

NEWPORT HISTORY



PLUM BEACH LIGHT

Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society

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NEWPORT HISTORY

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SOME GUARDIANS OF THE EAST BAY

by

RICHARD L. CHAMPLIN

GOAT ISLAND LIGHT

The site of the Colonial Hilton Inn marks the parcel of land first used for a lighthouse and Keeper's dwelling on Goat Island. The year was 1824; the day, New Year's Day. Keeper Samuel Watson left his dwelling, walked over to the light tower and set aglow the whale oil lantern. Newporters looked over the harbor with considerable satisfaction.

Hardly a decade passed, though, before seafarers saw the greater need for a light, not on the island proper, but at the northern end of its sandy reef. Hence when readers of the *Newport Mercury* picked up their paper dated May 27, 1837, they read about a proposed dike or pier to be built over that reef to which the light would be removed. The work came in two stages, first in building the foundation where the light would stand, second in linking the light to Goat Island proper with a breakwater. The *Mercury* explained:

"This long contemplated measure for the improvement of our Harbour, is, we are happy to say, about being carried into effect. The contractors commenced laying the foundation for the Pier on Monday last. It will stand on the outer end of the Dike; it will be 50 feet square, and in a mean depth of nearly 13 feet at low water, and when completed, the Light-House will be removed to it. The work is under the superintendence of Lieut. G. W. Cullum, of the U.S. Engineers."

Also working on this construction were Lt. James L. Mason, likewise with the Engineers, and Alexander McGregor who served as master mechanic. (McGregor, an able stone mason, had migrated to Newport from Scotland in the early 1800's with nothing more than a carpetbag slung over his shoulder. He went on to erect some of Newport's many stone buildings.) As it turned out, the Engineers never did move the original light to the pier. Instead a new tower, the octagonal one still to be seen, was constructed, and the old one was removed to Prudence Island.

Two years later, in 1839, bids or "sealed proposals" for erecting

the breakwater linking the island to the light were received by Lt. Mason. Stone for the work came from the government quarry at Brenton's Cove.

A certain Caleb C. Mumford became Keeper of the light at its new location. Still another Keeper, Henry Oman, received criticism from Supt. William Ennis for "extravagant consumption of oil at the Goat Island Light."¹ In a letter to Ennis, Oman made his defence:

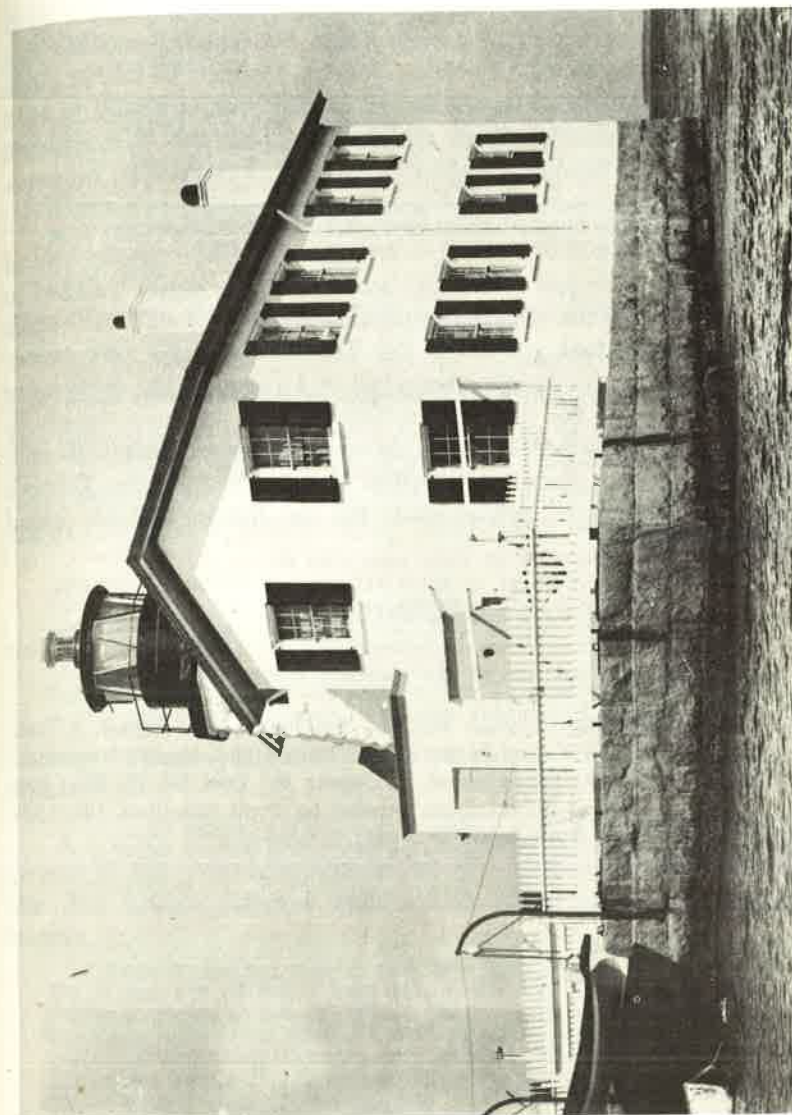
"Newport, Feb. 9, 1846, Sir, According to your request, I will explain the cause of the consumption of a larger quantity of oil than usual during the past year. It has been my whole study to keep the light as bright as possible, and in endeavoring to do this I have had the flame $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches high. This is the cause without doubt why so much more oil has been consumed than usual. Since being admonished by you in regard to this I have lowered the flame to one inch and the decrease has been from two to three gills the first night & has so continued, and in very cold nights the Light is not so good without raising it one inch and a half high. Yours respectfully, Henry Oman Keeper of Goat Island Light."²

By contrast, the next Keeper was "a person of good common sense and judgement and one of the most faithful in the district," namely Pardon W. Stevens.³ Rigorous inspections kept these Keepers alert. An inspector from the Lighthouse Board reached Goat Island on the afternoon of June 30, 1851. Pardon Stevens happened to be absent, yet the inspector found things very much to his liking. "Everything managed better than in any light visited before . . .", he jotted down, for a report eventually laid before the U. S. Senate. "Tower of masonry in courses; inside hammered, outside rough . . . spiral stairs of stone; windows far better than any seen before . . ."⁴ Tight-fitting windows, probably the work of McGregor, assured a minimum of draft to disturb the sensitive oil-burning lantern.

The next decade saw the erection of the dwelling attached to the light tower as pictured in old photographs.

After Pardon Stevens other Keepers included John Cass, John Heath and Henry Crawford. On Oct. 1, 1882 Capt. Charles Schoeneman accepted the post. A Coast Pilot of this period describes the light as standing thirty-three feet above sea level and as being visible for eleven miles, and as fixed (that is not revolving) white, flashing for fifteen seconds and eclipsed for five seconds. The bell received a single blow every fifteen seconds in foggy weather.

Past Goat Island Light sailed the Fall River Line vessels, about to dock at Long Wharf, as well as the ferry to and from Jamestown,



Courtesy of Wilfred Warren

GOAT ISLAND LIGHT

the *Eolus* and later the *General* of the Wickford-Newport line and countless other marine vessels.

A gale on November 26, 1898 saw every window on the north side of the Keeper's house broken. Capt. Schoeneman recalled this storm years later to a Daily News reporter. Further, he told of a rescue he had effected when in his seventieth year. A squall in 1912 had beset eight sailors from the destroyer *Myrant*. It overturned their sailboat. The men clung to the boat until rescued by Schoeneman, a feat to match any of Ida Lewis's.⁵

A new light and fog bell were placed on the opposite end of Goat Island in August 1912. And Schoeneman no doubt watched in the same month the unearthing of a ninety-seven foot whale while the excavation took place for the Torpedo Station's new power house. When a submarine numbered N-4 rammed the breakwater on Nov. 9, 1921, the death knell sounded for this as a personally attended lighthouse. Within the old stone tower an electrically controlled light was placed. Authorities decided to raze the Keeper's dwelling. Thus Capt. Schoeneman, the last Keeper of Goat Island Light, retired.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ennis, William, Collector & Superintendent of Lighthouses; *Report February 14, 1846*. Ms. at the Newport Historical Society.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Lawton, Edward; *Account Book — Disbursements*. August 1, 1850.
4. *Notices of Light-houses in the United States. U.S. Senate Report . . . of the U.S. Light-house Board . . . Senate Ex. Doc. No. 28, 32nd Congress, 1st Session*. Washington, Printed by Boyd Hamilton, 1852; 181.
5. *Newport Daily News*, June 28, 1922; 12.

BLOCK ISLAND LIGHTS

Sandy Point Light, Block Island, came into existence in 1829 after Congress had appropriated \$5,500 for its construction. William A. Weeden served as the first Keeper.¹ As described by the Coast Pilot, Sandy Point:

"is long, low and flat, partly grassy, but terminating at its northern end in a bare sand-beach. Above seven hundred yards back from the extremity of the point is built Block Island's North Light-house, one of the guides to the eastern entrance of the Sound. The light is fixed white, shown from the top of a granite dwelling two stories high, and sixty-one feet above sea-level, and is of the fourth order, visible thirteen and a half miles. Its geographical position is Latitude . . . 41 13'38" N, Longitude . . . 71 34'34" W."²

This of course, describes the light as it was in 1878.

The key word in the name of this light is Sandy. As on Cape Cod, sand gave the land its unique appearance, but it also created problems. Always on the move, it tended to drift away from the building. Edwin Wilbur of Newport, the Customs Collector and Superintendent of Lighthouses, showed his concern in 1848. Reporting its condition to authorities in Washington, he wrote:

"This Light stands on a sand bank, & the wind is continually driving the sand away from the building. In order to prevent this, the Government have heretofore placed planks about 2 feet in the sand edgeways around the building supported by posts & filled up the enclosure by placing bricks over the sand as a paving; the planks and posts have rotted and the bricks have become loose & are all torn up, the sand is now blowing away as before & it is necessary to prevent the house from being undermined."³

The cost of remedying this damage would, in Wilbur's opinion, be \$100.00.

A change of administration in Washington returned Edward Lawton to the post of Superintendent of Lighthouses, and it was to him that Keeper Edward Mott wrote asking some only human favors:

"New Shoreham, March the 12th 1851 Mr. E. W. Lawton. Sir if you are willing I had rather send my accounts by Mr. Simon R. Sands at the end of this quarter as it is rather difficult for me to leave home. Please answer this and say whether I must come and bring my accounts or whether I may send them, also please say wether [sic] you are willing for me to leave the Light House after I clean the Lamps and have them all in good order to light up at night and return home in time to light them. I don't mean to leave the Light House alone. Some part of the family will be in it. Yours respectfully, Edward Mott, Keeper Block Island Light."⁴

One wonders what sort of reply this conscientious request brought forth. Mott had previously sought a directive on what to do

with any extra coal he might have. He was told the lighthouse received no more coal than it needed, but if a surplus did exist, it belonged not to the Keeper but to the government.⁵ Reading between the lines, one suspects that Mott's fellow-Islanders eyed his coal bin with envy. To a people who burned peat, or tug as they called it, coal probably seemed a treasure.

Making his annual inspection in August 1850, Lawton reported that he found everything at Sandy Point Light:

"orderly, neat and clean to the most exact degree."

Then he made an interesting observation:

"The glass of the Lanterns is subject more than any other in the district to be broken by sea birds, also to be obscured by the united action of wind and sand, becoming in time like ground glass."⁶

A year later Lawton commended the Keeper as exemplary. He remarked further on the sand problem saying that it:

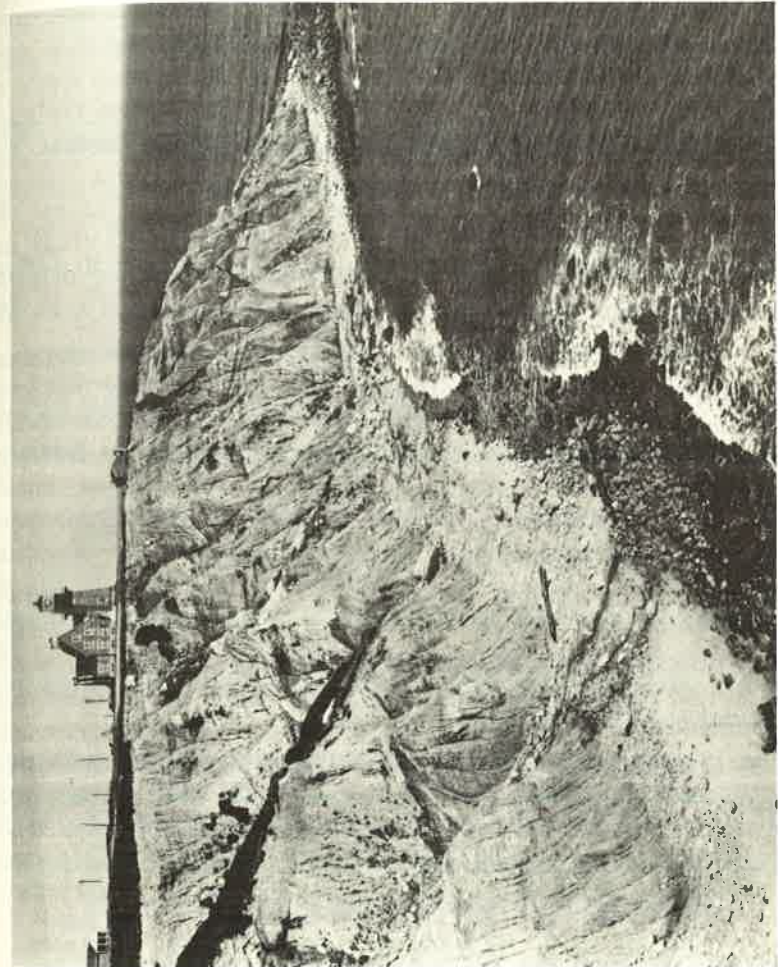
"shifts during violent storms of wind in a manner scarcely credible by those unacquainted with the place."⁷

Livermore, writing in 1877, described three other structures built at Sandy Point, dated 1837, 1857 and 1867, each replacing the previous one.⁸

Block Island's other lighthouse, Southeast Light, began its service in 1875 with H. W. Clark as Keeper, Nathaniel Dodge as first assistant and Charles E. Dodge as second assistant. This beacon commands a one hundred foot cliff, and has a fog signal used in conjunction with it.⁹

The last civilian Keeper of Southeast Light, before the U.S. Coast Guard started manning the lights, was Earl Carr who served there from 1928-1943. This included the hurricane date, September 21, 1938. Earl recalls vividly how he and the assistant stayed in the light tower as long as he dared to, that day, then sought shelter elsewhere, dashing to safety pressing a dishpan on his head. Various antennas bent like hairpins. Mrs. Carr, who had been stationed with her husband at Sabine's Point Light as well as at Block Island, recalls how lighthouse life taught her to plan her meals ahead, sometimes even weeks ahead, for when a spell of bad weather set in, it was comforting to have well-stocked shelves. Even in her husband's retirement she kept this habit.

No treatment of Block Island lighthouses can omit mention of the lore of the wreckers. A recent map of Block Island records the



Courtesy of R. I. Development Council

SOUTH EAST LIGHT — BLOCK ISLAND

sites of upwards of 90 marine disasters. Little wonder that the island became known as the Stumbling Block. Truly, islanders have witnessed their share of catastrophe, and being enterprising, have long known how to avail themselves of the laws of flotsam and jetsam. So far so good, but the legend keeps cropping up that Block Island wreckers, otherwise known as moon-cussers, have more than once dowsed the glim when they saw a well-laden ship headed their way, or even tied a lantern to the cow's tail and led her around the barn, misguiding the ship with a false, revolving light. Even the staid Whittier picked up the theme in his *Wreck of the Palatine*; but Livermore gives a bristling defense of Block Island honor. Suffice it to say that the usually imperturbable William Ellery, Customs Officer, had become highly incensed when the *Ann and Hope* ran aground in 1806 and her cargo was looted. Through the long and salty chronicles of Block Island history, where does the truth lie?

Here, finally, are two tales from the lively lore of Block Island moon-cussers. Oscar Lathen used to tell about a vessel that went aground on Southeast Point where the cliffs are steep. Her freight was general merchandise, mostly food in crates. Well, the enterprising islanders seized their opportunity, and all night long they hauled crates of food up the rugged cliffs to the top, where they stacked them row upon row, several rows deep. As daylight came, one of the toiling men on reaching the top of the bluffs with his burden thought he glimpsed the crack of dawn through what should have been a solid block of crates, only to discover that while he and others had been looting the shipwreck, a second party had been looting their stockpile on the back side.

The other tale concerns an islander of the fair sex who went down to a shipwreck, as the natives say, and with her axe started smashing her way to the desired goods. There pinned down by the debris she saw a man who cried out:

"Mother, Mother, it's your son. Don't strike me."
"Son or not," she cried, "a wrack is a wrack!"

FOOTNOTES

1. *Newport Mercury*, March 14, 1829.
2. *Atlantic Coast Pilot*. Washington, Government Printing Office; 1878; 291.
3. Edwin Wilbur. *Account Book*. July 21, 1848.
4. Letter at the Newport Historical Society.
5. Edward Lawton's *Account Book*, Disbursements. November 8, 1849.
6. Edward Lawton's *Account Book*, Disbursements. August 1, 1850.
7. *Ibid.* August 2, 1851.
8. Livermore, S. T. *History of Block Island, Rhode Island*. 1877; 205-206.
9. *Ibid.*, 206-207.

DUTCH ISLAND LIGHT

In 1825 the State of Rhode Island ceded to the United States government land on the southern tip of Dutch Island, or *Quetenis*, as the Indians had called it, for the erection of a lighthouse. Two years later on January 1, 1827 William Dennis became its first Keeper, a post he held until his decease in 1834 at the ripe age of ninety-three. Of this first structure no description remains except the brief statement by Lighthouse Superintendent William Ennis made in 1844 that it was "the worst constructed of any in the state."¹

When Edwin Wilbur inspected later in July 1848, the Keeper, William P. Babcock must have complained of conditions around him, for Wilbur reported:

"The boat is very much out of repair, & will cost \$20 to repair her; she is very heavy for the keeper to handle alone, he being the only man on the Island. It is proposed to have a new boat & sail of a smaller size instead of repairing the present one, which can be done by giving the boat builder the present one & \$25."²

The end of troubles was not in sight, though, for the next inspector, Capt. Green Walden, called for a cistern to catch water, since the well water was salty. A cistern affording good water had been built by 1850. However, the island still lacks standing surface water at all times of the year.

Anyone looking at a chart of Dutch Island may wonder why a buoy needs to be placed off the southeast shore toward Fox Hill, Jamestown, in deep channel water. The explanation, which incidentally still lingers on in the oral tradition of some Jamestowners, and accurately, may be found in a letter dated Sept. 18, 1849 from the then Superintendent of Lighthouses Edward W. Lawton. He wrote to Stephen Pleasonton, an official in Washington:

"Sir, some months previous to the retirement of my predecessor from Office the Brig *Clarendon* of Scituate, Mass. loaded with Stone (as it is understood for account of the Government of the U.S.) got aground on Dutch Island harbour up the 'middle ground' and threw over board some 60 or 70 Tons of her Cargo a part of which is said to have been large Blocks of granite which at low tide are near the surface of the water. The spot where these stones lie is directly in the track of Vessels coming in and going out of Providence River between Dutch Island and Fox Hill, and is much resorted to for a temporary harbour. Several accidents have occurred in consequence, once in particular to a vessel from Pictou loaded with coal, and much complaint is made on account of this obstruction. The object of this communication is to ask liberty to place a Spar buoy in such a manner as to give notice of the danger . . ."³

Evidently the request was granted, and a buoy, at present a bell buoy, still marks the site.

The lighthouse described in 1844 as the worst constructed in the state, had hardly improved when Lawton inspected it six years later:

"I noticed toad stools of large size and in considerable numbers, growing out of the lintels and crannies in the walls on the inside of the upper story of the house . . . The inside walls . . . are quite as green with moss as a Keeper would care to live with."

A pretty picture, this, but hardly one a Keeper would care to live with. The Keeper at that period, Robert Dennis, earned Lawton's praise. He continued in this report: "The Keeper of this Light is a correct and respectable person, keeps his Lighting apparatus in excellent order."⁴

One other glimpse of the lighthouse in the mid-nineteenth century from Lawton follows:

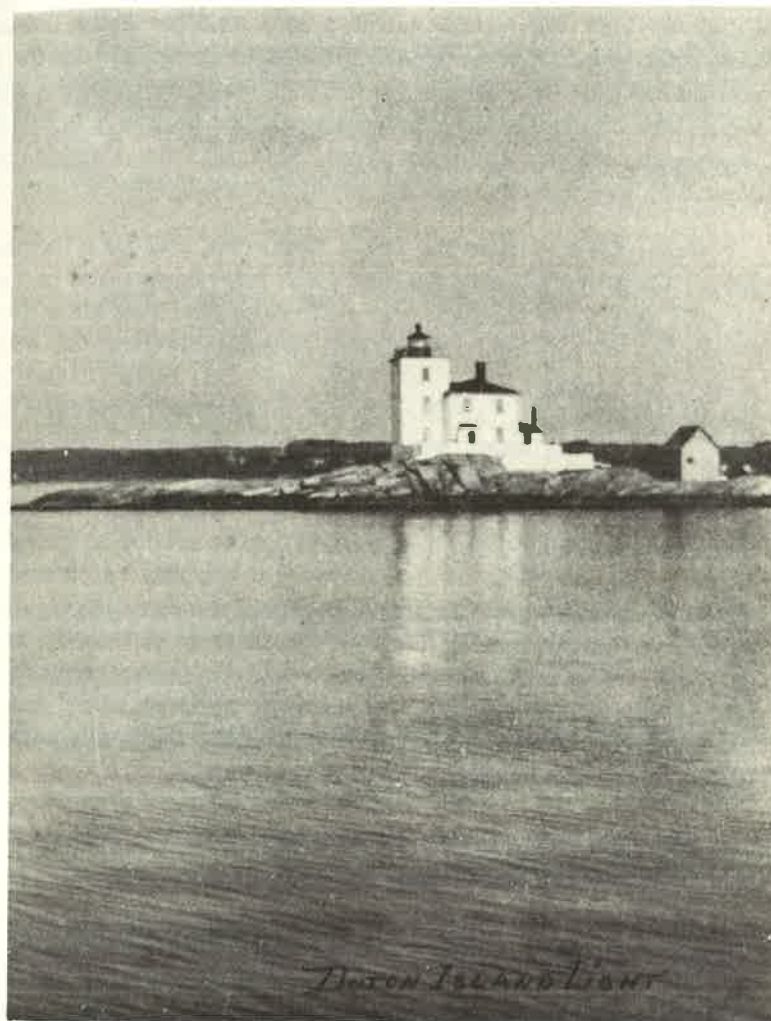
"The Keepers boat which is very much wanted at this place, and by means of which he has saved two vessels this season from going upon the rocks; is very much out of repair . . . As the surf constantly rolls in with a great swell at Dutch Island, it is necessary to haul up the boat to keep her from staving. This has to be done over rocks & stones which wears out the paint and boat itself very fast — a small rail way that would cost \$20.00 would be a perfect remedy, a great convenience and ultimately quite a saving . . . The Keeper complains bitterly about his lodging accommodations which to be sure are indifferent, and the place is a boisterous and lonely one."⁵

Better late than never Congress approved the expenditure of \$4,000 for the lighthouse and its equipment.

This island, named for the Dutch who had maintained a trading post here in the 1600's, underwent legal changes in the mid-1800's. Mr. Powel H. Carpenter came into ownership of the bulk of the island, and, Bayles tells us, he had plans for setting up works for expressing fish oil, but when this enterprise failed, he sold the land to the U.S. Government in January 1864.⁶ At that time the Army built batteries and barracks thereon which served until after World War I. The Jamestown-Saunders Ferry made scheduled stops at the Dutch Island post, first known as Fort Casey, later as Fort Greble.

In May 1888 John B. Landers of Newport resigned as Keeper, being succeeded by Charles A. Arnold of Narragansett.

A vessel named *Rosalie* came aground on Dutch Island in the early 1900's. Her cargo seemed to be barrel upon barrel of white



Courtesy of Wilfred Warren

DUTCH ISLAND LIGHT

beans. These washed ashore, to the great delight of the boys on either side of the bay. They carted them off by the bagful for ammunition in their bean-blowers.

Under thick fog one June day in 1910 the Colonial Line Steamer *Concord*, Capt. Wilcox, ran aground on a sand bar along the west side of the island. No one blamed the Keeper of the light, as the fog whistle had been operating at the time. Nor was the mishap a disaster. Soldiers from the Army post came aboard the steamer to assist passengers, and she was soon afloat. This trip from Providence to New York had been her maiden voyage.⁷

Other Keepers came and left, a Capt. Fife, and for a long term John J. Cook and his wife, Martha. Capt. John Paul served as Keeper until 1931, when the light was made automatic. Paul's son, Louis, recalls the life on Dutch Island with considerable pleasure. At that period, the twenties, the Paul family had come to the island from Borden's Flats Light, Fall River, a very restrictive, barrel-type light. They liked Dutch Island with its larger dwelling, its open scenery and ground for a garden. Capt. Paul kept ducks. He found fishing outstanding and would rise early, go out to the rocks and catch a bushel of blackfish before breakfast. When he needed to go ashore, either to Saunderstown or Jamestown for supplies or to cash his check, he hoisted a rag on a pole to signal the ferry pilots, Archie Arnold or Reuben Garlick, that he wanted them to stop by, which they did. Once ashore, Capt. Paul would buy large quantities of food, a side of beef at a time, for example, which he salted away at the lighthouse. The Lighthouse Service supplied the family with coal in the winter and drinking water all year long.

The light itself burned kerosene and showed a fixed red light, although now it is oscillating.

In the late 1950's the U.S. Government declared Dutch Island surplus and gave it to the State of Rhode Island for conservation purposes. Only a small parcel of land was reserved by the Coast Guard. Eventually even the Keeper's dwelling came down, but the square, white, brick tower remains forming a triangle of lights with Point Judith and Beavertail. At present the vine, swallowwort, threatens to cover the entire island, where neatly cropped pastures once showed, and the very fish hawks that once paired up yearly in April on the lofty elms have deserted Dutch Island. The future uses of *Quentenis* would seem to be more esthetic than practical, which is

probably just the way her long line of Lighthouse Keepers would like to have it.

FOOTNOTES

1. *William Ennis' Account Book*. September 11, 1844.
2. *Ibid.*, July 1, 1848.
3. *Edward Lawton's Account Book* — Disbursements.
4. *Edward Lawton's Account Book* — Disbursements. August 1, 1850.
5. *Ibid.*, August 2, 1851.
6. Bayles, Richard M. ; *History of Newport County*. New York, Preston, 1888; 747.
7. *Newport Journal*, June 18, 1910.

BRENTON REEF LIGHTSHIP

Brenton Reef — the very name has spelled out a warning to generations of fishermen and mariners. The reef is, in fact, as an Atlantic Coast Pilot has described it, "a long shoal making off to the southwestward from Brenton's Point for nearly half a mile. It is awash at low water near its southern end, and has several half-tide ledges scattered along its length."¹ Little wonder, then, that the tide of feeling ran high in the mid-nineteenth century for placing what had come to be known as a Floating Light near the tip of Brenton Reef. In 1850 the Newport Daily News urged its commercial friends to be sure they supported passage by Congress of an appropriation for the Floating Light. They should not be found "sleeping at their oars."²

To Edward Lawton, Customs Officer and Superintendent of Lighthouses for Rhode Island, fell the assignment of seeing the plan from its inception through to the launching and stationing of the vessel. Writing to Pleasonton of the Treasury Department in Washington, Lawton proposed a staunch vessel of two hundred tons or a little upwards. "Brenton's Reef is a wild place, especially in Southeast storms, which are," he asserted, "prevalent in this latitude at all seasons of the year."³

No sooner had Congress voted its approval than aspiring Keepers began making application to master the proposed vessel, John Heath and Hosea Lewis, father of Ida Lewis, being among them. But a South County man, David C. Champlin, earned Lawton's recommendation, and in March 1852 he received the appointment as Keeper. The first crew consisted of Nathan King, Mate; John Banister, William Holt, George Cobleigh, Stephen Crowell, William B. Champlin, Seamen; and Francis Randolph, Cook.

Rhode Island could supply not only the personnel, but also the plan for the lightship and the skill needed to construct her. Capt. Gardner Willard of Bristol came forward with a model which Lawton forwarded to Washington for approval. A month later the authorities accepted the bid of Silas H. Cottrell & Co. of Newport. Cottrell had worked on the revenue cutter *Jackson*, and for this Floating Light his bid came to \$12,575.

Work must have commenced immediately and progressed so fast that the *Ledyard*, as she was to be named, was launched the last day of 1852. Her mushroom type anchors weighed two thousand pounds each and had fifty fathom chains attached. The iron foundry

near Coddington Mill turned out the anchors, William Stanley being the worker who moulded them.⁴ As viewed by a Newport Mercury reporter, the *Ledyard* seemed "a fine looking craft, very sharp and smoothly built and well calculated to ride securely in that exposed situation. Her dimensions are as follows; length, ninety feet, on deck, breadth of beam, twenty two feet, and depth of hole, eleven feet."⁵

By the first of March the completed Floating Light took her place off Brenton Reef, and a new era of navigation dawned for Narragansett Bay. Right away fishermen began praising the *Ledyard*; her light shone brighter than that of Beavertail Lighthouse. A Capt. Brookins found it to have "the best light of any that he had seen in the United States."⁶

Capt. John Heath, a newly appointed Keeper in 1854, promptly came under fire for neglect of duty. On January 2 a schooner named *Mozelle* of Wellfleet on route from Boston to Virginia struck Brenton Reef during a severe storm. From the Newport shore Seth Bateman spotted the wreck soon after dawn. The sea made a clean breach over her. Four men clung to the rigging of the ship as the waves tore at her. Bateman, helpless without a boat, sent to Newport for assistance. The vessel meanwhile broke in two. One by one the men were hurled into the sea and drowned.

Why Capt. Heath failed to lower a boat from the lightship and attempt a rescue remains a mystery. The Newport Mercury hinted that Heath spent too much time ashore, yet he had been on duty at the time of this catastrophe. The Newport Daily News without comment printed Capt. Heath's defense of his action (or failure to act) in which he declared he had a clear conscience. At any rate John Heath shortly after received a new appointment to Goat Island Light, and Samuel Dunn took his place in March as Keeper of the Lightship *Ledyard*. Dunn in turn was replaced at the end of the year by Josiah K. Pitman.

Perhaps because of this tragedy or for other reasons the feeling grew that the ninety foot vessel was too small for the rough situation. So in June of 1856 the steam tug *Hercules* towed a new vessel to the south end of Brenton's Reef, and the *Ledyard* was reassigned. The new lightship, built at Baltimore for \$40,000, bore the name "*Brenton Reef*" in large black letters on the straw-colored hull.

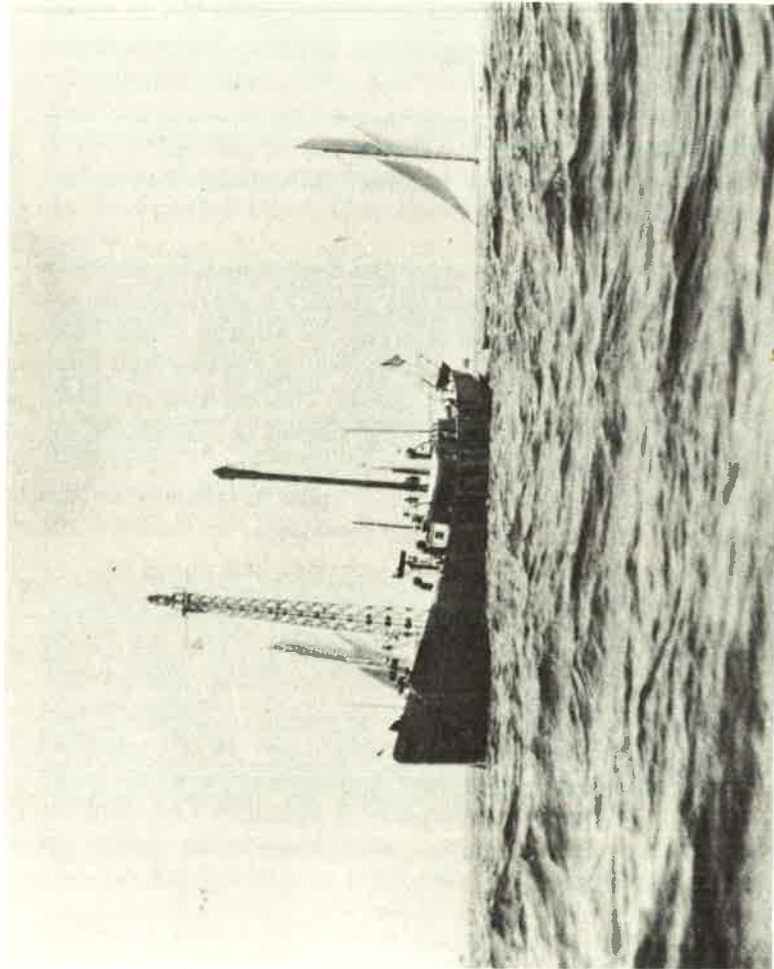
Except for occasional overhauls, when a relief vessel took her place, the new lightship became a permanent fixture, and life on

board went on quietly for the next decade. A joke, well-known in marine circles, spread abroad that they raised their own vegetables on the lightship, raised them, that is, up over the side whenever the supply boat came by.

After the Civil War yachting gained in popularity, and no yachtsman of the period was more flamboyant than James Gordon Bennett. The owner of the *New York Herald* had set up two races with suitable trophies, one the Cape May Cup and the other the Brenton Reef Cup, which Bennett presented to the New York Yacht Club in 1871. The course of the Brenton Reef race ran from "the Lightship off Newport to and around the Lightship off Sandy Hook and outside Long Island and return." Bennett's own Yacht, the *Dauntless*, entered many of the races. The Bennetts' biographer, Don Seitz, describes the yacht *Dauntless* as "a thing of beauty aglow with brass, the deck polished until it shone and every strand of cordage as taut as the strings of a fiddle."⁷ But no yacht is any better than its crew, and the best crew can be beset by fog. In August 1872 racing off Newport the *Dauntless* found herself off course in dense fog, tacked and took what was thought to be the right course. Without warning she ran into the lightship's *Relief* with full force, tearing away ten feet of that vessel's side and main rigging. This occurred despite the efforts of Capt. Marsh of the lightship who frantically rang a bell and of the crew who shouted when they saw the yacht nosing toward them. *Dauntless* sustained only minor damage; she lost about three feet of her jib boom.⁸ (And several weeks later when the race was re-run — this time from Brenton Reef to Sow and Pigs light and back — *Dauntless* won by five minutes over the *Madeline*.)

The above Capt. Charles D. Marsh served as Keeper during these years, having been appointed to the post by President Lincoln in 1861. He had gone to sea at the age of fourteen in a whaler, but finally "settled down" on the lightship which he made his home almost without break for twenty-four years. Under his captaincy in 1865 the lightship broke away from her moorings and drifted ashore on Price's Neck inside Seal Rock. According to Clarence Stanhope who recollected this episode years later and described it in the *Newport Mercury*, the lightship:

"parted her chain early in the evening of Oct. 19, 1865, during a gale, the wind being W.S.W.; she drifted over several ledges and went ashore on the beach at Price's Neck, where she bilged. Messrs. S. H. Cottrell & Co., were given the contract to get her off in which they were successful, and by the aid of a steam tug brought into the harbor four days after her mishap. Shortly after, she was hauled out on the marine railway and thoroughly



Courtesy of Wilfred Warren

BRENTON REEF LIGHTSHIP

repaired. The writer was one of several lads who utilized the shipyard as a playground on Saturdays, and while the lightship was on the railway she was recoppered. The boys were paid a small sum of money for every pound of copper nails they recovered from the ground where they had fallen when the old copper was torn off."⁹

At another time, December 1873, the steamer *Newport* came into the bay and found the lightship absent from her station. The helpless ship with no locomotive power of her own had little choice in the matter and ended up off Beavertail, but she was hauled away with little damage. In the spring of 1868 Capt. Marsh and his crew rescued two fishermen whose boat was dashed upon the coast at Castle Hill. Still later, on October 15, 1883, a lumber-bearing brig went ashore at Bateman's Beach.

Big events happened rarely, though. For the most part the isolated crew of the lightship had to content themselves with watching the buoys and gulls. A certain herring gull furnished no little amusement and earned for itself the name Gull Dick. For many winters this same gull, easily recognizable by his markings, his call, and above all by his habits, returned to the lightship to enjoy handouts. The crew came to expect Gull Dick, newspapers heralded his return in September and his departure in April, ornithologists of that day and as late as 1947 cited the longevity of the seagull.¹⁰

The bird made a strong impression on Mr. George H. Mackay who kept readers of the ornithological journal, *The Auk*, posted year after year. As Mackay described it:

"Every morning at sunrise, when the lights on the ship are lowered for the day, this Gull is perceived coming towards the ship, from the rocks (where it roosts) about two miles away, for its breakfast which it always receives from the hands of the crew. Should the bird not be noticed flying around near by, one of the crew will call the bird by name, whistle or wave his hand, and soon the bird appears. The last seen of Dick in the late afternoon is just before the lights are hoisted for the night. When this movement commences, it at once starts for and flies to the rocks near the Beavertail Lighthouse to roost, again reappearing on the following morning to go through the same procedure."¹¹

Mackay continued by saying that the bird would not allow anyone to fondle him, nor would he tolerate competition from others of his kind. The *Newport Mercury* for April 20, 1895, as if announcing the departure of a celebrity, reported, "Dick, the sea-gull . . . departed this week for his summer quarters." But hear Mackay's obituary:

"'Gull Dick' . . . was observed for the last time in the vicinity of the Brenton Reef Light-ship on April 7, 1896, making twenty-four summers the bird had passed in this immediate vicinity. Captain Edward Fogarty, at present in charge of the ship, has known Dick for ten years.

"The failure of this bird to put in an appearance as usual in October, 1896 and his continued absence ever since, leave little doubt that he is dead . . . I now feel called upon to record his probable demise."¹²

This event over the gay nineties could go on being gay!

In the late 1880's the *Providence Sunday Journal* arranged a visit to the lightship for one of its reporters and an artist. The pair reached Newport in the midst of a raging southeaster. No one but a dauntless lad of fifteen years, William Champion, would consent to hazard the trip from Newport harbor out to the lightship. They made the trip safely, however. It goes without saying in marine circles that a stationary vessel takes the brunt of the storm more severely than a moving one. Not everyone could endure life on a lightship, but the *Journal* reporter found a seaworthy crew, a good portion of whom were Scandinavians: Lars Wilhelmsen, the Norwegian mate; Andrew Gustafson, a Swede; Charles Steijen, also a Swede. Others were Gustavus Byer, William Varley, Olop Hall and Theodore H. Smith, all under the command of Capt. Edward Fogarty. The article, focusing on Smith, gives a sense of what life was like on the tempest tossed vessel:

"Theodore H. Smith, 64 years of age, a native of Newport," it explains, "is the veteran of the company, having been on the ship for the past 13 years. Theodore is an old barnacle, and has sailed the seas over from east to west, north to south, since he first shipped as cabin boy. He is a philosopher in his way, and can give more advice to the square inch than any man on the ship. The old sailor furnishes a front for his associates to assail, and during the downpour of this particular day the crew gathered around the ship's stove between decks, near the foremast, and chaffed the old man having a little world of its own."¹³

This private little world seems not to have been all jolly. An account of lightship life at the turn of the century hints that loneliness and boredom plagued the crews to the point where some of them were not on speaking terms with each other when their ten days of duty came to an end.¹⁴ But once back from their liberty ashore, they started in anew as buddies — shipmates. The captain in those days received \$1,000 a year, while the seamen took home a mere \$30.00 a month. All too infrequently the supply vessels provided reading matter, but it became customary for Fall River Line boats to pass close by the lightship and let passengers toss aboard their discarded newspapers. Newporters, too, venturing out of the mouth of the bay in pleasure craft likewise handed the Sunday papers to outstretched arms.

Mechanical improvements took place from time to time, as well

as repairs. Periodically the lightship went to drydocks for overhaul, and a vessel called Relief took its place. In 1904 a new signal bell came aboard, weighing 140 pounds. In fog it would ring the numbers 3 and 9, as 39 was the official number of Brenton Reef Lightship.

A tale, perhaps more legendary than true, has come down from World War I days, when civilian craft were frequently turned over by their owners to the U.S. Navy. In one such instance the donor was rewarded with a commission for his son. This son proved anything but nautical, as may be seen from the fact that after an evening of trying, he still failed to learn the knack of tying a square knot. Likewise at the helm this landlubber left much to be desired. One day he maneuvered his vessel between two coal barges entering the bay connected by a sagging hawser. The hawser parted, of course, and trouble ensued. Outbound one afternoon, the captain came within sight of the lightship. Mistaking it for an inbound ship, he gave it a blast of his whistle. He wanted it out of the way. Nothing happened. Again he blasted. Still no response. The distance closed between the vessels, and at last the greenhorn skipper outright rammed the unbudging lightship. The Captain of the lightship leaned over the side, spat contemptuously, then vehemently levelled with the offender. Couldn't he see this was a lightship?

Happenings of all sorts at the mouth of the bay came under the scrutiny of the lightships attendants. One summer day in 1912 the catboat *Alaska* owned by D. Palma, a Greek fisherman, sailed about in the vicinity of the lightship when suddenly Palma felt a heave from beneath as his boat was elevated several feet out of the water. He experienced a distinct jar, as the newspaper playfully reported, "He was uncertain in his mind, for a few minutes, whether it was a whale which he had bumped into, a monster, sea serpent, or Father Neptune himself coming on board to keep him company."¹⁵ It proved to be none of these but instead the U.S. Navy Submarine C-1 on maneuvers testing warheads. She had just surfaced and unwittingly gave the *Alaska* a pigaback ride. After the lapse of a few suspenseful moments, the boat slid off into the water without damage to itself or injury to the startled fisherman.

Charles Steijen's tour of duty on the lightship began in 1895 and stretched to 1914 when he succeeded Capt. Fogarty as skipper and continued until his retirement fourteen years later. During the captaincy of this Swedish American, the lighting apparatus of the ship was changed from the cluster of oil lamps hoisted nightly to a single

lamp burning acetylene gas with 408 candlepower. At the end of the lightship's duty the intensity of light had been raised to 13,000 candlepower. As recalled by his daughter, Mrs. Horace Parker, Steijen's family lived in Newport where he spent his off-duty days:

"In the early days of his tour aboard the Lightship," she recalls, "the only means of coming ashore was by sailboat. It was in the winter, and something came up, and he had to go ashore. The weather was fine when he left the ship, and he had just got underway when a squall came up. He admitted afterwards he didn't think he would make it, but he did. The water was so rough they couldn't make the harbor and beached the sailboat at Castle Hill and walked into town soaking wet. Of course my Mother was furious, but found out later that it was quite a commonplace occurrence. It was just part of his job. Later they were given a launch, but he was never too happy with it. He called it his fair weather boat."¹⁶

In March 1935 the old outmoded lightship gave place to a remodeled steel vessel called a turtleback. This new Brenton Reef Lightship, being self-propelled, could maneuver back to its station by itself if a heavy storm caused it to drift. Its single steel mast rose 50 feet above water, where the glassed-in gallery contained an electric light.

Three years later, with Theodore Anderson as captain, the lightship underwent the most vehement storm in its history. On Sept. 21, 1938 the fury of a hurricane swept all the lifeboats away and everything else on deck. The crew took turns at the helm all night, but said Anderson reverently, "Fortunately there was a better one at the helm than any of us, and we managed to come through."¹⁷ Considering the utter devastation caused elsewhere — at Whale Rock Light, for instance, where the hurricane swept away the light itself and claimed two lives — the *Brenton* seems to have been charmed.

In the 1940's with the demise of the Lighthouse Service, the lightship came under the U.S. Coast Guard.

The first intimation Newporters had of the removal of this floating light came in August 1959 with the announcement that a light tower would be built to replace the *Brenton*. Three years later that neared completion. The lightship, having at the end a complement of fourteen men under her Commanding Officer, E. E. Godlewski, left her station for the last time and in September 1962 made a tour of the bay, around Conanicut Island. Shortly after she departed for a new assignment at Cross Rip, Nantucket Sound.

If sentimentalists recall fondly the red-hulled lightship with BRENTON in bold white letters across her beam, the lightship

which seemed such a permanent part of the seascape, some will not soon forget her doleful foghorn — two decending tones, one rapid, one protracted, which earned her the name of "The Old Groaner."

FOOTNOTES

1. *Atlantic Coast Pilot*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1878, 243.
2. *Newport Daily News*, Oct. 17, 1850.
3. *Edward Lawton's Account Book — Disbursements*. April 12, 1851. Manuscript owned by the Newport Historical Society.
4. See *Newport Journal*, Jan. 11, 1902.
5. *Newport Mercury*, Jan. 1, 1853.
6. *Newport Mercury*, Feb. 17, 1855.
7. Seitz, Don C.; *The James Gordon Bennetts*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, c. 1928; 255.
8. See *Newport Mercury*, Aug. 24, 1872.
9. *Newport Mercury*, Jan. 28, 1899.
10. Bent, Arthur C.; *Life Histories of North American Gulls and Terns*. N.Y., Dodd, Mead, 1947, 116-117.
11. *The Auk*, vol. 9, 1892, 227-228.
12. *Ibid.*, vol. 15, 1898, 49-50.
13. *The Providence Sunday Journal*; undated. G. H. Richardson: Scrapbook No. 972; 115-116. Newport Historical Society.
14. *Newport Herald*, Dec. 18, 1903.
15. *Newport Journal*, July 12, 1912.
16. Unpublished letter to the author, Nov. 12, 1970.
17. *Newport Mercury*, Sept. 30, 1938

WHALE ROCK LIGHT

That a light was needed at the mouth of the West Passage, between the Narragansett shore and Beavertail, seemed amply apparent to Shepherd Tom Hazard who wrote in praise of it for the *Providence Journal*. He described the rock which resembled a whale as "over three hundred feet in length, and sixty-five feet in width at the widest part, and from four to five feet out of water at ordinary high tide . . . A short distance north of the Whale Rock is a sunken rock four or five feet under water." (The sunken rock became known as Little Whale.) Hazard continues with a convincing list of sixteen shipwrecks on the rock, describing one in great detail:

"One of the most remarkable, I remember perfectly well myself, from the fact that my brother, Dr. Hazard, attended the man who escaped with his life. It was the schooner *Pearl*, of Blue Point, N.J. She struck on the rock about 9 o'clock in the evening January, 1887, and sank immediately, carrying down all on board. Four men and a boy were drowned. The Captain, Benjamin F. Hudson, came to the surface, and seeing the masts out of water, swam to the mainmast and lashed himself to the main-topmast, where he remained until noon the next day, when he was taken off by Capt. John F. Nichols, of the sloop *Rocky Brook*, and carried to Narragansett Pier, and taken to the house of Captain William E. Whaley, where he remained six weeks. He was dreadfully frozen, but finally recovered."

Merritt, Chapman and Scott, Wreckers, of New London, built this circular light house, which first shone in 1872. On its three decks it contained six spacious rooms, the largest being used as a living room. The watch tower contained the light itself. At first Whale Rock Light housed the Keeper and his family, and today Miss Adelaide Littlefield of Wakefield recalls being there with her father, Elam Littlefield in about 1890. When time permitted, Capt. Littlefield set lobster pots. Life proceeded on an even keel for a number of years. Not everyone adjusted to this special kind of life at a lonely post and in a circular dwelling. A certain Orlando Willis tried it briefly and left. Littlefield, himself, was soon reassigned to Block Island Light.

Notice appeared in the *Newport Journal* that the Keeper in October 1911, Theodore De Shong, and his crew had agreed among themselves to pay for a wireless radio set for use at the lighthouse. They felt helpless to assist when trouble occurred in the vicinity. They cited the instance of a barge foundering nearby with the resultant drowning of her captain. It might have been avoided, they reasoned, if they had owned a radio. But apparently their resolve never bore fruit.²

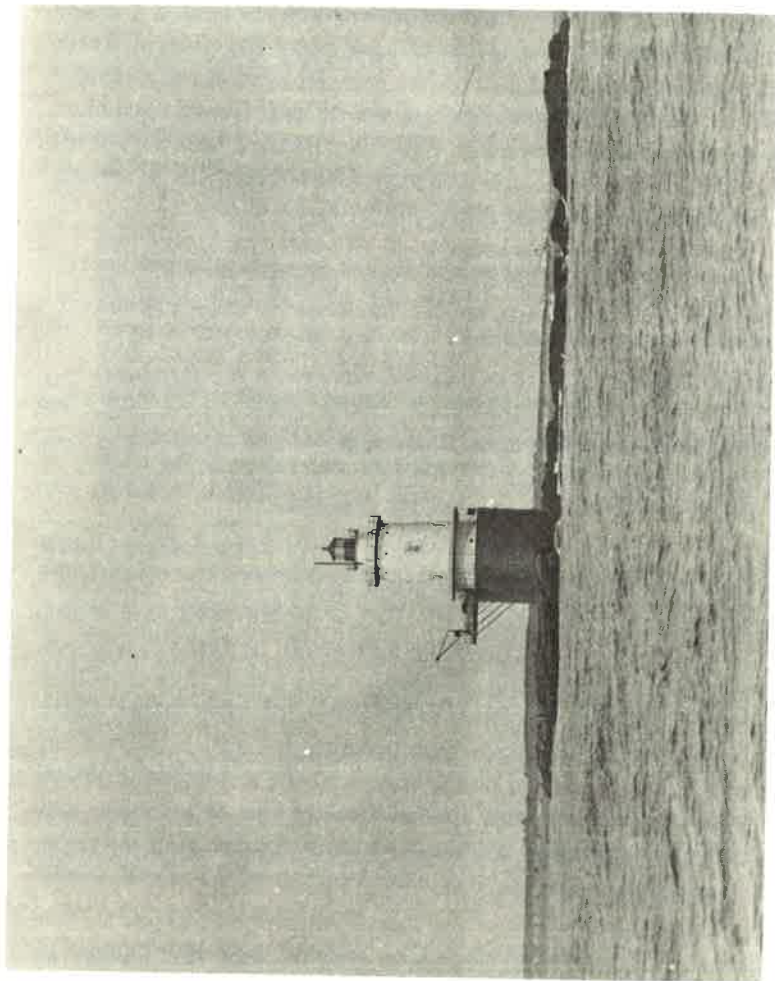
In 1918, just out of school, Earl Caswell of Jamestown, put in a year on Whale Rock. They assured him he would keep out of trouble there, but he confesses he managed to find it just the same. One day the Keeper's daughter visited the light while her father was painting the inside of the "barrel." She and Earl fell to insulting each other, whereupon the lass hurled a tomato at Earl. He dodged, causing it to collide with a stretch of fresh paint.

Of greater concern, though, was the time a Polish lobsterman named Silver Dollar came by asking for a free handout of government paint. Earl consented to give him some, and in return the lobsterman rewarded him by giving him a lobster pot for his own use. Whenever he wanted, Earl could pull it in and have fresh lobster. This led to trouble and almost caused Earl to be jailed when later a Greek lobsterman came to the lighthouse also asking for paint. This time Earl refused, and later the Greek retaliated by turning in Earl's name to the game warden, who pulled his lobster trap and found twenty shorts — short lobsters — in it.

The day Earl was to leave the light for good, the wind blew a gale. He was forced to wait one more day. This delay because of weather had often happened, especially in the winter when ice flowed down the bay. One Keeper had spent eight cold hours in his own boat trapped amidst pack ice. Access to and from the light was not easy. The men hauled their boat up and down on davits with a block and fall.

In those days says Earl, the kerosene lamp was lighted from sunset to sunrise. A fog bell rang automatically, provided the Assistant Keeper had cranked up the 500 pound weight. This would keep it ringing four and a half hours. The barrel was cold in winter, despite the fact that they placed shutters over the few windows. Earl remembers seeing posters up on the bulkhead picturing German vessels, but he wonders what good it would have done even if they had correctly identified an enemy vessel, since there was no way of communicating with shore rapidly to relay a message. Evidently De Shong's efforts to obtain a wireless set had failed.

Finally, Earl states that the Keeper, whose duty included keeping the lighthouse log, more than once recorded his opinion that the light had been constructed in such a way as to be well secured to the rock, but that it was not adequately rivetted at its first joint. Waves, in other words, could hardly sever the foundation from the



Courtesy of Wilfred Warren

WHALE ROCK LIGHT

rock but might easily topple the upper sections of the barrel. Ominous words these proved to be.

In June 1924 Alfred Auger became Keeper of Whale Rock Light with Daniel A. Sullivan as Assistant. Sullivan stayed on into the thirties and was Keeper in 1938 when the hurricane struck. That calamity claimed the life of the assistant then on duty, Walter B. Eberle of Newport. Eberle, the father of five children, disappeared with the entire upper section of the lighthouse, never to be found again.³ Earnest attempts were made to retrieve his body as well as the valuable Fresnel lenses of the light, but to no avail. On the morning after the disaster only the lower section of the lighthouse remained. Her Keeper, Sullivan, and an assistant, Gustave Larson, had been off duty at the time, hence their lives were spared. Most remarkable of all is that no trace of the wreckage has ever been found. The Keeper's warnings of two decades earlier had proved all too true.

After the storm the light was not rebuilt. Only recently have skindivers roused new interest in searching for the remains of Whale Rock Light.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Providence Journal*, November 1, 1876.
2. *Newport Journal*, October 27, 1911.
3. *Newport Daily News*, September 24, 1938.

CONANICUT LIGHT

In the winter of 1885 during a blinding snowstorm the steamer *Eolus*, bound from Wickford to Newport, ran aground on the west shore of Jamestown near the north end. Despite the torch lantern and fog horn maintained there, the vessel missed the point and stuck fast in the shoal waters. Passengers went ashore in small boats and spent the night in neighboring farmhouses.¹

At that very time the Conanicut Lighthouse was under construction to accommodate not only vessels like the *Eolus* of the Newport and Wickford Railroad and Steamboat Company but the heavy marine traffic of those days on the West Passage of the bay.

Mr. Horace W. Arnold, a Civil War veteran, served as first Keeper of this family lighthouse, a post he held for at least twenty years after its opening in April 1886. At length his sons succeeded him. Horace had already served in the Lighthouse Service for many years. Before coming to Conanicut Park he had put in a hitch on Conimicut Light in Providence River, where an event occurred that his nephew, Capt. Archie Arnold of Saunderstown, tells with relish. One year in late winter the ice of Providence River commenced to break up. It did so vehemently. Blocks of ice rammed Conimicut Light relentlessly, and Uncle Horace became fearful for his safety. That was no place for him. He abandoned the lighthouse, launching himself out on a passing ice flow on which he placed a mattress, and there he sat, letting the tide and current take him away. Some time elapsed before the *Good Tug Reliance*, Capt. Nat Sutton, saw the Keeper sitting like a man on a magic carpet and hauled him aboard with his mattress. (This tale with a happy ending approximates the account given in the *Newport Mercury* of March 6, 1875).

Little wonder, then, that when a certain vessel became locked in ice off his point in Jamestown, Horace Arnold readily offered a helping hand. At considerable risk he walked the ice to this stranded vessel and assisted her passengers ashore. For this deed the Skipper rewarded the Keeper with a captain's chair, which to this day remains an Arnold family heirloom.

For his nephew, Archie, Keeper Arnold would specially start up the fog horn, even on a clear day. This delighted and frightened the youngster. He would heat a steel ball with a blowtorch, then ignite the fuel that compressed the air that would blow the whistle. Then he waited. They both waited, and in an offguard moment the blast

would boom forth, the young boy and the old looking gleefully at each other. "I shrank into my shoes," says Archie.

Like all lightkeepers, Horace Arnold kept an official Journal. Two volumes of it belong to Mrs. Edmond Webber of Rumford, R.I. Although it consists largely of weather data, the Journal also contains occasional notes on current happenings. For example in October 1902 he related a narrow escape his son, Wilton, had experienced as Assistant Keeper on Sakonnet Light. On April 16, 1903 Arnold wrote (in a neat, clear hand) "Steamer *General* became disabled and was towed to Newport." Not a hint as to his part, if any, in this event.

On another occasion Keeper Arnold noted that the Steamer *Cactus* had left a package of reading matter. The Lighthouse Service maintained the *Cactus* as a supply vessel.

Finally in October 1911 he recorded the passing of Mrs. Ida Lewis (Wilson), noting that she had saved many lives. We know that the various Keepers met each other from time to time and exchanged stories. Ida Lewis at Lime Rock, Charles Curtis at Rose Island, and John Wales at Beavertail must all have been acquainted. If only some of their conversations had been preserved!

After Horace's term, his sons Wilton and Sidney assisted at the red, wooden, Victorian-styled lighthouse, complete with its gingerbread trim; and Elmer Newton followed them. At length the Coast Guard abandoned Conanicut Light, replacing it with an automatic red signal. The house was sold to its present owner, Mrs. Richard Smith.

FOOTNOTES

1. Charles E. Preston. *The First Movable Church*. Newport, 1899.

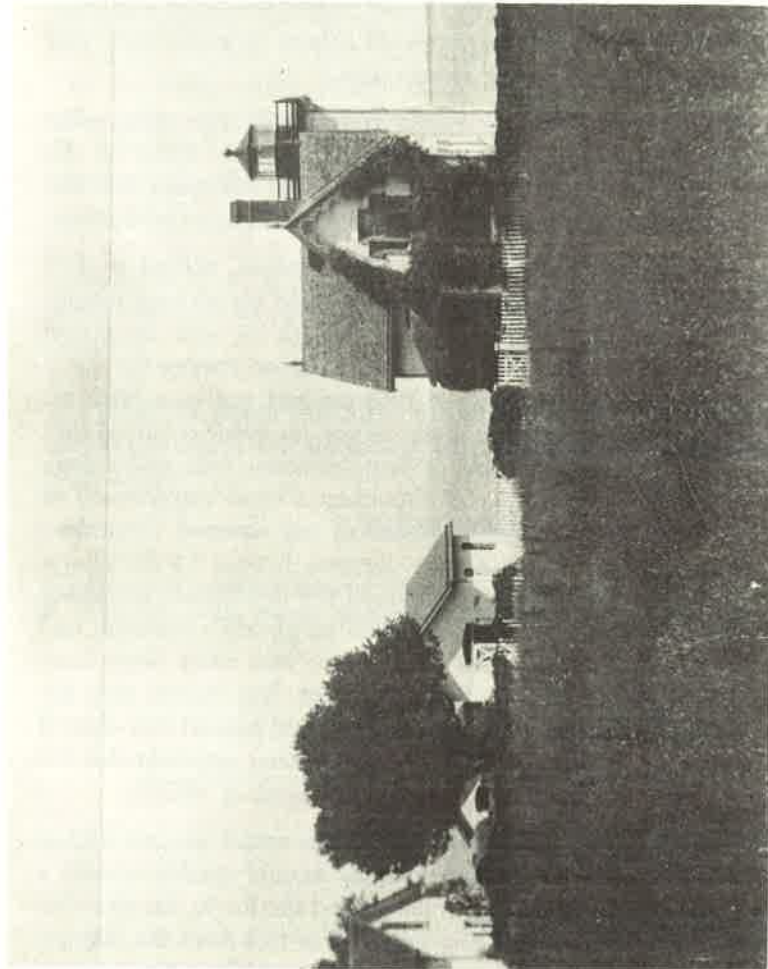


Photo by Wilfred Warren

CONANICUT LIGHT

Courtesy of Mrs. Wilton Arnold

GULL ROCKS LIGHT

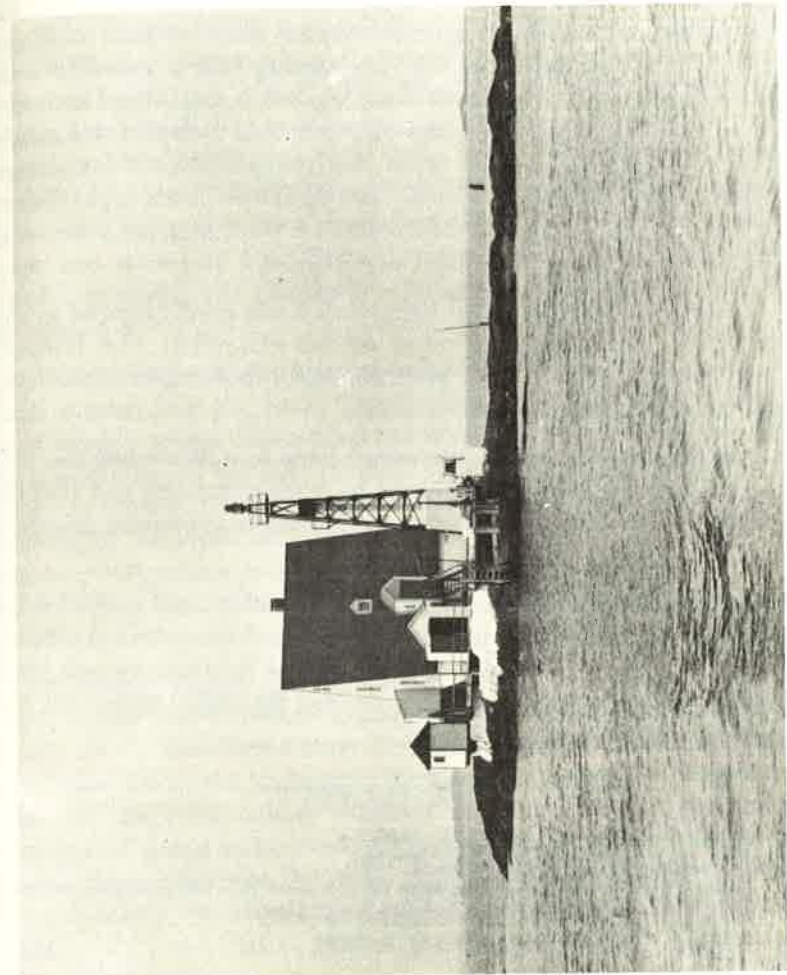
For years on the Atlantic Coast no more unusual lighthouse could be found than the one at Gull Rocks in upper Newport harbor. The A-frame structure rose 40 feet above dark slate rocks, had two steep roofs painted red which plunged from the ridge pole to within 5 feet of the ground. In short, it was a lightning splitter, and because of its steep roof, the local workforce came to dislike painting it.

Congress had appropriated the funds for this lighthouse and fog signal in 1886, at the same time and for the same amount as for the Castle Hill Light, namely \$10,000.¹ By April of 1887, according to a note in the Newport Daily News, work had begun on the Gull Rocks Light, the framing being made in Fall River.² Its two lights were scheduled to shine on September 20th. The third floor of this dwelling housed the lights. The one at the narrow, easterly peak shone a fixed white, and the opposite side, a fixed, that is not blinking, red. The lights themselves traveled in and out the peak windows on specially rigged rails. One duty of the Keeper consisted of opening the windows each evening and rolling out the lights, then in the morning retracting them. This operation resembled the punctual outburst of a cuckoo clock.

Designed as a family light, the building provided living space on two floors. Needless to say, water was at a premium here a quarter of a mile from Newport, but the designers of the lighthouse had planned for water supply as follows. Rain driving against the almost verticle roofs collected in an indoor well, from which it was piped to faucets and other plumbing. The Keepers soon realized, however, that any water collected during the first few minutes of a rainfall tended to be too salty for use, as the roof had inevitably accumulated a coating of salt spray. Hence they learned to run off the first few gallons.

The Lighthouse Service provided this station with the necessary fuel and other supplies for maintaining the light, as well as a minimum of food for the Keeper and his family. But to round out their diet, the Keeper kept his own chickens for eggs. From time immemorial gulls had roosted on these rocks; now they must share them with hens. And the tight little island — at least while Alfred Auger kept the light — also harbored rabbits and assorted cats.

For years the residents of nearby Washington Street in Newport puzzled over the appearance on their beach of hens' eggs washed up there and stranded. Had they asked him, the Keeper could have



Courtesy of Wilfred Warren

GULL ROCKS LIGHT

told them that sometimes the hens laid their eggs where the inconsiderate tide would rise up and sweep them off into the Deep Six.³

Keepers such as Michael Daley considered the duty on Gull Rocks Light easy, compared with a hitch on one of the outer harbor lights such as Sakonnet or Point Judith or Block Island. Keeper Alfred Auger received his assignment to Gull Rocks in June 1924 and served there until June 1926, at first earning \$926 a year. His wife and son, Alfred Jr., lived mostly ashore, but young Alfred returned to the rocks weekends after attending school in Newport. He recalls those weekends as carefree times. His father had served as lamp-lighter at Fort Adams and as Keeper of Whale Rock Light before coming to Gull Rocks. He later received a citation for bravery at Stratford Shoal Light Station, New York.

Never an extremely vital light, Gull Rocks hardly figured in any shipwrecks, groundings or other marine calamities. The Keeper's main concern seems to have been to roll out those lights at sundown and roll them back in again at dawn.

In the mid-1950's this procedure came to a halt when the U.S. Coast Guard ordered that the light be made automatic and that the building be razed.⁴ Thus disappeared a unique lighthouse structure.

The opening in June 1969 of the bridge spanning Newport and Jamestown rendered Gull Rocks beacon obsolete, and in November even the untended light and its fog bell were discontinued. Finally in January 1970 a helicopter settled over the light beacon and lifted it off, removed it to storage, and so ended the eighty-three year history of Gull Rocks Light Station.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Newport Mercury*, April 17, 1886.
2. *Newport Daily News*, April 6, 1887.
3. Authority for this observation is verbal from Mr. William King Covell, a longtime resident of Washington Street.
4. *Newport Daily News*, January 7, 1970.

PLUM BEACH LIGHT

Until the Fall of 1970 a rumor kept cropping up that Plum Beach Light, Saunderstown, was for sale. The terms — one dollar, providing the buyer move it away. This proved to be strictly a rumor, as events later showed.

Plum Beach Light, a newcomer in the family of lighthouses around the bay rose up out of the sea in 1897. Cylindrical in shape, it had an open deck roofed over, three stories within surmounted by the light, itself. Toomey Brothers of Guilford, Connecticut had constructed the barrel-type light, John Smith of Jamestown being one of the laborers.¹ During the period of construction Capt. Lester Eaton, that staunch South Countyman of ferry and weather station fame, had rowed up from Saunderstown every evening — or else sailed his catboat, the *Elizabeth* — to hang a temporary lantern on the caisson.

When first built, the lighthouse lacked the rip-rap or collar of rocks surrounding the base. That became necessary after several years when a severe winter filled the West Passage with salt ice. On the breakup of ice, the floes rammed so relentlessly against the steel barrel on their course out of the bay, they actually tilted the whole building to the south. So furiously did they pound at its sides that it became impossible to keep a plate on the table. Needless to say, the following spring saw the lighthouse set up straight again and the rip-rap dumped all around it.

A Keeper named Charles Osborn served the light for many years. In the 1930's Reuben Phillips became her Keeper, and John Ganze, newly transferred from Sakonnet Light, became Assistant. For Ganze life in the Lighthouse Service took a turn for the better, especially since the calmer situation of Plum Beach Light made coming and going easier than at Sakonnet. Also, he used to spear for fish frequently from the rocks. And the trip to Wickford could be made easily; he frequently attended square dances at Wickford Light.

The testing time, however, came on September 21, 1938. Ganze gives a vivid account of the harrowing experience of being in the light through all the hurricane. Wind and waves forced him and Babcock, the substitute, to rush topside, where they could only hope and pray through long hours to be safe. The concussion of waves against the smashed portholes below made it necessary to open the ports where they stood. They knew that each minute might be their

last. But they and the light survived. Only the next morning did they look seaward toward their sister light at Whale Rock to find her gone.

While repairs were being made to Plum Beach Light following the great storm, a new project commenced in the West Passage. A bridge from Saunderstown to Jamestown was becoming a reality. As it opened to traffic in 1941, the need for Plum Beach Light faded. Ships would hereafter navigate by the lights of the bridge under which they must sail. Plum Beach Light was decommissioned. But the history of the barrel had still another twist.

After steadily deteriorating, the lighthouse, full of broken windows, came into the news when the State Division of Harbors and Rivers announced in late 1970 that it would be put up for rent to the highest bidder, this despite the fact that Plum Beach Light has no electricity or waste disposal.² That was stage one. Stage two happened when a concerned graduate student at the University of Rhode Island disclosed that the present occupants of the light, namely pigeons, were the object of a study he is making of their nesting habits. Could the rental be delayed?³ Stage three: the Director of Natural Resources for Rhode Island considered the rental offers, then considered the pigeons, and decided in favor of the pigeons.⁴

Not pigeons but cormorants are what the traveler over the Jamestown bridge is likely to see in the winter months, shags, as the fishermen know them, perched with spread-eagle wings on the rails of the lighthouse drying their plumage after repeated plunges into the bay for fish. Their black, gaunt forms lend a somber touch to the already run-down and lonesome looking Plum Beach Light, a light that had burned for a mere two-score years and four.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Newport Journal*, September 15, 1900.
2. *Newport Daily News*, September 23, 1970.
3. *The Providence Journal*, October 22, 1970.
4. *Newport Daily News*, November 10, 1970.

NOTES

Cover Picture: The cover picture is from the collection of Miss Marjorie W. Champlin whom we thank for permission to use it. It is a watercolor by Mr. Richard Grosvenor, Head of the Art Department at St. George's School.

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The Board of Directors, at their February meeting, elected Mrs. Sydney L. Wright to fill the vacancy caused by the death of her husband last October.

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The photograph on the following page is of a Mahogany Dish-Top Tea Table attributed to John Goddard of Newport, R.I. which is a recent gift to the Society from Mr. John S. Walton of Griswold, Connecticut. This outstanding table is unique in having a stop-fluted pedestal. The general style indicates a date of around 1760 to 1780.

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Our museum collections have also been enriched by the loan, from Mr. John Millar, of a William Claggett tall clock which is exhibited on our second floor. At the same time Mr. Millar gave us a cradle dated 1724 which we look forward to having on view in the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House.