

Long Island Volunteer Hall of Fame

Archive Project

Inception to Induction

Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society

Year of Founding: 1979

Issue(s) Addressed: Building Restoration, Cultural Resource, Architectural Salvage

Induction Category & Year: Historic Preservation, 2006

Founder: Thomas Roberts III

Personal Quote from Founder: “I had previously been working abroad, but when I heard that the Coast Guard was going to knock down such an important part of Long Island’s history, I decided to get involved locally.”

History: In 1979, Thomas Roberts III saw a Newsday article that said the Coast Guard was going to abandon the Fire Island Lighthouse building due to a lack of funding. Robert was a long-time resident of Bay Shore and he said to his wife, “This is terrible and this can’t happen!” She responded, “Well, you travel all over the country, you do things for other people, but you don’t do anything locally. I dare you to get involved.”

They tried calling the National Sea Shore, but they didn’t have the funds to maintain the lighthouse either. With no organization to prevent the lighthouse from further deteriorating, whether from natural decay or vandalism, Roberts feared that the lighthouse would most likely be demolished. The Fire Island Lighthouse used to have a “sister lighthouse” in Shinnecock Canal, fifteen years earlier. But since the Coast Guard no longer had any need for it, they stopped funding it and had the lighthouse torn down. Fearing the same fate for the Fire Island Lighthouse, Roberts created the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society.

Since its founding in 1979, the Lighthouse Preservation Society was able to transfer ownership of the Fire Island Lighthouse from the Coast Guard through the General Service Administration to the National Park Service in 1981. However, the National Park Service also had difficulty providing the funding necessary to maintain the lighthouse’s stability.

At this point, the Lighthouse Preservation Society became incorporated and started a fundraising campaign to restore the lighthouse to its previous state and keep up maintenance. The fundraising campaign was able to raise nearly 1.4 million dollars and repair much of the damage done over the years.

In 1986, the society celebrated its success with a re-lighting ceremony. Over 7,000 boats gathered in the Great South Bay to celebrate the occasion.

That same year, the society worked out an arrangement with the Coast Guard that allowed the lighthouse to function as a private aid to maritime navigation. Since then, the National Park Service has opened the lighthouse to the public, but only with limited visitation.

In 1996, the National Park Service requested that the society privately manage and run the Fire Island Lighthouse. The Lighthouse Preservation Society then became the only party responsible for maintaining the lighthouse. At that time, the lighthouse received an average of 30,000 visitors a year. Today the number is as high as 140,000 visitors, including 7,000 elementary school students who visit annually.

The Fire Island Lighthouse is almost exclusively funded through private donations with little to no corporate or governmental funding. Most of this revenue comes from donations from the community and the small fees they charge for tours of the lighthouse tower. The society earns \$300,000 dollars a year, but they operate on a “break even” basis. They had an endowment fund from 1985 to 1987, but the revenue is being saved in case of emergency. The lighthouse might need repairs and the Federal Government is unable to provide the funds.

The Fire Island Lighthouse Society offers roughly 32 special events throughout the year. Most of these are free and open to the public. There is the very popular dinner-dance held in August, a “barefoot black-tie” beach party, an art show, as well as numerous educational programs, children’s activities and fundraisers.

Like many other National Parks, The Fire Island Lighthouse offers Junior Ranger booklets for children and a scavenger hunt that encourages them to explore the island and learn more about each part of the island. Children who complete their booklets will receive an honorary pin or patch to commemorate their achievement.

The society has two full time employees, two part time employees, three seasonal employees, and 80 volunteers. This staff allows them to at least “break even” on an annual basis, but anyone is welcome to join the volunteers.

Thanks to the efforts of the society, the Fire Island Lighthouse is open 12 months a year, 7 days a week, weather permitting. As Mr. Roberts stated, “If we’re not open, you probably wouldn’t be coming here to begin with.”

As for the society’s current projects, they are in the process of re-acquiring the original lens that the lighthouse used in 1974. The first order Fresnel lens was removed from the top of the lighthouse tower and put on display for nearly 40 years at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. About three years ago, the Fresnel lens was returned to the Coast Guard who in turn loaned it to the National Park Service. The Fire Island Lighthouse Society is now in the process of building a monument next to the lighthouse where they plan to

reassemble the decades old lens and put it on display for new generations who wish to see a piece of Long Island's heritage.

In the words of Thomas Roberts himself, "It will be a monumental addition to the educational facilities [of Fire Island] and it will be very important to the maritime history of Long Island as a whole."

The dedication of this building will take place on July 22, 2011. Once completed, the memorial building will be fully open to the public for visitation, free of charge.

In addition to the Long Island Volunteer Hall of Fame, the Long Island Maritime School personally honored Thomas Roberts III for his work in preserving maritime heritage. Just this year, Thomas Roberts also personally received a commendation from the Town of Islip for his work in historic preservation.

Agency Mission: Preservation and maintenance of the Fire Island Lighthouse.

Population Served: 135,000-140,000

Scope of Activities: Fundraising, tours, education.

Volunteer Involvement: 2 full time employees, 2 part time employees, 3 seasonal employees, and 80 volunteers.

Affiliate Organizations: Bank of New York Mellon, Design Edge Inc., Flag Oil Co., Frank Bros. Fuel Oil Co., Inc., www.limaritime.org, Hampton Inn Brookhaven, Holiday Inn Express Hauppauge, Long Island Hotels, Quogue Sinclair Fuel Inc., www.exploresouthshore.org, Swezey Fuel Co., Inc., W.C. ESP Inc., State Utilities, www.edwardmooneyphotography.com, www.fireislandwireless.com

Contact Information:

Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society
4640 Captree Island, NY 11702-4601
631-661-4876
631-321-7028
www.fireislandlighthouse.com

Submitted by:
Casey Rattner
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