



Admiral James M. Loy
Maine Lighthouse Transfer Ceremony
Rockland, Maine
June 20, 1998

Amenities:

Senator and Mrs. Stevens,

Senator Snowe,

Mr. Ralston,

Admiral and Mrs. Larrabee,

Admiral Rybacki,

Distinguished guests representing towns and organizations from West Quoddy Head to Cape Neddick.

Good afternoon.

The Value of Lighthouses:

We are here today—all of us—first and foremost because we love lighthouses.

They have fastened an unrelenting grip upon our imagination and affection as universal symbols of steadfastness, hope, guidance, and help.

What is it about these curious buildings with lights atop that evokes such strong emotions? What is it about these buildings that makes towns and non-profit organizations line up to apply for the privilege of maintaining and preserving them. The buildings are quaint and distinctive and capable of supporting a great weight of METAphors, but what explains their power over us? Why do lighthouses lay such claim to our hearts?

The answer lies in their history.

There are many very good histories of lighthouses. All of them discuss famous early lighthouses like the ones at Eddystone and Alexandria. Many step back further in time and speculate that the first lighthouse must have been a fire on the beach, set to guide someone home.

That fire on the beach holds the key to our love for lighthouses.

By itself, a fire on a beach is not a lighthouse. The first time that someone lit a fire on the beach to guide someone home may have been a notable event in the history of navigation, but that event did not establish a lighthouse. That fire starter may have established a temporary, privately-maintained, shore-based, short-range aid to navigation. But another element had to be present before the fire on a beach became the first lighthouse.

There needed to be a fire on the beach . . . and there needed to be a commitment to keep it burning.

The first lighthouse came to be only when someone lit a fire on the beach and made a commitment to keep it burning. To keep it burning so that all mariners could see the fire and so they could count on that fire to burn all the time to mark a hazard or a harbor or a headland.

[Similarly, a lighthouse is more than a building with a light on top of it. A lighthouse is a building with a light and a person or a community with a commitment to keep it burning.]

[There's a big new pyramid-shaped hotel in Las Vegas with a huge light on top of it. That light is brighter than any lighthouse we have and can be seen further away than any lighthouse we've ever built. But it is not a lighthouse. Why not? Because there's no commitment to keep it burning. Without the commitment to serve, it's just an interestingly-shaped building with a light on it. Without commitments to keep them burning, the twenty-eight lighthouses whose titles we transfer today would also be just so many interesting buildings with lights on them.]

A commitment to keep it burning. [That commitment explains why we date lighthouses as we do. We don't reckon the ages of lighthouses according to how long particular buildings stand but from the date that someone sends forth a light and makes a commitment to keep it burning.] Exposed to the worst buffeting of wind and water, the actual structures come and go. The lighthouses being transferred today have been built, claimed by the sea and the years, and built anew as the commitment to keep the fire burning asserted itself through every adversity. We observe therefore that Seguin (Pronounced "Suh-GWIN") Island Light, which has the distinction of being the oldest light transferred today, has actually seen three lighthouses on the site. We cherish the commitment that re-built it and the commitment to keep it burning.

When I approach a remote lighthouse, I admire the architecture and the aesthetics attending its placement against the seascape. But I care less about the beautiful photograph or painting it can inspire than about the men and women who passed their entire lives in isolation so that they could serve mariners whom they would never know on this side of eternity. Theirs was the commitment to keep it burning.

When I climb the spiral staircase of a lighthouse, I admire the craftsmanship of the iron railing. But I care less about the railing than about the feet that climbed those steps in the middle of the storms in the middle of the night, every night for a hundred and fifty or two

hundred years because sailors needed to see that light to live through those storms. The commitment to keep it burning.

When I reach the top of a lighthouse tower, I admire the vista it commands and I trace my fingertips across the perfection of the Fresnel lens. But I care less about the scenery than about the keepers who cared nothing for the view—because they climbed the tower at night, three times a night, to wind the weights whose gradual falling caused the lens to rotate and gave the lights their distinctive patterns of occultation so ships at sea could know whether they were making landfall at Portland Head or Cape Elizabeth. The commitment to keep it burning.

Deep down, more than anything else, we love lighthouses because they represent commitment to service.

The Value of the Ceremony:

The Maine Lighthouse Transfer Ceremony is also about commitment to service. Representatives of twenty seven groups will soon step forward and accept responsibility to paint and polish and prune to preserve these magnificent lighthouses as enduring tributes to the commitment to keep their light burning. The value of the keepers' commitment makes the commitment to preserve it a worthy enterprise.

Senator Snowe, thank you for your work to pass the legislation and to ensure its effective implementation. You solved a problem for the Coast Guard and for Maine. We have a commitment to keep the lights burning as long as mariners need them. But the austerity of our budget does not allow us to make a commitment to the preservation of historic structures at a time that we're running a fleet of ships whose own antiquity rivals that of some of these lighthouses. As America's maritime, multi-missioned military service we have commitments to keep other lights burning: the lights of search and rescue, marine safety, environmental protection, national security, protection of our fisheries, boating safety, aids to navigation and many other missions. Thank you for finding a way to preserve the lighthouses by bringing their control to the local towns and organizations that can best care for them. Thank you for your commitment to good government.

Mr. Ralston, thank you for the Island Institute's commitment to preserve the best elements of Maine's maritime heritage. Thank you for creating and nurturing the partnerships whose fruit we are witnessing today and for hosting this event.

Admiral Rybacki, thank you for the hard work of the Maine Lighthouse Selection Committee to ensure that these lighthouses would be entrusted to the towns and organizations that are best able to sustain their new commitments. More than seventy groups applied for lighthouses. I don't envy you your job of telling so many worthy, civic-minded people that you couldn't accept everybody's generosity.

Finally, I thank the people of Maine who are represented by the towns and organizations that are accepting responsibility for lighthouses today. For more than two hundred years,

these lighthouses have served the people of Maine. I'm proud of the Coast Guard's share of that service and our stewardship of the lights. Now the people of Maine commit themselves to serve the lighthouses so that they may preserve our heritage of commitment to service and ensure public access to that heritage. Please give each other a round of applause for your contribution to America's maritime heritage.

Semper Paratus.

Admiral Larrabee, please come forward now to recognize the work of the Maine Lighthouse Selection Committee before we proceed with the transfer of the lighthouses.

