

Dutch Island lighthouse shines for mariners

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By Sam Bari



An early photo of the Dutch Island Light. A dozen cars and twice as many people lined the shore at Fort Getty on the Jamestown side of Dutch Island last Saturday night. All eyes were focused on the freshly painted Dutch Island Lighthouse tower that was bathed in white light. At approximately 7:18 p.m., a red light blinked 42-feet above ground atop the tower.

A cheer went up from the small crowd. Across the water on the Saunderstown side, more than fifty of their counterparts also expressed their enthusiasm. Four seconds later, the light blinked again for two seconds. The light in the 1857 Dutch Island Lighthouse had completed its first cycle in more than 28-years, inspiring more cheers and praise from the groups celebrating the long-awaited return of the historical beacon.

Although the light was scheduled to be turned on at 7 p.m., "We were a few minutes late because we were waiting for Macy Webster's sons to bring down their cannon for the countdown," Dutch Island Lighthouse Society director Scott Chapin said. "Now it will stay on every night, 24/7, 365 days a year," he continued. Webster was a much-loved state representative in the 1960s and had also served on the planning commission.

Although Shirley Sheldon was not at the site, nobody was more excited or enthusiastic than the renowned, 84-year-old Saunderstown artist who watched from indoors via a computer camera set up exclusively for her. She was asked to make the declaration to "Light the light," which she did with gusto after listening to the countdown.

Shouts of "Yes!" "This is great!" and "Fantastic!" were heard on both sides of the water.

Chapin helped set up the solarpowered light in the lantern room on Saturday afternoon. After the countdown, Chapin's 16-year-old son, Daniel, removed a black covering to reveal the light that had been turned on earlier in the day.

Dutch Island Lighthouse Society members had much to cheer about. The lighting of the beacon was a major milestone in their efforts to restore the structure to its original glory.

Although they settled for a red blinking light instead of a turning beacon shining through a Fresnel lens, society members were happy to have the navigational aid in place to guide mariners through a potentially dangerous passage. The blinking red light supports the navigational rule "red right returning," letting boat operators know to keep the light to their starboard side when going up the bay in the West Passage.

Seeing the magnificent restoration makes it difficult to believe that little more than three

months ago, the proud structure at the southern tip of Dutch Island was little more than a rusted, deteriorated shell of a bygone beacon that withstood the perils of time and elements.

After years of fund-raising, through donations, the sale of T-shirts, and applying for government grants, the faithful and diligent society members raised more than \$135,000 with an additional \$120,000 in a grant from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. The light itself was made possible by a contribution from an anonymous donor.

"We're off to a great start," Chapin said, "but we still have a long way to go." Their goal is to raise \$200,000 to maintain the structure and keep the lamp lit for mariners in perpetuity, Chapin said.

Richard Ventrone, Jr., an architect from Newport Collaborative Architects, designed the lighthouse exterior to restore the structure and reflect its historic appearance. Olga Bachilova, director of preservation at NCA worked closely with Keith Lescarbeau, owner of Abcore Restoration, the contracting company awarded the restoration project. After spending more than three months at the lighthouse, Lescarbeau said that he sees it as being "very, very sound."

The restoration included interior and exterior repairs, removal of years of guano deposits, replacement of floors and metal work, and the repair of interior stairs. Graffiti and rust stains have been painted over, and the tower now has a white, stucco finish. The pump house next to the tower has also been restored and painted.

Dutch Island is Lescarbeau's fifth lighthouse rebuilding project in the last five years. A seasoned historic restoration specialist for 30 years, Lescarbeau has woven his magic at notable sites like Plum Beach Light and Rose Island. The 16-inch walls on the bottom and 1-foot thick walls on top of the Dutch Island tower made it a good bet for rebuilding, he said.

Now that the first phase of restoration is completed, a blessing has been received from the Coast Guard, and the light has been lit, DILS members can bask in the light of the sweet glow of success.