

LOG

THE KEEPERS

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Block Island North Lighthouse Rhode Island

By Jeremy D'Entremont

Block Island has been proclaimed “one of the last great places in the Western Hemisphere” by the Nature Conservancy, and the “Bermuda of the North” by tourism bureaus. Those descriptions are apt, but the pork chop-shaped island was long cursed as a stumbling block for coastal shipping traffic. The island is 14 miles from Point Judith, Rhode Island, and the same distance from Montauk Point, New York.

Block Island had no natural harbors and owed its development to its strategic location at the eastern mouth of Long Island Sound. Two artificial harbors were created in the nineteenth century: Old Harbor in 1876 and New Harbor in 1896.

Ethel Colt Ritchie, in her 1955 book *Block Island Lore and Legends*, tells us that during the previous two centuries, nearly half of the 1,100 or more shipwrecks on the southern New England coast occurred in the vicinity

of Block Island. Many of these disasters were the result of vessels running up on the long sandbar that extends for a mile and a half from Sandy Point at the north end of the island. There was once a small peninsula called the Hummock at the northern extremity of the bar, a place frequented by islanders for picnics and berry gathering.

In the decade preceding 1829, 22 ships were wrecked on Block Island. On March 2, 1829, Congress finally appropriated \$5,500 for a lighthouse at Sandy Point to warn of the dangerous bar and to guide coastal traffic entering Long Island Sound from the east. Late in the following month, Christopher Ellery, local superintendent of lighthouses, wrote to Stephen Pleasanton, Fifth Auditor of the Treasury in charge of lighthouses:

“I have purchased twenty acres of land at the northwest point of Block Island for a site for the light-house . . . consisting of sand whereon grows the beach plum and

some very coarse beach grass . . . The lighthouse must be erected near to the sea, on the sand, which has been heaped up by the winds to the height of perhaps twenty feet . . . I suppose it will be necessary, in order to distinguish the light from others in its neighbourhood, to have two lanterns . . . with the dwelling-house between, and to which both to be attached. . . .”

On May 13, 1829, the customs collector's office of the District and Port of Newport published the specifications of the new lighthouse. The one-story dwelling would be divided into two rooms with a separate porch or kitchen. At each end of the house would be a wooden, octagonal lighthouse tower, ten feet in diameter, rising six feet above the line of the roof. The towers were to be topped by octagonal iron lanterns large enough to accommodate lighting apparatus including seven oil lamps and accompanying 16-inch silver-coated reflectors.



Block Island North Lighthouse as it looks today. Note the oil house at right. Photo courtesy of the author.

The low bidder for both the construction of the building and the installation of the lighting apparatus was David Melville of Newport. It was pointed out that Melville was in the employment of the customs house in Newport at the time of his bid, raising the possibility of accusations of favoritism.

Melville was disqualified, and the construction contract went instead to the firm of Clarke and Eldred. The building was finished by October. Winslow Lewis installed the lighting apparatus, and the two lights, about 30 feet apart from each other on a north-south bearing, went into service on December 10, 1829. The first keeper was William A. Weeden, a native of Jamestown, Rhode Island.

Wrecks continued with frequency in spite of the lighthouse. On April 9, 1831, the schooner *Warrior* was driven ashore at Sandy Point in a heavy gale, with several deaths. It was reported that some of the passengers and crew tried to scramble to higher ground, only to be swept off the sandbar by the high waves.

Within a few years, the lighthouse was being severely threatened by the erosion of the

sandy beach. In March 1835, Keeper Weeden reported, "The sand has blown and washed away from the east and north sides of the lighthouse so as to let the sea approach very near it every easterly storm." Weeden also described the towers as leaky, with sagging floors in the lanterns. In January 1836, Weeden said that the leaks were so bad that it was difficult to keep the lamps burning on stormy nights.

Capt. Winslow Foster of the U. S. Revenue Service examined the station in July 1836. The house and towers were very well built, he said, but the lanterns and lighting equipment were in "very bad order." He continued:

"The sea has made a breach through in some late gale, on the north side and within about 50 feet of the house, and left a ravine, not more than 3 feet above high water; a ravine is also formed by the wind-sweeping of the sand on the W(est) and South sides, the sea has encroached on the East side greatly, leaving but 45 feet between high water and the base of the house."

Foster feared that a strong storm or two could undermine the building or even destroy

it totally. A survey in August 1836 by an official named Horatio Tracy made the situation sound even more urgent. Tracy reported that the keeper had made arrangements to move his family unless something was done soon, "for he thinks their lives are in danger." Keeper Weeden agreed to build a wall on the west and east sides of the point, but this was clearly a stopgap measure.

Congress appropriated \$5,000 on March 3, 1837, for the rebuilding of the lighthouse farther from the sea. A letter from Stephen Pleasanton in March 1837 stated that the new building should be built like the earlier one, "though instead of brick it may be built of stone." (From this, it would appear that although the original specifications in 1829 had called for a stone dwelling, it was actually constructed of brick.)

The building was soon completed. William Weeden remained keeper and moved with his family to the new site, which was in the dunes about a quarter-mile inland from the original site. Historian Benjamin F. Rathbun has theorized recently that erosion has left the location of the first lighthouse at least 2,800 feet seaward of the tip of the island.

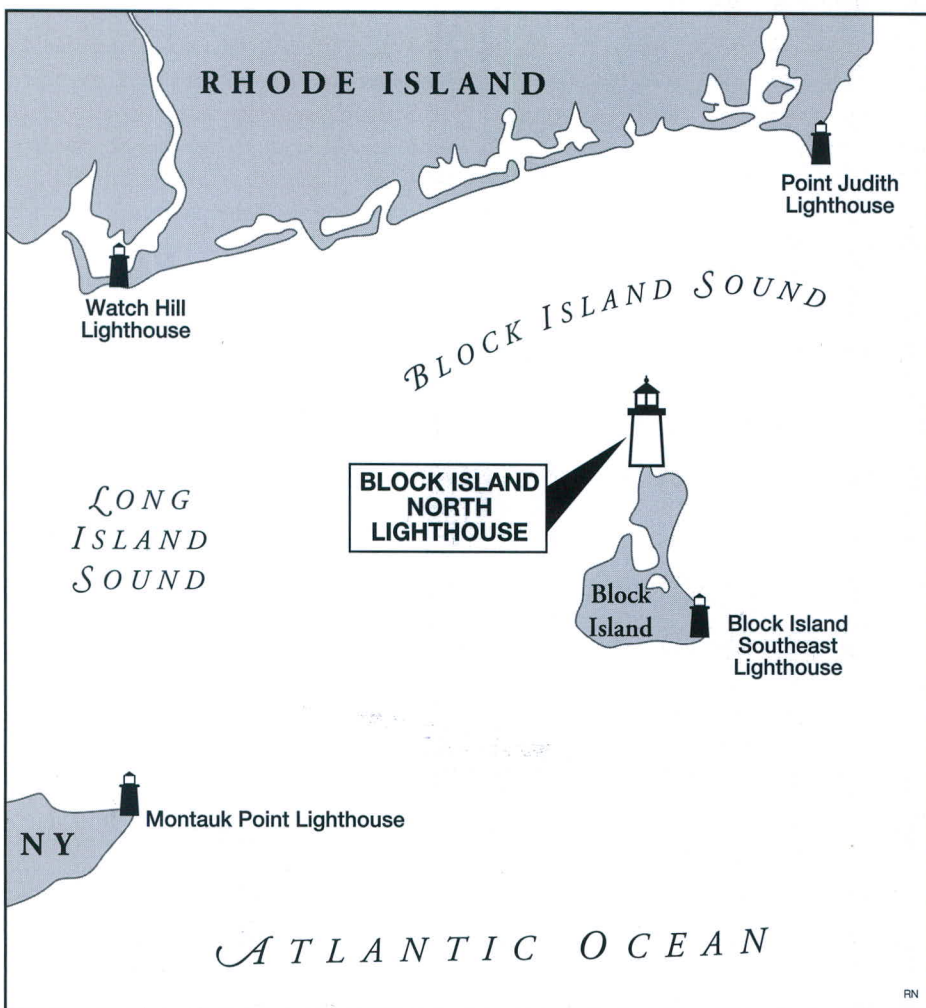
In a year-end report in 1837, Weeden complained that the new lanterns were just as leaky as the old ones. The water that entered through the lantern doors during storms would run all the way down to the cellar, said the keeper.

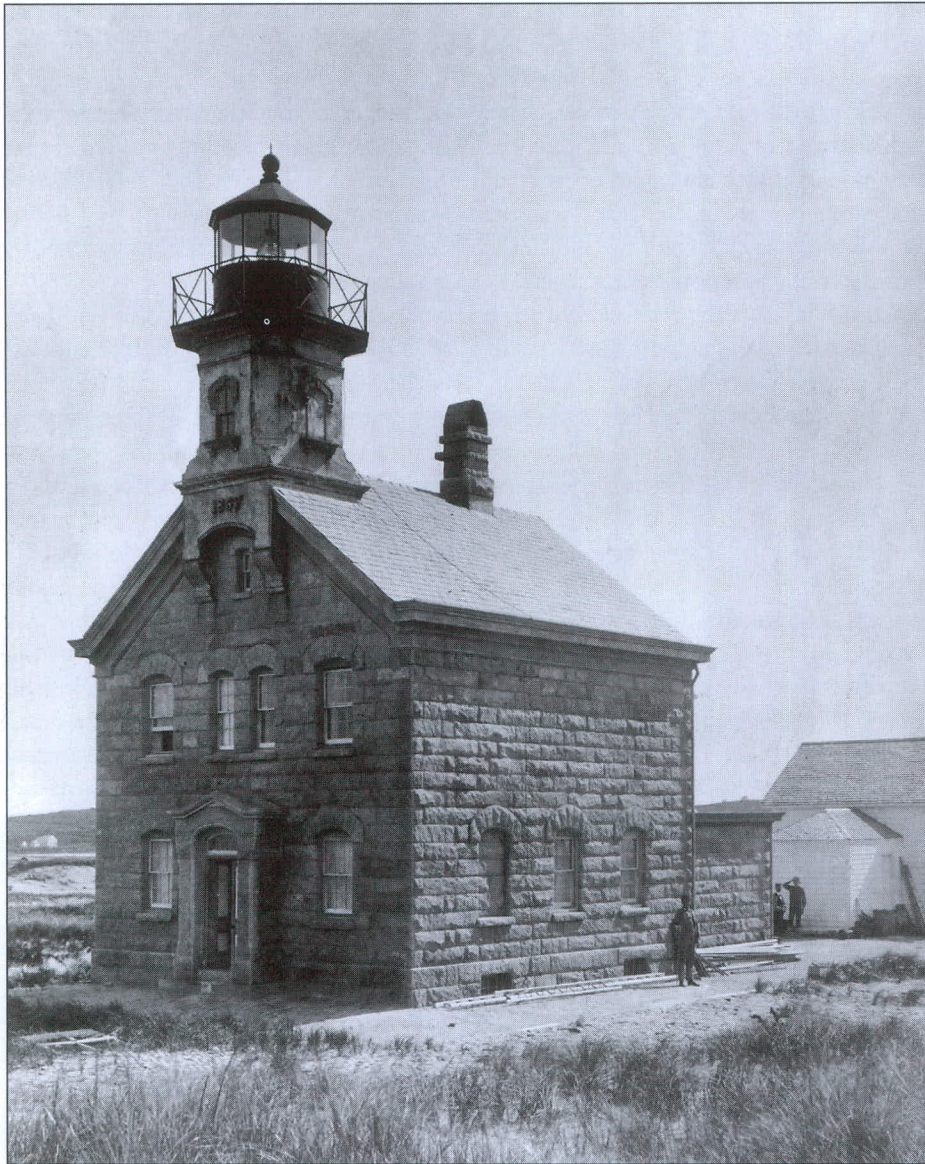
A report by Lt. George M. Bache of the U. S. Navy late in 1838 described the station:

"The building is 50 feet in length; the walls are of granite, well laid in cement; and justice appears to have been done it throughout by the contractor."

Bache noted that there were 59 vessels wrecked on Block Island from 1829 to 1838, and that the number of wrecks had actually increased in the first year after the lighthouse was established. He blamed this fact on increased trade and the "peculiar circumstances" of some the wrecks, rather than on any defect of the lighthouse.

A letter dated July 3, 1838, from Keeper Weeden to the local lighthouse superintendent, William Littlefield, described problems with some of the lighting equipment. Weeden also asked whether it was acceptable for the crews of vessels to remove stones for ballast from the government land around the lighthouse. Weeden was no longer worried about erosion, expressing an optimistic belief that





Above – An early view of the lighthouse. Note the original Fourth Order Fresnel lens in the lantern. The station barn can be seen to the right of the lighthouse as well as in the drawing at right. U. S. Coast Guard photo courtesy of the North Light Association.

Right – Nineteenth century engraving of the lighthouse. Courtesy of Dorothy Snow Bicknell.

the new lighthouse would not be washed away for “several hundred years to come.” He was concerned, however, that the government should be fairly compensated for the taking of ballast stones.

Simeon Babcock replaced Weeden as keeper in 1839, staying for two years and returning for another stint from 1845 to 1849. The keepers seemed to be going through a revolving door for a while, with the position changing according to the direction of the political winds in Washington. Edward Mott also served two separate terms as keeper—at a salary of \$400 yearly—from 1841 to 1845 and 1849 to 1853.

Soon after he arrived at the lighthouse in July 1841, Keeper Mott wrote a letter expressing displeasure at some of the conditions:

“I do this to inform you that the cellar door is not in good order and they want repairing verry [sic] much—the brick wants to be laid down around the house for there is many of them up—and there is some of the floors that wants repainting. I will do it all if you say that I must. Send me word what to do.”

The bricks had been placed around the lighthouse, along with a system of wooden planks and posts, in an attempt to keep the house from being undermined as the winds blew the sand away from around it.

An inspection by the local lighthouse superintendent in July 1850, during Mott’s second stint, reported that much of the lantern glass was broken (most likely by storms and seabirds) and that the lanterns were leaky. The dwelling needed painting, also, but it was reported that things were in a much better state overall than they had been under Keeper Babcock a year earlier. “Some little conveniences are needed,” the report concluded, “as a new sink and some repairs to the barn.”

Surviving correspondence shows Mott to be a conscientious keeper who occasionally asked permission to go to the mainland to pick up his pay or to deliver financial records. “I don’t mean to leave the lighthouse alone,” he wrote on one occasion. “Some part of the family will be in it.”



Enoch Rose followed Mott as keeper. When Rose died in 1858, Nicholas Littlefield replaced him. A receipt in the files of the National Archives branch in Waltham, Massachusetts, indicates that Littlefield received all the possessions of the late Mr. Rose, including "property of every description."

The 1837 lighthouse was certainly safe from encroachment from the sea, but the station was still plagued by the deep sands that shifted greatly in storms, and by seabirds that frequently smashed the lantern glass.

The more secure location also rendered it less effective as a guide to navigation. The inland light sometimes confused approaching navigators, who thought it was closer to the point. And the 1850 *American Coast Pilot* by Edmund and George W. Blunt stated, "The two lights situated on the N. W. point of this island, are so near together, they appear as one light until you are within two or three miles of them." This fault was potentially a cause of disaster, as mariners could mistake the lights for other single lights in the vicinity.

The sum of \$9,000 was appropriated in 1856 for the building of a lighthouse on the island's southeast shore, but it was decided instead to use the funds for rebuilding of the North Light. Some consideration had been given to a new lighthouse at Clay Head on the island's northeast coast, but instead, a single tower and dwelling were constructed at Sandy Point in 1857. Today, some surviving granite blocks can be found at the end of the point, at the water's edge.

The 1857 lighthouse was soon in danger of being lost to the forces of wind and sea, and \$15,000 was appropriated for a new station on July 28, 1866. This time a sturdy granite combination lighthouse/dwelling was planned. It would be similar in design to the ones built around the same time at several locations in Long Island Sound, including Morgan Point, Sheffield Island, and Great Captain Island in Connecticut, and Plum Island and Old Field Point in New York. The handsome and sturdy two-story granite dwelling has a cast-iron light tower at the front end of the peak of its roof.

Contractor John Beattie of Fall River, Massachusetts, obtained the huge granite blocks for the lighthouse from a quarry at Leete Island in Long Island Sound, near Guilford, Connecticut. According to Robert M. Downie in his book, *Block Island—The Sea*, the blocks were delivered to Block Island by a schooner, placed on skids, and hauled by oxen to Sandy Point.

The new light was illuminated for the first time on September 15, 1868, with a fourth-order Fresnel lens showing a fixed white light, 61 feet above sea level. The lighthouse is located about 400 yards south of its predecessor. Based on the fact that it is still safe and sound after 138 years, the Lighthouse Board selected the proper site this time. Its survival was aided by considerable efforts in the early 1870s to control erosion by the "grading and paving" of the shoreline to the north.



Howard Beebe was keeper from 1938 to 1945. He is shown in his Lighthouse Service uniform. He stayed on after the Coast Guard took over in 1939. Photo courtesy of Barbara Gaspar.

Hiram D. Ball had taken over as keeper of the previous lighthouse in 1861, and he moved to the new one when it went into operation. Ball was a Block Island native who first went to sea at the age of 13 as a cook on a West Indies-bound schooner. At the age of 20, he became captain of the Newport schooner *Eagle*, and he went on to skipper a number of other vessels. Before becoming a lighthouse keeper, Ball also tried his hand at farming. A farmhouse he built still stands and is one of the few buildings on the island older than the North Lighthouse. His brother, Nicholas Ball, was a state senator who had a great deal to do with the development of Block Island as a resort.

In his *History of Block Island* (1877), S. T. Livermore described the lighthouse under

Keeper Ball as a "favorite resort for visitors, both on account of the natural scenery, and the agreeableness of the respectable family of Mr. Ball, the keeper, whose ample means could furnish him a far more pleasant home, especially in winter."

The Providence Journal announced that Ball was considering retirement in November 1887. "He has served the Government faithfully in this position for more than a quarter of a century," said the newspaper, "and as his means are ample and he is getting considerably past the prime of an active life, he naturally feels that he is entitled to pass the rest of his days in comfortable retirement and quiet." Ball apparently reconsidered and stayed on at Sandy Point for four more years. He never did get the chance to enjoy retirement, as he died while still keeper in 1891.

With the development of the U. S. Life-saving Service, three lifesaving stations were established on Block Island in the nineteenth century. The first (1872) was on the west side and was officially called the Block Island Station. The second, the New Shoreham Station, was established at Old Harbor in 1874. The third and final location was Sandy Point, where a lifesaving station was built in 1898 just a little over 500 feet north of the lighthouse. The keepers and their families at the North Light must have welcomed the company of the lifesaving crew, as well as the help in dealing with the frequent wrecks. Combined, the crewmen from the three stations walked the entire perimeter of the island every night, during all but two months of the year.

The next keeper after Hiram Ball was Elam Littlefield, another Block Island native who must have regarded Sandy Point as paradise after spending seven years at wave-swept Whale Rock Light at the entrance to Narragansett Bay. A few years after he arrived, Littlefield was given more responsibility when the light was changed from fixed to flashing. This meant that every four hours, the keeper (or a family member) had to wind a clockwork mechanism that rotated the lens.

Littlefield stayed for 32 years, longer than any keeper in the North Light's history. About halfway through his tenure, his peaceful routine was spectacularly interrupted by one of New England's most unforgettable shipwrecks.



In this undated photo, it appears that an inspection is taking place by Coast Guardsmen, which would place it after 1939. Note the Fresnel lens is still in the lantern. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.

Early in the evening of February 11, 1907, the Joy Line side-wheel steamer *Larchmont* left Providence bound for New York City in stormy conditions. The sole passenger list was on board, and there has been much debate over the number on the ship; it was probably somewhere between 120 and 200. A northwest wind was already blowing nearly 40 miles per hour as the steamer headed down the Providence River, and visibility was low. Shortly before 11:00, when the *Larchmont* was about three miles off Watch Hill Lighthouse, the schooner *Harry Knowlton* loomed out of the darkness and collided directly with the steamer. The damage proved fatal, and the *Larchmont* sank in less than 15 minutes.

Capt. George McVey and seven other crewmen escaped in a lifeboat and apparently tried to pick up survivors, but the harsh conditions prevented it. Some of the passengers managed to launch five additional lifeboats and a raft into the frigid waves. The icy winds propelled them toward the gleam of the Block Island North Lighthouse.

Keeper Littlefield was awakened early in the morning on February 12 by the frantic barking of his dog, Leo. The keeper was then startled by someone knocking on a window.

When he opened the door, a teenaged boy fell near his feet, nearly dead. "More coming, more coming," was all he could manage to say. The boy, Fred Heirgessell, later said that he had nearly given up hope, but was encouraged when he heard the barking dog.

Keeper Littlefield woke his wife and children and phoned the nearby lifesaving station. Captain McVey reached Block Island alive along with seven others in the crew. Only three passengers arrived at the island alive in the other lifeboats, and the heroic crew of the fishing schooner *Elsie* rescued another eight survivors after they drifted for 12 hours on the *Larchmont's* deckhouse.

The keeper's wife and children played a major role in caring for the survivors. The lighthouse became a makeshift hospital, with strips torn from bedspreads used as bandages. In 1974, Block Island historian Robert M. Downie interviewed the keeper's daughter, Gladys, who was 17 at the time of the *Larchmont* disaster. Gladys ran errands between the lighthouse and lifesaving station during the ordeal. She told Downie about one man who was brought into the kitchen, more dead than alive. One of the lifesaving crew and Gladys's sister, Austis, tried to revive the man, but

he died. Gladys vividly recalled the arrival of Captain McVey, who simply said, "Two hundred lives lost."

Keeper Littlefield had the solemn duty of taking his horse and cart along the beach, picking up the bodies that washed ashore and taking them to the lifesaving station. The exact number will never be known, but over 100 had perished, with more than 40 bodies washing up at Sandy Point. The remains of the *Larchmont* now lie in about 130 feet of water, three miles southeast of Watch Hill.

Elam Littlefield left Sandy Point in 1923. As a final note on his long stay, a United Press story appearing in November 1955 announced that a message in a bottle had just been found at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Littlefield had set the bottle adrift from Block Island in 1908. Unfortunately, the article didn't indicate what the keeper had written.

Littlefield was followed by John Anderson (1923–26) and then Ezra B. Dunn, who remained until late 1938. A notable incident during Anderson's stay was described by the keeper in a letter to his superiors:

"I respectfully report that on Friday night July 24th a whale came on the beach west of the Lighthouse. On Saturday the taxi drivers started to take people down here and it was at one time 64 cars around the light house, and starting to dig up the bricks around the house and cut up the road so bad that I closed the road this morning by putting a rope across with a sign closed. I did this to save the road and the brickwork from destruction."

Dunn was at the lighthouse for the epic hurricane of September 21, 1938. Like most of southern New England, Block Island was devastated by the storm. At high tide, the island was actually divided into two parts, with the waters flooding over Corn Neck Road near the east shore and into Great Salt Pond. All the island's hotels were badly damaged. Every barn was demolished, as were the cottages on the island's south side. The island's fishing fleet was virtually wiped out. No description survives of the storm as it was experienced at the lighthouse, but "Old Granitesides" might have been one of the safest places on Block Island to be on that day.

Howard Beebe, who had barely survived the hurricane at New London Ledge Lighthouse in Connecticut, was the next keeper after Dunn, starting on November 4, 1938, and staying until 1945. His daughter, Barbara (Beebe) Gaspar, recalls those years happily.

"They were the best years of my life, even with rationing [during World War II] and walking two miles to get the school bus. Sliding down the sand dunes, swimming, ice boating, ice-skating, and school were great fun."

Severe weather sometimes made the trip to school a major ordeal. Once, an ice storm hit and Keeper Beebe had to haul his children with a rope over the icy bricks that surrounded the lighthouse so they could get back inside their home. Barbara Gaspar and her husband, a Coast Guardsman, were later stationed at Block Island Southeast Light, and Howard Beebe ended his 30-year career as a keeper at Pomham Rocks Light in 1956.

In August 1946, Frank Perry, an architect and photographer from Providence, visited Block Island to take some photos for a book. After walking along the sandy spit to the North Lighthouse, he returned to his taxi and saw a man and woman on bicycles fitted with carriers overloaded with groceries. Perry talked to the couple and found out the man was John Lee, Jr., the keeper at the time. Lee and his wife, Eileen, were about to leave the bicycles at a friend's house and trudge a mile on the beach to the lighthouse, carrying their heavy bags.

Perry felt the situation was deplorable and described it in a letter to President Truman. "These people are in the employ of the U. S. Government," he wrote, "rendering a faithful service in caring for an important light and it seems to me that they are deserving of consideration. In other words they should be furnished means of transportation, a jeep, for example. . . ." Perry didn't receive an answer from the president, but the matter was referred to the Coast Guard.

Lee—the light's last civilian keeper before Coast Guard personnel moved in—and his wife eventually got a Model A Ford for transportation. "It was better than a jeep in the sand," he remembered many years later. Interviewed in 1995, Lee called his time at the lighthouse a "seven-year honeymoon" with his wife. One of the most exciting events during his stay was the time a 55-foot sloop came ashore nearby. "It was abandoned by the crew and left to crash on the shore," he said. "There wasn't anything I could do."

Edith Littlefield Blane, the sister of Eileen Lee, spent a good deal of time at the lighthouse when the Lees were there. "It was a lovely, cozy place," she later told *The Providence Journal*. "With those thick granite walls,

we felt like we were in a fortress. We had great thunderstorms. The tower would snap and crack. One night during a storm, a blue streak came out of the telephone two feet into the living room and every hair on our arms stood straight out."

In the spring of 1956, the Coast Guard was preparing to automate and destaff the light station. The last Coast Guard keeper was 23-year-old Seaman Donald M. Lawson, from the Allston section of Boston. He had asked for a shore berth after more than two years aboard the icebreaker *Eastwind*, but hadn't bargained for a location as isolated as Sandy Point.

Lawson lived at the lighthouse with his wife, Margaret, their one-year-old son, Ricky, and a large tomcat ("a good mouser") inherited from previous keepers. Lawson painted the interior walls of the lighthouse bright yellow. "There wasn't much else to do," he explained.

"Actually, it wasn't too bad," Lawson told the *Providence Evening Bulletin*, referring to his one-year stay as keeper. "Good fishing, swimming, and hunting, and we had a diesel generator for the TV and washing machine. But that's all." Asked how his wife enjoyed lighthouse life, Lawson smiled and said, "I'd better not say."



Another view of the present day lighthouse. Photo courtesy of the author.

Lawson still used kerosene to fuel the lamp, and still had to wind up the lens mechanism every four hours. He shrugged off the odd nighttime routine, saying, "Well, it doesn't make much difference when you've got a young baby." During the Lawsons' one winter at the station, a snowstorm left the roads to Sandy Point impassable, and supplies were delivered by boat. All in all, when asked how he felt about leaving, Lawson replied, "I'm happy."

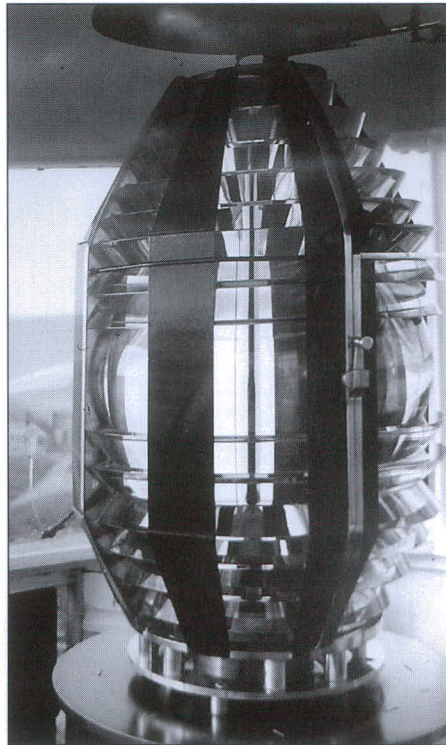
Along with the automation of the light, the characteristic was changed in 1956 from occulting to a white flash every five seconds. A fixed fourth-order lens and electric flasher replaced the previous lens and rotating equipment. Coast Guard personnel occasionally checked on the equipment, but little maintenance was done on the building. It didn't fare well in the harsh environment, and occasional intrusion by vandals didn't help. The exterior woodwork began to rot and rain got inside the lighthouse.

Near the end of 1972, the Coast Guard erected a steel skeletal tower north of the lighthouse with an automatic flashing light, and the old building was boarded up and abandoned in January 1973. By this time, the roof was practically caving in.

Officials of the town of New Shoreham let the Coast Guard know of their interest in the lighthouse. "Block Islanders, always mindful of their traditions and history," wrote Herbert S. Whitman of the town council in a letter dated November 29, 1972, "have for years anticipated the time when the old light would be released by the Coast Guard, and we are taking all means to have the building and its land deeded to the Town of New Shoreham." Soon a new committee, the North Light Commission, was formed, with members appointed by the town council. Herb Whitman became the commission's first chairman.

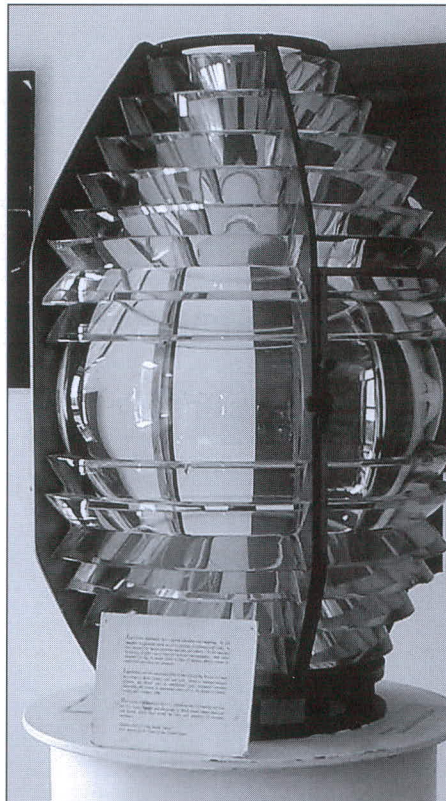
The lighthouse would eventually belong to the town, but it took a circuitous route. It was turned over along with the surrounding 28 acres to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1973 and was designated the Block Island National Wildlife Refuge. Since then, the refuge has grown to incorporate 127 acres.

About \$80,000 in grants and donations was used to complete phase one of the lighthouse's restoration, the renovation of the building's exterior, by 1980. The roof was replaced, along with all flashings, moldings, windows, and the railing around the lantern gallery. Bul-



Above – The Fourth Order lens is seen here during its active days in the lighthouse. The entire assembly was rotated by clockworks. The vertical black bands blocked the light source to produce an occulting light. It's one of the rarer instances where a fixed lens was rotated. Photo courtesy of the North Light Association.

Below – The original lens is now on display in the museum inside the lighthouse. Photo by Bedard Photo. <www.bedardphoto.com>.



letproof (and vandal-proof) Lexan panes were installed in the lantern, and much of the rotting wood trim was replaced.

In November 1983, the lighthouse was transferred from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the town along with two acres of land, in exchange for a perpetual conservation easement on 20 acres of migratory bird habitat. The title was presented to Jack Gray, first warden of the town, in a ceremony at Block Island's town hall. Over the next few years, more work was completed on the building's interior.

As early as 1983, the North Light Commission had asked the Coast Guard about the feasibility of returning the navigational light to the lighthouse. By 1989, the Coast Guard was convinced that things were sufficiently in order, and the lighthouse was relighted in a ceremony on August 5.

Work on the interior continued, and by the summer of 1993 the first floor of the lighthouse was opened to the public as a museum. From Memorial Day to Labor Day in 1994, more than 14,000 slogged through the soft sand to visit the lighthouse. One of the first volunteer tour guides was Dick Littlefield, nephew of Keeper Elam Littlefield and son of Oswald Littlefield, who was once in charge of the Sandy Point Lifesaving Station. Dick recalled playing, as a boy, in one of the lifeboats that had come ashore from the *Larchmont*.

Among the leaders in the 20-year haul to restore the building is Rob Gilpin, a mason by trade. Gilpin had worked all over Block Island, but said that working at Sandy Point gave him a new appreciation for the loneliness and hardship endured by the light's keepers. Gilpin is now co-chair of the North Light Commission and the North Light Association. The North Light Association was founded as a separate nonprofit membership organization to raise funds for the restoration of the lighthouse.

In the mid-1990s, the North Light Commission began taking orders for \$50 personalized bricks to be placed in a new brick apron to be installed in front of the lighthouse. Commission chairman Dan Cahill organized the project. The first phase of the apron, with bricks surrounding a flagpole on the east side of the building, was finished in 1997. The complete apron, made up of 2,200 bricks, was dedicated on July 5, 2003.

Despite the years of toil and sweat, an inspection by engineers in 2001 showed that the lighthouse still needed major work. The

iron tower had badly deteriorated, especially where it met the rest of the building. At the time, the town had only about \$25,000 in its North Light Fund, and North Light Commission co-chairman Gilbert Plumb said that it would cost as much as \$400,000 to repair the tower.

It was just what the doctor ordered when the town was awarded \$400,000 in June 2002 from the federal Transportation Enhancement Program. The project has been slowed somewhat by red tape, but when work gets underway, the entire tower will be lifted off the dwelling for repairs. In anticipation of this work, the navigational light was relocated from the lighthouse to a small tower to the north in 2003.

More funds will be needed for a complete restoration of the building. Renovation of the upper stories is also planned, with the ultimate goal of having overnight accommodations available to the public.

After several years of planning and gaining the proper permits, a new wind and solar power

system was installed in February 2004. The 30-foot, 1,500-watt windmill does nothing to intrude on the landscape, as some had feared. A generator is still on hand as a backup, but the new system has reduced pollution and will save on fuel costs. The wind speed and kilowatt output of the windmill can be read on a display inside the museum.

The long fight with erosion at Sandy Point is still being waged. Rob Gilpin has concerns about visitors who trespass on roped-off dunes, killing the beach grass that helps protect the land. The North Light Commission has erected hundreds of feet of fencing, but with as many as 3,000 people walking to the area around the lighthouse daily in summer, it's hard to keep people from wandering where they shouldn't go.

You can get to Block Island via ferry from Point Judith, New London, Connecticut, or Montauk Point, New York. Once there, it's an extremely long hike to the North Light from the ferry. The adventurous can rent bicycles. Another option is to hire a taxi to take you to

Sandy Point. From the parking area, it's about a 20- to 30-minute walk on the beach to the lighthouse. It takes a little effort to get here, but that shouldn't stop any true lighthouse aficionado from visiting this gem. For more information, contact the North Light Association, P.O. Box 1662, Block Island, RI 02807. Phone (401) 466-3200.

Note: The cost of the restoration of the tower and roof is now estimated at \$846,000 (as of December 2006). The project was awarded a \$100,000 State Preservation Grant on December 6, 2006.

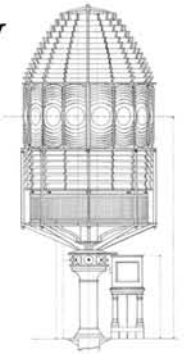
This article is excerpted from the book *The Lighthouses of Rhode Island* by Jeremy D'Entremont, published in 2006 by Commonwealth Editions of Beverly, Massachusetts. You can buy the book at Jeremy's web site "New England Lighthouses: A Virtual Guide" at <www.lighthouse.cc> and at <www.commonwealtheditions.com>.



Aerial view of Block Island North Light Station in the 1950s. Note the oil house at left and the shirtless fellow waving at the left rear of the dwelling. Also the remains of an automobile upper left. The lens appears to be shrouded in linen. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



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Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

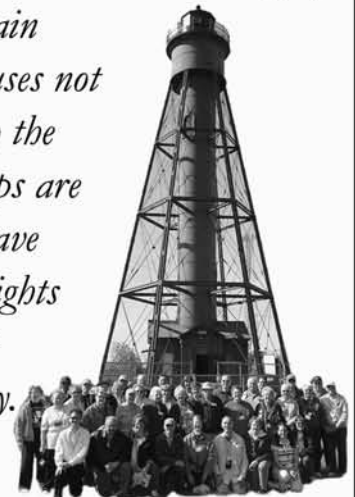
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