

Cedar Island Light Station

By Robert Müller



Perhaps no other light station on Long Island has experienced as many ups and downs as Cedar Island. From the glory of Sag Harbor's whaling days and the laughter of many children, through erosion, storms, and abandonment, to the current struggle just to remain standing, this light station has had its share of good times, as well as bad.

In the early to mid-1800s, the town of Sag Harbor was generally considered the second most important town on Long Island, second only to Brooklyn. The whaling industry had brought great fortune to the area. To this day, the town touts itself as being "Built by the Whalers."

In 1838, Sag Harbor boasted 20 vessels "employed in the coasting trade and cod fisheries," as well as 29 whaling ships. By comparison, Greenport, at that time the second most popular whaling port on Long Island, had seven whaling ships sailing from port.

Getting in and out of Sag Harbor could be hazardous to mariners. Cedar Island stood between the South Fork of Long Island and Shelter Island, posing a danger to ships entering and leaving the port. The federal government realized this and, on August 20 1838, purchased the three-acre Cedar Island from "the Trustees of the Freeholders and Commonality of the town of East Hampton" for \$200.

In 1839, the government spent \$3480 to build a lighthouse on the north side of the island. It was a wooden keeper's dwelling with a tower and cast iron lantern room on top. Like many Pleasanton-era lights it did not fare well. The cast iron lantern was not properly supported, leading this lighthouse, and others like it, to experience structural problems.

On February 2, 1844, Sineus Conkling became the keeper at Cedar Island. He remained until September 1845.

On June 20, 1850, Captain Howland, of the lighthouse tender supplying the area's stations, visited Cedar Island. At that time, Keeper Hubbard L. Fordham was in charge of the



Cedar Island Light Station before 1910 with original fog bell tower. The open A-frame provided height for the falling weight to power the bell striker. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

lighthouse. Howland reported in his log that: "[w]ith the exception of the house being leaky, it is in good order. Lantern is very leaky." He also noted that "[a]n attempt has been made to protect the island from washing away by a wooden fence or breakwater. I am fearful it will not prove effectual."

On July 1, 1851, the Cedar Island Light had a listed effective range of 12.5 miles. Its nine lamps with 14-inch reflectors cast this light from a height of 32 feet above sea level.

Lyman G. Sherman, a former whaling ship captain who had been born on Shelter Island in 1804, became the keeper at Cedar Island on September 8, 1853. He would remain until April 13, 1861.

The Annual Report of the Light-house Board for 1855 stated that the Cedar Island Lighthouse had received a new illuminating apparatus. The lens installed was a 270-degree Sixth Order lens, with Argand lamp, to replace the nine Winslow Lewis lamps and reflectors. The Cedar Island Light was the first Long Island lighthouse to be refitted with a Fresnel lens. Keeper Sherman was likely trained to take care of this new style of apparatus. With the price of whale oil at \$2.25 per gallon, the fuel savings

associated with the more efficient lamp and lens system must have been great.

The 1858 Annual Report indicated that the Cedar Island Light showed a fixed white light from a Sixth Order lens 34 feet above sea level. Oddly, it lists the range as ten miles, 2.5 less than the old lamps with reflectors. The tower on top of the keeper's quarters was painted white.

In April 1861, Nathaniel Edwards, a ship-builder by trade, took over as keeper of the lighthouse. He had been born in 1799, and married Mary (Polly) Eldridge in 1826. Nathaniel and Mary had a daughter, Mary Lucy Edwards, in 1833. In April 1855 Mary Lucy married Charles Finch Sherman (son of former Cedar Island keeper Lyman Sherman, he later became assistant keeper at Execution Rocks Lighthouse in 1873-1874). When Nathaniel passed away on May 21, 1862, his wife took over as keeper until a new keeper was assigned in September.

Hubbard L. Fordham, who had been the keeper at Cedar Island in 1850, returned to his old post and regained his position as keeper of the lighthouse on September 16, 1862. He remained until April 6, 1869, thereby witnessing the building of the new lighthouse.

Congress authorized the rebuilding of the lighthouse on March 2, 1867. An appropriation of \$25,000 was made for the purpose. Fifteen thousand dollars were spent on the lighthouse's construction in 1868, and another \$9992.62 to complete the structure in 1869.

The 1869 Annual Report stated that the "rebuilding of this station is completed and the old structure removed. A 5th order lens will be placed in this tower as a substitute for the

6th order which was in the old tower." The new lighthouse was L-shaped, with a square tower, made of granite with a hardwood interior. Despite the mention of the Fifth Order lens, subsequent documents would always report the presence of a Sixth Order lens at Cedar Island.

In 1882, a "fog bell, struck by machinery, was established" at the station. The "machinery" mentioned was probably a Steven's Fog Bell Apparatus, as illustrated in the July 1881

Instructions to Light-Keepers. This apparatus was, essentially, a wind-up clockworks mechanism that caused a large sledgehammer to strike the fog bell. The bell was suspended from a wooden frame, and the clockworks mechanism was contained in a small wooden structure under the bell frame.

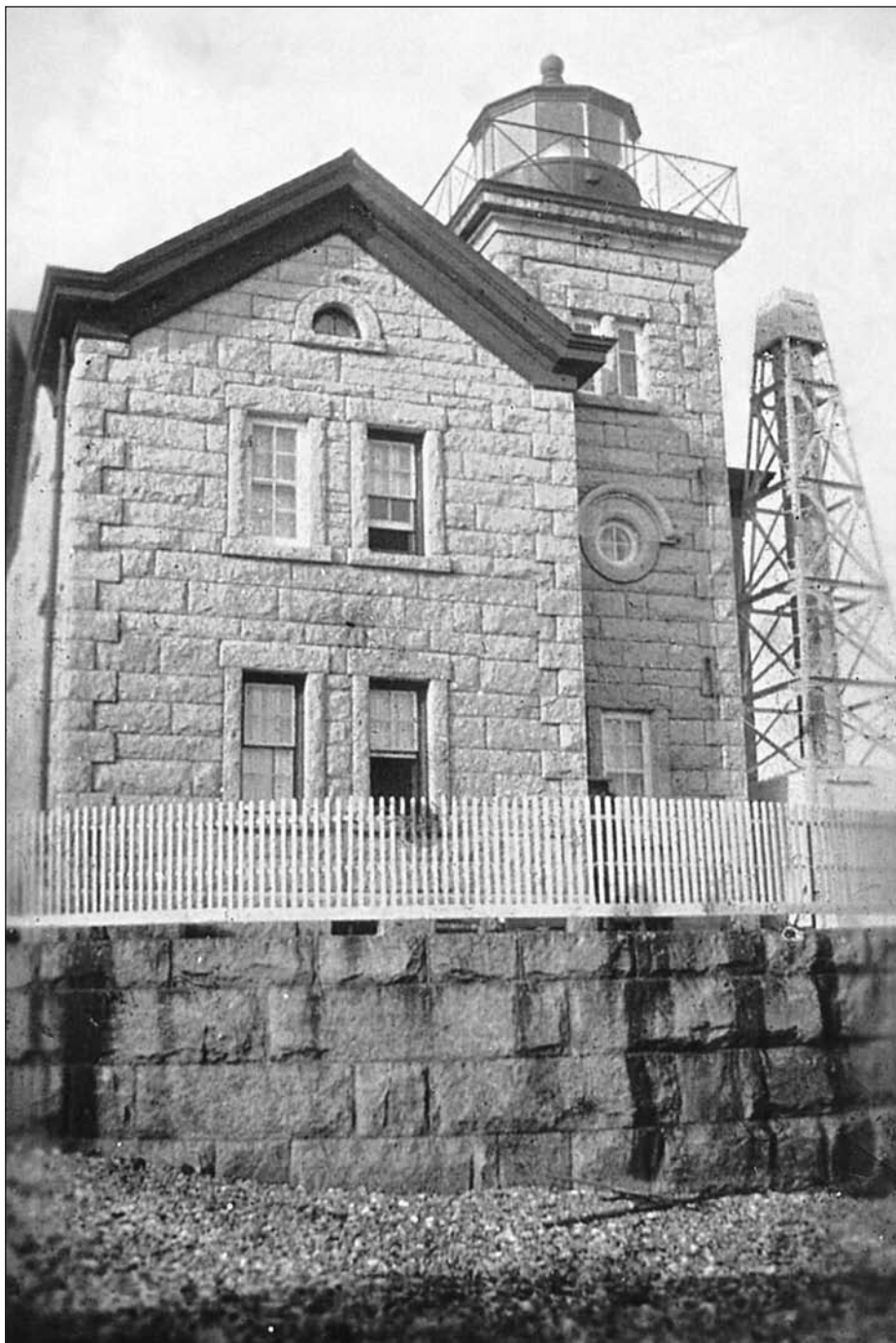
On March 23, 1897, Charles Mulford became the keeper at the Cedar Island Light. He was a Civil War veteran who had lost one leg in the war. Popular stories say that some of his wooden legs were still in the attic at Cedar Island when it burned in 1974. Keeper Mulford remained until January 1906.

In 1902, the brick oil house that still stands at the station was built. Many oil houses were built on Long Island about this time, including the extant ones at Plum Island, Old Field Point, Montauk Point, and Shinnecock Bay.

By 1903, erosion, which had been first documented in 1850, had reduced Cedar Island to about 1.5 acres, a loss of half the island in less than 70 years. At this point, riprap began to be placed around the north and west sides of the island to protect it. By 1907, over 6000 tons would be placed. Much of this riprap is still visible at the site.

In 1906, Adolf Nordstrom became the keeper at Cedar Island, for the princely sum of \$46 per month. The fog signal at this time was a "[bell struck by machinery every 20 sec[onds]."

John Frederick Anderson became the light's keeper in May of 1912, replacing Nordstrom.



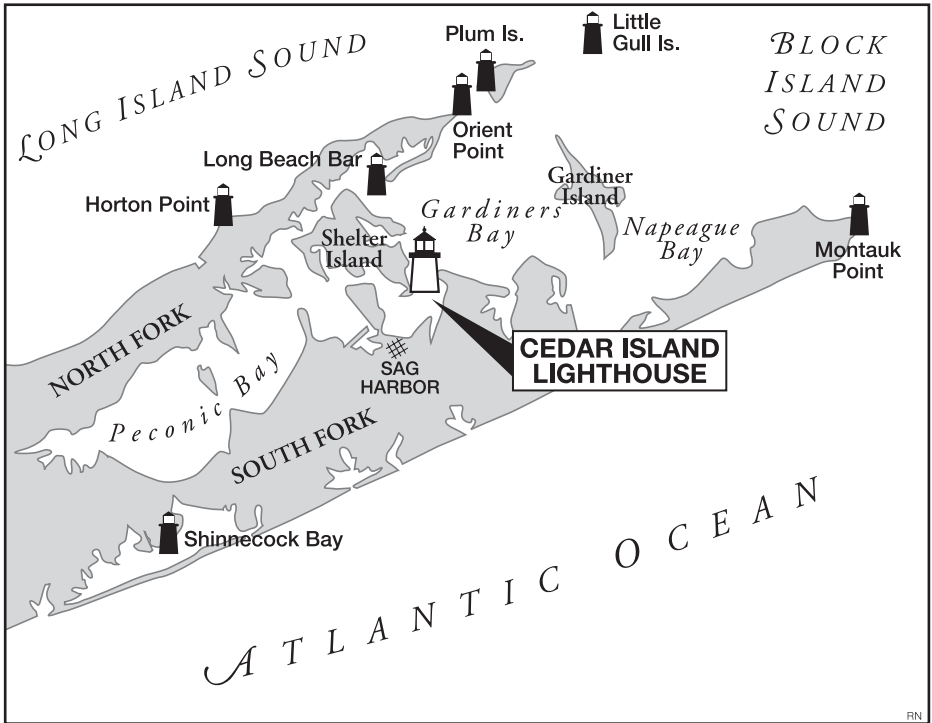
Cedar Island Light, with its post-1926 fog bell tower. The "tube" contained the weights. Photo courtesy of Bob Allen.



Keeper John Anderson with wife and dog. Anderson served at Cedar Island from 1906 to early 1917. Photographer unknown.



Cedar Island Lighthouse in June, 1999, prior to beginning of restoration work. Note the date, 1868 over the door. Photo by the author.



Anderson, who had been born in Sweden on Christmas Day, 1859, had transferred from Montauk Point, and took a large pay cut to do so. He remained until January 1917, leaving for the Prince's Bay Light in Staten Island.

The Andersons had four daughters and a son. While at Cedar Island, the Andersons received a visit from their three-year-old grandson, Norman Johnson. Six years later, when Norman's mother died, John Anderson wrote to Norman's father asking that Norman be allowed to come live with them at Prince's Bay. The nine-year-old traveled alone, bearing a tag that said: "This boy Norman Johnson is travelling alone from Portland, Ore., to New York to his grandfather, John F. Anderson, whose address is Princes Bay Lighthouse, Staten Island, New York." The reverse side of tag said: "To Officials and Trainmen: Please give this boy, who is travelling alone, every assistance. In case of accident or serious illness notify his father, Emil Johnson at Klickitat, Washington." Norman was sorry that he was not going back to Cedar Island, but was happy to be with his cherished grandparents, who were just as happy to have him.



Keeper William Follett in the lantern room with the Sixth Order Fresnel lens. Note that the top and bottom portions of the lens are missing. A somewhat unusual configuration. Photo courtesy of Bob Allen.



William and Atta Follett. Follett served from 1917 until the station was decommissioned in 1934. Photo courtesy of Ellen Fithian Halsey.

From 1917 until the light's decommissioning in 1934, William H. Follett was the keeper of the Cedar Island Lighthouse. On July 13, 1919, Follett spotted a boat on fire. The *Flyer* had had an explosion on board. Follett managed to reach the boat, and get the three burned men to the hospital, but none of them survived.

Keeper Follett (who had been an assistant at Hog Island Shoal, Rhode Island and Montauk Point) and his wife Atta, had many good times at the light. During the summers, grandchildren spent time on the tiny island, swimming, boating, and fishing to pass the time. Warren and Bill Allen, grandsons of the Folletts, lived at the lighthouse full-time for a few years until they had to go to school. Then, they would come spend the summers. As Warren recalled at a visit to the lighthouse in August 2003, his first time there since 1934, the boys would often row a boat between the lighthouse and the stone breakwater, an area that is now all sand and beach grass.

As with many light stations, the keeper and his family were important members of the community. Painter Frank B. Fithian, a ninth generation resident of East Hampton, and his wife, Louise, were friends of the Folletts. Frank had given the Folletts a puppy, Brownie, when their previous dog, Mutt, died in 1926 (Brownie remained with the family for the rest of the Folletts' lighthouse-keeping career, passing away shortly after William Follett retired). When Louise Fithian was pregnant in 1922, she chose Atta Follett to be her nurse. When Ellen Fithian was born, with the help of Atta Follett, "Grandpa Follett" was chosen as her godfather.

During Follett's time at the light, the tenders *Tulip*, *Hawthorne*, and *Hickory* would occasionally visit, bringing supplies or inspectors. Warren Allen remembered the duties of each tender. The *Tulip* brought oil, coal, and wood to the area's lighthouses. The *Hawthorne* would bring paint, turpentine, and various supplies for the maintenance of the lighthouses, and also bring the inspectors to visit the light stations twice each year. The *Hickory* was used to maintain buoys.

In 1926, a barge arrived at the breakwater off Cedar Island (today this breakwater is onshore). On the barge was the new steel fog bell tower. The workmen toppled the old wooden tower, breaking it up after it fell off the pier and into the water, then carried the already-assembled new steel tower from

the breakwater, through the shallow water inside the breakwater, and hauled it up onto the pier. One of the workmen, a man named Tommy, had to endure the many questions and watchful eyes of Bill and Warren as he worked to secure the tower to the pier. The new tower did not hold the bell aloft as the old one had; rather, it merely served to elevate the weights for the striking mechanism. They were held inside a central steel column.

William Follett kept his personal powerboat at the island, along with a 16-foot sailboat and 12-foot rowboat, which were provided by the U. S. Lighthouse Service. The grandsons would spend much time in the boats, but never piloted Grandpa's powerboat.

Warren and Bill learned important lessons at the light station. One time, Grandma Follett asked the boys to catch her some fish for dinner. The boys came through, using soft shell clams as bait to catch many blowfish; many more, in fact, than were actually needed. The boys cleaned 30 fish for dinner. When Grandpa Follett asked what they were going to do with the rest, they told him they were going to throw them away. The seasoned lighthouse keeper informed them that the Good Lord did not provide the fish for the boys to throw away. Bill and Warren then cleaned the remaining 97 fish. From then on, whenever Grandma asked them to get something, they asked, "how many?"

During Prohibition, rum running was as active in the Sag Harbor area as other areas of Long Island. William Follett used to hang a lantern on one of the half-dozen or so cedar trees left on the island if the Coast Guard was in the area. When the grandsons asked what the lantern was for, Grandpa told them it was to keep the deer away. They learned the true reason years later.

In the channel between Cedar Island and Shelter Island, not far from the breakwater, a Coast Guard boat once intercepted some bootleggers. When the rum running boat turned to escape, the Coast Guard fired on them, stopping the boat and setting it on fire. Water from the Coast Guard boat put the fire out, but all those on board were apprehended. Or so it seemed.

The next morning, Bill and Warren sighted a man clinging to one of the rocks on the breakwater (they had given many of the individual rocks names—this one was "Fatty"). Bill rowed out and brought the man, Bill Parker, to the lighthouse. He had been shot in the leg, though not seriously. Grandma Follett treated



A good view of Cedar Island Lighthouse with the oil house at left. Photo courtesy of Joseph Kiebish.

the wound and Parker stayed for a few days to recover. William Follett eventually took him to Sag Harbor.

The next Sunday, a large wooden boat dropped off a barrel at the station. In it was the Sunday paper, candy bars for the kids, and a bone for Brownie, the Follett's dog. This happened for three weeks straight. By this time, the kids had come to call the 60-foot boat "the ark," as it looked like what they had imagined Noah's boat was like. On the last visit, Bill Parker called out to them from the back of the boat and told them that they would not see him anymore, as they were moving across the Sound. They later learned that the boat, named *Liberty*, had been sunk in the Sound. To this day, though, Warren was sure that Bill Parker got away safely: "He was just that sort of guy."

When Bill and Warren reached school age, they shipped out to Rhode Island the day before school started, then would return the day after school ended. Warren reminisced that leaving the island, and watching the lighthouse fade into the distance, was very sad, but the return the next Summer, seeing the lighthouse enter into view and get larger and larger, was cause for great joy.

Warren remembered his days with Grandpa and Grandma Follett at Cedar Island with

great fondness. He believed those many days on the one-acre island were an important part of his life, and regretted that he could not give his children that experience in their youth. In summing up his childhood experiences at Cedar Island, Warren said, with a distant look in his eyes: "We were free."

The 1930s saw several Long Island lighthouses decommissioned. Like the lighthouses at Shinnecock Bay, Horton Point, and Old Field Point, the Cedar Island Light had the lamp and lens removed from its tower. A skeletal tower, which still stands, became the light at Cedar Island in 1934. Keeper Follett moved on to the Long Beach Bar Light.

In 1936, Cedar Island was surveyed. By this time, the island had been reduced to less than one acre, with its grove of cedar trees long since washed away by the encroaching waters. The high water line had approached so close as to half encircle the pier upon which the lighthouse was built. It must have seemed that the shifting Long Island sands that had plagued the island for years would soon deposit the old lighthouse into the sea.

The island and lighthouse were sold for \$2002 in 1937 to Phelan Beale, a Manhattan lawyer. One year later, in 1938, the infamous September hurricane struck Long Island,

reeking havoc throughout the area. In a bizarre act of fate, this horrible storm would be the savior the Cedar Island Lighthouse had long awaited. The storm filled in the strait of water between Cedar Island and the south fork of Long Island, stabilizing the area sands. Cedar Island now became Cedar Point.

The lighthouse remained in private hands until 1967, when it was purchased by Suffolk County to become part of Cedar Point County



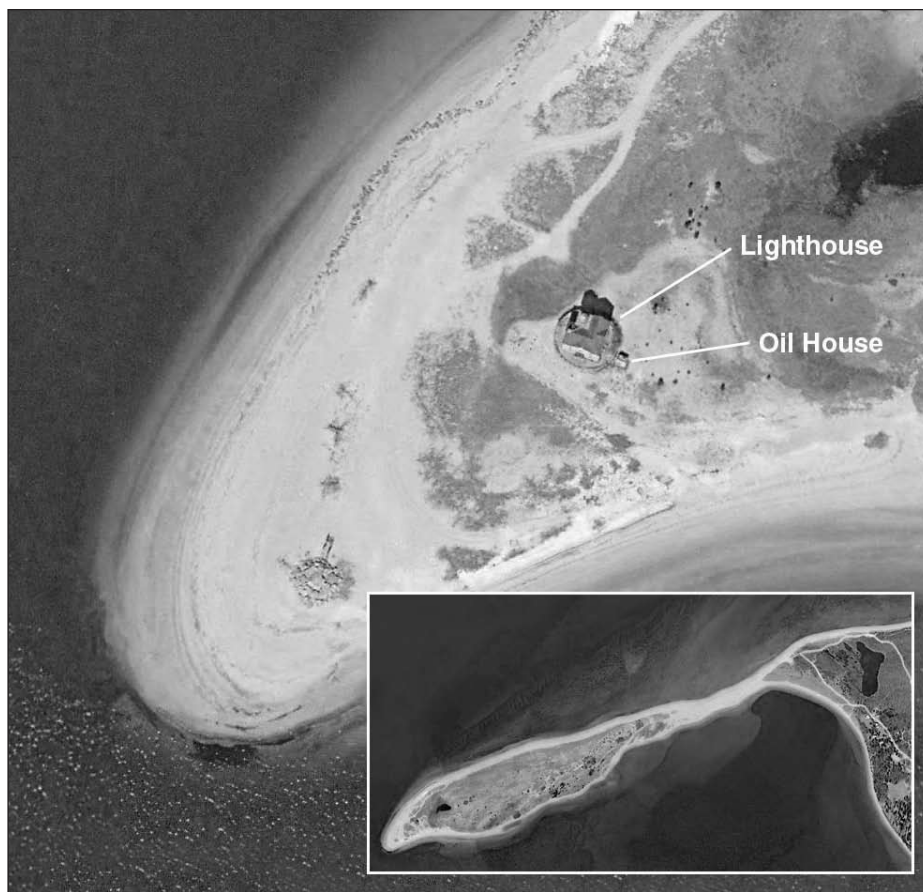
Above – The Cedar Island Light Station oil house prior to restoration. Photo by the author.

Below – The restored oil house. Photo taken in August, 2006. Photo by Diane Mancini.



Park. After 40 years of private ownership, the lighthouse still was intact, its hardwood interior having the appearance, as one visitor put it, of a mansion. Unfortunately, that changed in June of 1974, just before sunset, when the lighthouse caught fire. Its location at the end of a long sandspit made it too difficult to receive help in time, and the interior and roof of the lighthouse burned away, leaving only the granite shell and cast iron lantern room.

The County sealed the doors and windows



Cedar Island Light Station from the air. Note the silting which resulted from the infamous September 1938 hurricane that connected the island to the mainland. Thus Cedar Island became Cedar Point, but the official name was not changed. It remains to this day, Cedar Island. Image ©NYState GIS courtesy of Google Earth.

and built a new roof. The lighthouse remained in essentially that state for 29 years. Along with the lighthouse, one other building from the light station remains: the 1902 oil house. This building, historically important in its own right, suffered at the hands of vandals for years, and many of the bricks that made up its walls were torn away.

The Cedar Island Lighthouse has been beaten, burned, and even threatened by damage from trees and vines growing in the spaces between its granite blocks. But today it has a chance to regain the glory of its former years.

The Suffolk County Parks Department and Long Island Chapter of the U. S. Lighthouse Society entered into a stewardship agreement to restore the lighthouse in 2002. The joint effort has thus far resulted in the light's listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the start of preliminary work inside the structure, the removal of vegetation from the building, sealing the structure to keep out birds, and the completion of an architectural

assessment of the site. The 1902 oil house was completely restored in 2004, but has since suffered from minor vandalism and once again requires some attention.

For the first time in many years, it appears that the Cedar Island Lighthouse may once again stand proud. Although there are no longer any whaling ships to guide, a restored Cedar Island Lighthouse will be a poignant reminder of the area's rich maritime heritage, and an inspiration for visitors and the Long Island community. Warren Allen wishes that his children had had the opportunity to have the sort of experiences that he and his brother did while at the Cedar Island Lighthouse. While that may no longer be possible on Long Island, a restored Cedar Island Lighthouse will provide memorable experiences, and important lessons, for many more children.