



The Elbow Reef Lighthouse is the only kerosene-fueled, hand-cranked lighthouse in the world. However, an automated kerosene-fueled lighthouse at San Salvador in the Bahamas may soon return to manual operation. HEATHER FORDE-PROSA/ELBOW REEF LIGHTHOUSE SOCIETY

# HOPE SHINES

## *in Hope Town*

FOUR YEARS AFTER DORIAN'S DEVASTATION, LIGHTHOUSE STANDS AS A BEACON OF A COMMUNITY'S RESILIENCE

Nancy Maass Kinnally Special to Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

As Hurricane Dorian churned toward the Abaco islands in the Bahamas, morphing from a manageable Cat 3 to a deadly Cat 5 in a matter of hours, Jeffery Forbes Jr., the principal keeper for Hope Town's historic lighthouse, sat helpless in West Palm Beach, where he and his wife had gone for a well-deserved vacation. ● Left behind with Forbes' sister in Marsh Harbour was their 7-year-old son, whose fate was unknown during the first two days of September 2019 as the hurricane sat over the northwestern Bahamas, and for a full week afterward. Meanwhile, news reports relayed the devastation wrought by a storm surge of up to 23 feet and winds of more than 185 mph. ● "I was very worried. You couldn't reach anybody. There was no communication. At one point they were saying Abaco was wiped off the map. It was crazy," Forbes said.



An aerial view of the Hope Town Lighthouse taken three days after Hurricane Dorian made landfall in the Abaco Islands of the Bahamas. NORTHWEST FLORIDA DAILY NEWS

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While he eventually learned his son had survived, the keepers quarters at the lighthouse were heavily damaged, and Forbes had to sort out a place for his wife and son to stay in Florida before he could return to his battered island.

In Hope Town on Elbow Cay — as elsewhere in the Abacos and on Grand Bahama — residents quickly found that the vast majority of homes and buildings were either gone or rendered unusable. Each night after the storm, the islands were plunged into darkness, the power grid having been completely wrecked.

While they awaited Forbes' return, the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society placed a temporary light, powered by a generator, in the lighthouse, which had sustained some damage from saltwater intrusion, but still stood 89 feet high and 120 feet above sea level. Within 10 days after Dorian, the lighthouse once again shone across the harbor and 23 nautical miles beyond.

Prior to the storm, the diamond-shaped panes of weather glass around the lantern had begun to crack from the corrosion of the metal around them. Had the organization not just completed in 2017 a five-year project to replace the weatherglass, the 155-year-old lighthouse likely would have been torn apart — and with it the island's heart.

"It wouldn't be Hope Town without the lighthouse," Forbes said.

### 'An awesome piece of machinery'

Forbes has tended the iconic lighthouse since 2005, when he took over the job from his father, who had been a keeper at lighthouses all over the Bahamas. One of 11 lighthouses the British Empire built in the Bahamas, Hope Town's Elbow Reef Lighthouse dates to 1863 and is the only remaining kerosene-fueled, hand-cranked light station in the world.

Each night Forbes and his fellow keeper, Jackson Blatch, work in shifts, climbing the 101 steps of the Victorian-era structure every two hours to wind a cable through a series of gears that raise a weight up a tube running through the center of the lighthouse. Gravity slowly unwinds the spool of cable holding the weight, causing the lens of the lighthouse to turn upon a mercury bath. The unique array of bullseyes in the Fresnel lens create five flashes, the signature of the Elbow Reef Lighthouse.

"It's an awesome piece of machinery," Forbes said.

Recognizing the historic and cultural significance of the lighthouse, the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation awarded the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society a grant of \$472,000 dollars for a restoration project that is nearly complete.

The lighthouse was once again lit with kerosene Oct. 6, 2019. With the help of the grant, the lantern canopy has been repaired and the lighthouse has been repainted. Soon, the kerosene pressure tanks will be refurbished, the weight tube cleaned, and the slate floors replaced.

### Hope Town bustles once again

Just as the lighthouse has been restored, so has the larger community, although much work remains.

Unlike Marsh Harbour, which Hope Town visitors pass through on a taxi ride from the airport to the ferry, most of the homes and businesses have been rebuilt, and tourism is back to pre-storm levels.

Vernon Malone, 85, still works 12-hour days, six days a week, at his famed bakery and grocery store, more than 60 years after he opened it.

Last Easter weekend, visitors ran through his stock by Friday. Normally, it would have lasted through Tuesday and been restocked Wednesday morning, when his shipments arrive at the dock down the hill.

"I don't think I've seen that many people in Hope Town ever," said Malone, a descendant of one of the British Loyalist families that settled Hope Town after the American Revolution.

The parcel on which his house sits was part of a land grant the British government made to his ancestors in the 1780s. His new home replaces one he and his father had built by hand. All but the stone hearth washed away in Dorian's storm surge, and it has been incorporated into the new structure.

Many donors and generous friends, as well as Methodist churches where Malone has served as a lay minister, contributed to the construction. Among those helping was a local nonprofit called Hope Town United that operated in the first 18 months after the storm and also funded the rebuilding of the docks and Hope Town Primary School.

Justin Higgs, the school's principal, said almost all of the families that were



Jeffrey Forbes Jr. lighting the lantern at Elbow Reef lighthouse. NANCY MAASS KINNALLY/SPECIAL TO PALM BEACH POST

### Preserving the Lighthouse

Maintaining Hope Town's lighthouse is an ongoing financial challenge. In order to ensure its preservation, the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society is hosting a fishing tournament called the Elbow Reef Classic June 21-24.

To register, visit: [elbowreeflighthousesociety.com/elbowreefclassic](http://elbowreeflighthousesociety.com/elbowreefclassic)

For sponsorship opportunities, contact Kelly Ring at 561-714-7158 or Kellyring1@gmail.com, or Courtney Bowden at 561-909-7868 or hello@contactcourtney.com.

at the school pre-Dorian have returned, and a few new families have come. Enrollment is down from 60 in 2018 to 53 this year only because there is currently no preschool teacher and therefore no preschool students.

Higgs said the original school building, which was made by shipwrights out of Abaco pine in 1893, withstood the storm, although its contents got stirred around when a hole was poked through the roof. However, a modern concrete structure crumbled.

With the rebuilding, the school is now more structurally sound, has two new classrooms connected by a deck, and an assembly hall made by joining two of the old classrooms. In addition to Hope Town United, many private donors ensured that the school would reopen.

"Without those people readily coming forward to help fund the rebuild, this school would not be here," said Higgs. "For that, we are forever grateful."

He is hoping that the Bahamian government will soon help complete the construction of a lower-level, bunker-like classroom with a kitchen that would double as the community shelter in future storms.

Meanwhile, the school continues to raise funds on its own.

### Signs of reconstruction everywhere

So far, private funds alone have made Hope Town's progress possible. Samaritan's Purse was instrumental in the recovery, and other faith-based organizations have played significant roles in restoring the Abacos.

On nearby Man O'War Cay, Mennonites from Pennsylvania spent three months building a new home for Albury's Sail Shop, which sells colorful canvas bags of all shapes and sizes. The shop, which had been on a platform over the water, went into the sea along with thousands of hand-sewn bags representing years of work. It is now located uphill from the same dock.

The Mennonites were among many visitors who worked hand-in-hand with locals to bring the islands back.

"That's when you really have faith in the human race, when people pull together in tragedy," said Deb Patterson, administrator for the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society. "We can't survive without each other."

Several substantial Hope Town businesses such as Firefly Sunset Resort, Abaco Inn and the Hope Town Inn & Marina are open for business again, as are popular restaurants such as On Da Beach, Munchies, and Cap'n Jack's, which is back to hosting trivia night and karaoke.

Others are still a work in progress.



A descendant of Wyannie Malone, one of the first British Loyalists to arrive in Hope Town from South Carolina in the 1780s, Vernon Malone opened his now famous grocery and bakery in 1962 and still works there all day, six days a week, at the age of 85. NANCY MAASS KINNALLY/SPECIAL TO PALM BEACH POST



In early September 2019, Hurricane Dorian destroyed docks in Hope Town, a Bahamian settlement on Elbow Cay in the Abacos. PHOTO COURTESY HOPE TOWN UNITED

Bonnie and Arnold Hall are laying plans for the reopening of Wine Down Sip Sip, a restaurant that catered to an older demographic who preferred a quiet, air conditioned, indoor atmosphere.

Many of them were second homeowners who decided to sell rather than rebuild.

"A solid 80% of those people aren't here anymore," said Bonnie Hall, who is Malone's daughter.

### Recovery has been uneven

In their place, locals say, are many younger, more affluent second homeowners, who have driven up real estate

prices in much the same way they have in South Florida since the pandemic made it possible for them to work from anywhere.

Even successful business owners like the Halls, who once had to turn people away on the busiest nights, continue to struggle. Although they were insured, the increased cost of building materials has meant that their payout has not been enough to repair both their home and their business, which has been temporarily turned into a residence.

Frank Knowles, a Hope Town real estate agent with HG Christie, said rising

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home prices have made for an uneven recovery, in which some people were continuing to live in tents and cars more than three years after the hurricane.

Visiting Elbow Cay, where the median price for a move-in ready home over the last 24 months was \$1.1 million, one would never realize that many of the people working in the tourism industry, which is to say the vast majority of locals, are still relying on friends and family for a place to lay their heads.

“Still, people are going from house to house, wherever they can find a spot,” Knowles said.

Meanwhile, refurbished rental properties provide the appearance of widespread prosperity.

In less than four years, the apocalyptic scene that emerged after Dorian made landfall in Hope Town, through sheer force of will, has gradually been returned to one of peace and tranquility. Cottages again beckon guests with names like Summer Magic, Coral Reef House and Blue Heaven.

A few gaps remain, such as where the Hope Town Harbour Lodge once faced the lighthouse across the boat-filled harbor.

But Hope Town is living up to its name.

“The economy is back, and it’s very strong,” Higgs said. “Anyone working construction has been working non-stop.”

Locals and tourists alike speculate as to what the owners of the Sandals all-inclusive resort chain will do with the recently purchased ocean-to-harbor property where the lodge was once the only hotel in the historic settlement.

Malone believes 95% of the people coming to Hope Town, whether boaters, second homeowners or tourists, want the community to keep its quiet, understated charm. Yet, he recognizes that change is inevitable after a catastrophe of Dorian’s magnitude.

“I don’t think it will ever be the same as it was,” Malone said. “It will be nice again, but it will be different.”

*Nancy Maass Kinnally, CEO of Reliable Communications Group, is a Palm Beach County native and lifelong visitor to the islands of Grand Bahama and the Abacos, where her family vacationed every year when she was a child.*



View from Firefly Sunset Resort at dusk. NANCY MAASS KINNALLY PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO PALM BEACH POST

## If you go

**Elbow Cay Properties,**  
elbowcayproperties.com

Find homes for rent in the historic settlement or anywhere throughout the 8-mile long island.

**Firefly Sunset Resort,**  
fireflysunsetsresort.com

Dockside cottages and villas and an open-air bar and grill overlooking the Sea of Abaco, a short distance from town.

**Abaco Inn,** abacoinn.com

Villas overlooking either the Sea of Abaco or the Atlantic Ocean, along with an indoor-outdoor restaurant, located a few miles south of the settlement.

**Hope Town Inn & Marina,**  
hopetownmarina.com

Dock slips, hotel and villa accommodations on the Hope Town harbor, across the water from the settlement.

**Golf Cart Rentals,**  
getawaycartrentals.com

Although you can’t drive them in the pedestrian friendly settlement, golf carts are useful for getting from the settlement to Abaco Inn, Firefly and Tahiti Beach, where you can get lunch from the Thirsty Cuda, a boat serving burgers, chicken fingers, cracked conch and island concoctions to waders. Getaway Cart Rentals is one of several companies from which you can rent a cart. Reserve well in advance.

**Boat Rentals & Excursions,**  
islandmarine.com

Marsh Harbour and Hope Town still have a greatly reduced rental fleet since Dorian sank many of the boats. Check with Island Marine about rental availability, or better yet, call Stafford Patterson, aka Captain Plug, at 242-801-5085, or Ira Key at

242-458-8521 about booking an excursion to Man O’ War and Great Guana Cay or one of several nearby diving or fishing spots.

**Groceries & Baked Goods**

Vernon’s is not the only grocery store on the island, but it is a must. His freshly made breads and pies are legendary, and if the store isn’t busy, it is worth a visit just for the chance to have a chat. Vernon doesn’t have a website, but all you have to do is ask anyone on the island how to find his store, which is just up the hill from the lower public dock.

**Visiting the Lighthouse,**  
elbowreeflighthousesociety.com

Any of the ferries that take Hope Town visitors to and from Marsh Harbour will gladly pick you up and drop you off at the lighthouse, which is across the harbor from the historic settlement. Contact the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society if you would like to try to pre-arrange a visit during the lighting, which occurs each evening at sunset. Availability is limited.



Vernon Malone opened his now famous grocery and bakery in 1962 and still works there all day, six days a week.



Hope Town Primary School, which goes up to sixth grade, is the only school on Elbow Cay. It was built by shipwrights out of Abaco pine in 1893 and is the oldest schoolhouse in the Bahamas still operating as a school. Beyond sixth grade, students have to take the ferry to Marsh Harbour to go to school.