairs.



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Some work was done on the exterior of the ...
Photo by: Donna Wiegle

In addition, the town has received a $7,500 matching grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The funds are being used to obtain professional expertise for preservation planning for the light station. The product will be a five-year strategic plan.

Along with the preservation of the station's buildings, the town is also working to preserve the human history of the station. John Bryan, chair of the lighthouse committee, and Donna Wiegle are conducting an oral history project, compiling stories as well as photos from descendants of the light's keepers. Anyone with knowledge of keepers and families at Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station can email Donna, who was approved by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as an oral historian, at donna@swansisland.org.

The Coast Guard pitched in this summer by replacing panes in the lighthouse lantern that had been broken by vandals, as well as other repairs. The town will continue fundraising toward the complete restoration of the station. This year's community fundraisers included an art sale, a raffle of a painting, concerts, and even a "Chowder Cookoff." And perhaps most heartening of all, three island children-aged 4, 6, and 8-donated 25% of their profits from a lemonade stand, totaling $25, to the lighthouse project.

You can learn more about Swan's Island and the Burnt

Coat Harbor Light Station by visiting the town's website at www.swansisland.org. If you'd like to help with the restoration of the light station, you can email Selectman Dexter Lee at swanisle@tdstelme.net or call the town office at (207) 526-4279.