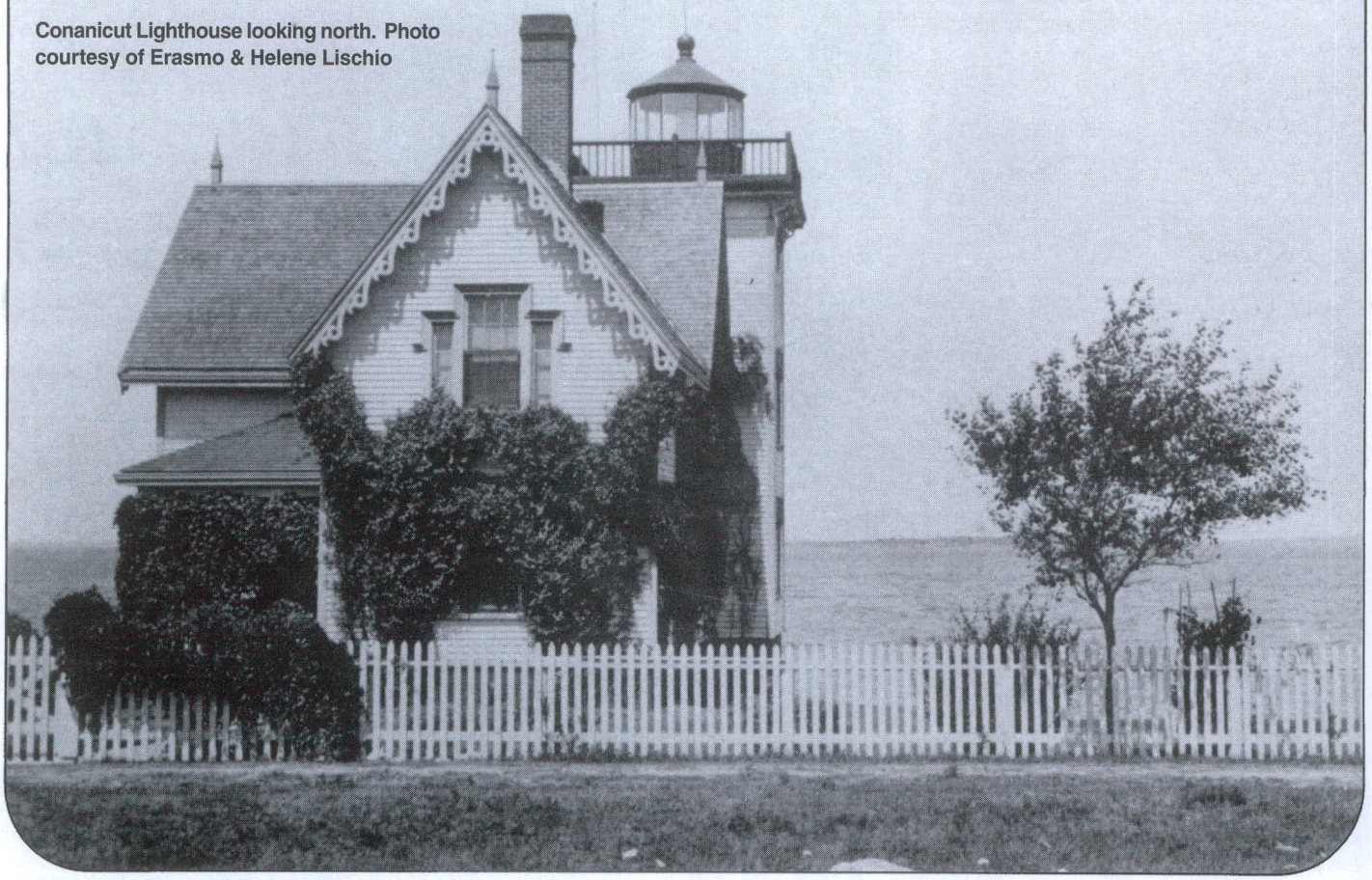


Conanicut Lighthouse, RI

By George Worthylake



Conanicut Lighthouse looking north. Photo courtesy of Erasmo & Helene Lischio

Certainly every citizen of Jamestown, on Rhode Island's Conanicut Island, is familiar with the Beavertail Lighthouse on the island's southern end. However, it is less certain that local citizens are familiar with Conanicut Lighthouse on the island's north end. It may be that many local people aren't aware of it at all. Yet for 48 years it served as a significant aid to navigation for shipping in Narragansett Bay. For 28 of those years it was under the charge of Keeper Horace Weeden Arnold, an eighth generation descendant of Benedict Arnold, who at one time was proprietor of all land south of the causeway at Mackerel Cove.

It is surprising that it wasn't until 1885 that the Conanicut (north) Lighthouse was established. The need for a light at this location was perhaps most keenly felt by the owners of the Wickford Railway and Steamship Company. That firm operated a ferry between Wickford and Newport, passing close to Conanicut Island's north end. Before the light station was established they made an arrangement with the owners of the point, the Conanicut Land Company, to erect a private aid to navigation consisting of a small lantern and fog signal. This small aid assisted the ferry captains to navigate in the area.

One might reasonably speculate that it was the ferry company that was responsible for the petition for a lighthouse that was circulated in the fall of 1882. Evidently enough signatures were collected, and it was forwarded to Washington the following year under the sponsorship of Senator N.W. Aldrich. The Lighthouse Board approved the proposal and on July 7, 1884, Congress appropriated $18,000 for a lighthouse on the north point of the island.

The first order of business was the purchase of land on which to construct the lighthouse. The lot acquired in 1885 was a 200-foot strip of land lying along the water north of Bay Drive. It was part of the so-called North Farm, which had passed through many hands before being purchased by the Conanicut Land Company. It was not a large lot, less than a full acre, and it cost the government $1,000. There was some delay in taking possession as one of the trustees whose signature was required was in Europe. Finally, constructed began that September.

Even as the lighthouse was under construction, the need for it was dramatically demonstrated. In a winter snowstorm the steamer *Eolus,* bound for Newport, went aground on the nearby shoal. Fortunately no lives were lost or injuries resulted. The passengers were taken off in boats and accommodated in local farmhouses.

When the lighthouse was completed in 1886 it looked pretty much as it appears today, a combination of dwelling and tower.



Keeper Horace Arnold with granddaughters Amy Louise, left, and Luella, right. Photo circa 1907. Courtesy of Sid Webber.

The house is one-and-a-half stories consisting of six rooms and a basement. Only the lantern room is missing today. The original lens was a 5th order Fresnel displaying a fixed red light with a range of 8 _ miles. The station also had a bell fog signal, activated by an automatic bell striker, with a characteristic of two blows every 30 seconds. The lighthouse went into service on April 1, 1886, although the keeper had not yet taken residence. The bell signal was changed to a double blow every 10 seconds in 1897.

This new station was certainly an attractive assignment for a lighthouse keeper. It was located in a quiet area of the island, yet close to town; he hardly have to leave the dwelling to attend to his duties; and the lantern room was only 47 feet above water level – no endless flights of stairs to climb as in many tall towers. It was the policy of the Lighthouse Board to place keepers in such location that had once served on remote or dangerous offshore stations. Horace Arnold, the keeper of the Conanicut Lighthouse clearly qualified. He applied for the position on March 10, 1886, and was informed: "Referring to your application, you will be transferred to the new station on Conanicut Island . . . salary $300 per annum . . . Be prepared to move before the end of the month." On the 16th he received the official documentation of his appointment, and on April 13th he took up his new duties.

Arnold was not new to the area. He was born and raised on Prudence Island at the north end of Narragansett Bay. As a young man he worked in the Newport office of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. Then, for two years, he was an assistant keeper at the Beavertail Lighthouse. At Beavertail he met Amy Elizabeth Rathbun, daughter of the keeper, and his future wife. They were married in 1858 when he was 19 and she was 17.

In 1861, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and fought in the Civil War. When he was 22 he was described as 5 foot 7 _ inches tall, dark complexioned, with dark hair and eyes. According to his obituary (*Newport Journal,* February 13, 1914): "He served three years without mishap, but on his way home at the end of the war he was in a ship wreck on the Potomac River which nearly cost him his life." An intriguing entry, but no record has been found of the incident.

The obituary goes on to state that after the war Arnold enlisted in the Navy and spent a year doing special duty at the Torpedo Station (possibly on nearby Rose Island). He next went into the coasting trade, but gave that up after the schooner he was on sank in Long Island Sound. Again, no details.

One might think that after these life-threatening adventures Horace would settle down to a quiet life with a normal routine. But his days of adventure were not over.

In 1874 he was appointed keeper of the Conimicut Point Lighthouse, a lighthouse with a granite tower located in the Providence River about a mile offshore. The tower and dwelling were located on a pier structure on a reef in the river. Just a year after he was assigned to the lighthouse, during a winter storm a floe of ice moved down the river and began to batter the lighthouse and five room dwelling.

Parts of the structure began to be carried away. Horace was on duty and fearing for his life, he launched himself on a passing floe. Some accounts say he placed a mattress on the passing ice raft, and that his son was with him. In any case, he was adrift for several hours before being rescued by Nat Sutton, Captain of the tug *Reliance*. Sutton reported that he had spotted him floating on Narragansett Bay, " . . . sitting like a man on a magic carpet." Arnold was so badly frostbitten that it was some months before he could resume his duties.

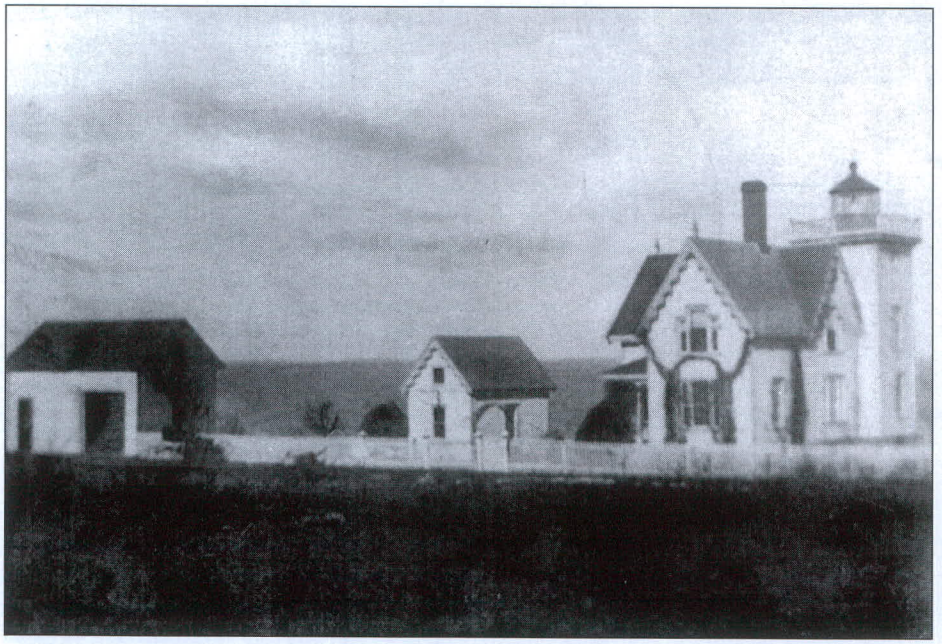
The granite lighthouse tower survived, but the dwelling was completely destroyed, and all the furniture, valued at $319, was lost. Keeper Arnold had to wait five years before being reimbursed (red tape is not a modern phenomenon). Meanwhile the family was relocated to the dwelling at nearby Nyatt Point Light Station, which had been abandoned when the Conimicut Lighthouse was established. Government furniture was provided.

Even without ice Conimicut was a miserable station. Now the keepers (there was an assistant) had to row back and forth from shore in all kinds of weather. The families remained on the mainland, while the keepers took turns manning the lighthouse. The structure was not totally weatherproof and leaked badly in rainstorms. There was no provision for cooking, and there was only a stove for heat. The station always had a tragic association for the Arnolds. Back when they lived at the lighthouse the second of their four sons, eight-year-old Leon, had fallen out one of the windows and was killed on the rocks below. They also had a daughter who was born a month after Leon died.

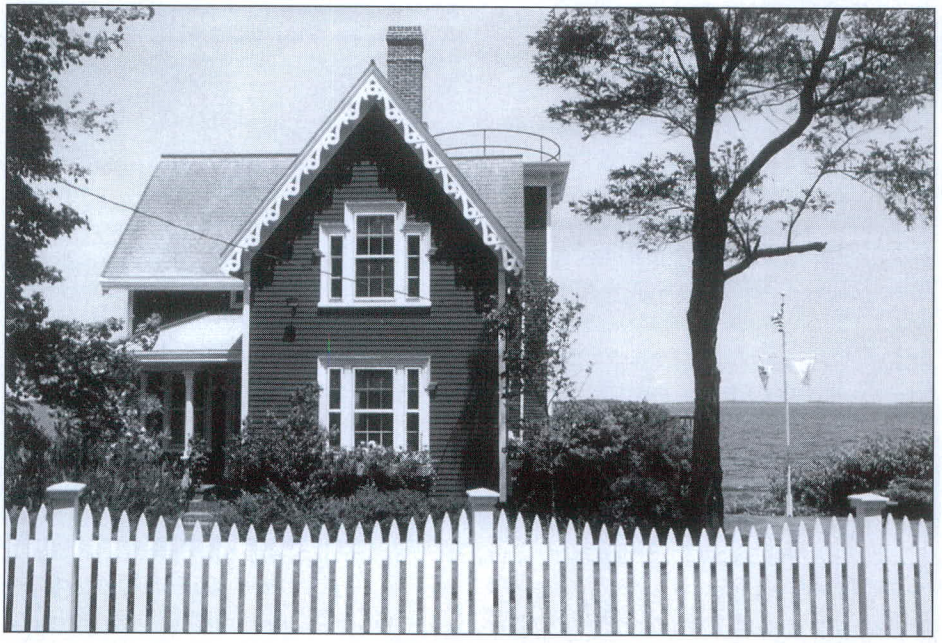
It is little wonder that Horace might desire a more "friendly" station, and perhaps his hardships assisted his request for the new Conanicut station. March 23, 1880 he wrote to the Chief Clerk of the Lighthouse Board suggesting that he would receive some influential support should a suitable opening occur. However, he had to wait six years before his application for the new light station was received and approved.

At last he could look forward to a quieter and less strenuous life. His obituary in the *Newport Journal* stated: "At Conanicut he lived a routine but pleasant life. The excitement of former days had passed and the captain found in his later years [a station] where he could rest as well as do the work of his position, and where he did much to add to the pleasure of his home life by cultivating the garden about the house and making it agreeable for his many friend, who frequently called upon him."

This does not mean that life at North Point was entirely without incident, as we learn from the journal that Captain Arnold kept. There were storms, one in April 1911, " . . . the severest I ever saw in my 37 years of keeping light," perhaps topped by another in December, "Very hard blow, hardest since I have lived here for the past 27 years." There were marine mishaps, despite the lighthouse: on October 3, 1902, "*Torpedo boat #1* ashore at this station," and on March 5, 1904, "Schooner *Henry A. Barrett* ran aground near this station." Also there were a number of yachts that got into trouble in the area. But most of the journal tells us of the day-to-day life of a conscientious lighthouse keeper – when inspections were made, what supplies were received, what workmen came to do and what they did.



Conanicut Lighthouse. From left - barn, fog bell house and combination dwelling and tower. Photo courtesy of Erasmo & Helene Lischio.



Conanicut Lighthouse as it appears today, painted red with white trim and the lantern missing. Photographer unknown.

Two exceptions to these routine entries were his notations on October 11, 1911, of the death of Ida Lewis Wilson, keeper for 26 years at the Lime Rock Lighthouse at Newport, and on April 14, 1912, of the sinking of the *Titanic*, with 1,595 lives lost and only 745 saved.

Changes were made at the station over the years. In 1894, a breakwater was constructed to protect the shoreline from damaging gales from the north. In 1900, 8,000 bricks were delivered to construct the oil house. Also that year a siren fog signal was installed in a small barn at the station, which had been constructed in 1897, to replace the bell signal. The signal was initially to be continuous during inclement weather, but this placed such a strain on the 2-_ horsepower engine that powered the compressor that it continuously failed. In 1903, the characteristic was changed to a three second blast every 17 seconds. In 1904, the signal had become reliable and the old fog bell system was removed. Three years later a new brick building was constructed for the fog signal equipment.

The Conanicut Light Station did not rate an assistant keeper. If Horace became sick his wife took care of duties and in his later years his son, Philip, helped him, virtually an unpaid assistant.

When Horace Arnold died in 1914 at age 75, Philip was temporarily appointed to replace him at a salary of $625 a year. Influential supporters urged that the appointment be made permanent, but the Bureau of Lighthouses rightly ruled that according to Civil Service practice such a desirable station should be reserved for veteran keepers who had served at hardship stations. In fact that's why Horace Arnold was given the potion back in 1886.

The new keeper was Elmer Newton. He remained at the station until it was discontinued in 1933.

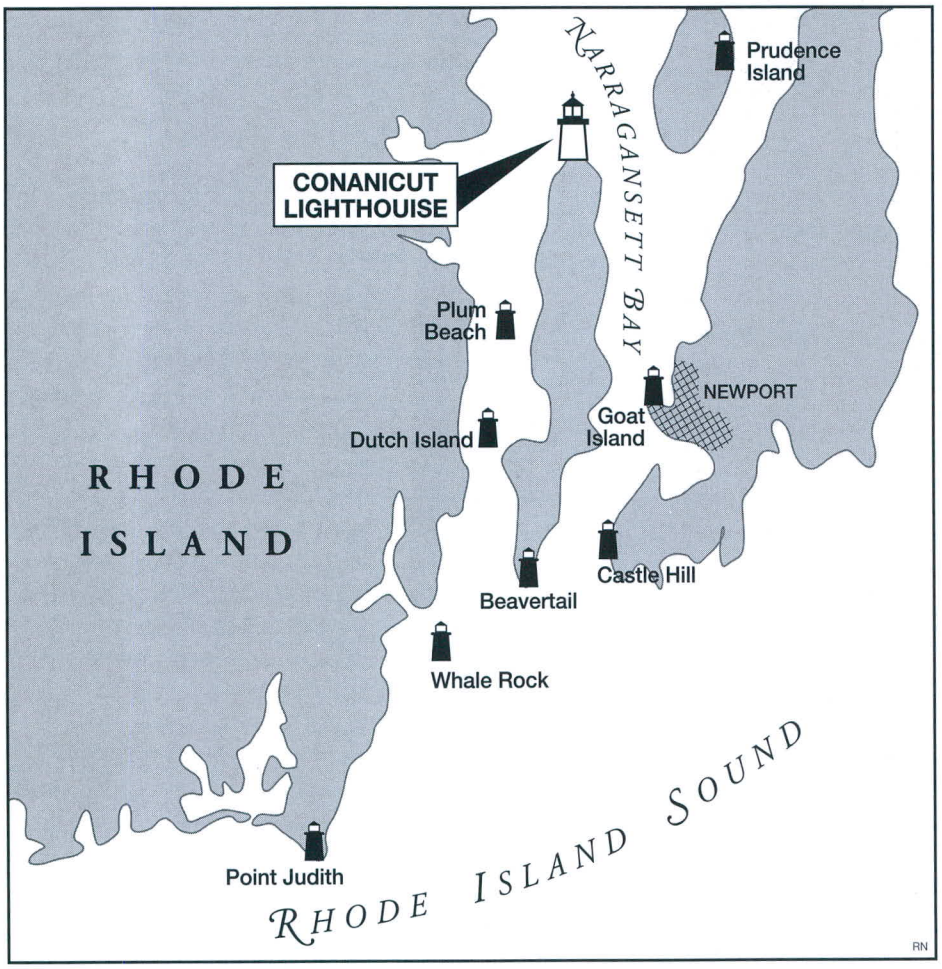
Horace Arnold is buried in Cedar Cemetery alongside his wife, who died a few months after he did.

It is perhaps surprising that electricity didn't reach North Point and the station until 1932. It was laid to the house but not the lighthouse. The service felt that with reliable electricity they could save money by abandoning the lighthouse. Traffic on the Bay no longer justified a manned light station and a fog signal. A small, metal, 40-foot skeleton tower was erected to support a small optic. The old lens and fog signal machinery were removed. Elmer Newton was transferred to the Prudence Island Light Station, not quite as desirable as Conanicut perhaps, but still an "easy" station.

The Lighthouse Service surveyed and subdivided the property. They retained a small plot on which the new tower was located and solicited bids for the sale of the combination dwelling and lighthouse and the remaining property (6/10 of an acre). The high bid of $2,874 was made by Mahlon and Ida Dunn of Dorchester, Mass., considerably below the estimated worth of $5,875. It was the Depression, though. Since that time the property has changed hands many times, but never at such a bargain price. At some point the lantern room was removed from the tower.

Older Jamestown citizens remember the operating lighthouse, and a few younger people may even remember the minor light on the steel tower, but even that has been removed.

For 47 years a bright red light signaled the north end of Conanicut Island, a light noticed by the skippers of vessel plying the waters of Narragansett Bay, used by the ferry captain traveling between Wickford and Newport, by the overnight steamers sailing from Providence to New York City and other east coast ports and it seems like . . . Only Yesterday!



Note – This article is about the *Conanicut* Lighthouse and mentions the *Conimicut* lighthouse. The Conimicut Lighthouse is a caisson-style structure, located offshore, at the mouth of the Providence River, ten miles north of the Conanicut Light Station.