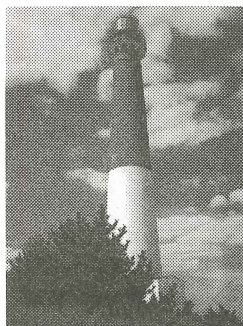


New Sites Added to New Jersey's Lighthouse Challenge '08



Barnegat Lighthouse State Park, Barnegat Light, NJ

The countdown has begun to the annual New Jersey Lighthouse Challenge on Oct. 18 and 19. And this time around, the challenge is even bigger, with two sites added to the list, bringing the total to 13 – three of which are in Ocean County.

This year marks the New Jersey Lighthouse Society's ninth annual nonprofit event, featuring in Ocean County the Barnegat Lighthouse, known affectionately as "Old Barney," on the northern tip of Long Beach Island; the Barnegat Light Historical Museum, which houses the lighthouse's first order Fresnel lens; and Tucker's Island Lighthouse at the Tuckerton Seaport, a reconstruction of the original, which fell into the bay in 1927.

Each October, more than 1,000 Garden State residents and visitors participate in the challenge to visit 11 land-based lighthouses in a single weekend, from Sandy Hook to Cape May. The event is sponsored by the Lighthouse Society, whose mission is to foster appreciation for the history of lighthouses and to support their preservation through fund-raising efforts. Brand new additions to the 2008 Challenge are the Fresnel lenses at the Barnegat Light and Cape May County Historical Museums.

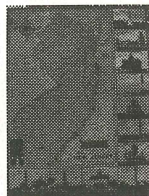
Event organizers and past participants describe it as a nice way to get the family together, pile everyone in the car and spend some time together while experiencing the state's historic landmarks and scenery along the approximately 300-mile route, which is shaped like the letter J, encompassing seven counties and three bodies of water – the Atlantic Ocean, the Delaware Bay and the Delaware River.

"It's worth doing because you get to see all of South Jersey," according to Bobbi Steele, Director of Ocean County Public Affairs and Tourism, who has completed the Challenge two separate years. "You can actually do (the route) in one day, but you can't enjoy it," she said, as hurrying to beat the clock leaves no time to "come up for air." She said she encourages people to stretch it out over the two days.

"And the drive is pretty in a lot of places," she added.

The price of gas shouldn't be a factor, she figured, "when you consider the entertainment you provide for the family." For the average driver, the trip might use one full tank of gas, perhaps a little more.

Event co-chair Doreen Berson, of Brick, admitted the organizers had been somewhat concerned that high gas prices might negatively affect this year's turnout, but an advertisement for the Lighthouse Challenge in *AAA World* magazine drew 154 inquiries in the first week it ran and nearly 100 more in the second week.



Lighthouse Challenge maps & souvenirs of years past

Berson sits on the Lighthouse Society's board of directors and is chairing this year's Challenge with Laura Portée. Involved with the event for the past nine years, Berson started as a volunteer at the Barnegat Lighthouse and then became a regional coordinator in charge of the Barnegat, Tuckers Island and Absecon Lighthouses.

"It's like a second job for me," she said of the planning process, which begins immediately after the Challenge is over for the following year. She actually took part in the Challenge for the first time last year.

Typically, a fair portion of the participants are lighthouse enthusiasts, Berson said, but just as many are first-timers who simply enjoy taking in the historical significance or the serenity lighthouses seem to represent, while others do it for the photographic opportunities.

Aside from the spectacular views, the Challenge affords a deeper look at the state's unique maritime history, with the help of different special events, informational displays and knowledgeable volunteers stationed at each location.

"Each one has its own personality," Steele said.

"It's a learning experience," Berson added, and therefore also extremely beneficial for groups of schoolchildren.

But it's also supremely beneficial for the lighthouses themselves, as the Challenge is their largest fund-raising event of the year, Berson said. In addition to whatever monetary assistance the Lighthouse Society provides, donations help to offset operation and maintenance costs, and there is a subset of the Society called Helping Hands, made up of volunteers who fix up the grounds and make minor repairs when necessary.

"They do a lot of good for lighthouses, that's for sure," she said.

Steele described the massive cooperative effort among government and nonprofit agencies that makes the event possible "a modern-day miracle." Staffing 11 lighthouses with volunteers for two days, 12 hours a day, is no small feat, she explained.

"New Jersey was the first to have a land-based challenge," she said. Maryland and New York both have similar annual events, and some people complete all three to earn a special certificate of recognition. "But New Jersey's is the best and the easiest, because it has the least amount of backtracking," Steele explained. Nor are bridge tolls an issue, just a few coins for the Garden State Parkway, she added. Another advantage is, in all 13 cases, the proximity of the parking lots to the sites, facilitating access for everyone from infants to grandparents.

The souvenirs collected at each destination on the route change from year to year. This year everyone will begin with a lanyard and collect a pin at each lighthouse to attach to it and, at the end, a special tag of completion to hang at the bottom. Previous years have had stickers, jigsaw puzzle pieces, "wooden nickel" tokens and baseball cards (a picture of each lighthouse on the front and relevant facts and stats on the back).

"I don't know what they're going to do next year to one-up themselves," she remarked.

Climbing the lighthouses is optional; showing up at the site is all that's required to get a token. But for many participants, climbing to the top of each lighthouse is what makes the trip most memorable and rewarding.

Steele described two highlights: From the top of the Tinicum Lighthouse in Paulsboro, a visitor can see William Penn's hat atop Philadelphia's City Hall building. From the top of the Barnegat Lighthouse, one gets a view of the contrast between the two distinguishing characteristics of the Jersey Shore – to the south and west, rampant seaside development and, to the north, Island Beach State Park, one of the longest stretches of preserved natural habitat in the Northeast, still looking much the way Henry Hudson must have seen it when he sailed the coast in the Half Moon, his 1609 Ship of Exploration.

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A unique attraction at the Barnegat Lighthouse, she added, is the widescreen television at the base that shows the view at the top, so those who aren't up to besting the 217-step tower need not miss out on the breathtaking vista. In addition to its historic light on display in the nearby museum (an old one-room schoolhouse that needed its supports shored up in preparation to receive the five-ton lens), Old Barney has even more to offer Challenge participants this year, with special events in celebration of its approaching 150th anniversary in January.

Another fun part of the experience, Steele said, is the camaraderie that develops among different groups of participants as people keep bumping into each other at the different locations. There's also a diverse range of challengers – motorcyclists, senior citizens, school students and couples with young children might find themselves all standing in line together.

There is no cost to participate, although several lighthouses charge a small admission fee or request a donation.

For the whole month of September, the Toms River branch of the Ocean County Library hosts an exhibit showing the history of the Lighthouse Challenge, according to Steele.

The 2008 event brochure, complete with a list of stops along the Challenge route and directions to and from each, is available to download in .pdf format and print from the Lighthouse Society's website, www.njlhs.org. 

- Victoria Ford