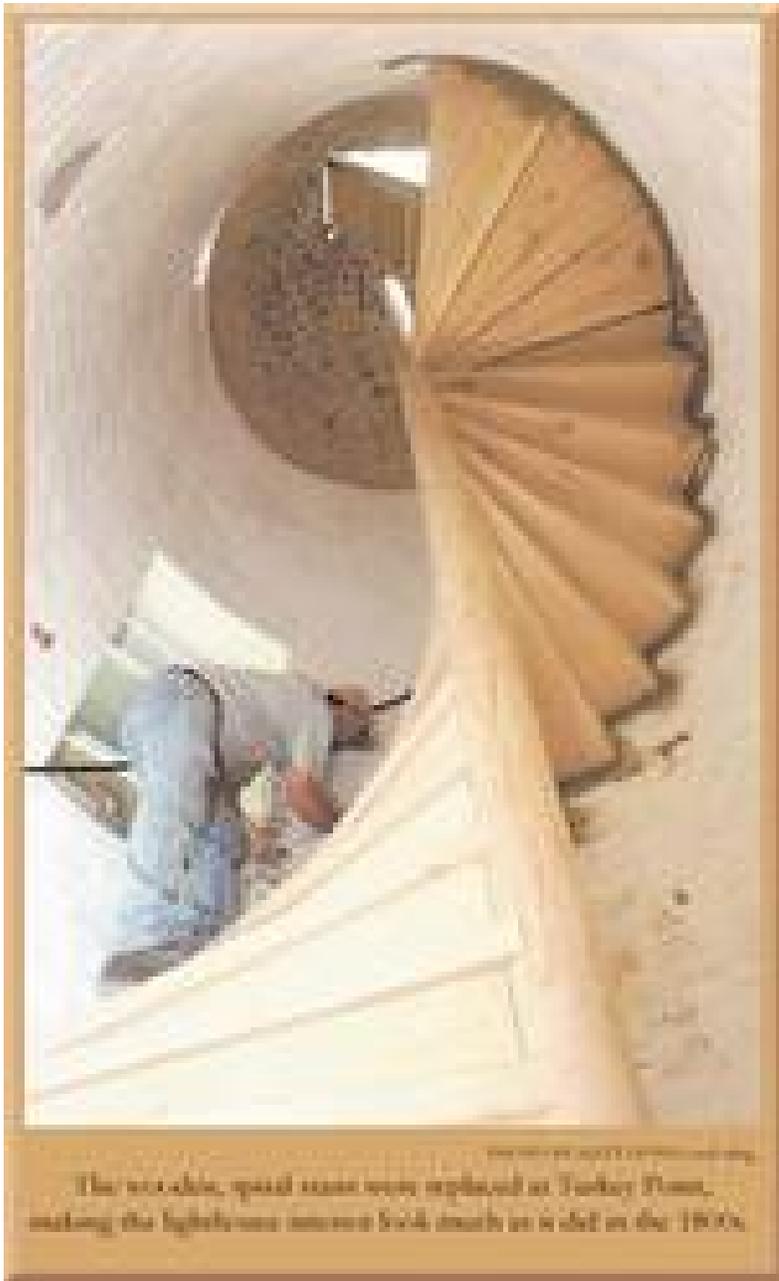


5th annual Lighthouse Challenge begins Saturday

- By DAVID HEALEY
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When the clockwork bell broke to the lighthouse bell on a foggy night, keeper Fannie Mae Salter spent hour after hour ringing the bell by hand to make sure ships had safe passage past Turkey Point.

That's just one of the legends that clings to Turkey Point like a Chesapeake Bay fog. Since 1833, the whitewashed stone tower has stood upon its bluff in the northern Bay, home to a string of hardy lighthouse keepers like Salter.

As part of the 5th Annual Lighthouse Challenge this weekend, lighthouse enthusiasts from across Maryland — and as many as 25 other states — will be coming to Turkey Point to absorb its history, drink in the view, and perhaps munch a crab cake on the lighthouse lawn.

“We’re very proud of our lighthouse,” said North East resident Dean Rice, president of Turkey Point Light Station, Inc., the non-profit group that now maintains the light.

Rice, who has been a promoter of the lighthouse for years, is always glad to share a story about this upper Bay landmark and sentinel. He also points out that Turkey Point is lighted and is officially a “private aide to navigation” in an age when most sailors rely on GPS.

“There are people who still use it,” Rice said. “Not everyone has GPS. Maybe they’re a bit old fashioned.”

Plans for the lighthouse were begun as early as 1812, but it took more than 20 years for the work to be completed. The tower is just 35 feet high, but its location on the 100-foot bluff makes it the highest of 74 lighthouse on Chesapeake Bay. Its beacon could be seen for 13 miles down the Bay. In those days, whale oil fueled the lamp. The switch was made to kerosene in the 1870s and to an incandescent oil vapor lamp in late 1800s. The lighthouse was electrified in 1943.

As for dedicated keeper Fannie Mae Salter, she retired in 1948 and the light was consequently automated, ending a special era on the Bay. According to Rice, Turkey Point was nicknamed “The Lady’s Light” in honor of Salter and previous female lightkeepers.

The Turkey Point light is similar in design and construction to the Concord Point lighthouse in Havre de Grace. That lighthouse will also be on the weekend tour, along with Chesapeake Lightship (moored at Baltimore’s Inner Harbor), Cove Point, Drum Point, Fort Washington, Hooper Strait (at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels), Piney Point, Point Lookout and Seven-Foot Knoll.

“I love the gorgeous coastal settings of lighthouses and find their architectural designs very interesting,” said Lighthouse Challenge Event Chair Karen Rosage, in an e-mail.

“There is truly a mystique and mystery surrounding lighthouses and their picture-perfect settings. Some people refer to it almost as a romance. I think that is what makes them so alluring.”

In recent years, Turkey Point light has undergone a transformation thanks to TPLS volunteers, who signed a 30-year lease agreement to maintain the historic lighthouse. The group spent \$40,000 to restore the lighthouse interior. Now, visitors can climb the 35 spiral steps — then an 8-foot ladder — to reach the lighthouse cupola.

There’s also a new roof, wainscoting and exterior paint, along with a restoration of the original brick flooring. Finding historically correct materials was sometimes as challenging as navigating the sandy shoals at the base of the point. The bricks came from a century-old railroad station shed in Delaware that was demolished. The central post for the spiral stairs was salvaged from an 1800s barn. The square timber was painstakingly reworked into a round post.

“We just finished having it totally redone,” Rice said. “It was just a mess before that. The guys who worked on the lighthouse have a real love for it. The new staircase looks like furniture.”

Someday, according to Rice, the group would like to rebuild the keeper’s house on the bluff. The original house | badly damaged by neglect and vandals — was torn down in 1971. Local artists are fond of painting the long-gone keeper’s house into their artwork.

The rebuilt keeper's house would serve as a museum and also as a home for a modern-day caretaker. The group remains short of its fund-raising goal.

Meanwhile, the lighthouse itself is open weekends from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. The doors close for the season around Thanksgiving week and re-open about Easter.