SABINE PASS (AP) — Restoring the Sabine Pass lighthouse promises to be a complex, costly ordeal, but the Cameron Parish landmark is already helping to save a piece of American history.

When the Texas Parks Department started a $2.8 million project to restore a lighthouse in Port Isabel, Texas, the restoration team discovered that critical parts of it were missing.

The ironwork in the Port Isabel and Sabine Pass lighthouses was cast from the same molds, so Texas Parks official Jim Biggers contacted the owners of the Sabine Pass lighthouse about using its surviving ironwork to create new patterns for the restoration.

The Sabine Lighthouse and the 45-acre site surrounding it have been in private hands since 1986, when the property was auctioned off by the federal government. Houston developers Pincus Grenader and W.E. Pieop III had gone to the auction to buy another parcel, but arrived too late to bid on it. On a whim, the partners paid $35,000 for the historic property, not really knowing what they would do with it.

They wound up doing nothing after finding out the cost involved. The site now belongs to their sons, Jon Grenader and W.E. "Bill" Pieop III, both of Houston.

Jon Grenader said he didn't think much about the shelved project until Biggers contacted him about the Port Isabel restoration.

Although the exterior of the Sabine Pass lighthouse, built in 1886, bears little resemblance to the Port Isabel lighthouse, both had to be repaired after the Civil War. It was the 1872 repair effort that led to the lighthouses having the same metalwork, Grenader said.

The metalwork on the Sabine lighthouse survived the strain of time and salt air better than its Texas cousin. Grenader said restoration experts were glad to find so much of it intact. At some point, the iron railings at Port Isabel had been replaced with a chain-link fence, and the cast-iron deck had been covered when it was covered with concrete.

The restoration team spent several days at Sabine Pass, carefully measuring and photographing each detail of the rusted ironwork. The collected data will be used to fabricate replacement pieces.

Grenader said the Port Isabel project sparked his interest in preserving the lighthouse in Sabine Pass.

"It sort of brought in focus how important it is, and how we should try to preserve it," Grenader said.

Grenader recalled his first visit to the site, shortly after his father and Pieop bought it.

"We have all these sort of storybook images of lighthouses — all painted and shipshape and working. It was kind of sad to see its deteriorated condition," he said.

Grenader and Pieop have agreed to lease the property to the Cameron Parish Police Jury for 20 years in the hope that the lighthouse will be stored up and opened to the public.

If the parish can raise enough money to turn the historical landmark into a tourist attraction, the molds created for the Port Isabel project could be used to restore parts of the Sabine lighthouse interior.

A committee called the Friends of the Sabine Pass Lighthouse has been established to spearhead the effort and accept donations from lighthouse enthusiasts.

Bird groups have also expressed an interest in making the site accessible because of the dense grove of trees near the lighthouse is a popular nesting area for unusual bird species.

Future plans for the site also include building an access road from La. 82, rebuilding the lighthouse boardwalk and dock and possibly rebuilding the lighthouse keeper's quarters.

Grenader said the lighthouse has changed little since the first time he saw it, but he hopes the parish will be able to find funding to restore it.

"It's overwhelming to be responsible for this historical landmark," he said.