

Prospect Harbor Lighthouse



Prospect Harbor Lighthouse and Gull Cottage guard the harbor's rocky entrance. STEPHENS PHOTO

BY JOHN STEPHENS

In 1989, when the town of Gouldsboro celebrated its bicentennial, the United States Lighthouse Service (USLS) should have been celebrating its 200th birthday, too.

The USLS relinquished control of lighthouses to the Coast Guard in 1938,

but Barbara Riley, a Corea lighthouse buff, would not let the occasion pass unobserved. She organized an open house at the Prospect Harbor Lighthouse.

"It was such a success I convinced the Navy we should do it every year," Riley said on Monday, seated comfortably in the beacon's snug Gull Cottage, once the lightkeeper's dwelling, and now a vacation retreat for military personnel, owned and operated by the U.S. Navy. Perched on a rocky spit on Prospect Harbor Point, it is easy to see why the 105-year-old cottage might be booked every day of the year. But for three days each spring for the last eight years, the Prospect Harbor Woman's Club and the U.S. Navy Astronautics Group, Detachment Alpha, have opened the grounds of the classic harbor light to the public. The light tower itself is still under U.S. Coast Guard jurisdiction, and both the cottage and the tower are on the State Historic Register.

"You don't find too many lighthouses that are still operational and open to the public," Riley points out. She should know; a walking encyclopedia of lighthouse lore, she is happy to pass the time with Memorial Day visitors, poring over antique photographs and telling tales. Riley is currently at work on a book about the lighthouses of New Brunswick,

and is clearly an authority on those protecting Maine waters as well. She notes that the Prospect Harbor Light is the only shingled light tower in Maine, and explains to a visitor the finer points of a sectored light (a central white pane in the red lens is visible to a sailor only when he's on a safe course into the harbor).

Barbara Riley is also an authority on the light's history. In 1848 the U.S. Government bought the land the lighthouse occupies for \$150, paid to J. Wilson Godfrey, a Gouldsboro merchant. The light was first lit in 1850, and the small outbuilding that once housed the whale oil it burned still stands, now used by the Navy to store more modern combustibles.

The cottage and light tower were once connected by a breezeway, now gone. Gone, too, are the hardy souls who once tended the light and rescued survivors of wrecks. The cottage's interior is modern, but it would no doubt be recognized by keepers a century gone. Rebuilt in 1891 to the same dimensions of the 1850 building, it now has all the modern conveniences one would expect in a vacation home. Still, for many of the 450 visitors Barbara Riley estimates passed through during this Memorial Day weekend, the history and romance of the place are palpable. ■