



The Lighthouse Log

Fall 2021

The Quarterly Newsletter of the BLMA

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Published by

Sir Speedy, Cranston

Front Cover Photo

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Fall 2021 President's Message

Hello everyone,

This year our Annual Meeting will be held on Thursday, October 7th at the Fort Getty Pavilion at 4 P.M. We are very pleased that Trudy Coxe, CEO and Executive Director of the Preservation Society of Newport County, will be speaking on "Lighthouses and Mansions – Meeting Complex Preservation Challenges Head On."

The Museum was humming with activity this past summer. We were pleased to welcome several new docents to greet our visitors. Since we couldn't have our usual docent breakfast in May, we plan to celebrate our volunteers with a get-together on October 7th.

We began cataloging and archiving artifacts, documents, and photographs with the help of our intern, Victoria Schultz, who you met in the last newsletter. We were also able to start our Oral History project with her help as well.

Despite the difficulty in getting inventory, we had a very good season in our Gift Shop. And our Tower Climbs were very successful as well. Our last one will be on Columbus Day.

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On the maintenance side, we finally painted the Fog Signal building roof. The husband of a Board Member built hurricane shutters for several of the Museum windows, which came in handy when Hurricane Henri hit Rhode Island in August. Luckily, we sustained minimal damage. In addition, one of our Board members took on the daunting task of cleaning up the basements in both the Keeper's and Assistant Keeper's houses in anticipation of having insulation work done there to protect the buildings.

We continue to work with the RIDEM on their application for ownership of the Lighthouse property which is due to be submitted by October 21, 2021. Hopefully, we will know something by year-end. Enjoy a beautiful fall season!

Best regards,
Diane

An Amazing Summer Internship

Over the summer, I had the amazing opportunity of interning at the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association. From late May until mid-August, I was able to take part in archiving a large number of artifacts and documents displayed around the museum. Having this as my first internship was a fantastic experience, and I could not have asked for a better one.

Working with the various artifacts and documents that BLMA had collected and kept over the years was very interesting and eye-opening. I had the opportunity to archive many of those artifacts and documents into an online database to be used for future online exhibits run by BLMA. While this may seem like an easy task, it was not as easy as it sounded. I had to make sure that I had a picture of said artifact or document and then summarize what this artifact/document was. From there, I had to fill in other fields, such as where the object/document came from or to whom it once belonged. Filling in the data for each item was a time-consuming task as there were many historical artifacts/documents within the Lighthouse Museum. It was an excellent way to use the skills I learned at school and put them to the test!

Aside from archiving the various artifacts and documents, I attended the once-a-month board meetings hosted by BLMA. While the information discussed at the meetings is confidential, I learned more about the museum and its operation. Furthermore, I was able to take notes on the topics discussed and ask questions. Having the opportunity to attend these meetings was informative and eye-opening.

The most interesting thing that I experienced while interning at BLMA was interviewing Mary Dennis, the daughter of Robert I. Dennis. Mary's father had created many of the lighthouse models displayed within the museum. Listening to her speak about her father was very interesting because I learned more about his remarkable life and childhood. I learned about the various contributions that he made as Mary grew up. Robert was actively involved in the Newport Power Squadron, where he taught classes on boating safety, weather and navigation. He was also involved with many other organizations, such as the Middletown Historical Society, Middletown Knights of Columbus, and Odd Fellows. His contributions and involvement had allowed him to make many connections with various groups of people. Aside from his involvement within these organizations, he also fought in World War II. Mary mentioned that while her father would talk about his time fighting in Normandy, he would not talk about the fighting in the Pacific Theater as the experience there was too brutal and difficult for him to discuss.

Beavertail was a wonderful place to spend my first internship! All the people that I met and worked with were very friendly and a pleasure to work with. I hope that I can come back to Beavertail in the future to help out even though my internship has ended.



BLMA Intern Victoria Schultz

Victoria Schultz

BLMA 2021 Annual Meeting

The Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association will hold its Annual Meeting on Thursday, October 7, from 4-6 pm at the Fort Getty Pavilion. The meeting is open to the general public, and light refreshments will be served.

Our featured speaker is Trudy Coxe, CEO and Executive Director of The Preservation Society of Newport County. Topic: “Lighthouses and Mansions, Meeting Complex Preservation Challenges Head On.”

The BLMA Board of Directors hope to see you there!

Update: Transfer of the Lighthouse Property

In 2006, the U.S. Coast Guard declared Beavertail Lighthouse Station “excess property,” making it a candidate for transfer to a municipality or non-profit entity. Thirteen years later, after the government removed 160 tons of contaminated soil, a formal notification was distributed nationwide that Beavertail was available for inspection by any qualified organization interested in purchasing the property.

On July 22 of this year, fourteen organizations visited the site under the guidance of the General Services Administration (GSA) and National Park Service (NPS.)

BLMA, RI DEM, and the Town of Jamestown had partnered under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) months earlier. After 28 years of occupation, BLMA attended the formal inspection meeting while hosting the visiting organizations.

It appears that some attendees were interested in adding buildings at the site to house their museum exhibits, while others wanted to add food courts and a few to expand the site for the use of special events.

On the same date, the NPS sent applications with a 90-day deadline and requests for detailed descriptions on how the applicants would preserve, fund, and maintain the buildings at the site. This process is underway, with RI DEM, as the recipient of the property, and BLMA continuing to manage the preservation and the related educational programs.

Lighthouse Wisdom



“Daughter, there’s virtue in the sea, for both body and soul. Listen to her when you are wrought-up, and see how she calms you—yes, even if she’s pounding on the rocks.”

Beavertail Lighthouse Keeper, Silas G. Shaw to his granddaughter Emily Dunham Hall, *Random Scenes for Nancy*, published in 1938.

Back in History

In 1822, David Melville of Newport, Rhode Island, wrote former President Thomas Jefferson a letter on some changes he was experimenting with in the lantern room. Melville's father-in-law, Captain George Shearman, was the Keeper at Beavertail lighthouse (1816-1829), so Melville had easy access. Melville wrote to Jefferson enlightening him on some of the difficulties facing New England lighthouses during the harsh winter. Melville explained that the whale oil would frequently congeal, causing the lamps to go out—and “in consequence of the collection of frost on the windows, as well as of smoke and soot from the lamps and stoves” a dangerous set of circumstances is created “to the great annoyance of mariners and the significant loss of lives and property.” Melville described the improvement that he made...by which the oil is kept warm by the heat communicated to it from the flame of the same lamp” and that his changes “let air enough admitted to

prevent the collection of frost on the windows of the lanterns.”

Jefferson responded, “Your idea of keeping the oil pilloried by the warmth of the lamp itself is ingenious...”

David Melville was a man before his time. He hoped for a contract with the Federal Government using his new burner design to keep whale oil in the lighthouse lantern warm during winter months. In 1817, he had secured a one-year contract to light the lamp at Beavertail Lighthouse (then called the Newport Lighthouse) with his newly patented invention-gas lighting. Melville had been lighting his home and the corner of Pelham and Thames streets in front of his house with gaslight since 1805. This was decades before gaslight would become available to the general public. Unfortunately, the contract was not renewed at the end of the year, even though Melville's light was brighter, cleaner, and cheaper than whale oil.

Melville would probably be famous today for his work with gaslight except for this fact; the whaling industry supplied the Navy with its well-seasoned seamen. In

Thomas Jefferson Esq, Washington City Jan'y 23^d 1822
 BIXBY COLLECTION
 MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY SAINT LOUIS
 JEFFERSONIANA
 Venerable Sir,
 It is with emotions of extreme regret, that I am necessitated to trouble you with an inquiry relating to the causes of a phenomenon which has fallen under my observation, which I have not been able to account for satisfactorily to myself and which I have not been able to find any body who could account for it either to themselves or me, indeed the greatest number of those of whom I have made the inquiry, doubt the existence of the fact, until they are made evident to them by actual experiment, and then they have generally expressed their astonishment, without being able to explain the causes in nature which produces the effect.
 In order to explain my views in making the inquiry, perhaps interesting to myself alone, and to apologize in some degree for troubling you, I must enter into considerable detail, which I hope will not prove wholly uninteresting to you, Sir, since the object is to promote the public interest as well as my own.
 It is a fact, Sir, with which from your local situation you may not be acquainted, that the Light Houses on the Sea Coast of the United States are rendered almost useless in the Winter season, when they are most wanted, in consequence of the congealing of the oil, which frequently causes the lamps to go out—and in consequence of the collection of frost on the windows, as well as of smoke and soot from the lamps and stoves, to the great annoyance of mariners, & the great loss of lives and property. To obviate these difficulties is a thing

David Melville Letter to Thomas Jefferson, January 23, 1822

1817, not too long after the War of 1812 ended, when the whale oil industry lobbied against using gas to light the lighthouses across the country, the federal government would not approve the use of gas at Lighthouses. The government most likely feared that with the obsolescence of the whaling industry, the government would lose their reliable source of Navy men.

What do you do with a handful of brass buttons?



This past September, Sarah Gleason, a retired RI DEM employee and one of the principal supporters and creators of the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum, decided to donate her collection of documents to BLMA for archiving.

Among Sarah's papers was a collection of lighthouse uniform brass buttons worn by Keepers.

Starting in 1883, the U.S. Lighthouse Service establishment required its Lighthouse Keepers to wear uniforms. The Service believed that requiring uniforms, "...will aid in maintaining its discipline, increase its efficiency, raise its tone and add esprit de corps".

The Service paid for the initial outfitting of all 1,600 Keepers at 673 lighthouses existing in 1885. After this period, the Service required Keepers to pay for their uniforms. Each uniform, in addition to two rectangle insignias, required 14 buttons.

Two manufacturers: Horstmann Brothers, Philadelphia, and Oak Hall Clothing of Boston, made the 22,400 buttons needed for these uniforms.

Seven of these historic buttons and a one inch highly detailed model of Beavertail Light, also donated by Sarah, are displayed in this frame created by Varoujan Karentz.

Did You Know?



At this time of year (late September to early October), thousands of Monarch butterflies flutter thru Beavertail headed south on a 3,000-mile migration to Mexico. Sometimes you may find dozens on a bush. The butterflies stop to feed on the nectar of Goldenrod, Tickseed, and Pye Weed plants before continuing their journey. Sadly, Monarch butterfly populations are decreasing due to loss of habitat, and the use of pesticides and herbicides.

Rhode Island's Perilous Coast Brenton Point and Reef (Part 2)

The Lloyd's List newspaper for Friday, February 23, 1816, offers the following notation "*The Eliza, Gorton of New York, from Havannah, was wrecked 9th ulto. on Brenton's Reef. Crew saved.*" As succinct as this appears, the story behind the loss of the schooner ELIZA is even more amazing. It was about 6 AM on January 10th (not the 9th) that Captain Charles Gorton sailed into Narragansett Bay before dawn. His navigational skills were solid, but



something didn't seem quite right. The guiding light from the lighthouse on Beavertail Point was nowhere to be seen. Ultimately authorities would blame the loss of the ELIZA on this allegation. Nonetheless, the little schooner ran onto the reef. Good fortune favored the crew in two respects. First, all eleven of the crew were lucky enough to be in the vicinity of the quarterdeck when the vessel went to pieces. The deck section broke free of the wreck and drifted away with the helpless mariners aboard, frightened but alive. Second, as dawn broke, someone on shore spotted the wreck and immediately sent a messenger to town for help. The alert went to Oliver Hazard Perry, then commander of the US frigate JAVA, which was fortunately at anchor in Newport harbor. He immediately took charge of a rescue effort that ultimately located and rescued the drifting survivors. Perry and his men saved the entire crew, described as "*a miraculous preservation of their lives.*" A dozen years after the rescue of the mariners from the ELIZA, another schooner, the HENRY bringing a cargo of cotton, flour, iron, and wool from New York City to its homeport of Bristol, R.I., found itself in trouble and on the reef at 3 AM on the morning of January 21, 1828. The 55-ton vessel had been in service for little more than a decade when this incident brought her career to an end. According to James Diman, her master and owner, the cause of the stranding was a defective compass. It seems from the tone of the account of the incident that the weather was not severe - the captain, crew, and passengers made it into the ship's small boat and landed on Brenton Point. Included with the cargo was a small keg filled with specie (coins), said to be worth between \$5,000 and \$7,000. Interestingly, although no lives were in danger, the crew of the revenue cutter took it upon themselves to board the wreck at the risk of their lives to save the specie.

Two years later, during the winter months, a severe storm struck the Rhode Island coast. Captain David Battles and the crew of the Boston-based schooner ANN found themselves in trouble on a voyage from New York City to Newport, R.I. and were driven ashore on Brenton's Neck where the 53-ton vessel immediately bilged. The

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schooner measured 54' x 16' x 6' and was just four years old when launched from Hingham, MA, in 1826. The crew survived to sail again, but the sailing vessel's career ended on December 6, 1830.

There is an unspoken "rule" among mariners that if you see another vessel in trouble, or more importantly if you put another ship at risk of loss, you take every step necessary to aid them in their distress. Unfortunately, over the years, this rule has sometimes been ignored. This was the case with the loss of the 47-ton sloop JULIAN of East Haddam, CT. An unknown Schooner struck JULIAN off the head of Brenton Reef, and she was left to fend for herself. Under the command of Captain Coleman, the sloop was en route from Block Island to Providence with a cargo of paving stones. Luckily, the event took place during the summer months, on August 13, 1837, or the outcome could have been radically different. As it was, those aboard the merchant sloop had time enough only to launch the sloop's small boat and jump aboard, saving nothing but what they had on before their vessel sunk. Authorities never discovered the identity of the colliding schooner.

September 9, 1840, was not a good day for Captain B. Merchant and the crew of the schooner WASHINGTON. Although details of her size are unknown, she was likely a tiny coastal trading vessel. She belonged to and was bound for Edgartown, MA from Bristol, R.I., with a cargo of onions at the time of her loss. Typically, Brenton Reef is a threat to inbound vessels, but this stranding was an exception. She missed her stays in tacking out of the bay and ran onto the reef in short order. The master and crew of the Revenue Cutter VIGILANT provided rescue and helped to strip the wreck of cargo and salvageable rigging. The owner of the WASHINGTON sold the remains as they lay for \$10.50.

The roll call of lost vessels on Brenton Point and Reef will continue in the next edition of the Lighthouse Log.

JFJ

Musical Lighthouse Keepers

A Small Sign!

We understand that Mr. Caleb C. Mumford, of this town, has been appointed keeper of Goat Island Light House, vice Samuel Watson, removed, and that he is to enter upon his duties forthwith. Also, that Mr. Hadwen of South Kingston, has been appointed keeper of Beaver Tail Light House, vice Mr. Gavit removed.

"The Campbells are coming!"

The Herald of the Times, Newport, RI, published this notice more than 180 years ago on September 16, 1841.

Like the game musical chairs, these Lighthouse Keepers didn't know where they might land. Caleb C. Mumford did become Keeper at Goat Island in 1841, but Mr. Benjamin Hadwen was not appointed Keeper at Beavertail Lighthouse; instead, lighthouse authorities assigned him to the Point Judith Lighthouse. Sylvester R. Hazard who had been a Lighthouse Keeper at Beavertail for many years prior was again assigned to Beavertail in 1841. And who is Mr. Gavit? He doesn't show up in lighthouse records for Beavertail and doesn't seem to have landed at any other Rhode Island lighthouse in 1841.

"The Campbells are Coming" is a Scottish song with military associations. Perhaps an inside reference related to the changing of the Lighthouse Keepers.



BEAVERTAIL LIGHTHOUSE
MUSEUM ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 83
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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

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 is open:

October 11 (Columbus Day) from 1:30PM -4:00 PM
(last day open for the season.)

The Museum is open:

Saturday & Sunday

October 2 & 3 from 10:30 AM - 4:30 PM

October 9 & 10 from 10:30 AM - 4:30 PM

Monday October 11 (Columbus Day) from 10:30AM - 4:30 PM (last day open for the season.)

Group Tours & Events

We will announce any updates and/or changes to the schedule on our website at Beavertailight.org.

Weddings and private events on the Lighthouse grounds are not allowed by the U.S. Coast Guard. For information on scheduling events at Beavertail State Park contact the RI Dept. of Environmental Management (DEM) at 401.884.2010.