

Barnegat Light Museum & Edith Gwinn Gardens: Historic Preservation Award

By Pat Johnson

The Barnegat Light Museum & Edith Gwinn Gardens has earned the Ocean County Historic Preservation Award for meticulous upkeep and preservation of Barnegat Light's one-room schoolhouse museum that houses the first order Fresnel lens that used to shine forth from the Barnegat Lighthouse.

The sparkling glass first order Fresnel lens has 984 rectangular prisms and 24 'bulls eye' prisms. The pyramid-shaped "lens" was first lit in 1859 by kerosene lamps and decommissioned in 1927 when a lightship took up the job of marking the inlet. The Fresnel lens was then sent to Staten Island. It was taken out of storage twice to be exhibited in the 1931 Chicago World's Fair and later exhibited in the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Society President Karen Larson said it was the wives of Norwegian fishermen who established the Barnegat Light Historical Society. They were given the schoolhouse in 1954 to use as a museum and after they petitioned legislators for the return of the Fresnel lens, it came back to the borough in 1957 in time for the borough's 50th Anniversary.

Larson's roots in Barnegat Light fuels her dedication to the Museum; she has been president since 2005 and still offers tours to the public. The schoolhouse, located at 501 Central Avenue, educated the borough's children from 1903 to 1951. The Society exhibits photos of each class and two of the schoolhouse alumni, Margaret Buchholz and Edith Parker, still volunteer at the museum. Larson's father John attended the school and Ethel Jacobson was his teacher.

Between 1910 and 1930, many Norwegians immigrated to Long Beach Island to work on the pound nets, said Larson. The nets were located two miles off the beach. Nets set in poles directed the fish into ever-narrower corrals. Retrieving the fish required strong men to row the heavy surfboats through the waves out to the nets where they scooped the fish into the boat. A model of

the pound fishery nets show how they functioned.

"My grandfather, Uncle Ole and their brother Lars came here in 1923—Lars wound up in Oregon on the scallop boats."

Larson's Grandfather and Great Uncle plus eight or nine other Norwegians started Independent Docks (present day Viking Village). They captained pot boats, setting their pots out for lobster and sea bass.

Other exhibits tell the story of early tourism at the shore. Barnegat Bay was well known for gunning. President Grover Cleveland and baseball legend Babe Ruth used to come to hunt ducks.

Museum President Karen Larson and the fresnel lens.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.



There was a railroad up and down the island and these served three hotels in town. The Oceanic, a large wooden hotel used to be on East 4th Street; after many terrible storms the ocean undermined it in 1921. The Sunset was on the bay and was a sportsmen's paradise. It burnt down in 1931, and it is now under Barnegat Bay. The third was a rooming house called The Social.

A popular exhibit is that of 'Sinbad the Coast Guard Dog.' Sinbad was a stray dog that became a mascot for the Coast Guard ship 'Campbell' in 1937. He traveled all around the world during WWII and was made a non-commissioned officer. He was featured in a book, Sinbad of the Coast Guard. Sinbad would 'pawtograph' the book at events, said Larson. "He appeared at Macys in Newark and thousands waited in line to get his autograph." He was furloughed to the Barnegat Light Coast Guard Station and is buried there.

The horrors of World War II were felt up and down the Jersey Coast as Nazi u-boats torpedoed merchant ships—two oil tankers were sunk off Barnegat Light.

"My father was 9 years old in 1942 when his teacher took the class to the beach to see the burning boat that had been torpedoed," said Larson. "He said his heart was beating so fast because he was scared the Nazis would get him."

Of particular interest to children are the fossils of mammoth teeth and whale bones that were found on the beach. "We are very child-friendly," said Larson. "You can touch most things." Children can learn the points of the compass during a Treasure Hunt and they get a treat at the end.

Larson also has an interesting tale to tell about a Friendship quilt made in 1861 that was given to the first lighthouse keeper's daughter before the family moved west to Iowa. On each square was stitched the name and town of the friend.

"That quilt was returned to us by a woman from Washington state in 1980 where it had been in her attic in Spokane, Washington."

Once the find made the local newspaper, the museum received a fascinating letter from the great granddaughter of the woman who received the quilt. She recalled playing with fragile glass animals that had been salvaged from a shipwreck off Long Beach Island.

"There's so many things here--so many stories," said Larson. "This is why I love history."

The Museum opens weekends in June and is open everyday in July and August except Mondays; hours are 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; tours are by appointment. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated. The museum hosts a Wine and Cheese party on the last Sunday in August, and in September the museum offers lectures on local history. The museum is also open during the annual Lighthouse Challenge in October.

Surrounding the museum are the Edith Duff Gwinn Gardens run by the Long Beach Island Garden Club. The gardens are open for a wander from dusk to dawn all year round. And in the garden is one more Barnegat Light artifact--a huge iron cauldron that was used to melt tar to coat the lobster pots and nets.

Above:
Schoolhouse bell.
Below: Museum
artifacts on display.
Photo credit:
Pat Johnson.

