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A SHORT HISTORY OF

BEAVER TAIL LIGHT, CONANICUT, RHODE ISLAND

By

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By William Gilman Low

The Island of Conanicut lies fairly parallel with the Island of Rhode Island and, generally speaking, runs north and south, bisecting the lower portion of Narragansett Bay. At its southern extremity a promontory enters the open Atlantic at a spot long known as the "Beaver's Tail." This name is derived from the circumstance of the peninsula originally owned by Josiah Arnold and his brother Benedict having some resemblance in outline to the form of a Beaver.

As though this spot had not been sufficiently prepared as a vantage point for observation of all shipping entering and leaving, Nature laid down under water a series of dangerous reefs skirting the southern shore of the Island of Rhode Island, so that to avoid Brenton's Reef, upon entering or leaving by the so called 'Eastern Passage' it is necessary to pass not far from Beaver Tail. While free from reefs, the 'Western Passage' is likewise so drawn that equally by that route vessels must pass close by. It is true that a narrow strait ending at Tiverton at the extreme northern tip of the island of Rhode Island may be utilized by small vessels, but, for all intents and purposes navigation is confined to the two main passages. For example, when the British fleet, on December 7th, 1776, entered Narragansett Bay, it used the west passage, sailing around the north end of the island of Conanicut, and anchored along the shores of the island of Rhode Island from Portsmouth to Newport Harbor. Now, however, with the exception of one line of Sound Steamers, which has long used this passage, all vessels of consequence enter and leave the Bay by the east passage. In either case they must pass close to Beaver Tail.

Marked out as it is by nature there can be no surprise at its selection by the Indians as a point of observation and a place from which to signal to their associates on the mainland. Authentic records show that prior to 1657 Jamestown was a favorite summer home of the Indian chief Quonanicus. It is known to have been one of the earliest settlements of the Indians and from very early times it was used by them as a great burying ground.

It is not easy to say precisely when the colonists who settled on the island of Rhode Island first recognized the importance of Beaver Tail as a point of observation, but it must have been soon after Newport became an established community, for Newport like Bristol, some twelve miles up the Bay, drew its sustenance largely from the sea. As early as 1635 Roger Williams, owing to his religious views incompatible with the narrow minded bigotry of the Bay Colony, moved to what subsequently became

Providence Plantations and he was soon followed by a group of persons who had also offended the Church Government. Under the leadership of Dr. John Clarke and William Coddington, this little band started with the intention of founding a colony on Long Island or somewhere on the shores of Delaware Bay. As a result of an interview with Roger Williams they went no farther than Narragansett Bay where they remained and purchased from the Indians the island of Acquidneck, now the island of Rhode Island. Owing to the attitude of these newcomers, who unlike the people of the Bay Colony treated the Indians as rightful owners of the soil, they soon established a settlement at Pocasset, subsequently Portsmouth; and not long afterwards a substantial portion of the population moved to the southern end of the island founding the settlement of Newport. It is not without interest to note that the island which was purchased from the Indians approximates closely in size, and is not unlike in shape, to the island of Manhattan, New York. In the records of the first town meeting at Newport there appears the following entry; "It is agreed and ordered, that the Plantation now begun at this Southwest end of the island, shall be called Newport; and that all the landes lying Northward and Eastward from the said Towns towards Pocasset, for the space of five miles, so across from sea to sea with all ye landes Southward and Westward, bounded with the Main sea, together with the small Islands and the grass of Cunnunnegott, is appointed for the accomodation of ye said Towne." It is interesting to observe the different methods of spelling what is now Conanicut as follows: "Cunnunnegott," "Quinunicutt," "Quononaqutt." The subject of the spelling was an Indian chief Quonanicus who, with Miantanomu, were very friendly with Roger Williams and consequently friendly with the settlers at Newport.

Almost at once it is clear that the island of Conanicut was regarded as of importance to the settlers in Newport and on March 10th, 1656, in the Land Evidence Book under that date, occurs the following entry: "For as much as it is frequently declared that of late there have been endeavors used by some who are neither inhabitants of this Island or members of this Colony, to get into their possession and power of disposal the above Island of Quononaqutt. And considering how commodiously ye said Island lieth for enlarging the accomodations of some of us, in regard to ye nearness of it to our dwellings as also considering the great straight that many of us are in, for want of commonage for cattle, therefore and for preventing any forreigners getting into their possession whereby inconvenience and disturbance might possibly, yea and probably arise to ye government of this Colony." "We whose names are hereto subscribed do as above said for ourselves etc. agree as followeth: etc." Some ninety-eight signatures are affixed to the foregoing agreement which led to a purchase from the Indian sachems for a price of one hundred pounds paid in wampum and peage of the aforesaid island. The lands purchased were allotted to the purchasers in the same proportion as the amount subscribed and, in 1657, the southern extremity on which now stands Beaver Tail Light had passed into the possession of Benedict Arnold.

The reference to "Commonage" is to land, long previously cleared by the Indians, for Conanicut like the island of Rhode Island was well timbered and grazing land for cattle was unplentiful.

Speaking of the early good will existing between the settlers of Newport and the neighboring Indians, it seems the irony of fate that both the home of King Philip, who organized the most formidable revolt of our Coast Indians, should have been on Mt. Hope in Bristol and that the "Great Swamp Fight," which finally broke the Indians' power of resistance to the whites, should, in 1675, have taken place in Rhode Island. There is no record, however, of any unpleasantness of this nature in the annals of Jamestown where a settlement was effected after the purchase of the island of Conanicut. While less populous and progressive than neighboring Newport, Jamestown shared in the maritime activities of a very prosperous Colony.

One of the most striking facts connected with the development of this portion of the New England coast is the rapidity with which a large maritime trade developed. As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century Narragansett Bay had become a shipping centre, and from 1730 to just before the Revolutionary War, Newport was at the height of its prosperity, surpassing New York as a commercial centre. Over two hundred vessels were engaged in foreign trade and over four hundred coasting vessels sailed from this harbor, as well as a regular line of packets to London. With all this shipping passing in and out of the narrow entrances it is incredible that Beaver Tail should have been otherwise than of the greatest importance to navigation. As early as 1690 a French fleet of seven privateers appeared off Narragansett Bay and a Captain Thomas Paine, of Jamestown, himself a privateer, sailed out to meet them. With only two ships under his command, Captain Paine did not hesitate to give battle to the enemy, five of whose vessels he engaged off Block Island forcing them to flee and compelling them to sink a prize loaded with wines and brandy.

Privateering while generally recognized in those days as a legitimate, albeit hazardous business in time of war, more frequently than not, verged on actual piracy, being conducted not always under regular letters of Marque. The line between was not too scrupulously drawn and the term privateer or pirate depended somewhat, no doubt, on an individual's reputation among his fellows. It is certain that Narragansett Bay was the home of many daring and reckless seamen of whom the Captain Paine referred to is an excellent example. It is known that he was a good friend of the redoubtable Captain Kidd, a pirate who ended his career on the gallows. Captain Kidd himself visited Jamestown on at least one occasion. It is interesting to note that Lord Bellemont's Journal for September 26th, 1699 refers to an examination he made of Captain Thomas Paine, as "formerly a pirate." It is also worth noting that the same doughty individual was a sufficiently pious and respected citizen to have a commission as Captain given him in the commissioned officers of the town, and to open his home for occasional services to be held there by a worthy divine by the name of Dr. McSparran belonging to the Church of England. Later on, this reckless and defiant spirit of freedom was manifested in lawless conflicts with English revenue vessels. There is

an amusing example of a battle between a one gun battery run by a Captain John Eldred of Jamestown and a British war vessel. The warlike Captain had much enjoyed taking pot-shots at passing English ships from a vantage point on his farm until at length his sport was ended by an indignant landing party. During the War of the Revolution, American privateers swarmed around the British Isles in such numbers as to cause serious inconvenience and alarm to English shipping. At one time it became impossible even to obtain insurance on vessels passing between the west coast and Ireland, a situation somewhat similar to that caused by German submarines in the recent war. Privateering was in fact so successful, and recognized as so important, that the United States Government long declined officially to surrender its right to issue Letters of Marque in time of war.

A somewhat anomalous fact would seem to be the Quaker element. Newport was the first spot in which the Society of Friends was able successfully to establish itself on this side of the ocean. By 1700 Quakerism had affected the entire population of the island. The leading citizens were active members of the Society and the large majority of the settlers of Jamestown were Quakers. Possibly the existence of privateering on a large scale together with the prevalence of the Slave Trader was in spite of the religious convictions of these same "leading citizens," but there seems a possibility also that a distinction was maintained between business and religion, a distinction unfortunately not confined to those times or persons. Any one at all familiar with the difficulties of navigation and the limitation of sail power as it existed in the days referred to, must be deeply impressed as he contemplates the daring, skill and hardihood of these American seamen than whom none stood higher in their profession than the men who sailed from Rhode Island. It is not necessary to be blind to the often iniquitous character of their deeds, nor their callous indifference to the suffering caused by the slave trade in which they indulged, in order to feel for them the keenest admiration. Nor were they alone, their skill was shared equally by their hated rivals the British seamen.

Anyone who, like the writer, watched the frigate Constellation, in the late eighties or early nineties—the precise date is not recalled—beat out from her anchorage in Newport through the east passage under full sail, against a moderate sea breeze, will understand this to the full. It was a splendid piece of work to bring a British fleet of the line up the west passage, passing around the north end of Conanicut, and anchor it in workman-like fashion along the shore from Portsmouth down to Coddington's Cove. No doubt it was done as a matter of course, and all in the day's work, but candor compels a doubt as to where the seamen would today be found to repeat this feat; certainly not in Rhode Island.

Taking into consideration all the foregoing facts it is hard to believe that the settlers in Newport and at Jamestown, from the first, failed to regard Beaver Tail point as a spot of the greatest strategic importance, or one which could be overlooked as a place where regular warning signals should be displayed at night.

The earliest public record, so far obtainable of any such provision, is contained in reference to a "Watch-house" on that spot.

Under date of March 2nd, 1705 the Proprietor's Records of the town of Jamestown states that: "the Town Council ordered that there shall be a chimney built upon the Watch-house at Beaver Tail by the Indians belonging to the town, at the discretion of Captain Stephen Remington." This watchhouse must have met with some disaster, for at the Town Council meeting of June 9th, 1712 called by the Governor's order, the Proprietor's Records tells us that "it is ordered that John Hull grant a warrant to Gersham Remington to warn the Indians to build a beacon as soon as possible; "it is further ordered that John Hull grant forth a warrant to Benedict Arnold, on whose farm the watchhouse stood, to look after the watch and see that it is faithfully 'keept,' and if any person or persons shall neglect his duty, you are hereby ordered to make complaint unto the wardens that they may be dealt withal," and "it is ordered that Gersham Remington shall warn the Indians, viz; Dick, Isaac, Peter, Anthony, Daniel, Tobe, Davide and Stetienson upon forfeiture of three shillings each that is defective to build a beacon at Beaver Tail, and to go to John Hull's house for directions where and how to make it," "It is further ordered that the clerk make a list and draw the orders the watch will observe, and the clerk will sign the order in behalf of the Town Council."

Here we have clear indication of the importance attached by the Town Council to the maintenance of a beacon, watchhouse, and regularly constituted watch at Beaver Tail. It has been suggested that such 'watch' was maintained for the purpose merely of warning the colonists of the approach of possibly hostile vessels, such for example as the French privateers who appeared in 1690, and that the 'beacon' was a supplementary means of accomplishing this purpose. This is hard to believe in view of the known facts. Narragansett Bay was at no time prior to the Revolutionary War, actually entered by a hostile vessel, nor indeed is there record of the destruction of any shipping, injury to any persons or destruction of any property on land by foreign enemies, prior to the War. It must also be remembered that the Colonists were at that time under the protection of British Frigates whose visits on this side of the ocean were not infrequent. A reasonable conclusion is, therefore, that the beacon, watchhouse and watch regularly kept were for the purpose, principally at least, of guiding shipping entering or leaving Narragansett Bay and that it was a calculated effort to fulfill, so far as then thought practicable, the functions of the present day lighthouse.

It is known, of course, that the earliest forms of beacon light did not burn steadily over any length of time, but were rather adapted to intermittent use. They were made from fire balls of pitch and oakum, burned in a brazier of iron, or wire in the form of a basket at the end of a pole. This was a natural development of the wood signal fire of historic significance, better adapted for frequent use and equally effective.

Mrs. E. A. Helmick in her "History of Jamestown and Early Days Around Narragansett Bay," Chapter XIII, makes a rather surprising statement, namely that in 1716 tallow candles with tin reflectors were used

for the first time at Beaver Tail. She states also that in 1719 the General Court of Rhode Island provided for "A great gun to answer ships in a fog." It is possible that the 'beacon' had thus early changed in character into a light to burn steadily even though less vividly, than a fire of pitch and oakum. The thought not unnaturally arises as to the possibility of maintaining such a light as "tallow candles" in any breeze of consequence, unless perhaps in some such form as a hurricane lantern similar to that used on shipboard; a form of illumination necessarily dim. If the candles were burned behind glass windows, for protection, it would seem that the 'beacon' approached close indeed to a 'lighthouse.'

The great gun, on the other hand, was undoubtedly practical and its establishment, if it took place, and was regularly used, would seem clearly to indicate that the purpose of the watchhouse and beacon was primarily that of a regular aid to navigation.

The first public record found available, however, dealing with the establishment of a light at Beaver Tail described as a "lighthouse" appears in an act of the General Assembly on the 23rd day of August 1738, authorizing the establishment of such a lighthouse; but owing to the War with Spain the undertaking was temporarily abandoned.

In May 1740, Abel Franklin was ordered to build "a beacon" at Beaver Tail to be paid for out of the Town Treasury, for which service two hundred pounds was authorized to be paid to Mr. Franklin, and subsequently it was voted and ordered that John Wilson be appointed to finish the chimney in the watch house at Beaver Tail." The date, 1740, when Abel Franklin was directed to build a 'beacon' at Beaver Tail and subsequently John Wilson appointed to finish the chimney on the watchhouse at Beaver Tail, suggests some connection with the five beacons referred to in Arnold's History of Rhode Island, which states that in the year 1739-40, five beacons were established on commanding heights to convey intelligence of any hostile demonstration. The same history, p. 144 states that the "old watch tower" and beacon at Point Judith and Beaver Tail were "renewed" by June 1744.

In June 1749 the General Assembly provided funds for the erection of a lighthouse on Beaver Tail and in August of the same year provided as follows:

"An Act for Regulating the Lighthouse etc.

"Whereas this Colony hath erected a Lighthouse upon Beaver Tail, for the Benefit of Shipping coming into and going out of this Colony: and it being necessary to establish the Rules of keeping and supporting the same.

"Be it therefore Enacted by the General Assembly, and by the Authority thereof, it is enacted, that there be a proper Person appointed by the Committee who built the Lighthouse, to be Keeper of said Lighthouse; and agrees with him upon the best Terms they can: And that he be under the particular inspection of said Committee, who are hereby fully impowered upon such Person's failing in his duty, to remove him, and put another

in his Room from time to time. And said Keeper shall carefully and diligently attend his duty at all times, in kindling the Lights from Sun setting to Sun rising, and placing them so as they may be most seen by vessels coming into or going out from this Colony."

Tax was levied, with certain exception, on all vessels entering the harbors of Narragansett Bay to pay for costs of operating said Lighthouse.

In February 1749 there appears in the Acts of Rhode Island General Assembly that a "Committee was appointed to build a lighthouse at Beaver Tail on the 'island of Jamestown,' alias Conanicut, as there appears a great necessity for a lighthouse as several misfortunes have happened lately for want of a light." The members of this Committee were Captain Simon Pease, Jonathan Nichols, Captain Joseph Harrison, Abel Franklin, George Brown and Josiah Arnold.

Evidently from the above statement referring to 'several misfortunes' the directions issued to Abel Franklin in 1740 to build a 'beacon' at Beaver Tail were either not carried out, or the 'beacon' had proved ineffective. There seems to be little doubt that the earlier beacon and regular watch had been abandoned or had proved unsatisfactory. In any event by the year 1750 the first 'lighthouse' recognized as such was built and regularly operated.

According to information furnished by J. S. Conway, Acting Commissioner, Department of Lighthouses under date of July 6th, 1927, the first lighthouse built on the Atlantic Coast, in fact, the first on the Continent, was built on Little Brewster Island at the entrance to Boston Harbor and is known as Boston Lighthouse. It was built in 1715-16 by the order and at the expense of the Province of Massachusetts Bay.

In a list of the ten lighthouses owned and in operation by the Colonies and taken over by the new Federal Government, on August 7th, 1789 as reported in Mrs. E. A. Helmick's "History of Jamestown, etc." together with the dates of their establishment, Beaver Tail is third, both Boston Light and the light at Nantucket, Brant Point, established in 1746, having precedence. Owing to the situation of Nantucket it may be technically true that Beaver Tail Light was the second strictly 'Coastal' light; on the other hand plain speaking ranks it third.

The character of the first lighthouse built at Beaver Tail is not clearly indicated but at any rate its life was short. In 1753 it was totally destroyed by fire and it is stated, also in the Newport Mercury of March 12th, 1859 that Mr. Franklin, the first lighthouse keeper, continued his duties with an ordinary lantern. No time was lost in making plans for the establishment of a new and more permanent form of lighthouse. In August 1753 there appears in the General Assembly Acts: p. 29. " It is voted and resolved, that Jonathan Nichols and Daniel Jencks Esq., with Mr. William Read be, and they, or the major part of them, are hereby constituted a Committee, for erecting another Lighthouse with stone or brick, at the Place where that lately burnt stood, as soon as they can conveniently, and that the said Committee make use of all the bricks at Fort George,

or such part of them as they shall think proper."

"On June 12th 1754, being appointed to a Committee by the General Assembly, to view and make Return to this Assembly, what quantity of land is necessary for the Government to purchase, adjoining to the Lighthouse on Beaver Tail, which is ordered by the government to be built, do adjudge, that two acres will be necessary, that is to begin at the Point, and to extend so far Northward, as to make up said two Acres, including all the land, beach, and upland, across said neck, from High-Water Mark: 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. As witness our hands, the day and year above written.

Jabey Brown

Christopher Champlin Committee.

Thomas Howland

"And now this Assembly having taken the said report into consideration, Do vote and Resolve, and it is voted and resolved, that the same be, and is hereby accepted; and that Messrs. James Sheffield and William Read be, and they are hereby appointed, and fully impowered in Behalf of the Colony to agree for the above mentioned land with the owners thereof, and make report to this Assembly at this next Session."

Evidently Josiah Arnold did not view with complete equanamity the establishment and maintenance of a lighthouse on Beaver Tail with the consequent loss of a portion of his farm. The establishment of a lighthouse is not always welcomed by the land owner whose property is taken for the purpose. Many years later, on Castle Hill, Newport, summer residents objected, some of them strenuously, to the erection of that small lighthouse which has stood there so long now that it seems almost historic Evidence of difficulty with Arnold appears in May 1755; in the General Acts of the Rhode Island Assembly, p. 21, where it is stated; "This Assembly do vote and Resolve, and it is voted and Resolved, that Col. Godfrey Mallbone, with Messrs. Thomas Wickham, and Evan Mallbone, be, and they, or any two of them, are hereby appointed a Committee, to treat with Josiah Arnold, Esq., about the land at Beaver Tail, upon which the Lighthouse stands, in order to purchase the same of him, with as much land more as they shall think necessary for the use of said Lighthouse: That when they shall have agreed, they take a deed of him unto the Colony, and draw money out of the General 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 of said land unto the Colony, that the Committee engage one of the best Attourneys in this Colony, to defend at the Colony's Expense, against the said Josiah Arnold, in the suit he hath commenced; and that the said Committee, or any two of them, have and take care of

said Lighthouse in the meantime, and until the end of the General Assembly's next Session."

From the foregoing and from the following extract it would seem that justice, in the wrangle over the lighthouse, was not entirely on the side of the Colony, for in August 1759 there appears on page A2 of the same records that;

"What follows is a Report made by the Gentlemen who signed the same;

"We the subscribers being appointed a Committee at the General Assembly held in August last, to examine the Accounts of Josiah Arnold, Esq., arising on the Lighthouse against the Colony, etc. do report, that we have carefully examined the Books of the Naval Office respecting that affair, and find a Ballance due to the said Josiah Arnold of thirty eight Pounds twelve Shillings and six pence Stirling; the same being due the Seventeenth Day of November 1758; and for which he had given him an order upon the General Treasurer £38.2s.6d. Jamestown, February 5th, 1759. Josiah Clarke

William Haszard"

It would seem that Arnold and the Colony came to a satisfactory understanding following this payment, for in February 1760 there appears in the General Assembly Act at page A that;

"It is Voted and Resolved, that Capt. Josiah Arnold with Messrs. William Read and Peter Harrison, be, and they are hereby appointed to put the Lighthouse into good Repair; and that the charge thereof be paid out of the Lighthouse Money. and further it is Voted and Resolved, that the aforesaid Mr. Read, Captain Daniel Ayrault, and Mr. Gideon Wanton, Jun. or the major part of them, be and hereby are constituted a Committee, to audit the Accounts of the Naval Officer, respecting the Lighthouse, and make Report unto the Assembly at their next Session." And further there appears.

"An Act augmenting the Duties on Vessels for the better support of the Lighthouse.

"Whereas the Lighthouse at Beaver Tail is at this time very much out of Repair; and it hath been found by Experience, that the Duties arising on the Navigation of the Colony, are not sufficient for the Maintenance of the said Lighthouse.

"Be it therefore Enacted by this General Assembly and by the authority of the same, It is enacted, that for the Repairing, and better maintenance and support of the aforesaid Lighthouse, the Duty on Vessels in this Colony shall be, and hereby is augmented to the sum of three pounds Old Tenor, on every Coasting Vessel, and to Eight Shillings of the like money per ton, on all other vessels."

It is interesting to note that while Arnold's name appears on the Committee charged with the duty of putting the Lighthouse in good repair

he is not made a member of the Committee appointed to audit the accounts of the Naval Officer through whose hands passed the "Lighthouse Money."

It is quite possible that friction between the two, owing to Arnold's suit against the Colony for moneys owing to him on the 'Lighthouse Account,' may have been one reason for Arnold's opposition. At any rate Arnold was not alone in his attitude for many residents of Jamestown felt it to be unwise to erect a lighthouse in view of the lengthening shadows of the coming revolution.

Just what part Beaver Tail Light played during the Revolutionary War is not precisely clear but Field in his "Revolutionary Defences in Rhode Island" states that prior to the occupation of Newport by the British, in May 1776, a fort was ordered built "at Beaver Tail on Conanicut to contain six or eight heavy cannon."

Apparently the British took a different view of the strategic importance of the place for there is no record that the point was ever fortified by the British, who nevertheless did send the 54th British Regiment to occupy the redoubt on the west side of the island (Fox Hill) about two miles north of the Lighthouse, which they had observed as their fleet entered through the West Passage had been abandoned by the Americans. Mr. W. L. Watson in his treatise entitled "A Short History of Jamestown on the Island of Conanicut, Rhode Island," issued by the Rhode Island Historical Society, from which much of the information used in this article has been derived, states that for a time two battalions of Hessians were stationed at Beaver Tail. Beyond this, however, there is no record of military activity on the point.

When the large French fleet appeared off Newport on July 29th, 1778 it is quite possible that prompt action on their part might have led to the seizure of the island with its garrison of British troops but instead the fleet remained for several days at anchor off Beaver Tail; certainly an exposed and precarious anchorage for heavy ships of the line. Just when Beaver Tail Light was burned is uncertain but in all probability either when the British fleet seized Newport or perhaps more likely prior to the evacuation in 1779. It would be quite in keeping with the spirit of wantoness and vandalism displayed by Captain Wallace and his men when on December 11th, 1775 they burned the undefended town of Jamestown, but as no mention is made of the destruction of the Light on that occasion it seems more likely that it was an act something in the nature of an "Au revoir," on the part of the departing fleet in 1779.

Promptly on the close of the Revolution, in May 1783, it was voted by the General Assembly, "that the duty on all ships and vessels (except Coasters, fishing vessels, wood sloops and vessels employed in bringing stone and sand) be raised 8d. per ton: that the said duty be continued until there shall be a sufficient sum raised to defray the expense of repairing the said lighthouse." Caleb Gardiner, Esq., was appointed to superintend the repairs upon the old lighthouse and he was empowered to borrow sufficient funds at 6 per cent to complete the work as soon as possible. He was, also instructed to lay out a drive way to the light-

house "which shall be free to all persons with horses or carriages passing to or from the lighthouse." A lighthouse was built upon this same site and after the same pattern, with stones taken from the nearby fields and this structure lasted until 1862 when the present lighthouse was constructed by the U. S. Government.*

As soon as the new Federal Government was organized Beaver Tail Light was taken over and operated as a national undertaking. The Act of Congress of August 7th, 1789 accepted the cession of the titles and jurisdiction over ten lighthouses, among which was Beaver Tail Light, and agreed to maintain them.

It is worth noting in this connection that one of the early acts of President Washington regarding lighthouses was a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton on October 12th, 1790 regarding the agreements made relative to the lighthouses at Beaver Tail and at Portland, Maine in which he says: "They are perfectly agreeable to me and receive my approbation." It is interesting to note, also, that in the report of the Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton on July 10th, 1793 the pay of the lighthouse keeper at Beaver Tail, Conanicut, was recorded at $160.00 a year.

In 1812 the Government bought of Mr. Winslow Lewis for $20,000.00 the patent for his "magnifying and reflecting lantern." This was a fountain type lamp and burned from thirty to forty gallons of oil a year. It had three fourth inch burners. Sperm oil was introduced in 1812 in Argand lamps in the Winslow Lewis lanterns which continued in use until the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Some interesting experiments in the use of gas as an illuminant were conducted at Beaver Tail and in 1817 David Melville contracted with the Government to built a gas house and apparatus for Beaver Tail Lighthouse to cover a year's trial. Apparently the experiment proved satisfactory to the inventor, who was far ahead of his time, in thus using gas as a substitute for oil, but not equally satisfactory to the Government. Anyone who has had experience with attempts to change established customs in any government service will sympathize with Melville. There is a hint that the question of reliability of operation, so essential in a lighthouse, may have been a factor, not to mention the additional cost. On August 12th, 1817 Melville notes in his log book: "Found the light out at daylight, the key having been turned during the night, supposed by the Masons boys who are working on the keeper's house and lodge in the lighthouse. Obliged them to quit the lighthouse and find other lodgings, in consequence of smoking cigars in the lighthouse, and carelessness with their lamp, indangering its safety."

On August 5th, 1817, the Government bought for $600.00 three acres more of land for the lighthouse property with the right to go through adjoining properties with supplies and also the right to land with materials for the light.

*Bayles in his History of Newport County gives the date as 1856.

In 1829 a bell house was built near the base of the tower and a fog bell established. In 1851 an air fog whistle and an air trumpet or reed horn was experimentally installed, the air compressor being operated by a horse; then six years later a steam fog whistle was placed in operation. This last it is claimed was first used at Beaver Tail.

The existing Beaver Tail Lighthouse tower was built in 1862.* It is constructed of granite, with a square tower. The upper half of the tower is painted white and the adjacent buildings are likewise white. The lantern is sixty-four feet from the ground and gives 240,000 candle power electric. It was installed in the year 1931. The light is a flash 0.4 second, eclipse 3.2 seconds, flash 0.4 second, eclipse 0.4 second. The fog horn is now operated by oil engines which were installed some thirty-five years ago and still ranks first class. The blast is 4 seconds, silence 10 seconds, blast 4 seconds, silence 50 seconds, a rotating period of 68 seconds. I have myself clearly distinguished the sound as I stood of a calm misty evening on my veranda at Bristol some fourteen miles north of Beaver Tail, far up the Bay, with the islands of Conanicut and Gould intervening.

While by no means occupying as exposed a position, as is the case with some other lighthouses, Beaver Tail has borne the brunt of savage storms from the Atlantic and its watch-house has been several times struck by lightning. An attempt was made on one occasion to put up lightning conductors, but the plan was vigorously opposed by a group of religious men who claimed it was "vanity and irreligious for the arm of flesh to presume to avert the stroke of heaven," an attitude hardly encouraging to the lightning conductor's trade.

There have been various wrecks about Beaver Tail, an account of which would be interesting and worth compiling, but one notable one may be mentioned here. In a letter to her brother, Mr. Thomas H. Clarke, later Supt. of Schools in Newport, Mrs. John E. Watson under date of March 6th, 1859 wrote from her home on the Audley Clarke Farm, Jamestown: "Thursday night we had quite a snow storm and a fine large schooner came ashore near the lighthouse. She was loaded with Granite, Bonedust, Furniture, and other things. The vessel will be a total loss. She was only three years old. They saved nearly $3,000.00 worth of her cargo in chronometers." The salvage of the chronometers it appears was due to the heroic fidelity of the captain of the vessel, the H. F. Payton, and his mate, who in spite of the remonstrances of the crew and others risked their lives to recover the above mentioned property. Incidentally it may be mentioned they lost everything of their own on board the vessel; of such stuff were American sailors made.

One of the most interesting features at Beaver Tail today is the old well dug in 1749. This well, although nearly two hundred years old, serves as a source for drinking water at the lighthouse and supplies water as cool, clear and fresh as it did when originally sunk. The writer has frequently drunk from the oaken bucket after raising it brimming and knows of no water better to the taste. Recently it appears some question having been raised by casual visitors the water was chemically

*See previous reference to "Bayles' History of Newport County" as to the date. Ed.

tested and pronounced excellent in every respect. Most old wells have no such record and the writer questions if another well of equal age and service can be readily found in any part of the country.

One other peculiarity should be noted, namely an unexplained phenomenon known to engineers as a "dead spot." Lying in an arc roughly between Brenton's Reef light vessel and Whale Rock at some short distance away from the Point, occurs a dead zone in the ocean through which no sound from the powerful fog horn will penetrate. Although repeated efforts, by Government engineers, have been made to solve the mystery, no successful conclusion has been reached. The spot is there, remains there, and so far as is now known, will always so remain.

In conclusion the writer is moved to record the following:

Although association, where recollections are always pleasant ones, may well enhance the charms of any spot, association does not in itself make indelible impression such as has the Beaver's Tail on the writer of this article. Much travel and a natural love of the ocean have given him opportunity to enjoy grandeur as well as beauty in many parts of the world, but he returns always in mind, as well as in person, when occasion offers, to enjoy a place which, for him at least, has a haunting and enduring charm.

Authorities consulted by the author include—

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Field's Revolutionary Defences in Rhode Island.

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History of Jamestown and Early Days around Narragansett Bay by Mrs. E. A. Helmick. (Newport Daily News.)

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