

He's preserving nautical past with miniature lighthouses

By **DOREEN E. IUDICA**
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NEWPORT — Robert Dennis would like to think of himself as a bright beacon of hope in the crusade to preserve a piece of America's nautical past.

Dennis, 72, of Middletown, builds miniature replicas of Rhode Island lighthouses both past and present. His 31-piece collection is now on display at the Naval War College Museum as part of an exhibit called, "Lighting the Way, the Lighthouses of Narragansett Bay."

"I want to do something to preserve

American heritage," Dennis said during a recent viewing of the collection.

"Future generations will never know what was there and I want to help them see what was there."

There are currently 11 operating lighthouses in Narragansett Bay, and 18 of the original 33 are still standing. The rest have been destroyed by the ravages of time, weather and sea or were leveled for safety reasons by the Coast Guard.

Dennis, who worked on a 125-foot tender in the now-defunct Lighthouse Service during the 1930s, and later as a Coast

Guardsman, reminisced about the days when lighthouses were maintained by men and the guiding beacons lighting the route to a safe harbor were illuminated by kerosene.

"I've always loved lighthouses and one day it came to me. I said to my wife, 'look, all these lighthouses are deteriorating and disappearing, I think I'll make some models,'" recalled Dennis, a gray-haired, distinguished-looking man with warm, friendly eyes that brighten when he speaks.

That one day was five years ago, and Dennis, who retired from his job as an elec-

tronics technician at the Naval Underwater Systems Center in Middletown in 1975 after 34 years, has handmade 31 of the 33 lighthouses that are or have been in Narragansett Bay.

Dennis begins each approximately foot-high project by searching for a clear, close-up photograph of the lighthouse and then draws a picture of it to 1/87 scale. He uses scraps of wood and copper to build them, orders tiny windows and doors from a model company and finishes them off with color-coordinated paints, paying close attention to minuscule details that give each

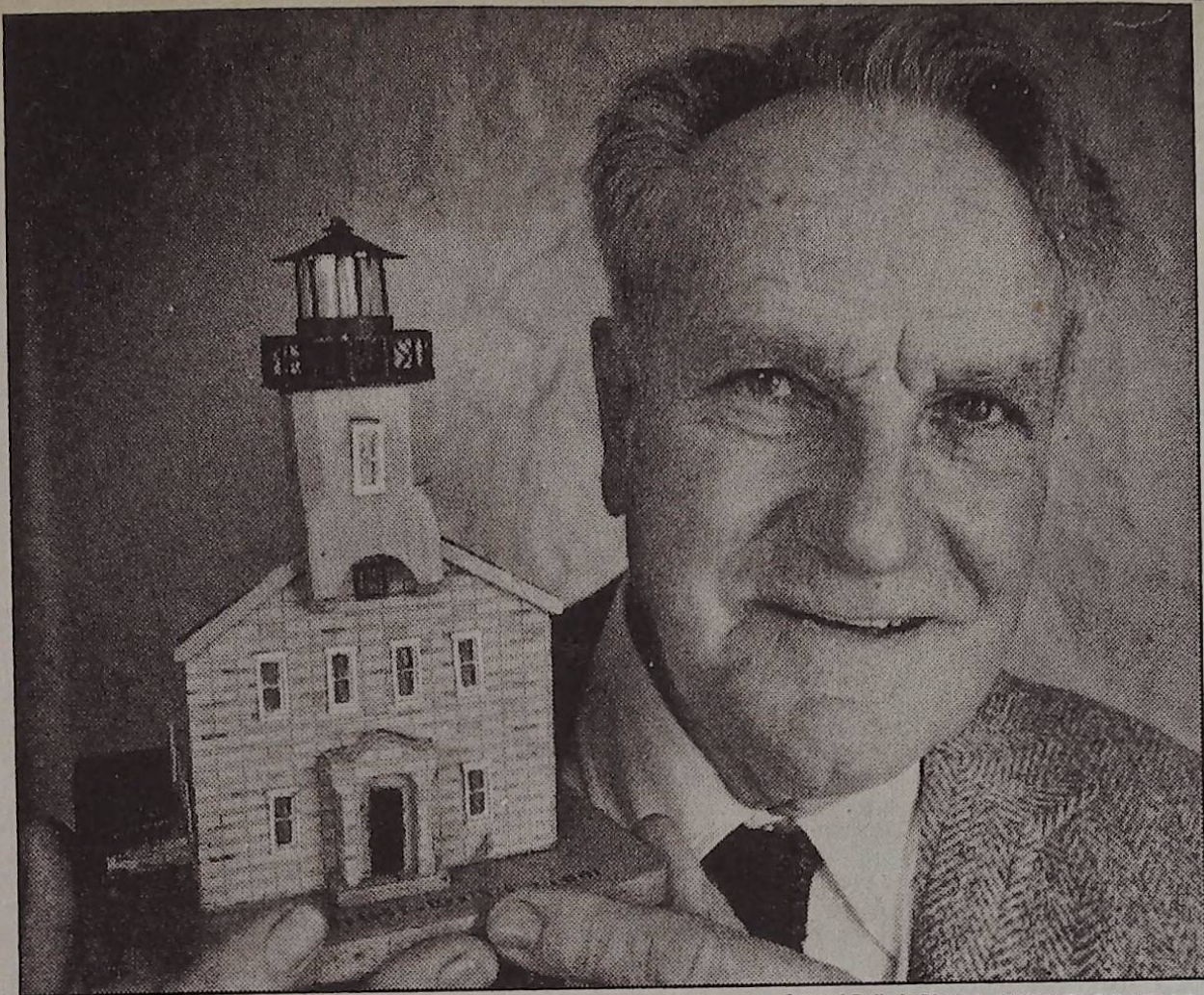
lighthouse its own uniqueness.

"Lighthouses are something that this country had and is losing," Dennis said in between picking up each miniature and pointing out its characteristics.

"It's a way of life that's going out the window, that's going to be gone forever."

A few of the now-defunct lighthouses are being privately restored and a maritime museum is being planned for Beavertail Light in Jamestown. It is the third oldest lighthouse site in the nation and the oldest in Rhode Island, having been built in 1749.

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—Journal-Bulletin Photo by MICHAEL J. B. KELLY

LIGHT TOUCH: Robert Dennis holds a model of Block Island's North Light.

Animal shelters

The **BRISTOL ANIMAL SHELTER**, Minturn Farm Road, has animals in need of homes, as listed by Volunteer Services for Animals.

Several mixed breed dogs are available, including puppies.

Many neutered cats are also available.

Shelter hours are: Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturdays, noon to 4 p.m.; and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. For information call 253-4834 or evenings, 246-0790.

EAST PROVIDENCE ANIMAL SHELTER, Commercial Way, has several animals available for adoption.

Mixed breed dogs available include four young shepherds. Several cats also are available.

The shelter is open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and weekends from noon to 4 p.m.

All pets come with a low-cost spay or neuter certificate. For information, call 438-3720 or 434-6036.

Lighthouse

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With each lighthouse displayed, Dennis also displayed an enviable recall of maritime history and lighthouse lore.

From his memory and more than a bit of study, Dennis knows the lifespan, builder and dimensions of every lighthouse. He knows how badly each was damaged by the 1938 hurricane, and which ones withstood the storm. He knows which lighthouses were manned, the men whose livelihoods depended on them and, especially, how the sea and sailing "will never be the same without them."

Museum Director Anthony Nicolosi said that the inspiration for the collection, which, along with the other displays at the museum, is open to the public weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., was "an important story that needed to be told of lighthouses in the bay."

Nicolosi said Dennis called and visited the museum several times to find pictures and other information about the Ocean State's lighthouses,

and when Dennis took him for a tour of his workshop, Nicolosi said he was "flabbergasted" by the extent of detail and quality of the miniatures.

The exhibit also includes the treasures of local private collectors including paintings, photographs, charts, kerosene lanterns, log books, and a working beacon made with a refracting prism lens.

The museum hopes to feature Dennis' collection during the 200th anniversary of lighthouse service at a convention in Newport next year.

"All 33 of 'em will be there, don't you worry," Dennis promised Nicolosi. "I'm committed to that."

Dennis will complete the collection when he finishes making his miniatures of Mussel Bed Lighthouse on the Portsmouth side of the bay and Southeast Light on Block Island.

"It might take me until next summer, but I won't stop until I make them all," Dennis said, holding a model of Gull Rock lighthouse. "It's too important."