



The Lighthouse Log

Spring 2020

The Quarterly Newsletter of the BLMA

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Spring 2020 Editor Message

Beavertail has that typical Spring feel, following its own pattern even as global events reshape our own. Prepping for the new season is underway. Like everyone else we hope for a return to normalcy as soon as safely possible.

Other events upstaged the station but much has taken place on site since we closed in 2019. We even made the evening news twice:



- The access road to the light station was closed to non-emergency vehicles by RIDEM. Though disappointing in some respects, as the road itself is still capable of handling passenger vehicles, the stated goal is minimizing the chance of pedestrian injuries. More on that later.
- On Feb. 7 a strong front passed through with 70 MPH winds, damaging the older portion of the fog signal building roof. It will require replacement and this is being pursued.

We are pleased the soil mitigation project was essentially completed in February by USCG contractor Renova Environmental. Residual lead paint was removed from an open area around the buildings, a major accomplishment. All that remains is re-seeding of excavated areas.

Ursula Parenteau and Varoujan Karentz completed plans for a redesign of the museum. New displays of the former Halon fire suppression system and other equipment will be available for viewing in the Tower Control Room. The remainder of the museum will undergo remodeling in line with a master plan developed by Ursula and Varoujan. This won't happen overnight but will be done methodically in phases.

As stated above, despite the incredible change in daily activities everyone is coping with, BLMA is preparing for the 2020 season. Due to COVID-19, the Memorial Day weekend opening is uncertain. A modified season schedule may be necessary. The Tower Climb schedule is also being revised. Museum schedules and event details will be posted on our web site when determined. They can be found at www.beavertailight.org.

We hope to hold another 'Night at the Light' event in October, pending updated guidelines for group activities. The first event in 2017 was a phenomenal success, and we would like to recreate that. There would be gourmet food stations from highly regarded area establishments, live music and a silent auction. All this would happen under a party tent so weather will not be a factor.

Elsewhere in this issue: a new slant on the HF Payton shipwreck and a message in a bottle. H.P. Lovecraft and lighthouses and a surreal stroll around the point. Details of the road closure and the soil mitigation work are covered by Varoujan Karentz.

As we await the all clear for season scheduling we know there will be many questions about 2020 events and concerns about parking and access to the museum (in light of the road closure.) New pathways were provided from parking lots 2 and 3 leading to the access road. We are working with the various agencies involved to make access as straightforward as possible.

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Food for thought:

While some buildings were added over the years of necessity (when Beavertail was attended by Keepers) the idea of returning the site to another era was an inspiration. It happened last year, unveiling the uncluttered vistas of 100 years ago. A well regarded American had this to say about preservation of a different park: "Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and for all who come after you, as one of the great sights which every American, if he can travel at all, should see." (Teddy Roosevelt at the 1903 dedication of the Grand Canyon.)

As a reminder if you haven't yet renewed your membership please take a moment to do so. This year will be a distinct challenge, and membership renewals will be vitally important to BLMA.

BLMA looks forward to seeing you in our first year of the new decade, even as the world around us changes. For now please be safe and smart.

Warm regards,

Bob Dutson

Spring 2020 Photos



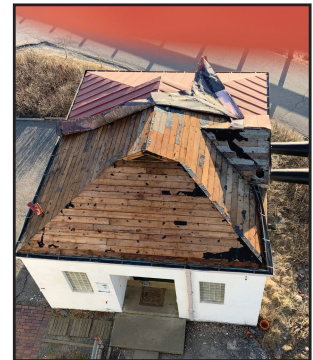
The roadway around the lighthouse was closed to "ordinary" vehicles on Feb. 3 with post barriers, chain attached.



One positive: pedestrians, canines included, are safer on a road free of traffic.



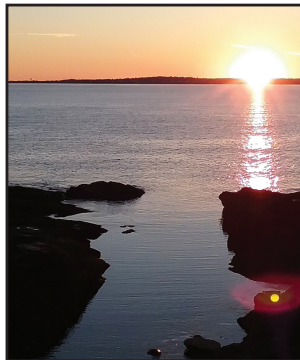
A familiar view with an unfamiliar aspect: excavation work during the soil remediation project. The hole was backfilled.



Fog Signal Building as seen from the tower. The copper roof was damaged again by strong winds on Feb. 7.



A "new" display: Halon 1301 fire suppression system sphere in the Tower Control Room..



Day's end as seen from Bass Alley at the tip of Beavertail. The road may be closed but the view is as beautiful as ever.



Appearances can be deceiving; a jet contrail looks more like steam venting from the old Fog Signal Building.



A new rock artist has arrived at the light station. Painted rock courtesy of Friends of Jamestown Seniors.

Women Keepers

According to the “Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912” at least 144 women ‘were appointed official keepers in their own name. Twice that number were officially appointed assistant keepers’ *

Details are minimal except for those women noted for ‘social standing’ or outstanding accomplishments. The prime example of the latter is Rhode Island’s own Ida Lewis, Keeper at Lime Rock Station, whose life saving efforts earned her fame and presidential commendations. The bulk of women who make up the numbers mentioned above tended US lighthouses dating back to the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century.

The earliest on record is Hannah Thomas. She and husband John Thomas agreed to build a lighthouse on land they owned after the General Court of Massachusetts requested it. The lighthouse was built at the entrance to Plymouth Harbor around 1769-1770, and was active by November 1770. That date is based on a statement of expenses submitted by John at that time for the “Gurnet Lighthouse. “ He tended the lighthouse with Hannah until he left to fight in the War for Independence.

She took over all lighthouse duties at that time and tended the light 7 days a week, day and night. It was a very arduous task given the work needed at that time including carrying whale oil up to the lamps, constant cleaning and daily trimming of wicks. She was the sole Keeper until April 23 1775 when the “lights were extinguished (to avoid aiding the British war efforts) presumably until the war ended.” She remained there after the war until 1786.

** From the Introduction and Chapter II of ‘Women Who Kept the Lights’ 3RD Edition 2013 by Mary Louise Clifford & JC Clifford. In addition to Hannah Thomas, other women keepers with chapters devoted to their notable efforts at the noted locations include:*

Kathleen A Moore, Black Rock Harbor CT 1817-1878

Margaret Stuart, Bombay Hook DE 1850-1862

Rebecca Flaherty, Sand Key FL 1830-1835

Abbie Burgess Grant (2 stations in ME) 1853-1892

Barbara Mabrity 1832-1862

Ida Lewis, Newport RI, 1857 - 1911

and Mary Eliza Bethel 1908-1913, Key West FL

The stories of these and other women will be covered in subsequent issues of the newsletter.

BD



Gurnet Lighthouse at Plymouth Harbor as it appears today, once tended by Hannah Thomas in the 1770's. Photo courtesy Friends of the Lighthouse.

HP Lovecraft Loved Beavertail

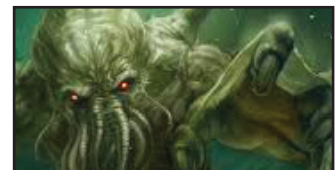
One of Providence’s more memorable residents died in 1937, 15 years before I was born there. So I never met this guy who wrote some of the creepiest books and short stories ever published, anywhere. His works make Kafka and Poe read like Dr. Seuss. (Sorry King fans - he’s a minor leaguer. The big hitters actually used polysyllables.) I googled Lovecraft at Beavertail multiple ways and found no direct connection, but then no place in RI is distant from any other. Plus he wrote numerous horror stories set in coastal settings.

One such was “The White Ship” about a Keeper named Basil Elton. Basil has a vivid dream of a perilous voyage on a white ghost ship, only to wake up on the rocks by his lighthouse. But how did he manage to wake up outside the buildings? If it was only a dream why was there a white ship’s spar lying next to him when he awoke? So Lovecraft wrote about lighthouses and was a world traveler; how could he resist a historic, legendary site in his own backyard?

His favorite “character” was the gigantic, bone chilling monster named Cthulhu. I’m still not sure how you pronounce that. Had this huge dragon-cephalopod hybrid creature ever appeared on our little peninsula, wading ashore while his adoring cult knelt before him, the station would’ve been cordoned off to traffic years ago. Whoever decided to close off the access road may have dreamed of Cthulhu rising up from the ocean near the point. That could drive anyone over the edge.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft will never be ranked among the great American authors like Bellow or Steinbeck. Nonetheless his stories are unique, in a style that’s a mix of visceral horror and Dickens’ grammar. And they are noteworthy enough to inspire a recent movie with the same name as his short story “The Colour Out of Space.” They should not be read by the faint of heart on a stormy Halloween night.

In addition to the lighthouse endangered by Cthulhu shown above, there are many other graphics for his fans. You gotta love those 30-meter tentacles.



Cthulhu menaces a lighthouse keeper, eye to eye

BD



Message in a Bottle

I must have heard that tune 100 times. Anyone within earshot knew why I didn't pursue a singing career. Happily, an engineer doesn't need magical vocal chords. But long before "The Police" were making hits, certainly by age 9, I was intrigued by tales of castaways releasing bottles containing valuable notes. Preferably with a map leading to a chest full of gold and jewels. Today, all you need are GPS coordinates.

But even then I was a bit skeptical; wouldn't a bottle just keep washing up on the beach where it was released? Even with a falling tide? And wouldn't that enrage the frustrated castaway, at least until he accepted his lot and gave up? (And why not enjoy the easy life? There are worse fates than a paradise filled with exotic fruits and other edibles, no work hours, no mortgage, and gorgeous sunsets!)

After a bit of research, I found out my rationale about bottles returning to the sender doesn't really hold water. A musician by the name of Clint Buffington learned of 90+ bottles with messages (as reported by CNN and others) and wrote a book about it. So how hard can it be? Another enterprising individual reportedly sent out some 4800 bottles and got back over 3100 written replies, as further proof that my 'logic' was flawed. A Twitter reply to the 4800-bottles item argued the practice should be construed as illegal, or at least unethical disposal of bottles. Not very green without doubt. The debate led to one retort after another. Then I realized how lucky I am - why indulge the sort of venting that enables certain billionaire Social Media moguls? I can do it in a quarterly Newsletter instead!

To make this relevant let's use a long term perspective. It's quite possible a few 'note-worthy' bottles were discovered off Beavertail. I say 'off' Beavertail because the odds of actually finding an intact bottle on our rocky ledges are pretty slim. The heavy surf would batter it into glass slivers. Perhaps some lucky boater happened upon one floating off the point and rescued it from oblivion. Of course a bottle could be intentionally stashed on the rocks awaiting some sharp-eyed visitor. Maybe even planted and 'found' by the same person, looking for a little short term fame or spicing up a short story?

NOTE: The bottle and message in the photo shown above are fakes; the bottle was left on the rocks by some unknown individual. To my disappointment the note contained a shopping list. I give the author some marks for good penmanship, a talent almost as rare as a thriving glacier. It was even spelled properly, with no cutesy smiles. Not even an OMG or LOL! Which proves the author must be a Boomer or even more ancient. But otherwise, it was quite mundane. Anyway if you want more insights check out ClintBuffington.com. I have no personal hints for the casual bottle hunter myself. Good luck with your search in any case, and keep in touch, especially if you succeed. I'm sure we could find shelf space in the museum for a certified message & bottle. (If perchance you discover a note leading to bona-fide buried treasure, please contact ME DIRECTLY. I can help you secure the loot and invest it wisely.)

BD

Road Closing

This past January RIDEM arbitrarily closed off the vehicle perimeter road around the light station property claiming "Our strategic study on modernizing state parks notes that Rhode Island must do more to make our special places more resilient to the effects of climate change."

The reality of the situation is the road is in good shape and washouts along the adjacent pedestrian path caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 have never been repaired. The closing of the road was done after various agencies could not agree on ownership of the public road or responsibility for repairing its eroding shoulders.

The drive around the light station's buildings, overlooking the sea, has always been a delight to visitors and residents. It provided motorists extraordinary views of ocean waves and rocks without even exiting their vehicles. It had provided the elderly, the handicapped and those just out for a drive scenic beauty unparalleled except perhaps in the state of Maine. Solutions are still under study.

VK



Aerial view of the road which is no longer accessible to vehicles.

2020

Today is April 5 but it's no ordinary Sunday. We've been "quarantined" for what seems like an eternity. Approaching Beavertail Park on foot is now the only way in. The road was barricaded so park visitors won't congregate in large numbers. COVID 19 has taken control. I have to step around huge road barriers as a DEM officer watches from his pickup. He looks tired and bored, probably seen it all.

It's inconceivable that this landmark is now closed to traffic, unprecedented in my lifetime. The park may be physically the same apart from the absence of other people. But there is an unnatural feel about it as if I intrude where I ought not to be. Humans, those in vehicles anyway, have been banished for their own safety. Perhaps nature had a hand in this, calling in the markers from all those who trash the park, taking it for granted. She has advised the guilty ones their visa expired.

Outside the park drivers zoom up to the barricade, determined to get inside. They hit the brakes, make 2 sharp left turns and head back even faster. This thing is temporary but it brings out the worst in some. Walking a dog along the main road (with no breakdown lane) was a bit risky under any conditions but it's outright treacherous now. Ticks in the grass are the least of my concern!

Of course the pandemic has also unveiled the best in people. I have come to appreciate those seniors' support group volunteers and supermarket employees who get minimum wage. Not to mention exhausted medical staff who've earned their pay for the next 20 years in the span of a few weeks, risking their lives and their families as well.

What is happening reminds me of those post-apocalyptic movies or old 'Twilight Zone' episodes. Except there's no mass destruction. Of course the death toll is spiking elsewhere and expected to crest here in RI very soon. Our country already leads the world in cases and deaths. One analogy may be waiting for a tsunami as the ocean slowly retreats from the shoreline. Here on Jamestown there is as yet no major impact, but it already hit the cities with monstrous waves. The water won't recede for years.

It's hard to process those types of images here in the park. Except for the light station and peripheral signs of human activity, it could be the way Verrazzano saw it four centuries ago. I stop at one point and record peep frogs performing their annual symphony. They seem frantic in their need even as Spring is trying its best. New life is visible everywhere in red maple buds, crocuses and Ospreys settling down to nest. It stands in stark contrast to what's going on outside this sanctuary.

Surreal is the word I often hear. It's accurate but it's becoming just another cliché. Perhaps no one foresaw this except the epidemiologists. Anyway, even after a hair raising walk along Beavertail Road back to the village, the strangeness persists. The village is so quiet! Cars sit in driveways though it's mid-afternoon. One neighbor prepares his boat for a new season and we talk for a short while. But it's subdued and we stand well over 6 feet apart; his wife and daughter sit on the porch and wave distractedly.

So I guess we're safe for now. We survived the road hazard. My breath isn't labored and I have no fever, cough or sore throat. My sense of smell is intact. No one I know appears to have contracted the virus. These are small victories but they are so very important too. Tomorrow is another day.

BD

Contaminated Soil Removal Project

After a delay of almost 15 years, the US Coast Guard has nearly completed removal of contaminated soil deposits at Beavertail, caused by the use of lead paint applied to buildings and structures decades ago.

This mandatory project is applicable to all government lighthouses nationwide listed as candidates for eventual transfer to state agencies, municipalities and/or non-profit organizations. Beavertail's soil was twice analyzed, once in 2009 and again in 2016, due to EPA specification limitation changes.

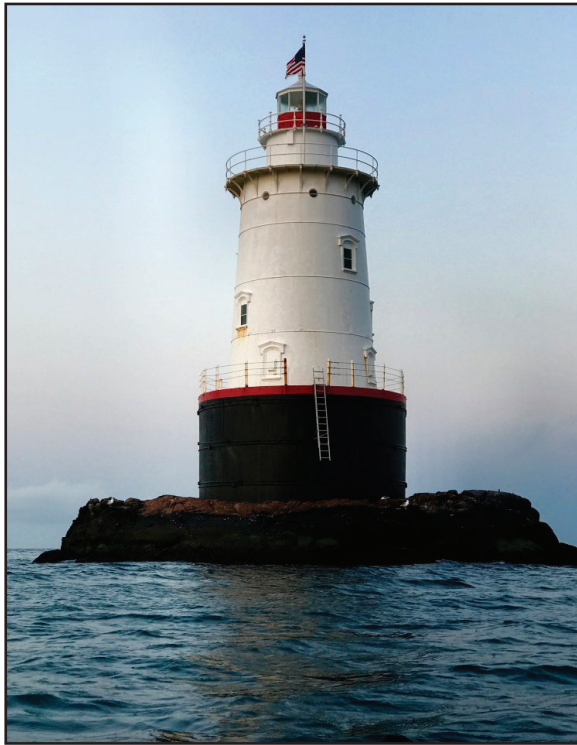
In 2019, funds were finally appropriated for both Watch Hill and Beavertail lights. This past February, Renova Environmental Services of Ocean Township, NJ, the Coast Guard's Contractor, removed the designated "hot spots" and refilled those areas with clean soil. Some contaminants were as much as 3 ft below the surface soil. Since the work was undertaken in mid-winter, the entire site was sprayed with hydro-mulch/flexible fiber to stabilize the area until springtime. The contractor will return this spring, hydroseed the soil with grass seed and remove the straw bales used as erosion control boundaries.

VK



Various perspectives of the project.

Rhode Island's Perilous Coast Sakonnet Point (Part 4)



This is the final segment in the discussion of ships wrecked on Sakonnet Point, at the mouth of the Sakonnet River. Previously detailed were 13 of the 17 known total losses here.

On the day following the loss of the Canadian schooner ANNA CRAIG mentioned in Part 3 of this series, yet another schooner, this one an American fishing vessel, washed ashore and went to pieces near Seaconnet Point. The date was October 7, 1896 when the 73-ton schooner F.S. GRANT fell victim to the same weather conditions noted on the day prior. The news report from Boston indicated that the GRANT was a mackerel fishing boat and struck on Sea Gull Rock, Seaconnet Point. She ran ashore on Sunday and by Wednesday had gone entirely to pieces, but in those few days the rigging of the vessel was saved (in addition to and probably by the crew).¹

Another decade passed before another disaster took place here. This time it was the smallest of the vessels that would end her days just off Sakonnet Point. The IDELLA was a 6-ton sloop measuring just 28-feet in length. It seems odd that someone would be pleasure boating in November but that is the information provided. S.A. Webber was the owner and master of the craft which called Fall River her home port. Details relating to this disaster have not been uncovered including the fate of the master and, if any, the crew or passengers aboard. However, she takes her place in the list of vessels lost at Sakonnet Point.

It would be almost 20 years before another schooner would end her days off Sakonnet Point. The JONATHAN CONE, a 122-ton schooner owned by Gustav Olsen would founder and sink on June 6, 1923. Built in Cooper's Point, NJ in 1855, this schooner had endured almost 70 years at sea. A search of her pedigree has not turned up any evidence of having been rebuilt even once during that period of service, an unusual situation for a vessel that old. Details of her final voyage have also been elusive but as her home port was New York City it is clear that she was northbound at time of loss. She appears on the list of lost vessels in the annual Merchant Vessels of the United States for 1924.

The final entrant to this list of Sakonnet victims was actually put ashore on Seaconnet Point Beach when a fire developed on board. The entire story of her loss, on May 19, 1930, is worth noting here, "The Coast Guard crew of the Price's Neck lifesaving station here figured in an attempted rescue at sea Monday morning, in which the speedboat ASTRID, which left this city [Newport] for Boston, caught fire and was beached almost a total loss. At 7 o'clock the ASTRID was stopped in the East Passage by Boatswain Nickerson of the Price's Neck station, on patrol duty, but was allowed to continue its course when no contraband was found. At 9 o'clock the watchman in the observation tower at Price's Neck saw a boat burst into flames off Horseneck Beach, in the direction of Cuttyhunk, and at once the motor lifeboat, in command of Boatswain's Mate Ellsworth Latham, went to the scene with all possible speed. In the meantime, however, things were happening at the scene. The ASTRID burst into flames as the result of a back-fire, and nothing the crew could do was sufficient to extinguish the flames. A powerboat nearby, engaged in fishing, hastened to the ASTRID and took off the three men who comprised the crew, and brought them into New Bedford. The identity of these men was not made known. When the Coast Guard boat arrived, the ASTRID was in tow of the GORDON T., a fishing boat, which brought the craft to Seaconnet Beach, where it was beached. Examination by the Coast Guard revealed that the speedboat, which is said to be a costly craft, is a total loss." Whether or not anyone identified the original occupants of the boat or conducted any salvage on the beached remains is not known. The boat belonged to Philodore J. Vensult and called New Bedford her home port. She measured 55-feet in length and registered 18 tons.

Since the incident with the ASTRID there have been no other vessels reported to have been totally lost in the immediate vicinity of Sakonnet Point. Vessels lost further offshore are another matter, but that would be a subject for another day.

NOTE: Seaconnet and Sakonnet are variations on the name of the same location.

The “HF PAYTON” Legacy



The HF Payton's ornamental stone slabs emerge at low tide.

In 1859 one of the most famous of area shipwrecks took place during a storm off Beavertail. The schooner HF Payton carried a specialized cargo, namely a number of large ornamental stones. Some of these monolithic granite slabs are believed to weigh nearly a ton. Each was sculpted with floral and other elaborate designs specified by the wealthy patron who purchased them.

The slabs were so large that the various gales and winter storms subsequent to the wreck did very little to move them over many years. Apparently they lay on the bottom where they first settled, unseen and undisturbed, until the great Hurricane of 1938. That epic storm may have produced huge hydrodynamic surges, tossing and flipping the slabs over and over like so many dominoes. Finally they wedged up against the east flank of Beavertail's rock ledges.

They are so close to the shoreline they can be seen at low tide, if one knows where to look. Many fishermen use adjacent ledges seemingly unaware of what's only 30 ft away. More than one study for retrieving one or more stones has been proposed. Their weight and the soft soil at the top of the bluffs make doing so a major challenge.

It appears to me that a mobile crane moved close to the bluff could be mired in the soil or topple onto the rocks. A barge and mounted crane might work if the hoisting cables could be secured safely under a slab, assuming the barge & crane escaped Beavertail's huge underwater rocks. A military helicopter was reportedly considered, at least briefly. The risk to the crew could be immense and the same logistical problems apply with securing the cables.

As I understand it, one of the most straightforward and promising methods discussed is to attach “float bags” to a selected stone. Bags would be tied down with metal cables secured underneath the stone. (The cables would be maneuvered under this stone after it was lifted from the bottom using a hydraulic jack, then hooked together in a way to avoid slipping.) At high tide the bags would be pressurized with air to “float” the stone up off the bottom, and towed by boat to a location where it can be pulled from the water.

The stone is tantalizingly close, and if situated as a display on site would be a great addition to the grounds near the light station. Personally I think it would be perfect as part of the Beavertail experience.

In an imaginative moment, it occurred to me a mammoth hot air balloon might be used. A properly designed balloon could lift it and sail a short distance to the grounds near the museum. What a spectacle that would make! However, the “HowStuffWorks” page states one such balloon would need 65,000 cubic feet of air to lift 1000 lb. We would need a balloon almost twice that size for a slab approaching one ton. (In fact, even that would be too small; the slabs are wedged against rocks or stuck in layers of bottom sand. They may as well be stuck in cement. That force would need to be overcome too.) So it appears the float bag proposal is the most practical and cost effective solution.

Until such time as a stone is retrieved, all we can do is admire them as they re-emerge twice each day at low tide. They are not very fetching at the moment, being coated with marine growth. But they are a unique, well preserved glimpse of local history and deserve a better method of display. If that happens in 2020, it would be a happy moment in an unhappy year.

They're fairly easy to spot so check it out next time you visit. It would be wise to study tide charts first though, because you won't see them when the water is high. Low tide shortly after sunrise is perfect.

BD



BEAVERTAIL LIGHTHOUSE
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BMLA is dedicated to preserving America's third oldest light, providing educational experiences reflecting the best current thinking for all learners and engaging in fund raising activities necessary for enhancing visitor experiences.

Visit us on the web at
www.beavertaillight.org

Our newsletter is published four times per year for members. If you would like to receive each issue immediately after publication please provide us with your updated email address.



Tower Climb Schedule

The tower climb schedule is undetermined at this time, pending updated guidelines for group activities from the state of Rhode Island. We will issue further clarification on our web site when RI announces any changes to state requirements for this type of activity.

If you would like to schedule a tour of the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum please call (401) 423-3270, or email us at info@BeavertailLight.org.

Group Tours & Events

To arrange Lighthouse tours for school or senior groups please contact Mrs. Linda Warner at:
info@beavertail.org

Weddings and private events on the Lighthouse grounds are not allowed by the U.S. Coast Guard.

For scheduling special events, including weddings at Beavertail State Park contact the RI Dept. of Environmental Management (DEM) at 401.884.2010.

At this time BLMA is unable to schedule group tours or events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Until further notice no requests for tours or events can be entertained.