



# The Lighthouse Log

Spring 2022

## *Quarterly Newsletter of the BLMA*

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## Spring 2022 President's Message

Hello Everyone,

We are excited to start our preparations for the 2022 season at the Lighthouse!

Our Docent Coordinator, Nancy Beye, has already reached out to all of our current docents and everyone who has told us that they are interested in becoming a docent over the winter months. Nancy will continue to do blast emails to our docent list so that, before the season starts, we can determine how frequently we can open the Museum. We hope to return to two shifts during weekdays while continuing two shifts on the weekends. Plus, we are working on adding even more information to our Docent Handbook. And good news - we plan to bring back our May Docent Breakfast event where everyone can meet, sign up, have the training, and get acclimated to any changes. More details will follow via email.

Our membership drive is still ongoing so if you have not renewed yet, please go to our website and renew.

Continued on the next page

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This year we are participating in United Way's 401Gives initiative. Powered by United Way of Rhode Island, 401Gives brings people in our communities together to support local nonprofits. The main push for donations will be 24 hours of giving from 6A.M. April 1st to 6 A.M. April 2nd with matching gifts and prizes on 401gives.org. The website will be available until April 4th so please help us and other local nonprofits.

You may have read in the Press about our proposal to have a design of Beavertail on Rhode Island License plates. Beavertail would get a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the plate. Representative Deborah Ruggiero sponsored a bill before the House of Representatives, and it passed the House Committee on Special Legislation in February. We were so pleased that our Town Council and the Jamestown Historical Society provided significant support for the bill at the hearing. We are hoping it will pass the full General Assembly by June. If so, we will be able to take preorders for this plate. This is an exciting project for us and will help us maintain the buildings and museum we love. Stay tuned for more information.

We are proceeding with our Courtyard project and the completion of a new Master Plan for the Museum and Lighthouse. You can find more information on these topics in this newsletter. Our schedule for the new season will be available on our website by May 1st. As I mentioned above, we hope to go back to two shifts daily from 10:30 am-4:30 pm if we get commitments from enough docents.

Best regards,  
Diane

## Memorial: Melissa Warner Burrows



It's not often that we lose a BLMA volunteer, nor one that was always so full of life and in the background year after year helping out at the Museum.

Melissa Burrows, known as Missy, 56 of Jamestown, has gone home to heaven after fighting a very stubborn battle against a breakthrough case of Covid 19. While she outlasted the virus itself, the damage it left behind was more significant than her body could heal.

Missy was an inspired woman filling in voids and resolving matters that came up at the Lighthouse. Be it improving the lighthouse landscaping or correcting the giftshop computer programs, she was always willing to help whenever there was a problem. Along with her husband Ed, she volunteered at many of the special events held at the Lighthouse over the years. Missy, an extraordinary, creative individual, followed in the steps of her mother Linda and father, the late George Warner, as being gifted in many areas. One of those areas

was art. She painted the Lighthouse on rocks, magnets, driftwood, trays, and boxes to sell in the gift shop for the benefit of the Lighthouse.

We will miss Melissa greatly, but she leaves her fingerprints on all that she touched at the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum, and we will never forget her impact there.



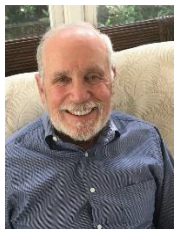
## Give

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 go to the link below to support Beavertail Lighthouse Museum:

<https://www.401gives.org/organizations/beavertail-lighthouse-museum-association>

## Meet Our BLMA Directors

We will feature some of our wonderful Directors in each of the next few issues.



**Bob Bendick**

"I am a former Director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and have been a seasonal resident of Jamestown for more than 35 years. Beavertail Point is one of my favorite places in the world. My roles on the Board are to try to ensure a close working relationship between the Museum and the surrounding state park and to support and contribute to the interpretation of the history and natural history of Beavertail Point and Narragansett Bay at the museum."



**Nancy Beye**

"I am the docent coordinator for BLMA and one of the newest board members. I am a local business owner, Town Council President, EMT with the Jamestown Fire Department and proud mom and grandmother. I love working with people and my position seems to be a good fit for me! The bonus is I get to be at the lighthouse!"



**Varoujan Karentz**

"In 2003, almost 20 years ago, I was asked to write a Business Plan for BLMA. That plan ended up as a Master Plan and a history book of Beavertail Light. In 2006, we started expanding the museum from a two-room venue to encompass all of the buildings on the site, and ended up as the best small museum in Rhode Island. With preservation as the main theme, every room tells the stories of the 273-year-old site. Those accomplishments and working alongside my peers continue to drive my interest to probe further into Beavertail's history and make our museum even better. "



**Leo N. Orsi, Jr.**

"Prior to becoming a full-time Jamestown resident, I had been visiting Jamestown seasonally for the past 50 years. Much of that time while on the Island was spent fishing below the Beavertail Lighthouse. I am now the Chairman of the BLMA Building and Grounds Committee and my responsibility is to oversee the upkeep, maintenance and preservation of the lighthouse and its property. It's an honor and a privilege to be able to contribute service to such an iconic landmark. I treat it as if it were my own home."



**Ursula Parenteau**

"My passion is to research anything related to the Lighthouse and its Keepers, to explore maritime history and Beavertail Park, to make the entire museum visit enjoyable and educational for our guests, and to create new wall exhibits. I also design new instructional signs for the museum and craft graphics for events and fundraiser posters."



**Joan Marie Vessella**

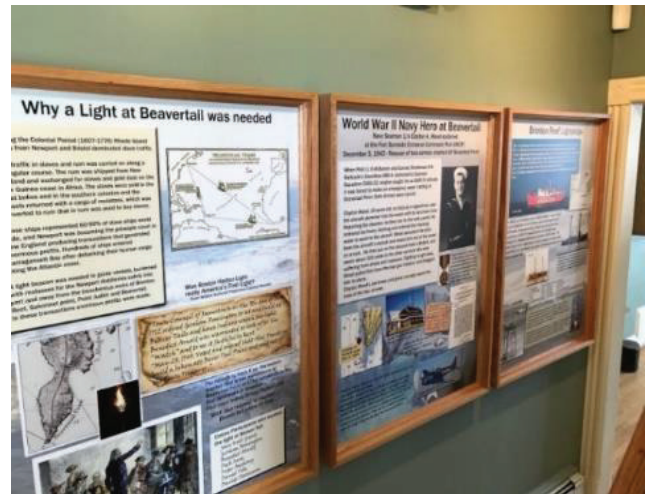
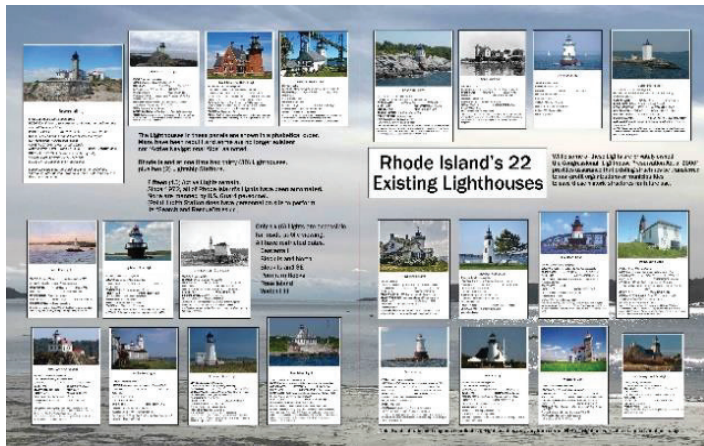
"Being born under the Zodiac sign of Pisces and having maternal grandparents with the last name of Fish, it is no wonder why I have a gravitational pull towards RI's iconic landmark called Beavertail. In 2003, I was searching for a way to fill my retirement days and I became a docent at the lighthouse. Imparting information about Beavertail to visitors from throughout the world was a welcomed offshoot of a 35-year career in elementary education. Before long, I became the Docent Coordinator and Docent Appreciation Reception planner for two years. Then I was asked to help the gift shop buyer. That led to my becoming the book, postcard, charts, magnets, pictures, and posters buyer. I became a BLMA Board Member and have served as its Secretary since 2007. Acting as a hostess or waitress during many Decembers, Open House events and special fund-raising activities has been fun. I also helped coordinate a special Paint Beavertail artistic fundraiser. You couldn't ask for a better place to view wonderful vistas, amazing sunrises and sunsets, yachting races, waterfowl, the crashing surf, and you can feel the refreshing ocean breezes. Beavertail Lighthouse brings happiness to all."



## New Exhibits

A team of BLMA members, Ursula Parenteau, Varoujan Karentz, and David Smith worked together to install three new wall exhibits in the front door hallway. The wall photo in the image to the right shows the new panels. BLMA Director Ursula Parenteau's husband, Al Parenteau, volunteered and crafted the new oak frames.

New storyboards have also been created to replace storyboards in the dedicated Rhode Island Lighthouse



room in the Assistant Keeper's house. More color, attractive backgrounds, improved narratives, and hints of nature make these displays pop! The team, worked together, making what was there better.

## Site Transfer Status

The site transfer process with the U.S Government is still ongoing. The National Park Service (NPS), the government administrators, are now requesting more detailed information and clarification of statements submitted with our application. Therefore another 60 days have been added for RIDEM's responses. The NPS has directed most of the questions to BLMA about how continuous maintenance and preservation projects work now and how BLMA will manage them in the future.

## Site Improvements

The emergency electrical generator is in place behind the Oil Storage Building, awaiting final connections to the main electrical power distribution circuits located in the basement of the Keeper's house. The emergency generator can provide continuous heat in both the Keeper's House and Assistant Keeper's house and, more importantly, electrical power to keep both basement sump pumps operational, preventing basement flooding and bursting water pipes.



## BLMA Master Plan

The new BLMA Master Plan for the future of the site buildings and their educational use has begun to take shape. Newport Collaborative Architects (NCA) are compiling the plan after collecting answers from BLMA Board members in response to NCA's survey questions. NCA is planning a Charette in mid-April where invitees will brainstorm ideas, potential improvements, and feedback on the first conceptual draft of the site's Master Plan. RIDEM has contracted with Beta Group Inc. of Lincoln, RI, to develop a Master Plan for the entire Beavertail State Park, including relocation of roads and the addition of visitor parking lots. The BLMA plan should be completed this summer and merged into the RIDEM plan.

## The Pea Island Lifesavers and their Connections to Rhode Island

In October 1896, Captain Sylvester R. Gardiner, his wife Nellie, their 3-year-old son Tommy, and a 6-man crew sailed out of Providence, Rhode Island on the 133 ft, 373-ton, three-masted schooner, E. S. Newman bound for Norfolk, Virginia. Gardiner, the vessel's owner, and an experienced Sailing Master from North Kingston, RI, may have been mixing business with pleasure as he had family in Virginia, hence the inclusion of his wife and young son on this trip.



*Richard Etheridge (l.) and the Pea Island Life Saving Station Team c. 1896*

As the vessel reached Norfolk, she was caught up in a hurricane and lost most of her sails. Pushed over one hundred miles south past the Virginia/North Carolina border, E. S. Newman ended up in the treacherous "Graveyard of the Atlantic," just off the shore of North Carolina's Outer Banks.

As the waves became larger and larger and pushed through to swamp the thin bar of sand that holds back the ocean from Pamlico Sound, Captain Gardiner tried to steer his

vessel towards shore as best he could with the tatters of his sails. The vessel landed about two miles south of the Pea Island United States Life-Saving station and 50 yards from shore in the dark of night. Gardiner must have been desperately worried about his young son and wife, as he tied them to the Mizzenmast so as not to be swept into the sea. He shot off a flare, knowing that it was unlikely that anyone would see its glare in the heavy rain, wind, and surf. Captain Gardiner could not have known that his vessel grounded near one of the best-trained life-saving stations in the Outer Banks. The Keeper, Richard Etheridge, was the first African American Keeper and his team of Surfmen, the first all-black life-saving station in the United States.

Born enslaved near Roanoke Island, North Carolina in 1842, Richard Etheridge was the son of an enslaver and an enslaved woman. His father was in the commercial fishing business, and Richard learned how to navigate around the Outer Banks with its constantly shifting shoals and treacherous winds. Richard's white half-sister taught him to read and write, which was strictly forbidden by the authorities during slavery. Reading and writing were essential skills for any Keeper who would need to keep the Log Book up to date and follow the large volume manual that dictated the Keeper's daily routine. This prohibition from education made becoming a Keeper nearly impossible for black Surfman of the time.

During the Civil War's Battle of Roanoke Island, Rhode Island's Brigadier General Ambrose E. Burnside learned the hard way how North Carolina's Outer Banks got their nickname. Several of Burnside's Union vessels were stuck on the shoals as they tried to navigate Hatteras Inlet and the surf dashed the ships to pieces. Despite this setback, Burnside delivered a quick victory at Roanoke Island, which emancipated Etheridge. He became part of the Freeman's Colony on the island. Etheridge enlisted with the Union's 2<sup>nd</sup> Colored Volunteers of North Carolina, which later merged to become part of the 36th Colored Regiment.

Etheridge fought at the Battle of New Market Heights, an important Union victory against General Lee's forces, and he earned a promotion to Sergeant. Still, later in the war, Richard Etheridge was a buffalo soldier in the first black Cavalry regiment in Texas. After the war, he returned to North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Lifesaving stations did include both black and white Surfmen at the time, and the teams were known as "checker board" teams, but blacks usually held the lowest positions. Etheridge's nautical and military background gave him an advantage, and he became well known in the Outer Banks as one of the best Surfmen around. A Revenue Cutter Service officer recommended Etheridge for the Keeper's post. When Etheridge was made Keeper at Pea Island, the white Surfmen quit, and later someone burned down the station. With fortitude of spirit, Etheridge carried on, the station was rebuilt and he restaffed his team. Only black surfmen applied. He knew that many would scrutinize his team of Surfmen, and he trained his men with military precision similar to how the Navy Seals and the Coast Guard train today.

Richard Etheridge had suspended the beach patrol for the night due to the intense weather. Surfman Theodore Meekins scanned the horizon at the station for any signs of distress. He thought he had seen something but wasn't sure as the visibility was near zero.

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He continued to scan the horizon and saw the unmistakable light of a flare in answer to a flare that he shot off. Meekins alerted the Pea Island team, and they rushed out to where he had seen the flare. When they reached the wreck of the E.S. Newman, they realized that the surf had inundated the sand with water, and they could not use the surfboat or any of the rescue apparatus needed to attempt such a dangerous rescue. Keeper Etheridge knew what they must do; he and his team of Surfmen, Benjamin Bowser, Lewis Wescott, Dorman Pugh, Theodore Meekins, Stanley Wise, and William Irving, went into action immediately.

Captain Gardiner must have been relieved to see Meekins' flare in response to his own and rescuers on the shore shortly after, but he must have been worried too when he saw that they were attempting to swim out into the surf to get to the E. S Newman. Keeper Etheridge, undaunted by the fact that they could not use the surfboat or life-saving apparatus in the heavy surf, decided to tie Theodore Meekins and Stanley Wise together and have them swim out to the wreck to be pulled back through the surf by the rest of the team. Captain Gardiner must have lost hope as he saw the men struggling as each large wave battered them, yet his hope must have revived as they got closer and closer. Three-year-old Tommy was the first to be rescued. The Pea Island surfmen would swap out surfmen to swim out to the wreck and make eight more trips to save all nine aboard.

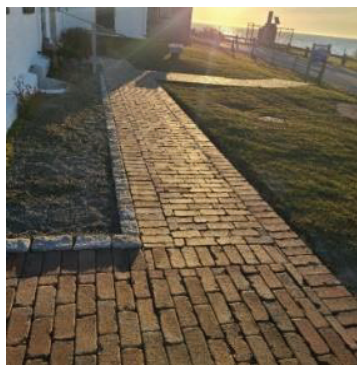
In the past, rescues of this scale always won the rescuers a gold lifesaving medal. The Pea Island Lifesavers received no such recognition. It was not until 100 years later, when a fourteen-year-old student doing a report on the Pea Island Lifesaving station shed light on this incredible story, that these brave men received any recognition.

In 1996, the U.S. Coast Guard awarded the Pea Island Life Savers gold lifesaving medals posthumously. Dwight Meekins, a Coast Guard Captain and the grandson of Pea Island Surfman Theodore Meekins, along with Daniel Gardiner, a Fire Fighter Captain and the grandson of Sylvester R. Gardiner, met to remember the heroic events that took place 100 years earlier. The two met again in October of 2021 to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rescue of E. S. Newman. Daniel Gardiner noted that he would not be alive today if it hadn't been for the heroic efforts of the Pea Island Lifesavers. And, his uncle, the 3-year-old, Tommy, would not have had the chance to grow up to be a successful Attorney and well-known Rhode Island politician in his day.

Richard Etheridge would work at the Pea Island Lifesaving station for 20 years. He died at the Pea Island station in 1900. It continued as an all African-American station until the U.S. Coast Guard decommissioned it in 1947.

CV

## Courtyard



As reported previously, the Courtyard Project was interrupted by Covid 19, which required a new contractor. The landscaping crew, including its owner, were affected, resulting in the contractor withdrawing from the project and the Courtyard Project being held in abeyance. Since the project contained several tasks, including relocating the staff parking lot, we decided to undertake the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirement of widening the brick walkways and bedding the brick surfaces by placing a firm base under the

brickwork for both safety and aesthetic purposes. The contractor has partially completed the walkways on the north, south, and west sides. We expect to commence the Courtyard work beginning in the spring with completion before opening day in late May.



## Rhode Island's Perilous Coast Brenton Point & Reef Part 4

The rocks of Brenton Reef were not particular about vessel type, use, or age. The fishing schooner CLARION was thirty-four years old when she met her end on the reef on May 13, 1866, which, in that era, was pretty old for a sailing craft. Launched in Essex, MA in 1832 and belonging to the fishing port of Gloucester, MA, suggests that she was a staunch and well-built craft. At 67 tons, she was built for fishing at places like Georges Bank or other distant offshore fishing grounds and she likely carried a sizeable crew of fishermen. On her fateful voyage, the schooner was sailing from Gloucester to Newport, but it is unclear whether or not she had a cargo, though there would be little reason for her to make that trip without cargo. Under the command of Captain Morse, she simply piled up on the reef and became a total loss.



Another old-timer who ended her days on Brenton Reef was the schooner ARGUS of Somerset, MA. This 93-ton vessel belonged to the Mount Hope Iron Works and made most of her trips to deliver raw iron for use by the company in manufacturing nails. On this voyage, she brought iron from Troy, NY, to the Iron Works in Fall River, across the Taunton River from Somerset, MA. Captain O. Smith was entering the bay on a Sunday night and judged himself about halfway between Beavertail Light and Newport Light on Goat Island when he ran onto the outer edges of Brenton Reef. His error was mistaking another light on the shore to be the Newport lighthouse. Built in 1840, this workhorse was approaching 30 years of service when the stranding took place on September 28, 1867. The steamer UNITED STATES removed the crew from the merchant vessel and brought the men to Fall River. There were probably as many, if not more, fishing vessels lost here as merchant vessels. On June 10, 1869, the STAR OF HOPE, a fishing schooner from Cohasset, MA, ran onto the reef after mistaking a light. This case was similar to the mistake made by the schooner ARGUS lost two years earlier, but, in this instance, the light was on an anchored schooner named BRIDE. Captain Snow was bringing the HOPE from her homeport of Cohasset, MA, with 110 barrels of mackerel, etc. In just a few days, the STAR OF HOPE went to pieces. She had been stripped of her sails and relieved of most of her mackerel cargo before her loss.

On the same evening as the loss of the STAR OF HOPE another fishing vessel, the 61-ton ISLAND QUEEN met with exactly the same fate on the reef off Brenton Point. She was a Maine-built schooner under the command of Captain Stinson and was carrying a cargo identical to her fellow wrecked fishing vessel. The principal and noteworthy difference in the loss of these two crafts is the source of the light which each mistook for a fixed lighthouse light. Where the error on the part of the STAR OF HOPE was a light on an anchored vessel, the mistake for the ISLAND QUEEN was of a light in a window of a house onshore.

In fact, the newspaper remarked on this problem with the following comment: *"...Hardly a year passes but some vessel is misled and lost from the same cause in entering Newport harbor, and people residing in houses exposed to view from vessels near the reef should be careful and close their shutters after lighting their lights..."*

Another fishing vessel, built in Essex, MA, and sailing out of Gloucester, MA, became a total loss on Brenton Reef on June 4, 1873. This one was named BELVIDERE under the command of a Captain Bradley and likely incoming to Narragansett Bay when lost. The BELVIDERE measured 73' x 20' x 10', displaced 46 tons, and was twenty-two years old at the time of the stranding. The cause of this disaster was fog. Though, like most of the wrecks here, the incident occurred in the evening or at night. She immediately bilged after striking the rocks, and the crew narrowly escaped with their lives. They saved the spars, sails, and rigging before the vessel went to pieces, where she ran aground.



BEAVERTAIL LIGHTHOUSE  
MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 83  
Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835

BLMA 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 and Museum are closed for the winter season.**

**BLMA plans to reopen the Tower and Museum in late May 2022. Please see our website for details on the reopening of the Tower and Museum.**

**To contact the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum please call (401) 423-3270, or email us at [info@BeavertailLight.org](mailto:info@BeavertailLight.org).**

## Group Tours & Events

We will announce any updates and/or changes to the schedule on our website at [Beavertailight.org](http://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 (RIDEM) at 401.884.2010.