Harbor Lighthouse Restoration: Progress Report

Background

The harbor lighthouse was built in 1874 to mark the entrance to the inner channel. It operated continuously until 1968, when an automated beacon on the breakwater replaced it. The tower stood empty for the next five decades, and by the time the restoration society took ownership in 2021 the lantern room glazing was gone, the iron stair had rusted through in two places, and water had been entering the brickwork from the parapet for years.

The society set out three goals for the restoration: make the structure watertight, return the tower to public access, and relight the lantern with a historically accurate lens. This report covers the second full season of work and the progress made toward each goal.

Masonry and Weatherproofing

Repointing of the exterior brick was completed in June. The contractor removed the hard cement mortar applied in the 1950s, which had trapped moisture against the softer original brick, and replaced it with a lime mortar matched to samples taken from the base of the tower. Roughly one in twelve bricks on the weather side was too damaged to keep and was replaced with reclaimed brick of the same size and color.

The parapet was rebuilt with a lead-lined gutter and new copper downspouts. Since the work was finished there has been no sign of water inside the tower, even during the two storms in September. The interior plaster, which had been left to dry over the summer, will be repaired in the spring once the moisture readings have stabilized.

The Iron Stair

The spiral stair is original and is the most fragile part of the building. Twelve of the ninety-one treads were cracked or missing, and the central column had corroded badly at the second landing. The treads were cast from patterns taken off an intact tread, and the column was sleeved rather than replaced so that the original casting remains in place.

A structural engineer certified the stair for public use in October, with a limit of eight people on the stair at one time. Handrail height does not meet the modern code, so a second, lower rail was added on the inside of the spiral; it can be removed without damage to the ironwork.

The Lantern Room

The lantern room frame was stripped, primed and repainted in the original dark green. New curved glazing was ordered from a specialist and fitted in August. The society located a fourth-order lens of the correct period at a museum in the next county, and an agreement to loan it for ten years was signed in November.

The lens will be lit with a low-wattage electric lamp rather than oil, and it will be displayed as a historic light rather than registered as an aid to navigation. The coast guard has confirmed in writing that a display light of this kind raises no objection as long as it does not flash.

Public Access

The grounds opened to visitors on weekends from July. Nearly three thousand people climbed the tower over the summer, with no incidents. Volunteers staffed the entrance and the lantern room on every open day, and a small exhibit about the keepers and their families was set up in the oil house.

Admission was free this year. The committee has recommended a modest charge for next season, with the proceeds going toward the remaining work on the keeper's cottage. A decision will be taken at the annual meeting in March.

Finances

Spending for the season came in slightly under the approved budget, largely because the parapet work took less time than expected. The lens loan carries no fee, but the society is responsible for insurance and for the specialist cleaning, which will be a recurring cost.

Grant applications for the cottage have been submitted to two foundations and to the state historical commission. Decisions are expected by the end of the first quarter. The society's reserve remains sufficient to cover the winter maintenance of the tower whatever the outcome.

Next Steps

Over the winter the volunteers will finish cataloguing the keepers' logbooks, which run from 1874 to 1931 with a gap during the First World War. The logbooks will be scanned and made available online. Work on the cottage, the interior plaster and the signage for the grounds will begin as soon as the weather allows.

The society thanks the volunteers, the contractors and the many visitors whose interest has made the second season such a success. The tower is watertight, the stair is safe, and the light will shine again next summer for the first time in nearly sixty years.