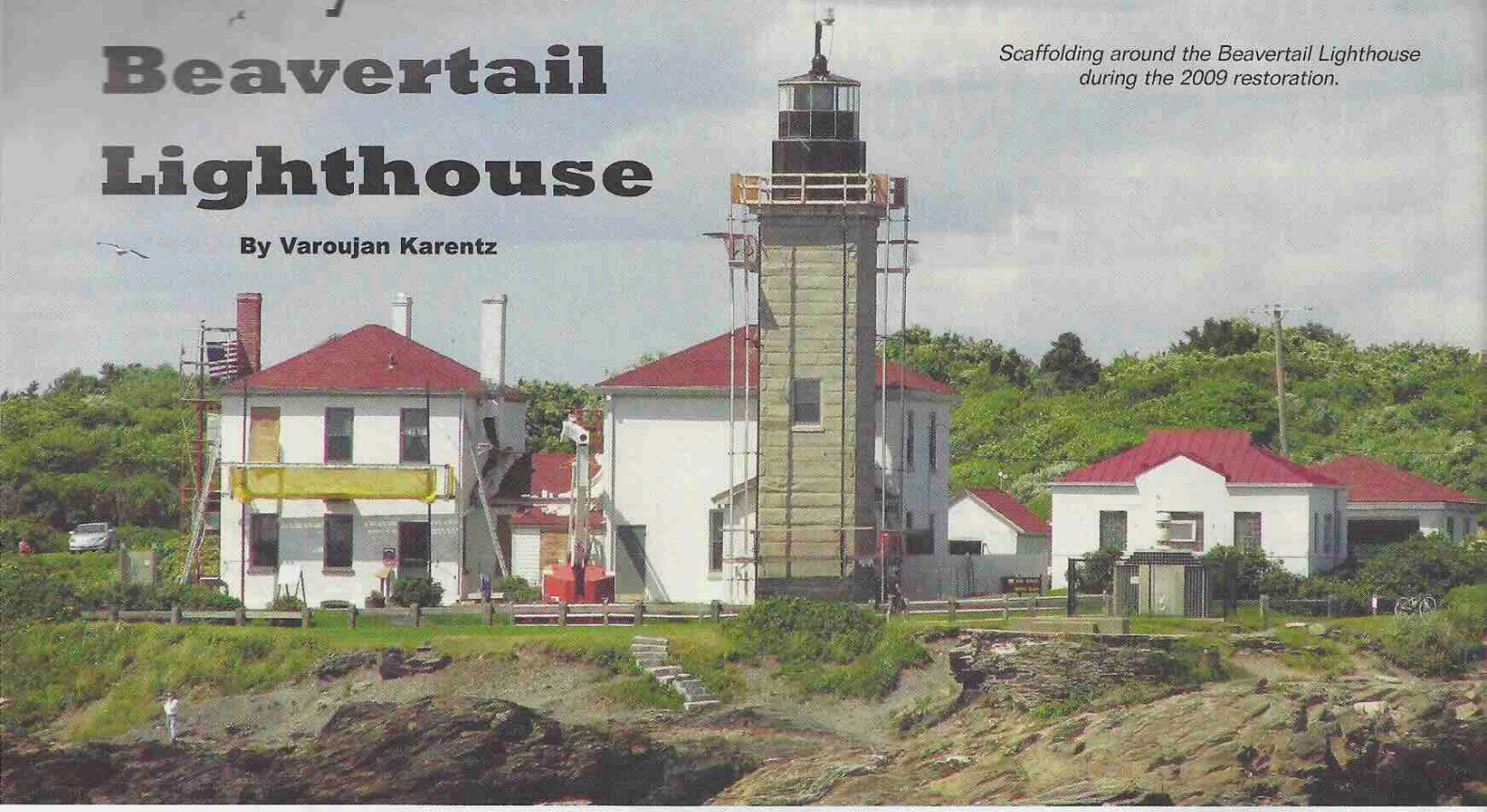
History Preserved at Beavertail Lighthouse

By Varoujan Karentz



Scaffolding around the Beavertail Lighthouse during the 2009 restoration.

This past year was a busy one at the historic Beavertail Lighthouse that is located on the tip of Conanicut Island at the entrance to Narragansett Bay in Jamestown, Rhode Island. Thanks to efforts led by the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association (BLMA), the lighthouse station has received its first major restoration in over 150 years. This was all accomplished while the museum at the lighthouse remained open with its full complement of docents conducting tours and answering visitor questions.

While the history of the light goes back to 1749, an amazing 27 years before the Revolutionary War, it was in 1856 that the present granite light tower and its adjoining keeper's quarters were built. As the station's importance grew, a second assistant keeper's quarters were built in 1896.This structure is now home to the BLMA museum.

The property, still owned by the U.S. Coast Guard, has gradually fallen into disrepair since the Coast Guard automated the light in 1972. Over the following years, attempts have been made to stabilize and preserve the buildings by both the Town of Jamestown and the BLMA. Unfortunately, conditions continued to deteriorate to the point where safety and severe moisture damage remediation was necessary by undertaking the major restoration.

Under two grant programs, $227,000 from the Champlin Foundations and $100,000 matching grant from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, BLMA hired ABCORE Restorations Inc. of Narragansett to undertake the eleven month long restoration project. ABCORE Inc. previously completed restoration projects of other Rhode Island lighthouses at Pomham Rocks, Dutch Island Light and Plum Beach. As they are well respected for, they performed the work at Beavertail Lighthouse with quality old fashioned workmanship while exhibiting an uncanny attention toward preserving the historical accuracy of the buildings.

All deteriorated "iron" and metal work above the granite portion of the light tower has been replaced or repaired. All window panes surrounding the light have been replaced with new glass. All metal castings were taken down to bare metal. The entire external cast iron lantern deck, railings and supports were removed. New deck plates were cast from molds replicated by ABCORE, manufactured by a foundry, sandblasted and prepared for painting. New deck supporting members were fabricated and installed. The gallery main deck external railings were removed and new sections forged. New corroded corner plate castings were cast and welded to the existing lower deck structure. The gallery deck railings and balusters were been removed, recast as necessary, sandblasted, prepared for hot zinc galvanizing, then epoxy coated, painted and reinstalled. The interior inside of the gallery deck "Watch Room," paneled with decorative wooden vertical siding, has been meticulously scraped clean of multi-year paint layers, sanded to bare wood and finished to its original condition.

Masonry reconstruction work on the external granite blocks of the light tower was accomplished by removing deteriorated and loose mortar between each seam of the granite block tower by hand tools to a depth of two inches. Over 1400 liner feet of mortar was removed. The replacement mortar, formulated to replicate the original lime and cement mix used a hundred and fifty years ago, was then re-pointed.

Additionally, after a void of many years, the historical vent ball and lightning rod on top of the light dome has a replacement wind vane, compliments of the contractor.

The BLMA is now working on plans for interior work on the two keeper's homes and expanding their wonderful museum.

To learn more about the lighthouse, we would recommend the book, *Beavertail Light Station On Conanicut Island, Its Use, Development and History* from 1749, by Varoujan Karentz.



Close-up view of scaffolding around the lantern room at Beavertail Lighthouse.



Restoring the outer walkway around the lantern room at Rhode Island's Beavertail Lighthouse.



The Board of Directors of the Beavertail Lighthouse Museum Association took a rare advantage of the contractor's crane to capture this photo of them on the lantern room's lower outer deck. They can be proud of their accomplishments in saving the lighthouse for future generations.



Rhode Island's Beavertail Lighthouse from a World War II era aerial photograph. At that time just behind the light, a military installation called Ft Burnside (now a State Park) was constructed with a disguised farmhouse concrete building called "Harbor Entrance Command Post" (HECP). This command post controlled all traffic into Narragansett Bay, the minefields and anti-submarine nets on each side of Beavertail Point and the underwater detection system in front of the light.

The tower in the photo in front of the light housed a large 36 in diameter carbon arc searchlight to illuminate "enemy" shipping.

The structure in the lower left corner is the original 1749 light stone and mortar foundation ruin. It was uncovered during the 1938 Hurricane. It had been covered over since 1856 when the present light tower was built. Prior to the hurricane, the station's fog signal building sat on top of the stone ruin and was destroyed by the hurricane. At that time the fog signal building shown with the fog horns protruding from the structure was constructed.

Shortly after this photo was taken, the military poured a concrete cap over the top of the ruin and mounted some optical range finding equipment on top of it and a ramp to wheel up a machine gun battery. The photo appears to show the temporary sandbagged gun emplacement. When the light was automated in the 1970's, the automatic fog signal was relocated on top of the ruin and later moved off the ruin to its present position about 50 ft to the north.

Just below the light tower base and across the road in the photo is a dug-in, sandbagged, rapid fire gun emplacement. It was built to suppress possible German high speed motor torpedo boats which may have been launched by disguised off shore freighters with the intent of entering Narragansett Bay to attack Navy vessels in Newport Harbor. (United States Coast Guard photo, Lighthouse Digest archives.)



You need to be steady on your feet to work on a lighthouse restoration, as is shown here at Beavertail Lighthouse.