Lighthouse stands tall through ages

Sabine Pass icon was built in 1857

The Associated Press

JOHNSON BAYOU—The Sabine Pass Lighthouse has weathered a half-dozen hurricanes, including two in the past five years, and still stands tall in the marshes of extreme southwest Cameron Parish.

There were the nameless hurricanes in 1865, 1886 and 1918, Hurricane Audrey in 1957, Hurricane Rita in 2005 and Hurricane Ike in 2008.

Rita and Ike damaged the buttresses that flare out like rocket fins at the bottom. Work on those will be a priority when preservation work begins, said Carolyn Thibodeaux of the Cameron Preservation Alliance, which owns the property.

She said the Alliance hasn't done much since Rita, but in January will be ready to launch a new membership campaign.

The buttresses need to be stabilized before anything else is done because they help support the lighthouse walls, and have given it the strength to withstand storms and weathering, she said.

The Sabine Pass Lighthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981, the first property in Cameron Parish to make the list.

The octagonal brick structure with a flared octagonal base is believed unique on the Mississippi-Louisiana-Texas coasts.

The lighthouse, built in 1857 for $22,258, served as a navigational aid in trade and aided the westward migration in Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana.

Capt. Sammie Faulk, Cameron Parish outdoorsman and tour guide, said the surrounding area was also known for its cattle drives. One of the remaining signs on the countryside from the cattle drive days are cactus plants.

Thibodeaux said the lighthouse is also "hallowed" ground, since it was the site of a Civil War skirmish and battle on April 18, 1863. One Confederate soldier and five Union sailors were killed.

On Sept. 8, 1863, Union gunboats near the lighthouse opened fire on Confederate Fort Griffin on the Texas side of the river. In the Battle of Sabine Pass, Confederate forces stopped a Union invasion of Texas.

Construction of the lighthouse began in 1856, with brick from New Jersey. The first lighthouse keeper, Benjamin F. Granger, lit a whale-oil light.

The light was extinguished in 1861, and the lantern and clockworks dismantled by Granger in 1862 to thwart their use by the Union Navy.

It was repaired in 1865 and began operation on Dec. 23 of that year.

During the hurricane of Oct. 12, 1886, between 50 and 110 people were drowned in nearby Johnson Bayou, which had a population of 1,200.

Faulk said that at that time, Johnson Bayou was known for its orange groves. The hurricane also swept away the lighthouse keeper's wood-frame house. It was rebuilt.

Electricity and a radio beacon were installed in 1929 and black bands painted onto the white tower in 1932 to make it more visible. On May 21, 1952, lighthouse keeper Steve Purpyley turned off the light for the last time.

A marsh fire destroyed the keeper's wood-frame house and walkway were destroyed in 1976. Only the brick tower and generator building survived.

Over the years, ownership of the property was transferred by the federal government to Lamar University, P.G. Grenader and W.C. Fielpo Jr. and, in 2001, to its current owner, Cameron Preservation Alliance.

Last year, the Sabine Pass Lighthouse was featured on a stamp by the U.S. Postal Service.

It is not open to the public. Thibodeaux said that after the preservation organization gets going again, more public activities will be held there.