



BEAVERTAIL LIGHTHOUSE MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

# *The Lighthouse Log*

Summer 2020

## *The Quarterly Newsletter of the BLMA*

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## **Summer 2020 President's Message**

Dear Members,

I am pleased to extend warm greetings to all of you in my first President's report and to welcome you to our July Newsletter. I am also excited to welcome Cheryl Vislay as our new Lighthouse Log Editor.

We are now six months into 2020 and it has been an eventful year so far. As you know, in early January, RI DEM closed the loop road around Beavertail to vehicular traffic due to concerns about soil erosion on the perimeter paths. The US Coast Guard began their soil remediation project to remove any lead in the soil around the lighthouse. Then,



in early February, a part of the roof on the Fog Signal Building (the Aquarium) blew off in a windstorm. And, of course, the Coronavirus has been ravaging the world, our country, and our state. Social distancing and wearing masks have become part of our daily life. We had to make the painful but correct decision to remain closed through the end of June and we are now reevaluating our options under Phase 3 of the Governor's reopening plans.

BLMA continues to work with DEM to address concerns about the roof damage and road closure and their impact on our operations in the future. We are reaching out to our state and local officials as well to see if anything can be done to correct the erosion of the paths around Beavertail. We are also seeking grants and other financial support in hopes of getting the roof repaired soon.

Now that the soil remediation project is complete, planting and landscaping are in process. New *Rosa rugosa* bushes have been planted around the Fog Signal Building and, even though we have not opened, our Board has been busy working on different projects. We are using this time to complete repairs, paint and perform other maintenance projects. New displays, story boards and signage have been built for several of our rooms.

Finally, I would like to comment on the special beauty I have found in Jamestown since moving here six years ago. I am not only referring to its physical beauty which is magnificent. During this crisis, I have seen the beauty of community spirit in all the wonderful people who volunteer not just at Beavertail but also at all the other deserving organizations that need our help. I have seen the beauty of community spirit in all the people who are devoting their time and energy to help others in this time of crisis. This is the essence of our community and one I am so proud to live in. It is our hope that everyone will stay safe, stay healthy, and stay well as we work through this together.

Diane Bakley  
President, BLMA

## Removal of Lead Contaminated Soil

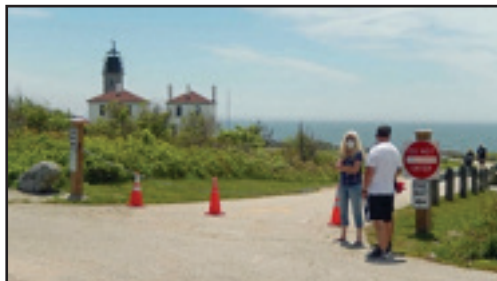
In April 2005, the U.S. Coast Guard convened at the New England Lighthouse Conference in Newport, Rhode Island to explain the process of turning over historic lighthouses considered to be excess property to municipalities and/or non-profit organizations. These actions were to be in accordance with the “Congressional Historical Lighthouse Preservation Act of year 2000.” Beavertail and six other lighthouses were listed in the first group. A complex transfer procedure involving the Coast Guard, General Service Administration and the National Park Service was part of the plan.

The ruling was held up due to Government EPA restrictions that contaminants on the properties would first have to be removed by the government. This in turn required analysis of buildings and grounds. In Beavertail’s case, the issue was lead paint contamination in the soil at various locations around the buildings.

Fifteen years passed and funding was eventually appropriated. In February of this year, the mitigation process was undertaken, and the contaminants were removed and clean soil was filled in along with hydro-seeding the grounds. As to the transfer of the property, “time will tell.” Renova Environmental Services, the government’s contractor, returned to Beavertail in June to plant *Rosa rugosa* bushes and hydro-seed bare areas. All the hay bales and black plastic barriers have been removed with the soil underneath seeded. In total, one hundred and sixty-six tons of soil were removed.



## Perimeter Road Still Closed



*The access road on the last day traffic was permitted.*

The perimeter road encompassing the lighthouse grounds was closed by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) this past January; the road remains closed. While vehicles are prohibited by a chained off barrier, wooden walkways have been installed over a few culverts extending from the parking lot. Americans with Disability Act (ADA) parking spaces are available. It appears that visitors while not taking that scenic drive around the building have no problem taking the short walk down to the museum and the picturesque view overlooking the end of the peninsula.

## Women Keepers



*Ann Neal (Goddard) Shaw and Silas Gardner Shaw  
Donated by the author to Jamestown Historical Society*

According to her granddaughter, even if Ann ‘had a bone in her foot’ and couldn’t dance, her presence in a room lent a happy and spontaneous hilarity to any occasion, making a quite ordinary affair seem unusual and exciting.

Ann Neal (Goddard) Shaw was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1828. Her family had been in these parts from Rhode Island’s inception. In fact, Ann’s ancestor Colonial Governor Benedict Arnold, not to be confused with his great-great grandson the Revolutionary War traitor, once owned the land where the Beavertail Lighthouse now stands. As a child, Ann’s family moved to Key West, Florida. There her father opened a bakery, but when he died of yellow fever a few years later, Ann and her family returned to Rhode Island to settle in Newport.

As an adult, Ann married Silas Gardner Shaw. Silas became Keeper at Beavertail in 1858. This was a position he would keep until 1862 when he was removed (there is a story behind his removal, but it is too long to explain here); he and Ann came back to Beavertail again in 1863. In 1864, Ann became her husband’s seventh and final

Assistant Keeper. More than likely, Ann became the Assistant due to the limited availability of men as the Civil War was grinding on with a new draft of men in 1863. Like most female Keepers of the day, Ann’s salary at \$400 per annum was commensurate with the salaries of the male Assistant Keepers at other lighthouses. Interestingly, Ann was the mother of eight children, ages two to fourteen, at the time. Her last child would be born at the lighthouse the following year. With so many children to care for, it’s likely that Ann’s older children helped fill in for Ann with lighthouse duties.

Ann’s grandfather, George Washington Topham (depicted in the miniature on ivory seen in the daguerreotype above), whose mother was a first cousin of Benedict Arnold the traitor, was an experienced mariner in the East India trade out of Newport. He was lost at sea along with his twelve-year-old son in 1810 according to Ann’s grand- daughter. Other family members, including Ann’s son Joseph, would also perish at sea and now here was Ann on the same ground that her ancestor Colonial Governor Benedict Arnold once owned working hard to prevent shipwrecks by keeping the light at Beavertail lit.

Ann remained the Assistant Lighthouse Keeper until 1869 when the family finally left Beavertail and moved back to Newport.

CV

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





Over the winter months, volunteers have been busy sprucing up the museum with new cabinets, wall displays, cleaning and painting. We now have a dedicated Welcome Center with shelves for brochures, our donation box and guest book. A panoramic drone photo of Beavertail Point allows visitors a bird's eye view of the important location of the Beavertail Lighthouse in Narragansett Bay. A new cabinet holds models of the three Beavertail Lighthouses and it is placed at eye level for our younger guests. We have a new wall panel with information on Fort Burnside during WWII in the hallway and an updated David Melville display in the Lens Room. The Tower Room has been cleaned and fortified, and it will be open to our visitors to browse anytime. We look forward to welcoming you again to explore the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum.

Ursula Parenteau  
Board member  
Building & Grounds Committee

## Over the Winter Months

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## Beavertail Light Towers Models



Four lights from left to right: 1712 Wood Fire, 1749 Harrison Design, 1754 2nd Harrison Design, 1856 Current Design

This year you will see a new exhibit in the Lens Room showing models of the three series of light towers used at Beavertail over the past two hundred and seventy years. Included is a small wood fire replica to remind people that it was commanded to be lit in 1712 to help navigators guide themselves into Narragansett Bay. Most significant is the addition of a model representing the original 1749 light. Since the museum's concept some twenty-five years ago a model was on display based on Colonial records of architect Peter Harrison specifying the diameter of the base, height of the tower and the diameter of the lantern. Our unknown model maker adhered to the dimensions and constructed an attractive circular model with curved wooden stave type features.

In 2008, from an underground radar study of the 1749 lighthouse base, it was determined to be an octagon shaped structure not circular. This was confirmed by John Miller a Peter Harrison authority and historian. The new 1749 model with the correct features including the lantern cage sits along with the existing 2nd 1754 lighthouse model (also maker unknown) and a new 1856 model representative of the present granite structure.

VK

## New Exhibit Room

When the museum was expanded a few years ago, all first-floor rooms in the two Keeper houses plus the Oil Storage building were converted into exhibit areas. Excluded was the Electrical/Battery Control room entrance into the granite tower and the spiral staircase. The Coast Guard permitted us to open the door and cord off the room so visitors could take a glimpse in from the doorway. During tower open days, limited to two days per month, a BLMA docent (Linda Warner) could staff the room and while visitors queue up in the room to prepare to climb the tower, they may listen to Linda's history dissertation about the room and tower.

With the Coast Guard's approval this winter, we installed safety barriers on all electrical switches and potential hazards. As a result, this room became an open viewing exhibit with interpretive signs which provides a closer observation of the electrical control and battery back-up system. In terms of space, this newly opened visitor room added a ten percent increase to the museum's exhibit space and adds information on the functions of the light tower.

VK



*Electrical/Battery room switch controls with spiral stair case leading to the tower*



## Rhode Island's Perilous Coast Beavertail Point (Part 1)

The southernmost tip of Beavertail Point was recognized in the earliest times as being an ideal location for a lighthouse to guide mariners into Narragansett Bay. That point stands at the juncture between two of the three main entrances into the bay like the tip of a spear stuck out into the Atlantic Ocean and like a finger pointing toward Block Island and beyond. And, like most lighthouse locations, it was known as a place where ships could become imperiled day or night. Over the years there have been hundreds of vessels which have found themselves in difficulty at the point and on Newton Rock, just offshore.



Seventeen of them resulted in total loss and are the subject of this series of articles.

On January 19, 1787, the schooner SALLY was inbound from St. Eustatia, a small Caribbean island, for Middletown, Connecticut when she found herself seeking shelter in a winter storm and was cast away near the lighthouse at Beavertail. Communication being what it was at the time, early reports were confusing and at first the wreck was thought to be an outbound vessel heading for New London, but the facts eventually came to light. Captain Stratton and his people (certainly a reference to his crew and not to passengers, though that is not a certainty) were saved, but the vessel became a total loss.

Winter in New England can be brutal and is one of the worst times of year to meet with a maritime disaster. The full-rigged brig MINERVA, homeward bound to Bristol from Copenhagen, Denmark and under the command of one Captain Russell, became another storm victim at Beavertail Point on December 27, 1804 and her master and crew were, with difficulty, saved. It is interesting to note that with nothing even remotely resembling a formal life-saving team or coast guard at this time, all rescues were either performed by the mariners themselves or by locals who lived near the wreck site (something to ponder in those years when there were few who lived nearby). Unfortunately, shipwrecks bring the worst out in people as well as the best and it was little more than two months after the stranding that a reward of \$100 was posted for the return of stolen property from the wreck. The brig brought fine German linen, Russian sheeting and Russian duck among other items of interest from Denmark and these were stolen at the time of or immediately following the loss. It is unclear whether or not the thieves were ever caught and the property restored to the owners.

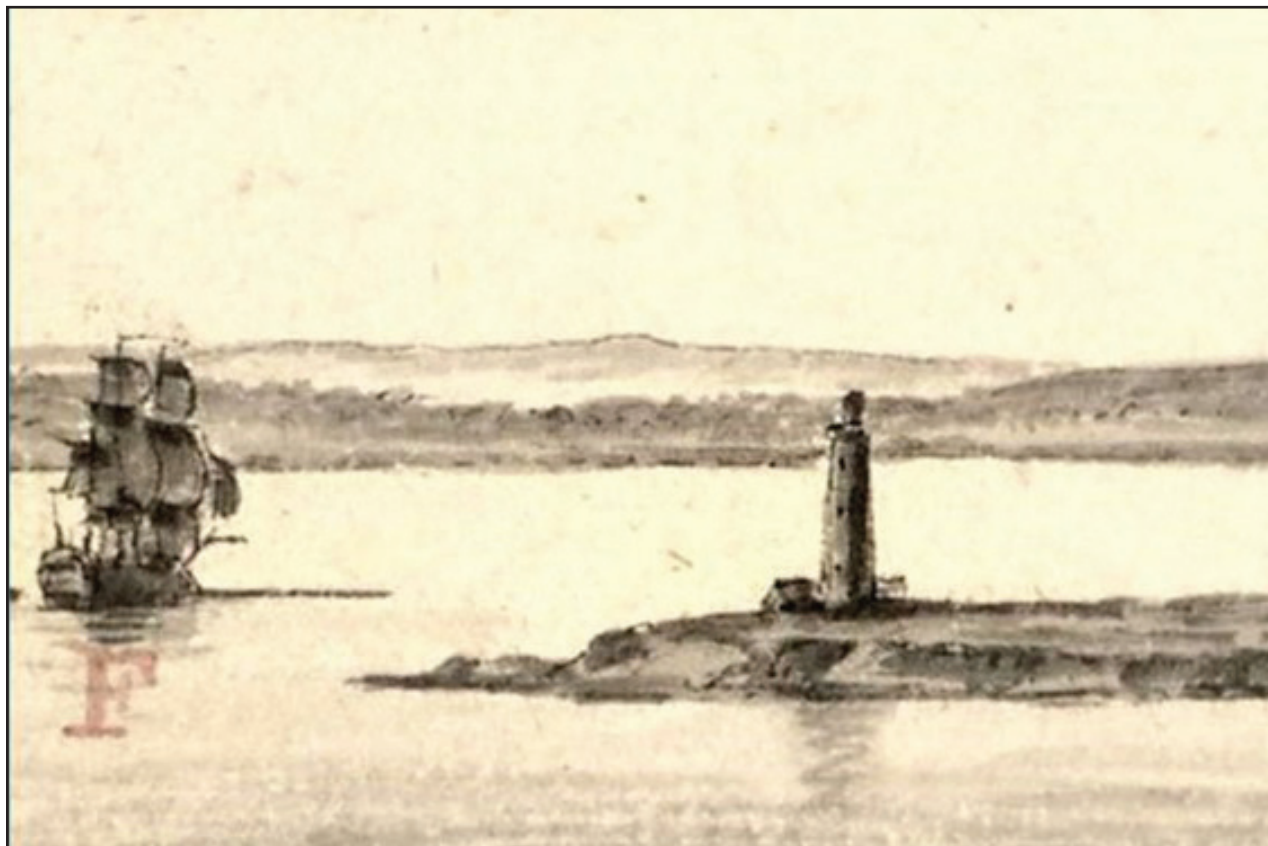
One of the most interesting early wrecks at Beavertail Point occurred on September 29, 1812 and involved the sinking of US GUNBOAT NO. 46. Built in 1806 in New York City, the gunboat measured forty-seven feet in length and at the time of her loss was under the command of 28-year old Lt. Samuel G. Blodget. NO. 46 was one of ten gunboats assigned to Newport under Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry. It is uncertain whether this gunboat was entering or leaving the bay or was on a patrol, but there were eighteen men aboard at the time of the incident half of which were lost including her master. The cause of the loss was reported as her having missed stays two times in the rough weather causing her to be cast away near the lighthouse. Shortly after the incident a diver was dispatched to the wreck and recovered her cannon, anchors, cables and a small quantity of shot (ammunition).

Three years later, on November 19, 1815, a small coastal schooner met with grief here. She was the FRANCES of Newbury, Massachusetts, and she was bound from Boston to Hartford, Connecticut with a cargo that included wine, logwood and juniper berries among other items. The schooner initially ran aground on Brenton's Reef, on the other side of the entrance to the bay, at which time her master, David Coffin, and all but one member of the crew was washed overboard and drowned. Albert West was the sole living survivor when the wreck floated off the reef and was taken in tow by the Sloop GEORGE & MARY. The wreck was brought to the east side of Beavertail and anchored there. Why she was not taken into the bay is uncertain, but most likely the wind was blowing from the west and the eastern side of Beavertail provided the safest anchorage at the time. No one remained aboard the vessel, and on the night following the stranding, the anchor line parted and the FRANCES ended her days on the east shore of Beavertail Point.

In the next edition of the Lighthouse Log the roll call of totally lost vessels on Beavertail Point will continue.

JFJ

## Back in History



*Beavertail Point (Library of Congress)*

With the “Beaver Tail” lighthouse transferred from private ownership to the newly established “U. S. Lighthouse Establishment” in 1789, little documentation about the lighthouse existed until the mid-1800’s. There is a brief report written by Lieut. George M. Bache of Washington City on November 22, 1838 which adds some information.

“It is elevated 98 feet above the level of the sea, and its limit of visibility is 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles. The tower, from which the light is shown, is sixty-four feet in height; the masonry is of rubble-stone, of small size, roughcast on the exterior; it is ascended by an interior spiral stairway of wood, having landings at convenient distances.

The oil is stored under the lower landing. The lanterns contain fifteen lamps, with reflectors, arranged around two circular copper tables, each three feet in diameter. The lower table supports eight lamps, which illuminate every point of the horizon; on the upper table there are seven lamps, the vacant space being towards the land. These are so arranged that the axes of the reflectors in the upper circle of lights are over the spaces between the reflectors in the circle below, an arrangement well calculated to diffuse the light pretty equally in every direction when the reflectors are in good order and properly adjusted; in this instance, however, several of the reflectors are bent from their original forms, which is probably owing to their great lightness, their diameters being 9 inches, and weight from 7 ounces to 1 pound; two of them are very much worn and cracked.”

VK

*Note: this tower stood for 103 years until the present granite tower was constructed in 1856*



BEAVERTAIL LIGHTHOUSE  
MUSEUM ASSOCIATION  
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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.beavertailight.org](http://www.beavertailight.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](mailto:info@BeavertailLight.org).

## **Group Tours & Events**

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