

A Whole New Light

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The newly lit Dutch Island Lighthouse, as seen from the Saunderstown shore. Years of work made the celebration possible.

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NORTH KINGSTOWN — A cannon sounded, the countdown began, and a little after 7 last night, the 1857 Dutch Island Lighthouse light blinked on for the first time in more than two decades.

Two seconds on, four seconds off, the six-second cycle beamed on, and will stay on, according to Dutch Island Lighthouse Society director Scott Chapin, “24/7, 365 days a year.”

“This is great, it’s very special to everyone here,” Chapin said. Earlier in the day, he helped set up the solar-powered light in the structure’s lantern room, a major milestone for the tower that had been deteriorating for decades.

Through the efforts of the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society, years of fundraising brought the all-volunteer group to the point last night, with the restoration finished, and the go-ahead obtained from the Coast Guard, where members were ready to light the light once again.

Contractors have been on site since August, cleaning up the graffiti-smearred building at the southern tip of the 81-acre Dutch Island, which sits in the West Passage of Narragansett Bay and is part of Jamestown. With the work complete, an outdoor celebration was held in the torch-lit Saunderstown front yard of the Rhein family, which faces the 150-year-old lighthouse.

Those gathered were warmed by big hopes and cups of hot cider. More than 50 people on the Saunderstown side of the light waited in brisk temperatures to see the red beacon flash once again.

Shouts of “It’s on! Unbelievable,” let out, but perhaps no one was as excited as Shirley Sheldon to see the light shine again, though she was watching from indoors by way of computer magic. The Saunderstown artist, 84, tuned in with the help of a Web-cam set up especially for her, installed so she could hear the countdown and declare “Light the light!” which she gladly did.

The cheers of those standing alongside the shoreline marked the end of one chapter of work in support of the historic structure. Money was raised in ways big and small, from the sale of T-shirts to applying for and obtaining grants to get this seaside structure shipshape once again.

“I like seeing things get fixed rather than just tossed away,” said neighbor Robin Squibb, who spent many of her childhood days sailing to Dutch Island, scrambling around the lighthouse.

“We used to call it treasure island,” recalled light the lighthouse party host Jane Rheim. “It was magical.”

The Dutch Island Lighthouse has its own history among Rhode Island’s two-dozen plus lighthouses, a history the lighthouse society is determined to maintain.

With renovations already in progress, the society received initial approval from the Coast Guard’s Boston district in late September to install a flashing light. The light had been decommissioned in 1979.

The addition of the light itself was supported by an anonymous donation, Chapin said.

Abcore Restoration of Narragansett began work on the 42-foot tower in mid-August. Financing for the work came from the \$135,000 raised by the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society, and a \$120,000 grant from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Additional money will be needed to maintain the structure, Chapin said, so while the light shines, the work is far from over.

Restoration has included interior and exterior repairs to the stucco and brick structure, guano removal, replacement of floors and metal work, and the repair of interior stairs. Graffiti and rust have been covered over, and the tower now has a white-colored stucco finish.

The finishing elements are expected to be completed this week, said Keith Lescarbeau, Abcore Restoration owner, who, after spending more than three months at the lighthouse, sees it as being “very, very sound.”

Lescarbeau and his crew have been involved in the restoration of five lighthouses, each structure having its own problems and challenges.

“It takes twice as long to do anything,” he said last week from the landing craft he docks against rocks and old tires at the eastern side of Dutch Island.

When he first approached the project, he said the lighthouse “was all green and mossy looking,” and suffered damage not just from the elements, but also from vandals. Now, with the original lantern room painted an elegant black and trimmed with bronze, and the stucco on the four-sided tower (“it took two of us nine days,” Lescarbeau said of that process), the lighthouse stands out, he said, rather than sinking into the landscape.

Windows have been secured with black steel panels, as has the door.

Standing alongside the lantern house at the structure’s highest point, Lescarbeau pointed out “little details no one will ever see,” such

as the four corners “which were all broken. We took the best corner to Cumberland Foundry to be reconstructed.”

Lescarbeau admired them, looking a little crestfallen that the finish work will mostly be admired by seagulls.

At the moment, the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society is looking towards keeping what it has in tip-top condition, and keeping it lit, which it was, officially, last night, when Chapin’s 16-year-old son, Dannel, removed a black covering from the light that had been turned on earlier in the day, allowing it to shine through the darkness once more.

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