



The Lighthouse Log

Spring 2019

The Quarterly Newsletter of the BLMA

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Spring 2019 Editor Message



Spring finally arrived after a schizoid winter, mild one day and bitterly cold the next. Snow was much lighter than usual (until winter's end) but those arctic temps were tough to take. And backyards were swamps. Wind blasted Beavertail from every quadrant. But today wherever you look it's green! And if there were any lingering doubts about Spring, the ospreys are nesting all over the island and peep frogs are louder than ever.

At least one local diver doesn't seem to feel the cold. Patrick Monaghan became a fixture at the point over the off season, preparing for a "refreshing plunge" in water temps around 35-38 degrees. I believe he is part polar bear.

BLMA will hold the kickoff brunch for docents on May 5. Eileen Donnelly our new docent coordinator will welcome newcomers and orient them into the museum and tower operations. The schedule for this year's tower climbs appears on Pg 8. As usual we plan to open the museum on Memorial Day weekend, May 25th through the 27th. Weather permitting the tower will open on the 27th from 12PM to 3PM.

We will have refurbished the Oil House exhibits by the time we open and will replace the storm doors before we open. Chimney linings were replaced by stainless liners. Work on heating systems will be done over the next few months. Steve Meade watches over our buildings as B&G coordinator so we stay ahead of future headaches.

The local wildlife is so much a part of Beavertail a note here seems appropriate. Please bear with me on this - the park feels a bit warmer when I spot some creature which survives those frigid nights. Coyotes are audible day and night. There were

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huge buck deer and their deep hoof prints are impressive. Minks are definitely here to stay. The rest of the animals are obviously more wary. No snowy owls were evident, though their more common brethren are a noisy presence after the sun sets. I saw no trace of bobcats or wild turkey either. Maybe I'm just not as observant as I once was.

On a rather disturbing, inexplicable note someone released a dozen chickens in the park area on Feb 4th. They were left to fend for themselves but happily were rescued by volunteers, and brought to a nearby shelter. Apparently the individual in question left grain out for them, as if this might be viewed as a humane gesture! Given the ambient temperatures in February and ubiquitous coyotes, their fate was sealed, but they are in better hands now.

On March 12 the US Coast Guard converted the fog signal from automatic mode to manual actuation only. The old power line under the roadway was replaced by a solar panel supply. For mariners possessing VHF radios, the signal can be actuated by pressing the radio transmit key 5 times on Channel 83A.

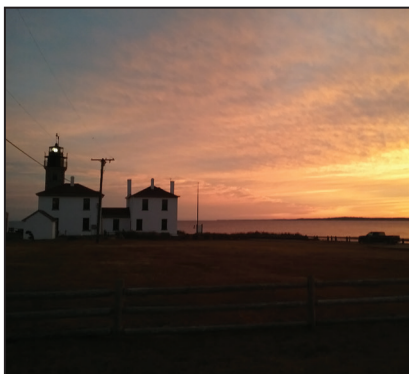
Elsewhere in this issue we continue a four part series about ship disasters near Sandy Point on Block Island. There is an article about lightning strikes. Plus a somewhat speculative bit about an historic Lighthouse Keeper's average day on the job, and what it's like having a museum with five buildings on a small parcel of land. And some ancient Beavertail history, looking back 300 million years give or take.

A bit more recently (three years ago) I inherited the role of Editor from one of the most noteworthy of BLMA's early pioneers, Richard Sullivan. I'm not sure how well I've filled those shoes but time does fly when it's fun. It was also a pain-free way to see some ideas make it to the written page. All the more enjoyable absent the rumors of publishers and editors with immense egos and greedy personal agents. Granted, it doesn't pay the bills but retirement means one's finances better be under control anyway. What it really comes down to is knowing one can always grow and mature, and the stories contributed by others helped me learn along the way. Bottom line: if anything you've seen in The Log over that period of time was of interest, enjoyable or amusing it's been a success. To those who took the time to provide feedback, whether critique or compliment, please accept my thanks. It's been an education so far. What more could I ask?

Warm regards,

Bob Dutton

Spring 2019 Photos



Another spectacular sunset.



The navigational buoy south of Beavertail is all but hidden by a carpet of water vapor during extreme cold temperatures.



Patrick Monaghan after a recent dive in front of Beavertail.

A Day in The Life*

There's no way to fully appreciate a Keeper's typical day in earlier times. Just surviving harsh winters must have been tough, even for someone in a small cabin with no keeper duties. We take refrigerators, central heating & hot water for granted. Getting food, water and adequate heat was a lot of work in the most basic of dwellings.

But on any given day, a Keeper had to manage all those 'simple' tasks and then tend to a fuel hungry light, lugging heavy oil containers up the spiral staircase, and cleaning lenses on schedule. If necessary he or she needed to actuate the fog signal for hours at the same time. (At one point that included feeding and grooming a horse.) Not to mention maintaining the buildings and grounds. On many days the job must have been a grind.



The whole family would be involved once children were old enough for chores, even catching fish for dinner. Looking at old photos in the Richard Sullivan Memorial room those families tended to be large. A distinct advantage since everyone who was physically able would have been assigned a job. The worst behavior would likely be procrastination or laziness, followed by selfishness. Everyone physically and mentally able needed to carry their own load. (Sleeping arrangements would have been cramped to put it mildly.)

Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations were probably understated and austere, but very spiritual. And even on those days the light was hungry too, and had to be kept illuminated. No rest for the weary.

On the upside, as long as a keeper was healthy the job was surely a very gratifying one. Local mariners and ship owners definitely held them in high regard. In reality, it must have been rough. Injuries were probably inevitable, and serious chronic health problems were all too common in those times. Lifting heavy oil containers, slips and falls, infectious disease and respiratory illnesses from cold, damp towers and ocean air surely took their toll. That meant others in the family had to step up.

When her father was unable to continue keeper duties at Lime Rock Lighthouse Ida Lewis took over, becoming a legend after saving many locals from drowning off Newport. At Beavertail wives and sons inherited the job for similar reasons. We have posted in the Lens Room a roster of all past Keepers, including family members who inherited the job. Some Keepers didn't vacate their posts voluntarily; they were fired for neglect or dereliction of duty. Replacements probably worked even harder than usual for a time, bringing the premises back up to speed.

A few old sepia photos of the grounds around our light station and other stations in RI, and more recent color photos, give tantalizing insights into the lives of Beavertail's Keepers. Some hints of what their daily routine was like were taken from logs, lighthouse publications, old newspapers and written accounts. Locating additional photos of keepers or family historical accounts and memorabilia would be a great resource for BLMA. That's the main reason requests for such info, especially photos, have appeared in the newsletter. In their absence we rely on imagination, and old accounts which are often sketchy. But I would wager there is a treasure trove of historical items out there waiting to be shared with members and visitors alike. I remain optimistic they will surface some day.

** Thanks to the Beatles for 'loaning' me the title of their iconic song; a day in a Keeper's life must have been long.*

Photo of former Keeper Peter Lee and family, circa 1871, from BLMA Archives.

Lightning and Lighthouses



The periodicals in our archives have some fascinating info about lightstations, not to mention some quirky (and truthfully, sometimes less than riveting) trivia. Not that the most ‘mundane’ stories don’t have future reference potential. There are some that really stand out from the rest. Included in one article titled “Tempting the Hand of God, Lightning Strikes at Lighthouses” by Elinor DeWire were spectacular photos like the one shown. (The story can be found in The US Lighthouse Society’s Keeper’s Log, Volume XXX.)

It got me wondering how much, if any, history of lightning we have at Beavertail. An interesting web item, if only because it is so recent, includes a night time photo of the station on June 13 2017. Included is a reported lightning ‘bolt’ in clouds beyond the station. The photo was taken from east

of the main buildings and the exterior lighting itself is very bright, no doubt as a result of film exposure time, but it was difficult (for me at least) to actually pick out a lightning bolt from the background sky. Others doubtless have better vision and can see what eluded me.

Thunderstorms pass near or right over the station each season and the tower has been in place since before the Civil War. That suggests several hundred such storms could have exposed it. Nonetheless I couldn’t locate much else about Beavertail (and lightning) on line. There is ample detail about historic events including the famous 1815 Gale and the event most written about, being of course the Great Hurricane of September 21, 1938. In other words, lots of material about wind damage and storm surge but precious little about lightning. Plenty of broken window panes but no molten metal. Which really doesn’t prove one way or another whether there have been few or numerous strikes on site.

It could be that a tall structure in the open (like almost all lighthouses) with a grounded lightning “ball and rod” was expected to be struck fairly often, and events of that type weren’t really newsworthy. After all, mere day to day survival took enough of the keepers’ time, and something as ‘trivial’ as lightning could go unreported. Who knows?

But I believe we’ve been spared the worst of this phenomenon, unlike some other light stations. Looking through those photos adds a lot of impact to DeWire’s article. The research involved is impressive. There are case histories for both US and international stations. Some are literally hair raising and all the more interesting because they are factual.

A major strike with ensuing fire damage at an abandoned Delaware lighthouse necessitated a rebuild just 17 years ago. Elsewhere a keeper paralyzed by lightning managed to crawl down the tower stairs using only his one uninjured arm. Another keeper at Barrenjoey Lighthouse in NSW Australia was killed by a strike while collecting firewood. His more fortunate son took over, surviving a later strike.

A search for the individual with the most confirmed lightning strikes was irresistible. That would be Roy Cleveland Sullivan, who may have never set foot in a lightstation. A former U.S. Park Ranger in Virginia, he may be in the Guinness Book of Records for being struck 7 times (at different times and places) and living to tell about it. He was either the luckiest or the most unlucky man in that line of work, depending on how you look at it. He died in Doods, VA six years after the last strike.

One thing for sure is lightning deserves a whole lot of respect. If there is any sign we might be exposed to lightning during a tower climb a rapid trip back to grade level will be in order. It’s comforting to realize that though we are one of the oldest stations in the US, we are relatively low in height compared to many others, with wide open vistas in every direction. That means a quick orderly descent to terra firma is possible before a storm arrives. And the tower is provided with grounded lightning protection. Perhaps that’s why no once-molten metal is evident. Beavertail may actually be one of the safest light towers around.

The Outbuildings

Our three outbuildings, namely the Oil House, Garage and old Fog Signal Building, don't seem to get much attention. It would be easy to think they might get overlooked or be neglected. The Main and Assistant Keepers' buildings get the lion's share of upkeep of course. That's because they're, well, bigger, comprising most of the museum and are contiguous with the tower and its control room. Our staff are all stationed in those areas and only go to the smaller buildings when needed. So who really needs the other structures? A rhetorical question if there ever was one.

Obviously we do attach considerable value to these detached structures. Over the past 2 years they have all been painted, and the old fog signal building, now an aquarium, was given a new copper roof and electric equipment. The Garage has new overhead doors courtesy of a local contractor. All this was done in accord with historic building requirements and that means the work was not inexpensive.

And of course the Oil House is truly part of the museum now. The exhibits have been upgraded and updated to such an extent the interior bears little resemblance to its former self. Inside one finds the old DCB 24 beacon light, two additional flat screens dedicated to Fresnel lens technology and a donated navigational signal. The story boards were refurbished for the 2019 opening. And there is an old anchor which the observant may notice. It's not really an exhibit but it is in keeping with maritime traditions, so it blends right in. It's hard to believe they all fit inside this tiny structure until you see how well planned the work was.

Most other museums, be they of the 'traditional' sort or like ours, a former lightstation, are housed in one or perhaps two structures. But we have 5 separate buildings here at Beavertail and none of them are taken for granted. We couldn't do that even if we were predisposed to do so, they're part of a historic landmark after all. And several parties are keen on making sure we tow the line.

BD



Fog Signal building during roof replacement



Oil House & Garage in background



A Point of Paleontology

The records are etched in stone. Around 200 million years ago North America, Europe, Asia, Antarctica and Africa were still connected in the so called super continent known as Pangea. Intact fossils of certain species of trilobites (a sort of ancient horseshoe crab) found near Beavertail are very closely related to fossils found in Portugal. They were even older than when those land masses separated, living an estimated 300 million years ago. We're talking ancient history here. These strange looking creatures were not long distance swimmers so they didn't swim across the Atlantic. It's believed they were all one big family which split up when the present continents spread apart. Fossil hunters gave these long lost cousins a family reunion, posthumously. And Beavertail figures in the story, which isn't exactly front page stuff, but it does put us on the map (again.)

The idea of continental drift was already widely accepted, as the continents fit very neatly into one another juxtaposed on a map. Their continued spreading apart even today (at about 1 inch per year) makes a 'glacial' pace look fast. When basically identical fossils were found on both sides of the Atlantic it gave even more credibility to that theory. Beavertail has few accessible fossils now as most of them are concealed under layers of rock. But those which were found are pretty clear cut. What also fascinates geologists and paleologists are the tortured looking 'folds' in the rock ledges all around us. They're visible almost everywhere you look. That's evidence of titanic collisions between the continental plates underlying land masses. Like the O and D lines battling in the trenches in the NFL. This also caused our mountain ranges. When one plate butted up against another the edges pushed upwards, stretching vertically for miles in some cases.

This is very dry stuff, but there are times when coming up with a different slant on the Beavertail story ain't easy. Nonetheless I thought this might be of interest to some members. So recently on one cold, rainy day I was reminiscing about early days at the point. They involved fishing for the most part but I recall that a childhood friend actually made the local papers circa 1969. He found one of those trilobites in a sheet of slate at the point, quite accidentally. I was incredibly envious, as I once had a drawer full of "fern" fossils found in a quarry in Warwick. They are tame by comparison. All I ever brought home from Beavertail was a couple of stripers for dinner.

BD

Rhode Island's Perilous Coast Sandy Point/Northern Block Island (Part 4)



Prior to the end of the 19th century there were no fewer than seventeen vessels totally lost at or near Sandy Point on the northern tip of Block Island. In this final segment of the story, the remaining lost vessels, mostly during the 20th century will be detailed.

Just over a week after the loss of the three-masted schooner **LEXINGTON** during the Portland Gale, another three-master found herself in trouble here. The 387-ton, three-masted Canadian schooner **VAMOOSE** found herself threatened on December 5, 1898. Southbound from Sydney, Nova Scotia for St. John, New Brunswick under the command of Captain Byron Knowlton, the tern schooner found herself

way off course, perhaps blown south by the intensity of the Portland Gale, and was caught in another storm when she ran ashore 120 yards off Clay Head. Her hold was filled with a 600-ton cargo of coal as she ran firmly on the rocks under the fifty-foot bluff. In separate incidents, both the captain and mate were killed at the scene. Two crewmen decided to attempt to build a raft and with great difficulty reached the shore and altered the lifesavers who immediately responded to the scene. The remaining four members of the crew were rescued with great difficulty only moments before the seas tore the stern off the schooner and turned her into splinters.

On May 23, 1901 the schooner **POLAR WAVE**, a moderately sized fishing vessel that was enroute from Boston for Block Island with fish and salt, ran ashore in fog off Clay Head, 2½ miles south of the Life Saving Station at Sandy Point. Captain Warren, her master, had been fishing for six weeks and had 15 barrels of mackerel aboard and did not realize that he was so close to land when the stranding occurred. The vessel was reported well up on the beach without a good chance of rescue. Though the crew was saved, the 90-ton schooner was doomed and would not sail again.

Fourteen years after the stranding of the **POLAR WAVE**, another small fishing vessel ran ashore on Sandy Point and was abandoned. The **ACTIVE** was originally built as a catboat but later had a gasoline motor added a decade before her loss. At 34 feet-in-length she measured only 9 tons. The motorboat was a local vessel which called New Shoreham her home port and at the time of the disaster had been on a fishing trip from that port. Her master's name was Irving T. Latham, the owner of the vessel for just a few months and it was speculated that her loss could have been due to a lack of familiarity with the vessel's handling peculiarities. The sails, rigging and her motor were recovered but the thirty-five-year-old hull was lost.

Nearly twenty years after the loss of the small fishing vessel **ACTIVE**, a 348-foot long steamer became yet another victim to the waters near Sandy Point. The Hungarian steamship **PUSZTA**, in ballast, ran ashore and sunk in fog on April 17, 1934 about 500 yards southwest from Old Britton Rock, southeast of the lighthouse. At 3,733 tons the **PUSZTA** was the largest vessel to become a total loss in this area. Although she was registered to a foreign country, the steamer was bound from Providence to Key West, FL at the time of her loss. Her remains are visited by local divers to this day.

In the fall of 1946 there was another vessel which found herself in trouble and was lost off Sandy Point. This one was the gaff-rigged schooner **FURIOUS DUCHESS**. Owned by Sylva Lareau and being sailed at the time by Donald Lareau, the 16-ton sailing vessel was cruising off Block Island in fair weather. On October 5, 1946 the occupants of the vessel left her in a dory to go ashore for the night and apparently forgot to set the anchor. During the night a storm came up and the 68-foot vessel was wrecked on the beach. Built in Nova Scotia in 1927 the pleasure craft met her end after just nineteen seasons.

In the Fall of 1955, the 85-TON diesel screw vessel **LITTLE STAR** was engaged in fishing for blue fish off Sandy Point when she struck the sandbar off Sandy Point and knocked off her rudder. The six persons aboard the craft came ashore in a motor launch with some difficulty. The craft was valued at \$150,000.

This brings to an end, the discussion of vessels which have been totally lost on or near Sandy Point, on the northern tip of Block Island. There are probably others whose stories remain undiscovered at this writing but perhaps, in time, those will join this record.

Beavertail State Park Crisis

An astounding reduction of both RIDEM personnel staffing and state funding has occurred recently. This has stymied the repairs needed for the washouts along the Beavertail perimeter roadway following damage from Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The pathways are hazardous to visitors of all ages and continue to erode. In addition, maintenance tasks throughout the park have been deferred including replacement of deteriorated interpretive signs.

Funding receipts from state parks, beaches and campgrounds are diverted to other state programs. Both the governor and conservation agencies are attempting to correct this through the General Assembly, which determines annually where those funds are spent.

This past year, due to the lack of funds, repairs for the copper roof for the fog signal building used by DEM naturalists as an aquarium were delayed. This necessitated closing the building until repairs were finished. BLMA saw their plight and repaired the roof using its own funds so they could reopen.

By contacting your state representative you may show your support and concern and help bring an end to this unfair legislative practice.

VK

Beavertail's New Fog Signal



New solar panel



New VHF receiver

This past fall the US Coast Guard circulated a regional "Notice to Mariners" which advised the Beavertail Light Station's fog signal would be terminated and removed. Opposing comments were solicited. Both users & interested parties (including BLMA) convinced the USCG the fog signal was indeed necessary. It serves as both a vital aid to navigation and as a symbol of Beavertail's location as a historic site for development of fog signals for the past two centuries.

In mid-March the CG installed a new system. The Bristol Aids to Navigation team installed new equipment operating by VHF radio signal which will actuate the fog horn. The change is part of a larger initiative by the USCG involving lighthouses across the United States.

The system known as Mariner Radio Activated Sound System (MRASS) has been installed at light stations in fog prone areas of New England, the Pacific Coast and the Great Lakes. It consists of a solar powered VHF receiver, a controller and a bank of storage batteries.

The purpose of this initiative is to replace the less reliable and less efficient VM-100 fog detectors as used at Beavertail. Users are able to activate the new signal by keying the Push To Talk (PTT) microphone of their VHF radio. Either a hand held or fixed VHF radio works by keying the PTT five times within a 10 second interval on VHF channel 81A or 83A (157.075 or 157.175 MHz.)

VK



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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



Tower Climb Schedule

MONDAY MAY 27 12-3	SUNDAY JULY 21 1-4	SUNDAY SEPT 15 12-3
SATURDAY JUNE 8 12-3	SATURDAY AUGUST 3 1-4	SATURDAY SEPT 28 12-3
SATURDAY JUNE 22 1-4	SUNDAY AUGUST 18 1-4	MONDAY OCT 14 12-3
SATURDAY JULY 6 1-4	MONDAY SEPT 2 12-3	

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.