

Rhode Island Yearbook 73

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Block Island


by Katherine Patricia Tucker

An island has a special magic — the sight of sail, the scent of salt, the sea, dunes of windswept sand and, overhead, a seagull's wild, haunting cry. Everywhere there is an awareness of the sea — in all her moods, in all her beauty. The sunlight dances gaily on a shimmering sea. The moonlight bathes in beauty the silver sea. Misty gray fog gently blankets the dull silent sea.

An island is a place apart. The remarkable spirit of insular independence is captured in a story of days of impenetrable fog headlined in *The London Times*, "Continent Isolated."

Off our shores there is a unique "Isle of Enchantment." To the Indians, the island was known as "Manisses," the "Island of the Little God." The "Little God" was Manitou, Sachem of the Manisseans, a branch of the famous and powerful Narragansetts.

In 1524, Giovanni da Verrazzano, an Italian explorer, was commissioned by the King of France, Francis I, to sail on a voyage of discovery. In a letter to the King, Verrazzano tells of sighting an island "*in the forme of a triangle, distant from the maine land three leagues, about the bigness of the island of Rhodes; it was full of hilles covered with trees, well peopled, for we saw fires all along the coaste.*" With pleasure, the explorer informed the King, "*We gave to it the name of Claudia, of your majestie's mother.*"



Katherine P. Tucker, maintains active membership in many organizations including the Rhode Island Historical Society, World Affairs Council and the Rhode Island Short Story Club. She has been published in many newspapers and authored *Over There, Over Here* for the 1972 edition of the Yearbook.

After 1614, Queen Claudia was no longer so honored, for in that year a Dutch trader landed on the island, and although maps of the period are marked "Adriaen's Eylant," the island was forever after known by the explorer's last name, Block.

In 1636 another trader, Captain John Oldham from Boston, came to the island. Often in cases of conflict between the white men and the Indians, the cause was the intruder's trickery. It is not a matter of record, but there is a story not very widely known that Captain Oldham "*had sold the Manisseans onion seeds, which he told them would yield a crop of gunpowder if planted.*"*

Whatever the circumstances were, the Indians killed Captain Oldham and when word of the murder was received in Massachusetts, the Bay Colony sent an expedition under the command of Colonel John Endicott to punish the Indians. The island became part of Massachusetts in 1637, and the proud Narragansett sachem, *Miantonomoh*, began "*paying a yearly tribute of 100 fathoms of beads or wampum into the colonial treasury.*"*

In 1658, Massachusetts transferred the island to John Endicott, Richard Bellingham, Daniel Dennison and William Hawthorne who sold it two years later for 400 pounds to sixteen individuals who "bought to improve." "*The purchasers built their vessels at Braintree and sent them around Cape Cod to Taunton, where the party embarked for Block Island, to become its pioneer settlers and the ancestors of its hardy people.*"*

The first settlers landed in April, 1661, on the north side of the island at Cow Cove. The cove is so named because the first cow is said to have swum ashore there from a shipwreck outside the cove. A monument with the names of these brave pioneers commemorates the spot. This memorial was erected in September, 1911, to mark the 250th anniversary of the landing.

In 1664, Block Island came under the jurisdiction of the Rhode Island Colony. The Rhode Island General Assembly voted, in 1672, that "*at the request and for reasons by the inhabitants showed, and as a sign of our unity and likeness to many parts of our native country, the said Block Island shall be called New Shoreham, otherwise Block Island.*" New Shoreham was named for Shoreham in Sussex County, England.

During the turbulent period from 1689 to 1706 when France and England were at war, Block Island was in a state of almost constant siege as French privateers preyed upon her. On one occasion in July, 1689, some ships anchored off shore and a complement of officers and crew came in to be greeted by the anxious islanders. The group was led by William Trimming, an Englishman, who said

that the ships were under the command of George Austin, a noted English privateer. This news pleased the islanders because they feared a visit by the French. The visitors requested water, wood, and a pilot to conduct them safely into Newport Harbor. They also inquired about the defenses of that harbor.

Some of the islanders returned with the visitors to their ships only to learn, to their dismay and chagrin, of French trickery. The ships did not belong to the friendly English but to the enemy French. The crafty Trimming had played his role well in the employ of France. The islanders were forced to remain on board, and the French returned to the island and captured some of the inhabitants and imprisoned them in the stone house of Captain John Sands. Then the island became the prey of Trimming and his fellows as they sought booty and ruthlessly pillaged and plundered. The inhabitants were terrorized and robbed, and cattle and poultry were cruelly slaughtered. Signal fires were lighted on Beacon Hill and other points. These fires were the island's distress call — her S.O.S.

The Reverend Samuel Niles wrote an eye-witness account of this French attack: "*When news of the invasion reached the mainland, two vessels were fitted out at Newport under the command of Captains Thomas Paine and John Godfrey. On arrival at Block Island, they learned that the enemy had left to attack New London, so they pursued the Frenchmen, and on Fishers Island, in Long Island Sound, surprised the enemy and killed the deceitful Trimming.*" Henceforth the Governor and Council of Rhode Island were obliged to maintain a quota of men at Block Island for "*defence of Her Majesty's interest there.*"

During these trying times, the principal surgeon and physician on the island was a woman, Sarah Sands, wife of James Sands. Sarah was believed to be the first doctor in the English Colonies. She died at Block Island in 1702. Sands' Point on Long Island was named after the Block Island Sands who settled there.

The Reverend Samuel Niles, son of Nathaniel, who wrote an interesting and detailed account of French raids on the island, was the first graduate of Harvard College from Rhode Island.

The wife of Simon Ray, Jr., was the granddaughter of Roger Williams. The descendants of Simon Ray, one of the early settlers, intermarried with the Greene family of Warwick. Catherine Ray married William Greene who was afterwards Governor. One of her sisters married Governor Samuel Ward, and their niece, Catherine Littlefield, daughter of John Littlefield, married General Nathanael Greene.

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Catherine Ray Greene corresponded with Dr. Benjamin Franklin, and some of her letters have been published with his writings. "*Mrs. Governor Greene*" has described the way of life of the early settlers from information given to her from "an aged relative."

According to Mrs. Greene's account, "*the first settlers had one cow to three families. They made mush of Indian meal, which they eat with a little milk instead of molasses. They had a fish called horse mackerel. [Later, this fish became the highly prized tuna.] This was their daily fare. They eat their breakfast and went sometimes several miles to their work of clearing, and on their return this was their supper.*"

Mrs. Greene also relates the story of her ancestor, Simon Ray, Sr., who was captured by the French who sought by torture and beating to force him to reveal the place where his silver was hidden. They first squeezed him in a cheese press and then later tied him to a tree and whipped him.

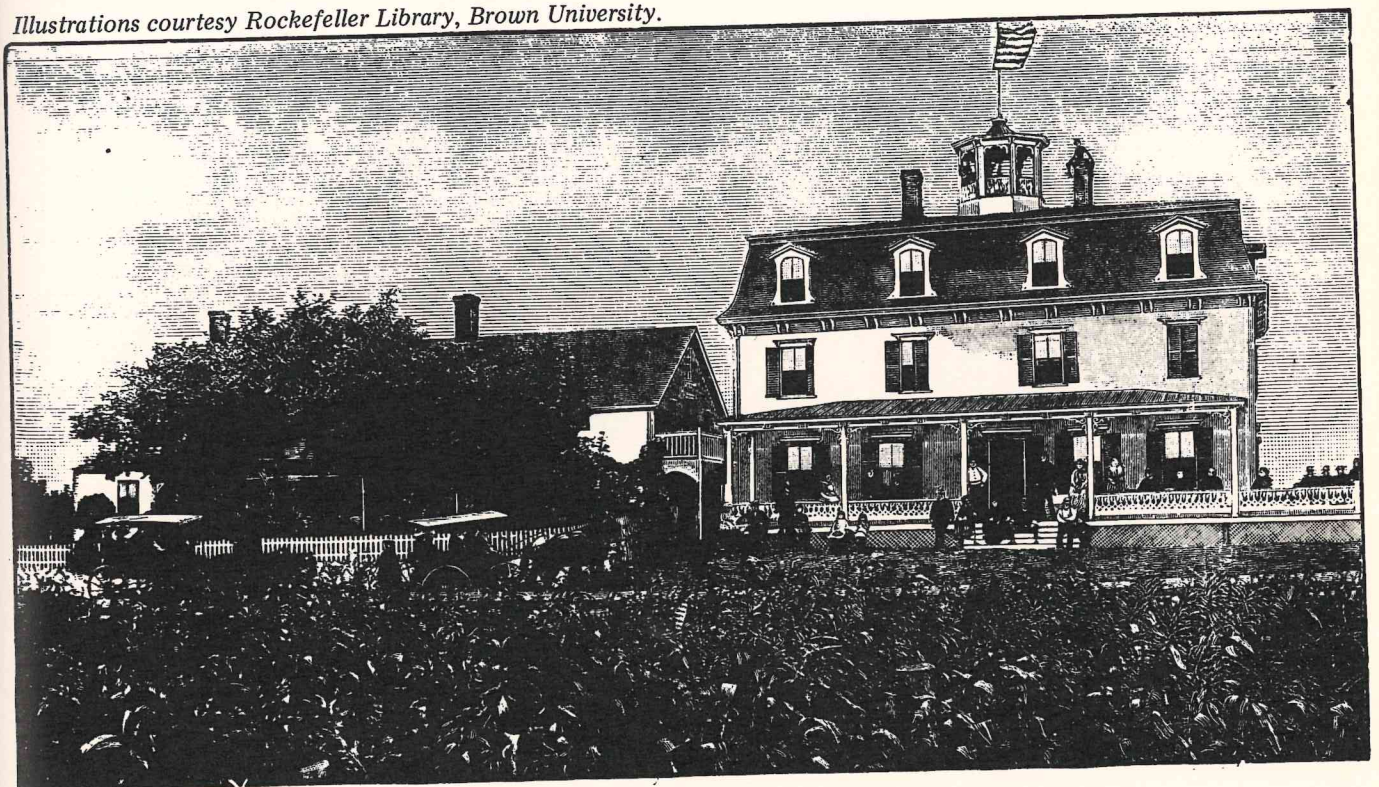
Block Island experienced a period of peace and prosperity. Then, gradually, war clouds gathered as tension mounted and resentment grew in the colonies against the oppressive measures enacted by the British Crown. The colonists felt that they had bravely faced the dangers of the New World. They had pioneered, struggled against great odds and somehow survived. Now, instead of a reward, or even fair treatment, they were forced to submit to repressive trade measures and unjust taxation.

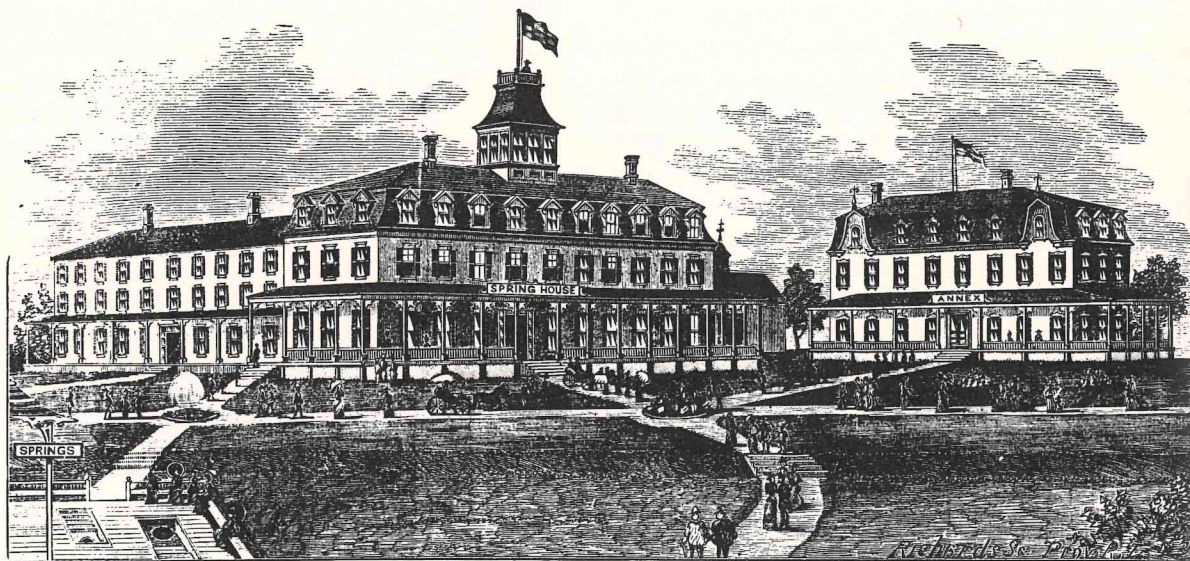
Illustrations courtesy Rockefeller Library, Brown University.

Block Islanders were in sympathy with the colonies, and these courageous people did not wait until July 4, 1776, when all the thirteen colonies were represented in Philadelphia. They pioneered again and wrote their own, special Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1774. On that date a town meeting was held, with John Sands, Esq., as moderator, and the following resolution was passed:

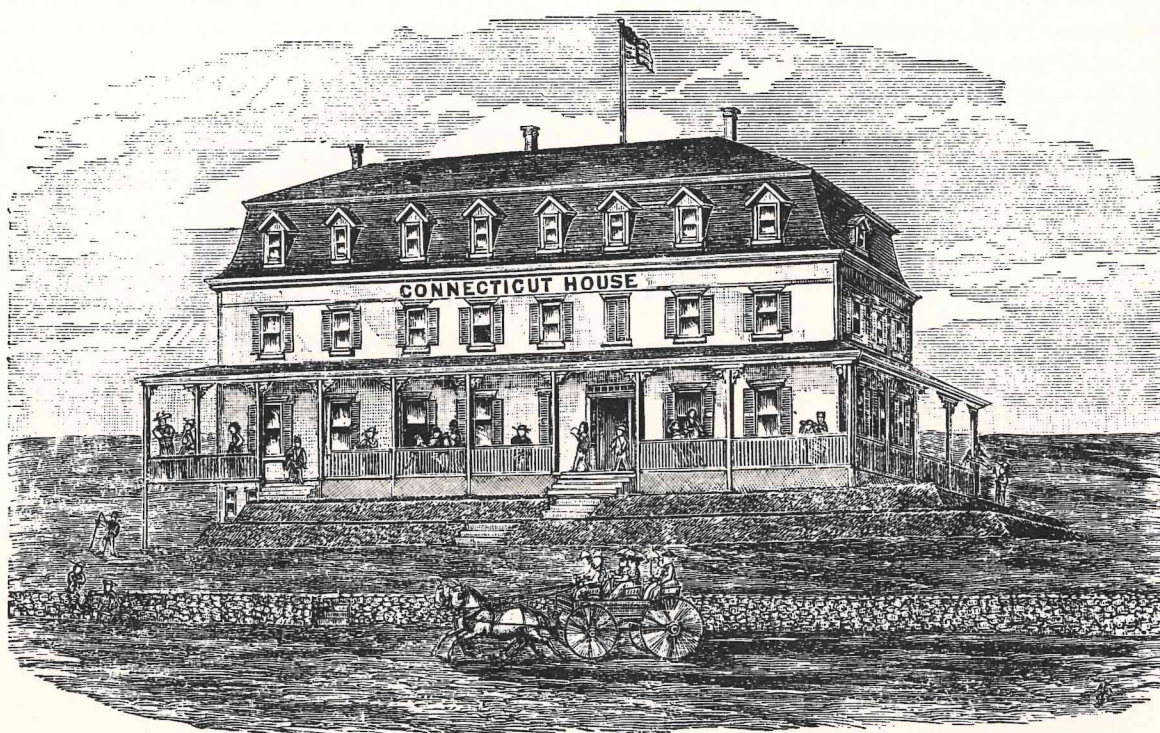
"We, the inhabitants of this town, being legally convened in town meeting, do firmly resolve, as the opinion of said town, that the Americans have as good a right to be as free a people as any upon the earth, and to enjoy at all times an uninterrupted possession of their rights and properties. That a tax on the inhabitants of America, without their consent is a measure absolutely destructive of their freedom, tending to enslave and impoverish all who tamely submit to it. That we will heartily unite with our American brethren in supporting the inhabitants of this Continent in all their just rights and privileges."

It required great courage and fortitude to survive on Block Island during the Revolution. In addition to the dangers inherent in the island's "exposed and defenceless position," the brave islanders found themselves virtually living in exile. Rhode Island, their mother colony, forbade them to come to the mainland, restricted their trade, and commandeered their cattle and sheep. The Rhode Island General Assembly voted that "*all neat cattle and sheep, except a sufficiency for the inhabitants,*"





THE SPRING HOUSE, BLOCK ISLAND, R. I. HON. B. B. MITCHELL, Proprietor.



THE CONNECTICUT HOUSE, BLOCK ISLAND, R. I. M. M. DAY, Proprietor.

be sent to the mainland to prevent them from being seized by the enemy.

To prevent information from falling into enemy hands, the General Assembly voted that the inhabitants of Block Island be "*prohibited from coming from said island into any other part of this state, upon pain of being considered as enemies to the state.*" The penalty was imprisonment. The only exception made was in cases where people left the island permanently, and they were encouraged to do so. By a vote of the General Assembly, all persons were forbidden passing between the island and the mainland without written permission. Town records were sent to the mainland for safekeeping. "*During the Revolution the town was a miniature republic, amenable to no one.*"* Town meetings were held, taxes assessed, wills, births, and deaths recorded, real estate sold and recorded. It is to the everlasting credit of the islanders that they survived unprotected from the enemy, unrepresented in the legislature, deprived of most of their livestock, and restricted in their essential trade.

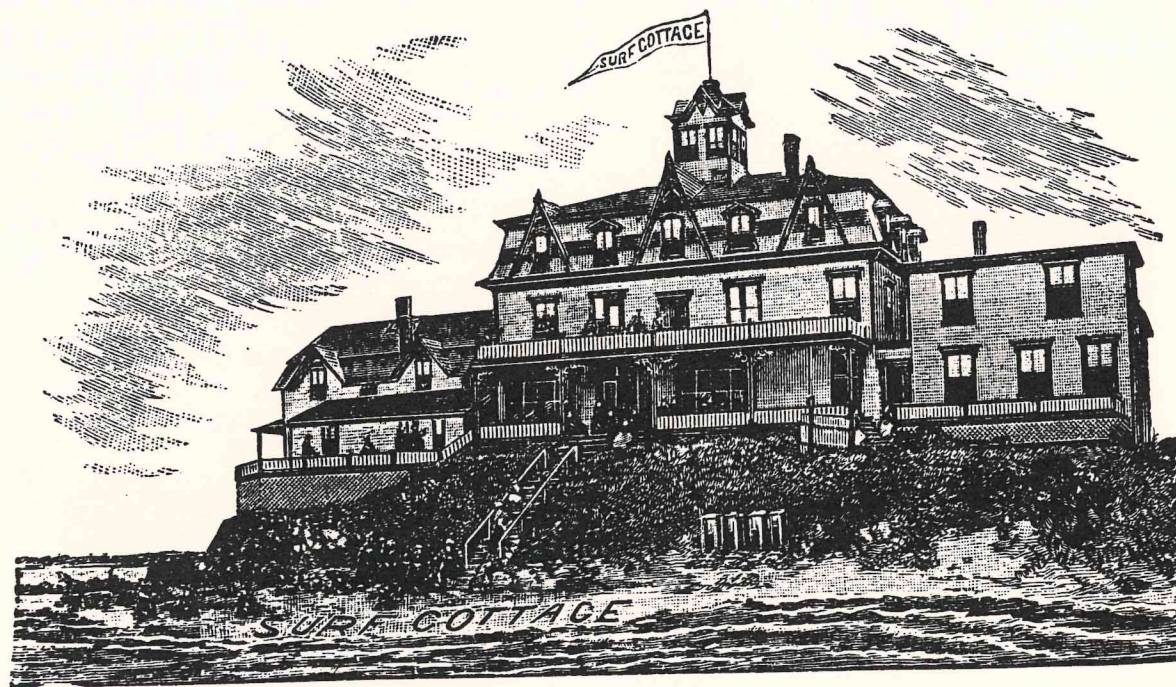
In 1779, the General Assembly repealed the act forbidding passing between the island and the mainland, but continued restrictions on transportation of merchandise. Finally, in May of 1783, glad tidings reached Block Island. The General Assembly voted that "*all the rights, liberties and privileges of the other citizens of this state be restored.*"

During the War of 1812, Block Island remained neutral. In 1862, many islanders enlisted in the "*War of the Rebellion.*"

The year 1842 marked the beginning of a new and happy era. According to the Reverend Samuel T. Livermore, "*The first hotel for boarders from abroad was opened in 1842 by Mr. Alfred Card, one hundred and eighty years from the first settlement by sixteen families. It stood where the Adrian House is now located. There Mr. Card 'set the first excursion table for boarders of pleasure' ever furnished on the Island. His first party consisted of seven men from Newport, one of whom was Mr. Van Buren.*" The Spring House opened for visitors in 1852. Located high on a hill, surrounded by fragrant green fields, the Spring House has a magnificent view of the ocean. The hotel takes its name from two springs located nearby.

The Ocean View Hotel was featured as "*The Palace Hotel of the Famous Rhode Island Seashore.*" Other well-known hotels of the great resort era were Connecticut House, Manisses, Highland House, Norwich House, Pequot House, Woonsocket House, Block Island House, Surf Cottage, Seaside House and The Hygeia. The Ocean View Hotel was destroyed by fire a few years ago, but The Spring House is still enjoyed by many delighted guests. The Eureka, The Royal, Vail's Cottages, The National, The Narragansett and The Surf have joined the group of hotels catering to island visitors.

The spacious Victorian structures with their large verandas, beautiful sloping lawns, pleasant rooms with wonderful views, excellent meals, garden-fresh vegetables, "hot sea baths," both string and brass orchestras, tea concerts, dances and balls, and other



SURF COTTAGE. C. W. WILLIS, Proprietor.

activities planned by the hotels, continually attracted new guests who joined the ones who returned each year. Carriages met the steamers to convey guests to the hotels, and two schooners, *The Hattie Rebecca* and *The Daisy* were available for fishing and pleasure trips.

All this — and Heaven too — the Heaven of just being on the "Isle of Enchantment," Block Island, was possible at the best hotels at "terms moderate." Weekly rates were quoted as ranging from \$7.00 to \$10.00 a week. Transient rates were from \$2.50 to \$3.50, depending on the season. In 1886, *The Manisses* advertised accommodations from \$10.00 and up weekly. The inns had a longer season then, generally opening in early June and remaining open

until late September, thus including two of the loveliest months.

The praises of Block Island were widely sung by the Press — *The New York Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Press*, *The Boston Journal*, etc. —

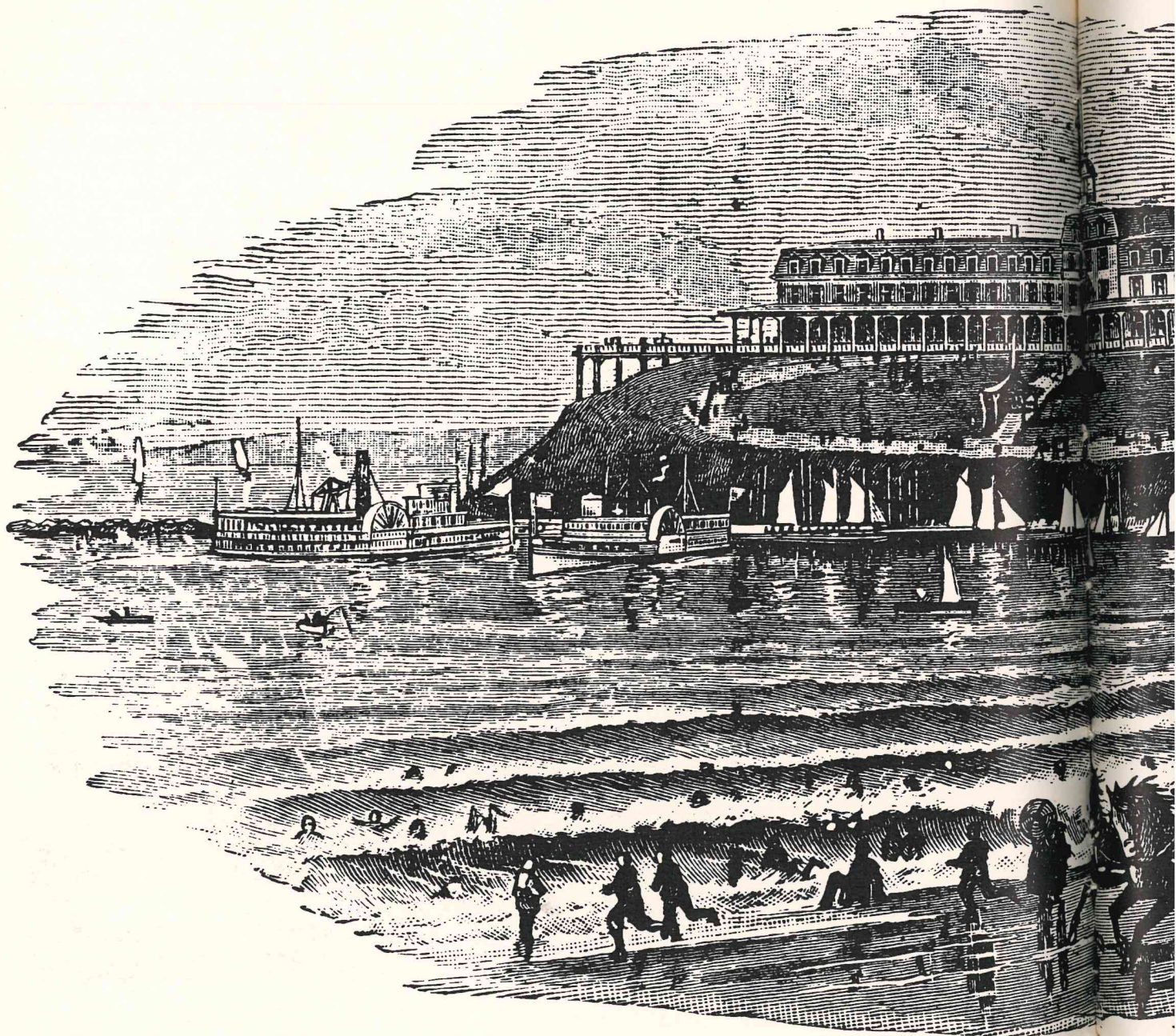
"*The Earthly Paradise is at last found.*"

"*A Summer at Block Island is a Summer At Sea.*"

"*The salt air is a tonic.*"

"*The climate of this 'sea-girt isle' is like that of Bermuda, 'an atmosphere almost intoxicating in its strength and purity.'*"

In August, 1875, when President Ulysses S. Grant came to Rhode Island and visited General Ambrose E. Burnside in Bristol, he made a special trip to Block Island and was delighted with his visit.



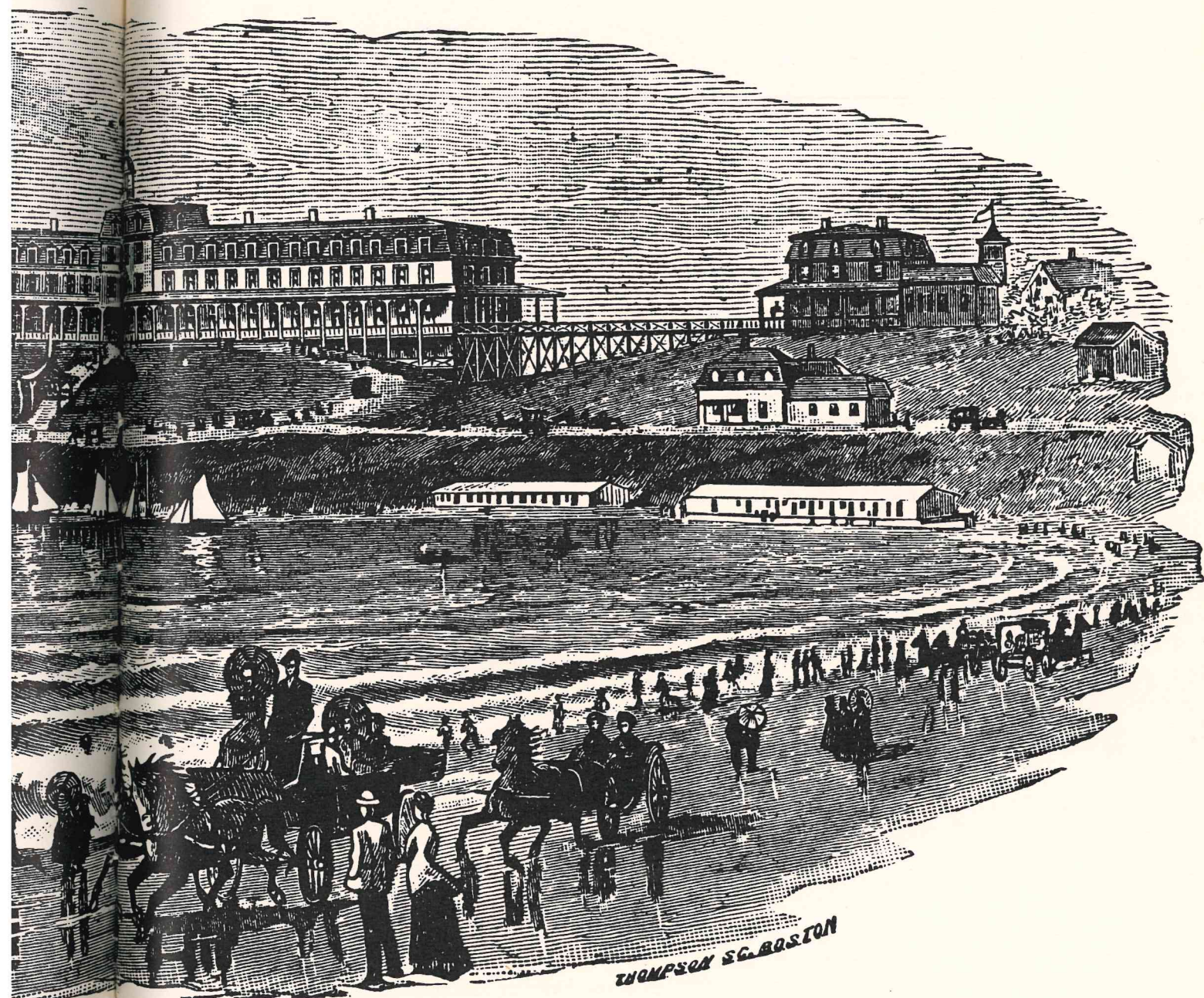
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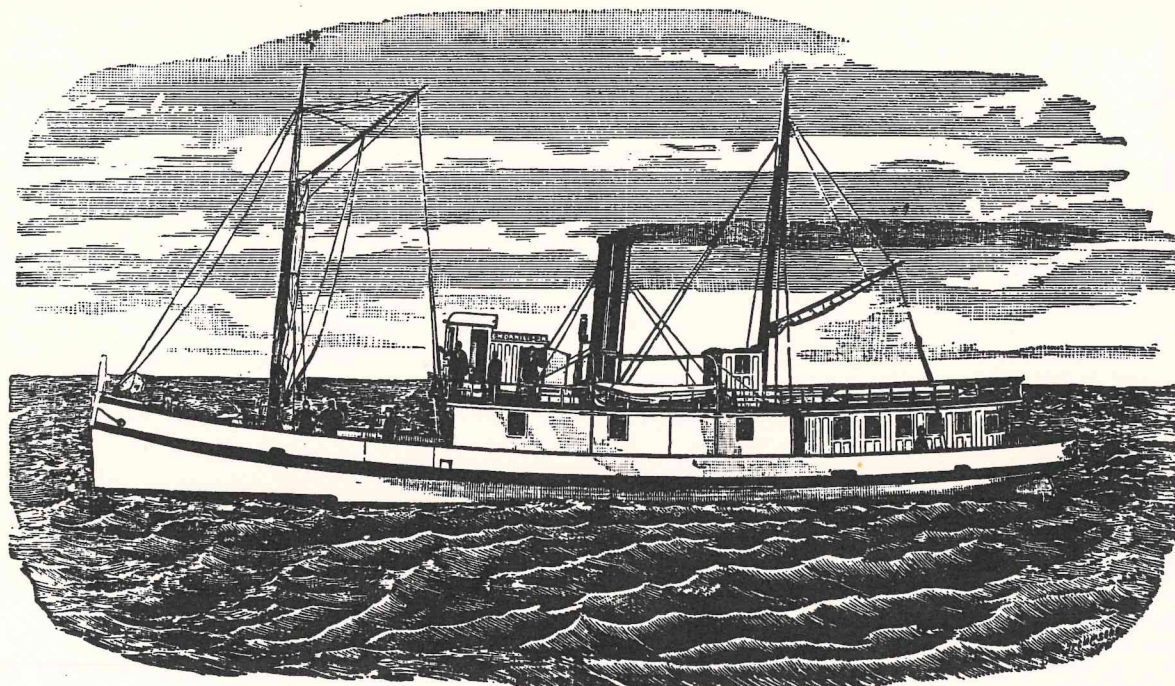
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"VIEW" BLOCK ISLAND, R. I.



STEAMER G. W. DANIELSON, BLOCK ISLAND, R. I.

Secretary of the Treasury, John G. Carlisle, who was appointed to that cabinet post by President Cleveland in 1893, enjoyed Block Island so much that he wrote in a letter that an island visit has "*all the advantages of a protracted sea voyage without any of the dangers or discomforts incident to travel on board a vessel.*"

The year 1853 marked the first steamboat excursion to the island, and the proceeds went to the construction of the First Baptist Church there. According to the Reverend Samuel T. Livermore, "*The first permanent Block Island steamer, the George W. Danielson, built by the Block Island Steamboat Company, was launched at Mystic, Connecticut, in May, 1880. Her first trip on her regular line from Block Island to Newport and Providence was made June 15, 1880.*" She was under the able command of Captain Conley.

The steamer *Block Island* sailed from Norwich, Connecticut, at 8:15 a.m. and made port at Montville, New London, Mystic Island and Watch Hill, arriving at Block Island at 12:30 p.m. The fast *Mount Hope* made the trip from Providence to Block Island, and the single fare was 75 cents.

In 1881, the Government cable was laid between the island and the mainland connecting with "Western Union" at Narragansett Pier. A telegraph office and station of the U. S. Signal Service was established.

Block Island is without a natural harbor. This discouraging fact was duly noted by the early settlers, for in the agreement to purchase and settle the

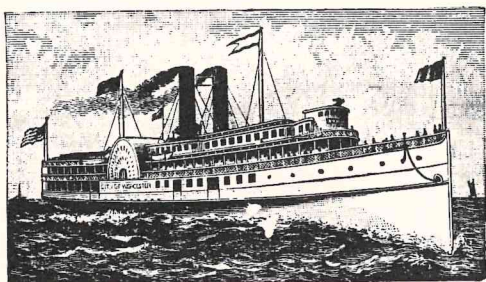
island, in 1660, are the words, "*There was no harbor.*" There followed years of battling the elements to create a harbor. In 1816, a unique solution was a "Pole Harbor," where oak poles were sunk 5 or 6 feet into the ocean bottom and projected 10 to 15 feet above the water. Stones were sunk between these poles. The fishermen tied their boats to the poles, but in stormy weather it was necessary to haul the boats up onto the beach.

On February 16, 1870, the Honorable Henry B. Anthony delivered his famous speech in the U. S. Senate urging the construction of a harbor at Block Island. The project was commenced the following October and the work was completed in November, 1878. This harbor lies on the east side of the island and today is known as the Old Harbor.

After a long struggle with nature and finances, and greatly aided by the efforts of State Senator Champlin, the Great Pond Harbor (or New Harbor) was completed in 1900. The Honorable Nicholas Ball is credited with doing much to aid in the construction of the breakwater and the establishment of the signal station.

William P. Sheffield, a descendant of the first settlers, in his *Historical Sketch of Block Island*, written in 1876, stated that, "*the topography of this Island is peculiar; it resembles the sea running high before a northeast gale, and suggests that the Island may have been thrown up in some convulsion of nature, and have taken its form from the waves which it penetrated. During the revolutionary war it was stripped of trees.*" [The trees were used in house building and ship building.]

BEST ROUTES TO AND FROM BLOCK ISLAND.



During the season, except Sundays, Steamers of the "Norwich Line" will make daily connection at New London, Conn., with Steamer "Block Island" to and from Block Island.

Fare between New York and Block Island.

One way, \$2.50. - Round Trip, \$4.25.

The island has three striking features — rolling inland hills, a great many ponds, and a lack of trees. It is generally said that there are 365 ponds — one for each day of the year. Fragrant pink and white water lilies float on the ponds' blue surfaces.

Wonderful curving Crescent Beach, houses with weathered gray shingles, wild honeysuckle, radiant roses, beautiful blue irises, pink hollyhocks peeking over picket fences, rows of neat stone walls and green fields contrasting with the blue sea spell Block Island.

The charming 17th century white cottage which was once the home of Arthur Penn, the composer of "Smilin' Thru," is a feature of the island.

The Mohegan Bluffs rise in a solid mass of clay from the ocean 150 feet below. These bluffs received their name from the Mohegan Indian warriors who invaded the island many centuries ago, were driven to these bluffs, cornered there and starved by the Manisseans. The view of the ocean lashing against them during a "sou'easter" is magnificent.

If some follow different drummers, those who respond to the beat of surf on sand should seek an island to fully savor the mystery and majesty of the ocean.

Once you have fully savored the flavor of the sea, you will be consumed by "Sea Fever." In Masfield's beautiful imagery:

*"I must go down to the seas again,
to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way
where the wind's like a whetted knife;
I must go down to the seas again,
for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call
that may not be denied."*

"Go down to the seas again," again and again to the seas around Manisses — where lies the special magic.

**New England Magazine, August, 1897*

"Block Island Illustrated," by Samuel W. Mendum

