Paul St. Germain, president of the Thacher Island Association since 1999, has decided it’s time to relinquish his duties to the next generation.

When St. Germain joined the board in 1997, he saw a need he was equipped to meet. The group had ambitious ideas about historical restoration of the island it was urging Rockport to acquire from the US Coast Guard, but the organization had few members and little money. A retired marketing executive with the soft drink manufacturer A&W Brands, St. Germain had ideas about increasing both.

Realizing that grant applications would be more effective if Thacher Island had a National Historic Landmark designation, he enlisted the help of historian and author Eleanor Parsons, whose copious records he inherited after her death. When the NHL designation was awarded in 2001, grant writing began in earnest. Over the course of St. Germain’s involvement, $3.2 million has been raised to support infrastructure improvements on Thacher and, more recently, Straitsmouth Island. Since 2004, he has teamed with vice president Peter Bergholtz and treasurer Bill Whiting to establish a more aggressive grant-writing strategy, resulting in a higher success rate. Membership has increased from fewer than 25 to 760, with 225 of those being lifetime members.

St. Germain became vice president in 1998 and was elected president the following year. He took over management of the association’s website and newsletter and launched new merchandising and membership programs. He also introduced marketing events, such as the annual lighthouse cruise, art and photo days on the island, and art shows to raise additional funds.

In addition to the NHL designation for Thacher Island, St. Germain lists his proudest accomplishments as working with the Cape Ann Museum and the Coast Guard to bring the South Tower’s first-order Fresnel lens back to Cape Ann, redesigning and upgrading the Thacher Island newsletter, and his role in renovation of the two keepers’ houses on Thacher as well as the keeper’s house on Straitsmouth. St. Germain wrote the applications to the Coast Guard, National Park Service, and General Services Administration to acquire the lighthouse and 1.8 acres of Straitsmouth Island on behalf of the Town in 2010.

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"If you looked at my resume, you'd think I couldn't hold a job for long," says launch captain Larry Libert. "But I was given a series of opportunities, and I acted on them."

Born and raised in Beverly, Libert came to Cape Ann to teach math at Central Grammar in Gloucester. During the summer he worked as a seasonal patrolman for the Rockport Police Department. After nine years of teaching middle schoolers he accepted the police department's offer of a full-time job, nine years of teaching middle schoolers he accepted to teach math at Central Grammar in Gloucester. "Firefighting could be an interesting job."

"It's just a matter of swapping apparatus. Because the basket was too heavy to lift over the railing, he kicked out the balusters. Libert remembers what he thought as he stood on the balcony of a burning building watching firefighters slide the basket down the ladder. "Firefighting could be an interesting job."

After 27 years with the Rockport Police Department and a brief sojourn as assistant harbormaster in Rockport and Gloucester, Libert joined the Rockport Fire Department, where he spent twelve years assigned to an aerial ladder truck. Libert assisted them in getting her into a rescue basket and attached to emergency breathing apparatus. Because the basket was too heavy to lift over the railing, he kicked out the balusters. Libert remembers what he thought as he stood on the balcony of a burning building watching the firefighters slide the basket down the ladder. "Firefighting could be an interesting job."

Since the beginning of his tenure he has formed a close working and personal relationship with Syd Wedmore, chairman of the Thacher/Starsmouth Island Town Committee. Wedmore manages the islands' volunteers and coordinates the many work projects. "We have a unique partnership," St. Germain said. "The Thacher Island Association raises the money, and Syd's Town Committee spends it. That's worked well for over 22 years."

Working together, they have built a special relationship with Mass. Audubon, which owns the remaining 29 acres of Straitsmouth, culminating in the negotiation of a long-term lease for the keeper house and, allowing public access for the first time in 180 years.

St. Germain has been equally involved with the down-and-dirty aspects of the island, working alongside weekly carpentry crews on both islands and creating needed elements in his home workshop during the winter months. Recently, he and Wedmore drove a truck to Boston and carried a donated display cabinet out of a North End home. The cabinet will be used in the keeper's house on Straitsmouth.

Paul St. Germain pictured to the right of the newly installed “Welcome to Straitsmouth” sign with some of the Straitsmouth Savages crew.
Straitsmouth Doings

After ten years of planning, fundraising, trail clearing, and barn building, Straitsmouth Island welcomed public visitors for the first time in 180 years. With keepers housed in the renovated residence and a newly constructed ramp, the work crews looked forward to a busy season.

A Few Problems

Members of the work crew, eager to begin construction of a winch engine house and a public restroom on the bluff, were stymied by the presence of an excavator that remained on the ramp until early July. Everything that was landed on the ramp had to be lifted over the timbers on which the excavator’s bucket rested, then carried up the stairs.

Green Technologies

An ambitious range of green technologies have been planned to lessen the impact of keepers and visitors on the island. Dick MacPherson oversaw the installation of solar panels and batteries to meet the electrical needs of the house, barn, and security cameras.

Visitor Access

Ray Moss cleared rocks and granite pilings from the path to the lighthouse with the help of Peter Chick, Bill Whiting, and Rich Calnan. The pilings will be used to support a wooden footbridge to the lighthouse entrance. Straitsmouth quickly became a popular destination for kayakers, 966 of whom visited the island from June 8 to August 31.

Incessant June rains turned the island’s main trail into a ribbon of muck. Wheelbarrows and handcarts were used to transport supplies from the ramp to the house until the trail was made passable to the island’s vehicles via the use of a “Plywood Highway.”

Construction

The outdoor composting toilet, which is being built for visitor convenience on the bluff above the landing ramp, ran into early problems. Ray Moss encountered rocks as well as a high-water table while digging a foundation. Ray Moss and Peter Chick added gravel around French drains, which were constructed to counteract the high-water table.

Visitors were able to visit the lighthouse and see photographs of the keeper’s house renovation, Bill Sclafani, Nathan Ives, and Randy Saville packed up after closing in the shed with plywood and waterproofing roof, and got an early look at the visitor center, which is being restored as a Victorian parlor.

Ray Moss and Peter Chick added gravel around French drains, which were constructed to counteract the high-water table.

Ray Moss and Peter Chick added gravel around French drains, which were constructed to counteract the high-water table.

Composting toilet base was lowered into place.

Composting toilet base was pulled up the ramp that covered the main staircase.

A Sunmar composting toilet was installed in the keeper’s house. Jeannette Haynes prepared to add enzymes to the toilet’s rotating drum.

Rich Calnan, Nathan Ives, Steve Kowalski, Bill Whiting, John Dave and Randy Saville raised the back wall.

During the same time, a shed to house the winch engine took shape. Bill Whiting, Steve Kowalski and Nathan Ives saw photographs of the keeper’s house renovation.

Kayakers visited the lighthouse.
Despite Thacher Island’s reputation as “the spa island” among those who spent time on both it and Straitsmouth this summer, there was no lack of work to be done.

A willing crew of maintenance and trail crew volunteers showed up to prepare the island for the season’s visitors.

Roger Perkins supervised the placement of a new winch engine in the boathouse.

Tom Mikus, Norm Delisle, George Langer, and Sloan Craven removed a solar panel before reshingling the boathouse roof.

Dick Morris, Norm Delisle, and Tom Mikus repaired the assistant keeper’s house porch roof.

Dick Morris, Norm Delisle, George Langer, and Sloan Craven removed a solar panel before reshingling the boathouse roof.

Intern keeper Scott Bisgaard watched as Lee Marr and Roger Perkins filled the new winch engine with hydraulic fluid.

The US Fish & Wildlife Service personnel replaced their sign on the north end of the island.

Others came by private boat and kayak.

As always, Thacher Island’s buildings were in need of repair. Donna Cusick repaired a storage area underneath the principal keeper’s house porch.

Joe Napolitano replaced the rotted cornices, soffit, and fascia boards on the assistant keeper’s house.

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The US Fish & Wildlife Service personnel replaced their sign on the north end of the island.

As always, Thacher Island’s buildings were in need of repair. Donna Cusick repaired a storage area underneath the principal keeper’s house porch.
This plaque marks the beginning of the new Manton Trail on Straitsmouth Island.

Jeannette Haynes has kept an eye peeled for sea glass every summer of her 13 years as a keeper on Thacher Island. Early this season she found a piece from a German-manufactured net float. Its distinctive cloverleaf pattern marked it as a product of Heyes Glass of Oberkirchen, which began production of glass floats in 1910. Over the winter Haynes used her sea glass collection to create a tableau of the island’s twin towers on an old window salvaged from the principal keeper’s house. Her artwork is displayed in the Thacher Island visitor center.

Marty Smith claims to have been the last Coast Guardsman to leave Thacher Island, and he has a frayed Gloucester Daily Times clipping to prove it. In the December 1980 photo, Smith can be seen behind Thacher Island Association president Ned Cameron and Thacher’s first civilian keeper, Russell Grubb, as Coast Guard captain David Flanagan bids them goodbye and good luck.

The work depicted in this newsletter cannot be done without the open-hearted support of many benefactors. Thacher Island Association has been blessed with generous donors and a community of hardworking volunteers.

Oystercatchers returned to Thacher Island for a second year.

NOAA urges anyone who sees a stranded, wounded, or dead seal to call its marine mammal hotline (866-755-6622).

A peregrine falcon kept watch from its perch on the North Tower.

Feeding the Young

A duckling fell prey to a gull’s need to feed its chicks.

Members Joyce Cannon of Rockport saw our plea for a Victorian style settee and glass display cabinet in the April 2019 issue. Joyce mentioned it to her friend Mary Tavilla, who lives in the North End of Boston’s “Little Italy” section. Mary had an oak and glass china cabinet shown here.

Paul St. Germain and Syd Wedmore drove into the back streets of the North End to pick it up. Having owned it for over 70 years, Mary was very attached to this piece. She said she needed the room so thought Straitsmouth would be a good home for it. “You are right, Mary. We will take good care of it for years to come,” Paul St. Germain told her. “It will make a great display case for nautical artifacts in the parlor (New Visitor Center) of the newly restored keeper’s house on Straitsmouth Island.” Thanks, Mary.

A KEEPER’S GLASS

Early in July, keeper Ian Deweese-Boyd photographed an injured harbor seal resting on Thacher Island. Queries to NOAA, the Seacoast Science Center, and the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy led to a consensus that the wound was more likely caused by an encounter with a shark than a propeller. Though that seal was not observed on the island again, several marine mammal experts said they’d seen animals with worse wounds survive.

A nearly 40 years later, after retirement from a career in pharmaceutical sales and marketing, Smith returned to Thacher Island as a member of the boat crew. He has a volunteer work crew doughnut to prove it.
Thank you to our volunteer workers, keepers, boat crews and docents who put in over 3000 person hours this summer.

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

The annual volunteer barbecue, held on Thacher Island in August, celebrated the 90th birthday of long-time island mechanic Roger Perkins.

Also remembered was Frederick (Ted) Tarr, who died at the end of the 2018 season. His cousin Sharon Chace attended the gathering, walked the trail that has been named in Tarr’s honor, and shared the following tribute with his fellow work crew members:

Thank you to our volunteer workers, keepers, boat crews and docents who put in over 3000 person hours this summer.

Ted’s Story:

I am all the ages and stages of my life.
I am a boy of nine, reading books on natural history, interacting with nature, active in the Boy Scouts.
I am a boy of eleven, racing to the Post Office to pick up my hatchling alligator, legal at the time. He will not bite me or so I think. Ouch!
In the McCarthy era I name him Alger Hiss!

The Audubon lady who visits classes wants us to care for pets. Bunnies, hamsters … I am the only kid with a gator!

I am a teen in Gloucester High School, hiking home through Dog Town. Sports, wrestling, soccer, and golf are my games! I transfer to Governor Dummer. Putting live lobsters into a teacher’s desk drawer is my kind of fun.

I am a young man at Washington and Lee, enjoying my biology major and being politically active. Being house manager of Phi Kappa Psi keeps the adrenaline flowing.

I am middle-aged, passionately committed to conservation. It is an honor to serve as a selectman and member of the planning board. I fight for the Twin Lights and cut trails on Thacher Island. I am part of the efforts to establish Halibut Point and the Kieran Preserve. I lead Sunday walks to Dog Town, other historic sites, and vistas of natural beauty. I am aging but still interested in conservation. I welcome visits from the members of Greenbelt and the Mill Pond Committee. I still read the Boston Globe and the Gloucester Daily Times. I am still me in your memories.

I am still me in your memories.

RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE

TED’S STORY: Connecting the Stepping Stones of My Life

(TED TARR’S WORDS, SHAPED BY SHARON CHACE)

The 2020 Thacher & Straitsmouth calendar is now available.

It features spectacular photography by local artists Kim Smith and Skip Montello. Get yours today by going to our web site. All proceeds go to the association for island maintenance.
Price of $23.00 includes shipping.

Membership

Give the gift of membership for next season. Go online to order your individual or family memberships at $30 or $60 each. A thoughtful gift for your friends and relatives, membership comes with two issues of this newsletter, car/boat sticker, free rides on the Thacher launch and the knowledge that you are helping to preserve two great and historic islands. See the web site for details.

www.thacherisland.org

Lighthouse Cruise Tickets

How is this for an unusual gift – tickets on our annual lighthouse cruise around Cape Ann and up the Annisquam River?
We leave aboard the 150-foot Privateer II on Wednesday evening July 15, 2020. Check out our web site to purchase tickets.
We will send you a receipt to wrap and put under the tree.
Only $30 per person.

Go to www.thacherisland.org to order on-line for additional merchandise. Or send checks to Thacher Island Association, Box 73, Rockport, MA 01966.
The Association is looking for a few good men and women. We need boat crews and volunteer workers.

To inquire about boat crew assignments (assisting on the launches on Wednesdays and Saturdays) contact Tom Eldridge at cteldridge@comcast.net or 978-546-6895.

For volunteer workers, contact Syd Wedmore at syneywedmore@comcast.net or 617-335-1799.