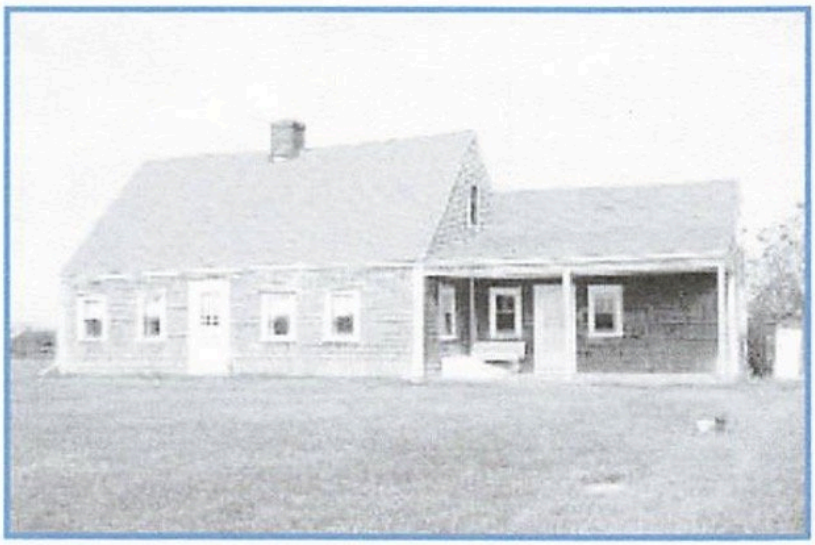
This week in Block Island history
—Nov. 15, 1887—
By Robert M. Downie



The Cape Cod style house of Captain Hiram D. Ball (1818-1891) has stood off Corn Neck Road for more than 150 years.

On this day in Block Island's history, Nov. 15, 1887, the Providence Journal announced the anticipated retirement of Captain Hiram D. Ball, one of the island's most esteemed seafarers:

"It is said that Capt. Hiram D. Ball, a brother of Hon. Nicholas Ball and keeper of the North Light since 1861, contemplates resigning. He has served the Government faithfully in this position for more than a quarter of a century, and as his means are ample and he is getting considerably past the prime of an active life, he naturally feels that he is entitled to pass the rest of his days in comfortable retirement and quiet."

This was to be the good captain's third retirement. His first career began at the age of 13, when he went to sea as a cook on a schooner bound for the West Indies.

That was a late start on the ocean — his brother Nicholas began working for a wage on a ship when he was 9 and a half years old. Whereas Nicholas, though, spent only a dozen years sailing — devoting the rest of his life to making the island a tourist resort and building the grand Ocean View Hotel — Hiram continued for more than 20 years in the merchant service.

Before reaching the age of 21, Hiram was captain of the Eagle, out of Newport. Captain Ball took that schooner on a trip to Philadelphia and returned within seven days — a sailing record at the time. He was later the master of the Superior, the Faker, the brig Lasso, and other vessels, making most of his trips to the Caribbean.

Meanwhile, the captain bought a 33-acre farm in 1845 that stretched from Corn Neck Road to the West Beach, and another 16 acres in 1850 adjacent to the Great Salt Pond, just north of Andy's Way. His house still stands.

Around the age of 40, Hiram retired from the sea, spending the next 10 years farming as ardently as he had sailed. Retiring once more, this time from agriculture, the former captain and farmer became keeper of the North Light in 1861.

There's something about a lighthouse though — as we all know — and Hiram's expected retirement in 1887 from the keeper's job never happened. He stayed four more years, until 1891, when he died of influenza, which his obituary called by the French name, "la grippe."

Captain Hiram D. Ball's 30 years on that job at Sandy Point set a record for longevity, one you'd think would have lasted a long while. But the lighthouse, designed to drive ships away, has a siren-like grip over men, and the very next keeper, Elam P. Littlefield, remained at the north end 32 years, managing to retire from the attractions of the lighthouse in 1923, just a year before his own death.