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South Fox Island Light Station Restoration Underway this Summer

Leelanau County – Just about anyone who travels in Michigan knows that lighthouses are a big deal to the Great Lake State. In addition to the historic lighthouses that line Michigan's shorelines, small-scale lighthouse-type structures stand at welcome centers and miniature versions appear as lawn ornaments. The enthusiasm for these buildings is understandable because with its 3,288 miles of shoreline, Michigan has more historic lighthouses than any other state. Some of these structures are accessible to automobile travelers and others are not. One in the latter category is the South Fox Island Light Station.

South Fox Island is located in northern Lake Michigan approximately 16 nautical miles northwest of Leelanau County. It is one of eight islands stretching from South Manitou Island to the Wilderness State Park Islands near the Straits of Mackinac. The South Fox Island Light Station stands on a 115-acre parcel at the southernmost tip of the island and it includes a light tower and keeper's dwelling constructed in 1867, an oil house and a fog signal building, both dating from c. 1895, a boat house built in 1897, an assistant keeper's house built c. 1910, a skeletal light tower erected in 1934, and a carpenter shop of an unknown date.

Electronic navigation made the lighthouse obsolete in 1968 and the complex was eventually transferred out of federal ownership into the hands of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). As a complex without a purpose, the buildings have deteriorated. A nonprofit organization, the Fox Island Lighthouse Association, is committed to working with the MDNR to preserve and restore the light station and to build a dock. For some eight years the group has worked to control vegetation around the buildings, secured the buildings, and stabilized them until they could be restored.

“The South Fox Island complex is a rare intact collection of buildings, including both a lighthouse tower and a skeletal tower,” said SHPO architect Bryan Lijewski. As the architect assigned to work with lighthouses, Lijewski works with lighthouses both on land and off shore. “South Fox is remote. The fact that it lacks a docking facility makes the transportation of materials and equipment a greater challenge than usual, but I know the committed volunteers will make it happen.”

Work will continue this summer on the restoration of the boat house, one of the most prominently placed buildings in the complex. The work will include replacing the doors, which have been missing for years. The new doors – replicas of the originals, with hinges forged by a modern-day blacksmith -- will secure the building from both four- legged and two-legged intruders, and will recreate the historic appearance of the boat house. Historic photographs of the building are guiding the replication of the doors.

The stabilization and securing of the boat house was recommended in a recently completed Historic Structure Report (HSR), which was commissioned with the help of a Michigan Lighthouse Assistance Program grant from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to the Fox Island Lighthouse Association. U.P. Engineers & Architects, Inc. of Marquette researched the history of the complex, assessed and documented the current condition of each building, and made recommendations for the physical rehabilitation of the buildings and their future use, including interpretation. The next projects planned are the repair of the roof on the assistant keepers quarters and the reconstruction of a lean-to on the lighthouse.

The Michigan Lighthouse Assistance Program is funded by the sale of **Save Our Lights** license plates. The purchase of the Save Our Lights lighthouse license plate supports lighthouse preservation. Twenty-five dollars from each new plate and \$10 for each renewal goes toward the Michigan Lighthouse Assistance Fund.

Be sure to pick up your copy of the SHPO's *Historic Lighthouses of Michigan* map at a welcome center this summer.

The State Historic Preservation Office is part of the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) , which provides financial and technical assistance through public and private partnerships to create and preserve decent, affordable housing for low- and moderate-income residents and to engage in community economic development activities to revitalize urban and rural communities.*

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