

Built in 1881, Borden Flats Lighthouse stands at the mouth of the Taunton River near Fall River, Massachusetts.

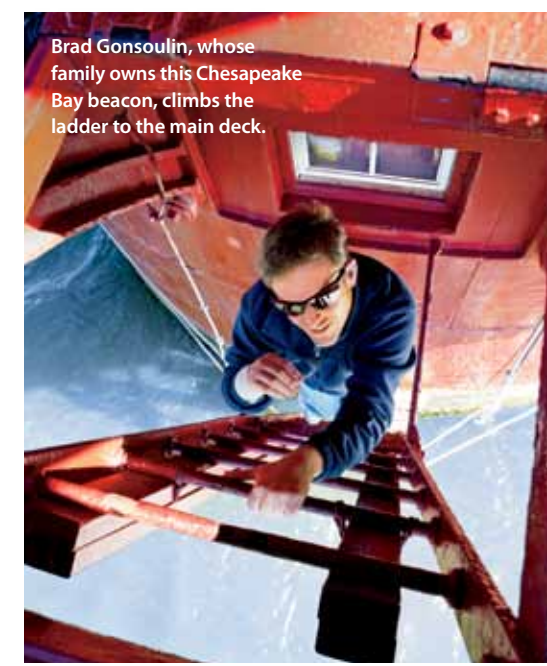
# WHO OWNS AMERICA'S LIGHTHOUSES?

The Coast Guard can't afford to maintain all of our beloved coastal icons, so private citizens are stepping up. Meet the people who are preserving the past—and shining a new light on the giant fixer-uppers they cherish *By Virginia Sole-Smith*

*Photographs by William Abranowicz*



Nick Korstad purchased Borden Flats in 2010 and paddles to his place by kayak: "I always wanted to live in a lighthouse," he says.



Brad Gonsoulin, whose family owns this Chesapeake Bay beacon, climbs the ladder to the main deck.



On purchasing Goose Rocks Lighthouse near North Haven, Maine, Casey Jordan says, "I've never regretted it."

When Dan Billingsley set out to refinish the spiral staircase in his historic waterfront vacation home, it began like any hardcore DIY project: Put on a respirator and scrape away at the 12 decades worth of paint that was hiding an original diamond tread pattern. "I started at the top and worked my way down," Dan says. "It took days." And every so often, like any weekend warrior, he would realize that he'd forgotten an essential tool in the basement. That's when he'd have to hike down 55 stairs to collect the forgotten tool and then all the way back to the top of Middle Ground Lighthouse, a 60-foot-tall beacon in the Chesapeake Bay near Newport News,

Virginia, that Dan and his wife, Jackie, purchased in 2006 for the bargain price of \$31,000 with Jackie's sister Joan and Joan's husband, Bob Gonsoulin.

The Billingsleys and the Gonsoulin's are among a handful of private-citizen lighthouse owners—a niche that has been slowly growing. Since Congress passed the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act (NHLPA) in 2000, the federal government has been unloading lighthouses around the country because of their high maintenance costs. The Coast Guard's first priority is to transfer these landmarks to qualified nonprofits or local governments for free—but when no



qualified organization can be found, it will sell the beacons at public auction to private bidders, with auctioneers sometimes opening the bidding at just \$10,000. In the years since the law was enacted, at least 20 lighthouses have passed into private ownership, with more coming up for auction every year. “Nonprofit groups and government agencies cannot possibly care for all the lighthouses out there, so the private sector has become our last line of defense,” says Bob Trapani, executive director of the American Lighthouse Foundation, a national nonprofit organization. “Without it, who knows what would happen to these historic structures?”

Although their sticker prices may make these lighthouses sound like bargains, the folks who have taken on the properties are quick to explain the kind of additional investment they require—in renovation costs; time; and blood, sweat, and tears. The Gonsoulins and the Billingsleys, with the help of more than 100 friends and family members, spent five summers renovating Middle Ground and now laugh when they remember how even the simplest project took hours longer than expected. If they ran out of paint or refills for the sander, restocking required a three-hour round-trip back to shore by boat. “You start to ask yourself: ‘Why did I buy a six-story building smack in the middle of the James River?’” Dan says.

He has his answer when the two families gather at Middle Ground for long weekends spent savoring the 360-degree views of sunsets and sailboats from the lighthouse’s two wraparound decks. “There’s a feeling out there that’s like nothing else in the world,” says Bob Gonsoulin. It’s a feeling that Casey Jordan, owner of Goose Rocks Lighthouse in the Fox Island Thoroughfare just off the coast of Maine, knows well. “There’s something extremely special about being in a lighthouse that’s completely surrounded by water,” she says. “It’s a magical experience.”

After Casey purchased Goose Rocks in 2006 for \$27,000—perhaps the lowest amount a lighthouse has ever sold for—she’s since invested four times that much in the structure and donated it to Beacon Preservation, a nonprofit group she founded that preserves lighthouses all along the Northeast coastline. Donors to Beacon Preservation can qualify for an overnight stay in Goose Rocks, which has now been fully renovated; Casey also hosts several annual Open House days when the lighthouse is open to anyone willing to make the 13-mile boat trip and climb one of the two 20-foot ladders that serve as the lighthouse’s only entrance.

Although Middle Ground Lighthouse is not open to the public, the Gonsoulins and Billingsleys also relish their role as its modern-day keepers. Every so often, they spot a curious family on a passing boat and invite them up for a tour: “Kids love to explore lighthouses,” Jackie Billingsley says.

“And we’re aware that this is a historic landmark as well as our family’s home. Our goal from the start has been to rehabilitate it, preserve it, and enjoy it.”

### AN ENDANGERED ICON

Approximately one-third of the country’s more than 600 lighthouses no longer actively aid navigation, as human lighthouse keepers were first replaced by automatic light systems in the 1960s. The advent of GPS made these icons seem even more obsolete. “We are in a transitional period for lighthouses,” says Candace Clifford, a researcher who works with collections at both the National Archives and the U.S. Coast Guard Historian’s Office in Washington, D.C. “The Coast Guard considers lighthouses obsolete because they’re no longer crucial for navigation.” But it’s saddled with their upkeep—and doesn’t have the budget to maintain them, notes James Gabbert, a historian with the National Register of Historic Places who facilitates the transfer of lighthouses to nonprofits.

The NHLPA was designed to lighten the taxpayer burden while ensuring that lighthouses could pass to caretakers better equipped to take on their specific challenges and costs. “With all the government has to fund in our normal lives, I can’t imagine how we’d pull lighthouses into the future if this act hadn’t come along,” Bob Trapani says.

Enter a few ambitious, lighthouse-loving citizens. When a property can’t be matched to a public steward, the General Services Administration, which serves as the real estate arm of the federal government, sells it to the highest bidder in an online auction. The NHLPA stipulates that while a lighthouse obtained by a nonprofit group or government agency for free must be maintained for public benefit, when private citizens buy a lighthouse, they can use it however they like, as long as the property is maintained according to historical standards.

Maintaining the lighthouses is important because even as they languish, many are still among the approximately 400 offshore beacons around the country that are considered “active aids to navigation,” meaning they have a functioning light and/or foghorn. After all: “GPS can fail,” James says. “Lighthouses offer a useful backup.”

The practical purpose, the emotional premium, and the historical importance of lighthouses have combined to produce critics of the public auction process. “There are people who bid just because it seems cool, or because they want to add a lighthouse to their real estate portfolio,” says Casey Jordan. She worries that such prospective owners become seduced by the romance but lack a full understanding of the responsibility involved. Renovation plans must be reviewed by your state’s historic preservation office; the exterior must

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The scene from Goose Rocks’s deck on a typical day includes sailboats, lobster boats, and 360-degree water views.



Nick raises the flag. “The lighthouse is offshore, so the flags don’t last long,” he says. “There seems to be a constant wind!”



The ceiling compass in Middle Ground Lighthouse’s only bedroom was painted by Joan Gonsoulin.



The bench and coat rack were made by Jackie Billingsley and her dad.



## WANT TO BUY A LIGHTHOUSE?

Visit [gsaauctions.gov](https://gsaauctions.gov) and click on “real estate” and then “lighthouse” to see lighthouses like these, available at auction for opening bids of \$25,000.



### Miah Maull Light Station

Downe Township, New Jersey  
**DETAILS:** Working navigational aid built in 1913 as a 45-foot red cast iron tower with a black lantern; three stories with brick interior; concrete and cast iron foundation; 18 miles northwest of Cape May, New Jersey, in Delaware Bay  
**EXTRA POINTS:** On the National Register of Historic Places



### Orient Point Lighthouse

Southold, New York  
**DETAILS:** Working navigational aid built in 1899 as a cast iron-plated 45-foot tower; brick-lined interior; three stories of living space; panoramic views of Long Island Sound  
**EXTRA POINTS:** Minutes away from public marinas, restaurants, and shops in Greenport, New York

### Ship John Shoal Lighthouse

Seabreeze, New Jersey  
**DETAILS:** Working navigational aid built in 1877 as a 50-foot octagonal tower with mansard roof; windows on all levels; about three miles south of the mouth of the Cohansey River  
**EXTRA POINTS:** Concrete pier and boat dock



### Penfield Reef Lighthouse

Fairfield, Connecticut  
**DETAILS:** Built in 1874 as a 51-foot octagonal light structure with concrete foundation and boat landing; attached two-story keeper's quarters; in Long Island Sound  
**EXTRA POINTS:** Easily accessible by boat; about one mile from the public marina in Fairfield



be repainted frequently according to regulations; and if the beacon and foghorn still work, the lighthouse will come with an easement allowing the Coast Guard access to them. Adds Casey, “When people walk in, it should evoke the original architectural detail and meet historical standards.”

The good news is that the government hasn't yet had to pursue any of the lighthouse deeds' reversionary clauses, which state that a property can be reclaimed if the owners don't adhere to the standards. “We're only 11 years in, but so far, things have run smoothly,” James says. “Ninety-nine percent of people who go to the trouble of buying a lighthouse really do want to preserve it.” Advocates agree that there are more benefits than risks. “It's a shame that most privately owned lighthouses are no longer ‘public,’ but at least someone is investing in their upkeep,” says Candace.

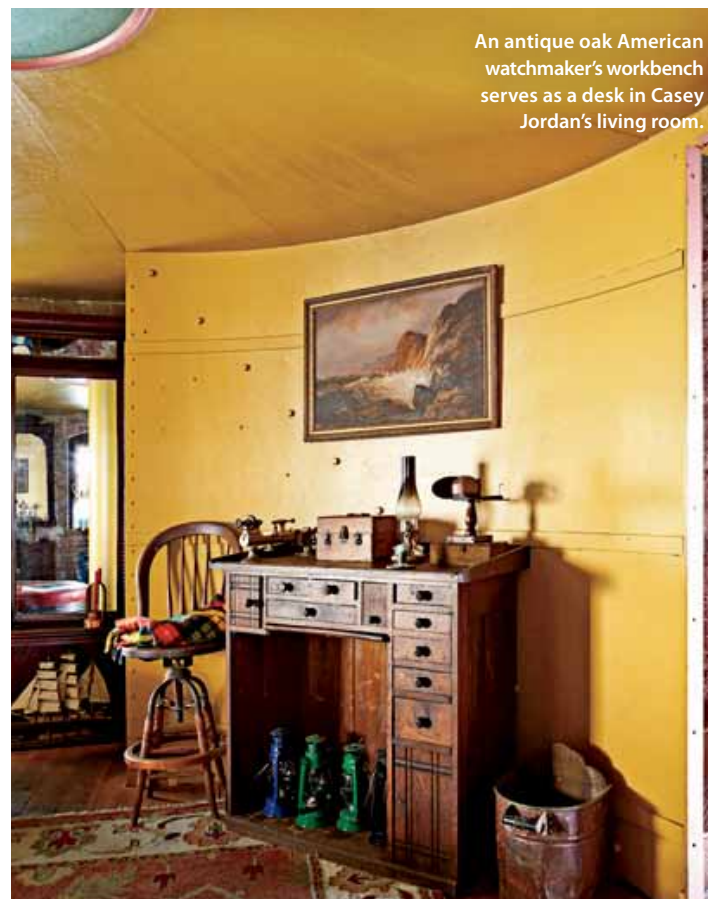
### THE LIGHTHOUSE LIFE

Every lighthouse owner agrees that property upkeep has turned out to cost more and require more time than they ever could have imagined. “It's a massive undertaking,” says Casey Jordan, who has spent more than \$100,000 during five years of renovations. Many lighthouses are in terrible condition by the time they reach auction: Goose Rocks was badly rusted and lacking electricity, plumbing, and floors. A door had been left open at the top of Middle Ground, so the Gonsoulin and Billingsleys arrived to discover years' worth of seagull poop, along with a host of leaks and rust

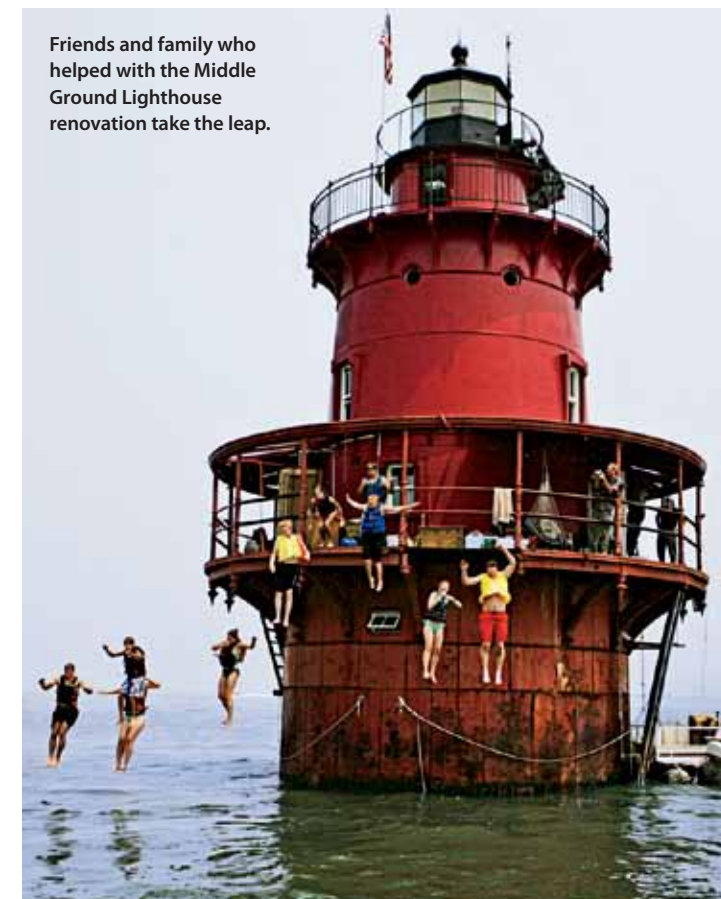
spots. “Every time we went, I thought, ‘What did we get ourselves into?’” says Joan.

Nick Korstad, who purchased Borden Flats Lighthouse in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 2010, says one of the biggest surprises about any lighthouse is its size. “When you see an offshore lighthouse from a distance, you think, ‘It's so tiny—that will be an afternoon of scraping and painting!’” he laughs. “It's a shock when you get up close and realize that it's 50 feet tall. You can cover a house with maybe eight gallons of paint. I'm up to 45 gallons with more to go—plus it will take another 10 to put a fresh coat on each spring.” Inside, the average offshore lighthouse is about as roomy as a beach house—albeit with a slightly more unusual layout. The Gonsoulin and Billingsleys regularly host gatherings for their large extended family, creatively fitting everyone in Middle Ground's 1,200 square feet of interior space. “The whole family likes to congregate on the main level, which has the kitchen and dining room opening onto our main deck,” Bob explains. “Plus it has the one bathroom—in a closet!” The next floor up has a bedroom; two flights up, the “porthole room” has a TV, a game table, and four sleeper sofas. The families plan to add more sleeping spaces on the first floor and fifth floor, which is where past lighthouse keepers would hold their watches.

In addition to painting, installing floors, and other cosmetic and structural work, most lighthouses are off the grid and require a generator, composting toilets, and a freshwater



An antique oak American watchmaker's workbench serves as a desk in Casey Jordan's living room.



Friends and family who helped with the Middle Ground Lighthouse renovation take the leap.

source for plumbing—all of which have to be ferried out by boat and then carried up a ladder or hoisted up with ropes. “Construction projects require lots of extra planning—you have to figure out how to get the materials out there and you need a contractor who is something of a Renaissance thinker and knows how to work in a round room,” says Casey, who cites the specific challenge of laying hardwood floors in the round: “It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle!” And prospective owners shouldn't expect to see financial returns on their investment. Casey recently had Goose Rocks appraised by the IRS and discovered the value had increased by about \$20,000 in five years, despite her studs-out renovation. “The access issues of an offshore lighthouse make it a white elephant in the market,” she says. “It's so unique; only certain people will want this.” Or be able to finance it; banks view lighthouses as personal property, like a boat or an RV, and won't offer mortgages or home improvement loans.

But lighthouse owners agree that resale value tends to be the last thing on their minds as they're watching the sunset

from their deck—including after a long day of sweat equity. Casey loves her lighthouse even when the weather doesn't cooperate: “We get this incredible pea soup fog, so there have been times I'll find myself stuck on the lighthouse for four days before the weather clears enough to sail to shore,” she explains. “But I love the solitude.”

For the owners of Middle Ground, one of the biggest rewards was bringing Joan and Jackie's father to visit. “He'd lost his wife the year before we bought it, and he was down and out,” Bob remembers. So Jackie asked her dad, who had been a woodworker all his life, to help her build some furniture for the lighthouse using wood salvaged from its decks, and the old man's imagination caught fire. “There was just something about being there at the lighthouse that brought him back to life,” Jackie says. Joan still laughs at the memory of how the two families agreed to bid on the lighthouse in the first place: “I said yes, because I honestly thought there was no way we'd ever get it! But we did—and it has been a magnificent adventure.”

### HELP SAVE A PIECE OF HISTORY

You can aid lighthouse preservation efforts by volunteering your time or making a donation to one of these organizations.

- **American Lighthouse Foundation** oversees 22 American lighthouses and relies on 25,000 volunteer hours annually; [lighthousefoundation.org](https://lighthousefoundation.org).
- **United States Lighthouse Society** organizes lighthouse tours around the United States and Canada as well as the United Kingdom, and also offers vacation rentals at the Point No Point Lighthouse, a renovated Puget Sound beacon; [uslhs.org](https://uslhs.org).
- **Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association** provides educational resources on lighthouse history for anyone interested in purchasing one of the 350 lighthouses in the Great Lakes. Donations of any amount are welcome; [gllka.com](https://gllka.com).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP, LEFT: DAVE SLEEPER, KRAIG ANDERSON, GENEVIEVE REILLY/FAIRFIELD CITIZEN, KRAIG ANDERSON

FAR RIGHT: ANDREW HENDERSON