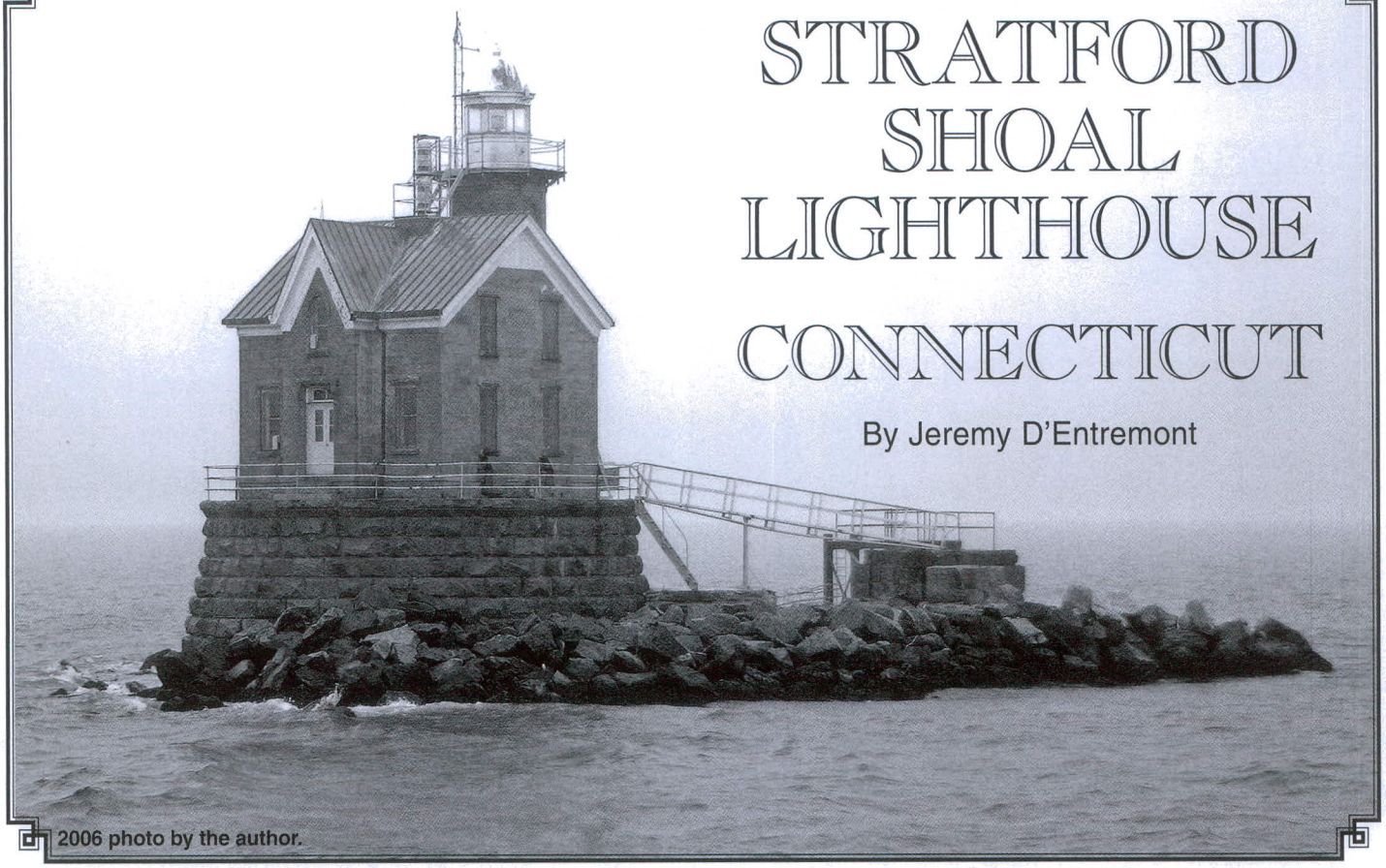
STRATFORD SHOAL LIGHTHOUSE

CONNECTICUT

By Jeremy D'Entremont



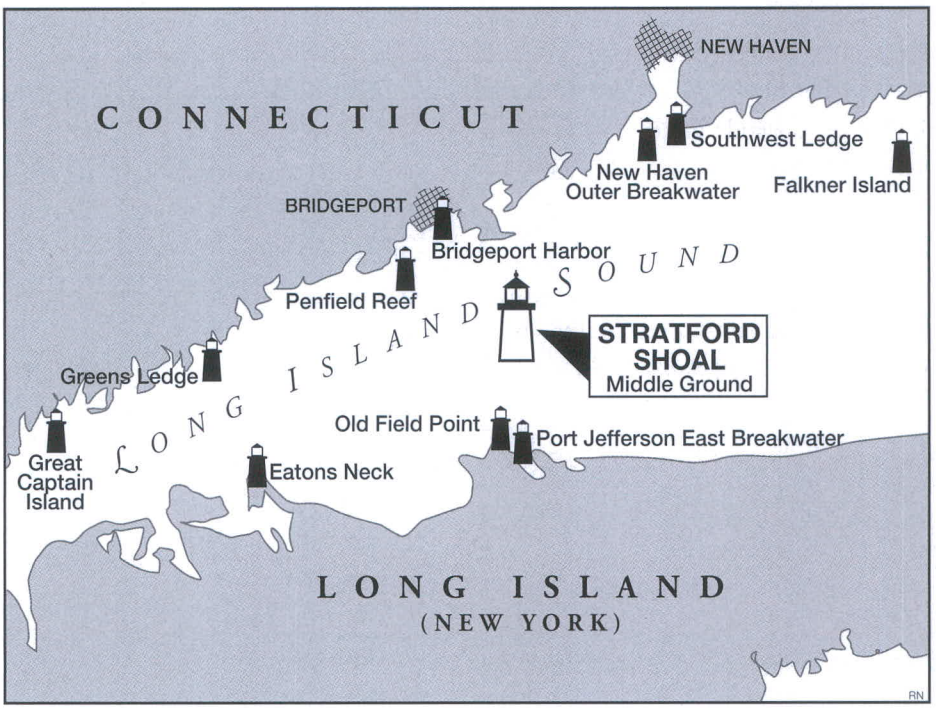
2006 photo by the author.

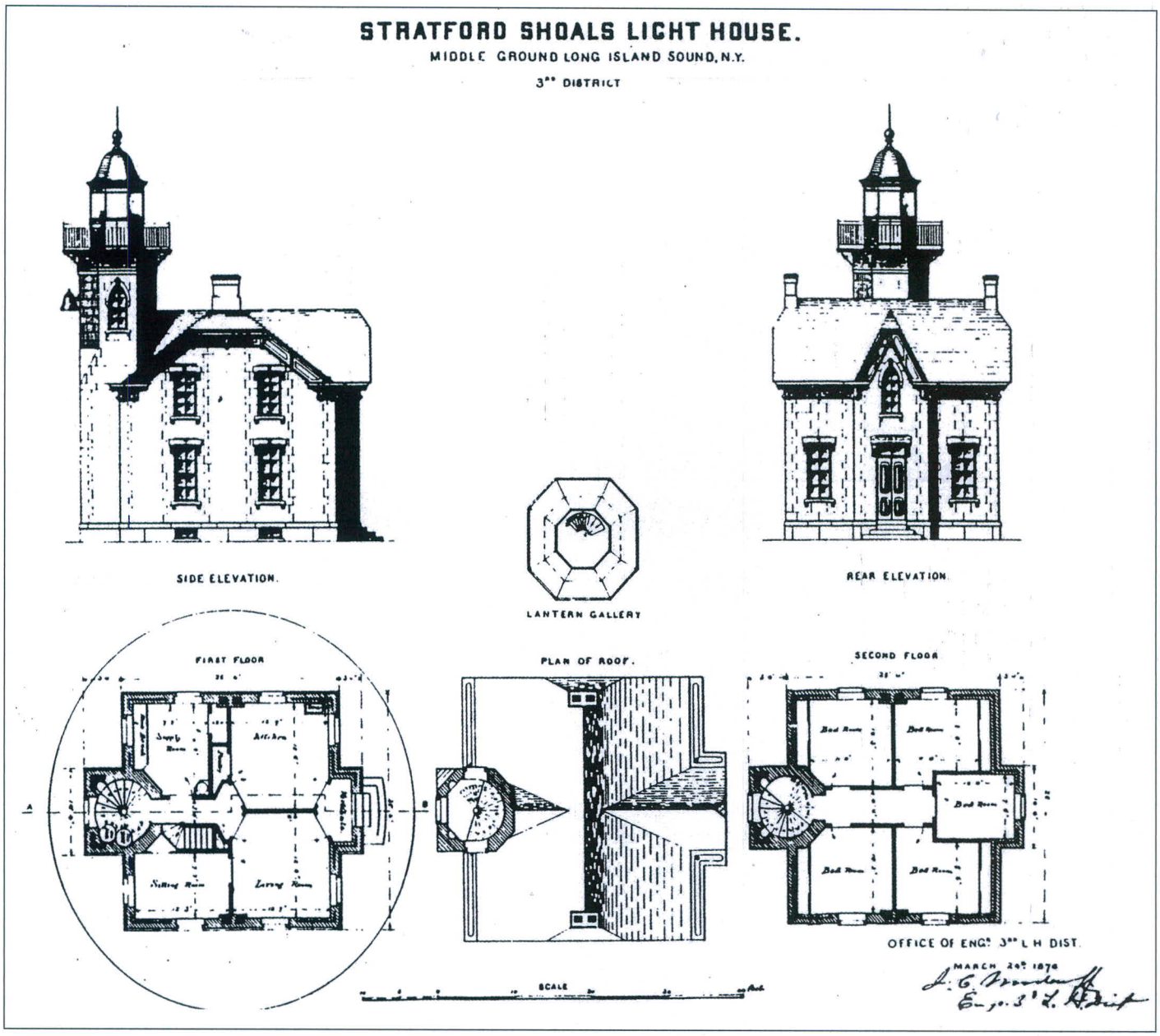
Stratford Shoal Light has often been categorized as a New York lighthouse, but according to U.S. Geological Survey maps, it's clearly on the Connecticut side of the border in Long Island Sound by about 1000 feet. Beginning around 1820, Stratford Shoal—also known as Middleground Shoal—about three-quarters of a mile in length, was marked by two spar buoys to the north and south.

In March 1837, an appropriation of $10,000 was made and a small lightship was built at Norfolk, Virginia, and placed off the southeastern extremity of the treacherous shoal by the following January. A report by Lieutenant George M. Bache made in November of that year provides a description of the lightship:

This light-boat is a vessel of about 100 tons burden, under the charge of a captain and mate, and manned by a crew of four men; ample provision appears to have been made for the accommodation of the crew, and for the stowage of wood and water for four-months' supply, and of oil for one year. The lights are shown from two masts, which are fitted for the purpose – one 40 feet, the other 50 feet in height; each lantern contains a compass-lamp, which is fitted to burn ten wicks. This vessel appears to be well calculated for the station she occupies; it must be obeserved, however, that, in consequence of being made to ride to a single anchor of 1,200 pounds weight, when first placed there, she has been driven several times from her proper position.

The 73-foot light vessel was referred to as Stratford Point Light Vessel or Stratford Shoal Light Vessel until it was designated *LV-15* in





1867. It was dragged from its position several more times over the years, usually by drifting ice. In 1875 it was called "in poor condition much decayed" after being dragged off station by ice and subsequently towed to New London. It broke free again early the next year and was eventually found near Faulkner's Island, about 23 miles to the northeast.

Meanwhile, $50,000 had been appropriated on March 3, 1873, for a lighthouse to replace the *LV-15*. Two more appropriations of $50,000 each were needed to complete the project.

Stratford Shoal Lighthouse was planned during the early part of the era when most offshore lighthouses were built on tubular cast iron foundations. The final plan in this location, however, called for a granite dwelling-and-lighthouse combination atop a cylindrical granite-and-concrete pier. Lighthouse Service engineeer Edward L. Woodruff was credited with the design. During 18 years as superintendent of construction in the Third Lighthouse District, Woodruff also designed New York's Race Rock and Stepping Stones lighthouses.

Work began in 1874 with the laying of a ring of granite riprap at the site. The contract for the pier came too late for work to progress that year, and over the winter much gravel from the shoal was swept into the granite ring. When work commenced in 1875, the contractor had to clear out the gravel before concrete could be laid and the first courses of the pier put into place. The project moved slowly but steadily forward. According to the 1876 *Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board:*

"The operations at this station were pushed forward during the last season until the month of December, when the first course of the cutstone pier and the concrete backing were completed, and several cargoes of riprap-stone delivered at the work in places where the former riprap had settled in consequence of the scouring out of the gravel-bed. This scour occurs at the stage of low water and during the prevalence of gales. The third course of the pier and thirty-four stones of the fourth course have been completed and put in place during this season."

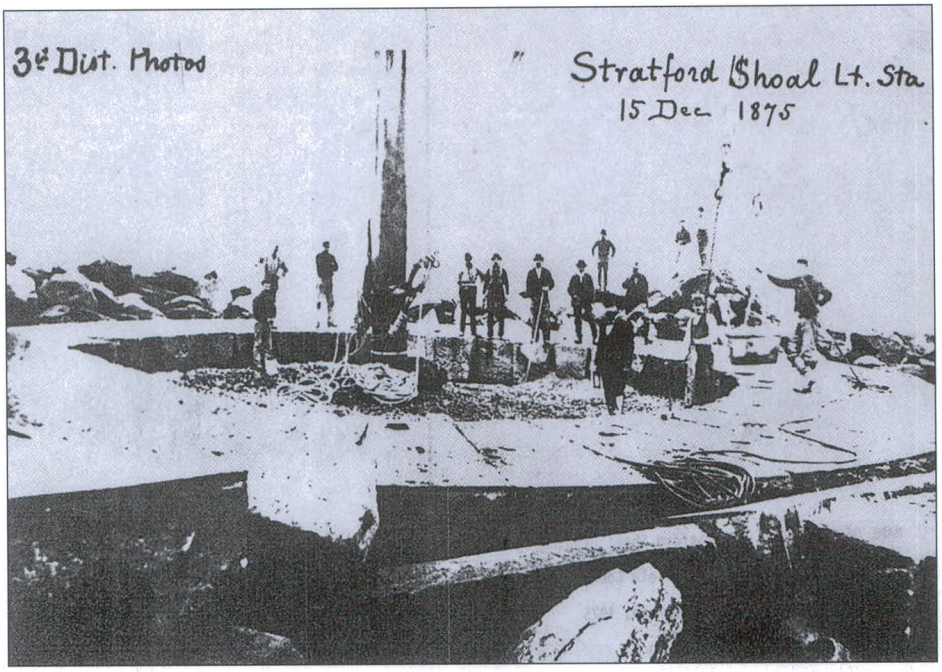
The granite pier, including a cellar and cisterns, was completed by December 1, 1876. The pier is 55 feet in diameter at its base, tapering to 46 feet at the top. During the following spring the surface of the pier was levelled and a temporary wharf was added for

landing materials for the lighthouse. The walls of the lighthouse were begun in the summer of 1877, but the building couldn't be completed that year. More setbacks were described in the *Annual Report* of 1878:

"The work at this station for the [fiscal] year ending June 30, 1878, commenced with the ninth course of the granite facing of the dwelling and tower. From this point the work progressed satisfactorily, notwithstanding serious drawbacks from storms, which at this place make a heavy sea... On the 8th of November, in a severe gale, the construction schooner Mignonette broke from her moorings, struck on the rocks, and sunk. The men and most of the materials and utensils were saved, after which the work continued, the men taking up their quarters in the now almost completed building."

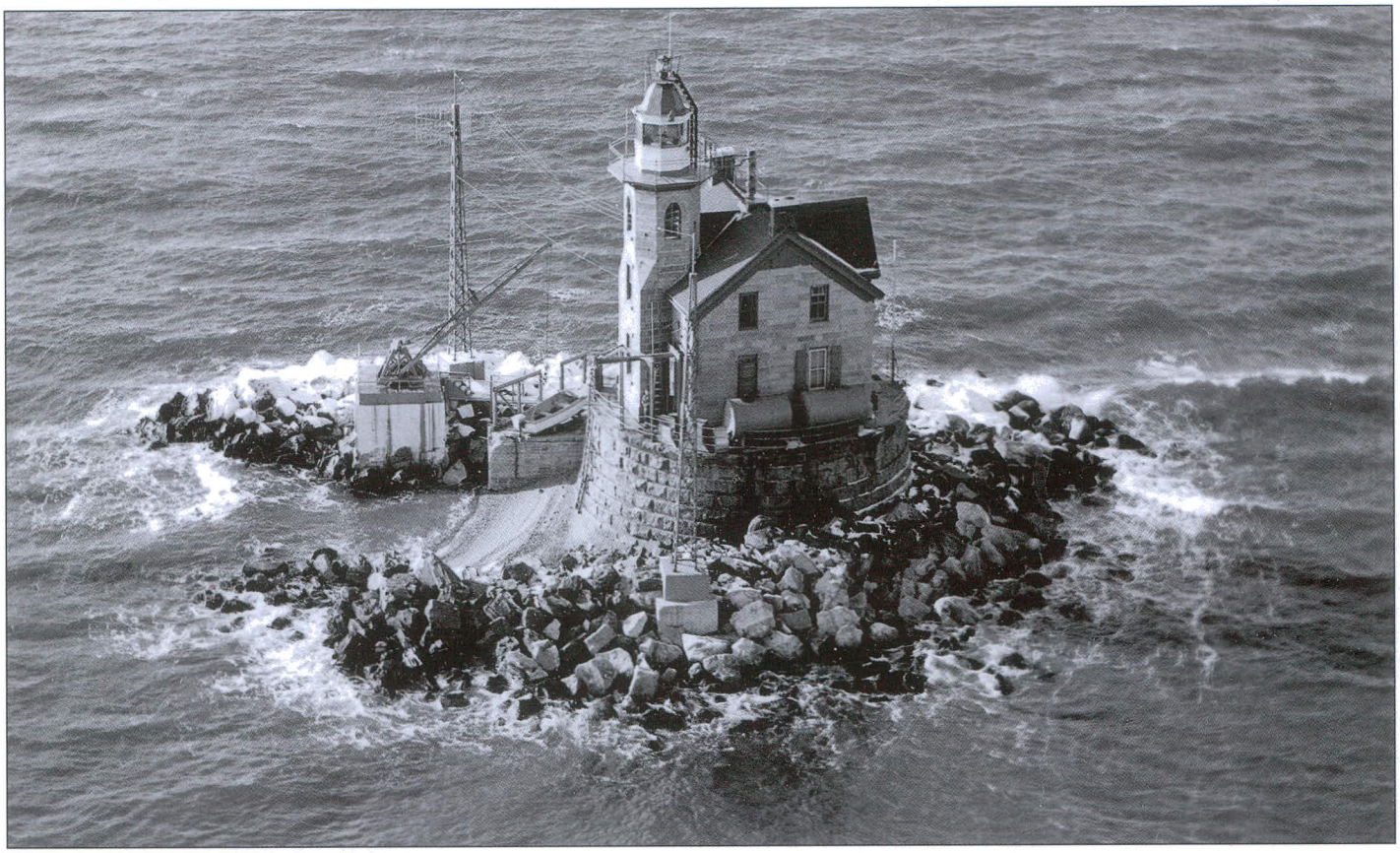
The dwelling is 28 feet on a side, with walls about 18 inches thick. The 35-foot tower is lined with brick and projects five feet out from the dwelling's south façade. Inside the tower, which is octagonal above the second story, a spiral stairway climbs to the upper levels.

The design of the lighthouse is very similar to Race Rock Light in Fisher's Island Sound, but the two have different roof shapes and window arches. According to the listing in the National Register of Historic Places, "Stratford Shoal exhibits some Gothic Revival details, such as pointed windows on the third story of the tower. . . . The Gothic detail and tall tower lend an institutional air to the lighthouse, saved from an ecclesiastical reference by the tower's position on the façade rather than at the gable end."



Work crew on the granite base during construction of the lighthouse, December 15, 1875. Photo courtesy of the National Archives.

A fourth-order Fresnel lens was installed and a flashing white light was first exhibited, 60 feet above mean high water, on December 15, 1877. The first keeper was William McGloin, originally from Ireland. McGloin had been the captain of the *LV-15* lightship since early in the previous year. (After the lighthouse went into service, the little lightship was sold. It was used as a floating barracks during construction of New York's Great Beds Lighthouse.)



U. S. Coast Guard aerial view of Stratford Shoal Lighthouse in 1970. Note the radio masts and crane at left.



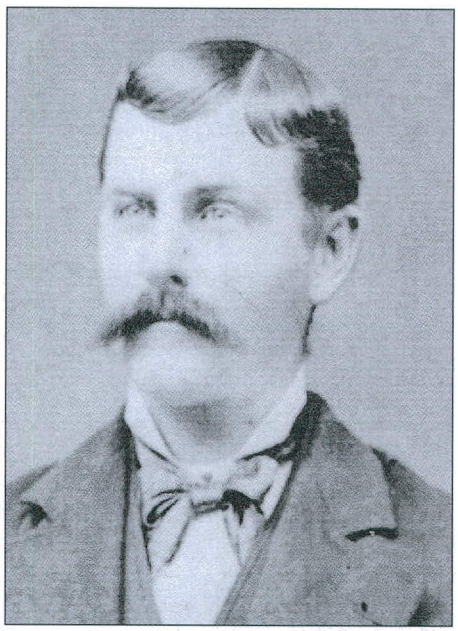
A view of the ighthouse circa early 1900s. Note the double davits for the dory. Photo from the author's collection.

McGloin remained keeper until 1880. The lighthouse had a principal keeper and two assistants, and there was plenty of turnover, as might be expected at an isolated, waveswept location. Ezra Mott arrived as second assistant in 1881, progressed to first assistant two years later, then became principal keeper in 1885. Mott's wife and children lived ashore. A newspaper article emphasized the isolation of the keepers:

"Ezra S. Mott is keeper, Joseph Collins and Elisha E. Davis assistant keepers. They are always courteous to visitors and it is very pleasing to them to hear the news from shore. Newspapers and magazines are especially acceptable to these isolated people, and parties who start out with the intention of blackfishing on the Middleground Reef are said to have better luck when they carry along a little bundle of papers for the keepers."

On Monday, March 14, 1887, Assistant Keeper John P. Hutchinson, Jr. left Port Jefferson on Long Island to row back to the lighthouse. Days went by with no sign of Hutchinson. That Friday the *New York Times* reported that the boat and Hutchinson's hat had drifted ashore, and it was apparent that he had drowned.

Gilbert L. Rulon became keeper in September 1901. In August 1905, Rulon was ashore



Morrell Edson Hulse, first assistant keeper in 1905, when a bizarre drama was played out at the lighthouse. Photo courtesy of Long Island Geneology.

on vacation when the most bizarre drama in the lighthouse's history played itself out. Left in charge was First Assistant Keeper Morrell Hulse, a 54-year-old Long Island native and former packet sailor who had just served two years as an assistant keeper at Rhode Island's Whale Rock Light. Also at the lighthouse was Second Assistant Keeper Julius Koster of New York City, a newcomer to the Lighthouse Service.

According to newspaper reports, Hulse was taken by complete surprise when Koster charged at him with a weapon consisting of a razor lashed to the end of a long pole. Hulse fought off his assailant and Koster seemed to calm down for the moment. Several similar scenes took place over the next couple of days, forcing Hulse to stay awake night and day. He not only had to defend himself against the deranged Koster but also had to make sure the light continued to function properly.

One afternoon Hulse found Koster chopping at the walls of the lighthouse with a hammer and chisel. Later that night Hulse became aware that the light had stopped revolving. Rushing to the lantern room, he found Koster holding an axe and about to destroy the lens. It isn't clear whether Hulse used brute force, gentle pursuasion or both, but he somehow dissuaded Koster from his violent intent.

According to the *Washington Post*, Hulse did not get a moment's sleep or rest for the next five days as he protected himself and the light. Koster eventually turned his rage on himself and threatened suicide. When help finally arrived, Koster was found with self-inflicted gashes on his neck and was taken to a hospital.

During the following year, Hulse was awarded a Diploma of Honor by La Societe des Sauveteurs for his courageous defense of the lighthouse. The French organization bestowed the honor because it was said that Hulse's actions had prevented the possible loss of a French vessel in the vicinity.

Rescues in the vicinity of the lighthouse were not uncommon. On August 18, 1911, keepers witnessed a sailboat capsize in heavy seas as its three-man crew tried to reach Port Jefferson from Bridgeport. Two assistant keepers, John H. Paul and Nicholas Sarre, started for the scene in the station's rowboat. The sailboat was two and a half miles from the lighthouse, and it took a full five hours for the keepers to reach the three men on the sailboat and get them safely to land. Both men received lifesaving medals for their heroism.

Keeper Emil Usinger was credited with saving five people from a disabled boat during a storm in 1915. And on July 27, 1930, First Assistant Keeper John A. Tatay saved the life of a swimmer by lowering a boat and rushing to the man's aid as he was being carried away



Side view showing the two radio masts and a small crane. Note the American flag at right. Undated U.S. Coast Guard photo.

by a strong ebb tide. The man was part of a fishing party anchored near the lighthouse.

In December 1919 two assistant keepers, William Prumuka and Harold Hobson, both natives of Bridgeport, were headed to shore from the lighthouse when a rope became entangled in the boat's propeller in rough seas. This put the motor out of commission, and the men drifted helplessly through the afternoon and an entire frigid night, a total of almost 20 hours. The next morning they made it to Port Jefferson, Long Island. It was reported that Prumuka's hands and Hobson's feet were frozen. After two weeks under medical care, the men went to Bridgeport and eventually got a boat ride back to the lighthouse.

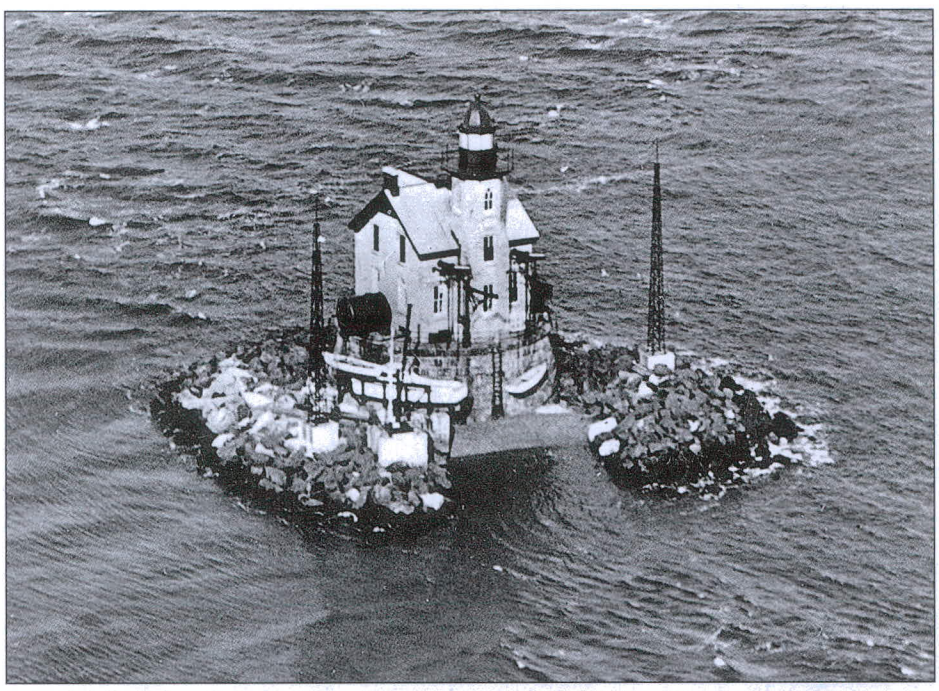
Lewis J. Allen of Norwalk became keeper in 1928, and on one occasion he saved the lives of two Bridgeport girls who were unable to control their canoe in heavy seas. Keeper Allen, a Spanish-American War veteran and longtime sailor, was involved in an even more dramatic rescue about two years later.

Late at night on Wednesday, February 8, 1933, the 30-foot powerboat *Saugatuck* left Westport, Connecticut, to search for a teenager named Eddie Connelly, who had not returned from a clam digging expedition in a rowboat. On board were Captain John Mulhaley, Mulhaley's wife and 18-year-old daughter, the mother of Eddie Connelly, and nine men. Three men disemarked at Cockenoe Island to look for Connelly.

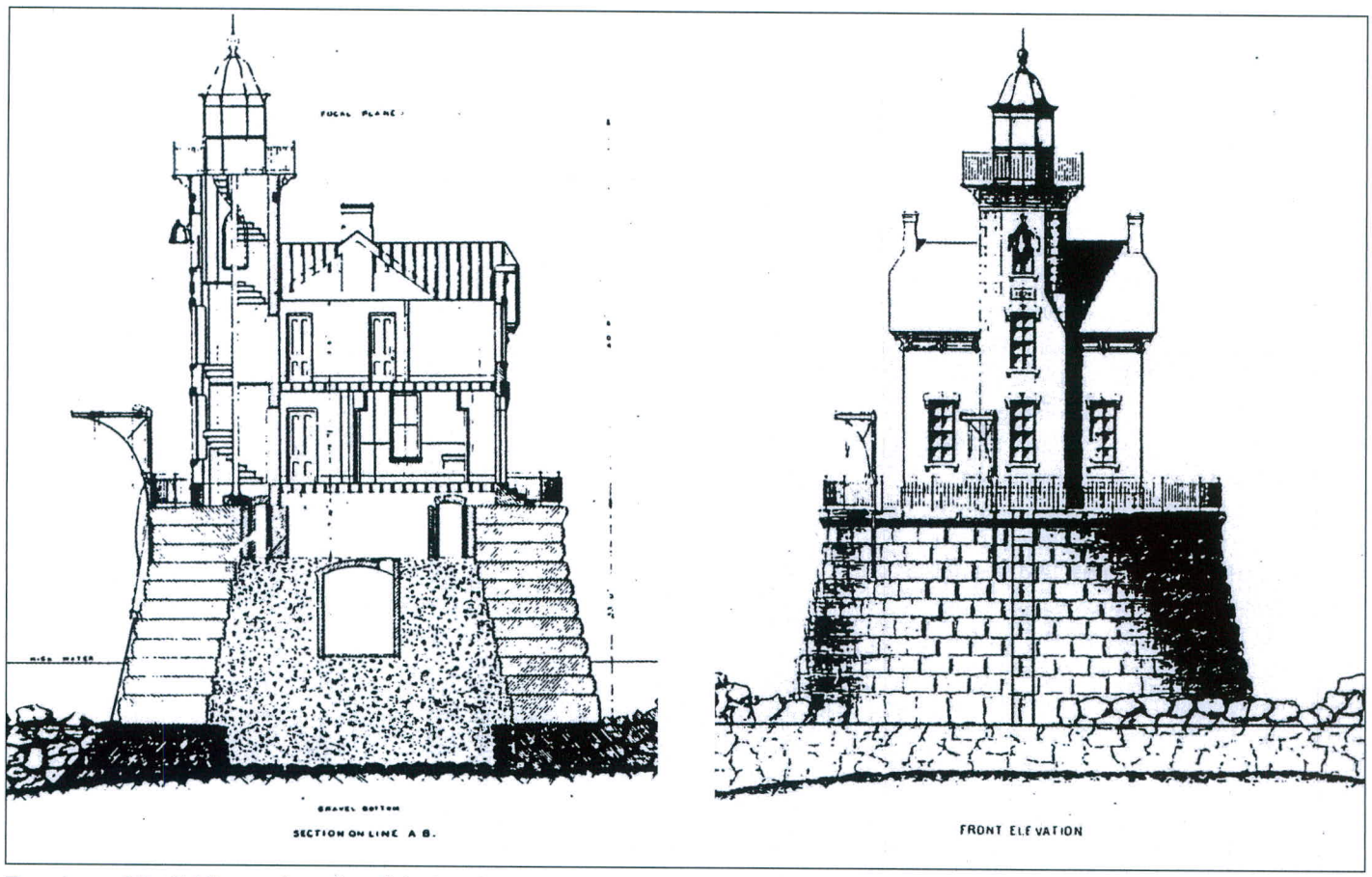
Off Cockenoe Island, the *Saugatuck* became disabled with a broken tiller and then a dead motor and began to drift eastward with the other 10 people still on board. One of the men, Police Sergeant Howard Baker, took charge along with another man after Mulhaley collapsed early Thursday morning. Baker spent long periods lying flat on his stomach at the stern, using a long plank in an effort to steer the boat to shore.

Through the entire night and all of Thursday the boat continued drifting to the east until, late at night, they could see Penfield Reef Lighthouse off Fairfield. Friday dawned and they continued drifting past Bridgeport Harbor. Search planes combed the Sound but failed to spot the *Saugatuck*. A red sweater was hung from a mast and the passengers tried frantically to signal passing vessels for help, but none stopped. By 10:00 a.m., they could see Stratford Shoal Lighthouse. At noon the freezing and desperately hungry group set a drum of gasoline on fire and set it adrift, hoping to attract the attention of the keepers.

Keeper Allen and Assistant Keeper Alfred Auger saw the burning gasoline and quickly responded. They had to chop a heavy coating of ice away from the launching gear for the station's powerboat, but they managed to reach the *Saugatuck* and tow it to the lighthouse in heavy seas. The ten on board had been adrift without food or water for about 38 hours. Mulhaley's hands were badly frostbitten and were said to be twice their normal size.



An aerial view circa 1948. Note the choppy water and the additional boats during Coast Guard days. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.



Two views of the lighthouse from the original engineering drawings from the 3rd District.

After a few hours at the lighthouse, word came by radio that Eddie Connelly had spent Wednesday night at Peck's Ledge Lighthouse. On Thursday he and the three men on Cockenoe Island were all picked up by a boat from Norwalk and taken to safety. "God was good to us," said Connelly's mother. A couple of weeks later, Allen and Auger were commended for their heroism by Secretary of Commerce Roy Chapin.

Under the Coast Guard, four or five men were assigned to Stratford Shoal Light Station, with each of them on duty for two weeks followed by one week off. The year 1955 was a memorable one at the station. On February 1, 1955, two of the Coast Guard keepers, Harry Buede and Jerry Hill, were coming into Bridgeport in a 20-foot boat when they struck ice and developed a leak. They got the boat safely to a municipal dock. Three months later, on May 5, the 10,000-ton tanker *Menara* went aground about a mile northeast of the lighthouse, thankfully with no major damage or casualties.

On June 23 of that same year, a test pilot named Lyle Monkton had to parachute from his F-84 Thunderjet fighter plane after its engine failed at 25,000 feet. He landed not far from the lighthouse and was quickly picked up by a family out fishing. Moments later two of the Coast Guard lightkeepers, Harry Buede and William Schumacher, arrived in their motor launch. The unscathed Monkton told his rescuers, "First swim I've had this year."

Stratford Shoal itself has an otherworldly legend. It's said that back in the early nineteenth century a ship called the *Trustful* was about to leave Bridgeport with a cargo of church bells. The weather was stormy and the seas grew rough, but the captain insisted on sailing. He told those in favor of staying ashore, "The *Trustful* will be all right. The devil looks after his own. Anyway, if we do go down, these bells here will never ring in Setauket, but they may peel a dirge for some of you white-livered folk at the bottom of the sea."

According to the legend, the *Trustful* went to the bottom of the sea near Middleground Shoal, and not a trace of the ship or its crew was ever found. But they say that if you listen closely as you sail the Sound near Middleground Shoal, you can hear the clang of eerily muffled church bells emanating from the sea bottom. The *Trustful* is also said to appear as a ghost ship in full sail off the shoal.

The lighthouse was automated in the summer of 1970, and the four Coast Guard crewmen were reassigned. A contractor hired by the Coast Guard performed some renovation, including repointing of the granite masonry, in the mid-1980s. Today the solar-powered Vega VRB-25 optic continues to flash white every five seconds as an active aid to navigation. In 2004 the Coast Guard installed a new solar array and automatic monitoring system.

Stratford Shoal Lighthouse can be seen distantly from the Bridgeport-to-Port Jefferson ferry. To get closer you'll need to be in a private boat or charter.

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