

METRO

SUNDAY, AUGUST 6, 2006

C

Merchandise Classified
Local Life
Weather

DC MD VA B

Bringing Back a Potomac Institution

St. Clement's Island Light to Be Rebuilt

By DAN ZAK
Washington Post Staff Writer

It started with a \$5,000 bequest and an idea for a memorial bench or tree. Over the years, it has turned into a \$600,000 endeavor to reconstruct, brick by brick, the lighthouse that once stood on St. Clement's Island.

Josephine McWilliams Freeman was the keeper of the Blackstone Lighthouse for nearly four decades, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th. She was one of the few women to hold such a job. When Freeman's granddaughter, Josephine Mattingly, died in 1998, she left \$5,000 to the St. Clement's Hundred, a non-profit group dedicated to preserving the island, off Coltons Point on the Potomac River, where English colonists first landed in Maryland, in 1634.

"Some of our older members just kept saying we need to do two things: We need to honor her grandmother, and we need to build the lighthouse as they remember it," said Richard Gass, president and co-founder of the St. Clement's Hundred.

After years of planning, fundraising and jumping hurdles, the group is doing both. The St. Clement's Hundred planned to break ground this weekend, 100 yards inland from the foundation of the original lighthouse. Construction is scheduled to begin early next year.

"We've kidded with potential contractors that it was built manually in 126 days under 1850 conditions," Gass said. "I think today we could do it in that time or less."

See LIGHTHOUSE, C4, Col. 1

St. Clement's Beacon to Return

LIGHTHOUSE, From C1

The original lighthouse was built in 1851 for \$3,500, which was provided by Congress. It sat on just over 2½ acres, which had been sold to the government for \$300 by country doctor Joseph McWilliams, the father of Josephine McWilliams Freeman. The lighthouse served as a navigation beacon on the Potomac River, a busy corridor for commerce, Gass said. After the prolifer-

ation of battery-powered lights and increased road construction, water traffic decreased, and the lighthouse was decommissioned in 1932. For the next 25 years, it remained a link to the past.

Frank E. Roys, a member of the St. Clement's Hundred, spent weekends on the island as a child. He has been a driving force for the reconstruction since moving to Coltons Point 18 years ago.

"It was just a wonderful place to

go to and had a wonderful view of the Virginia shore and the Maryland shore from that point," Roys recalled. "High up in the cupola, you could see miles down the river. You could see Raggedy Point. You could see Tall Timbers."

In July 1956, the lighthouse was charred by a fire of unknown origin. Soon after, the Navy further dismantled it. The ruins have sat on the island since, though the building's foundation was not visible until



ST. CLEMENT'S ISLAND-POTOMAC RIVER MUSEUM

Blackstone Lighthouse as it looked in the first half of the 20th century, before it burned and was dismantled.

waves from Hurricane Isabel flushed it out of the sand three years ago, just as plans for reconstruction gathered momentum.

Using diagrams and blueprints from the 1850s, a contractor, yet to be chosen, will build a replica of the lighthouse, which featured a 50-foot light tower rising from the middle of a multi-bedroom brick house. It was known as Blackstone Lighthouse; St. Clement's Island is also called Blackstone Island.

The new lighthouse, planned as an annex to the St. Clement's Island-Potomac River Museum, will become the third in St. Mary's County, after the 1836 Piney Point Lighthouse and the still-operational light at Point Lookout.

Because of its historical significance, St. Clement's Island is a state park, and it was difficult to obtain permission for building from the Department of Natural Resources, Gass said. Another hurdle was convincing federal, state and local officials that the project was worth the financial investment, Roys said.

"Anytime you're within 100 feet of tidal waters and you're talking about building a structure of this magnitude — it's almost forbidden," he said. "We had such a small portion of property to deal with. We had the tides on one side, and the federal government's edict on the [first landing] memorial on the other, and we were kind of squeezed."

After getting permission to build, the St. Clement's Hundred capitalized on community support. Avenue native George McWilliams, an artist who moved to West Virginia three years ago, painted portraits of the lighthouse for the group, which sold them to raise money for the reconstruction.

"I think it's great," said McWilliams, a descendant of Joseph McWilliams, whose great-great-grandfather Jerome tended the lighthouse. "It's something I've wanted to see since I was a kid. I was born in 1958, so I missed it. I was always a little fascinated by it."

Members of the St. Clement's Hundred say the new lighthouse will be an educational tool for schoolchildren as well as a destination for tourists. Visitors will be able to see all three St. Mary's lighthouses in one day, Roys said.

"We've still got a lot of work to do," he said. "But I'm 78 years old now, and I never really thought it would ever get to this point in my lifetime, so this is a tremendous thing."