Restoration of landmark lighthouse is complete

A restoration project was recently completed at Beavertail Light, which houses the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum. The restoration, which replaced deteriorating iron and metal work, among other improvements, took 11 months to complete.
Photo courtesy of Varoujan Karentz

By Varoujan Karentz

The first major restoration in more than 150 years was recently completed at the historic Beavertail Light Station.

While the history of the light dates back to 1749 — 27 years before the Revolutionary War — the present granite light tower and its joining keeper's quarters were built in 1856. Forty years later, in 1896, a second house was built for the assistant keeper.

That structure now houses the BLMA museum.

The property, owned by the U.S. Coast Guard, had gradually fallen into disrepair since the Coast Guard automated the light in 1972 and removed its personnel from the site. During the following years, attempts to stabilize and preserve the buildings were made by both the town of Jamestown and the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association. Unfortunately, however, conditions continued to deteriorate, and safety and severe moisture damage remediation was necessary.

With monies procured through two grant programs — $227,000 from the Champlin Foundations and a $100,000 matching grant from the R.I. Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission — BLMA hired ABCORE Restorations Inc. of Narragansett to undertake the 11-month-long restoration project.

ABCORE Inc. had previously completed restoration of the Dutch Island Light and Plum Beach Light. The company performed the work at Beavertail, making every effort to preserve the historical accuracy of the buildings.

All deteriorated "iron" and metal work above the granite portion of the light tower has been replaced or repaired. All window panes surrounding the light have been replaced with new glass, and all metal castings were taken down to bare metal. The entire external cast-iron lantern deck, railings and supports were removed, and new deck plates were cast from molds replicated by ABCORE, manufactured by a foundry, sandblasted and prepared for painting.

New deck supporting members were also fabricated and installed. The gallery main deck external railings were removed and new sections were forged. New corroded corner plate castings were cast and welded to the existing lower deck structure. The gallery deck railings and balusters were removed, recast as necessary, sandblasted, prepared for hot zinc galvanizing, and then epoxy coated, painted and reinstalled.

The interior of the gallery deck "watch room," paneled with decorative wooden vertical siding, has been meticulously scraped clean of multi-year paint layers, sanded to bare wood and finished to its original condition

Masonry reconstruction work on the external granite blocks of the light tower was accomplished by removing deteriorated and loose mortar between each seam of each granite block by hand tools to a depth of two inches. More than 1,400 linear feet of mortar was removed. The replacement mortar, formulated to replicate the original lime and cement mix used 150 years ago, was then re-pointed.

After a void of many years, the historical vent ball and lightning rod on top of the light dome has a replacement wind vane, complements of the contractor.

While the work on the light tower was being done, the two keeper houses were sealed from damaging water and moisture intrusion. Rotted roof soffits have been replaced, along with floor joists and entrance thresholds. The gutters of both houses have been repaired, and a new replacement chimney was constructed on the assistant keeper's house.

All of the loose and peeling "parge" coating — the exterior brick protective skim coat — was also removed and both buildings were "re-parged" and repainted to a gleaming white.

During the restoration period, the museum remained open with its full complement of docents, conducting tours and informing visitors about its history and that of other lighthouses in Narragansett Bay. The museum's season culminated in an invitation to the public to visit Beavertail to see the new look of the buildings and safely climb to the top of the tower via the internal spiral staircase to the outside catwalk deck.

Varoujan Karentz is a member of the board of the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association.

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