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A step back in time at local lighthouse

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Staff Writer

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Wood Island Lighthouse was first commissioned in 1808 and provided safe passage for ships heading up the Saco River. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. The Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse have been maintaining the property since 2003. (Grant McPherson photo)

BIDDEFORD – Wood Island Lighthouse has received more than just a fresh coat of paint over the past few months. The lighthouse has sat off the shore of Biddeford Pool in the south of Saco Bay for the past 200 years. For the past 14 years, Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse has maintained the property and led tours to the island. The group has completed many projects on the island since its formation and the latest round of renovations pertain to the keeper's house. Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse's ultimate goal is to give visitors to the island a sense of what the keeper's house would have looked like in 1906.



Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse are restoring the keeper's house as close to the year 1906 as possible, when the current configuration of buildings was established. The current building dates back to 1857. Volunteers hope to have the house furnished before the end of the summer. Gail Browning (right) has been a Friend of Wood Island Lighthouse for the past five years. She le ads tours through the lighthouse once a week, giving visitors a sense of history and importance behind the tower. Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse welcomes any additional volunteers or donations. (Grant McPherson photos)

Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse Chairman Brad Coupe said he hoped to have the house fully furnished

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Coupe said much of the restoration including the walls and floors is completed but right now the house is empty of furnishings. He said he is optimistic about bringing furniture to the island within the next two weeks but can't say for certain when it will happen. However, Coupe said tours are running and the house is open for viewing.

Coupe said bringing furniture to the island will be an incremental process. He said volunteers will most likely start with beds, tables and chairs. He said the pieces the group is most excited about are a 1900's era ice box and restored stove. Coupe said the ice box was donated by two women who have a home in Biddeford Pool who are interested in the lighthouse. He said Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse Vice Chair Sean Murphy drove to the women's full-time home in Maryland to retrieve the ice box.

Coupe said all restoration has been done in accordance with standards of the National Register of Historic places. The lighthouse was added to the register in 1988 under the name "Wood Island Light Station." Coupe said all the renovations are, to the best of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse's ability, specific to 1906.



Visitors to Wood Island Lighthouse can climb to the top and glimpse a panoramic view of the grounds and Saco Bay. The last keeper to live on the island left in 1986. In 2012 the Coast Guard installed an LED beacon designed to last longer, cost less and require little to no maintenance. Russ Lowell (bottom right) was a lighthouse keeper on Wood Island from 1979 to 1982. He captains the boat that takes tours to the island a few times a week in July and August. Lowell said he believed some of the superstitions surrounding the island. He said if he left out certain items overnight like pens and calculators, they would be gone in the morning. (Grant McPherson photos)

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Sheri Poftak, a former Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse member and historian for the group, said paint samples from the original interior were found in the process of renovating the dining room. She said the group consulted archives at Benjamin Moore Paint Company and were able to use an original paint swatch from 1906. Poftak said Benjamin Moore was able to recreate a modern paint based on the original with consultation from Maine Historic Preservation Commission, which was then used for the interior of the keeper's house.

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"It didn't look good before they did all this," Poftak said. "It's nice to see it come back."

Kyle Noble, a self-employed general contractor and Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse volunteer, said the largest project left in the keeper's house is pantry installation. He said the design was based off other examples of the same period, specifically one in a museum in Castine. Noble said once the pantry is complete, volunteers will likely start furnishing bedrooms upstairs and work their way downstairs.

Noble also coordinates much of the volunteer activity on the island. He said in the past volunteers from IDEXX helped with routine maintenance around the oil house and boathouse. Noble said current renovations to the keeper's house have taken up the majority of his time, leading to few volunteers working on the island this summer.

"It was difficult to think about volunteers while all that was happening," Noble said.

Noble said the septic tank has been replaced as well. He said that project required maneuvering an excavator back and forth onto a boat and across the island. Noble said working on the island is time consuming and expensive.

"Working remotely adds to logistics and subtracts from production," he said.

Noble said on top of current renovation projects, Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse members and

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moment.

“We’re focusing on finishing what we have in front of us,” Noble said.

Coupe said Wood Island has its first new residents in the 14 years since Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse began. He said a flock of Canada Geese landed recently and don’t appear to be going anytime soon. Coupe said there is more maintenance required since the flock arrived, but volunteers have no plans to remove them.

“We will try to live in harmony,” he said.

Coupe said Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse is also trying, for the first time, an online reservation system for tours. He said in the past people interested in a tour had to call a week ahead of time to make a reservation. The new system allows people to schedule a tour for any available date during summer. He said the new system is working well and people are signing up.

“The driver for the new system was to relieve our volunteers otherwise tied to the phones all summer long,” Coupe said. “Hopefully we cut the need for much of that work.”

Noble said tours wouldn’t be possible without the work of many people including the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse board, groundskeepers, boat captain, boat crew and tour guides. He said lighthouses are iconic for a reason. Prior to the industrial age they were instrumental in navigation.

“They were integral to the early economy here,” Noble said. “We have a duty to preserve the history.”

Noble said he was surprised that many locals have never seen or visited the lighthouse. He said the lighthouse is not visible from the main beach at Biddeford Pool. The only locations on shore the lighthouse is visible from are Hills Beach, the public landing at Biddeford Pool or Maine Audubon’s East Point Sactuary.

“We have a great future in getting people out here,” Noble said. *Contact Staff Writer Grant McPherson at news@inthecourier.com*

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