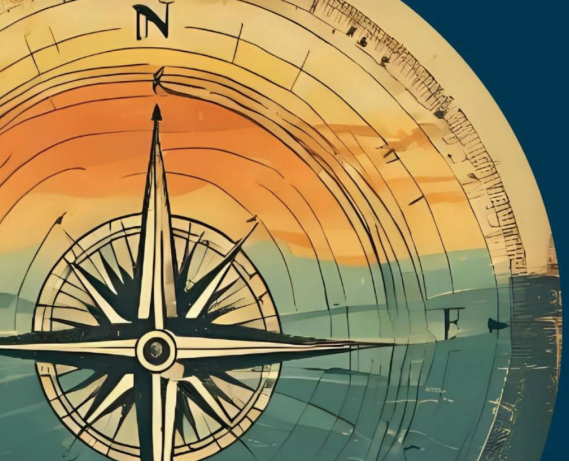


Community Foundation for
NORTHEAST MICHIGAN
Navigator
Autumn 2025

A Visit to St. Helena Island

The Straits of Mackinac's Hidden Treasure

By Christine Hitch, Development & Marketing Director

On a clear day, we would have been able to see across the entire length of the Straits of Mackinac, but the day we visited St. Helena Island was a hot one, one shrouded in wildfire smoke hanging in the humid heat of the late July air. Yet the beauty, tranquility, and history of the island and its majestic lighthouse welcomed our arrival despite the haze.

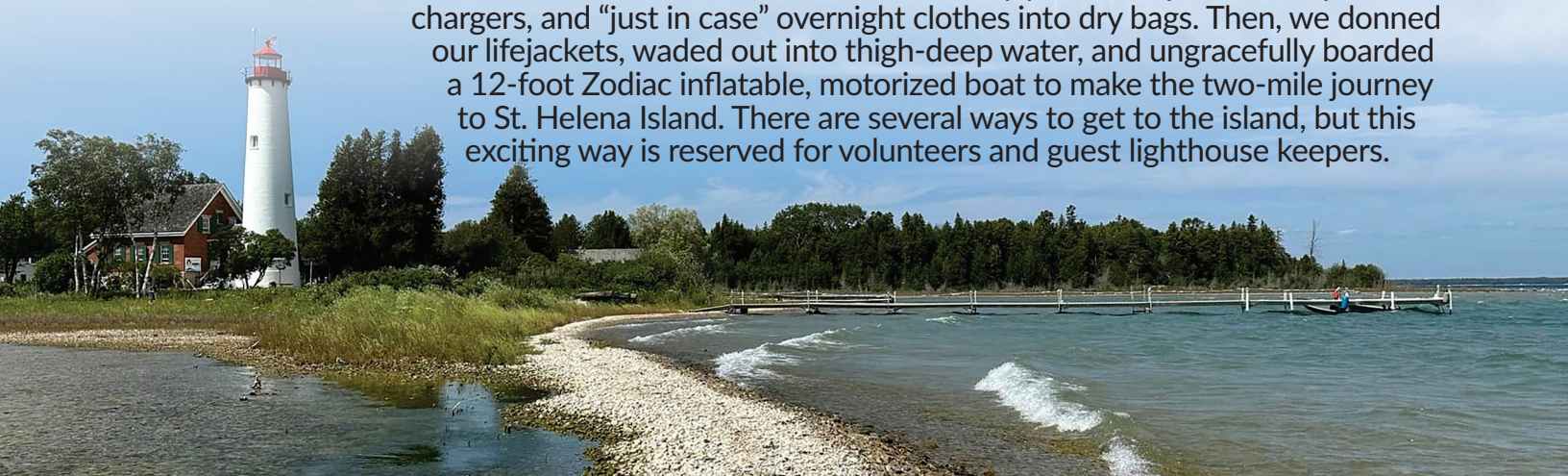


Left to right, Mark VanderVelde, DeeAnn Karos, Michele VanderVelde, and Christine Hitch

Our Straits Area Community Foundation affiliate has held the St. Helena Island Lighthouse Endowment Fund since 1999. It was set up to preserve and protect the lighthouse and its surrounding buildings. My fellow staff member, DeeAnn Karos, journeyed with me to learn more about this lesser-known island in the Straits. We wanted to see first-hand what has been done with the help of many people's generous donations to the Fund, and learn about what plans are in store for the future. I specifically asked DeeAnn to travel with me because, well, she isn't afraid of snakes. And there are snakes. More on that later.

St. Helena Island lies about five miles west of the Mackinac Bridge and two miles off the southern shore of the Upper Peninsula. Tucked into the pristine, turquoise waters in the Straits of Mackinac, it is a truly unique, rugged, and magical place to experience. At 266 acres in size, St. Helena Island bustles in an entirely different way than the popular, nearby Mackinac Island. There are guests helping with odd jobs around the lighthouse station, plenty of wildlife, island tours, and dedicated volunteers determined to preserve this Michigan maritime treasure for future generations. Among the island's gems is the beautifully preserved historic landmark of St. Helena Island Lighthouse, built in 1873. If you've crossed the Mighty Mac, you will likely have seen the white lighthouse standing tall marking the shallow shoal surrounding the island.

DeeAnn and I were greeted onshore just west of St. Ignace, by Mark VanderVelde. Mark has been volunteering as a summer lighthouse keeper and jack-of-all-trades on the island with his wife, Michele, for twenty years. We packed our phones, chargers, and "just in case" overnight clothes into dry bags. Then, we donned our lifejackets, waded out into thigh-deep water, and ungracefully boarded a 12-foot Zodiac inflatable, motorized boat to make the two-mile journey to St. Helena Island. There are several ways to get to the island, but this exciting way is reserved for volunteers and guest lighthouse keepers.





"The uniqueness of this place is that it's hard to get here. You can't just drive up," Mark told us as we idled toward the landing dock. "Where do you go where you have a nature preserve and history in the same place, in such a unique location and experience? This place is unlike any other." And he was right.

Once we arrived, the next person we met was Michele, who welcomed us into the boathouse for our introduction to St. Helena Island. We were also greeted by a black water snake that, although startling at first, basked innocently on the shore's rocks in the bit of sunshine that managed to break through the day's haze. Like most islands in the Great Lakes, St. Helena Island is a haven for several kinds of harmless snakes. The truth is, though they can startle at times, they aren't interested in hurting or chasing anyone. They just want to enjoy the day's sunshine along with everyone else and they tuck themselves away when they've had enough. In fact, the island is teeming with wildlife of all kinds: rabbits, fish, ducks, butterflies, and eagles.

Inside the lighthouse quarters, the restoration is so well done that you can feel what this place was like in its prime. Today, guest keepers enjoy their meals in the same dining room where keepers and their families ate; relax in the same living space; and sleep in the same bedrooms after a long day of fresh air. Climbing the tower, we navigated the same stairs as past generations to 360-degree breathtaking views of the Straits.

"You can touch history here. The island and lighthouse's remoteness make it magical. It's a little more adventurous, too," says Mark. "Your travel is weather dictated. You pump your water. There's electricity, but only enough to run a fridge, freezer, and microwave. You shower outside. And you can stay in the lighthouse. This one is so preserved, and you just don't get that in other places."

By the 1980s, long after being decommissioned, the whole lighthouse station had been abandoned, weather-beaten, and overgrown. Nearly every valuable item had been taken, and the structures were damaged by passersby who stopped at the island and found it empty. The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association, or GLLKA, took ownership of the lighthouse in 1986, and began the long, arduous process of completely restoring the lighthouse, keeper's quarters, oil house (pictured above), and boathouse. Volunteers spent countless hours working on the restoration and researching history to tell the island's stories. Many generous individuals donated historically time-accurate furnishings to replace those that were taken.

"Now it's up to the next generation to continue protecting this place through donations and volunteerism," says Mark, who also serves on the GLLKA Board of Directors. "Without people's support and donations, everything we've gained we'll go backwards on."

The St. Helena Island Lighthouse Endowment Fund has already provided $65,000 toward restoration and preservation expenses such as re-roofing, artifact display cases, paint, an automated external defibrillator (AED), and restoration of the boathouse, oil house, and keeper's quarters. The Fund also paid for three zodiac boats and life jackets to safely transport volunteers and supplies.



Now, with the full restoration complete, GLLKA runs a summer guest lighthouse keeper program where people can spend a few days exploring the island, swim near secluded beaches, see wildlife, kayak, freighter watch, catch amazing sunrises and sunsets, climb the lighthouse tower, and perhaps even see the northern lights in the open expanse of dark sky.

"If people want, they can do some age and ability-appropriate tasks around the lighthouse and grounds to help with the upkeep, but we really want people to just enjoy this special place," says Michele.

"When people contribute, through a donation, volunteering, or being a guest light keeper for a few days and helping out, there is a sense of ownership," says Mark. "People feel like they belong; like they've helped to do something positive. And they have."

In the immediate future, donations to the St. Helena Lighthouse Endowment Fund will help GLLKA purchase an eagle nest camera; rebuild and secure the landing dock, purchase additional kayaks for island guests, get new stoves, purchase historic replicas, and keep up on preservation.

Donations to support these efforts can be made at sacf.net. Contact the Community Foundation to set up a recurring donation to support GLLKA's work on St. Helena Island.

So, if you're looking for a new kind of adventure – one that's truly unique, not only to our area, but to the whole nation, plan to spend some time visiting St. Helena Island and its lighthouse. But be forewarned: You might just fall in love with this place and want to forever keep it close to your heart, snakes and all.



Sunset from the St. Helena Island Boathouse

Interested in visiting St. Helena Island? Contact the Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association at www.gllka.org or at (231) 436-5580.



A Rich and Storied History

St. Helena Island has long provided a safe harbor on its north shore for indigenous people and voyagers seeking shelter from bad weather. In 1853, two brothers, Archie and Wilson Newton purchased the entire island and established operations for fishing and lumbering. The island became home to about 200 people and was a vibrant, bustling community. In fact, people traveled from the mainland to St. Helena Island for dancing, entertainment, and weekend fun – even traveling by sleigh in the winter months. While the northern shore's deep waters were a safe place for vessels to anchor, the shallow shoals around the rest of the island led to the construction of the St. Helena Island Lighthouse, which operated with keepers from 1873 until the light was automated in 1922. The lighthouse and station buildings were then boarded up, only visited when there were issues with the light reported by passing boats. By that time, the fishing and lumbering industries had evolved, and the Newton brothers had closed their businesses and left the island. Over time, everyone else left, too. Without any inhabitants or lighthouse keepers, the buildings eventually fell victim to deterioration and vandalism, so the Coast Guard planned to demolish the buildings in the early 1980s. When GLLKA learned this, the organization began the process of taking ownership of the St. Helena Island Lighthouse to ensure this piece of history wouldn't be lost. Ownership transferred to GLLKA in 1986, and the Little Traverse Nature Conservancy purchased the island, making it a nature preserve. Now, the island has around 250 visitors each summer visiting to explore, learn, and preserve the historic treasure of the St. Helena Island Lighthouse Station.

CFNEM Briefs

Community Foundation Celebrates Record-Breaking Scholarship Year



The Community Foundation for Northeast Michigan and its three Affiliate Foundations awarded a total of $640,000 to 193 students across the nine counties of northeast Michigan this year! Scholarships are awarded to individuals heading off to college, medical school, or to study in a skilled trade or specialty program. *Pictured right: Students graduating from Alcona High School receive the Dee Brown Perry Scholarship.*

Giving Tuesday

December 2, 2025

Giving Tuesday 2025 Will Connect and Support Nonprofit Partners

Giving Tuesday, always celebrated on the Tuesday following Thanksgiving (after the popular shopping days of Black Friday and Cyber Monday), will be held on December 2nd this year. Donors visiting the Community Foundation website on Giving Tuesday can support any of more than 125 nonprofits that hold a fund at CFNEM or any of our Affiliate Foundations, providing them with a source of income to carry out their important missions. Mark your calendar for December 2nd to visit cfnem.org! You're sure to find something that tugs at your heart strings.

Urgent Needs Fund Update



Since the Urgent Needs Fund was reopened in April 2025 following the spring ice storm that crippled northern Michigan, 38 grants totaling $191,611 have been awarded to nonprofits working to support our communities with immediate needs and recovery efforts. Urgent Needs Grants provided funds in the spring to get food and hygiene items to people, support linemen, keep generators running, and reimburse expenses to nonprofits that opened their doors as warming shelters. Grants were also made to help with brush clean up, support farmers who suffered loss to their incomes and equipment, restock community food pantries, and make critical home repairs for damage caused by the storm. Urgent Needs Fund donations and grant applications continue to be accepted as recovery from the natural disaster continues. *Pictured right: Volunteers at the AuSable Inclusion Center host pop-up hygiene pantries for basic items.*

Women's Giving Circle Grants

28 Grants

$56,000

Women's Giving Circle Awards 2025 Round of Grants

This summer, the Northeast Michigan Women's Giving Circle (WGC) awarded $56,000 in grants to support issues important to women in our communities. Among this year's grants were **projects that aim to inspire, encourage, and support women and young girls.** These grants are overseen by the WGC committee, made up of members who have supported the WGC Endowment Fund at CFNEM.

A full list of WGC grants and members can be found at cfnem.org under "Give/Women's Giving Circle", where you can also find information on becoming a WGC member, participating in **impactful collective giving**.

Find these full stories and more at cfnem.org under "Resources" and "News".

CFNEM Featured Grants

New Drone Makes Easier Work to Protect and Preserve Nature



Aerial monitoring of conservation areas efficiently is an essential part of HeadWaters Land Conservancy's (HLC) work in ensuring that protected lands remain undisturbed and can support critical habitats. Many conservation easements and nature preserves are in remote wetlands and terrain that is hard to traverse. To help make this process safer for staff, and less time-consuming and labor-intensive, HLC used a $2,175 grant to purchase a drone. The new equipment includes high-resolution cameras and mapping software to help HLC monitor more than 13,000 acres of land, 37 miles of shoreline across 11 counties, and 98 preserves that protect habitats and unique ecosystems. The grant also helped a staff member to obtain a drone pilot license to safely operate the drone. *Pictured above, right: Susanna Glass operates the drone to get aerial photos of the Hess Nature Preserve while HLC Executive Director Dianne Farner looks on.*



Project Connect Supports Montmorency and Presque Isle County Families

Project Connect in Presque Isle County is a great example of the types of community initiatives funded by the grants from our Northeast Michigan Women's Giving Circle Fund. This year, more than 230 residents from Montmorency and Presque Isle Counties received assistance with basic needs. Project Connect is an annual event that helps families and individuals in need with everything from haircuts, back-to-school items, personal hygiene products, dental care, clothing, and food to lend our neighbors a helping hand. A $1,600 grant to United Way of Northeast Michigan helped to purchase many of the items provided at the 2025 events in Onaway and Rogers City. *Pictured left, MyMichigan Health attended the event as a vendor to provide health care direction and support.*

New Ball Courts in Downtown Alpena Enhance Recreation



If you traveled down State Street in Alpena this summer, you likely noticed some big projects happening in town. One of those projects was the redesign and revamping of the popular recreational courts at Bay View Park. The project was completed in late summer and has been busy with activity ever since. The refreshed park now includes three full-size basketball courts, five brand new, dedicated pickleball courts, three new tennis courts, and plenty of picnic tables. The Community Foundation provided a total of $10,000 to Friends of Alpena Courts through CFNEM Community Impact and Northeast Michigan Women's Giving Circle grants to help make the project a reality.



Friends Together Grant Supports Cancer Patients

Friends Together does amazing work to support cancer patients, their families, and caregivers. To make all their good work happen, staff and volunteers do a lot of fundraising like auctions, raffles, concerts, and comedy shows, so every grant means more time for getting it all done. With the help of a $5,000 Community Impact Grant, Friends Together was able to fully stock its Care & Comfort Boutique so cancer patients can "shop" for items they find helpful to them on their individual journey with cancer. Items purchased with the grant included over-the-counter products (anti-nausea items, soothing skin products, lip balm), specialized post-surgical items (breast cancer recovery shirts, seatbelt cushions, cough pillows), chemo caps, hats, and wigs. The Boutique also stocks "comfort items" such as puzzle books, warm blankets, and water bottles. A grant from our Iosco County Community Foundation provided funding for children's books about grief. *Pictured left: Malinda Amlotte of Friends Together shares the stocked boutique room and grief support book for children.*

Summer 2025 Community Impact Grants

The Community Foundation for Northeast Michigan awarded a new round of Community Impact Grants in September 2025 totaling $115,795 and covering Alcona, Alpena, Montmorency, and Presque Isle Counties. Projects awarded $5,000 include:

- $5,000 to Alpena Senior Citizens Center to offset the increased costs associated with meals on wheels.
- $5,000 to Ana's Treasures for their event that will provide foster children with Christmas gifts.
- $5,000 to Food Bank of Eastern Michigan to build a new regional warehouse in Gaylord.
- $5,000 to Habitat for Humanity Northeast Michigan to fund a promotional video that will help them raise money to build more homes.
- $5,000 to Harrisville United Methodist Church for the trucking expenses from the Michigan Food Bank to distribute food to Alcona County.
- $5,000 to HeadWaters Land Conservancy to purchase an additional 210 acres to add to the Hess Nature Preserve.
- $5,000 to Hospice of Michigan, Inc. for the expansion of the pediatric hospice program that provides medical, emotional, social, and spiritual support to children.
- $5,000 to Long Rapids Township Fire Department to purchase a generator for the Long Rapids Township Hall for emergency preparedness.
- $5,000 to NEMCSA to provide winter gear for Lewiston Elementary students in need.
- $5,000 to Presque Isle County Historical Museum to replace the HVAC system at the museum.

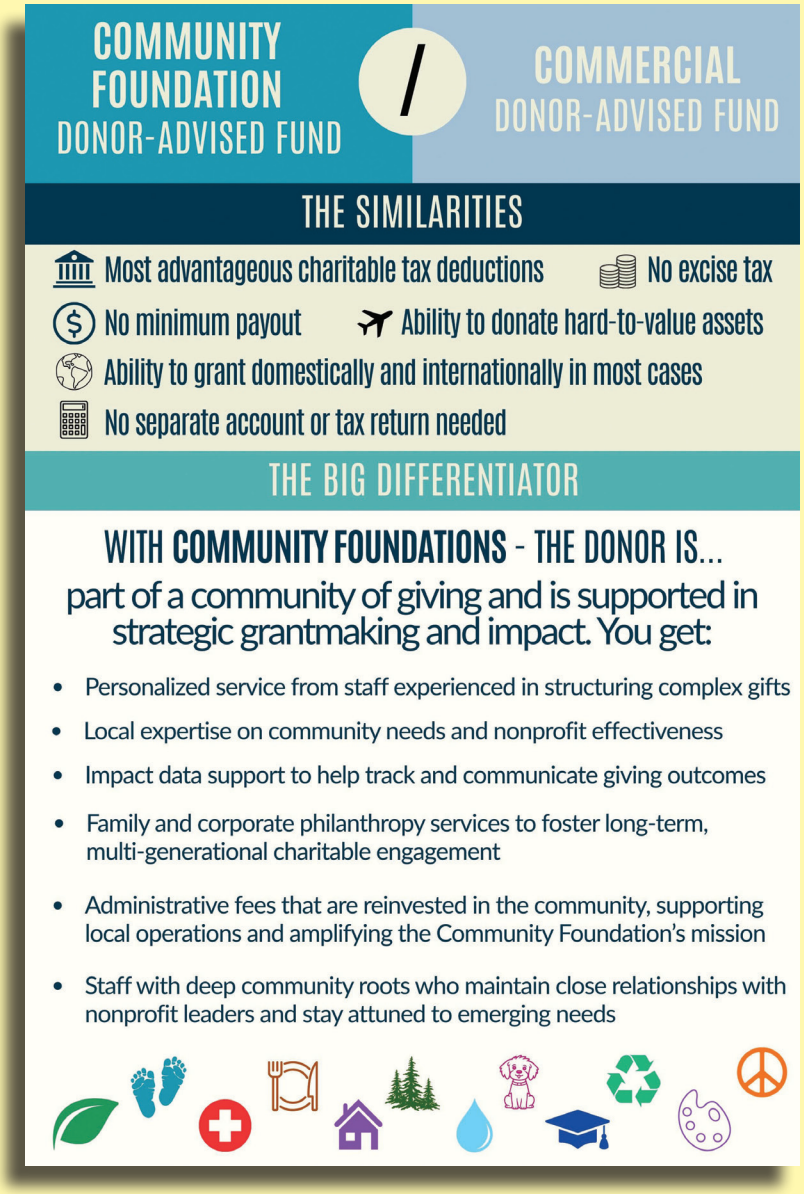
Community Impact Grants

37 Grants

$115,795

Grants for this Community Impact Grant cycle come from the Community Endowment Fund, as well as several other unrestricted, designated endowment funds, and donor-advised funds including: Alcona County General Fund, Alcona Healthcare Initiative Fund, Ann M. Kuntz Fund for Presque Isle Youth, Huron Shores Health Fund, United Communities of Presque Isle County Fund, Montmorency County General Fund, Wayne Wire Cloth Fund, Presque Isle General Fund, Mr. and Mrs. O.B. Eustis Memorial Fund, CFNEM Spendable Tobacco Fund, Marianne Kalivoda Hall Memorial Fund, Genite Family Fund, Lappan Family Fund, Neva Nelson Memorial Fund, Panel Processing Fund, Pfeiffenberger Fund, Reitz Family Fund, Stevens Fund, and Mr. and Mrs. Walter G. Weinkauf, Sr. Fund.

See the full list of Summer 2025 Community Impact Grants at cfnem.org/resources/news.



Knowledge Corner

Consider Your Local Impact

Although a donor-advised fund (DAF) can be established through a national financial institution, the Community Foundation for Northeast Michigan offers DAF holders something more: broader services, personal attention, and a deeper connection to the nonprofits whose work is creating lasting change. We work directly with donors to help them achieve their unique philanthropic vision. While there are similarities between commercial and community foundation DAFs, it's the differences that matter most.

If you already have a commercial DAF, transferring it to the Community Foundation is simple—and we are always happy to answer questions about making the switch.

Another key distinction is impact. With a DAF at the Community Foundation, administrative fees are reinvested locally, supporting community operations and strengthening our mission—rather than flowing to a national institution. This means your philanthropy goes even further.

If you're not ready to transfer your fund, consider naming the Community Foundation to receive annual grants or as the beneficiary of fund assets after your lifetime. We can even establish a legacy fund in your name to carry forward the causes you care about most.

We would love the opportunity to talk with you about how the Community Foundation can help you make the greatest impact with your giving.

Upcoming Grant Opportunities

Open Cycle
- Urgent Needs Fund

December 15
- Straits Area Community Foundation Youth Advisory Council Grant
- North Central Michigan Community Foundation Youth Advisory Council Grant

January 15
- CFNEM Community Impact Grant
- Northeast Michigan Youth Advisory Council Grant

February 1
- Iosco County Community Foundation Youth Advisory Council Grant

Guidelines and applications are available at cfnem.org. Applications open 8 weeks prior to deadlines.

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Mural Projects in Harrisville Supported Through Grants

Bright, beautiful murals have begun to pop up in Harrisville, adding vibrant splashes of color and celebrating this Alcona County community's history. The first mural was completed this year along a brick wall of the county's courthouse. A $4,000 Community Impact Grant to Harrisville Arts Council helped pay the artist, Tim Ninjenhuis, for his work on this mural that features two of Alcona County's prominent citizens: Chief Blue Cloud, a local Anishinaabe man from Mikado, Mich., and Kiki Cuyler, a professional baseball player. Additional CFNEM grants will support more murals as well.

"The most important outcome of this project is that we had a vision that public art could beautify our town and bring people together despite political, socio-economic, religious, and generational differences," says Mary Ellen Jones of the Arts Council. "We highlighted significant historical figures and depicted fun and colorful art hidden behind the illusion of our town's name. The feedback has been positive, and there is excitement for many other murals in Downtown Harrisville."