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News

Rutgers tears down a tower in Little Egg Harbor

By Ken Branson



Credit: Ken Branson

The 215-foot tower at Little Egg Harbor, erected nearly 40 years ago, outlived its utility and became fragile and weathered. It was torn down and cut into three pieces; the three-foot tall red light from the top of the tower soon will be on display in the vestibule of the Rutgers University Marine Field Station.

The 215-foot, three-legged radar tower at the Rutgers University Marine Field Station was coming down, one way or another. Ken Able and John Gambacorta wanted it to come down safely, cleanly, with as little drama as possible, and as soon as possible. Otherwise, they were sure Mother Nature would take it down.

“The footings have really started to deteriorate,” said Gambacorta, a planner and estimator for University Facilities. “We’ve lost a lot of marsh in the past five years. It’s a safety issue.”

Erected in 1968 to hold weather radars, the tower has been used for other projects since, but less and less in recent years. “The technology has improved enough that a lot of the [research] bases are covered by other techniques,” said Able, the station’s director and professor of marine science at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. The big, red beacon atop the tower, intended to warn off low-flying planes, has been a landmark for local mariners but wasn’t essential to navigation for either.

So, Able and Gambacorta decided to take the tower down and selected DonJon Marine Construction, Inc. for the job. Its crew would cut the tower’s legs from underneath and use a huge, barge-mounted crane to swing the tower free and lay it across the barge’s deck. A date was set in early October.

But weather forced three postponements of the demolition. DonJon’s barge, *Columbia*, and the two tugboats that push her around, need calm seas and a high tide to get over the bar at the entrance to Little Egg Inlet. Finally, on November 14, DonJon took down the tower, teased by Mother Nature all the way.

The day started with the inlet smothered in fog. *Columbia* and her escort tugs, *Bayou Dawn* and *Paul Andrew*, having started down the coast from Newark the previous afternoon, arrived off the inlet at dawn. By 7:30 a.m., *Paul Andrew* was cruising slowly around the mouth of the inlet, looking for a deep channel. Then she disappeared into the fog again

and re-emerged with *Columbia* sandwiched between herself and *Bayou Dawn*. But the current pushed them past the tower and into Great Bay, so that the tugs had to reverse their engines, pull the barge back into the main channel, and try again. This time, they made it.

Workers climbed down from the barge, then up the tower's ladder to a platform about two-thirds of the way to the top. The crane swung cable over to them, they attached the cables to the superstructure and climbed back down, and one of them, using an acetylene torch, began methodically cutting through the legs at the base.

In less than 15 minutes all the workers were back aboard the barge. One of the tugs gave a blast on her air horn, and the crane lifted the tower off its base. The crane operator swung the tower around to starboard, but evidently saw that he might strike *Bayou Dawn*, whose engines were grinding away, keeping the barge's bow in the mud. He swung the tower the other way, and as he did so, *Paul Andrew* was disconnected from the barge's port side, backed around to the stern, and re-connected.

The crane operator laid the tower, as planned, cross-wise on the deck. Workers cut it into three sections, and the top of the tower crumpled, dipping into the water. With hooks and cables, the crew drew it out again and separated the big red light at the top.

"I'm so glad they saved it," Able said. "It's a classic."

The three-foot tall light now sits in a conference room outside Able's office and soon will be on display in the vestibule of the field station.