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The 1938 Hurricane

Illustration by Linda Menges

By I.M. Gale

On September 21, 1938, one of the most powerful hurricanes to strike the East Coast wreaked havoc on Lighthouse Service facilities in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

The area of greatest damage included the eastern portion of Long Island, the eastern part of Connecticut, the entire coast of Rhode Island and the western area of Cape Cod. The damage was particularly severe at New London, CT, Narragansett Bay, RI and Buzzards Bay, MA.

In Long Island Sound the storm damaged the following New York light stations: Latimer Reef, North Dumpling Island, Race Rock, Little Gull Island and Orient Point.

In Connecticut the stations most severely damaged were: Saybrook Breakwater, Falkner Island, and New London Ledge. The Depot buildings at New London were damaged and buoys and appendages washed away. Also at New London the strength of the storm was evident when it parted all mooring lines of the Lighthouse Service tender *Tulip* and bodily threw the 190- foot-long, 900-ton vessel up on shore and across mainline railroad tracks. Later a contract was awarded to refloat the vessel. To accomplish this, a special channel was dredged from deep water to the stern of the ship. Then she was pulled off the bank by powerful tugs and refloated. Although the vessel leaked a little, she was sound, requiring only replacement of stern struts, the screw (propeller) and rudder.

Keeper Sidney Z. Gross of the Saybrook Breakwater station furnished the following report of the progress of the storm on his charge at the mouth of the Connecticut River:

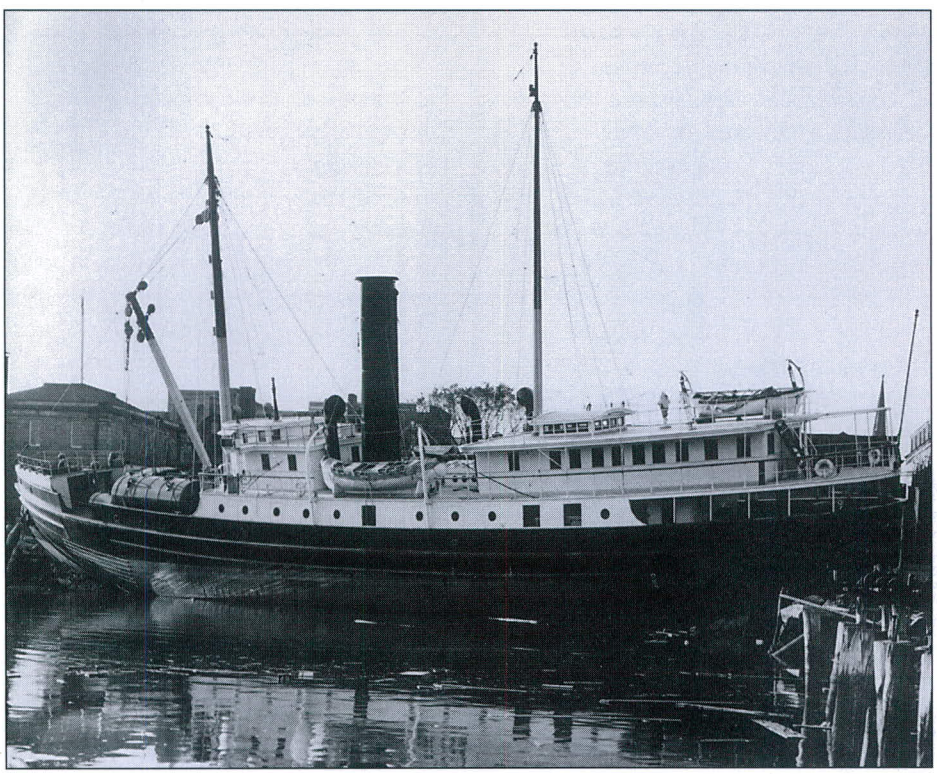
> At 2 p.m. on the afternoon of September 21, 1938, a light southeast breeze sprang up from a perfect calm. At 2:15 it became so hazy that it was necessary to start the fog signal. By 3 p.m. it was blowing a gale, and I was unable to step outside the engine room door, the only door through which we can enter and leave the building. I made several attempts to get outside to save some of the small articles on the platform, part of them not being lashed down, but I found it impossible and the wind pushed me right back into the engine room. Assistant Keeper Bennett also made an attempt to get out and save some of the gasoline for the engines, but the velocity of the wind has been increasing every minute, and we were absolutely helpless as far as saving anything outside of the tower was concerned.
>
> The tide was coming in and the water in Long Island Sound and the river was becoming rougher every minute. The fog signal was being sounded continuously. At 3:30 p.m. the water level almost reached the platform, and at that time the gasoline drum and the bridge to the breakwater were carried away. The wind then shifted from the southeast to the southwest, and the water pounded away still harder. At 4 p.m. the platform encircling the outside of the tower was torn from its fastenings and carried away with everything on it, including the 12-foot rowboat.

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By this time the water was so high outside that it backed up through the cistern through the overflow pipe, spoiling all our drinking water. Dozens of rocks, weighing several tons, were carried away from the breakwater and from around the tower...The wind was so strong that it carried away the tops of the combers in a spray, so that we could hardly see more than 25 or 30 feet from the station. At 4:30 p.m. the 1,500-gallon oil tank, which was full of kerosene, was carried away, its straps being snapped just a few minutes previously. At almost the same time the 600-gallon oil tank was lifted out of its cradle and carried away.

At 5 p.m. the water level was about even with the deck, just a few inches below the engine room floor. As the wind shifted the waves started to pound at the two fog horns and south window of the engine room. Assistant Keeper Bennett and myself boarded up the inside window as best we could, but at 5 p.m. the waves were pounding so hard, that all the glass was smashed in and the boards torn out, tons of seawater started to pour into the engine room. We made another attempt to board up the opening, but the water was too powerful...During these efforts a great wave came through the window carrying the sash and boards with it. As we were both directly in the path Mr. Bennett got cut on the hand by broken glass and I was hit on both legs by flying boards. At 5 p.m. the #1 engine went dead, being shorted by salt water. I tried to continue running of the horn by running on batteries only, but a few minutes later the automatic switch burst into flames, so I was forced to pull the battery switch to prevent fire. By this time the cellar was completely flooded and the engine room had about 15 inches of water on the floor. The next thing, both cam motors with the stand were torn from the concrete floor, and landed next to the #2 compressor, the fog signal machinery was put hopelessly out of commission.





The Tender *Tulip* across the railroad tracks at New London, CT. The top photo shows the damage to the screws (propellers). U.S. Lighthouse Society photos.

I could not ring the bell as it was impossible to get out onto the bell deck; if I had gotten out I would have been promptly swept overboard. At sunset I disconnected the electric light fixtures, and installed the incandescent oil vapor lamp (i.o.v). The lens was shaking so badly that I expected it to fall off the pedestal and break into pieces. I started up the i.o.v. lamp but the mantles collapsed from the vibrations as soon as they were put in place. I then removed the i.o.v. lamp and put in the 4th order oil wick lamp. The vibration was so great, and the draft from the wind so strong, that I had to stay up there with the light the whole night, to see that it did not smoke up or go out all together.

At 6 p.m. the water was pouring in through the second story window into the hall. I boarded up the window with the doors of a small cabinet and what loose material I could find. At this time I could hear the battery house being broken up. Seven of the batteries and my outboard motor were carried away. Everything outside the building was now carried away and I certainly did not expect to see another sunrise, as the whole structure was shaking under the pounding. When daylight came at last what we saw seemed more like a bad dream than reality. There was nothing around the tower. Everything was gone except the battery house and even that was badly out of shape.

(signed) Sidney Gross, Keeper

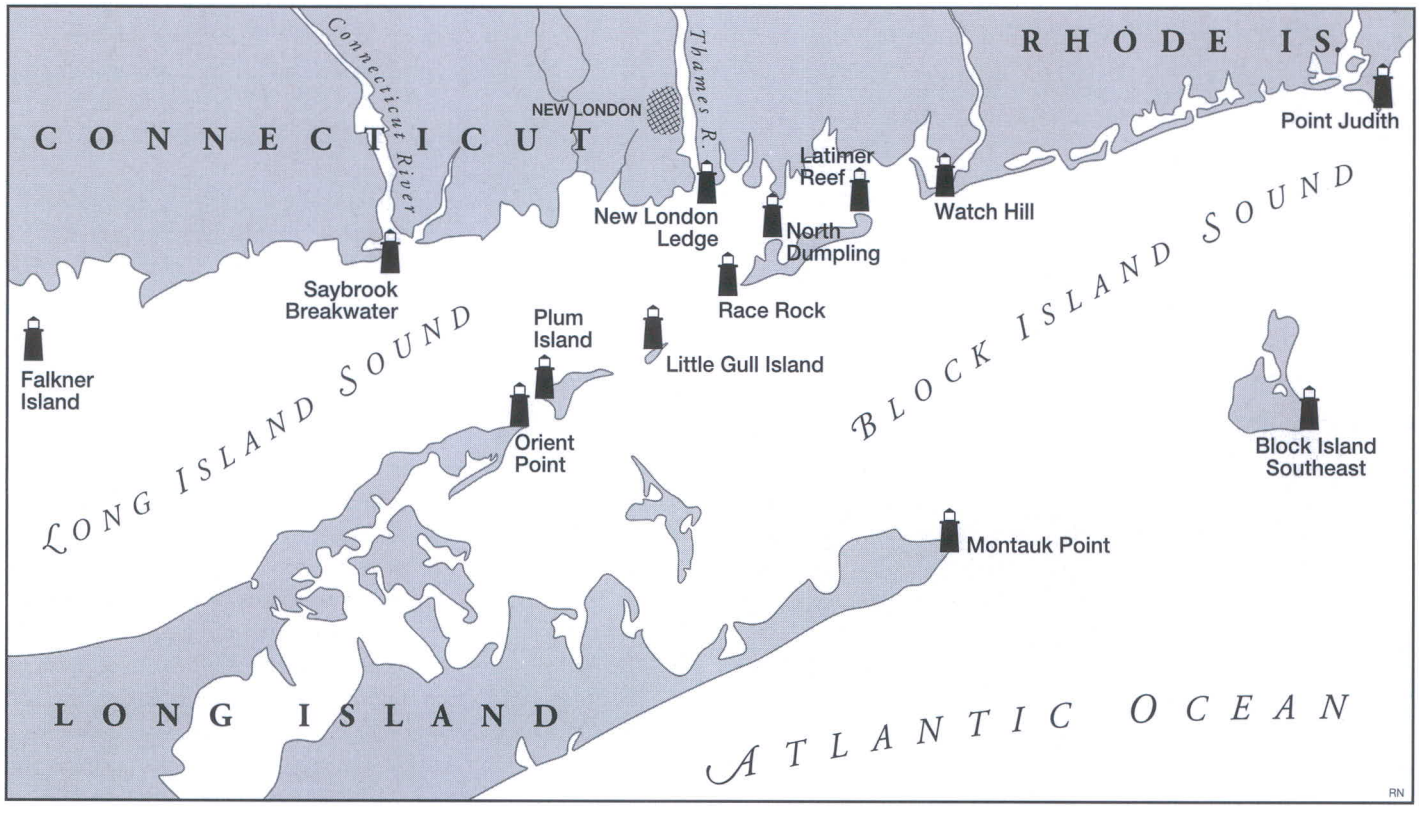
In Rhode Island a lighthouse structure similar to the Saybrook tower, called Whale Rock, guarded the western passage into Narragansett Bay. During the hurricane it was completely swept from its base, destroyed and never found. The keeper on duty, Assistant Keeper Walter Eberle, lost his life. The head keeper was ashore at the time the storm struck and was unable to return to the station. The next lighthouse up the bay from Whale Rock, Plum Beach Light (also a caisson-style structure) was completely inundated. The two keepers on duty lashed them-

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The Saybrook Breakwater Lighthouse in the 1930's. The fuel tank which was torn off the structure can be seen on the right side of the tower. Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.

Opposite page — The two lower photos in column one show Whale Rock Lighthouse before and after the hurricane. Photos courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



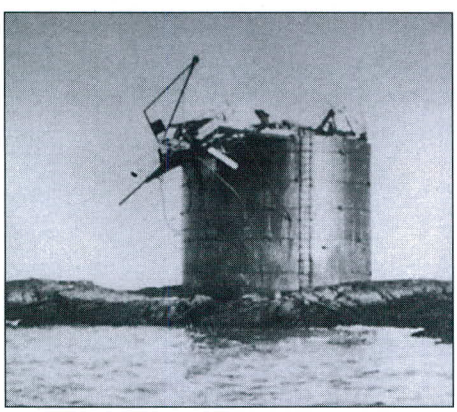
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Above left — The Bullock Point Lighthouse in Narragansett Bay, RI, before the hurricane. This photo is facing south. Courtesy of Robert Lewis. The photo at right shows the Bullock Point Lighthouse the day after the hurricane and was taken looking north (the weather side). The storm washed away all furnishings, supplies and the station boat. It also tore out the interior stairs, but the Keeper Andrew Zuis managed to climb to the lantern room and keep the light burning. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.





selves to the lantern room interior and survived the storm (see *Keeper's Log* Vol. 9 # 3). Further up Narragansett Bay, the Prudence Island Light Station tower was badly damaged and undermined, while the dwelling was swept away and destroyed, killing the keeper's wife and son. The keeper managed to save himself after being swept more than a quarter of a mile from the station. During the height of the storm, before the dwelling was destroyed, a former keeper of the station, Martin Thomas, and friends Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, sought refuge in the dwelling. They, too, were drowned.

The Bullock Point Light Station in the Providence River was damaged to the extent that the dwelling was not habitable, the tower unsafe and all furnishings, supplies and boats washed away.

Even the Lighthouse Depot at Bristol suffered severe damage; fences destroyed, keeper's dwelling and the storehouse badly damaged and every buoy, a number of ballast balls and acetylene tanks were washed away, drifting into the upper harbor. Two boats were sunk at the wharf.

Other stations which sustained damage in Rhode Island were: Pomham Rocks, Sabine Point, Newport Harbor (Goat Island), Castle Hill, Beavertail, Dutch Island, Warwick, Point Judith, Watch Hill and Block Island SE.

In Massachusetts, the Wings Neck Light Station in Upper Buzzards Bay was so badly damaged and unsafe that the keeper had to abandon the station, first employing an emergency light in the lantern. The Woods Hole, MA Depot suffered damage similar to that which occurred at the Bristol Depot.

One of the most dramatic stories in Massachusetts occurred at the Palmer Island Light Station. After the storm, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, in an address to an annual meeting of Lighthouse Service District Superintendents, noted -

"There has come to my attention a most extraordinary illustration of human sacrifice and devotion to duty such as is seldom seen in public or private service. The conduct of the lighthouse keeper at Palmer Island, in New Bedford Harbor, Mass., while in the shadow of death, is the ultimate in devotion to duty. With the exception of the light tower, the dwelling and other buildings located at this station were completely swept away. Shortly before the dwelling was destroyed, the keeper assisted his wife to the light tower for safety. He then risked his own safety with the turbulent elements and was swept overboard, prompting the wife to leave the tower and attempt to launch the boat for the husband's rescue. The courageous venture proved fatal for this intrepid woman. The keeper, by swimming under water, managed to save himself and recover the body of his wife. In spite of this hazardous and tragic experience and suffering

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from exposure, injury and exhaustion, the keeper remained at his post in the tower throughout the night, maintaining the light and fog signal in proper operation until relief was furnished him the following morning. The name of this keeper to whom we all express admiration and sympathy is Capt. Arthur A. Small.

"Permit me to quote from his own report of the disaster, dictated in the third person, from his hospital bed, reflecting unusual modesty and self abnegation, traits that are characteristic of the Lighthouse Service personnel:

'In reporting the destruction of and loss of building and equipment at Palmer Island Light Station, New Bedford Harbor, Mass. on Sept. 21, 1938: The keeper made preparations all during that day, securing everything so far as possible; carrying extra oil and lamp equipment to the tower. This station felt the full force of the gale. The seas breaching clear across the island, sweeping buildings as the sea increased. Keeper swept overboard, but by swimming underwater made the station again. Mrs. Small, the keeper's wife, was seen by the keeper while he was overboard. She left the oil house where he told her to stay in the upper part and evidently she tried to launch a boat to save the keeper. But she was swept away and drowned. The station is in need of a 35mm i.o.v. equipment and kerosene. All records are gone and stationery and log books needed. There is no shelter to be had at the station except in the top of the tower. Keeper remained on duty until properly relieved. The light and fog signal were in good order. Keeper removed to St. Luke's hospital suffering from exhaustion and exposure.

(Signed) Arthur A. Small, Keeper.' "

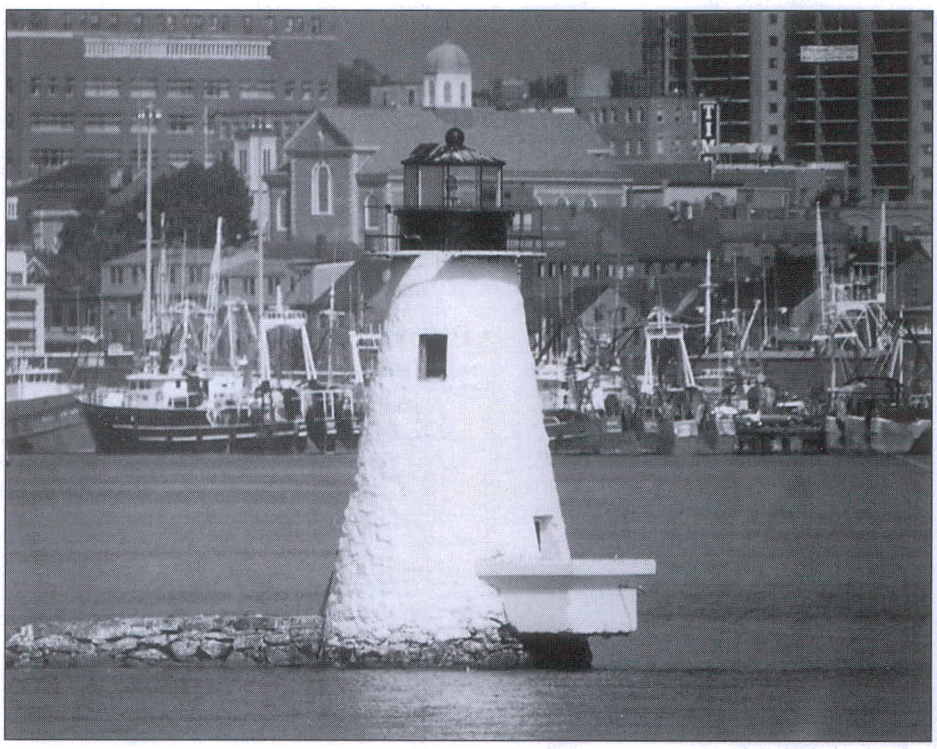
The other Massachusetts station badly damaged was Dumpling Rock.

New England has been struck by hurricanes before and after the storm of 1938, but that September blow was one for the ages, and a storm that is still talked about in southeastern New England when old timers gather to talk about the 'good ol' days.'

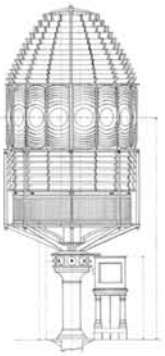


Above — Palmer Island Light Station in New Bedford Harbor. At left is the bell fog signal building (the oil house in which the keeper placed his wife is behind that structure). Dwelling in the middle. Old Post Card after 1912.

Below — The Palmer Island Lighthouse in recent years. Photo by Elliot Tayman.



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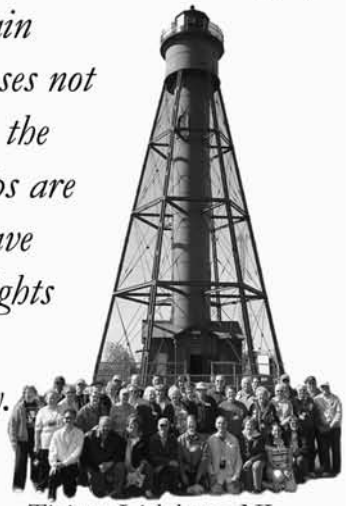
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