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Barnegat Lighthouse to light the sky once again

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Barnegat Lighthouse, one of the most recognizable symbols of the Jersey Shore, will be pressed back into service next year as a working — albeit unofficial — beacon in honor of its 150th anniversary.

Affectionately known by locals as "Old Barney," the 172-foot tower saw its First Order Fresnel lens originally light up the sky over Barnegat Inlet on Jan. 1, 1859. For the next 68 years, the lighthouse warded off transatlantic shipping traffic, according to the New Jersey Lighthouse Society.

In 1927, the lens was removed and Barnegat Lightship was anchored off the coast of Barnegat Light. The lighthouse formally was decommissioned in 1944. In the decades that followed, the lighthouse evolved into a tourist attraction and an unofficial monument of the Shore's past. To this day, the light-house remains a centerpiece of Ocean County's Columbia blue flag.

"It will become an active lighthouse on Jan. 1, 2009," 150 years to the day that it first became operational, said Angelo Rinaldi, president of the Friends of Barnegat Lighthouse State Park. He made the announcement before the Ocean County Board of Freeholders on Wednesday.

The new light will not be as powerful as the lens that was installed in 1859, Rinaldi pointed out. The original lens, which is on display at the Barnegat Light Museum and Gardens, is about 10 feet by 8 feet with a kerosene lamp at its center.

The soon-to-be-installed lens is about 20 inches high and 20 inches wide, composed of Lucite panels. A rotating turntable behind the panels can accommodate a 10- to 100-watt bulb. The Coast Guard has approved the use of the new light, which is being imported from Vega Industries Limited in New Zealand at a cost of about \$15,000, Rinaldi said.

As the turntable rotates, the light strikes a panel that refracts and magnifies the light to create a single beam that can be visible for up to 22 nautical miles.

"Now, depending on how much, how big a beam you want, you can graduate from 10 up to 100 watts. We're gonna go with the 10," Rinaldi said. He estimates the light will be visible for up to 15 miles using the softer 10-watt bulb.

In its heyday, Old Barney was an international lighthouse, he said. "By that I mean the ships coming from Europe would come on the 40th parallel, and when they saw the light, they knew they had to turn either to New York or Philadelphia."

These days, Barnegat Light sees little sea traffic coming through from Southampton, England, or Oslo, Norway. But Rinaldi said the light will serve as a back-up navigational aid for recreational boaters and the local commercial fishing fleet, even as modern GPS equipment has made the lighthouse a relic of the pre-electronic past.

And aside from the practical argument, "It's so cool," quipped Barnegat Light Mayor Kirk O. Larson, a commercial fisherman whose family has deep roots in the borough that Old Barney calls home.

"There were some people moaning in town here at the taxpayers' meeting, wondering if we did a light-

pollution survey or something," Larson said. "I don't think it's going to be in your eyes. It'll be less than the street lights, you know? And quieter than the fog horn we have to listen to, oh, every 30 seconds."

Not to worry, Rinaldi said. "The light that goes out is a pencil beam, whereas back in 1859, that thing could flood the whole neighborhood with light. This will not do that. We probably would've had a lot of complaints."

The group was honored at Wednesday's freeholder meeting with a proclamation making Oct. 11 "Barnegat Lighthouse Day" in Ocean County.

Freeholder Director Joseph H. Vicari called the lighthouse "a great monument" and noted the difficulty of climbing its 217 spiral steps to the top of the lighthouse, which is about 16 stories in height and offers a panoramic view of the Ocean County shoreline.

On Oct. 11, Friends of Barnegat Lighthouse State Park will host an anniversary celebration for Old Barney in the park from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.. There will be lectures, live music and a flyover by a Coast Guard rescue team.
