

Lighthouse News Line

Restoration Activity Continues

As the brick pieces of the St. George Light rest in the summer panhandle heat, other important steps toward the reconstruction of the lighthouse are moving ahead. This week all but the largest pieces of the brick structure were moved into the secure fenced-in area on Begonia Street in Eastpoint. (Please check out the photos of this effort in the Photo Gallery). Volunteers will be recruited to begin cleaning the bricks for re-use in rebuilding the tower when the weather cools.

Meanwhile, work is progressing on two other critical fronts: securing a permanent location for the historic structure, and rebuilding the lantern room. Several properties on St. George Island are currently under consideration for the rebuilding site. One is the triangle of land at the island terminus of the bridge, where Franklin Boulevard splits. This parcel is DOT right-of-way, and negotiations are underway with the DOT regional office in Chipley, FL, for use of this property. On July 5, the Franklin County Commission voted unanimously to send a letter to DOT in support of this effort. SGLA has also solicited the assistance of State Senator Al Lawson, Representative Will Kendrick, and Speaker Allan Bense. An important proponent of the rebuilding effort is Fred Gaske, Director of the Division of Historical Resources within the Florida Department of State.

An alternate site under consideration is in the County Park at the center of the island, near where the helipad and picnic pavilions now stand. The SGLA is actively seeking signatures on a petition urging the government entities involved to support the rebuilding of the historic lighthouse on St. George Island.

Reconstruction of the Light's lantern room may be completed by early next year, according to SGLA President Dennis Barnell. Dennis met last week with James Levy, the Historic Conservator from the Division of Historical Resources. The Division has agreed to treat the metal pieces of the lantern room to ensure their preservation. The process involves first sandblasting to remove the oxide scale and rust, then tank submersion electrolysis to remove more rust and salt, and finally priming and painting. James estimates that the entire process will take one to two years. The same preservation procedure is used on artifacts such as historically significant cannons and anchors recovered from the ocean after centuries of submersion in salt water.

Before the pieces of our lantern room are turned over to the Department of State for conservation, prototype pieces will be taken to a foundry to be used as patterns for forging replacement parts. The lantern room was octagonal in shape, so eight of each type of piece (railings, supports, etc.) were used in the construction. Many of the pieces have not been recovered, and some of those pulled up from the Gulf by the Luberto team were damaged beyond use by the force of the tower's collapse. Conserved original pieces will be utilized wherever possible, but it is likely that most of the lantern room will be reconstructed of new pieces forged to exactly match the original components. Dennis is currently in discussion with the owner of a foundry in Talladega, Alabama, who owns property in the Franklin County area and is interested in the project. Once the lantern room is reconstructed, it will be displayed for public view, as was done with the Key Biscayne Light's lantern room.

Unprecedented support for our project is also coming from the state's lighthouse community. Kathy Fleming, director of the beautifully restored St. Augustine Lighthouse, and Kathleen McCormick of their conservation staff, plan to visit the St. George project at the end of August. The St. Augustine organization is a tremendous supporter of lighthouse conservation efforts nationwide. They are a patron contributor to the St. George Lighthouse Association, and offer our prints for sale in their museum gift shop. Their preeminent conservation operation will be able to provide invaluable guidance to our effort, and we anticipate their visit and support with great enthusiasm. The Florida Lighthouse Association, who declared the Cape St. George Light to be the most endangered lighthouse in the State of Florida before its collapse, has also made a very generous financial contribution to our rebuilding effort. We are very, very grateful to our colleagues and our members for their continued support.