WARWICK NECK

A SPECIAL PORTRAIT OF

HISTORIC RESOURCES

COMPILED AND EDITED

BY

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WARWICK NECK IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION 1991

Warwick Neck Lighthouse

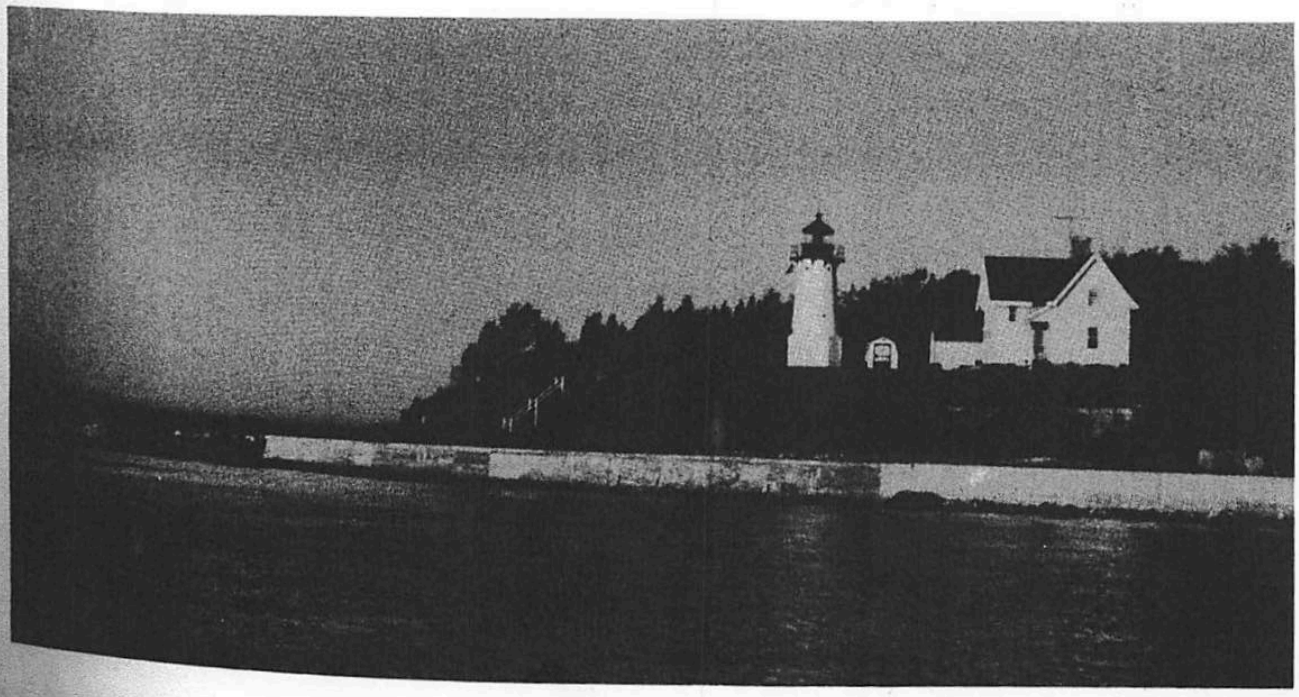
By Don D'Amato

One of Warwick's most famous landmarks is the lighthouse at Warwick Neck. This beacon in 1984 was one of the few remaining "manned" lighthouses on the East Coast. The Coast Guard maintained structure was then the responsibility of Boatswain Mate 1st Class, William Knight. Bill was ably assisted in his many duties by his wife Linda, who is authorized to operate the lighthouse under certain conditions. During their period as lighthouse keepers, the Knights lived in the six-room, 19th century gatekeeper's cottage adjacent to the Lighthouse. They felt that Warwick Neck was one of the most beautiful places they had ever seen and took a great deal of pride in their responsibility.

Warwick Neck has been an especially important area for directing navigation in the Upper Narragansett Bay. There is a general feeling that some type of "beacon light" was at the point during colonial times. Certainly, Warwick Neck played a significant role in that era when it was the site of the ferry that ran from Providence to Warwick Neck, and from Warwick Neck to Prudence Island, and then to Newport.

During the Revolution, in the winter of 1776-77, seventy-eight British warships and transports entered the harbor of Newport. They occupied much of Aquidneck Island and stopped the ferry from Warwick. For a time, Warwick Neck ceased to be a shipping area, but it continued to be a thorn in the side of the British throughout the War. As early as January, 1776, troops from Warwick Neck, under the command of Colonel John Waterman surprised the British at Prudence Island in a daring raid. A short time later a fort was built on the "Neck" very close to the location where the lighthouse stands today. It was from that region that Major William Barton recruited some Warwick men and embarked upon his famous raid which led to the capture of the British commander of Newport, General Richard Prescott. While the capture of this British officer did not alter the course of the war, it did bolster morale in the summer of 1777 when the American cause seemed hopeless.

The British occupation of Newport and other considerations, such as access to crops and provisions of the interior, shifted the major activities from Newport to Providence.



Warwick Neck Lighthouse. Constructed in 1928. Photo 1985. By Bill Nixon

With Providence as the State's most important port, the necessity for a lighthouse on Warwick Neck became more evident. On the 15th of May in 1826, while John Quincy Adams was President, three acres of land at the sothern-most end of Warwick Neck were purchased from the Greene family for $750. In 1827, the lighthouse was built on the site and two years later a house was added. The original house was rebuilt and enlarged around 1889 to its present 6 rooms. All the doors, windows, floors and stairs date back to at least 1889.

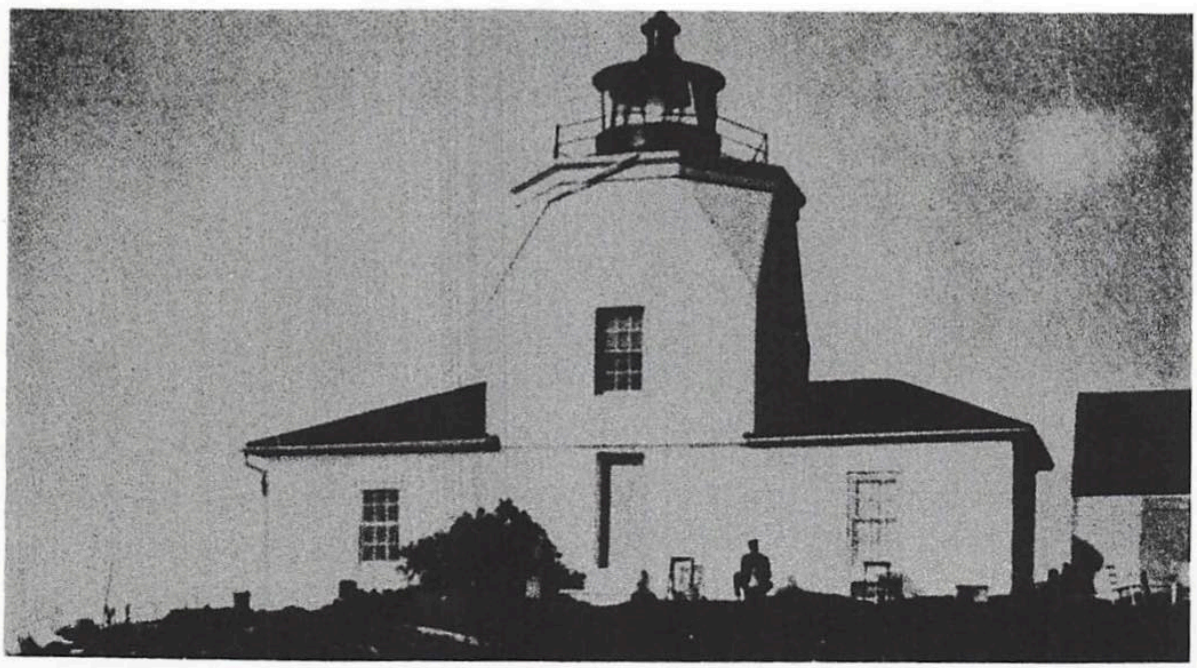
In 1932, the present cast iron structure was built. It was 75 feet closer to the sea until 1939. It was moved to its present location because of the extensive damage done to the foundation by the Hurricane of 1938. The fog-signal was located in a brick building at the foot of the embankment and that has also been moved.

When the lighthouse was built in 1826, and for a considerable time thereafter, it was the responsibility of the Department of Commerce to keep and maintain it. Later, that responsibility was assumed by the United States Coast Guard. From 1939 until recently, it had been a "one-man" station. Before the Hurricane of 1938, it was a two family operation, and once there were cattle on the site and a large barn to house them. In 1957, approximately 1.7 acres were sold by the government and the property was reduced to 1.3 acres.

Lighthouse keepers, in the late 20th centu at Warwick Neck, had many duties, includi maintenance of the tower building, the hor and the generators. The prime responsibili was the care of the 223 candlepower light. Th light can be seen for 12 nautical miles. It on for one second and off for three. It come on 15 minutes before sunset and shuts off minutes after sunrise. Care of the bulbs an mirrors is crucial. There are 2 bulbs in the light house, each one with the capacity of shinin for 4,000 hours and only one bulb works at time.

Another major responsibility of the light house keepers is taking care of the fog signa The foghorn is activated when visibility decreased to 5 miles. Bill Knight used Hop Island as a sighting spot during the daylight hours If he could not see the island, which is 5 mile from Warwick Neck, he activated the foghorn The same procedure was used at night, onl instead of Hope Island, Bill set his sights o Electric Boat which is 4.8 miles from the station There are occasions when a fog bank along th shore at night obscures the Electric Boat facility and in that case Bill would go out to the poin to sight other lights at the bridge and in th area. When the foghorn is activated, it send offa blast that can be heard for 5 nautical mile or 9 land miles. The horn releases a blast ever fifteen seconds, and lasts for two seconds.

The foghorn, Knight said, provoked the larges



Old Warwick Neck Lighthouse. Constructed in 1827. Photo c. 1900.
Courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society

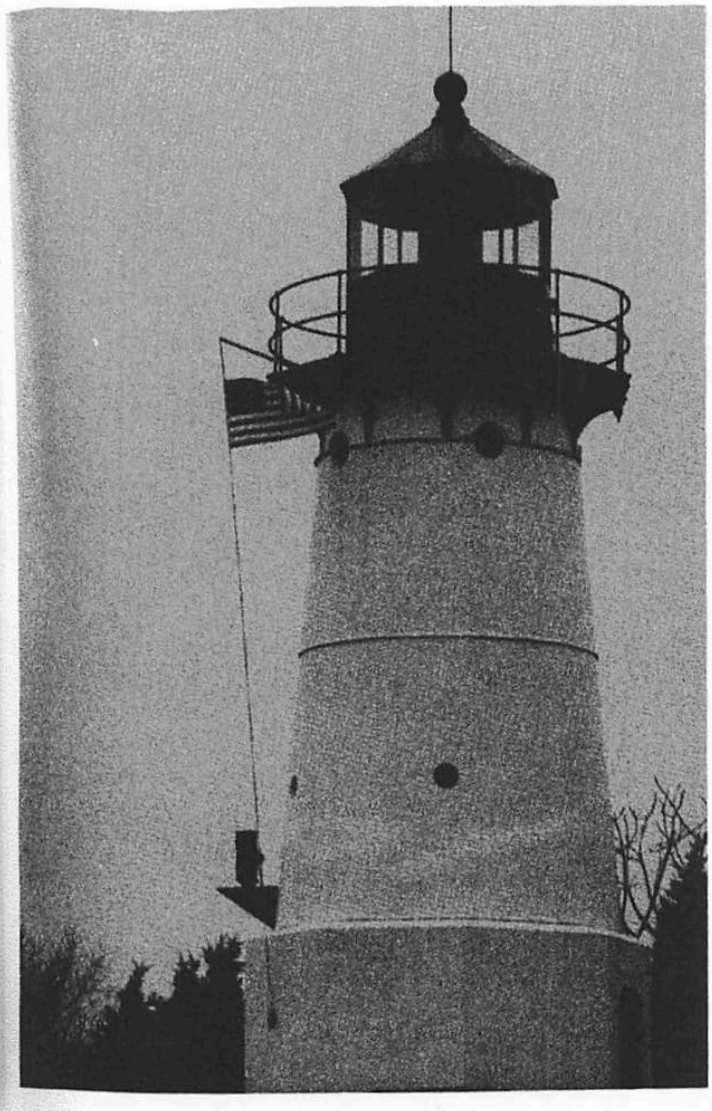


Photo 1985. by Bill Nixon

number of complaints received at the Lighthouse. People, especially those north of the station, will call and ask, "Are you alright?" There's no fog. We can see all the way across the river." Bill usually explained patiently that there was a 5 mile rule and that weather conditions are such that fog north of the lighthouse usually clears first, but that fog often lingers south of Warwick Neck.

In addition, the Knights had other duties to perform. One of the most demanding was the constant necessity to be on the alert for boats that might be in need of assistance. When such a situation arose, they had to call the Coast guard Station at Castle Hill in newport. As there are usually boats in the area, it was only a matter of minutes before help was available. In addition to this assistance, Bill Knight always keeps his personal boat available as a back-up safety factor. When he uses his boat, he is acting as a civilian and a "Good Samaritan," rather than in his official capacity.

The lighthouse is also an ideal location to keep watch for boats that are overdue or missing, or that may be engaged in illegal activity. Since pre-Revolutionary times, Narragansett Bay has been notorious for smuggling. In the twentieth century, prohibition brought about the rumrunners and, later, the high cost of clams and quahogs gave rise to illegal shellfishing.

The Knights were proud of the fact that the lighthouse played a significant role in the life of the community. During their stay in Warwick, the lighthouse was a very popular place for Rhode Islanders to come during the summer. The grounds were open to the public from 2-4 on Saturdays, Sundays, and Holidays. The average number of visitors on summer weekends was between two and three hundred. People were welcome to go there to fish on the lower beach, or sit on the benches and relax.

The most celebrated community function at the lighthouse continues to be the Easter Sunrise Service. This is a function of the Shawomet Baptist Church which is open to all denominations. This celebrated service has been carried on since 1923 and always attracts large crowds.

The Warwick Neck Light, rich in tradition and service, has been a very functional, important aspect of life in Warwick.



Lighthouse-Keeper's House.
Rebuilt c. 1889. Photo 1985.Bill Nixon