

A chance to step into a postcard

After being off limits for 132 years, Thomas Point Lighthouse will open for public tours

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

You don't have to look far to find the stunning image of the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

With its bright red roof and graceful dormers, the lighthouse south of Annapolis is one of the best-known icons on the Chesapeake Bay.

Its image graces postcards and posters; T-shirts and tchotchkes. On a pretty day on the water, scores of boaters sail and motor past.

But only a select few people have been had the privilege of going inside the lighthouse.

That's all about to change.

After being off-limits for 132 years, the doors are being opened to the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse this summer.

"It's great to share it with the public," said Henry Gonzalez, vice president of the U.S. Lighthouse Society.

Starting July 7, tours of Thomas Point will be offered out of Eastport. But it won't come cheap – tour tickets will cost \$70 per person.



VISITING THE LIGHTHOUSE

Lighthouse tours will be offered on seven weekends this summer: July 7-8, July 28-29, Aug. 11-12, Aug. 25-26, Sept. 15-16, Sept. 22-23 and Sept. 29-30. Three tours will be offered each day, at 9 a.m., noon and 3 p.m. Tours are limited to 18 people. Tours launch from the Annapolis Maritime Museum, located at the end of Second Street on Back Creek in Eastport. Tours cost \$70 and reservations must be made in advance by calling 800-690-5080 or visiting www.chesapeakelights.com.

While the cost is steep, lighthouse advocates say there's really nothing that can compare to seeing Thomas Point up close and personal.

"How many people have gone on a lighthouse out in the water?" said Loretta Breen of Dunkirk, a volunteer docent who traveled to the lighthouse recently to prepare for the tours.

Few people have been able to see a Chesapeake lighthouse the way visitors will see Thomas Point.

It's the last remaining cottage-style screwpile lighthouse in its original location on the bay.

While there were once dozens of such lighthouses dotting the bay, most have disappeared. A few have been moved to land and opened for tours, including the Drum Point Lighthouse at the Calvert Marine Museum, the Hooper Strait Lighthouse at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels and the Seven Foot Knoll Lighthouse at the Baltimore Maritime Museum in the Inner Harbor.

The fact that Thomas Point is still standing where it was built is not insignificant.

The lighthouse has earned the status of National Historic Landmark, the highest historic designation a structure can earn – putting it in the same league as the White House, the Naval Academy and the New York Stock Exchange.

The current red-roofed structure is actually the third lighthouse that was built at Thomas Point to warn boaters of a hazardous shoal.

Earlier versions were built on land in 1825 and 1840. The current lighthouse went up in 1875 at a cost of \$35,000.

Thomas Point was built in the screwpile fashion. The lighthouse legs are literally screwed into the bay floor – a solution for trying to build on the bay's soft, murky bottom.

The lighthouse was manned by live-aboard workers – men only; no women or children allowed. They lived and worked in four rooms on the 800-square-foot main floor. Upstairs was storage, the fog bell and ultimately, the Fresnel lens.

The Coast Guard took over in 1939, rotating Coasties on lighthouse duty for a few weeks at a time. In 1986, it was automated.

City takes over

In 2004, the government turned ownership of the lighthouse over to a nonprofit partnership made up of the City of Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, the Annapolis Maritime Museum and the U.S. Lighthouse Society and its Chesapeake Chapter.

Technically, the city owns the lighthouse and leases it to the lighthouse society, which manages it and is overseeing the restoration. The maritime museum is responsible for the tours.

The deal had its critics at the time, including aldermen who worried about the city's legal liability and whether the nonprofit partners would be financially stable enough to do the repairs and offer tours.

Now after three long years, the lighthouse buffs and maritime museum volunteers are ready to show off their pride and joy.

Volunteers and contractors lined up by the lighthouse society have been hard at work on the lighthouse, though it remains a work in progress.

Some of the work has focused on making the lighthouse safe for visitors – reinforcing the foundation, adding a dock, installing handrails.

Now the focus is shifting to making the lighthouse look as it did in the early 1900s. Mr. Gonzales of the lighthouse society said that's a period for which there is plenty of reference material to glean ideas from – photos, letters, family stories from relatives of the keepers.

The work is time-consuming and visitors will see more tools than furnishings at this point.

Because the lighthouse is a National Historic Landmark, every detail must be authentic as possible.

“We have standards just like Historic Annapolis has standards,” said Bob Stevenson of Edgewater, who will be one of the lighthouse docents.

For example, in the kitchen, more than 20 layers of paint are being stripped

off of the tongue-and-groove paneling on the walls, Mr. Gonzalez said. They've determined the original color was a white slightly tinted with blue. A historical paint supply company, Fine Paints of Europe, is helping find just the right match and will donate the paint.

"One of the goals this year for the interior of the lighthouse is to make as much project as we can in restoring the kitchen," Mr. Gonzalez said.

A five-year restoration plan began in 2004, so if all goes well, the lighthouse should be substantially restored by 2009. Restoration has been boosted by donations, including windows and doors from Jeld-Wen and shutters that will come from Timberlane Shutters.

Visitors will see the work and learn about the restoration, which has Mr. Gonzalez excited.

"Since they'll see it as a work in progress, they'll appreciate the historic preservation," he said.

Adventure excursion

Thomas Point visitors will start their lighthouse education back on shore, at the Annapolis Maritime Museum in Eastport.

First they'll view a short documentary video about the lighthouse. There's also a safety briefing, then it's off on a half-hour motor to the sight aboard the Sharps Island motorboat with Capt. Mike Richards of Chesapeake Lights, Inc.

At nearly every step of the way, visitors are reminded about the hazards of visiting the lighthouse.

Quarters are cramped, ladders can be slippery and there are plenty of easy ways to bump your head – which volunteers cheerfully call "headknockers."

A lighthouse tour is not for the faint of heart or people lacking in mobility – maritime museum director Jeff Holland calls it "an adventure excursion."

Visitors must be 12 years old and at least 4 feet tall. They must be able to manage the boat ride, climb from the boat to the dock, ascend steep ladders and climb through small openings.

There's no room for backpacks or large bags, and visitors must wear sturdy shoes with a covered heel. (So leave the Crocs and flipflops at home.) Hats aren't a good idea, either, since they can block the view of hazards up above.

And as a safety video warns, "This is no place for a skirt."

But for those who can make it, a visit to Thomas Point is remarkable.

The water wooshes below your feet and the view is unparalleled. On a good day, the Bloody Point Bar Lighthouse at the southern tip of Kent Island is visible.

Docents help visitors imagine what it must have been like to live aboard the lighthouse – which wasn't easy.

And the highlight is a climb up a steep and narrow ladder for a look at the light itself, which still beams a warning signal to approaching boats.

Bobbie Carew of Annapolis knew the outside of Thomas Point well and long wondered what the inside was like. Now she knows it inside-and-out as a docent.

"I've been cruising around this light for 40 years," she said. "So this is wonderful."

Volunteer Anne Cameron of Annapolis has one word for the experience: "Magnificent."

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- No Jumps-

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