

packet of Roger Williams letters from a pile of filth on Market Square.

They were busy men — bankers, lawyers, jurists, politicians, ministers. Only a few were gentlemen scholars with leisure time to play at history. Their materials were randomly assembled, their descriptions imperfectly arranged, sometimes hurriedly thrown together. Yet there will probably never be an ideal time to assemble all our materials, never probably will there be quite enough money, never will the evidence be quite all there — but these are the practical realities of our craft, and we accept them. We do not seek a vacation from our responsibilities, only as much cooperation as possible in the job of collecting, preserving, and interpreting and as much support and understanding as you are able to lend in this greatest of all humanizing endeavors, the process of transmitting a people's history. So let us join together in this great adventure: the local historical societies across this state with their knowledge of detail about the towns and neighborhoods and our state society with its resources and talents to organize this detail in a new interpretation. In so doing we shall honor not only those who have gone on before in this work, but ourselves and our posterity as well.



POINT JUDITH LIGHT — THE EARLY YEARS

by

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At Point Judith, the coastline of Rhode Island makes a right angle turn. Northward the way leads into Narragansett Bay, westward to Long Island Sound, southward to Block Island and the open sea, and woe to the vessel that tries to cut corners. It must have seemed to Narragansett men that if Watch Hill had needed a light and got it in 1807, much more should Point Judith have one. Shipwrecks and disasters had made the history of the Point. For example, as early as 1719 a sloop from Barbadoes was "cast away at Point Judah", and all lives saved except one.¹

Again, that faithful (though ungrammatical) recorder of events, Nailer Tom Hazard, scribbled in his Journal for March 21, 1805, "I

District and Port of Newport August 16th 1809

Received of Thomas Tudor Tucker esquire Treasurer of the United States, the sum of seven hundred thirty one dollar, thirty three cents, being the cost of a Lot of Land on Point Judith, purchased for the purpose of erecting a Light House thereon, including the expense of recording the deed, and advertising proposals for building the Light House, together with my Commission at 1/2 per cent, agreeably to an account adjusted at the Treasury, which sum I have discounted out of monies arising from duties on Imports and Tonnage and charged as a remittance to the Treasury in my account as Collector for the quarter ending September 30th 1809, having signed a duplicate of the same tenor and date

\$ 731. ³³/₁₀₀

Wm Ellery Collector

Newport Historical Society

Photo by John Hopf

RECEIPT FOR MONEY TO PURCHASE LAND
ON WHICH TO BUILD POINT JUDITH LIGHT
Money received from Thomas Tudor Tucker
Receipt signed by William Ellery, Collector

1. *The Boston News Letter*, Nov. 27, 1719, as quoted in *Historical & Genealogical Notes & Queries*, Jan. 7, 1899.

am informed that a schooner run on Shore Night before last on Point Judieth."² And more, three years later he wrote, "I am informed that Samuel Briggs of Block Island had his Boat Struck with Lightning of at Point Judieth Point this morning, but he gott on Shoer and the rest that ware with him the boat much damaged."³ For sufficient reasons, then, Point Judith Light came into existence under Light-house Superintendent, William Ellery, in 1810.

South Countyman Hazard Knowles sold a parcel of land to the United States for \$700.00 with an added offer to "make and maintain forever a stone fence round the Lot five feet high for \$350.00"⁴ A master workman, Daniel S. Ways, who had worked under Abishai Woodward in the construction of Watch Hill Light and other lights, was awarded the contract by Albert Gallatin in Washington.

By October 1809 applicants for the position of Keeper of the Light numbered four, namely John P. Whitford, Benjamin Baker, John Knowles (son of the former landowner) and William Swan. Whitford became the first Keeper with an annual salary of \$267.00, and he held the post until 1835.

Before his appointment, Ellery had outlined to Gallatin the living conditions at Point Judith. It was, he conceded, a fine place for fishing, and the lot of land would be advantageous to the Keeper, but firewood, to be drawn from seven or eight miles, would be expensive, and the nearest gristmill was about the same distance.

The structure, presumably of wood, was raised November 1. Its lantern contained twelve lamps and an eclipser that darkened the light every two and one half minutes. The following January Whitford reported seeing the panes of glass "bend and belly" and finally break during a gale, the glass having been of Dutch manufacture. Evidently lacking glass replacements, the Keeper substituted wooden ones which he removed in April. How many panes were blacked out, and what effect the blackout had on shipping is not mentioned.

Two years elapsed before the stone fence was completed and a well dug. At this period, Winslow Lewis, a man long associated with

2. Hazard, Thomas B. *Nailer Tom's Diary . . . 1778 to 1840*. Boston, the Merrymount Press, 1930. 255.

3. *Ibid.* 306.

4. Ellery, William: *Letter Book #3*. Letter dated April 1, 1809. Official information from the Superintendents of the Lighthouses issued in this history comes from these Letter Books owned by the Newport Historical Society.

lighthouses had secured a contract to fit all the lighthouses in the United States with metallic reflectors, and Ellery could report that the new mode had increased the light twofold and lessened the consumption of oil. That would surely have gladdened the budget-minded Treasury Department of the young republic.

Mariners who supplied the light with oil experienced trouble landing it at the point. This sperm or whale oil arrived by sea, but at Point Judith the great swell of the sea often hindered the work. Of more concern than the natural forces, though, were the human. The War of 1812 had reached our shores and Ellery, writing from Newport, complained of the difficulty of landing oil because of both privateers and British vessels. In Bristol, James De Wolfe urged that the lights at Beavertail, Watch Hill and Point Judith be extinguished. But no action was taken on this proposed, early blackout. At one date as late as 1815 whale oil was sent to East Greenwich for safe keeping from the enemy.

On September 23, 1815, less than six years after the lighthouse was constructed, calamity beset it. A severe hurricane struck, and in striking utterly demolished Point Judith Light:

"In the hurricane which raged on the 23rd instant along this Coast, and the Rivers, coves, and creeks thereof," reported Superintendent Ellery, "the Light House at Point Judith was thrown down and utterly destroyed, and in the fall injured a corner of the roof, and the Southeast part of the dwelling House, but not materially. The Keeper has been here, and I directed him to collect the copper and iron, etc., and store them in the vault, which was not hurt, and in the dwelling House. The wall around the lot was blown down . . . 5

Beavertail and Watch hill Lights had not suffered so greatly, but at Point Judith, construction must start again.

William Ellery, by now the seasoned Superintendent of Rhode Island lighthouses again recommended the services of Daniel S. Way of Hebron, Connecticut for building the new structure, Way having had as much, and perhaps more experience, Ellery tells us, than any man in New England in lighthouse building. All agreed that the new light should be built of hewn stone. Plans called for the building:

"to be twenty feet in diameter at the commencement of the Octagonal Pyramid, the height of the Pyramid to be thirty five feet from the Stone work to the floor of the Lantern, where the diameter was to be nine feet."⁶

5. *Ibid.* Letter dated Sept. 29, 1815.

6. *Ibid.* Letter dated Jan. 13, 1816.

Built this time of Connecticut free stone, Point Judith Light reopened on December 14, 1816. It was considered larger than most lighthouses of the day, the rock being well cut with a proper bevel, and well laid. The lantern poured out its light — feeble though it was by modern standards — and the tower was topped by a ball with a suitable weather vane and three-pronged lightning rods. It received a whitewashing within and outside.

Things appear to have run smoothly in the lighthouse itself, less so, however, at the Keeper's dwelling. Ellery reported;

"There is only one chamber in it, and that is in the garrett, and the Keeper and his wife and children, in the winter sleep in the kitchen [sic], so that they are almost in as bad condition as was the poor cobbler [sic] who lived in a stall — Which served him for parlour and kitchen and all."⁷

What, if any, accommodations came to pass is left in doubt. As Superintendent of Rhode Island lighthouses, Ellery succumbed to old age. But John P. Whitford continued as Keeper at Point Judith, and his year's salary, now under Superintendent Edward Lawton, was raised by 1829 to \$350.00.

The Keeper witnessed from his coign of vantage all the goings on of the waterfront. He must have watched the very first steam vessel to round Point Judith en route from New York to Providence. According to tradition when Robert Fulton's steamboat reached Squid Ledge, just west of Point Judith, her engine failed, and she anchored to make repairs. Quick to sense trouble but not at all familiar with steamboats, the shore folk suspected a shipwreck in the making, and with high hopes of looting they made ready to board the unlucky vessel. But dismay settled over them all like fog when the steamer regained control and went steaming off unscathed.⁸

William Ennis, a new superintendent, reported in September 1844 finding the lamp, reflectors and apparatus generally in excellent order at Point Judith and the Keeper, B. Hadwin, intelligent and attentive. The following year William A. Weeden was appointed to succeed Hadwin. Weeden came under fire of another superintendent in 1846. Edwin Wilbur scored him for not repairing immediately two panes that had been broken by a flight of birds against the lanterns. Weeden used the pretext that he had not had enough putty or a diamond to cut the glass. This, concluded Wilbur, is unpardon-

7. *Ibid.* Letter dated Feb. 26, 1819.

8. This anecdote is related in the *Narragansett Historical Register*, v. 2, no. 4, 286.

able. Further, he found Weeden 'troublesome' and threatened to discipline him.

But superintendents found fault easily. In 1850 Keeper Edgar R. Eaton allegedly burned too much oil. Did he neglect to turn off the lights in the morning? In spite of this, however, Eaton is described as being active and in the prime of life, though having the use of but one arm.

On outsiders the lighthouse and its Keeper made a favorable impression. The *Newport Mercury* quoted an unnamed Providence Journal reporter's somewhat inflated view of Point Judith Light:

"If this be a fair specimen of the manner in which this department of Uncle Sam's business is conducted, the old gentleman has no cause of complaint. Everything was in perfect order and scrupulously clean. The lamps and glasses and reflectors were as bright as silver, and not a stain was upon the floor. The outside of the shaft was newly whitewashed, and everything indicated that this light, one of the most important on the whole coast, was in the hands of a competent and faithful man."

"Millions of property and thousands of lives are risked every year upon the fidelity of this light . . ." ⁹ So it appeared in 1854.

Appointed by President Lincoln in 1862, Capt. Joseph Whaley became Keeper at the point, a post he held for twenty-seven years. His son, Henry, who acted as his Assistant, at length succeeded him in what began to look like a dynasty. This prolific Whaley family of South County stemmed from the regicide, Theophilus Whaley. You couldn't cast a biscuit in South Kingstown, they used to say, without hitting some of his descendants. Henry Whaley received a new assignment in 1912, this time to Sandy Hook Light.

Capt. Elmer J. Rathbun took his place with William B. Gilmore as Assistant. To Gilmore and his wife was born the first girl baby at the lighthouse for over a half century. Hence they named her Harriet Judith Gilmore.

The Keeper's task consisted, as expected, of maintaining the light during all the hours of darkness. His business was light, even when it meant the chore of replenishing the lamp at sundown, at 10:00 P.M. and at 2:00 A.M. Keepers must have felt an acute sense of helplessness at witnessing the many tragedies offshore and being able to offer so little assistance, as for example in 1875 when on November 11th under heavy seas the steamer *Providence* lost a bulkhead; or, when, only eleven days later, the Schooner *Oliver Crom-*

9. *The Newport Mercury*, November 11, 1854.

well was dismayed. In his work "Famous New England Lighthouses" Edward Snow lists no less than eighteen shipwrecks between the years 1864 and 1900, and there were still others before and after. Roger McAdam narrates the disasters that occurred to the Fall River Line vessels, as for instance the collision of the *Commonwealth* and the *Voland* in September 1908, when the *Voland* sank; also the collision of the *Boston* and the *Swift Arrow* in 1924.¹⁰

Before World War I it was estimated that roughly eighty vessels passed Point Judith every twenty-four hours.¹¹ Little wonder, then, that steps were taken to avert these marine calamities. Improved equipment constantly replaced the obsolete at the lighthouse. The long Point Judith breakwater was constructed near the end of the century. The Providence Evening Bulletin reported in February 1903 the installation of a wireless pole 175 feet high. Through it messages from Block Island or any passing vessels were radioed to

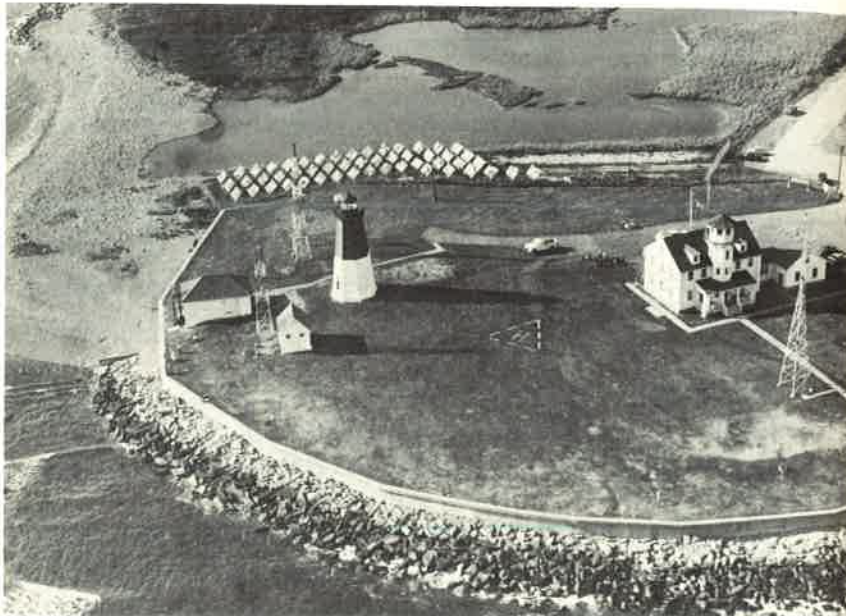


Photo by John Hopf

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF POINT JUDITH LIGHT AND PROPERTY
The squares at the top of the photograph are samples
of paint which are being tested for endurance to weather.

10. McAdam, Roger Williams. *Commonwealth, giantess of the Sound*. N. Y., Stephen Daye Press, 1959, 131.
11. *Providence Sunday Journal*. Jan. 2, 1916.

Providence, while the Block Island station would be used to transmit messages to Cape Hatteras and Bermuda.

Another preventive measure consisted of the erection of the Life Saving Station in 1888, long presided over by Capt. Herbert Knowles. (Knowles was the gent who used to talk a great deal to himself. When his associates questioned him why, he replied "I like to talk to a wise man, and I like to hear what a wise man has to say.") Also the Lighthouse Service established a system of guards called Surfmen, who patrolled the shoreline from Narragansett Pier all the way to Watch Hill. This included the stretch from the Pier to Point Judith Light. At night men set out from each place and passed each other about halfway, whereupon they punched a time clock, the purpose being to assist any grounded vessel. Their footpath alongshore became well-worn in time and a familiar feature of the landscape. Louis B. Potter of Narragansett was such a Surfman, and, in addition, he later served as lighthouse Keeper. Potter, when interviewed, boasted that he had learned at Point Judith Light to predict the weather three days in advance by watching the way waves broke on Beavertail Point.

So with these facts, memories and traditions, this history of the early years at Point Judith Light comes to a close. Its complete history has yet to be told.

