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Boston Lighthouse Keeper Sally Snowman

Justin Shatwell · June 22, 2009 ·

★★★★½
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Sally Snowman is the 70th keeper of Boston Light, a post that dates back to 1716. She's the last of her kind; every other Coast Guard light station in the country has long since reassigned its full-time keepers in the wake of automation. Secluded on Little Brewster Island for weeks at a time, she's one part watchman, one part caretaker, and one part historian. Over the summer she's eager to share her island's history with the visitors who flock there and to impart a taste of the tranquility she's found preserving this ancient lifestyle.

"This property speaks to me. I grew up in the harbor, and I was always fascinated by Boston Light. When I was 10 years old, my dad brought me out here, and I fell in love with the place. I never thought that someday I'd be a lighthouse keeper out here.

"I'm so close to the water, so close to Gaia, the Earth. This is transformational, and I knew that when I was 10, before I even knew what 'transformational' was. This is living in the moment here, doing the work, doing the left-brain stuff, doing the scheduling, doing all the paperwork, but at the same time being centered inside me–so that I know who I am, so I'm in my authentic self. This place allows me to do that. It's like coming home."

"The sun sets over Boston, and as the sun's setting, there are incredible hues of light … just the clouds, and the sacred geometry the clouds are making as they're doing the sunset. Last night the sun was awesome. It was turning all these unbelievable colors of orange and yellows and reds and then reflecting off the tower.

“Nights are peaceful. My husband and I don’t even need to look at the anemometer to know what the wind direction is. We know from where the planes are coming in where the wind shifts are. It’s nice when they’re not coming in over us, because we really can hear just the water lapping. We have a bell buoy out here, and also hear that with the slight motions of the ocean, hear it clanking. Even during the winter we sleep with the window open just a little so that I can get that ocean. Why put the stereo on and listen to ‘Ocean Sounds’ when you’ve got it right outside the front door?”



Sally Snowman, 56, tends Boston Light, a beacon that rises 89 feet on its own island and has guided sailors for almost three centuries.
Christian Kozowyk

“There’s something unique about Boston Harbor–especially in that it’s so close to the city, but so far away. I don’t consider myself a city person at all. Yet the city people come here, so I get the city brought to me. One of the things we ask visitors to do is to put that aside. We invite them to shut their cell phones off and get into island time–just sit and listen to the ocean and the gulls cawing and get into the sky.

“I love it when they bring their picnic blankets and they lie down, and then when the boat comes in you need to go and gently say, ‘It’s time to go.’ ‘It’s time to go? We just got here.’ So their hour and a half goes by so fast. And that’s the objective: to get them to know what it’s like to just be under the light, to be in the peace, and then take that peace into the city with them. And at any time they can just recall this memory in their third eye and in their ears and come back to this and they can remember it. Every cell in their body can remember this experience. They just have to call upon it.”

Boston Light, Little Brewster Island (Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area). 617-223-8666; bostonharborislands.org, nps.gov/boha

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Comments

Daryl September 1, 2015
Pointe Claire, QC, Canada
Thank you for a great article. Except for the necessary introduction, you gave way and gave all the room to let Ms. Snowman tell her story. And what a story. Exceptional all around.
Reply

Warren September 1, 2015
I met Sally and her husband 3 years ago on a trip to the lighthouse with my wife , I introduced myself as the grandson of Maurice Babcock who was the last civilian keeper at Boston Light before the Coast Guard took it over , She treated us like royalty , We are going back this Labor Day weekend with our children to see her and donate some old family photos that my mother had saved , Sally is having them put into the lighthouse photo collection , what a great lady she is . Can’t wait to get there
Reply

Andy August 24, 2015
I was out there this past Saturday and I’m sorry I didn’t take the time to talk to her. I was too busy taking photos with my $10K worth of camera gear. Next time I’m there (and there will be next time), I will make it a point to talk to her before I do anything else. If an hour and a half goes by, and I haven’t taken a single picture (besides that of Sally), so be it. I’lll be back.
Reply

Don January 24, 2015
You are so lucky to be doing this out on Little Brewster Island, I am envious of you. Thank you.
Reply

Sandy June 24, 2014

Articles such as this have kept us subscribing to Yankee for 40 years. Life, not lifestyle.

Reply

Greg June 24, 2014

What a lovely soul she is! Thank you for sharing this with us.

Reply