

## Newport Harbor Light Station, Rhode Island

By Jeremy D'Entremont

**N**o location is more emblematic of the blend—or clash, depending on how you view it—of Newport's maritime past with modern development than Goat Island, where this modest and relatively ancient stone lighthouse stands alongside the massive Hyatt Regency Hotel. For almost 350 years, Goat Island, about six-tenths of a mile long in a north–south direction and now attached to the rest of the city by a causeway, has been utilized in just about every way imaginable—from fort to hotel, torpedo station to marina, barracks to condominiums. The lighthouse and its keepers have played no small role in the island's historical pageant.

In 1658 Newport men John Greene and Benedict Arnold (ancestor of the famous general/traitor) purchased the island then known as Nomsussmuc (or Nante Sinunk, according to some sources) from Cachanaquoant, chief sachem of the Narragansetts. The colony's first fortifications were erected on the island in 1703 and were named Fort Anne after the queen of England. The fort would soon be renamed Fort George.

In 1763 it was noted by a town committee that the island was “vulgarly called Goat Island.” The new name stemmed from the custom of local farmers who brought their goats to graze in the island's pastures.

Goat Island was the scene of one of the first acts of defiance of the colonists toward the British when, in 1764, Newporters resisted an attempt by the British to remove an accused deserter from the city. The angry townspeople took control of Fort

George and turned its guns against a British frigate, firing eight shots. After the Revolution, the fort's name was changed to Fort Liberty. In the 1790s, larger fortifications known as Fort Wolcott were established, and the island was ceded to the federal government.

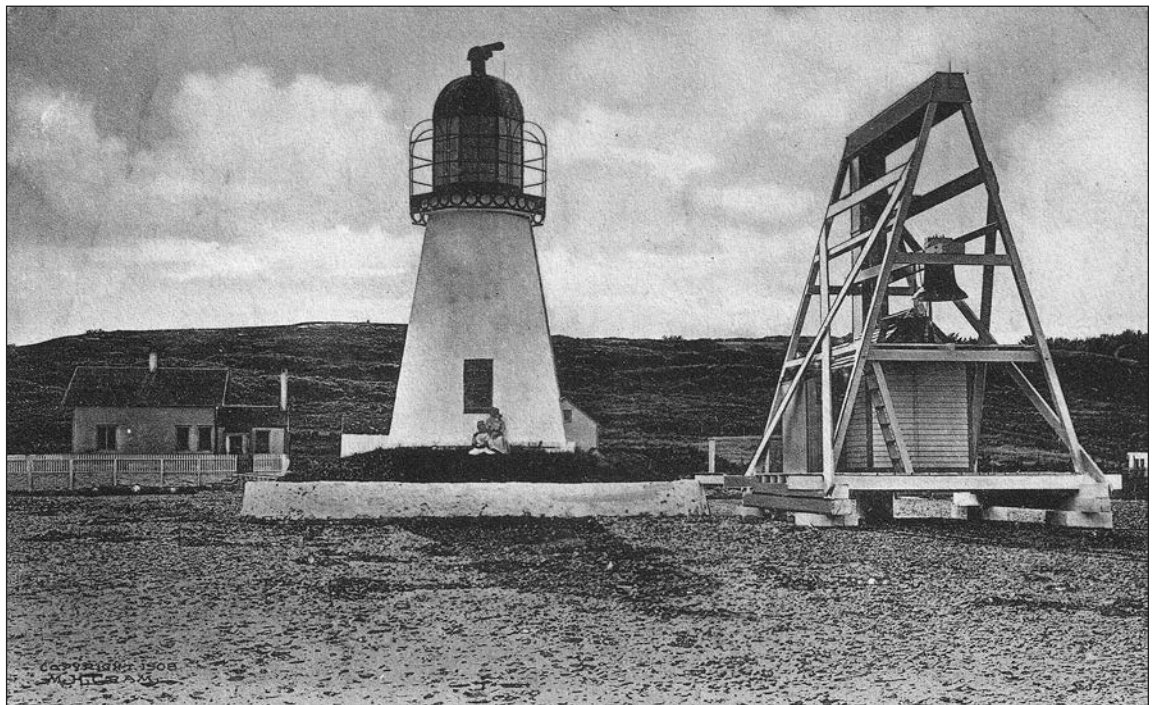
The deep, protected harbor at Newport was the key to its development from the start. Newport was long an important point in the infamous Triangle Trade. African slaves were traded in the West Indies for sugar and molasses, which was used for rum in Newport. After recovering from British occupation during the Revolution, the city prospered as a center for whaling, fishing, foreign trade, and shipbuilding. By the early 1820s, it became clear that a lighthouse was needed to help guide vessels into the harbor, and on March 23, 1823, Congress appropriated \$2,500 for that purpose.

Contractor David Melville finished a lighthouse at the northern tip of Goat Island by the end of 1823. (Melville is chiefly remembered as an innovator in the field of gas lighting.) Keeper Samuel Watson

first illuminated the multiple oil lamps in the lantern on January 1, 1824. The lighthouse exhibited a fixed white light, visible for 14 nautical miles. The 20-foot octagonal freestone and brick tower was fraught with problems almost from the start.

According to a report by Lt. George M. Bache of the U.S. Navy in 1838, the tower was “in a very bad condition, owing to its faulty construction.” The lighting apparatus at the time consisted of eight lamps arranged around a circular table, each fitted with a 9-inch parabolic reflector. Bache found that ice often formed on the inside surface of the lantern glass, due to poor ventilation and the damp condition of the tower. He also found much wrong with the six-room stone keeper's dwelling, which he said was badly built.

Lt. Edward D. Carpender also inspected the station in 1838. He pointed out that the lantern, 5 feet high and 4 feet wide, was “altogether too small for the convenience of the keeper.” Carpender said he found the light “in the filthiest condition of any light in the district,” and reported that the lantern glass



The original Newport Harbor Lighthouse was moved in 1851 about eight miles north to Prudence Island, where it still stands. Early 1900s postcard, from the collection of the author.



**Prudence Island Lighthouse, moved from Newport in 1851, as it looks today. The keeper's house at Prudence Island was destroyed in the great hurricane of September 21, 1938. The keeper survived the storm, but his wife, a son, a former keeper, and a visiting couple all lost their lives. Photo by the author.**

was darkened by smoke and the reflectors were dirty. He also offered the opinion that the six lamps, rather than eight, would be sufficient for the lighthouse's purpose.

A dangerous reef extended out from the northern end of the island, and vessels often went aground there. In the late 1830s a breakwater was constructed over the reef. It was planned at first that the lighthouse would be relocated to the end of the breakwater. Instead, a new 35-foot granite tower was erected on the breakwater. The tower was built in 1838, but didn't go into service until four years later.

The Army Corps of Engineers completed the breakwater in 1842. The old lighthouse remained in use until December 18, 1842, when the new tower was lighted for the first time. The original system of multiple lamps and reflectors was replaced by a fourth-order Fresnel lens in 1857.

At first, the keepers continued to live in the original dwelling. The original lighthouse tower was relocated to Prudence Island in 1851

and remains in operation there today. It is the oldest surviving lighthouse in the state.

Caleb Corey Mumford replaced Samuel Watson, who was described as "old and infirm" by the local superintendent, in 1841 and was keeper when the second lighthouse was established. Mumford had been a shoemaker with a shop in a part of Newport known as the Parade, later Washington Square. He was active in having the Farewell Street School established in 1839, and later a school on the same street was named for him. (The Mumford School has been converted into elderly housing in recent years.)

Henry Oman became keeper in 1845. Pardon W. Stevens, who arrived four years later, was given high marks after an inspection in 1850:

Light-house is a good building and in good order, except being leaky on the northeast side. The pier on which the light-house stands has been repaired, and now the causeway is being repaired also. Since I supplied

last year, several window-frames and sashes have been put into the dwelling. It is very leaky still in the walls, and the shingling on the roof is poor.

Lighting apparatus we found in good order and clean, and so was everything in the light-house. Keeper is attentive to his business, and is a good keeper.

John Case spent a decade (1853–63) as keeper. The next man to take the position, John Heath, died on September 24, 1868, and his wife received the appointment to replace him. Mary Ann Heath remained keeper until 1873, when Henry Crawford succeeded her. During the last half of Crawford's decade at Goat Island, his wife, Lydia, had the official title of assistant keeper.

In 1864 \$6,000 was appropriated for the rebuilding of the keeper's house. Some sources say the lighthouse tower was rebuilt in 1865, but it appears that only the dwelling was rebuilt. Having a comfortable two-story house attached to the tower certainly made life easier for the keepers and their



Circa 1884 photo of Newport Harbor Light Station. The keeper's house and outbuildings no longer stand. National Archives.

families, but Mary Ann Heath must have had quite a scare when a tremendous storm on September 8, 1869, carried away about a third of the slate roof and damaged her boat, which parted its moorings.

The light remained fixed until 1891, when it was converted to an occulting characteristic. It was later changed again to its present fixed green characteristic. A fog bell and striking machinery were added to the station in March 1873.

In 1869 the Secretary of War authorized the U.S. Navy to take over Goat Island, and Fort Wolcott became the new Naval Torpedo Station. The station was an important center for experimentation with various torpedoes and mines, for training of personnel, and eventually for the manufacture of torpedoes. The first self-propelled torpedo, the fish torpedo, was developed here. During World War II, the station became the largest employer in the state, with more than 12,600 employees. Eighty percent of the torpedoes used in the war were produced at Goat Island.

The next keeper, Charles Schoeneman, would become such a fixture that locals often simply referred to the lighthouse as

Schoeneman's Light. Keeper Schoeneman spent a remarkable 39 years at the station. His son, George, spent his early life on Goat Island and went on to be the U.S. Internal Revenue commissioner from 1947 to 1951.



Late 1800s photo of Newport Harbor Light Station, with a steamship at the wharf. National Archives.

An article on the occasion of Schoeneman's retirement recalled the famous Portland Gale (the steamer *Portland* sank during the storm, with the loss of about 200 lives) of November 26, 1898. The storm broke every window on the north side of the keeper's house.

Keeper Schoeneman was responsible for saving the lives of several sailors from the destroyer *Myrant* in 1912. The men were fishing from a sailboat that was overturned by a sudden squall, and the keeper quickly went to their aid. He was in his seventieth year at the time.

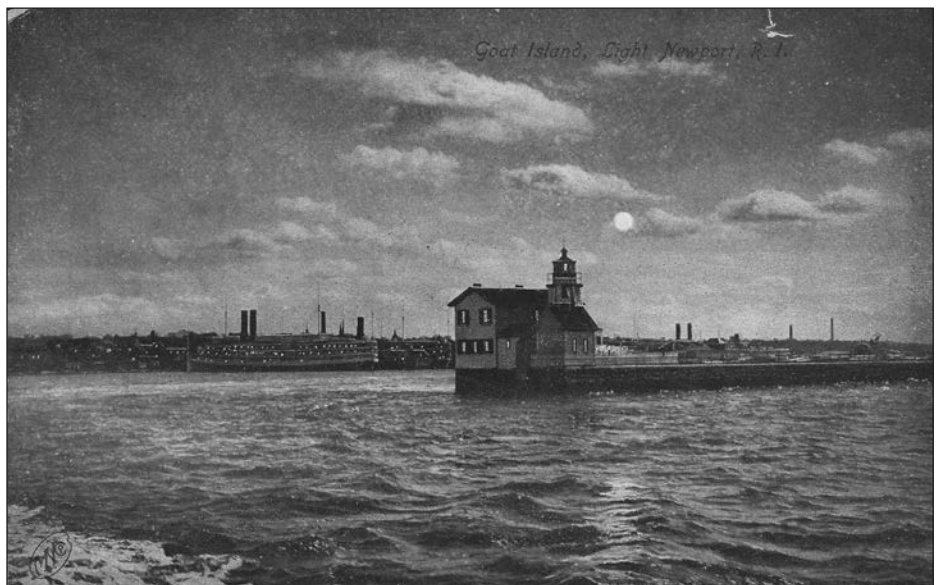
A coal wharf and buoy depot were also located at the northern end of Goat Island for some years. Also, for a time in the late 19th century, a lighted beacon was operated by steamboat companies at the southern end of Goat Island. This light, known as the Goat Island Shoal Dolphin, was electrified in 1891 and was taken over by the Lighthouse Service in 1905. A skeleton tower replaced the original structure in 1912.

On May 18, 1908, the steam launch *Breaker* accidentally rammed the *Stiletto*, a wooden torpedo boat that was towing another boat filled with mines at the time, near the lighthouse. The *Stiletto* was badly damaged but there were no injuries. This incident foreshadowed an accident that would strike even closer to home for Keeper Schoeneman.

On November 9, 1921, the 155-foot submarine *N-4* rammed the breakwater near the lighthouse, causing damage to the



Above and top right: The stone stairs in the tower. Photos by the author.  
Below: The ladder to the lantern room. Photo by the author.  
Right and bottom right: Early 1900s post-cards, from the collection of the author.





The lighthouse with the Newport Bridge, also known as the Claiborne Pell Bridge, in the background. Photo by the author.

foundation of the keeper's dwelling and signaling the end of the staffed light station on Goat Island. Charles Schoeneman retired during the following year, and the keeper's house was demolished. The light was electrified, and personnel from the torpedo station took over its operation. The light was automated in 1963.

It was probably a lucky thing that the house and keeper were gone when the hurricane of September 21, 1938, barreled into the Rhode Island coast. During that monumental storm, the *Pequonnock*, a boat owned by the Fall River Line, struck the breakwater at Goat Island before finally going aground at Gould Island. The severe damage to the breakwater left the lighthouse isolated for

a time, but eventually a new structure was built to reconnect it to the island.

The torpedo station ceased operations in 1951, and Goat Island was transferred to the city of Newport. The area between the lighthouse and shore was filled in when the Goat Island Sheraton Hotel was constructed. The hotel later became the Doubletree Islander, and more recently the Hyatt Regency Newport. Hotel staff keeps the area adjacent to the lighthouse nicely landscaped, and weddings are sometimes held close by.

In 1999 this lighthouse gained brief national exposure when it was featured in an episode of the television show *Providence*. Actress Melina Kanakaredes was seen on the lantern gallery in a dream sequence.

The Coast Guard licensed the lighthouse to the American Lighthouse Foundation (ALF) in 2000. In late 2006, an Abcore Restoration crew built a new picket fence around the perimeter of the foundation. The fence, which is similar to the fence that formerly surrounded the tower and dwelling, was built for safety reasons.

"The light's stoic presence in the harbor

today," says Bob Trapani, executive director of ALF, "quietly reminds both the local and international boating communities of Newport Harbor's rich maritime heritage. The American Lighthouse Foundation is committed to ensuring that this light continues to beckon the mariner to Newport Harbor for generations to come."

Newport Harbor Lighthouse, known to most locals as Goat Island Light or simply "the Green Light," continues as an active aid to navigation, its fixed green light 33 feet above the water.

Good views of Newport Harbor Lighthouse are available from the bridge to Goat Island and from various sightseeing cruises in the area. For a close view, you can park at the nearby marina and walk all the way around the Hyatt Regency Newport hotel. You can shorten the walk by cutting through the hotel; the helpful staff will gladly point the way. For more on the preservation of the lighthouse, visit the American Lighthouse Foundation's website at [www.lighthousefoundation.org](http://www.lighthousefoundation.org).

*This article is adapted with the publisher's permission from a chapter in the book *The Lighthouses of Rhode Island*, originally published in 2006 and soon to be released in summer 2016 in a new updated edition by Commonwealth Editions, an imprint of Applewood Books.*



The lighthouse shares Goat Island with a Hyatt Regency hotel. Photo by the author.