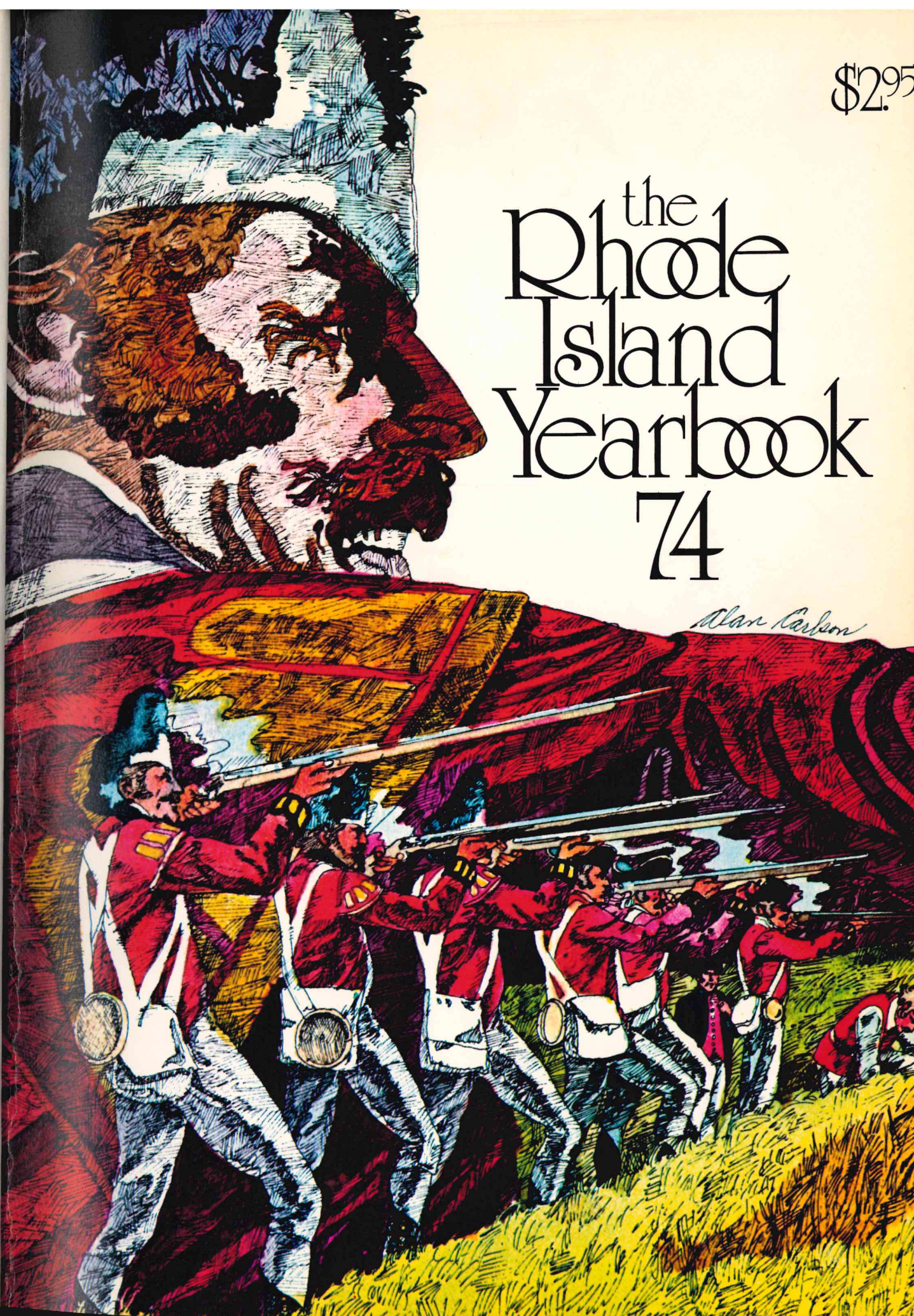


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*Alan Carlson*



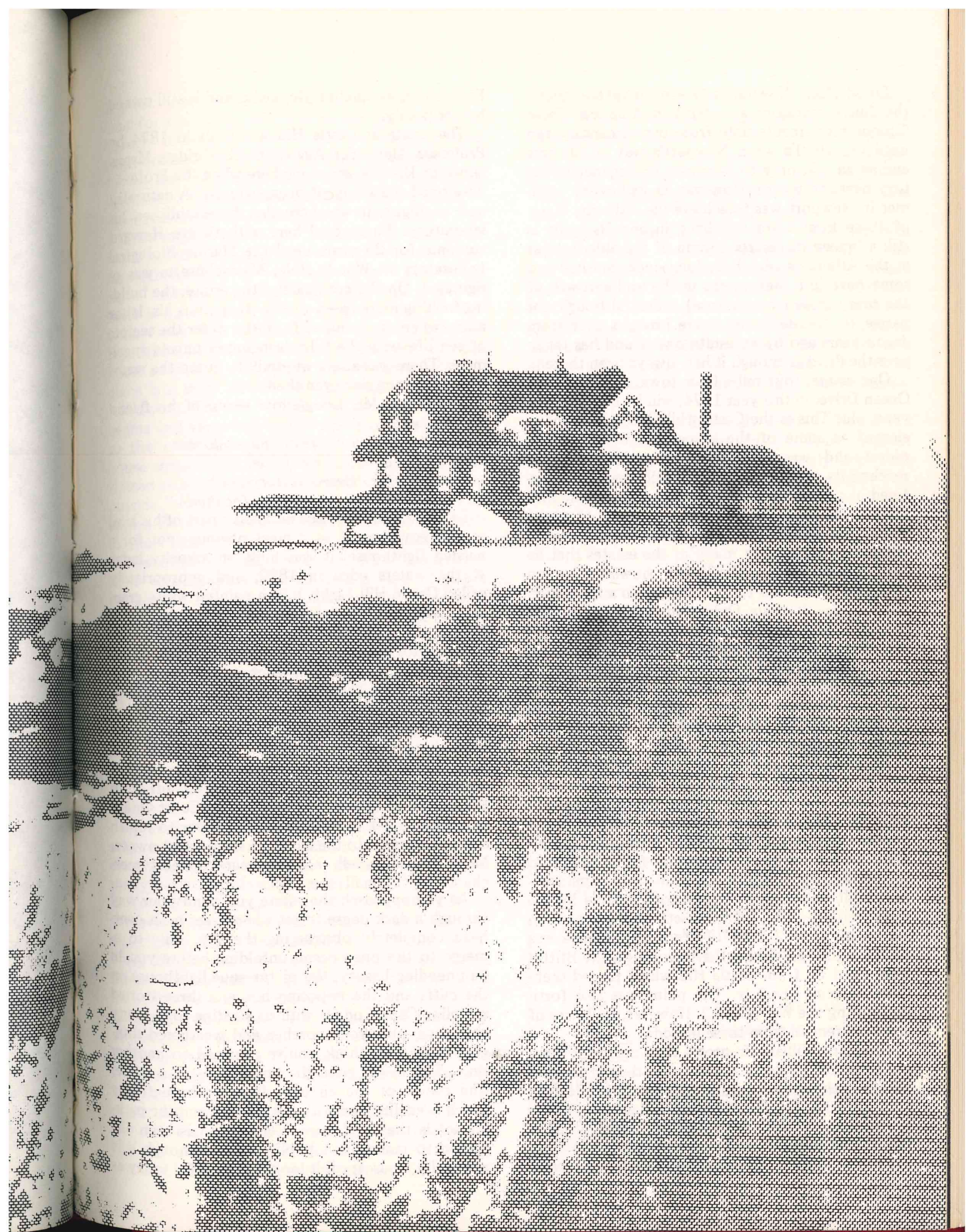


# A Century at Castle Hill

*by Milton W. Amacker*









Lined along Newport's Ocean Drive are among the finest mansions ever built in America. These famous monuments date from over a century ago until the 1930's when Newport's way of life was ending an era, only to be a part of elegance in history never to return. However, in its heyday, summer in Newport was to achieve the ultimate. Many of these homes are still lived in and Newport is still a 'queen of resorts.' Some of the older estates at the Atlantic's edge have long since vanished and some have left their marks in the undergrowth of the *rosa rugosa* (the sea rose) which, although not native to Rhode Island, were brought over from Japan years ago by an estate owner and has taken over the drive as though it had always been there.

One estate, four miles from town, at the start of Ocean Drive, in this year 1974, will be one hundred years old. This is the Castle Hill Hotel. It is not as elegant as some of the homes but is one of the oldest and was built long before the elegance reached its peak. However it is still very much defined as a mansion, and in its own fashion, the ultimate of its time. Until it became a hotel in recent years, the public was completely denied even a glimpse of it, as with many of the estates that lie behind stately walls. Castle Hill, however, has no wall around it and is easily bypassed in a flash without knowing it exists. Only a small drive looking as though it goes nowhere, with the small white sign "Castle Hill Hotel" is visible. However, by air or sea one could see that Castle Hill is a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic at the entrance to Narragansett Bay, covering some 32 acres, enclosed on one side by lovely trees and the other three sides by breathtaking seascapes.

Entering Narragansett Bay from sea, Castle Hill and its famous Castle Hill Lighthouse is the mariners first greeting situated on the southwestern most part of Aquidneck Island at the very entrance into the bay. With its imposing position it has always been used as a lookout and garrisoned from the earliest times, and is the sight of the first rampart built in Newport, hence got its name by the early settlers. The Narragansett Indians had an earthwork here. In the 1740's a watchhouse was on the sight and during the Revolution the British were fired on from Castle Hill which forced them from entering the bay. The point was also fortified during the War of 1812. However, no traces of any kind remain from these periods.

Governor William Brenton's Hammersmith Farm the foremost estate of the early settlers in the mid 1600's at the end of Aquidneck Island included the land of Castle Hill. Hammersmith Farm still exists several estates from Castle Hill with an elegant old mansion of the late 1800's on the sight of the original estate and was the childhood home of former

First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, and is still owned by her family.

The estate at Castle Hill was built in 1874 by Professor Alexander Agassiz of Cambridge, Massachusetts. History was made here when the Professor developed the study of oceanography. A naturalist and geologist, it was here that he established his laboratory. He studied here with twelve Harvard students for 25 years until the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts was originated. On the cove side of the estate, the building looking more like a guest cottage, was his laboratory where he gathered from the water the secrets of sea life with the tides bringing in untold specimens. There was also a windmill to pump the water which has long since vanished.

The famed Mr. Longfellow wrote of his friend Mr. Agassiz,

*"And nature, the old nurse, took  
the child upon her knee,  
Saying, 'Here is a story-book  
Thy father has written for thee.'"*

In 1875, the Professor donated a part of his land to the government as a most obvious spot for a needed lighthouse. It was built on a rocky ledge at the waters edge in 1890, and appropriately called Castle Hill Light. It is a painted white granite tower, forty feet above the sea and is visible for ten miles. A small charming structure without quarters for a keeper, it is manned by the Castle Hill Coast Guard Station which is in the cove next to the estate. The lighthouse characteristic is a blinking red light.

In 1938 the estate was owned by a lady who lived there when the destructive hurricane of that year ripped through New England. It seems that she was completely marooned, being cut off from the mainland. When the neighboring Coast Guard was able to get to her, she vowed never to return and so it came into the hands of the present owner, Mr. J.T. O'Connell, a prominent Newport merchant, for a small sum.

As you approach the estate you wind your way through a dark dense forest where trees meet overhead completely obstructing the sky, only to emerge to the open ocean unfolding before you in its unending beauty, the picturesque lighthouse on the cliffs and the imposing house, a three storied rambling Cape Codder with its slanting roof, many chimneys, numerous porches and weathered shingles, make you think you've returned to another time. The tower gives the appearance of a castle. The center of the circular drive to the entrance porch is enclustered with the sea rose and the parking lot is the front lawn. Very little has been disturbed to make this a public place. Although it is not really landscaped, it looks as beautiful today as



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it must have to the first explorers, unspoiled, except for the house, which is so old that it looks as though it belongs there. Lion statues guard the front entrance to the house on either side and nearby on the lawn are two propellers from German submarines sunk in the area, evidence of activity in Narragansett waters during World War II.

Entering the front door, the lobby is more of an entrance hall or living room with some fine antique furnishings. You might think you're at the wrong place and have walked into someone's home as there is no evidence of being a public place. There is no front desk and you must continue into the Britz family's living room and office, who run the hotel as well as live there. The entrance hall fireplace is a work of art with its magnificent inlaid woodwork. The bar with massive paneling, exposed beams and varnished woodwork is to one side and to the other the dining room, added on to the house some 70 years ago. It is oval shaped and all glassed in so that it has a complete water view. An outside concrete porch surrounds it with lawn chairs. Back in the foyer a thick oak staircase leads to the remaining floors. The upstairs hallway also has beautifully inlaid woodwork. Most rooms have their own fireplace and all have a view of either the bay or open sea. All rooms are quite large and their most outstanding feature is the huge elegant old bathrooms with the old tubs and lavatories. The hotel doesn't really have too many rooms but could have been made into more rooms with alterations, but all rooms have private baths, mostly the originals. Very little of the original house plan has been altered in converting it to include all modern conveniences.

There is a nice beach at Castle Hill but on most of the peninsula the high rock cliffs are predominantly met by the sea roses. The water is very deep at the base of the cliffs and at the lighthouse edge is no less than 29 fathoms. The fishing has always been excellent from all angles and draws many early morning fishermen.

You do not escape the traffic at Castle Hill, as there is always activity in front of you - sea traffic, that is. The Coast Guard boats, fishing boats, Navy destroyers, air craft and sometimes luxury liners, coming and going, they must pass by Castle Hill. This has also been a favorite point to view the numerous yachts head for the start of the many famous races that have made Newport one of the yachting capitols of the world. I might add that Newport has one of the finest natural harbors in the world.

All ship aids to navigation are visible from Castle Hill. On a clear day you can sometimes make out the outline of Block Island, some 20 miles at sea and on a clear night you can see the light of

Southeast Lighthouse on the island. Next in line is Point Judith Lighthouse, eight miles out on the foremost point of land, then the lights of Narragansett Beach, Whale Rock Light, Beavertail Lighthouse on Conanicut Island, The Brenton Tower Light (two miles out) the Brenton Reef Lighted Bouy and its own Castle Hill Light.

The view from Castle Hill is very effective with its many moods, the sunlit sea sparkling like a million diamonds, sometimes dark clouds you think you can almost touch, fog you can almost feel and at night as colorful with the many lights of Narragansett, the Newport Bridge, brightly lit passing ships, fishermen returning from a days work and all the aids to navigation. All of this and a hotel room too, much more than a night's accommodations.

Yes, Castle Hill is definitely a part of Newport's long history and has since enabled many a guest lodging to relive its past. One can only hope that its future will continue to preserve its past.



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