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Keeper Of Boston Light Reflects On America's First Lighthouse

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NPR STAFF



Sally Snowman atop Boston Light. She is one of the last lighthouse keepers in the country — but the only one with the Coast Guard.

Jesse Costa/WBUR

The nation's first lighthouse celebrates 300 years off the Boston coast on Wednesday. It's called Boston Light and it's manned by Sally Snowman.

"I jokingly say 'womanned.' I'm the 70th keeper of Boston Light. The first 69 were all men," Snowman says.

This isn't just a job. For Snowman, this is a lifestyle. She knows the mechanics, all of the history, she even dresses in period clothing.

"I just think it as the best government housing in the United States," she says.



AROUND THE NATION

After Decades Away, It Took Just A Day To Bring This Lighthouse Home

When you bring up Wednesday's anniversary of Boston Light, she's quick to clarify — it's the 300th anniversary of the light station — not the actual light tower.

"The original tower built in 1716 was blown up by the British in 1776. We have the new one," she says. The "new one" was built 1783 — guiding ships with light powerful enough to see from 27 miles away.

"It's an 11-foot crystal made up of 336 prisms that rotate. That makes the 1,000 watt lamp that is on 24/7 appear to flash," she says.

Three centuries later, the role of lighthouse keeper is a little different. Boston Light is fully automated. Her job is maintaining the grounds, giving tours and managing 90 volunteers.



Boston Light, America's first lighthouse, beams light across the night sky.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Andrew Barresi/U.S. Coast Guard

From the moment she first saw Boston Light as a kid, she knew she wanted to be a part of its history — somehow.

"Ha, oh, how could I forget that day. I came to visit the island with my dad and stepped off the dingy onto the beach and looked up to this 89-foot tower and said, 'When I grow up, I want to get married out here,' " she says.

And she eventually did. Then, she started volunteering in 1994 — and when the Coast Guard civilianized the light station in 2003, she was officially designated as Keeper of Boston Light.

"And here I am in 2016, the keeper for our 300th anniversary, that's way beyond my wildest dreams," she says.

coast guard

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