The Empty Lantern Room

And I wonder now – will the grass stay green?

Will the brass stay bright and the windows clean

And will ever that automatic thing

Plant Marigolds in early Spring?

– Edgar A. Guest

Five miles from the New Haven Green, Lighthouse Point Park sits on a peninsula where the local harbor opens into the Long Island Sound. In the summertime, the sound of children clambering over playground obstacles clashes with the crash of waves rolling onto a rocky beach. The faint repetitive waltz of a restored antique carousel hums in the background, as painted horses rise and fall in endless rotation. The smell of sunscreen and salt floats through the air. Couples stroll down the beach hand in hand, families spread blankets across fields of grass, fishermen cast their rods from a worn wooden pier, and treasure hunters comb every surface with metal detectors, possibly searching for relics the British left when they stormed the beach some 250 years ago in hopes of setting New Haven ablaze.

On a Thursday in mid-February, I visited the park to find it was unrecognizable from a few months before. The water's edge had frozen over, and floes of ice danced along the shore – a miniature Weddell Sea. The sand and stone that met the Long Island Sound were coated by a glistening blanket of snow that absorbed the sounds of the world. Salt-licked air and bitter wind rushed around my face as I stared out at the town across the water. Benches sat empty. A

formation of migrating ducks cut through the gray sky. In that new environment, only one thing seemed to remain truly constant: the Five Mile Point Lighthouse.

Massive blocks of brownstone – originally drawn by horse from the East Haven quarry – towered 80 feet into the air. The octagonal base sat rooted in the ground like an elderly oak that had survived the harshest of storms. Its surface was porous and splotched with the few specks of white paint that remained from its last renovation. Behind a thick steel door that clanged in the wind was a circular granite staircase. Seventy-four steps led the way to a cast-iron lantern room. The room was once home to a series of twelve lamps and reflectors and eventually a magnificent fourth-order Fresnel lens – a functional work of art made of hand-cut glass prisms, capable of throwing light nearly thirty miles into the harbor. But on that winter day, the space sat barren.

Looking at the desolate structure, buffeted by the wind, I could easily envision a lonely keeper isolated at the end of the peninsula, keeping sole watch over the harbor. But that romanticized isolation was far from the truth. “I think there’s a stereotype about lighthouse keepers,” Jeremy D’Entremont, one of the nation’s leading lighthouse experts, told me. He noted that most people think of something like a caricature from *The Simpsons.* “A lighthouse keeper, almost like a pirate... this old man in a ragged sailor suit, squinting with a corncob pipe, saying ‘Arrr.’ He's depicted as a solitary lighthouse keeper living at this lighthouse all by himself.”

I met D’Entremont over Zoom while he sat in his office in Portsmouth, NH. The room was lined with books on every aspect of lighthouse history imaginable, and podcasting gear for his show “Light Hearted” sat in front of the camera. He told me that growing up, he loved hearing the maritime stories of historian Edward Rowe Snow on TV and radio, which sparked a lifelong obsession with lighthouses. He has since written over twenty books, given lighthouse tours to

around 1,500 people out of his minivan, and, at retirement age, found what he calls his dream job as historian for the U.S. Lighthouse Society.

The reality D'Entremont described was far from the stereotype. Lighthouse keepers, like the ones at Five Mile Point, took all different shapes and sizes, young and old, men and women, well-educated painters and writers. And they were seldom alone, often surrounded by families and dutiful assistants sharing the load. At Five Mile Point, a two-and-a-half-story brick keeper's house just a few feet from the base of the tower held the memories of wives and children learning to crank the fog bell and polish lenses. The windows were boarded up, and the roof tattered and patched. The wind rattled the shutters and doors. A long shed that would have held whale oil was attached to the back of the home and sunken into the dirt. The outside was coated in the same ivy that climbs the walls of the nearby university, but at Five Mile Point, it goes unadmired.

The life of a keeper was not one of sitting by the sea and writing poems. "It didn't matter if there was a hurricane or blizzard or somebody in your family was sick and dying, that light had to be on," D'Entremont told me. Keepers would haul heavy buckets of whale oil and kerosene up the seemingly endless granite steps as the sun set each night, taking short naps and waking constantly to ensure the flame was still shining. Countless hours were spent polishing brass, trimming wicks, cleaning glass, and climbing a nearby storm tower to raise flags. The lives of every sailor depended on the keeper's diligence. It was a role defined by teamwork and relentless labor, all to produce a single beam of light.

But this tradition has rapidly faded as technology has advanced. In 1877, the Southwest Ledge Light was built just a few hundred yards offshore, and the Five Mile Point Lighthouse was rendered obsolete and its flame extinguished. The last of the keepers, 81-year-old Elizur

Thompson, who had tended the Five Mile Point Lighthouse for decades, continued to service the new light offshore and lived in the keeper's house, where he flew storm flags till the day he died. His 1897 obituary captures what he meant to the harbor: "There is hardly a mariner along the Sound who has not been guided by the light on the point at Morris Cove, and has not been thankful for its keeper, Capt. Thompson." Today, there is not a single lighthouse keeper left in all the United States, the last having retired in 2023, her role already far removed from the job Thompson knew. Even physical buoys are being phased out by the Coast Guard in favor of an all-virtual system. Like many aspects of life today, physical connections have been replaced by invisible satellite signals. The idea of keeping the beacons alive is becoming a distant memory, and with it the reverence lighthouses once commanded.

This technological shift brings about the paradoxical threat that lighthouses like Five Mile Point face today. For most of their history, lighthouses stood as humanity's defense against the sea – fixed points of light warning sailors away from hidden reefs and rocky ledges, mediating the relationship between civilization and the water that both sustained and threatened it. But the terms of that relationship have reversed. It is the lighthouses that need protection from the seas.

The threat is no longer a shipwreck, but the water itself. Climate change has fundamentally altered the stakes for these historic structures. D'Entremont laid out for me how increasingly severe storms and rising sea levels pose an inevitable threat to lighthouses on lower beaches and sandy cliffs like Five Mile Point. In 2024 alone, storms caused unprecedented damage to at least twenty-two light stations along the coast of New England. Walls and roofs of keepers' homes torn apart by heavy gales. The glass of lantern rooms shattered by hail. Brick and concrete bases eroded by rising tides. The water that was once a scenic backdrop has shifted into an encroaching danger.

But with many of these structures long obsolete, the battle to preserve them is uphill against both nature and economics. Funding is scarce, and federal grants have become nonexistent. Many sites rely on small nonprofits and an aging demographic of volunteers. D'Entremont knows this firsthand. Two of his friends and fellow volunteers at Friends of the Portsmouth Harbor Lighthouses passed away recently, and COVID forced the organization to close for a year. The people who have devoted themselves to keeping these structures alive are aging out, and there is no clear generation waiting to take over. We are left to wonder: if the ships no longer need the light, and the ocean is rising to reclaim the brownstone, why should we care if the tower falls?

The answer lies in what the empty lantern rooms represent. Even without a flame, the towers remain "memorials to the keepers," D'Entremont told me. They are the last physical evidence that people once stood watch over these waters. To let them fall would be to sever the last tangible connection to that history.

Standing at the base of the lighthouse in the frigid wind, I looked out and saw the Southwest Ledge Light blinking steadily offshore. The tide of the Long Island Sound lapped on the rocks at my feet. The empty lantern room above caught the gray wintry light reflecting off the sound. Massive ships made their way through the harbor without ever looking toward the tower. Behind me, the keeper's house sat silent, shuttered, and derelict. No one would be coming to polish brass or trim wicks. The brownstone held its ground against the wind, just as it always had. Whether the water and wind would let it keep doing so was no longer up to any keeper.