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Erosion-prone radar tower taken down

LITTLE EGG LANDMARK

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For a few minutes, the Leaning Tower of Little Egg Inlet swayed in the breeze at the Rutgers University marine field station, as workers removed what has been a prominent landmark for boaters for some 40 years.

Tugboats, a barge and massive crane from the Hillside-based Don Jon Marine construction company steamed through the inlet shortly after 9 a.m. Wednesday, and by 11 a.m. the tower was being removed, bound for a Newark scrap yard. Long since supplanted by a modern network of coastal radars and satellite technology, the tower had been in danger from erosion, and university officials decided to remove it before it could topple into the station's boat basin or nearby Intracoastal Waterway channel.

"The tower is in pretty good shape, actually," remarked John Gambacorta, a planner-estimator with the Rutgers facilities department, as he watched riggers prepared to hoist the tower from its foundation. "The footings go down into the marsh. But now that the marsh is eroding, it's in danger of falling."

The inlet is renowned for its dynamism. It's the onetime location of Tucker's Island, an 1800s resort village that had washed away by the early 20th century. Just a few yards from the tower base, the channel plunges 40 feet deep, Gambacorta said.

University workers looked into the possibility of a bulkhead to protect the 215-foot tower, "but it would have been a serious bulkhead" costing \$1 million or more, Gambacorta said. Besides, the tower was simply not needed any more.

Erected in the 1960s

To passing boaters, the tower always looked like part of the original Coast Guard station, which was inherited by Rutgers in the early 1970s and gradually converted to a marine science research station. But the tower actually was built just a few years before that, to hold a radar unit used to measure offshore wave heights.

"I remember that very well. They had the sections up there in town, across the street from Shorty Corliss' trailer park," recalled Larry Burd of Tuckerton, as he watched the crane maneuver the uprooted tower. "They flew the pieces in here by helicopter."

It was part of a massive research effort to prepare for a floating nuclear power plant, which was proposed for emplacement in an artificial breakwater to be built a few miles offshore. Although the project was canceled, preparatory science made the Little Egg Inlet area one of the best-studied parts of the coast by the 1970s.

Ken Able, director of the field station at the end of Great Bay Boulevard, said Rutgers is

publicizing the removal of the tower so boaters will know that it will not be there to guide them. Rutgers also contacted the State Police and the Coast Guard.

"Boaters are used to using that light up on the top of the tower as a navigation tool at night," said Ken Branson of Rutgers media relations. The boaters navigating Great Bay to the south and Barnegat Bay to the north and Little Egg Inlet use the tower as a point of navigation.

The \$131,000 removal project has been in the works for four years, Able said. A smaller 40-foot tower adjacent to the station's parking deck was removed a couple of weeks ago, Gambacorta said.

"It's just been part of the landscape for a very long time," Able said of the high tower. "It used to hold a variety of instruments, mostly radar and mostly used for weather. It figured in a lot of studies, especially those associated with the LEO (Long-term Ecosystem Observatory), and it was also used more specifically in a lot of studies determining the frequency and duration of upwelling events. It also was used as a place for our antennae for tracking fish," Able said.

Done in by technology

These days, information is available from satellite imagery, coastal radar, meteorological stations around the watershed and a series of high-frequency radar stations stretching around the New York Bight, from Nantucket Island to Cape May, Rutgers workers said.

Wednesday's removal was scheduled around one of the periodic higher-than-normal tides that flood the salt marshes, to ensure the Don Jon crew had enough water under their tugboats. Even so, the front of the barge momentarily lodged on a shallow spot as the tugs maneuvered it toward the tower.

An earlier date around the October full moon had to be canceled, and this was probably the last best chance to get the tower out before winter, Gambacorta said.

"They need at least a 4-foot tide to get in here. You almost need a planetary alignment," quipped Thomas M. Grothues, an assistant research professor with the Rutgers Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences.

After cutting the tower's steel legs with a torch, workers hoisted the tower and moved it onto the barge, where it was cut into three sections to be stowed for the trip back to Newark Bay. Rutgers officials will learn how much it weighed when they get a receipt for the recycling value of the steel, Gambacorta said.
