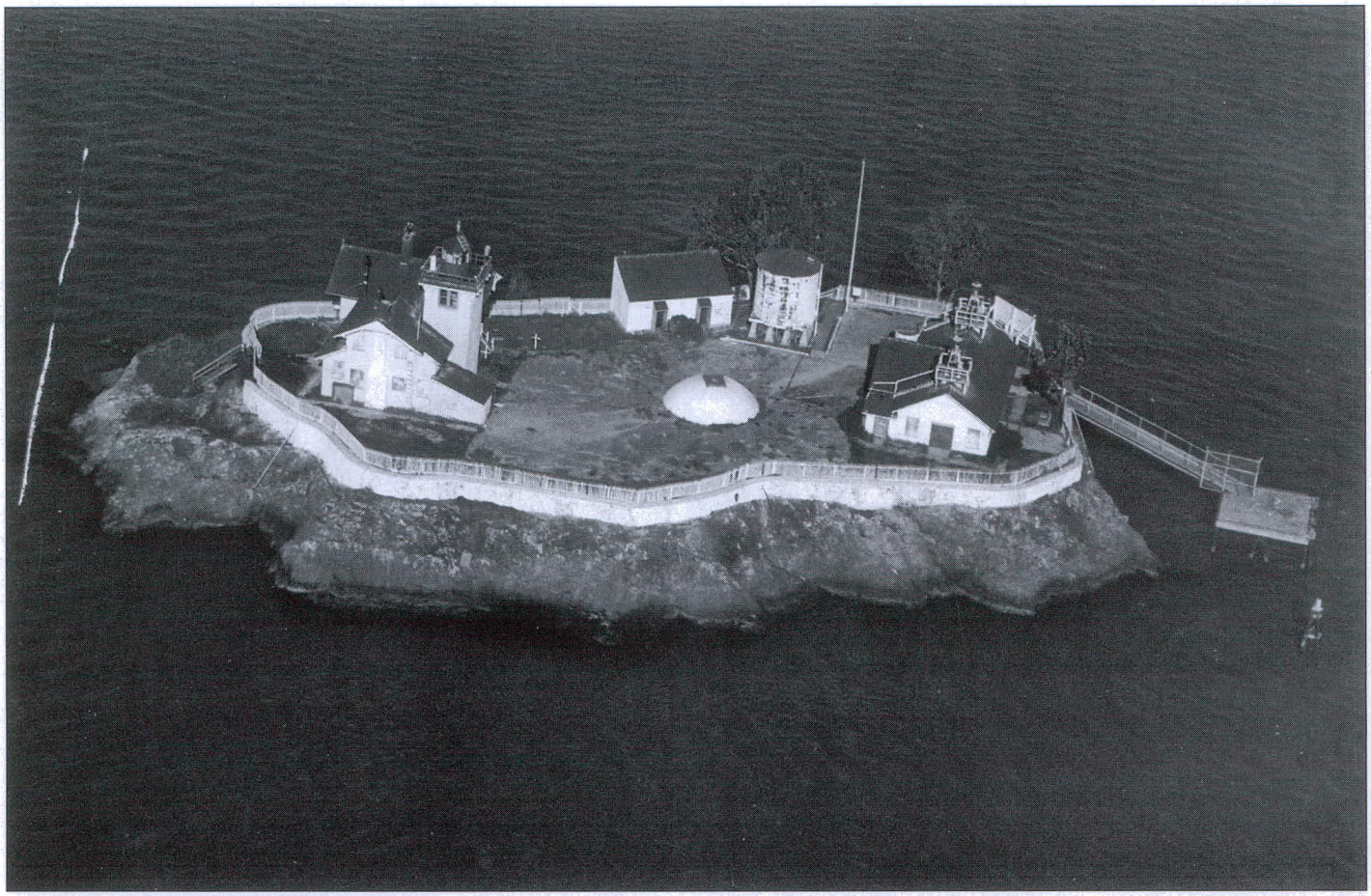
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EAST BROTHER LIGHT STATION SAVED

By Frank Perry



Official Coast Guard photo showing the East Brother Light Station in 1976. Fog signal building at right, cistern in the middle with a storage shed and water tank at rear.

In the Fall 2004 The Keeper's Log (Volume XXI, No. 1) we featured the history of East Brother Light Station. The Coast Guard automated the station in 1969 and was about to raze the buildings when a group of concerned citizens stepped forward to save the station. This is the story of that rescue and the conversion of this lovely Victorian station into a successful non-profit bed and breakfast (and dinner) inn. It was the first Coast Guard station to be awarded an extended (20 year) license for reuse by a non-profit.

Saved from Destruction

After World War II, Coast Guard personnel replaced civilian keepers at East Brother. Their duties, though , remained much the same as those of their predecessors. They tended the station around the clock, watching over the light each night and, when necessary, operating the diaphone There was still the work of cleaning the lens, checking the backup systems, doing painting and other routine maintenance work, and regularly ferrying groceries and supplies from shore to the island.

Change came slowly but surely. In 1946 use of the rainshed was discontinued, though the cistern was still used to store water delivered by the Navy. In the next few years a short-wave radio replaced the less-than-reliable telephone and butane replaced kerosene for cooking and heating. Unfortunately, remodeling soon robbed the lighthouse exterior of much of its Victorian charm. The attractive sawn banisters of the outside stairs and balcony were replaced by simple two-by-fours and the outside walls covered with asbestos shingles.

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One of the few exciting events during the 1950s occurred in 1952 when a misguided tug collided with the island in thick fog. The pilot claimed that he did not hear the diaphone. The tug company threatened to file suit against the government, assuming that the diaphone was not in operation and that the Coast Guard was negligent. A recording device attached to the signal, however, showed that it had indeed been functioning.

In the 1960s increases in salaries and benefits for personnel and increases in maintenance and equipment expenses brought a sharp rise in the cost of operating lighthouses. In order to lessen expenses and allow reassignment of many of the Coast Guardsmen tending lighthouses to other more critical duties, the Coast Guard in the mid-1960s launched its Lighthouse Automation Project (LAMP). The plan called for gradually automating most of the 400 remaining United States lighthouses over the next two decades.

With the initiation of LAMP, island light stations were not surprisingly given priority for automation. Ironically, East Brother was in some respects more remote now than several decades earlier. Under the Lighthouse Board and Bureau of Lighthouses most light stations were supplied by lighthouse tender. With better highways and increased automobile transportation, boat service to lighthouses was discontinued wherever possible. This made servicing and maintaining island stations an even greater inconvenience.

The first announcement that East Brother would be automated came in 1967. The Coast Guard said the changeover, which would occur within two years, would include replacing the existing island buildings with a "low maintenance structure"—namely, a steel tower or concrete block "lighthouse." Officials asserted that once the station was unmanned, a modern tower would be needed to protect the automatic light and fog signal from vandals. In the eyes of some, the quaint old lighthouse and other station buildings, so pristinely cared for through nearly a century, had outlived their usefulness. The station had survived storm waves, earthquakes, gales, collisions with ships, and a major fire, yet now seemed destined for demolition—a victim of modernization.

By 1967 the tradition of permanent residents on the island had been abandoned in favor of rotating two-man crews. The men worked forty-eight-hour shifts, exchanging duties with their partners on the mainland. The man in charge of the station was Chief Bosun's Mate Joseph Picotte. When the announcement came that the lighthouse would be automated, Picotte grew curious about its long history. He located Mrs. Annie Morisette, who still lived in nearby Richmond, and showed her one of the old journals he found that had been kept by her father John Stenmark. This sparked many happy reminiscences for Mrs. Morisette: going to school by boat, helping raise pigs and chickens, and the courtship visits of her husband-to-be. From her Richmond home Mrs. Morisette often heard the "bee-ooh" of the diaphone rekindling memories of the huge brass bell she used to strike as a child while her father raised steam in the boilers. Now it seemed such memories would soon be all that remained. "I'm going to miss it," she said. "It wasn't just a lighthouse to me, it was my home."

During the next year, a number of history-minded area residents vowed they would somehow find a way to save the ninety-five-year-old landmark. In 1968 the newly-formed Contra Costa Shoreline Parks Committee made this one of their primary goals. At their urging, the Richmond Planning Commission, City Council, and Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors passed resolutions asking the Coast Guard to reverse its decision to demolish the buildings. The Coast Guard responded positively and in March of that year gave committee representatives and local officials a tour of the island. The Coast Guard said that it would probably be willing to donate or lease the island to any government agency wishing to preserve it as a historical landmark. Several local parks departments and the county school district expressed interest in preserving and utilizing the buildings, but none could afford the estimated high cost of maintenance coupled with the expense and inconvenience of boat service.

In July 1969, the Coast Guard placed East Brother Light Station under automatic control and, for the time being, decided to let the buildings stand. To deter vandals, the windows were boarded up and the doors heavily barred. A tall chain-link fence and gate sealed off the ramp that connected the island to the dock, and "No Trespassing" signs punctuated the station's perimeter.

In early 1970 the Contra Costa Shoreline Parks Committee renewed its campaign to save East Brother. Their first goal was to have the station placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This would at least assure protection from demolition, a necessary first step before finding a new use for the buildings.

What worried the committee most was that no single agency or department was responsible for assuring the station's existence. The Coast Guard said it might still be willing to lease the property to a state or local agency, or it might turn the property over to the Bureau of Land Management or the General Services Administration. These agencies might in turn give it to a local government or sell it to a private interest. About the same time the parks committee



Members of the Committee To Save East Brother Island discuss their strategy. The fog signal building sports two mushroom trumpets for the diaphone horn. The badly deteriorated concrete water shed had to be completely removed and new concrete poured. East Brother Light Station, Inc. photo.

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renewed its efforts, the Bureau of Land Management burned to the ground the old keepers' dwellings of the Punta Gorda Light Station in Humboldt County. At least one BLM official later admitted that the burning was "probably a mistake." The Punta Gorda tragedy, however, breathed new life into the campaign to preserve East Brother, before it, too, was demolished through ignorance or mistake.

In March of 1970, with the cooperation of the Coast Guard, the committee gave reporters from a San Francisco television station a tour of the island and pleaded for public support to save the lighthouse. This burst of publicity brought a flood of telephone calls, telegrams, and letters to the committee sympathetic to its efforts. Not surprisingly, several people even inquired if they could live in the lighthouse to help preserve it. Local governments and the state legislature soon passed resolutions requesting the State Department of Parks and Recreation to nominate the lighthouse to the National Register. On February 12, 1971, East Brother Light Station was finally entered on the register.

Now the problem was finding a group to restore and make use of the island facilities. Many different public agencies again expressed interest in the station, and all thought it should be utilized as a resource. However, no one was willing to foot the bill. The county school superintendent, for example hoped that the property could be used for school and college programs in marine science and environmental studies, but these plans and others never materialized. In 1974 the abandoned lighthouse and other buildings passed the century mark in solitude. The weeds grew taller and the sun, wind, and rain began to take their toll. The island's only visitors were the Coast Guard service crews who occasionally landed to inspect the aero-beacon and electronic fog signal. The Coast Guard's budget only provided for upkeep of the navigational equipment.

In 1979, after ten years of neglect, a group of Richmond area citizens established a non-profit organization specifically dedicated to restoring the light station and making it accessible to the public. The organization, East Brother Light Station, Inc., hoped to restore the facility with the aid of grants and private donations and then maintain it through day use fees and operation as a bed-and-breakfast inn. The sight of the once-immaculate buildings and grounds decaying through years of abandonment brought a particular sense of urgency to the group's objectives. It seemed that this would be the last hope for restoring the landmark. Fortunately, the plan worked.

In July of 1979 the Coast Guard issued the organization a twenty-year renewable license (at no cost) to restore and occupy the station. Support came next from the U.S. Department of Interior, which awarded the group a Maritime Preservation Matching Grant of $67,000. Near the end of the year, work began. It was an enormous task, primarily made possible by overwhelming community support. Individuals,

businesses, corporations, and a variety of different government agencies all pitched in. Donations came in many forms: cash, building materials, services, and labor. Particularly important among the services was transportation. Small private boats, powerful tug boats, the Harbor Police patrol boat, Coast Guard buoy tenders, and East Brother's small Boston Whaler all assisted from time-to-time in hauling the tons of supplies and hundreds of volunteers to and from the island.

In all, over 300 people volunteered to help bring East Brother back to life. Some helped for only a day (coming, partly out of curiosity); others became regulars. Each weekend, from five-to-twenty people were hard at work fixing up the station. The more mundane tasks included scraping old paint, puttying cracks, and chiseling off asbestos shingles. For the more skilled workers were such jobs as reconstructing the ornate woodwork or making and painting the 250 new pickets needed to repair the fence.

Soon after restoration began, it became clear that the buildings, despite their weathered exterior appearance, were for the most part structurally sound. Only the south side of the lighthouse needed new studs and sheathing. A new foundation also had to be constructed under part of the dwelling. Luckily, the station's island location had deterred most vandals and souvenir hunters while abandoned.

Not a single detail was overlooked. Through study of old photographs and the original lighthouse plans, the banisters, window trim and other fine details of the dwelling's exterior were carefully reconstructed. To learn the original colors of the lighthouse, samples of paint were analyzed by the Chevron Research Company. The machinery of the diaphone was carefully taken apart, inspected, cleaned, and reassembled. Though unused for a decade, it was in surprisingly good shape, and soon its once-familiar grunts boomed across the bay.

For the third time in the station's history, the rainshed, which had deteriorated beyond



The combination dwelling and tower had been stripped of all the gingerbread woodwork and covered with shingles. Ten years of being boarded up and the vagaries of weather and guano had taken its toll. All that was changed in less than a year. Photo courtesy of East Brother Light Station, Inc.

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repair, had to be replaced so that rain could be captured as a water supply. First the old Concrete pavement was torn up. This took a crew from the California Conservation Corps six weeks. A barge from the Army Corps of Engineers then ferried over 100 tons of concrete ready-mix to the island. Using two small electric mixers, members of a CETA-funded concrete masonry training class poured the 9,000-square-foot rainshed.

Despite occasional equipment failures, some early setbacks from rough weather, and the ambitious nature of the project, restoration was completed on time, within budget, and without any serious accidents. In November 1980, less than a year after work began, the lighthouse was dedicated and welcomed its first overnight guests.

Today East Brother Light Station holds reminders of several eras. The buildings are painted much as they were in 1874 when the beacon was first lighted. The lighthouse floor plan and location of the outside stairs reflect remodeling shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, whereas the fog signal equipment dates mostly from the 1930s and 1940s. There are necessarily a few modern touches too, such as new wiring, solar panels for water heating, and propane for cooking. Essentially, though, the station looks much as it did in the nineteenth century. Indeed, with a little imagination, visitors can step right back to the days of John Stenmark or Willard Miller.

Those who help operate the facility today find that the job has many similarities with the past. Of course there is the continuing battle against the natural elements. Siding has to be repainted, windows recaulked, and machinery repaired. A skilled and dedicated crew of Monday morning volunteers tends to much of this work. Without such continued volunteer support upkeep would be a losing proposition.

Though not an official part of their duty, those working on the island keep a close watch over the bay and have several times aided boaters in distress. One afternoon a capsized canoe was sighted between East Brother and Red Rock. The light station's twenty-one-foot boat soon arrived on the scene, much to the relief of the two boaters. The two were helped aboard and taken back to the island with their canoe so that they could dry out and recover from the ordeal.

San Francisco Bay still gets fairly rough at times, precluding access to or from East Brother several days out of each year. The worst storm of recent memory struck the night of December 3, 1983. Winds of seventy-five miles per hour whipped across the bay as ten-toot waves crashed over the station wharf. The station's boat was hoisted out of the water (with the bilge holes open) so that waves would not splash into the boat and fill it with water—at least that was the plan. The waves were so large, however, that the hull soon filled, and the added weight snapped the boat loose from the derrick. Several days later the craft's battered remains drifted ashore at Hunter's Point in San Francisco.

Innkeepers Leigh and Linda Hurley admit that such incidents add spice to lighthouse life, though that one they could have lived without. The Hurleys, who are the third set of innkeepers since East Brother opened for public use took up residence on the island in 1983 and have more than a full-time job booking reservations, fixing dinner and breakfast for guests, shopping, conducting tours, cleaning, and running the boat to and from shore. Despite the traditional inconveniences, the couple cannot think of any place they would rather live. Says Mrs. Hurley, "We plan to break the Stenmarks' record and stay twenty years." The couple has already meshed well with the historical continuity of the island. A few months after moving in, they were joined by a baby daughter. With her arrival, family life returned to the island after an absence of seventy years.

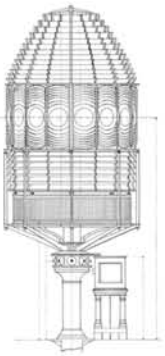
Though East Brother sits in the past, it is surrounded by the present. The nearby shoreline, barren and isolated in the 1800s, supports piers, warehouses, railroad tracks, a small yacht harbor, and a Navy fuel depot. Where ferries used to transport passengers across the bay, cars speed across the four-mile-long Richmond—San Rafael Bridge. Through San Pablo Strait, where tall-masted ships once sailed, freighters carry to distant ports the harvests of California's great Central Valley. But through all these changes and present emphasis on public use of the station, the lighthouse is still, and foremost, an aid to navigation.

The best part about the history of East Brother Light Station is that it has not yet ended. The lighthouse and other structures live on, not only guiding mariners, but also preserving part of our maritime heritage. Were it not for the many people who really cared about it and were willing to sacrifice great amounts of time and energy to preserve it, East Brother Light Station would not have survived into its second century. Its recent history is one of success and inspiration.



The restored building and tower. Asbestos shingles removed, gingerbread woodwork restored and freshly painted. Note the difference from the photo on previous page. East Brother Light Station, Inc. photo.

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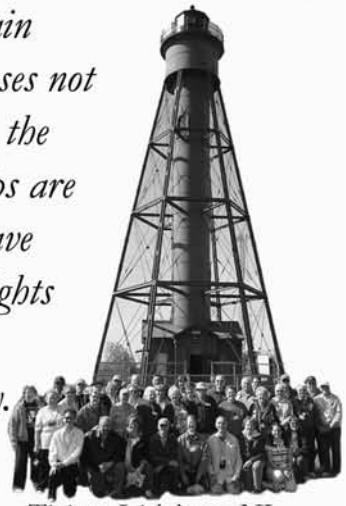
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