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BURNT COAT STATION LIVES ON THANKS TO VOLUNTEERS

HISTORY & HERITAGE, ON THE WATER, THINGS TO DO / HISTORY, LIGHTHOUSE, SWAN'S ISLAND

By: Madalyne Bird



The Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station is located on the Hockamock Head peninsula on Swan's Island. Located about six miles off Mount Desert Island, the island can be reached by a 40 minute ferry ride from Bass Harbor. PHOTO BY MADALYNE BIRD

There's a certain wave on Swan's Island.

In this village of roughly 330 year-round residents — no matter where you are, who you are or where you're going — the wave is a constant.

"The driver's job is to wave," resident Eric Chetwynd explained. "It's not like I know all these people, but that's just what you do here."

It's an extension of friendliness that only adds to the charm of such a place.

Swan's Island, located six miles off Mount Desert Island, is about a 40-minute ferry ride aboard the Maine State Ferry Service's ferry, *Captain Henry Lee*.

The 7,000-acre isle is home to three villages — Swan's Island, Minturn and Atlantic. The population here swells to about 1,000 in the summer.

Chetwynd and his wife, Fran, are summer residents on Swan's Island. Their home was at one time the Ocean View Hotel. After visiting Acadia National Park several times in the 1970s and then staying on Little Cranberry Island, the pair visited Swan's Island for the first time in 1988. They purchased their home the following year.

Eric Chetwynd is originally from Springfield, Mass., while his wife is a native of Dunedin, New Zealand. He was the former director of economic and institutional development for the United States Agency for International Development. She was a communications lawyer.



Eric and Fran Chetwynd are among the seasonal and local residents working to restore the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station.

PHOTO BY MADALYNE BIRD

Standing in the foyer on the first floor of Burnt Coat Harbor Light's keeper's house, clad in jeans and a navy blue fisherman's sweater, Chetwynd describes the couple's fortuitous meeting.

The couple, who will have been married 52 years this December, met when Fran went to live with her aunt and uncle in Washington, D.C.

"Then I met her and she wound up an American citizen," Eric quipped.

When the couple is not on Swan's Island, they live in Pittsboro, N.C.

The couple developed a connection to the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station — one the island's most prominent features — after they retired. Eric serves as secretary for the Lighthouse Committee and Fran, who also is a committee member, is the secretary of the Friends of Swan's Island Lighthouse, an independent Maine nonprofit.

Built in 1872, the station is a rich piece of island history. Perched on the rocky, granitic and diorite-covered Hockamock Head, the light tower stands at 35 feet, facing due south. Schooners and fishing boats are common sights from the windows of the keeper's house during the summer.

But how did the harbor become known as Burnt Coat? There are varying stories among islanders of how the name came about. But according to Fran, it happened, like so many other things in history — by accident.

When Samuel de Champlain and other French explorers came to the island, they called it "Côte Brûlé" which means "Burnt Coast" because presumably it had been burned over. But the name was incorrectly translated to "Burnt Coat" and stuck.



Volunteer Joe Boisvert gives a tour of the tower at the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station. Boisvert, a professor of Russian history and Egyptology, lives on Swan's Island for about eight months out of the year.

PHOTO BY MADALYNE BIRD

The beacon, originally a Fresnel lens, was automated in 1975 and is maintained by the Coast Guard and now runs on solar power. The light can be seen for nine miles, flashing every seven seconds during the night and serving as a sign post for fishermen, yachtsmen, cruise ship captains and other mariners.

In 1988, the station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Six years later, the Coast Guard deeded it to the town of Swan's Island, which now owns, operates and manages the historic edifice.

"[The station] is on the National Historic Register and you know what they say, people who ignore their history don't know where they're from," Fran explained. "It's really iconic for the island. A lot of people come here from the island as well as from

away, and if we think of the island, we think of the lighthouse. If you get a bill from the town it has a picture of the lighthouse on it. It's just really central to the island experience."

In an effort to restore the station, the Friends of the Swan's Island lighthouse began fundraising and with the help of volunteers, construction began in 2006.

"[Swan's Island] is a remote community and it's very dependent on fishing," Fran said. "Anything that provides a little bit of economic diversity in the summertime is a really good thing."

Already, a significant amount has been accomplished in the restoration process.

As of this spring, almost $400,000 had been raised for the project. The town, with the help of volunteers, was able to accomplish a lot. The keeper's house was reroofed, structurally strengthened and the downstairs rooms restored. About 1.8 miles of trails were created including a handicap-accessible trail.

"The lighthouse is on the National Register of Historic Places and all the work is being done to the highest standards," said John Bryan, chairman of the lighthouse committee. "The new loop trail around the headland circles the headland and includes several types of habitat and the lighthouse tower tours have proven to be especially popular. Last year, 2,300 people signed the guest book."

But work remains to be done.

As of this spring, more than $490,000 in funds was still needed to completely restore the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station. Chipping lead paint must be removed, as well as mold and asbestos. The tower needs to be refurbished as well as the upstairs in the keeper's house. The Oceanside porch requires rebuilding and strengthening. The list goes on.

"Everything we do is under the auspices of the state historic preservation office … In other words, everything has to be historically correct," Eric said.

Moving forward, work and more fundraising will persist for the light station restoration project.

The Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station is now open to the public for tours of the tower and the keeper's house, as well as for visitors to walk the trails. The keeper's house also is available for weddings and other special occasions.

Various fundraising events are planned including a chowder cook-off on Aug. 9.

"Our ultimate objective is for the light station and park to be a resource for the island and visitors to the island, and for it to be self-supporting through visitors' donations and special events," Fran said.

Burnt Coat Harbor Light StationKeeper's House hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Closed Sunday and Monday.

Tower tour hours: Call for times.

Contact: 526-4025, www.burntcoatharborlight.com

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Kansas City native Madalyne Bird was a 2014 summer intern for the *Ellsworth American* working primarily for the paper's summer guide to Downeast Maine, Out and About.

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