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LONGFORM

To the lighthouse

Staten Island's elusive beacon harks back to a more rural past

By **Rebecca Bengal** | Oct 17, 2018, 8:00am EDT
Produced and Photographed by Chris Mottalini

In Virginia Woolf's best-known novel, Lily never made it inside the lighthouse, and on Staten Island, neither did I.

The lighthouse Lily painted—"a silvery, misty-looking tower, with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening"—was off the coast of Scotland; the Staten Island Range Lighthouse sits between Lighthouse Avenue and Edinboro Road in Mid Island, near Latourette Park and the historic town of Richmond Hill.

The Staten Island Range does, in many ways, resemble a solitary Scottish or English lighthouse, like Eddystone Rocks near Plymouth, England. It is pyramidal in shape with an octagonal tower 90 feet tall, made of brick and stone and iron. For the past 106 years the steady white light from the Staten Island Range has been a beacon for watercraft in Raritan Bay and for ships sailing in from the Atlantic Ocean bound for New York Bay, working in tandem with West Bank Lighthouse, five miles northwest.

Its original light was said to shine for 21 miles. In 1912, when the lighthouse was complete, a local paper wrote that its "great white ray of 300,000 candlepower will bore a hole through the gloom seaward."

It is surprising that an inland-dwelling lighthouse in New York would be very useful now, but at 145 feet above sea level, it is one of the tallest points on Staten Island. (The actual tallest is Todt Hill, with a natural summit of 401 feet). Today just the top of its tower is visible from New York Harbor. A second light was added to serve as the rear range light for the Swash Channel near Sandy Hook Point.

"People around here cut their treetops if they grow in the path of the beam," says Jerry Smith, a U.S. Postal Service mail carrier who has had a route on Lighthouse Hill for 14 years. "My wife's a photographer and every year I put a different photo of the lighthouse on my holiday card."

No one ever tries to send letters to the lighthouse, but mail intended for London, England, often winds up in Smith's bag because of the British-seeming street names in the neighborhood (London Road parallels

Writer Rebecca Bengal and photographer Chris Mottalini are exploring New York City's boroughs through its blocks, one each in the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. They previously visited City Island's Hunter Avenue, Manhattan's Washington Square Village and Silver Towers, and a stretch of 107th Street in Corona, Queens.

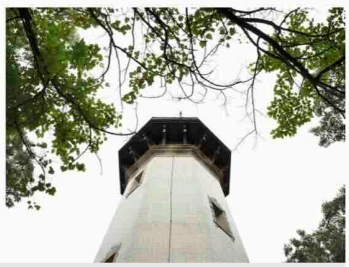
Edinboro). He has never been inside the lighthouse himself. Since the last volunteer caretaker retired in 2005, the Coast Guard resumed maintenance of the automated light. "You never really see them around here," Smith says, "but the light stays on."

Later, I call a succession of numbers at the Coast Guard. *Hello,* I say, leaving several voicemails that boil down to *I'm trying to get inside a lighthouse on Staten Island.* I don't really expect anyone to return my call, and for several days, no one does.

Because of the lighthouse, Lighthouse Avenue was one of the first paved roads in this part of Staten Island, then rural and agrarian. Now, Smith says, "I see deer on my route. I have schoolteachers, businessmen, doctors. I once had a former horse trainer who I think trained Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's horses."

The lighthouse is situated between two properties on Lighthouse Avenue, including the sprawling brick home with a terra-cotta roof originally built as a double dwelling to house two lighthouse keepers, with coal and vegetable bins in its cellars. It has long since been remodeled as a single-family home.







For several months, photographer Chris Mottalini and I have been exploring New York City's boroughs through its blocks. When we knock at the former lighthouse keeper's house, the grown son of the current resident, a local doctor, opens the door into an expansive-looking foyer. A television is audible in the background. His father "might" have a key to the lighthouse for emergencies, he allows, but he says he doesn't know for certain. We're welcome to walk around its exterior, and we do, passing through a driveway where a fountain bubbles over into a goldfish pond, and a Jeep is parked, a Wonder Woman cover over its spare tire.

I circle the base of the lighthouse, which is itself encircled by foliage, trying to imagine the view from above, houses shrouded in trees, maybe even the Jersey coast. Nine years ago the *New York Times* described the smell of the lighthouse's interior as "a mixture of a barnyard and a sun-baked patch of mud" and the sauna-like feeling of the lantern room. In a few days I will speak with a Coast Guard publicist who believes she has a lighthouse "contact" for me, though such a person fails to materialize. The doctor stops returning my calls for an interview without explanation. Close up, the lighthouse somehow feels even more remote than it did as I stared up at it from the streets below.

I wander those instead. A car blasting Metallica tears down Edinboro in the direction of the LaTourette golf course, which takes its name from an 1836 farmhouse on the edge of its green. In the opposite direction, the Wyeth house, an 1856 Italianate villa, remains empty but currently off the market; visible through its open windows are grand ceilings and a painted, wall-size mural of a horse-drawn carriage pulling up to a house much like the Wyeth itself.

Closer to the lighthouse, modernist houses (including Crimson Beech, the only house in New York City designed by Frank Lloyd Wright) sit next to Arts and Crafts cottages, colonials, and newly constructed duplexes with Halloween skeletons dancing in manicured front yards. Deeply ruched satin drapes mask the windows.

Among the first human inhabitants of Staten Island and its environs were three tribes of the Lenni-Lenape people, whose names are echoed in places near where they lived: The Tappan Zee Bridge over the Hudson River; the New Jersey city of Hackensack, and, abutting the eastern shore of Staten Island, within the lighthouse's scope, Raritan Bay. The first white men arrived in the early 1500s. On Staten Island the Lenape had made a living by hunting

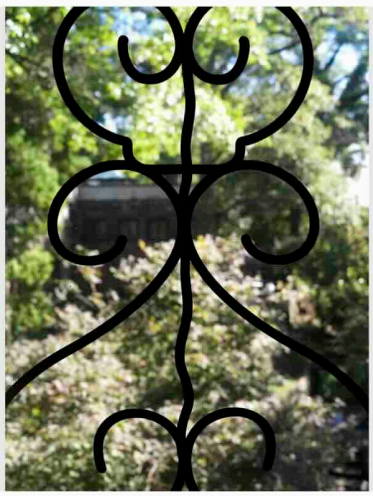
caribou and mastodons. They carved canoes out of tulip trees and paddled them with no lighthouse to guide the way.

One afternoon, I've stopped to speak to Jerry Smith in his mail truck when a silver Cadillac zooms up and a driver rolls down his window and screams at us for allegedly blocking the road. A woman in the passenger seat stares behind dark sunglasses, says nothing. The man accelerates and they zoom off again, a flash of Florida plates. The time is half past noon, on a day when much of the country is watching Christine Blasey Ford testify and undergo cross-examination.

It's impossible to tell if his outburst is mirroring a general national feeling or is simply a road-rage reaction to Lighthouse Hill's narrow, winding streets and lack of sidewalks. There had been plenty of room, after all, for the Cadillac to pass by, but perhaps it was a matter of perception. Things tend to shift in Lighthouse Hill—some of its houses were moved across the street, and so were some of the landmark buildings in historic Richmond Hill. A rural feeling still inhabits Lighthouse Hill; its woods are a little wilderness.

I can't get into the lighthouse, so I try other closed doors. Sari Kingsley's card features a cartoon illustration of a forlorn-looking fellow gazing out from a turret and the slogan *We Take the Hassle Out of Selling Your Castle!* "We won an award for it," she says, when I meet her one morning, and I can't tell if she's kidding. Do business cards really win awards? The castle at the top of her list actually looks like one, though, located in the pathway of the Staten Island Harbor Light and across Lighthouse Avenue, concealed behind a stone wall.

Built into the cliffside is a rambling fairy-tale structure of stucco and stone, with ceilings and rooms that seem to shrink and expand, eat-me, drink-me, Alice-in-Wonderland style. The front door opens into a living room with a 28-foot ceiling. Ashes spill from a fireplace—working!—and slanted windows are built into the cathedral roof ceiling. Small bedrooms upstairs and on the main floor look out over a deep, woodsy, stair-stepped yard, and, on a clear fall day before the leaves have fallen, over more yards and a tall church steeple and into a slice of blue sea in the distance. It feels like a treehouse.





A large kitchen is below the main floor, next to a humidor and a wine cellar added by the most recent owner, a retired horseman. Curiouser and curiouser. Outside, an adjoining workshop is large enough to serve as an artist's studio. There are no artists in residence, but there could be—say, an artist who might also like a humidor, who can meet the asking price of $999,000, and who doesn't mind the occasional deer grazing in the backyard. And, of course, an extraordinary beam of light shining nearby.

It has changed hands a couple times in the interim, but this is the former home of Jacques Marchais, the chosen name of an Ohio-born child actress who moved there with her second husband, George, in 1921. Marchais had sought a farmlike environment in commuting distance of Manhattan, and at the time, not counting the lighthouse, hers was one of the few houses in a remote-seeming part of the island. It was the perfect place to envision an unprecedented collection of Tibetan and Buddhist art, which she would house inside the first example of Himalayan-style architecture in the United States.

The Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art is a rustic complex connected to its founder's former home, which the museum would like to acquire (Marchais herself died in 1947, not long after the museum opened its doors).

Though Marchais never traveled to Mongolia or Nepal or any of the countries from which she assiduously collected sculptures, "She was really ahead of her time in having this interest in Tibet and India, and in Buddhism and spirituality, but from the point of view of an art dealer," says Meg Ventrudo, the museum's executive director. "This was before any Tibetan monks had a presence in the U.S."

Marchais focused her interests on sculpture, like the 17th century Nepalese altar tables, Tibetan offering bowls, and bodhisattva figures currently in the main gallery, which also serves as a gathering room for weekly meditation and tai chi and performances from Sri

Lankan dancers which tend to draw members of Staten Island's large Sri Lankan community. Only about 30 percent of the museum's collection is on view at a given time, explains Ventrudo, the executive director. The rest is kept in storage, or on loan to other collections, including the Rubin Museum of Art in Manhattan.

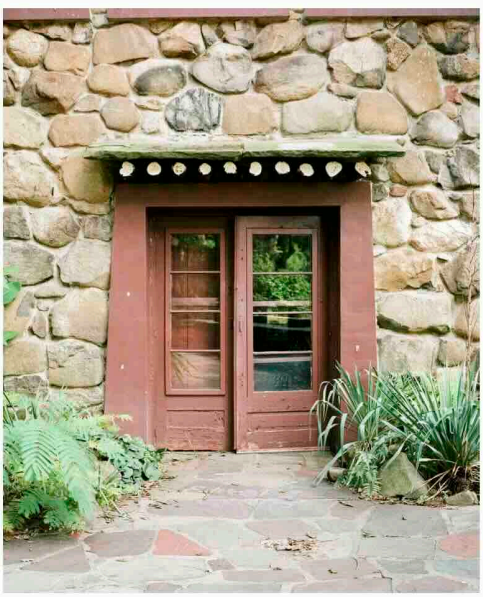
Even the original approach to the grounds was Himalayan in nature. Originally, says Ventrudo, "you used to hike up the cliff as if you were hiking to a monastery." Dogwood and rhododendron and witch hazel—plants native to the Himalayas—cover the hillside and logs protrude from the eaves and window frames; the structures are made using local fieldstone. "The greatest thing is when families from Tibet or Nepal visit and tell us, 'This reminds me of home.'"

Deer wander through too, and a large, shy turtle has taken up residence in a fish pond next to two crumbling meditation cells. The museum's carpenter, Abe Segarra, was in the process of restoring two towering sculpted cranes that stand on the stone patio by a garden of flowers and quince trees and a row of fluttering, multicolored prayer flags. One winter, after a sudden, deep snow fell, a friend who'd promised to arrive with a tow truck kept missing the destination—since then Segarra has added a sign to the fortress-like fieldstone wall on Lighthouse Avenue. The museum had achieved its goal of blending into the landscape.

The last person to spend a truly significant amount of time inside the lighthouse was an ardent volunteer caretaker. In 1992, when the Coast Guard's budget for the Staten Island Range lighthouse was cut, the agency got a call from a resident of Dongan Hills. Joe Esposito was in his 50s at the time, a superintendent of buildings and bridges for Staten Island Rapid Transit and a carpenter and electrician.

Lighthouses were a new obsession for Esposito, who had suffered a heart attack earlier that year. "He was annoyed he couldn't smoke in the hospital," his youngest daughter, Elizabeth Campbell, tells me from New Dorp Beach, where she lives now. Esposito spent his nights at the hospital restlessly wandering the hallways. "One night, he saw a lighthouse poster, and that was it," Campbell says. He didn't have an explanation, just a pull. "He said, 'It drew me in.'"

There are at least 10 lighthouses on or near Staten Island, and Esposito first considered lending his time to others, until his daughter mentioned one closer by. "To get to the mall from our house we passed by it and I always used to stare up at the lighthouse on the hill from the car," Campbell says. The Coast Guard gave Esposito a skeleton key and entrusted him with the lighthouse's day-to-day responsibilities including changing its large, thousand-watt bulb.



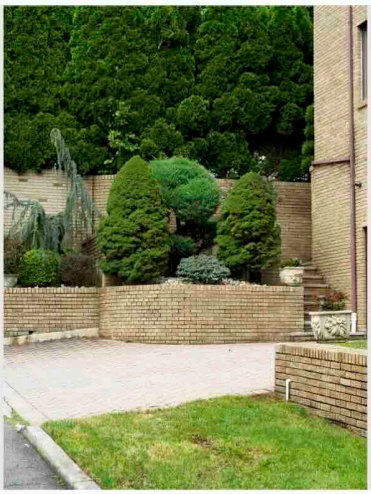


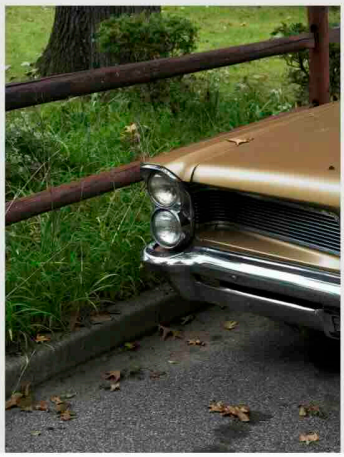
For the last 15 years of Esposito's life, "we ate, drank, and slept lighthouses," Campbell says. While Esposito landscaped the grounds and added handwritten entries to the lighthouse's logbook, she'd often accompany him, running up the 101 rail-less steps to the lantern room to clean the windows and the widow's walk that encircles the tower. "Honestly that freaked me out a little," says Campbell. "They don't call it a widow's walk for nothing! But you could look down and see all of [the historic town] of Richmond Hill. You could look out over the ocean."

During his service, her father led historical tours and advocated for the preservation of other lighthouses; he was instrumental in the founding of the National Lighthouse Museum in St. George. But in 2001, Esposito's heart trouble and lingering complications from a back injury made it impossible for him to continue his volunteer post. "He said he felt like he was losing his old friend," Campbell says; the Coast Guard presented him with a citation for

meritorious service. Esposito continued to make models of the lighthouse he'd served—one of the larger ones is on display in the museum. He whittled and fashioned other models out of unexpected materials: baseball bats, firehoses, scrap metal. He died in 2005.

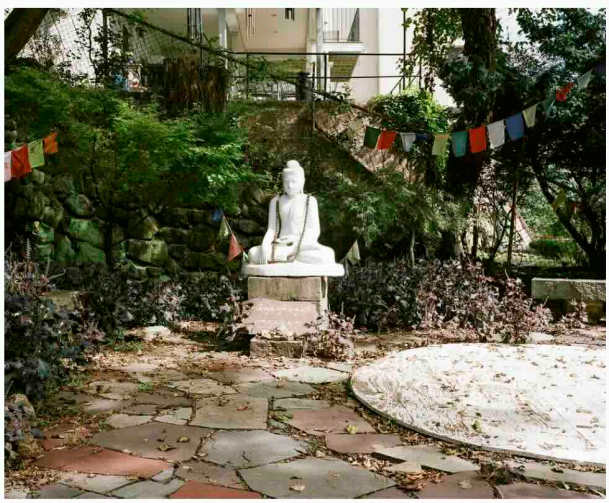
Campbell lives in New Dorp Beach and is principal of Holy Rosary School. She estimates it's been 18 or 20 years since she set foot in the lighthouse but recently, she and her three siblings—Joann, Ellena, and Joseph—petitioned the Coast Guard to collectively resume Esposito's volunteer post. Thirteen years have passed since their father's death, and "we're all still very lost without him," she says. Seeing his handwriting, and her own teenage entries, recorded in the old 1912-era logbook, will surely bring back "a lot," Campbell reckons. "Whenever I drive by the lighthouse, I always say hi."







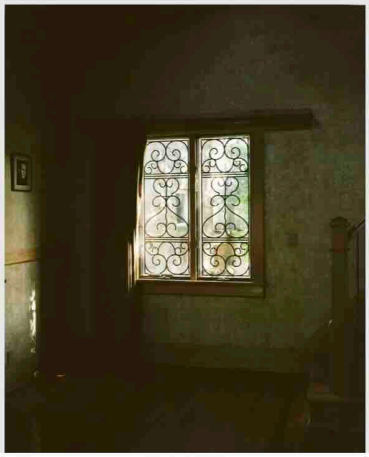




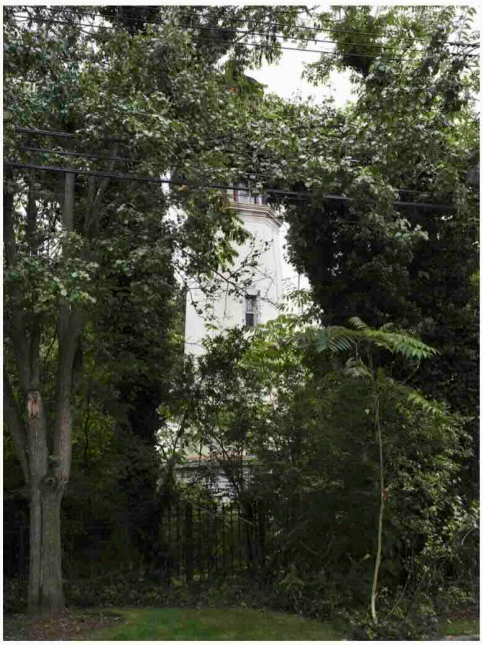


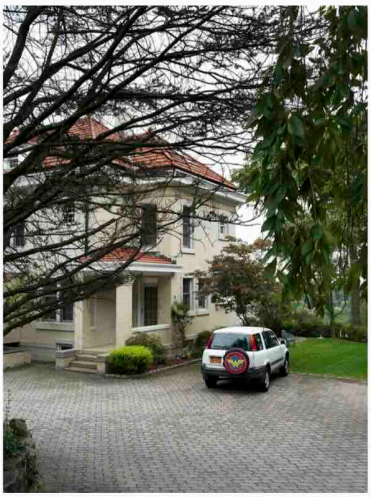


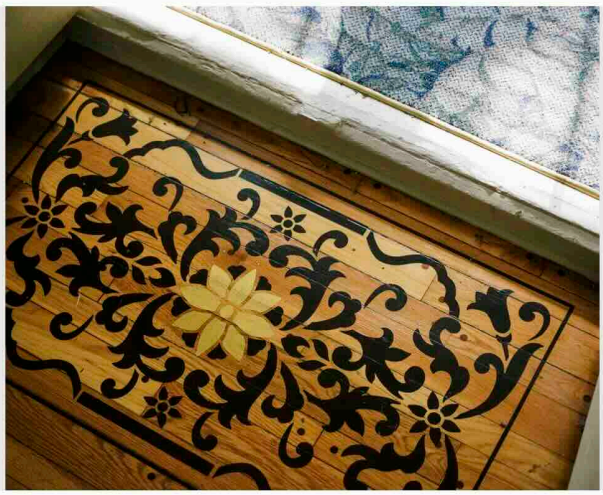




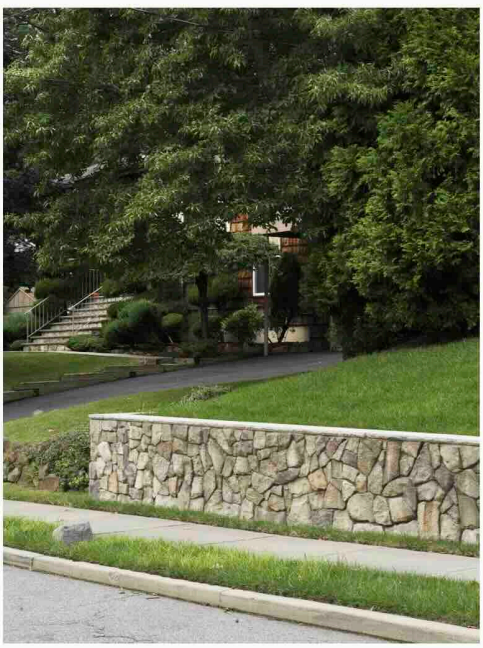


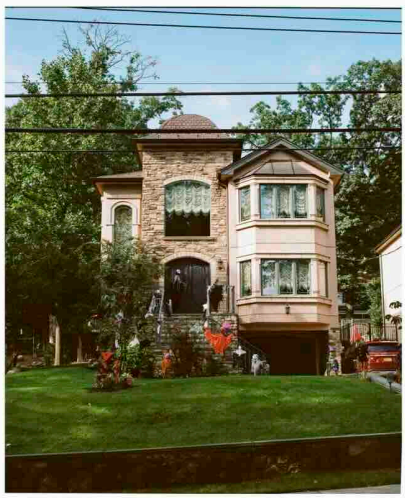














Rebecca Bengal lives in Brooklyn and writes fiction and nonfiction. Recent and forthcoming publications include the Guardian, Aperture, Vogue, Bookforum, the Paris Review, Oxford American, *and* Lapham's Quarterly.

Chris Mottalini is a photographer based in New York City. Much of his work deals with the photographic preservation of Modernist architecture and its place in the American landscape. His most recent book is Land of Smiles.

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