

Project alerts historians to lighthouse lore

By Cristine Gonzalez
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Heroes, damsels, romance and duty. Everything from war stories to love stories, pirates and sunken treasure.

These are part of the lore surrounding lighthouses, the beacons of warning that guide ships through unfamiliar waters and unpleasant weather.

The special appeal of lighthouses is also what attracted a Massachusetts history buff and a businessman to work together to educate the public on endangered lighthouses.

The combined efforts of James Hyland, president of the Lighthouse Preservation Society, and Stephen Bernard, president of Cape Cod Potato Chips, led to a \$15,000 advertising campaign in which information about lighthouses has been placed on the back of 9 million potato chip bags sent to Canada and across this country.

As a result, the society has received about 25 calls a day requesting information or T-shirts. Proceeds go to the society.

"We have an obligation to say what is good in our culture," said Hyland, who founded the group eight years ago.

Culminating the five-month effort was a cruise this past week to Boston Light, the oldest lighthouse in the nation and the last requiring manual operation. It sits on Little Brewster Island at the entrance to Boston Harbor, a mile off of Hull.

Participating in the cruise were members of various organizations such as Historic Boston Inc. and Friends of the Harbor Islands, a nonprofit educational group that encourages public use of the islands.

The tour was all one volunteer for Friends of the Harbor Islands needed. "Don't give us diamonds and furs; give us oceans and a rocky boat," Eleanor O'Sullivan said.

At the turn of the century, about 1,200 lighthouses, or "lights" as they're called by mariners, stood watch on American coasts. An estimated 800 remain - only half of which are still operational - with 150 in New England.

Initially run by civilians, lighthouses used to be a way of life for generations of families. In 1939, the Coast Guard began to supervise lighthouses.

"The people felt very betrayed by this act; it was very traumatic," said Nancy L. Salzman, a lighthouse histori-



Boston Light on Little Brewster Island.

an. "The Coast Guard offered them a chance to join, but it wasn't the same."

Boston Light now stands as the only operational lighthouse not run by a computer.

Aside from the romance, lighthouses stand historically as symbols of safety, commerce and maritime history.

Boston Light, for instance, was completed in 1716. It was partially destroyed by the British in the Revolutionary War, but rebuilt in 1783, Salzman said.

The granite tower, which stands at 98 feet, has 76 spiral steps to its beacon, which flashes 16 miles out to sea. Its only fault, literally and figuratively, is a crack in its foundation, which has been filled in with concrete.

Hyland's interest in lighthouses began when he received a grant to document lighthouses in New England. Soon after, he found the structures took on a personal significance.

"For me the lighthouses have a spiritual connotation as well," Hyland said. "The whole idea of bringing light to darkness, keeping a watchful eye for the benefit of others, and security appeals to all of us."