

# Maine's historic St. Peter's summer chapel celebrates 125-year anniversary

**Shawn P. Sullivan**

York County Coast Star  
USA TODAY NETWORK

CAPE NEDDICK – St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Chapel is celebrating its 125th anniversary this summer, with a look back at its long history and a handful of events planned in the coming weeks.

George and Nannie Conarroe, a prominent Philadelphia couple who spent summers at The Cliff House in Maine, provided the vision for the church in the late 19th century.

After her husband died, Nannie had the chapel built in 1897 on acreage the couple owned on Bald Head Cliffs. The exact site at 535 Shore Road was intentional: George had wanted fishermen to see from the sea the cross that rose from atop the church. Indeed, back then, one could stand on the church property and see far in just about every direction.

Now, in 2022, the church stands just as firm in its original place but is surrounded, though not dwarfed, by tall, handsome trees. From the ground, the view of the Atlantic Ocean is now blocked. However, the view on-site remains breathtaking with those trees that shine a bright green in the sunlight, and a memory garden that was put in place 15 years ago to serve as a final resting place for those who wish to have their cremated remains buried there.

"It's really a wonderful spot," Louesa Gillespie, a longtime trustee and member of the church, said as she gave a tour of the premises.

The York Water District tried to make its own mark in the area when it built a huge storage tower behind the church in the 1960s, according to Gillespie. The tower, well, towered over the church and blocked that view fishermen had of the cross from the ocean.

"There was such an outcry that it was taken down," Gillespie said.

## Summer-long celebration

This weekend, St. Peter's Church by the Sea will hold the signature event of its summer-long celebration of its anniversary. On Aug. 7, the New Legacy Swing Band will perform a jazz concert on the seaside lawn of the church's rectory from 4 to 6 p.m. Members of the church and public are invited to attend and enjoy an afternoon of music, wine and cheese, courtesy of The Beachmere Inn.

The church, a seasonal one that's open from early June until the second weekend of October, kicked off its cele-



St. Peter's Church is celebrating its 125th anniversary this summer. OLIVIA FALCIGNO

bration weeks ago, with a benefit picnic and choral concert on July 10 among other festivities.

Following the concert this Sunday, the church has other plans too: a benefit brunch, to be attended by Bishop Thomas Brown, following the 10 a.m. service on Sunday, Aug. 21; an organ concert by musician Ray Cornils at 4 p.m. on Sept. 18; the annual "Blessing of the Beasts," in honor of people's pets, on Oct. 2; an "au revoir" party at the rectory at 5 p.m. on Oct. 7; and the last service of the season on Sunday, Oct. 9.

The church does not have a set membership, according to Gillespie, but does have dedicated trustees, scores of faithful attendees, and those who visit from afar because they have fond or special memories of the place.

"We always ask at the end of a service if we have any newcomers who'd like to introduce themselves," Gillespie said. "Some people come from Canada, California, Tennessee, and all over."

## A historic church

While its surroundings have changed over the last century-plus, the church's original interior has been maintained and surely has a warm familiarity for those who attend church there. The red door at the entrance gives way to a red carpet that lines the center aisle and leads to the altar.

"It's very typical of Episcopal churches to have red doors," Gillespie said.

The stained-glass windows that line each side of the church are the originals – as is the large east window that looms over the altar and depicts Christ and the apostles Peter and John. A few of the windows were stolen during a burglary in the 1950s but were later recovered. Even most of the lights inside the church go back to the beginning, according to Gillespie.

"They had electricity then," Gillespie said.

Not that there have not been any additions over the years. At the altar on the south side of the church, for example, a stained-glass depiction of the breaking of the bread at Emmaus was installed in 1958, in memory of the Rev. E. Frank Salmon's sister, Constance Emily Brooker. As well, the Allen organ at the front of the church – the one on which Ray Cornils will perform in September – was provided as a gift in 1985.

Nationally known architect Charles M. Burns, of Philadelphia, designed the church. Local talent built it: Edward B. Braisbell, of York, served as contractor, using native stone and wood for construction, and Sidney D. Winn, of Cape Neddick, served as head mason. The church has a vaulted ceiling, a slated roof, and ceramic ridge tiles; in 1999, it officially made the National Registry of

Historic Places.

"We did extensive work on rehabbing this church about ten years ago, over a period of time," Gillespie said.

## One of 18 summer chapels in Maine

The church held its very first service on July 1, 1898, with the Rev. Henry Adams Neely at the helm. Weeks earlier, the Ogunquit Memorial Library – also a project by the Conarroes – had opened. The church's rectory was built behind the church in 1898.

St. Peter's by the Sea opened just five years after the first Episcopal service was held at the Methodist Church in Ogunquit. These days, the church is one of 18 summer chapels along the Maine coastline, with Trinity Episcopal Church in York and St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Kennebunkport being the closest ones to St. Peter's.

Over the course of a season, three priests live in the rectory and serve the church – one in June, another in July, and a third from August until October, according to Gillespie.

Nannie Conarroe died in Philadelphia in 1917, "leaving the church and library to become part of Ogunquit and Cape Neddick's heritage and charm," according to documents Gillespie used for a slide presentation delivered at the local library last year.

## 'A community church'

Every Sunday in the summer and early fall, a member rings the church's bell moments before the morning service begins – an invitation to one and all who would like to attend.

"We're a community church," Gillespie said. "We serve the community."

Gillespie has been there for that bell throughout her life. Earlier this week, she said she has attended St. Peter's by the Sea since the 1950s and has been one of its trustees for decades. Many members of her family were baptized, married and buried at the church.

"Approaching the church and going in every Sunday is very peaceful," she said. "It's been such a part of my life."

Gillespie attributed the church's perseverance – it has survived through all kinds of weather, economic crises, and other "ups and downs" over the years – to the "wonderful passion" of the people who consistently work together on its behalf.

"In a day where a lot of churches are closing, this summer chapel is alive and well," she said.

# Baker Island Lighthouse added to Doomsday List

Submitted

CRANBERRY ISLES – Maine's 1855 Baker Island Lighthouse has been added to the Lighthouse Digest Doomsday List of Endangered Lighthouses.

According to Timothy Harrison, editor of Lighthouse Digest, who created the Doomsday List back in 1992, if something isn't done soon, it may be impossible to save the historic lighthouse located on one of the five islands in the Cranberry Isles at the southwestern entrance to Frenchman Bay.

Ownership of the former Baker Island Lighthouse keeper's house was transferred to the National Park Service (NPS) in 1958, and in 2011, under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act, the NPS was awarded ownership of the light tower, both of which are within the boundaries of Acadia National Park.

Although the Baker Island Light Station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, that law does little to protect the lighthouse.

In 2008, the NPS estimated that it would cost \$800,000 to restore the lighthouse, an amount that will be much higher today due to inflation and the rapid state of deterioration of the light station.

The Keepers of Baker Island, a local nonprofit, have helped with some minor repairs and have done their best to try and protect the station, but they have limited resources and no authority.

Harrison said he wonders how the National Park Service, which, in 2020, accepted ownership of the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse, can also take care of that popular tourist attraction light-



Baker Island Lighthouse has been added to the Lighthouse Digest Doomsday List of Endangered Lighthouses.

house, when they can't take care of Baker Island Lighthouse, which they have owned for many years.

There are currently 57 lighthouses in the United States and its territories that are on the Lighthouse Digest Doomsday List of Endangered Lighthouses.

"Over the Years," Harrison said, "some have come off the list after they were restored and saved, and some have been lost forever."

Baker Island Lighthouse is currently the only Maine lighthouse on the list. Previous Maine lighthouses that were on the Doomsday List were Little River Lighthouse, located on a small island off the coast of Cutler, and Halfway Rock Lighthouse, located in Casco Bay, both of which have been restored and saved.

The announcement that Baker Is-



COURTESY PHOTOS

# New priest arrives at St Peter's by the Sea Episcopal

Submitted

CAPE NEDDICK – The Right Rev. Gary R. Lillibridge, recently retired Bishop of the Diocese of SW Texas (San Antonio) has returned this summer to serve the historic St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Chapel as it celebrates its 125th Anniversary in serving the coastal community of York County. Bishop Lillibridge will serve the parish



Lillibridge

during August, September, and mid October. He will be joined by his wife, Catherine, as they begin their 12th season here. The couple will reside in the renovated Marmion House, which serves as the parish rectory for priest in residence.

Bishop Lillibridge will celebrate and preach each Sunday at 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. He retired from the Diocese of SW Texas after serving as the Bishop for 14 years. He is currently in his semi-retired status working with a group known as The Workshop (based in San Antonio but serving the entire denomination) where Gary teaches, writes, leads study groups, helps guide Episcopalian seminarians, and develops continuing education and spiritual formation opportunities for both clergy and lay persons.

He is in his 41st year of ordination, being a 1982 graduate of Virginia Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Va. Bishop Lillibridge and his wife, Catherine have three grown children who visit Maine each summer.