SAKONNET LIGHTHOUSE TO BE RESTORED

By Timothy E. Harrison

Rhode Island's Sakonnet Point Lighthouse will soon undergo a massive restoration project that will start as soon as the warm weather months arrive; it is expected to take two seasons to complete.

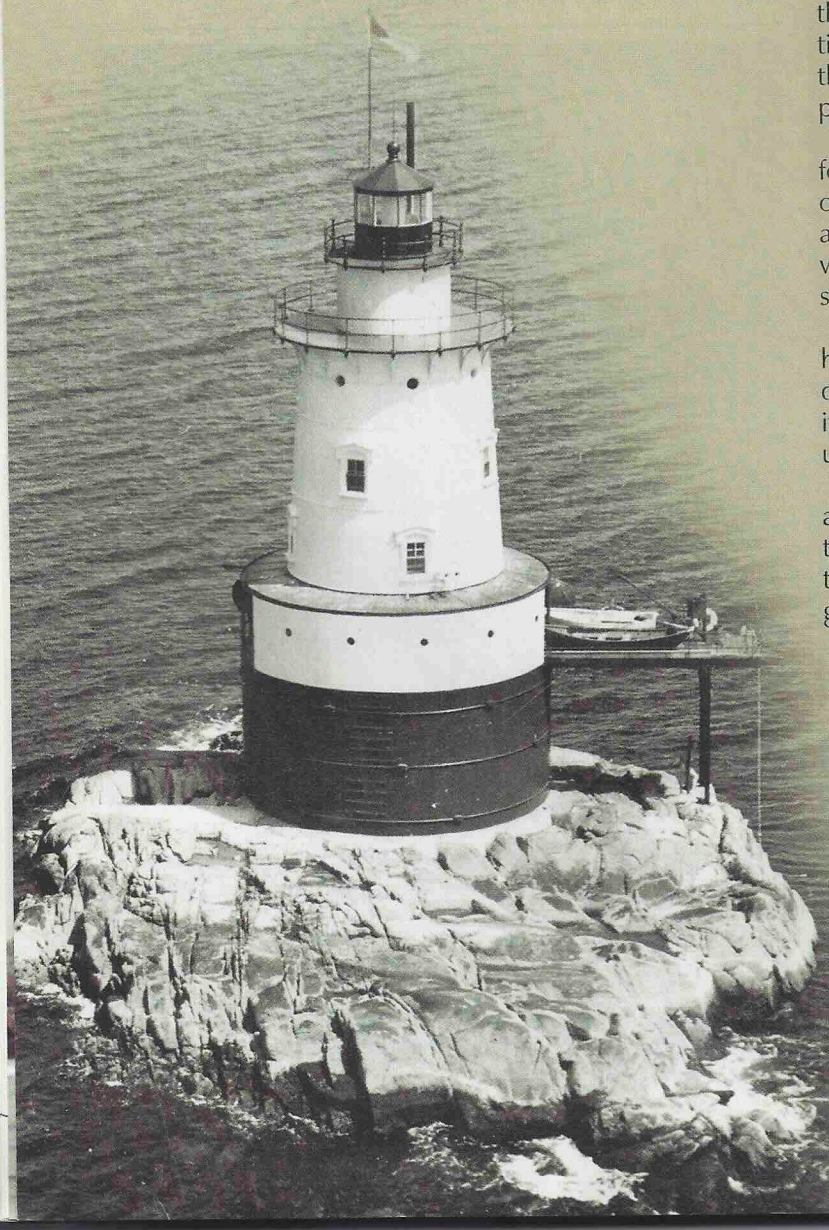
The restoration is the result of $170,000 raised by the Friends of Sakonnet Lighthouse and an $843,000 grant from the State of Rhode Island's Department of Transportation.

In calm seas, over a dozen contractors, representing various firms, visited the spark plug style lighthouse to access the scope and logistics of bidding on the project. Just getting supplies to the lighthouse will be no easy task, something of which the lighthouse keepers of yesteryear and the previous owner of the lighthouse were only too aware.

Upon arriving at the lighthouse, one early keeper, who fought for his life in rough seas to reach the structure that sits on a rocky outcropping surrounded by water, took one look around and promptly quit. The small confined living quarters were also a detriment too many other people assigned to the station; many left after being there only a short time.

When Hurricane Carol struck the area in 1954, the lighthouse suffered heavy damage and the Coast Guard abandoned the station and announced they were going to blow it up to get rid of it. The local community created such an uproar that the Coast Guard officials backed off.

In 1961 the lighthouse was sold into private ownership and was spruced up, but never restored. On May 12, 1985 the owner of the lighthouse, Carl Haffenreffer, donated it to the Friends of Sakonnet Lighthouse and he helped the group to raise over $100,000 to sand blast and paint the



Sakonnet Lighthouse, Rhode Island as it appeared in 1944. At this time, the entire lower section of the lighthouse, which had previously been an open catwalk with a canopy, was enclosed and the boat was stored on a platform, high above the rocks and the water. The purpose of enclosing the lower portion of the lighthouse is unclear and it left only the upper portion of the tower as a location for the keepers to enjoy the fresh open air.

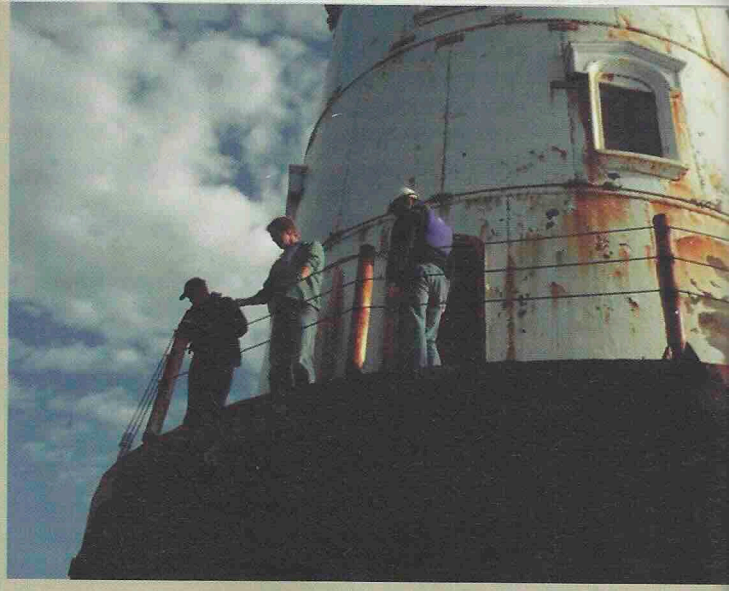
tower. The Friends group also removed over two feet of bird guano from the structure. However, the work done that year was not without its setbacks. A fierce storm on July 28, 1985 marooned several of the contractor's work crew at the lighthouse and smashed their boat on the rocks.

After another series of setbacks, the Friends group was finally able to have the lighthouse relighted in 1997 as an aid to navigation.

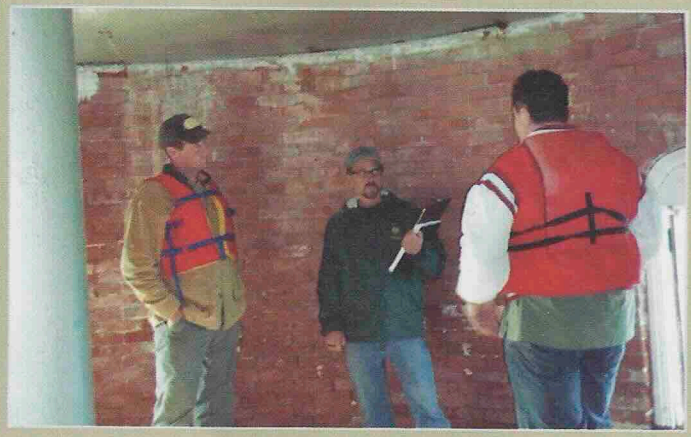
The old structure, built in 1884, is in bad shape and restoration is now considered urgent. The grant application stated that the lighthouse is "a shell of cast-iron plated bolted together around a masonry core."

John M. Wathne, a structural engineer, has documented the deterioration of the lighthouse over the past several years and said in his report, "Without serious structural intervention, the lighthouse will not survive a large wave event striking the tower, which is sure to happen given the lighthouse's exposed position."

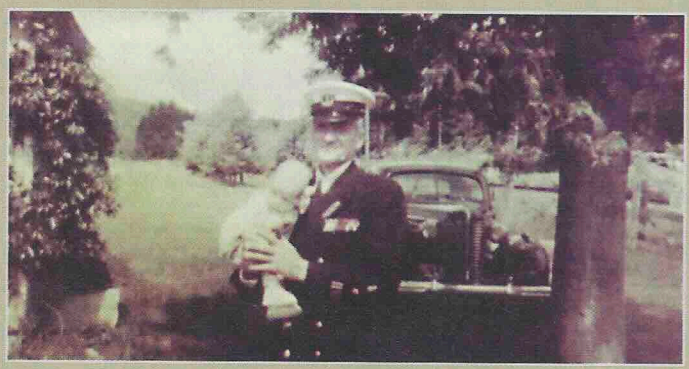
Rust is now affecting the structural integrity of the lighthouse and recent movement has been noted in the tower. Metal stairs, ladders, stanchions and railings also need work, as well as the walkways and windows. The brick lining and wood floors will all need replacing.



Prospective contractors made a recent fair weather visit to Rhode Island's Sakonnet Point Lighthouse to access the scope of the work that needs to be done. (Photograph by A Michael Steers.)



Prospective contractors inspect the interior of the Sakonnet Point Lighthouse. It was inside this round caisson structure that lighthouse keepers once lived. (Photograph by A. Michael Steers.)



Joseph O. Bouley, Sr. was on duty as an assistant keeper at Sakonnet Point Lighthouse with head keeper William Durfee when the Hurricane of 1938 struck. A Navy veteran, he joined the Lighthouse Service in 1910. He was later transferred to Gull Rocks Lighthouse, but the Navy was in his blood, so he left the Lighthouse Service and again joined the Navy. He later rejoined the Lighthouse Service and was again stationed at Sakonnet Point Lighthouse where he served from 1937 until his retirement in 1943. (Lighthouse Digest archives photo.)

Additional photos on next page...



Nils Nelson served as an assistant keeper at Sakonnet Point Lighthouse from 1901 to 1903 when he was promoted to Head Keeper. In June of 1904, he bravely rescued a man from drowning whose boat had smashed on the rocks near the lighthouse. Nelson was awarded the gold lifesaving medal.

For some reason, Nelson was demoted in 1907 and was transferred to Southwest Ledge Lighthouse in New Haven, Connecticut. His demotion may have been the result of a mental problem that was not properly diagnosed at the time. The head keeper at Southwest Ledge Lighthouse, Jorgen Tonneson, later recalled Nelson's erratic behavior and, fearing for his life, Tonneson brought his brother-in-law to the lighthouse to live with him for extra protection against bodily harm from Nelson. However, Tonneson never reported Nelson's behavior to the lighthouse authorities.

On January 2, 1907, while on shore leave, the gold medal recipient, Nils Nelson, took his own life, tragically ending what could have otherwise been an illustrious lighthouse career. (Lighthouse Digest archives photo.)



The rough waters around Sakonnet Point Lighthouse can often make landing at the lighthouse difficult and dangerous as is evident by this recent photograph of a wave crashing up against the lighthouse. (Photograph by A. Michael Steers.)

On Sept 21, 1938 one of the deadliest hurricanes in history struck New England. The devastating storm cost the lives of over 700 people and the loss of property was nearly beyond comprehension. Numerous lighthouses were damaged or lost, such as Rhode Island's Whale Rock Lighthouse, which was swept away, causing the death of its keeper Walter Eberle.

Although the Sakonnet Lighthouse and its keepers survived the hurricane, the keepers on duty thought the end was near and the lighthouse was heavily damaged. Lighthouse keeper William Durfee, who was on duty at the time, reported that a tidal wave washed up and over the tower. He was in the lantern room at the time. The force of wave that struck and went over the top of the 56-foot tower knocked him to the floor. It was a good thing it did; otherwise he might have been killed by the flying glass that blew out some of the lantern room's windows. Seconds later a second giant, but smaller, second wave hit the tower. At this point, the keepers thought the end was near as the tower shook and rattled, but it stood firm.

This photograph, taken the day after the hurricane, shows one of the lighthouse boats suspended in the air, clinging to one rope. Another boat is hanging sideways against the right side of the tower. One of the heavy oil tanks was ripped from its bolted position and is hanging precariously from the side of the lighthouse. By the time this photo was taken, the keeper had put up some canvas coverings over the blown out windows and a tarp of some kind was covering up other damage to the upper portion of the left side of the lighthouse. The boat landing ramp had also been washed away. The storm flooded the engine room, which disabled the fog horn.

If you look closely, you will see one of the keepers standing at the base of the lighthouse. Most likely it is head keeper William Durfee. While many men who served here only stayed a short time, William Durfee served here for an amazing 20 years. For a time, Thurman Durfee, who was most likely a relative of William Durfee, served with him as an assistant keeper at the lighthouse. The man in this photograph could also be Joseph Bouley, Sr., one of the assistant keepers at that time, who was also in the lighthouse when the hurricane struck.

Notice the outside outhouse on the lower base of the lighthouse. At some later point the facilities were moved inside the tower. (Lighthouse Digest archives photo.)