

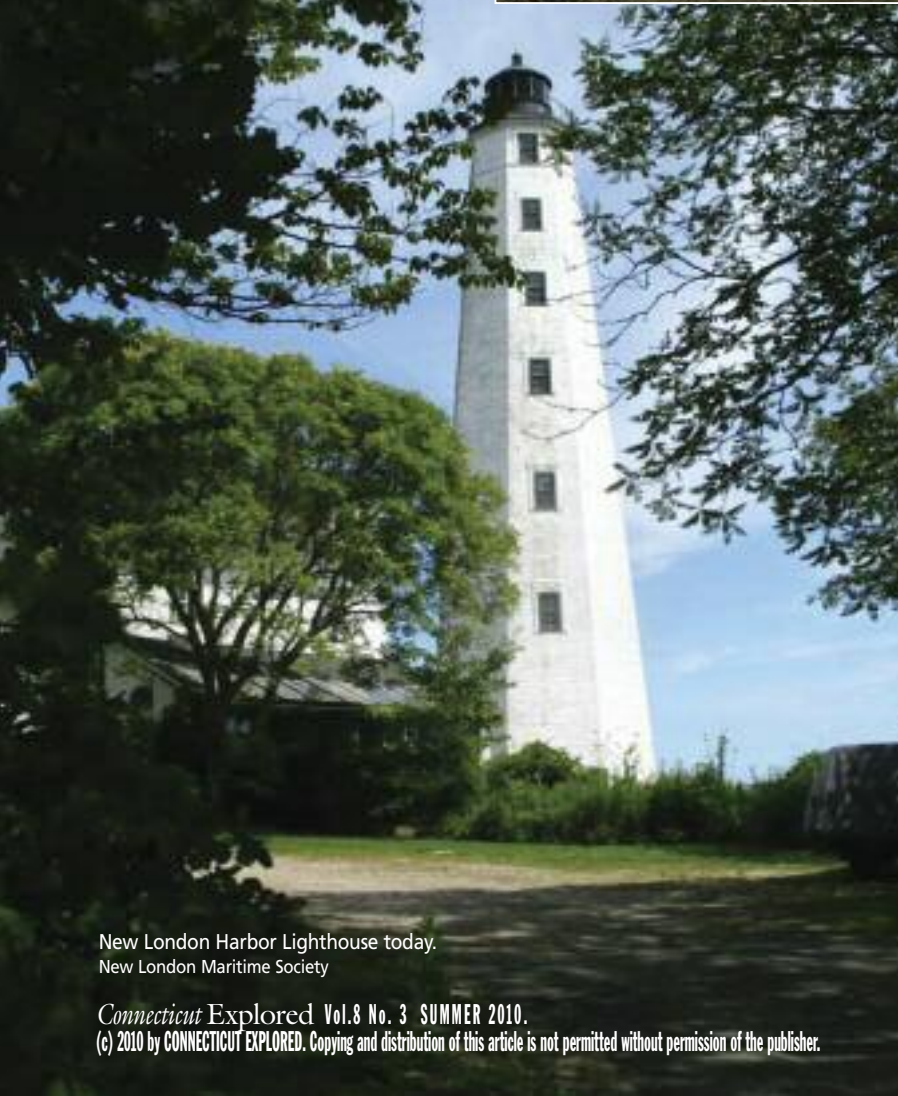
Site Lines Two if by Sea

By Elizabeth J. Normen

Robert Pittaway, a long-time NLMS trustee, volunteer, and now member of the new lighthouse committee, standing beside the fourth-order Fresnel lens (used since 1857) in New London Harbor Light. New London Maritime Society



New London Harbor Lighthouse, c. 1905. New London Maritime Society, courtesy of Alice Dimock



New London Harbor Light

Since 1761, a lighthouse has stood at the mouth of New London harbor where the Thames River meets Long Island Sound. The New London Harbor Light was the fourth lighthouse in North America and the first on Long Island Sound. The original stone tower was replaced in 1801 with the present 89-foot octagonal brownstone structure housing a cast-iron lantern. Still active and operated by the U. S. Coastguard, it is the oldest extant lighthouse in the state.

Ownership and stewardship of the building transferred to the New London Maritime Society last summer under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. That act allows for the transfer of government-owned lighthouses listed on (or eligible for listing on) the National Register of Historic Places to nonprofit organizations, state and local governments, or educational agencies that have agreed to maintain the properties and make them available to the public as parks, sites for education or recreation, or for cultural or historic preservation purposes. The society also operates the Custom House Museum on Bank Street in New London.

In 1904, Arthur Hewitt, visiting from the lighthouse tender *Larkspur*, recalled a story lighthouse keeper Charles Field had told him: "One night, when he was operating the horn, and 'the fog was so thick yer could have cut it with a knife and it fairly stuck in yer throat,' suddenly the sound seemed to strike something and reverberate with a strange echo against the lighthouse. Instinct told him that this was caused by the sails of some ship quite near by and in immediate danger of running on the rocks. He shouted a warning to the invisible ship, and between the blasts of the horn surely enough there came back an answer. He had altered the vessel's course just in time." The lighthouse continues today to warn sailors away from the dangerous Sarah Ledge.

In the short term, the Maritime Society plans some cleaning and landscaping and will install a handrail up the winding stairs in anticipation of offering tours. While the lighthouse is visible from Pequot Avenue, the keeper's house, built in 1863, is privately owned, and the grounds are not now open to the public. The Society is working out the details and hopes to offer tours on a limited basis this summer. And, as the Society's director Susan Tamulevich says, "We look forward to celebrating the light's 350th anniversary in 2011!"

New London Harbor Lighthouse today. New London Maritime Society

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Old Lighthouse Museum, Stonington

If the New London Maritime Society is new to lighthouse preservation, the Stonington Historical Society is an old hand, having operated the Old Lighthouse Museum for 85 years.

Stonington, the easternmost town on the Connecticut coast and still home to the last of Connecticut's commercial fishing fleets, erected the fourth lighthouse in Connecticut in 1823, building it on the end of the point of land that makes up Stonington Borough. By 1840, erosion forced it to be dismantled and rebuilt a bit farther north. The light was initially fueled by whale oil and then by kerosene. It remained in use until 1889, when it was decided that the light positioned on the breakwater protecting the harbor was sufficient. Since 1925, the lighthouse has been operated by the Stonington Historical Society as a museum that is open to the public. The structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

From the top of the lighthouse, which agile visitors access by a winding granite stair and short iron ladder, the view encompasses three states:

Connecticut, of course; Rhode Island (including Block Island on a clear day); and Long Island, New York. Visitors also may tour six museum galleries illustrating Stonington's surprisingly diverse history. To be sure, the exhibit offers plenty of fascinating maritime history, with displays about whaling, the Stonington steamship line, and the China trade. But there are also displays about agriculture, pottery manufacture, ice harvesting (one of the museum's most popular exhibits, says curator Louise Pittaway), and how the townspeople repelled the British during the War of 1812. You'll also want to take a look at the interactive map of all 40 lighthouses extant along the shores of Long Island Sound.

For a story on the Fayerweather Lighthouse in Bridgeport, see *Hog River Journal*, Spring 2009; find it on line at <http://connecticutexplored.org/issues/v7n02/katemoore.pdf>.

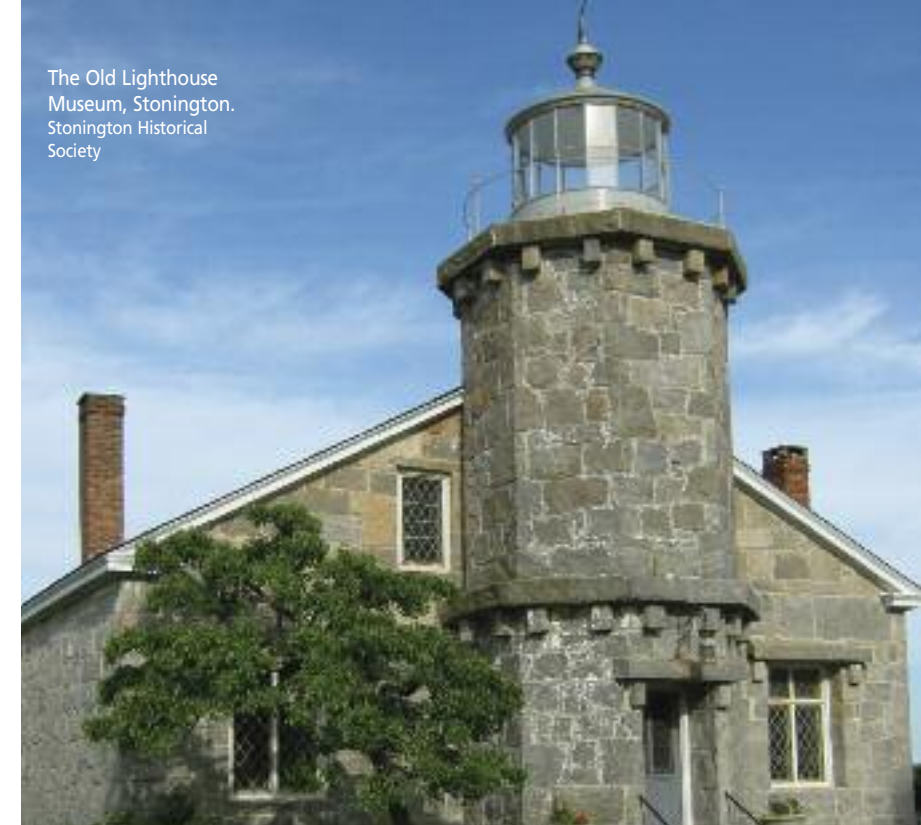
Elizabeth Normen is publisher of *Connecticut Explored*.



Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism

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The Old Lighthouse Museum, Stonington. Stonington Historical Society



The Old Lighthouse Museum, Stonington, c. 1920s. Stonington Historical Society



Exhibits on view for visitors to the Old Lighthouse Museum, Stonington. Stonington Historical Society

Explore!

New London Harbor Light

Pequot Avenue, New London. By appointment only. For more information on tour availability call (860) 447-2501 or visit www.nlmaritimesociety.org.

Old Lighthouse Museum

7 Water Street, Stonington Borough. Open daily, May to October. For more information visit www.stoningtonhistory.org or call (860) 535-1440.