Landmark now threatened
Lighthouse that survived Civil War may succumb to age

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PASS MANCHAC — The lighthouse lists slightly, its once whitewashed bricks waiting to dislodge like those of the crumbling keeper’s house next to it. Water laps at the base, surrounds it, separates it from the shore of which it was once a part.

Manchac Lighthouse was a beacon built on land, but erosion and subsidence have created some 300 yards of open water between it and the receding shoreline, said Bob Hastings, a Southeastern Louisiana University wetland ecologist, gazing at the creeping changes he’s watched through the years.

Mother Nature now threatens to do what shells from Civil War gunboats never quite accomplished.

Some want to save this structure.

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The Manchac Lighthouse no longer has a beacon light, and erosion and subsidence have gradually left it surrounded by water. The structure was first built in 1837.

Advocate photo by Bob Anderson

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Beacons
Chances are the next big hurricane will blow it over.

— Bob Hastings, a wetland ecologist at Southeastern Louisiana University

Lighthouse

which once lit the way for schooners and later for steamboats, but they are fighting a battle against time and lack the man power needed.

The cost ofacking up the lighthouse, which sits atop dramatic overlooks, will run from $150,000 to $250,000, Ben Taylor, president of the Manchac Lighthouse Committee, said. So far the commitment is $30,000.

That might be enough to drive a few pigs as a stop-gap measure to prevent the structure from toppling during the next few years, but the U.S. Coast Guard won’t allow any work on the site until the lighthouse is transferred to a new owner.

Taylor said, "Sale, donation or lease of the site to a combination of the committee and state and local government provides one possibility."

"They’re better to rent to a lease with us,” Taylor said of the Coast Guard, but that still leaves the long-term problem of finding a new foundation for the structure and then maintaining it.

More promising, he said, is the possibility that the Lake Pontchartrain Maritime Museum might adopt the lighthouse, which sits in the lake on the northern edge of Pass Manchac. Already on the list of national historic places, the oft-photographed and painted Manchac lighthouse is part of the area’s heritage, Taylor said. It’s also unique in the region because of its brick construction, Louis Crouch, a local member of the U.S. Lighthouse Society, said.

And, it serves as an important landmark, he said.

Even though it no longer has a light beacon, the Manchac Lighthouse still provides a navigation aid for boaters on Lake Pontchartrain, said Betty Herbert, who grew up in the area. People use the lighthouse and know that's the entrance to the pass, she said.

Herbert, a descendant of three lighthouse keepers, said the lighthouse should be maintained as an aid to navigation as well as a historical landmark.

In a recent interview, Herbert’s mother, Rosaliy Allen, recalled the schooners and other vessels that came through the pass when she was a child living at the lighthouse.

Sometimes one would stop and drop off ice, 100 pounds of coffee and other items from a world linked only by waterway.

These would be special days. She told of coming to the door with her father where he filled the oil lamp, for which he stood around the fireplace.

"No one knows how many aids the sound and the flame guided over tens of thousands of dark and stormy nights," she said.

The lighthouse’s crystal, crafted in France, voted the light visible for miles, guiding ships to the pass, Allen said.

"It was pretty to look at. The crystal sparkled” in the lamp light, she said, describing the colors.

When the Coast Guard decommissioned the lighthouse in 1987, it took away that crystal for safekeeping, Herbert said.

Supposedly the dome of the lighthouse was auctioned by a man who had lived there long before, "but I never did see anything," Allen said, laughing at the superstition of some of the long string of lighthouse keepers that, at one point, included her grandmother as well as her father and grandfather.

She knew of Lake Pontchartrain’s dirt water and its beacon as seen from the dome.

She also visited from relatives who enjoyed the days at the lighthouse despite the seven-mile row.

She told of the sadness of finally leaving, at the age of nine, for the mundane life of a Patchanella strawberry farm where rows replaced waves.

Allen recalled theallestest waves of a hurricane, as seen from the eyes of a small child in the lighthouse in 1913.

"The boats are gone and all we can do is pray," she recalled her mother saying at the height of the storm as breakers pounded the lighthouse.

"All the boats are gone and all we can do is pray," she remembered what I said, but we were all praying and the wind stopped,” Allen said. "It was unbelievable.”

Storms occasionally have had great impact on the lighthouse since the U.S. government built it at the entrance to Pass Manchac in 1837. Several times the structure had to undergo major repairs or rebuilding.

During the Civil War, gunboats from the North and the South also took their toll, as both forces alternately occupied the lighthouse that had just been rebuilt in 1857.

As a result of the Civil War damage, the lighthouse received extensive repairs in 1867, according to notes by the late David Cipra, a lighthouse historian.

However, his notes indicated some people that it was completely rebuilt at a slightly different location is incorrect.

According to information Cipra gleaned from the National Archives, the lighthouse required an almost new tower from the western room deck upward after the breaching of the Civil War. But that was a long time ago, and time has since taken its toll.

"Chances are the next big hurricane will blow it over," said Hastings, who has watched the lighthouse gradually lean and watched the land move steadily away.

An aerial photograph from 1940 shows the lighthouse still on the shore.

By 1954 it was on an island, Hastings said. G Gradually the island has disappeared, leaving only the lighthouse and the fallen brick walls of the lighthouse keeper’s house, he said.

"The old wooden foundation is now exposed," and the rapid current coming through the pass may be further undermining the structure, Taylor said.

Even without a storm, the lighthouse will probably topple in less than a decade if work isn’t done to shore it up, he said.

We’d like to get a surveyor with a laser to shoot it at 90-day intervals to obtain the rate of creep and extrapolate a full-over date,” Taylor said.

At least that would give a time frame for finding the money and getting the needed work done, he added.

"If I had enough money I’d pay for myself," Allen said of the restoration, recalling what a wonderful place the lighthouse was to grow up.

"Other parts of the country have invested a lot in preserving their past and now they’re making something from it through tourism,” but that doesn’t happen much in Louisiana, with the exception of New Orleans, Taylor said.

But the continued work put in by Taylor and others indicates a huge case might be different.

The Manchac Lighthouse is one of the most historic sites in the area, he said, "can’t stand to see it fall.”