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Information Guide

Year 2000 Memories

Block Island Southeast Light

Block Island, Rhode Island

History

Block Island is a 7,000 acre island, about seven miles long and three miles across at its widest point, located 12 miles from Long Island and the same distance from Charlestown, Rhode Island. The island is surrounded by dangerous shoals and ledges, and was sometimes called the "stumbling block" of the New England coast. Dozens of vessels went down in the years before the Lighthouse Service decided to build two lighthouses: the North Light in 1829 and the Southeast Light in 1875. Block Island Southeast Light, considered a primary seacoast light, is the highest light in New England.

In 1856 Congress appropriated $9,000 for the building of a lighthouse at the southeast tip of Block Island. The Lighthouse Board then decided instead to use the money to rebuild the existing lighthouse at the northern tip of the island, and the building of the Southeast Light was put off indefinitely.

In 1872 a local merchant named Nicholas Ball circulated a petition for a lighthouse at the island's southeast tip. The petition stated that vessels passing the area were "exposed to as much danger as at almost any other place on the entire coast of the United States." The Lighthouse Board agreed, and Congress appropriated $75,000 for the lighthouse. A ten-acre plot of land on Mohegan Bluffs was purchased for $1,350 for the lighthouse site.

President Grant signed the appropriation for the Southeast Light and later visited the station. Cleveland Light in Ohio, built in 1870, was a very similar structure. Cleveland Light was discontinued in 1892 and later destroyed.

The melding of Italianate and Gothic Revival styles makes the Block Island Southeast Light unique. The Southeast Light ended up costing almost $80,000 - $10,000 for the huge first order Fresnel lens alone. The lighthouse was designated a primary seacoast aid to navigation, which meant it was equipped with the most powerful lighting apparatus available. The other primary seacoast lights in the area were Gay Head Light, Sankaty Head Light and Montauk Light. The fixed white light, illuminated by lard oil, was first exhibited on February 1, 1875.

The keeper's house, attached to the tower, was a 2-story duplex residence with twin 1- story kitchen wings to the rear. The building is brick with a granite foundation and trim. The octagonal tower is capped by a 16-sided cast-iron lantern.

In 1873 fog signal experiments were conducted near the lighthouse site by Joseph Henry, chairman of the Lighthouse Board and director of the Smithsonian Institution. Henry studied the effects of weather conditions and air currents on the ability of mariners to hear the steam-driven fog whistle. A new compressed air fog signal with kerosene engines was installed in 1906. Two years later the fog signal house was destroyed by fire. A new building and fog signal equipment were soon installed. The present electronic fog signal dates from 1974.

In 1929 the Southeast Light was changed to a flashing green light to differentiate it from the other lights in the vicinity. A new lens was installed with flash panels; it appears that this lens was made up of pieces "cannibalized" from earlier lenses. A mercury float assembly was added for the revolving lens. This system had replaced bearing and "chariot-wheel" assemblies in many lighthouses beginning in 1890.

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The hurricane of September 21, 1938, New England's worst ever, did tremendous damage to the lighthouse and grounds. The radio beacon was knocked over, the oil house was demolished, windows were blown out, and all power was lost. The keepers had to turn the lens by hand for several days.

In 1939 a Texaco gasoline tanker was wrecked in a thick fog near the bluffs, creating a burning gas slick. Luckily, there were no injuries. The ship as later sunk by the Coast Guard and remains a favorite scuba diving site.

In 1990 the Coast Guard deactivated the Southeast Light, replacing it with a steel tower. Jean Napier, a descendant of the first keeper, said, "It's going to be a very sad day. I just hate to see it happen." Petty Officer Steve Koskinen was the last Coast Guard keeper. One local resident, Marceline Mazzur, reflected, "It was a thing of beauty that we never thought would go away."

By the early '90's, 115 years of erosion had put the lighthouse on the endangered list. The National Trust for Historic Preservation listed it as one of America's 11 most endangered structures of historic significance. The building, once over 300 feet from the edge of the bluff, was then only 55 feet from the brink.

A dedicated group of volunteers, the Block Island Southeast Lighthouse Foundation, managed to raise about $2 million in federal and private funds to pay for the lighthouse to be moved. In August 1993, International Chimney Company of Buffalo, New York, and Expert House Movers, Inc. of Virginia, moved the historic structure to its present location about 300 feet from the bluff.

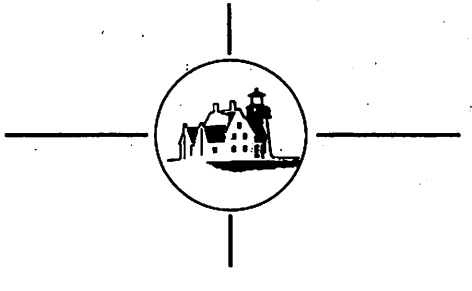
The first order lens had to be removed, since it rested on a potentially dangerous mercury bed. It was later replaced with a first order lens that was originally in Cape Lookout Light in North Carolina. The restored light was relit on August 27, 1994.

Block Island Southeast Light was named a National Historic Landmark on September 25, 1997. The Block Island Southeast Lighthouse Foundation operates a small museum and a gift shop in the lighthouse, and tours of the tower are offered in the summer.

The 'Millennium Cancellation' would like to thank Jeremy D'Entremont for his permission to reprint this article from his website, New England Lighthouses: A Virtual Guide. Please visit his website at http://www.lighthouse.cc. This article may not be reproduced without Jeremy's written permission. For more information or help with the ongoing restoration of the Block Island Southeast Lighthouse, contact:

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Family Events 2000

New Year's Eve Happenings

Technical Details Chart

Issue:	Block Island Lighthouse Stamped Card
Item Number:	2294
Denomination & Type of Issue:	20-cent Stamped Card
Format:	Stamped Card
Series:	Scenic America
Issue Date & City:	July 24, 1999, Block Island, RI 02807
Illustrator:	Wendell Minor, Washington, DC
Designer:	Derry Noyes, Washington, DC
Engraver:	N/A
Art Director:	Derry Noyes, Washington, DC
Typographer:	John Boyd, New York, NY
Modeler:	N/A
Manuf. Process:	Offset
Printer:	Government Printing Office, (GPO)
Press Type:	Offset
Stamps per Coil/Pane	N/A
Print Quantity:	100 million Stamped Cards
Paper Type:	22-lb. bright white
Gum Type:	N/A
Process at:	GPO, Washington, DC
Colors:	Magenta, yellow, cyan, black
Card Orientation:	Horizontal
Image Area	2.25 x 1.25 in./57.11 x 31.78mm
Overall Size:	5.5 x 3.5 in./139.59 x 88.83 mm
Full Pane Size:	N/A
Plate Size:	N/A
Plate Numbers:	N/A
Marginal:	©USPS 1997+
Markings:	Recycled logo + the work "recycled"
Catalog Item Number:	229440 Stamped Card – $0.21, 229461 First Day Cancellation - $0.31

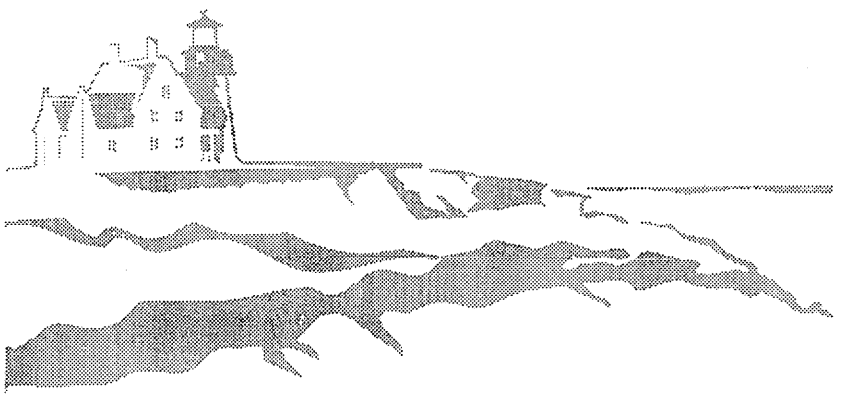
This 'Technical Details Chart' was developed from information contained in USPS Postal Bulletin # 22001, dated 7-1-99 and the StampsOnline's Collector's Corner at http://www.stampsonline.com/collect/stamp99/blockleft.htm.

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