A History of Piloting and Pilots

Printed with permission of Mr. Edward Spinney from his recently published manuscript "Piloting on Narragansett Bay "

The ancient and practical practice of bringing a vessel safely into strange harbors where charts and navigation aids such as lighthouses were non existent was accomplished by the practice of soundings. This was usually done with a weighted or leaded line marked in intervals of fathoms (6 feet to a fathom) thrown out in *front* of the vessel by a crew member or done by prodding the bottom with long marked poles. Both methods were both time consuming and tedious and at times a ship struck a rock or shoal while the line was being retrieved.

The entrance to Narragansett Bay provided its own traps to the unsuspecting vessel and even during daylight hours there were treacherous rocks to avoid. The lighthouse at Beavertail provided a valuable reference and a variable bearing line as the vessel moved into the bay but provided little assurance unless other marks could be used to provide a cross bearing as to the vessel's actual position. One method evolved advancing the single bearing by the vessel's estimated speed and taking a second bearing at a given time. Even with this navigational "fix," the position was an estimate only and the unknowns below the water were a constant worry. Here is where local knowledge of the bottom, tides and currents was worth the money paid.

The use of "local knowledge" was always preferred. This meant placing aboard a person, the "Pilot," who was familiar with the location of rocks, shoals and channels. The pilot would guide the ship master and helmsman to steer the vessel and avoid these under water hazards which he learned existed from first hand experience. It was common practice to seek out a local indigenous native or fisherman and engage him to guide the vessel. In return ship owners and captains were willing to pay handsome fees for safe guidance into port.

Captain Arthur Lemke boards a tanker bound for Providence.

Brenton Reef, a long rock shoal running southwest from Brenton Point, was notorious and along side it South by East stood Seal Ledge totally underwater waiting for any ship with a draft over 19 feet. Newton Rock off the southern tip of Beavertail Point, where the lighthouse was located, lay offshore less than one half mile from the point. Only when there was a high swell did it provide an advance warning of its danger. Over on the East Passage side another hidden danger was Butter Ball Rock. While always awash, its proximity to Castle Hill with

the deepest water in the bay (184 feet) gave navigators a false sense of security. As a ship ventured further up the bay before entering Newport Harbor, other obstructions had to be heeded. Off Conanicut Island lay Kettle Bottom Rock near the entrance of Mackerel Cove. The infamous Dumplings, a series of small rocky islands off of Bull Point were treacherous claws waiting for the unwary navigator. Further up were the shoals around Rose and Dyer Islands the Bishop Rock Shoals and Mitchell Rocks. The locations of all of these hazards are where the valuable knowledge of the local fishermen was in demand. The fishermen used piloting as a means to supplement their income.

There is no information how pilots were engaged during the late 18th century. Perhaps the ship owners or those who manned the watch house at Beavertail would alert a fisherman to row or sail out and meet an incoming vessel. Block Island residents had an earlier opportunity to sight incoming vessels and often were able to get out to an incoming vessel and offer services as a pilot. As shipping increased, local fishermen saw these as a financial opportunity. These developed into a very lucrative pastime supplementing his fishing income. There were no rules or regulations for piloting and it was the convention of ship masters that the pilot who "first came; was the first engaged."

The Energy Enterprise, shown here anchored in Jamestown, is one of approximately 1,500 ships that make their way up Narragansett Bay each year.

For over 100 years pilots in Narragansett Bay were not well organized. Early piloting was looked upon not as a profession but as a sideline business. Pilots were local fisherman or captains of coastal vessels who knew where the rocks, shoals and natural channels lay. Piloting was chaotic. Even in later years it was a freelance business which anyone could enter. The business of getting the job to pilot a ship was usually a competitive race by local entrepreneurs to row or sail out to an incoming vessel. Often it was two rowers per pulling boat setting out from the Jamestown shore or Newport's inner harbor in both good and bad weather. Once reaching the incoming vessel, the pilot had to convince the Captain he was a qualified pilot and negotiate a fee. The pulling boat was then towed by the incoming vessel. In later years there was serious feuding between Block Island pilots and those on the main land which eventually brought about Rhode Island piloting regulations. These piloting laws were not enacted by the Rhode Island General Assembly until 1867.

Regulations included individual licensing by qualifications and designation of geographical piloting locations where a pilot could be expected to be stationed in order to board a ship. Fees were also established based on a formula defining the vessel to be piloting. It was only in later years that international signal flags or lights at night denoting the ship was requesting a pilot were flown from a yard arm or mast of the vessel. The striped blue and yellow international code flag "G" (Golf) became the "request for a pilot" when flown at the yard arm and after the pilot was on board, the vessel flew the red and white code flag "H" (Hotel) signifying that a pilot was on board and the ship was under his guidance.

The work was both hard and sometimes hazardous since weather played a significant role. Narragansett Bay with an ebbing tide against the strong prevailing Southwest breeze results in a rough chop mixed with rolling seas. Rowing two to five miles to intercept a vessel in these conditions is only for the very few. During winter time the famous "Northeaster" is experienced that makes the situation more precarious and dangerous. This excerpt from the Newport Daily News of January 10, 1903 starkly reflects the risks.

The 1,132 foot Queen Mary 2 is one of many passenger cruise ships that Rhode Island pilots navigate safely through the challenging waters of Narragansett Bay each year.

> *This morning about 7 o'clock Captain C.H. King sighted a large tramp steamer laying her jack for a pilot. He hurried across the island (Conanicut) with his brother, Andrew T. King, and secured a rowboat at the ferry, started to row to the steamer. It was rough and cold work and the boat shipped considerable water, and the two men were soon completely cased in ice where the spray struck them and froze. They were fortunate enough while off Castle hill to be taken in tow by a Newport auxiliary sloop, and a mile and a half southwest of the lightship boarded the steamer, which was an English tramp with about 5,000 tons of Welsh coal for Providence. She was 22 days out from England and was well covered with ice.*

Today, Narragansett Bay pilots are equipped with computer mapping programs coupled to GPS navigation instruments and hand held radios which they carry aboard the vessels to be piloted. Although experienced and supplemented with electronic aids, they still rely on lights, buoy's and visual bearings to direct the ship safely into the channels and finally to harbor. The safety record of piloted vessels in Narragansett Bay is impressive with few mishaps and groundings. A large number of vessels such as tugs and barges are exempt from piloting regulations as are the many private recreational boats.