HISTORY OF BEAVERTAIL LIGHT HOUSE

Beavertail is the southern point of Conanicut Island which separates the entrance to Narragansett Bay into the East and West Passages. Today there are lights at Point Judith and Dutch Island in the West Passage, and Brenton Reef Tower, Castle Hill and Rose Island in the East Passage, with Beavertail Light at the point of separation of the two entrances to the bay. Thus the importance of Beavertail Light to vessels entering the harbor can be seen. It is conceivable that the early settlers recognized this fact for in the Proprietors' Records for April 1705, is the following entry: "Ordered and made by the authority of this present Council that there shall be a chimney built to the watch house at the discretion of Capt. Stephen Remington." From this it is evident that the watch house had been built some time befor, and the following entries show that it was used.

At a Meeting of the Town Council of Jamestown on 9 June 1712 called by the Govenors order to set a watch and build a Beacon. It was ordered that John Hull grant a warrant to Gershom Remington to warn the Indians to build a beacon as soon as possible, It is further ordered that John Hull grant a warrant to Benedict Arnold to look after the watch and see that it be faithfully kept and if any person or persons should neglect his duty you are hereby ordered to make complaint to the wardens that they may be delt with. It was further ordered that any that shall neglect his watching or warning shall pay three shillings fof his defect by distraint or otherwise. It was ordered that Gersham Remington warn the Indians to build a beacon at Beaver Tail and to come to John Hulls house for his directions as to where and how to make it visible. It was further ordered that the Clerk draw a list and draw the order the watch was to observe, and the Clerk to sign the order in behalf of the Council.

Proprietors Records, 20 May 1740. "Voted and ordered that Abel Franklin build a beacon at Beavertail Point and paid out of the Town Treasury. Voted and ordered that John Wilson is apointed to finish the chimney in the watch house at Beavertail and paid out of the Town Treasury."

Proprietors Records, 17 May 1741. "Voted and ordered that Town Treasurer to pay Abel Franklin for a fence and a gate."

Town Council, 16 June 1744."Voted and resolved that Thomas Carr procure a good stock lock and key for the watch house on Beavertail Point and put the same lock on the south door, and prepare a good bolt for the north door to bolt on the inside. Also Thomas Carr to provide a good and suitable gun or small arm for the use of the town and to deposit the same in the watch house and to be paid out of the Town Treasury."

At this time England was at war with France and any vessel of the enemy was legal pray. Commissions for privateering were granted to Rhode Island vessels and many prizes were brought into Narragansett Bay. Newport became the principal port for these operations and it is conceivable that the beacon and watch house at Beavertail could have been used as an aid to navigation as well as a watch house for an approaching enemy. This possibility, however, is not recognized by the division of the U.S.Coast Guard, in charge of lighthouses.

In August I738 a bank for raising money was issued by the colony. One reason for the issue was "and whereas there is a necessity of building a light house at Beavertail ,which will be of singular service for vessels coming into the harbor at night, and prevent great damage which is occationed for the want thereof." The erection of the light house was authorized, but work was not started because of war breaking out between England and Spain. In I749 the General Assembly appointed a committee with an authorization to build the light house, and this is the date recognized by the U.S. Coast Guard Lighthouse Dept.; making Beavertail Light the third to be erected on the Atlantic Coast. (The first having been erected in I715-I6 on Little Brewster Island at the entrance to Boston Harbor and the second on Brant Point, Nantucket, in I746.)

Mr. Joseph Harrison served on the committee to superintend the erection of the lighthouse which was designed by Peter Harrison, architect of the Redwood Library, Newport, and accepted as America's first architect. Tht lighthouse was described by Dr. William Douglas, as follows "Diameter at base is 24 feet and at the top I3 feet. The height from the ground to the top of the cornice is 58 feet. The gallery is round, and within that stands the lantern, which is about II feet high and 8 feet in diameter."

Unfortunately the construction was of timber and on July 23, I753 only three days after the General Assembly had paid Joseph and Peter Harrison's bill of £329-7s-4p for paint, the structure burned to the ground. Mr. Franklin, the first light keeper continued his duties at night with an ordinary lantern untill a new lighthouse, authorized at the August session of the General Assembly was built. This new lighthouse, designed by Peter Harrison and constructed by William Reed, was built of stone and brick taken from Fort George on Goat Island.

A report (June I754) of the committee in charge states, "We do adjudge that 2 acres of land will be necessary; that is to begin at the point and to extend so far northward as to make two acers, and do also give it as our opinion, that there ought to be a way left on the East side of said land, to extend from the North part of said land down to the point, between where the lighthouse is intended to be built and the dwelling house, for all people to pass and repass." Thus the road to the point was established and it has been maintained for the benefit of the people to this day.

The land upon which the lighthouse was erected was part of that chosen by Benedict Arnold as his share of the original purchase of the Island. Evidently a controversy arose over the purchase of the two acres recommended by the committee, for Josiah Arnold, son of Benedict and owner of the land at the time, was summoned befor the General Assembly "to render a reason, if he have any, why two acres of land, adjoining the lighthouse at Beavertail, is not set off for the use of the colony." Again in May 1755 it was voted by the General Assembly that "Col. Godfrey Malbone, withThomas Wickham and Evan Malbone, be appointed a committee to treat with Josiah Arnold Esq. about the land at Beavertail upon which the lighthouse stands in order to purchase the same from him for the use of said light; that when they shall have agreed, they take a deed from him unto the colony, and draw money out of the treasury to pay for what they purchase; and when the said Josiah Arnold hath made and executed such a deed, that they move him to take upon himself the care and charge of said lighthouse; but if he will not sell and give a deed to the colony, that the committee engage one of the best attorneys in the colony to defend, at the colony's expense, against the said Josiah Arnold, in the suit he hath commenced; and that the said committee take care of the lighthouse untill the end of the General Assembly's next session." This controversy went on for many years and was never satisfactorily settled. In June 1784 an act was passed "Empowering the Indendants of Trade in this state to collect money for the support of the lights in the lighthouse at Beavertail."

The lighthouse was partially destroyed by the British in 1779, when they evacuated Newport, but was repaired and continued in service untill 1854 when a new lighthouse was built.In a report dated November 1838, the old lighthouse was described as being 98 feet above the level of the sea, and it's limit of visibility 15 3/4 miles. The rubble stone tower was 68 feet high, ascended by an interior spiral stairway of wood with landings at convenient places. The oil was stored under the lower landing. There were 15 lamps with reflectors, arranged around two circular copper tables, each 3 feet in diameter. The lower tablesupporting 8 lamps, which illuminated every point of the horizon and the upper table seven lamps, the vacant space being towards the land. The original dwelling, built at the same time as the tower, being to near the water and on a bad foundation, was destroyed in September 1815. The dwelling in existance at that time (1838) had been erected in 1816, the walls of rough stone being "badly laid."

In 1789 the newly formed government of the United States accepted pocession of the title to, and jurisdiction over, the lighthouses on the coast. Beavertail was one of twelve so taken over. On Oct. 12, 1790, President George Washington wrote Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury: "I have received your letter of the 5th instant, the public service requiring the arrangements, which you have made, relative to the lighthouses at Newport (Beavertail) and Portland, they are perfactly agreeable to me and receive my approbation."

However it was not until May 1793 that the General Assembly resolved to transfer the lighthouse to the U.S.Government, "provided, nevertheless, and be it further enacted by the authority aforsaid, that if the United States shall at any time hereafter neglect to keep it lighted and in repair, the lighthouse aforsaid, that then the grant of said lighthouse shall be void and of no effect." Incidently, the salary of the first light-keeper was $160.00 a year.

In 1851 another report states that Mrs. Damaris H. Wheaton was keeper of the light, having taken over upon the death of her husband, who had been appointed light keeper in 1844. Buildings reported in bad repair, "worst built tower yet seen, built of soft shale, not repaired in seven years."

ON August 3,1854, Congress appropriated $14,500.00 for a new lighthouse, illuminating apparatus and a fog signal. The new structures were erected 1855-57. The lighthouse proper was erected farther back from the shore embankment and the new fog signal house was erected approximately on the foundation of the old lighthouse. The light was equipped with a lens apparatus of the third order by Fresnel, and the signal house with a Daboll horn fog signal, operated by an Ericson hot-air engine, which in cold weather took 60 min. to start the fog signal.

Evidently the controversy with Josiah Arnold was not settled to the satisfaction of the government, for in 1889 Congress appropriated $3,500 for the purchase of the land.

New and improved equipment replaced the old from time to time as it became available. The hurricane of 1938 entirely destroyed and washed away the fog signal house, and left exposed the foundation of the old lighthouse, the location of which had been forgotten even by the oldest inhabitants. Onthe foundation of the old lighthouse the Jamestown Historical Society has placed a placque reading:

Foundation of the original
Beavertail Lighthouse
erected in 1749
Third Lighthouse to
be established on
the Atlantic Coast.

In 1939 a new signal house was erected farther back from the shore embankment, and a new and completely modern siren was put into operation. The same equipment, with some modification, is still in use today (1968).

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