TOWN HISTORIAN

320 Shore Road, Stratford, CT, 06497
March 27, 1989.

Janice Wynn, Chairman,
Booth Park Commission.
Dear Jan;

One of the local newspapers said that you are looking for documentation for the lighthouse lens and cupola stored at Boothe. As Town Historian, I'm usually available to research this kind of thing, but in this case I already have the answer for you, because I'm responsible for it.

The lens and cupola were donated to the town for display at Boothe Park by the Stratford Historical Society in 1969. I worked directly with town manager Dick Blake on this. It's an interesting story, and here it is.

It started not with the cupola or lens at all, but with the compressed air typhon horn (diaphone) that used to sound at Stratford Point in foggy weather, installed in 1911. As part of the Coast Guard automation program in the 1960s, the huge bronze low pitched diaphone was replaced by a new horn.

Harold Lovell came up with the idea that the old horn might grace the lawn at the Historical Society. These excerpts from Society executive board minutes tell the story.

"June 28, 1965. It was announced that the Stratford Point Light is going modern. Mrs. Lovell [in Mr. Lovell's absence] said there were some brass instruments which she heard were to be given to the Mystic Seaport and it was felt that some things should remain in Stratford. Mrs. Lovell will check again as to what might be obtained by the Stratford Historical Society. Also she is to inquire about the light (glass prism)."

"Oct. 25, 1965. Mrs. Lovell ... had contacted Mr. Fox regarding the items from Stratford lighthouse. Mr. Winton continued to report at this point on the old fog horns. These will be set on the grounds, and pressure will be continued to obtain some of the old brass pieces which were used at the light during the oil lamp days. A motion was made by Mrs. Miller and seconded by Mrs. Richardson that a letter requesting the fog horns and the brass pieces be sent to Chief Bos'n K. T. Outten at Eaton's Neck, N. Y. for preservation at the Stratford Historical Society."

"Nov. 26, 1965. Mrs. Lovell reported that she had written to Mr. Outten regarding the acquisition of articles from the Stratford lighthouse."

"Jan. 28, 1966. The Coast Guard advised they are to have their own museum and will keep the brasses from Stratford lighthouse."

"Feb. 28, 1966. A letter was read from the U. S. Coast Guard that they intend to build a museum and keep the brasses. It was felt that the society should be on record with our U. S. Senators, stating that some of the relics of the old Stratford light be kept in Stratford."

"April 25, 1966. Mr. Stanley Johnson read a letter, dictated by Mr. Winton [president] copies of which were sent to the U. S. Coast Guard and U. S. Senators Dodd and Ribicoff, stating the reasons the Society feel that some of the relics of the old Stratford Light should be kept in Stratford."

May 20, 1966. Mr. Lovell reported that in spite of valiant efforts to obtain the old foghorns from Stratford Light, the Coast Guard has finally informed him that they have been destroyed through some error."

"June 27, 1966. It was moved by Mrs. Miller and seconded by Mrs. Mussler that Mr. Winton write to the Commandant, the two U. S. Senators and the Governor regarding the brasses and the lighthouse fixtures."

"Aug. 29, 1966. Mr. Winton said that he has received no reply to his letters regarding the Fog Horns to Senators or the Governor."

In September that year I took over as president of the Stratford Historical Society, and almost immediately received a surprise when a Coast Guard truck showed up unannounced with the fresnel lens from Stratford Shoals (Middleground) Light for us to keep. (See the enclosed newspaper article.)

The society stored the lens for a few years. In 1969, as a director of the society, when I found out that the Stratford Point light was to be automated, I wrote to ask for the 1100 pound cast iron framed cupola to go with the Stratford Shoals lens we had, to be displayed together. Without hesitation, Mr. Wooten gave us the cupola. (See enclosed letter to the Society at my home address.)

However, the Stratford Historical Society had in the meantime had a change of heart, and was on an eighteenth century kick, so I had to find another home for it. Town manager Dick Blake was very receptive to the idea of displaying it at Boothe Park, and a town truck delivered it from the lighthouse to the park.

The Society's executive board minutes for Oct. 27, 1969, report: "Mr. Knapp reported that the town has taken the lighthouse 'cuppola' to Boothe Park. He recommended that the Historical Socity donate the Fresnel Lenses to go with it, along with the lanterns."

The Stratford Historical Society did then donate the lens from Middleground to go with the Stratford Point housing to the town of Stratford to display for educational purposes at Boothe Park. Both items have been at the park for twenty years.

Now, wearing another hat as town appointed Town Historian, I'm busy surfacing the town's half forgotten maritime history, and find that Stratford Point lighthouse was an important part of it. We're all pretty busy celebrating our tricentquinquagenary (sic) this year, but next year is the Coast Guard's 200th, and wouldn't it be great if the Boothe Park Commission could at last do what was intended twenty years ago -- that is, build a concrete block lighthouse tower structured and exhibit the light for educational purposes. I understand the Coast Guard has offered to work with you, and I'm sure other volunteers like the local power squadron would, also. Or, if the town can't swing it, there must be other spots along our Stratford shore where some private organization would erect it and display it for the public.

We've waited a long time since the Historical Society donated it for that puropose; let's put it on active display.

Town Historian,

Lewis G. Knapp

cc:Richard Blake
Helen Chagares
Ronald Owens
Stratford Historical Society
Stratford News
Stratford Star
Historical Files