

Is this historic lighthouse doomed to fall, or will it stand tall? Louisiana's oldest active lighthouse, Tchefuncte River Lighthouse, is on Lake Pontchartrain standing 43 feet tall.

"There used to be about 200 feet of land between the lighthouse and the water," said Jay Martinez, executive director of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum. Now, there is only about 10 feet of ground between the waves and the base of the lighthouse. Erosion is becoming a concerning issue due to the saltwater killing the vegetation. Martinez predicts that the next big hurricane will make it possible for the waves to start chipping away at the foundation.

Erosion has already separated the lighthouse from road access. "Soon it will isolate the lighthouse from the land behind it, putting it on a small island," said Walter Hargrove, head of the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources Coastal Restoration Section.

"Destruction of the lighthouse would be a historical loss," said Martinez. During the Civil War, the North attacked the lighthouse in 1863. In 1867, it was rebuilt from the same materials. The lighthouse is currently automated by solar panels. It survived Hurricane Katrina. The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum of Madisonville manages the lighthouse after the U.S. Coast Guard transferred ownership in 1999.

The loss of the lighthouse "would be a loss of an important navigational aid for both recreational and commercial mariners," said Martinez. The tall structure can be seen from up to 15 miles by day the magnified light can be seen the same distance at night. The lighthouse helps boaters avoid the stumps hidden under the water that could damage and sink boats.

"We made restoration of the lighthouse the museum's top priority this year," said Ray Carter, chairman of the museum's board. The Institution of Museum and Library Services and the Southeastern Museum Conference granted the museum \$25,000 to stabilize and begin restoring the lighthouse. The SLU Developmental Foundation also granted \$25,000 for the lighthouse. Once repairs are made, the museum plans to make the lighthouse public accessible and hopes to bring in about 30,000 people a year.

There was once a cottage near the lighthouse where the keepers and their families lived. The keeper had to climb the stairs and light the whale oil lamp twice every night. Back then, the lighthouse was also refuge for any mariners in trouble. U.S. Lighthouse Service built the first cottage in 1837. Then, it was rebuilt after being burned in the Civil War. A few years before Hurricane Katrina, the cottage was moved to the museum to avoid future damage.

In the early 1900s, timber companies lumbered all cypress trees in the area, said Betty Cassidy, head of Southeastern Louisiana University's Biology Department. The trees helped to buffer against storms and hold the land together. Although residents complained, timber companies argued no harm would be done. They never replanted trees after lumbering because no regulations require them to. "The Legislature doesn't have guts enough to fight the companies that make cypress mulch," Cassidy said.

Six SLU students came to plant 300 small cypress trees to fight the erosion. How long it could take for the new cypress trees to create enough of a root system to protect the land depends on future storms. Storms often tear up the ground and uproot the trees

before trees can obtain grip to help. "Soon this whole place will be gone, if we don't do something," said Cassidy.

Martinez dreams of saving the lighthouse and rebuilding a swamp to protect it. He wishes for a five-year-long break for the trees to build more land. Martinez would like to return the lighthouse keeper's cottage back in the next few years. "That would provide an early step to make the lighthouse an important attraction for school groups and tourists interested in the area's history.

Clay Parker, an SLU junior in biology, has volunteered a few times to help plant trees, "It's hard work, but I think it's important," he said. Both his father and grandfather were commercial fishermen who used the lighthouse. Now, he uses it to fish and does not want the lighthouse to fall. "That would be a sad day. I guess it would make for even sadder nights," said Parker.