

[Long Island Towns](#)

# Secrets of the Fire Island Lighthouse

[MENU](#)

1

[RJ](#)

Construction of the second Fire Island Lighthouse was completed in 1858. (Jan. 1, 2011) Photo Credit: T.C. McCarthy

**By Marlo Jappen** Updated July 22, 2015 12:38 PM

[Print](#) ☐ [Share](#)

[fbShare](#) [Tweet](#) ☐ [Email](#)

The Fire Island Lighthouse was built in 1826 as a 74-foot cream-colored tower. Its lack of height and discernible markings made it ineffective to mariners, so it was torn down and rebuilt in 1858. Today, the lighthouse is recognized by its four black and white bands, and at 168 feet high, it is the tallest lighthouse in New York State. But while it is as conspicuous as it gets, there is much that goes unnoticed.

## Remnants of the first lighthouse



Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

Inside the basement of the keeper's quarters lies a pile of Connecticut River blue split stones that once made up the first Fire Island Lighthouse. The rest of the stones were reused to build the terrace of the quarters.

## Hidden railway



Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

The coal scattered across the sand from the tower to the Boat House hints at a former railway. Superstorm Sandy uncovered the remains of the railway in 2012.

## Crane winch





Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

The railway wasn't the only artifact unearthed by Sandy. The storm also revealed a winch that was once part of a crane system used for transporting materials from the bay up to the lighthouse.

## Found in the attic



Photo Credit: Bette Berman

Historical renderings discovered by an artist hired by the U.S. National Park Service in the 1980s show that the Keeper's Quarters once had a chimney and a pot-bellied stove for the front bedroom. In 2010, volunteers found the chimney's outline in the attic while searching for something else. It is not known when the chimney and stove were removed.

## Stored away



Photo Credit: Bette Berman

This incandescent oil vapor lamp lit the tower once the lighthouse was electrified in 1907 until 1930. It was acquired by the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, then returned to Fire Island in 2012. The lamp, which Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society trustee Bette Berman called “basically priceless,” is stashed away until funds can be raised for it to be reassembled and put on display. “There are not many of these lamps around,” Berman said.

## Lights out

Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

It's no coincidence that none of the lighthouse's windows directly face the ocean. This was a strategic move to prevent mariners from mistaking the light emitted from passing lanterns to be the light coming from the tower, which was a concern due to shipwrecks along Fire Island during the time of the first lighthouse. In 1850, after the captain of a vessel called the Elizabeth died of smallpox and his inexperienced first mate took over, the acting captain mistook the Fire Island lighthouse for a lighthouse in New Jersey and led the ship to slam into a sandbar and flood. This shipwreck was highly publicized because it drowned eight passengers, including Margaret Fuller, a prominent writer and feminist.

## Seeing double

Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

Do the stairs that lead up to the first-order Fresnel lens in the lens building look familiar? That's because both the staircase and the brick wall behind the lens were designed to resemble the lighthouse.

## **The hotel next door**



Photo Credit: Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society

In 1892, New York State purchased the three-story Surf Hotel just east of the lighthouse — the first glimpse of land for many European immigrants who came to America — as a place to quarantine those exposed to cholera. The hotel, which accommodated 1,500 guests, was later destroyed from lack of maintenance and damage from storms. In 1908, New York transformed the hotel's 120 acres into Fire Island State Park. It is now part of Robert Moses State Park.

## Aside door

Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

Visitors of the Fire Island Lighthouse enter the keeper's quarters through the main entrance, but the lighthouse keepers would go through a side door that no longer exists.

**By Marlo Jappen**

[Share on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#)

## More on this topic

**A tour of the Fire Island Lighthouse**The Fire Island Lighthouse dates back to the 1800's and today it uses more than 100 volunteers to staff the gift shop and lead groups and school tours year round. (Credit: Newsday / Chuck Fadely) □ **Points of Light at Fire Island Lighthouse**The devoted volunteers of the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society light the way for visitors to one of Long Island's most popular attractions. □ **Secrets of Sands Point Preserve**Owned by Nassau County and maintained by the nonprofit Friends of the Sands Point Preserve, the former Guggenheim estate comprises some of the most opulent Gold Coast structures to have ever been built. Here are some hidden gems that make up their histories. □ **9 secrets of the Montauk Lighthouse**At the very end of Long Island stands a lighthouse that has served as a symbol of the region and a sentinel for ships since 1796. But there's far more to the Montauk Point Lighthouse than what meets the eye. Henry Osmer, the national landmark's historian, shined a light on some of its secrets. □

## Comments

We're revamping our Comments section. [Learn more and share your input.](#)

## Most Popular

[IHOP shooting suspect arraigned](#)

[Cops: 'Targeted' IHOP shooting may be gang-related](#)

[DA: Ex-driver, aides charged with child abuse](#)

[Ex-cop sentenced to 3 to 9 years in fatal DWI crash](#)

[Mets hire Jessica Mendoza as baseball ops adviser](#)

## Latest Long Island News

[Islamophobic poster](#)

[Community leaders condemn](#)

[settled](#)

[Bellone seeks SALT end-run, critics say issue](#)

[Mangano jury sends second note to judge](#)

**Former Lt. Gov. Duffy leads tax-cap push**

**Split decision in lawsuit against town board**

**DiNapoli sets revenue total for \$190M higher**



