STRAITSMOUTH ISLAND TO OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 180 YEARS

Straitsmouth Island had been owned by the federal government since the first lighthouse was built in 1835. In 1941, it was sold to a series of private owners until it was donated by the last owner to Mass Audubon in 1967. Through all those years until 2018 the public had been denied access. In 2019, with the cooperation of Mass Audubon and the Town of Rockport (who now owns the lighthouse and 1.8 acres) this National Historic Register site will be open to the public for the first time in over 180 years. The completion of a landing ramp on the Gap Cove side of Straitsmouth is the first step in opening the island to visitors. Syd Wedmore, chairman of the Thacher/Straitsmouth Island Town Committee, has announced a “soft opening” for June. Kayakers are welcome on the island, with the understanding that visitor amenities like a composting toilet, visitor center, and walking trails are works in progress. Further upgrades will be made during the summer by work crew and by keepers, who will be housed on the island for the first time since the 1920s. The island will be open to the public from June 1 to August 31.

Because a winch and hoist engine need to be installed on the ramp, there will be no scheduled launch trips to Straitsmouth until the summer of 2020, but a re-dedication ceremony on the island is planned for August.

Charles was the third member of the extended Wheeler family to walk into the bickering and backbiting that came with the head keeper’s job on Thacher Island in the first half of the 1800s. Aaron Wheeler, who was appointed in 1814, served for 20 years despite fierce opposition from prominent local political figure Rufus Choate. His cousin Austin Wheeler lasted only three years before turning stewardship of the island over to his brother Charles in 1837. Charles endured the situation until 1848, when he took his growing anger, along with a basket of Thacher Island grapes, to the Cape Ann Telegraph and News office.

Not only were accusations of incompetence untrue, he claimed, he had worked hard with no reward for his extra efforts. He had created and fenced a garden, planted trees, planked the cellar and installed a boiler, assisted in several rescues, and housed mariners without accepting monetary rewards from any of them. More important, he had improved the lights. “I have also invented and put to use a good and useful lighthouse lamp, which saves the government not less than $30 a year,” he followed up in a letter to the paper in 1849. “They have now been in use eleven years which has made a savings, in stoves and fuel, of not less than $300 . . . And the only recompense or thanks I received is the Secretary has been kind enough to notify me that my services are no longer required. . . ” Continued on Page 3
Work Crew Profile RICH AND SANDY LORIGAN

While Rich Lorigan admits that some of his stories are invented — he worked for the CIA, he was a rock musician — at least one of his stories is true, and it ends with a bang. After graduation from the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut (where he met his future wife, Sandy, in an art class), Rich built a career in marketing communications (advertising, PR, and sales promotion) for a series of computer hardware and software companies. His first employer, Honeywell Information Systems, sent Rich to Toronto as its marketing communications manager for Canada. The Lorigans' two-year residency corresponded with the rise of American anti-Vietnam War activism. While others in their age group were choosing Canadian residency, the Lorigans felt the pull of patriotism and chose to return to the Boston area. Rich was working for Honeywell’s North American headquarters in Wellesley when an anti-Vietnam War activist asked to fill in on a short-handed island launch. 

Rich eased himself into that retirement with a part-time job as a marketing and sales rep for a Boston printing company. His four-mornings-a-week work schedule allowed him to collect his grandchildren Max and Charlie from their Somerville daycare center and drive them to Rockport for weekends. Their Florida granddaughter, Alina, has summered with them for the past 10 years, and her stepbrother, Alex, has visited as well. When their children were older, Sandy became a travel agent for a series of agencies that included Hideaways International, Caboose Travel in Gloucester, and DWT Vacations. In the end she worked from home, having retained a small clientele for whom she designed mostly high-end travel packages. She also worked with the Mission Group from Cape Ann’s St. Joachim and St. Ann churches that traveled yearly to the Dominican Republic. Sandy volunteers with Open Door and has raised packages. She also worked with the Mission Group from Cape Ann’s St. Joachim and St. Ann churches that traveled yearly to the Dominican Republic. Sandy volunteers with Open Door and has raised money for the annual Alzheimer's walk.

Even before retirement, Rich volunteered for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and began regular blood donations to the Red Cross that now total nine gallons. After retirement he added Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, Rockport’s Millbrook Meadow Restoration Committee, and Thacher Island. This summer will be the third year he and Sandy have served as keepers, but his involvement started about 10 years ago as a hammer-and-paintbrush-wielding member of work crew. One day he was asked to fill in on a short-handed island launch. “That was it,” he said. “I loved it.” He especially likes the bowman position. He enjoys talking to the tourists, and he relishes the sea and sky. Standing at the bow of the Thacher Island launch, he sees an ample amount of both.

Charles Wheeler: Beleaguered Keeper

He had been head keeper on Thacher for a dozen years, during which time his wife, Sally, had died of consumption, leaving him with seven children. He was angry, and now he was done with Thacher Island. “I only wish it was in my power to find words to express my gratitude to my influential Whig friends of Gloucester and Rockport for volunteering their services to retain me on the island, but I have been so shamefully abused for the 12 years past that I do not wish to be retained here any longer...” he said in his final letter to the paper. William Hale took over as head keeper in August 1849. It’s hard to know the truth, especially after the passage of so many years. Charles Wheeler felt he had improved the lights — he did hold a patent for a device that prevented oil from freezing in the lamps — but he may not have done it as single-handedly as he claimed. He may have worked with Winslow Lewis, the supplier of Argand lamps to all US lighthouses, and Winslow Lewis was a problematic character.

Lewis came under criticism from, among others, his own nephew, lighthouse engineer I. W. P. Lewis, who charged that his uncle’s personal friend, Stephen Peaslyon, the fifth auditor at the US Treasury Department, relied on Winslow to prepare the specifications for the Argand lamps to be purchased by the government. Winslow then bid on and won the contracts to provide those lamps. In addition, while Winslow’s reworking of a previous Argand design saved the government 50 percent of the fuel required to illuminate the nation’s lighthouses, his lights were so beset with design flaws they decreased the intensity of illumination by up to 400 percent.

It’s possible that the 35-year-old feud that bedeviled three separate members of the Wheeler family was a reflection of a politically contentious time. But, because the retrofitting of lighthouses with Winslow Lewis’s “Improved” Argand lamps began about the time Aaron Wheeler became keeper, and I. W. P.’s report to Congress came just six years before Charles Wheeler was dismissed, it’s also possible that the Wheeler keepers felt victim to charges of incompetence because the lights were dimmer than they had been before.

By the time I. W. P. Lewis’s report ushered in a new era of standards in the lighthouse service, Charles Wheeler had moved on to the final chapter in his life. In early 1850, leaving his fourth wife behind, he and his 18-year-old son, Roscoe, traveled to San Francisco via steamers on both sides of a land crossing through Nicaragua. They supported themselves in California by crewing on schooners and building small ships before turning to the harvesting of hay. “Roscoe and my health was never better. Our spirits is not balled and if my wife and children were here she should never wish to return...” he wrote to his son Charles Jr. in 1851.

But he did decide to return. In September 1852, aboard the steamer Winfield Scott of Panama, 65-year-old Charles Wheeler succumbed to yellow fever. The former lighthouse keeper’s body was consigned to the sea.
This year, for the first time, Thacher Island launch reservations will be made through an online web-based system. Starting May 13, launch trips reservations will be scheduled and ticketed through Eventbrite, one of the world's largest event technology platforms. There are two ways to make reservations:

- Go to the Thacher web site at www.thacherisland.org, click on the "Visit Us" page for details about the trips, then scroll to the Eventbrite link, click on it, and search for keyword "Thacher.

- Go directly to the Eventbrite web site at www.eventbrite.com. Search for the keyword "Thacher" and follow the prompts.

In either case, select your desired date and time and number of seats. Pay by credit card and print your tickets from the web site. Thacher volunteer Camille Glick will be available by phone to answer questions but will not take reservations.

Thacher Island launches operate mornings on Wednesdays and Saturdays from June 22 to August 31. Credit goes to volunteer George Langer for introducing the concept and setting up this online ticketing service.

Frederick H. "Ted" Tarr II, 83, died last fall after years of service to the town of Rockport and the Thacher Island Association.

A biologist, cancer researcher, land-use consultant, seven-term Rockport selectman, volunteer firefighter, and local eccentric (he kept a pet alligator named Alger Hiss for 44 years), Ted chose as his avocation the preservation of the local environment.

He worked zealously to persuade Rockport’s selectmen to take ownership of Thacher Island when the Coast Guard closed its station there in 1980. He was a hard-working, hands-on member of the island’s work crew from the beginning of its volunteer stewardship to the year before his death.

Ted claimed he had evicted the last pigeon from the long-neglected North Tower’s lantern room, but his Thacher Island mark was made most clearly in trail maintenance. One of the trails he cut from a maze of brambles and poison ivy now bears his name. Tarr’s Traverse connects the footprint of the 1919 Radio Compass Station to remains of the Radio Compass barracks on the island’s South Bluff.

There is irony in Beate Vavak’s donation of a Jeff Weaver painting to the town of Rockport in honor of her late husband, Steven. The oil, which will be displayed at the police station in honor of his chairmanship of its building committee, depicts the Straitsmouth Island keepers’ house, cistern, and barn at a low point in their maintenance. According to Thacher Island Association president Paul St. Germain, the artist was upset to learn that several of his favorite subjects – the island’s picturesquely dilapidated buildings – were being restored by the association’s work crew. Steven Vavak was one of the island’s carpenters who worked on that restoration.
Summer Plans on the Islands.

STRAITSMOUTH ISLAND

Straitsmouth will be the primary focus of work crew activity in 2019. Although keepers will be in residence and the island will be open to the public, many projects need completion before the island can be considered operational.

A new set of stairs and handrails will be constructed on the current granite steps, which are steep and difficult to negotiate. A freight slide will be built adjacent to the stairs to facilitate bringing materials to the top of the bluff.

A kayak storage deck will be constructed on the beach adjacent to the ramp to allow the ramp to be kept clear for launches.

A hoist engine and winch for hauling launches up the ramp need to be installed. An enclosure for the hoist engine will be built at the top of the bluff overlooking the ramp while the winch will be mounted at the end of the boat ramp. The area will include benches, a security camera, and a composting toilet.

A series of web cams will be installed for security purposes. Some of the cameras will be linked to the Thacher Island Association web site for public viewing. This one is mounted in the gable on the oil house.

Directional, interpretive, memorial, and map signage will be installed to identify sites of interest. This is the island map sign which will guide the public around the island.

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The usual trail and lawn cutting, poison ivy control, scraping, painting, and plumbing repairs will continue.

Reshingling boat house roof and increasing the number of solar panels to supply more power for boat house operations is on the work crew’s schedule.

Dick MacPherson will be upgrading all solar power electrical and web cam security systems.

Donna Cusick tends to the island’s fleet of tractors.

Repair of soffit and fascia returns is needed on the assistant keepers’ house.

Repair is needed to the North Tower entry cable roof damaged by a falling piece of stone from the walkway parapet in 2017.

Repair is needed on the assistant keepers’ house.

Donna Cusick tends to the island’s fleet of tractors.

Keepers will be kept busy welcoming the 2000 plus annual visitors, manning the gift shop, working the boat ramp and directing kayakers.

Work will continue on a walkway between the keepers’ residence and the lighthouse. The lighthouse will be open to the public upon completion of the walkway. Walkway will be built on the original granite posts shown.

The parlor in the keepers’ house will be further equipped as a visitor center, with Victorian-era furniture and maritime artifacts as well as a gift shop.

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DONATIONS: Antique Steeple Clock

Dina Hamilton, a Thacher Island Association member for more than thirty years and great-granddaughter of Eugene Larsen, who served as a Thacher Island keeper in 1911, has donated a circa 1860 William L. Gilbert Company steeple clock for use in Straitsmouth Island’s newly created visitor center.

According to Thacher keeper, antique clock historian and collector David Murphy, the donation represents an especially fine example of a popular period clock because its finials are original and in good condition. This clock was made by the William L. Gilbert Clock Company between 1851 and 1865 according to Murphy. He has been maintaining the antique clocks in fine running condition on Thacher for the past 10 years. He explains this was a very popular clock during the 1850s-1860s, having first appeared around 1845.

Over the winter, Paul St. Germain repaired and refinshed the exterior veneer to look as close to the original as possible, and Murphy has promised to work on the clock’s timing mechanism. The restored Victorian timepiece will be displayed in the parlor of the Straitsmouth keepers’ house, which will also function as the island’s visitor center.

A Poem Comes Home

When Brenda Whitaker Lane died in Scottsville, KY, last June, her daughter found among her mother’s effects an unattributed poem about Thacher Island clipped from an unidentified newspaper. Diane Crowell, granddaughter of Thacher civilkeepers Harold and Sylvia Whitaker and great-great-granddaughter of keeper Albert Whitman, enlisted the help of her cousin Elizabeth Sharp, who sent it to the Thacher Island Facebook page with a request for information.

It didn’t take long to identify the poet. Suellen Wedmore has been writing about the island since she and her husband became involved with it nearly four decades ago. She remembers reading the poem in question at a Rockport town meeting, which, she conjectures, is how it made its way into the Gloucester Daily Times. Soon after that, she asked fellow Thacher volunteer Nancy Jaretz to render a revised version of the poem in calligraphy as a 1988 Christmas present for her husband, Syd, who is now chairman of the Thacher Island Town Committee.

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Who Owns This Island, Anyway? You Can by Becoming a Member!

Seagulls own it: Blackbacks big as dogs, herring gulls with dark-tipped wings, soaring, squawking, diving toward my uncoiled head as I explore a new-mowed path. A thousand? More, on every granite ledge rinsed with brown-feckled eggs and a hundred woolly chicks tumble from beneath the wild roses. Gulls plummet like missiles, scolding, taunting, drive me from their home.

Wildflowers own it; buttercups preening, whispering, flirting, beach peas scattered in the raged, tawny grass, elderberry and water parsnip, morning glories like a blaze of sunrise, prickly thistle, ilies bold as pumpkins, a violet sculpture of wild iris, all beguile me, enslave me, lure me to this home.

History owns it: Shipwrecks, Thacher’s children, Mary, Peter, gone and gone and gone. He keeps his desolation: Oh yet I see their cheeks, dear little lambs. In the mist of evening I sense the father’s crying, all his dreams diminished. Time cracks and I slip inside it. This island is my home.
2019 Volunteer Keepers Assigned for Both Islands.

Syd Wedmore has announced the keeper lineup for this summer. A total of 46 individuals will watch over both islands from May through the end of August. That number includes 35 experienced keepers who will be teaching 11 interns the day to day duties of the job. While most keepers serve in married pairs, 12 of this year’s keepers are serving individually. Eighteen of the keepers are drawn from the ranks of the association’s work crew.

Thirty-one keepers will serve on Straitsmouth, spanning the 13 weeks from June 1 until August 31. Most are experienced keepers who have volunteered many summers on Thacher. Thirty-three keepers will serve on Thacher, over the 14 weeks from May 25 until August 31. While some will serve for a minimum of five days, most keepers stay on the island for one to two weeks. Two husband and wife teams, Jeanette and Larry Haynes from Maiden, North Carolina, and John and Darlene Fulton from Smyrna, Georgia, will serve eight-week terms (seven weeks on Thacher and one on Straitsmouth). Both couples are long time volunteers, the Fultons serving for the past 15 years and the Haynes for 12 years. Twelve keepers will spend time on both islands.

Keepers will be busy landing the launches and assisting kayakers at the boat ramps.

Seasons on Thacher Island

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Thacher Merchandise

New Thacher Island Panorama T-Shirt
100% cotton. Sizes S,M,L,XL,2XL $22.00

NEW Long-Sleeve Thacher Island Panorama T-Shirt
Midnight Navy, 100% cotton. Comes in S,M,L,XL,2XL $25.00 plus shipping and handling. ($3.50)

New Straitsmouth Panorama T-shirt
100% cotton. Sizes S,M,L,XL,2XL $22.00

Denim Keeper Shirt
This 100% cotton soft denim shirt is a key item to own. It proudly shows off the Thacher Island twin lights embroidery. Comes in S,M,L,XL,2XL $35.00 plus shipping and handling. ($3.50)

Go to www.thacherisland.org to order on-line for additional merchandise. Or send checks to Thacher Island Association, Box 73, Rockport, MA 01966.
Membership renewal calendar has changed.

Because it seemed to create confusion about when to renew, the Thacher Island Association has done away with the April 30 to May 1 membership year. Starting this year, memberships will run for a full year from renewal anniversary dates. Personal expiration dates and types of membership will be kept on file and noted on your member card, and members will receive a reminder letter a month preceding renewal date.

We still encourage renewing today for 2019 and beyond. Unless your mailing label on the last page has 2019 above your name, you should renew today. Remittance envelopes are included in this newsletter for that purpose.

Ralph G. Sweet of Rockport reminisced during a visit to Thacher Island last summer. His grandfather George Washington Seavey served as a keeper from 1930 to 1945. Ralph’s mother, Cora Seavey Sweet, was one of George and Annie Seavey’s four children. For a brief period, they, combined with keeper Simeon Orne’s five children, outnumbered the eight adults on the island.