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Bringing the Lantern Home: Avery Point Tower Once Again Looks Like a Lighthouse

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Bringing the Lantern Home

Avery Point Tower Once Again Looks Like a Lighthouse

Stephen Jones

It is truth universally accepted that a lighthouse works best when it does not move. This was a belief that I myself adhered to when I was hanging onto the inside of an off-shore light station during the shakes and shivers of a three-day storm of March 1961, a gale now known as the Mid-Atlantic Storm of the Century. In the many years since, I've often felt a disconnect between events of that time and the subsequent lighthouse craze with its *tchotchkes*, sweatshirts and even my own literary attempts to render the experience. It was a welcome surprise then one day in mid-October when I was involved in moving a lighthouse some eleven miles over water from Willow Point, West Mystic to Avery Point.

The sun shone. The sea was calm. Only the day before, Long Island Sound had been scruffed up by a head sea which would have converted the low bow of our 1950's oyster boat into a battering ram that would have sent spray and maybe solid water over the lantern. This day our only challenge was from the enthusiastic wakes of our well-meaning escort boats. At ten knots, the *Chief* bore the lantern from the workshop to her ultimate home in a little under two hours.

The duration of the journey seemed much shorter. The squat steel tugboat had been conceived in pure utility in the 1960's at Blue Point, Long Island as a shellfish dredge. More recently *Chief* had seen service employed to push loaded barges from Boston's Big Dig out to the harbor spoils islands. On this day, however, though her mission was equally utilitarian, the old steel tub seemed to glide across the mirror of the sea within an aesthetic nimbus. My shipmate, lighthouse constructor Jim Wesolowski, characterized our deck load as "a great Fabergé Easter egg."

To be more precise this was not the entire lighthouse, but merely its raison d'être, the lantern. To some, lantern suggests the light itself, that is the bulb, or in the old days the wick. The lantern, however, is actually the house around the light, the pumpkin around the candle in the jack o' lantern.



photo: Peg Van Patten

Workers set the restored lantern atop the Avery Point Lighthouse at the UConn campus in Groton, Connecticut, in October, 2005.

Originally designed to harmonize with the garden gazebo of Avery Point's seignior, Morton Plant, the lantern was indeed a jewel. The elegant octagon of mahogany and curved glass set in arched, triple moldings was topped by a copper roof sweeping up like a great candy kiss to the gold-leafed finial vent ball itself surmounted by the spike of its lightning rod.

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The Chief chugged around the gently heaving bell buoy at Pine Island, and we looked up in the sun dazzle to see the masons preparing the top of the truncated tower to receive our cargo. The two men in turn looked down and waved to us. It was at that moment that I at last felt connected with the nearly three-year project.

The restoration of the Avery Point Lighthouse Lantern had begun in another gazebo, this one set firmly on the University Green a few hundred yards to the northwest. There one summer day James Streeter and Dale Treadway had called together a new group of volunteers called The Avery Point Lighthouse Society. From this moment grew a remarkable team of not only volunteers, but professionals. There were architects, engineers, constructors, riggers, administrators, fund raisers and as on this day in October, mariners.

Originally our plan to move the complete lantern had been to use the iconic *Anne*, an oysterboat built in 1884. The old girl's mast, however, was at the forward end of her deck, a location that would make it impossible to employ a travel lift to pluck the lighthouse lantern from her.

We had thought that if worse came to worse we could always truck the lantern over to Avery Point the same way that the University of Connecticut had brought us the old lantern two years ago. There was, however, a problem with this land route. their desire to beautify the old Spicer farm at Avery Point, Morton Plant and his wife Nellie had set out tree-lined, winding lanes leading to his new mansion. Long after Morton's death in 1918, the trees had finally achieved the desired effect of overarching the roads. The unintended consequence of this arboreal triumph was that to get from Avery Point to Willow Point, the crew had had to decapitate the roof from the lantern. Since the old lantern was to be used merely as a template, this was readily done.

"Decapitation of the newly built replica, however, was not something we wanted to perform," said boss constructor Mark Robinson. "It turned out that moving the lantern by sea was not just more romantic, it was actually the most efficient way to go."

What was then simply a practical consideration bore instant symbolic fruit. "Coming in by sea," Streeter announced to the press, "was, of course, the appropriate method. It reminded us of what a lighthouse was after all, about."



photo: Ben Isler, Telemark Productions

Bearing some resemblance to a giant candy kiss or a fabulous giant Fabergé Easter egg, the restored lantern wends its way home to Avery Point.

While West Mystic Woodenboat Co. had its own yard crane to load the lantern at Willow Point, using Anne, however, would have meant hiring a crane at the Avery Point end. The key to moving the lantern by water was when Shennecossett Yacht Club offered their travel lift. The Club had already generously provided the venue for some lighthouse fund raisers and by offering the travel lift they made it so we could arrive with the lantern on relatively short notice. We would not feel compelled to sail in questionable weather out of concern for tying up a crane at Avery Point at so much an hour. As it was, when Chief stuck her square bow into Pine Island Bay we were an hour early. Rather than keep us in a holding pattern in the crowded harbor, the Shennecossett crew bumped the appointed yacht and worked us in.

There remained, of course, several steps to complete the evolution. Despite some concerns about the trustworthiness of her pneumatic shift, Captain Geoffrey Jones was able to squeeze his tug into the Shennecossett Yacht Club travel lift well with all of two inches to spare on either side. (Yes, Mark Robinson had measured beforehand.) The Chief's crew sprang into action. Ty Whitman, Rebecca Wesley, and Beth Robinson, from the Robinsons' company 2-B Sailing, along with independent contractor Wesolowski were people who knew the lantern intimately. They had worked in various jobs on the project from the start. Whitman and Mark Robinson scrambled up onto the copper roof, unscrewing the lightning rod spike temporarily from the gilded

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heat ball. Beth Robinson and Rebecca, along with crew from the Yacht Club, burrowed under the cribbing to replace the Chief's chains with the Yacht Club's lift straps. When the transfer was complete, Mark Robinson signaled travel lift operator Andrew Caron. Slowly the great jewel rose from the deck to the cheers of the delegation from the Avery Point Lighthouse Association and two members of the UConn Police. A UConn flat bed trailer awaited to complete the journey around the corner to the Avery Point Campus. (Later, lift operator Caron confessed that the novelty and fame of his load had made him a bit nervous.)

The following week, a mighty crane hoisted the lantern from the University lawn and placed it snugly upon the gallery atop the tower. At once the men from Joseph Gnazzo Construction began rattling home the bolts and gave us a quick thumbs up. Mark Robinson's template was dead on, and the steeplejacks invited us to visit.

"Our beacon of hope is back," announced Dale Treadway.

It was a daunting climb up the sequence of ladders inside the tower, an excursion that combined vertigo and claustrophobia. After much huffing and puffing, Mark, Jim Streeter, Dale Treadway and I emerged through a hole into the lantern and crept through another small aperture out onto the railess scaffolding which formed a temporary gallery. The original marble balustrades from the old gallery were yet on the ground and it was comforting to shake hands with our friends from Gnazzo Construction, those once tiny figures up above the sea glare.

The view from the lighthouse gallery was almost overwhelming. It took us a moment to orient ourselves. Far below sailed the sloops from the Maritime Studies Program, tacking into the gradually building southwest breeze. We hung onto the edge of the lantern and overlooked where Fishers Island Sound met Long Island Sound. It was a comfort to be clinging to that gorgeous carpentry we'd watched taking form stick by stick the winter before in the abandoned theater above the grocery store in Noank.

We were joined by old friend Bob Trapani, executive director of the Lighthouse Foundation who had, with his wife Ann-Marie and three young, Nina, Katrina and Dominic, arisen in the appropriate darkness at Wells, Maine to make the journey. With Bob at our side the gallery of the lighthouse was the ideal spot from which to appreciate just how the Avery Point Light fit in, as an aid to navigation. No longer a porcelain nick-knack on the shelf or a paragraph upon the page, or an overgrown Easter egg (or even a memory of a dark night long ago), the Avery Point Lighthouse was now part of a windy brightness--once again in a partnership with Seaflower, North Dumpling, Race Rock, Little Gull, Plum Island, Ledge Light and New London Light– fellow guardians of the coast.

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Save the Date!

