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Only Yesterday

Rhode Island's Bullock Point Light Station

By George Worthylake

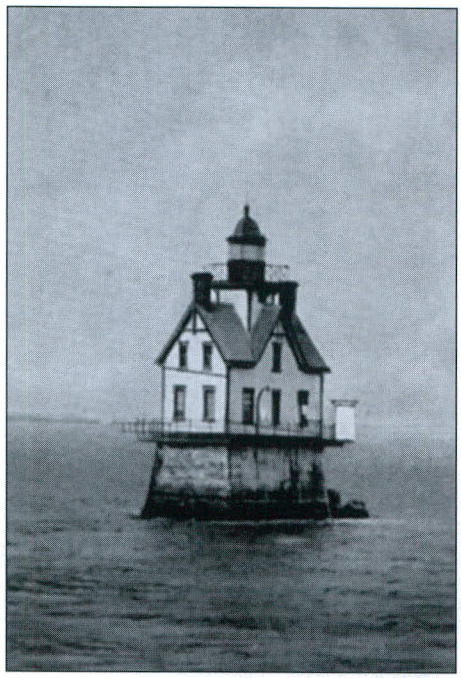


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Bullock Point Lighthouse was one of twenty-six lighthouses constructed on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay and on the Providence River. In the latter half of the 19th century and first two decades of the 20th century, these waterways were very busy. Several steamship lines had daily departures from Providence to New York, Boston and other east coast ports. Today, nine of those light stations no longer exist and others have been discontinued and are privately owned.

One of the strangest designs was that of the Bullock Point Lighthouse. This lonely looking structure was perched on a granite pier on the east side of the Providence River.

In 1860, a daybeacon was erected on a granite pier to mark the dangerous shoals off Bullock Point. But, as navigation increased it was evident that a lighted beacon was needed. In 1872 Congress authorized $1,000 for the Lighthouse Service to erect a lighted beacon in place of the daymark. It was lit for the first time on October 1, 1872. Joseph Bowes, keeper of the nearby Sabin Point Lighthouse, was given the added responsibility of maintaining this small fixed red light. It was most likely an eight-day kerosene beacon that keeper Bowes rowed out – once a week – to clean the lens and refill the oil reservoir.



Back of Bullock Point prior to deck being added on the left side. Privy shown at right. Photo from an old postcard.



Opposite page – Front of the Bullock Point Lighthouse in 1911 from an old postcard courtesy of Robert Lewis.

Above – Bullock Point on September 22, 1938 just after the hurricane passed through. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

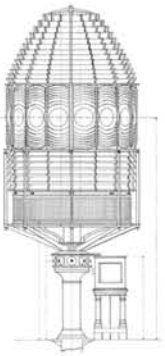
However, this minor aid to navigation didn't satisfy the mariners using the river and it was soon evident that a lighthouse was needed. The government appropriated $15,000 in 1874 to expand the granite pier and erect a lighthouse on it. The project took two years. The new lighthouse was lit in 1876. A lantern room containing a 6th order Fresnel lens surmounted the two-story Victorian house.

In 1907 the American Association of Masters, Mates and Pilots petitioned the Lighthouse Service for a fog signal at Bullock Point. Within four days of receiving the petition the Service acted with unusual speed installed a 1,000-pound fog bell at the lighthouse. An automatic fog bell-striking machine struck it at regular, timed intervals.

The Bullock Point Lighthouse lived a rather quiet life watching over the Providence River. A quiet life – that is until the Great Hurricane of 1938 struck Rhode Island and went hurtling up Narragansett Bay. The storm tore the Whale Rock Lighthouse off its foundation, inundated the Prudence Island station and slammed into the Bullock Point Light House. The hurricane badly damaged the dwelling, ripping off much of the siding. All the interior furnishings and supplies were washed away along with the station boat. The keeper somehow escaped the fury of the storm. An inspection after the storm showed that even the granite pier had been undermined and that, coupled with the extensive damage to the station, caused the service to discontinue Bullock Point.

For 62 years the Bullock Point Lighthouse, perched on its granite pier, served commercial and private vessels navigating the Providence River. This unique Victorian lady helped provide safe passage to large passenger vessels headed for New York and other eastern seaboard ports – and it was a friendly and welcoming sight to the numerous pleasure boaters out for a Sunday sail on the river and it seems like… Only Yesterday.

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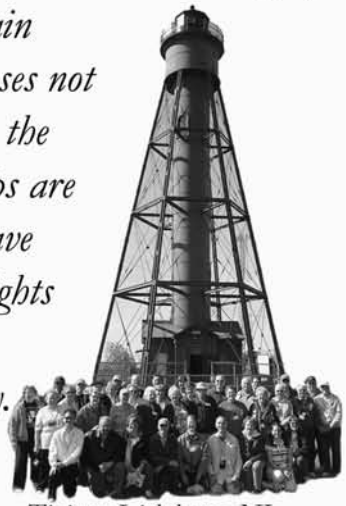
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