The Lure of the Lighthouse

A sea beacon might be the ultimate fantasy home—romantic, historic and right on the water. But as a growing number of lighthouses come on the market, there are drawbacks to consider: beware the foghorn.

By AMY GAMERMAN

Saybrook Breakwater Light, a white, cast-iron lighthouse shaped like a sparkplug, has guarded the mouth of the Connecticut River since 1886. A local icon, its image appears on postcards and some Connecticut license plates. Now the landmark beacon is about to embark on its second act, as a private pied-a-mer.

Siren's Call



Bob O'Connor for The Wall Street Journal

Nyatt Point Lighthouse, an 1828 house with a tower in Barrington, R.I., was bought by Neil and Christine Feins for $1.375 million for use as a weekend home. Dr. Feins says he has become a de facto guardian for mariners on Narragansett Bay.

Its new keeper, Kelly K. Navarro, the wife of Benjamin W. Navarro, founder of debt-collection firm Sherman Financial Group, snagged the lighthouse with a bid of $340,000 in an online government auction Monday. The bid was placed through her limited-liability company, Water III, which also holds the title to two waterfront homes directly offshore from Ms. Navarro's new lighthouse in the exclusive borough of Fenwick, home of the late Katharine Hepburn.

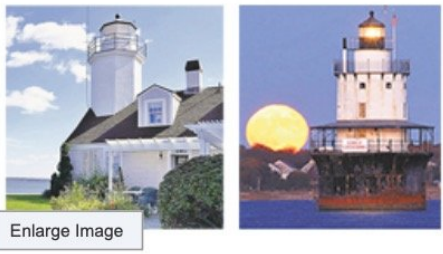
Along with stunning 360-degree views of Long Island Sound, Ms. Navarro's 48-foot-high getaway comes with a bright green light that flashes every six seconds, and an electronically sensitive foghorn so loud that a sign on the first level warns "DANGER: Hearing Protection Required In This Area." Since the lighthouse is still used as an active aid to navigation, Ms. Navarro can expect periodic visits from the Coast Guard, which will need to keep a set of keys to the place.

One part unique retreat, one part folly, the private lighthouse may be the ultimate status symbol for those in search of a great place on the water.

Although some lighthouses have been privately owned for decades, more are now

which allows the federal government to sell the landmarked beacons. Since the act was passed, 33 active lighthouses have been auctioned off to private owners. Graves Island Light Station, a wave-swept granite tower on a rocky 10-acre ledge in Boston Harbor, is now on the block. Bidding stood at $761,888 on Thursday—a record amount for any lighthouse auctioned by the General Services Administration.

Buy a Beacon: Two For Sale



Enlarge Image

There are some 700 lighthouses still standing in the U.S., according to Jeremy D'Entremont, a historian for the American Lighthouse Foundation. Most were built in the 19th century in essential shipping channels, with the highest concentration on the Northeast coast and in the Great Lakes region. These days, that is coveted real estate.

The aging beacons have become very costly for the government to maintain—and GPS technology has made their navigation services less essential. Between five and 10 lighthouses are sold every year. Public and nonprofit groups willing to assume guardianship get first dibs. If none come forward, the lighthouse is sold to the highest bidder through an online auction at the GSA website.

The auction price is just the cover charge. It takes deep pockets to turn an offshore lighthouse into a luxury retreat. New owners must provide all their own utilities—power, water and sewer. Construction costs multiply exponentially when done on water—and lighthouses demand constant work to maintain.

Because the lighthouses are federally landmarked, new owners must clear any remodeling plans with state historic-preservation offices. If you ask nicely, the Coast Guard might baffle one side of the foghorn to blunt its noise inside. But those used to living large may have a harder time adjusting to cramped rooms, low ceilings and small windows—less glass for a gale to shatter.

Panoramic View



View Graphics

"I do wonder if people know what they're getting into," said Richard Ventrone, an architect who has restored five Rhode Island lighthouses for the state's Department of Transportation. "You're hanging out in a tin can. If you get a nasty storm that comes through, you could be stuck out there."

Saybrook Breakwater Light is a handyman's special. Its 500-square-foot interior contains asbestos and lead-based paint. The beacon's riprap jetty—a mass of piled rocks—is prone to flooding, and the lower rooms are coated with rust and mold. Upstairs, uninvited visitors have left graffiti and dirty footprints on the walls. Ms. Navarro will have to build a dock: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns the half-mile stone breakwater out to the lighthouse, and it is off limits.

But handsome, wood-planked floors, ceilings and walls are largely intact on the upper floors of the lighthouse, as are details such as the peaked lintels that top some windows like arched eyebrows. On the fourth floor, porthole windows give the place the feeling of a small ship. An open-air gallery with a cast-iron railing offers vertigo-inducing views of the Connecticut shoreline and Ms. Navarro's Fenwick homes. A representative said that Ms. Navarro was traveling and couldn't be reached for comment.

"It's a beauty," Mr. Ventrone said. "I'm going to say it's between $800,000 to $1

alone, he estimates, would run between $60,000 to $70,000.

Audio

Amy Gamerman and WSJ This Morning's John Metaxas on the lure of lighthouses

00:00 | 07:03

With a large enough investment, some owners have been able to transform these beacons into fantasy waterfront retreats. Dean Kamen, the inventor behind the home dialysis machine and the Segway PT, was flying his helicopter when he first encountered North Dumpling Light, an 1871 red brick-and-shingle lighthouse on a 2-acre island in Fishers Island Sound, N.Y. Although the government sold the lighthouse in 1959, it is still in active use. On an impulse, Mr. Kamen landed on North Dumpling's tiny beach.

"I realized I need this place—it's magical and it's fantastic—and the next thing I know, I'm the proud owner," said Mr. Kamen, who bought the island for $2.5 million in 1986. He likes to describe North Dumpling as a sovereign state, and has been known to call himself Lord Dumpling: "My friends call me Dumpy."

He maintains a nonaggression pact with the Coast Guard, which dispatches a team with ladders to climb up the outside of the lighthouse when they need to service the solar-powered optic, about once every three months. "I said, "Come on, guys, come inside—you can walk up the stairs," Mr. Kamen said.

When the Coast Guard announced in 2006 that it would cut power to the island, Mr. Kamen began transforming his realm into a model of energy independence. Power is generated by wind turbine, solar panels and a thermodynamic generator of his own design, inspired by the 19th century Stirling engine. The Slingshot, a vapor compression distiller that is another of Mr. Kamen's inventions, supplies clean water along with a commercial water purifier. (The island has a septic system.)

Mr. Kamen also decreed that every incandescent light on the island be swapped for light-emitting diodes, which consume less power and are long-lasting—an important consideration when replacing fixtures means a long boat ride to the mainland. To make the switch, he hired Fritz Morgan, who helped design the brilliantly colored LEDs that illuminate the Empire State Building. Along with plain white lighting, Mr. Morgan installed computerized LEDs that bathe parts of the lighthouse in a spectrum of changing colors—more than 16 million of them.

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These days, the light show plays to a very small house: North Dumpling's two caretakers are its only full-time residents. "I rarely get there, sadly," said Mr. Kamen, who lives in Bedford, N.H., when he isn't traveling the globe. He opens the house for special events and fundraisers for his philanthropic work. "I'd have to convert dumplings [the island's official currency] to dollars," he said, when asked how much the redo cost. "I'm not sure it's in my best interest to flaunt the strength of the Dumpling economy."

Buyers should be prepared to put a lot of dumplings into their water-bound aeries. That might not have occurred to Sheila Consaul, a consultant for a government contracting firm in Fairfax, Va., when she first saw Ohio's Fairport Harbor West Breakwater Light on the GSA's auction website.

"I thought, 'That would be a really cool summer home', " said Ms. Consaul, who bid $71,010 for the 1925 lighthouse with square, steel-sheathed walls and a red cupola that sits on a rock platform in Lake Erie.

On her first GSA-escorted walk through the large, five-story lighthouse in 2011, Ms. Consaul was wowed by the high ceilings, tall windows and curling wrought-iron staircases. The original terra-cotta tiles on the main floor were all in good condition, as were the maple hardwood floors on the upper stories. Apart from an old foghorn and a giant green pulley dangling from a ceiling, the lighthouse—uninhabited since 1948—had been stripped bare. There were no doors, no sinks, no plumbing.

Ms. Consaul is in the midst of transforming it into a three bedroom, 3½-bath retreat, with a tentative budget of $300,000. To get to her lighthouse, she must park her car at a state beach, then hike a mile through a marsh, across the sand and down a slippery stone breakwater—or travel 10 minutes from Fairport Harbor by boat. There is no dock, so she ties the boat to the railing of a stone staircase that rises steeply up a side of the lighthouse platform.

Ms. Consaul is waiting for approval from the state to install a German self-recycling water system that she saw on an episode of "This Old House." For now, she has put in a composting toilet and carries in drinking water. A small generator supplies power. Ms. Consaul plans to swap it for a more powerful one once her kitchen appliances and washer-dryer arrive by barge.

She has had several visits from the Coast Guard. "Could we go in any time we want to?" said Chief Boatswain's Mate Andrew Merritt, whose team maintains beacons in the Great Lakes region. "Absolutely. But to be courteous to the owner, we call them up and let them know we'll be there."

In fact, Ms. Consaul welcomes their visits. Chief Officer Merritt's team has helped her spruce up the place, removing wires and old electrical panels that blocked her windows. They also relocated a massive battery bank to make room for her new kitchen cabinets. To Ms. Consaul's disappointment, they didn't install plugs for her blender.

"Their concern is maintaining the light as an active aid to navigation," she said.

That light is active all the time—a reality that didn't sink in until Ms. Consaul spent her first sleepless night in her new home. "The thing you notice is the flashing. It's on for two seconds and off for three. It goes on all night, dusk to dawn," she said. "Oh, and I also have a foghorn that goes on in the morning."

Lighthouse living is much easier when your beacon has an on-off switch. Nayatt Point Lighthouse, an 1828 gabled house with a 25-foot tower on the mainland in Barrington, R.I., hasn't been used for navigation since 1868. Neil and Christine Feins, who live in Brookline, Mass., bought it for $1.375 million in 2001 as a weekend home.

During work on their kitchen, they uncovered an interior doorway to the tower, which is still equipped with a working beacon. Dr. Feins, a professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School, likes to light it up when he and his wife go out to dinner.

Dr. Feins has become a de facto guardian for mariners on Narragansett Bay who regularly crash on the rocky shallows by his house while taking a shortcut out of the channel. "I had one guy who lost a transom—the whole back of his boat came off," he said. In the old days, Nayatt's lighthouse keeper would have rowed out to rescue the hapless boaters. "We call Sea Tow," said Dr. Feins.

As a boy growing up in Greenwich, Conn., Jason Pilalas was fascinated by the granite lighthouse on Great Captain Island, a mile offshore. He had dreamed of owning it since he first rowed out to the island at the age of 10. In 1991, Mr. Pilalas, then an investment management executive living in California, was visiting friends in Rhode Island when he saw a small notice in the pages of this newspaper advertising a historic lighthouse for sale: the 1868 Morgan Point Lighthouse in Noank, Conn.

"We went and saw it," said Mr. Pilalas, now retired and living in Lake Worth, Fla. The imposing, if neglected, granite lighthouse was a near twin of the beacon of his childhood. "There was a lot of rot and smell, and my wife was sure there were trolls in the basement," Mr. Pilalas said. He bought it for $1.06 million.

Moisture had seeped through the stone walls, creating mold and mildew. The house had one bathroom and a cold-water sink. Worst of all, Morgan Point's light tower was gone, removed or destroyed in the early 20th century.

"I didn't think there was much point of having a lighthouse without a light-room," said Mr. Pilalas.

So while the granite house was gutted and completely rebuilt (with its own 19th century wooden floorboards) in a $1.4 million overhaul, Mr. Pilalas began planning a new tower. He found the original architectural plans for Morgan Point in the Coast Guard archives and commissioned an exact copy, widening the watch room for comfortable seating.

The cast-iron replica, built by a Rhode Island shipyard for around $35,000, was lowered onto the roof with a crane. Its centerpiece is an antique Fresnel lens of hand-cut glass—a fixture of 19th century lighthouses—that Mr. Pilalas picked up at auction.

"It's 58 steps to get there. We go up there and drink wine and watch the sun set, or come up," he said.

His Fresnel lens sends out a beam that can be seen for several miles, among its other uses. "It doubles as a cocktail table," Mr. Pilalas said.