

# Black Rock Harbor History

Black Rock Harbor's historical significance is much greater than its relatively small size suggests. Now part of Bridgeport, CT, Black Rock was part of neighboring Fairfield until 1870. The area's first known inhabitants were the Pequonnock tribe, who subsisted on farming, hunting and fishing for the plentiful eels, shad and shellfish. Black Rock's first white settler was Thomas Wheeler, who built his home (circa 1644) on the site of what is now Fayerweather Boat Yard. As with other colonial New England towns, the early settlers of Black Rock tried, convicted and hung an alleged witch (Goody Knapp) in 1653.

By the 1760s, the potential of Black Rock's deep, reasonably protected harbor for a shipping port was recognized, and the settlement became western Connecticut's commercial center. In 1790 Black Rock became the official Port of Entry for Fairfield County. David Wheeler III, a descendant of Thomas Wheeler, developed Middle Wharf, near what is now the S.S. Norden Club.

Captain Ichabod Wheeler started a shipyard where Fayerweather Yacht Club and Port 5 Naval Veteran's Club now stand. Other wharves and storehouses were built on the site, which was called the Upper Wharves. Livestock, lumber and vegetables, including the region's main crop - onions - were shipped to the other colonies and the West Indies, starting a very profitable trade. Remnants of the onion farms can still be seen sprouting from lawns throughout the area.

Black Rock Harbor played an important role in the American Revolution. Fort Black Rock was built in 1776 at the foot of Grovers

Hill to protect the entrance to Ash Creek, where mills and a bakehouse that supplied the army were located. Captain Caleb Brewster, the owner of a blacksmith shop near the Upper Wharves, became a member of the Culper Spy Ring, a part of General George Washington's Espionage Service.

Brewster and his crew delivered coded messages to Washington from Setauket, NY to Black Rock by rowing a whaleboat across the Sound at night. On one occasion Brewster intentionally allowed fake plans for an American assault on New York to be intercepted by the British, who were fooled into delaying plans to dispatch their fleet to Newport, RI. This deception spared the French fleet (allies of the colonies) from attack.

The *Defence*, commissioned in 1775 for naval service, was an 80-foot brigantine commanded by Captain Seth Harding of Norwich, CT, and her officers were Lieutenants Ebenezer Bartram of Black Rock and Samuel Smedley of Fairfield. Her crew of 100 included many men from

Black Rock. In the spring of 1776, the *Defence*, armed with sixteen six-pound cannons, was assigned to Black Rock to prevent Tory information from crossing the Sound. She engaged and took several enemy boats, capturing and interrogating fifteen Tories. On a mission in the Atlantic, *Defence* captured three enemy ships and 330 enemy officers and crew.

In 1777, Smedley became *Defence's* captain, and he was responsible for taking seven enemy ships. During her three years of service, the *Defence* captured a total of thirteen enemy vessels and grabbed a half-million dollars in booty, a feat unequalled by any American vessel in the war for independence.

Black Rock shipping expanded in the 1800s, and trade with the West Indies for rum, molasses and sugar yielded huge profits. Shipbuilding in the harbor, which had been going on for some time, rose to greater prominence at this time. Shipyards owned by Captain John P. Brittin, Verdine Ellsworth, Captain Daniel Wilson and Sturges & Clearman were built next to the Upper Wharves. In 1856 these yards were consolidated under a new owner, Captain Wilson Hall, who built some of the best boats in the country.

As the Industrial Revolution progressed, commerce in Black Rock Harbor shifted from shipbuilding to coaling and manufacturing. Captain William B. Howes built a coal yard at the foot of what is now Seaview Terrace. Later owned by Woodruff Burr, the yard operated until 1903. Black Rock was the location of the Bridgeport Copper and

Sulfuric Acid Works. By the 1900s, Bridgeport Harbor, to the east, had replaced Black Rock as a commercial seaport, and the harbor became home to a previously unknown avocation: yachting.

The Bridgeport Yacht Club was relocated in 1898 from



Bridgeport Harbor to Black Rock, where the water was cleaner. The three-story clubhouse, built on land purchased from the Bartram family, had a wide two-story veranda facing a wharf and a sandy swimming beach. The club had 300 members and held their first regatta in 1899.

The queen of the Bridgeport Yacht Club fleet was Wilson Marshall's *Atlantic*, a 185-foot schooner that won a transatlantic race from Newport to the English Channel in 1904, and was awarded the German Kaiser's Cup. The clubhouse served as a Naval Reserve barracks during World War I. When the structure was torn down in 1923, sections were salvaged and converted into houses that are still standing. One house is located on the club's original site at 123 Anchorage Drive

and another was moved to the corner of Grovers Avenue. Following the Bridgeport Yacht Club's demise, its red & white striped burgee was adopted by Black Rock Yacht Club.

Bridgeport, the 'Park City', was once the most popular summer vacation resort between New York City and Newport, RI. Photographs from the 1900s depict throngs of swimmers and picnickers at Pleasure Beach (located east of Black Rock), where a popular amusement park once stood. Black Rock Harbor was home to what was perhaps the Sound's grandest summer resort hotel. The George Hotel, which opened in 1874, was built on Grovers Hill, near what is now Saint Mary's by the Sea.

The French Second Empire style George Hotel was built by George A. Wells, who was the public relations director for Bridgeport's most famous resident, P.T. Barnum, the hotel's main financial backer. Wells apparently learned the art of shameless promotion from Barnum: the George Hotel's promotional material promised "a bath with every room," the operative word being "with" - not "in". Guests wishing to bathe could wade in Long Island Sound! The George Hotel no longer stands, but its "Shore House," directly on the waterfront, which was once the hotel bar and a dining room, is now the Black Rock Yacht Club.

The picturesque Fayerweather Island Lighthouse, designed by John McComb, was built in 1823 (or 1835, according to some sources), and in all likelihood it is America's oldest cut brownstone lighthouse. The original lighthouse, built in 1808, was destroyed on September 22, 1821 by a southeasterly gale that washed over the island and washed every vessel in the harbor ashore. One ship, with six sailors aboard, went down with all hands lost.

Fayerweather Island Lighthouse is the fourth oldest lighthouse on Long Island Sound, and certainly among the prettiest, although it no longer serves as an aid to navigation. It was decommissioned in 1933. Two automatic blinkers (Red "2A" and Green "7") have replaced the beacon.

Purchased by the federal government in 1807, Fayerweather Island was truly an island until 1917, when the city built a wall connecting the breakwater. Before that the island was connected to what is now Bridgeport's Seaside Park by a sand bar that was only passable at low tide. The island provided the natural protection that made Black Rock an important shipping port; as many as 200 ships arrived and departed the harbor during the Age of Sail.

The Moore family tended Fayerweather Island Lighthouse from 1817 to 1878. Stephen Moore's daughter Catherine, who became the keeper after her father's death, is Black Rock Harbor's most famous heroine. A strong rower, Kate Moore is credited with saving the lives of 21 shipwrecked sailors.

After falling into disrepair, the lighthouse underwent a restoration that began in 1983. An annual Preservation Ball, initiated in 1994 by Black Rock artist David Grant Grimshaw, was held at Black Rock Yacht Club. Work was completed in 1998, thanks to the efforts of the Black Rock Community Council, the Black Rock Seaport Foundation and the Friends of Seaside Park. Two power companies, United Illuminating and Bridgeport Energy, donated solar panels and lighting equipment, which illuminate the 47-foot tower - for aesthetic, not navigational, purposes.

The *Connecticut Post* reported that the lighthouse had been mysteriously relighted in April 1996 for the Preservation Ball (the donated lighting equipment was not yet installed). Grimshaw arrived at Black Rock YC for the ball and was astonished by what he saw. "Across the harbor was the eerie glow of the lighthouse against the black sky. Everyone thought I had arranged the illumination, but I hadn't," said Grimshaw. The phantom "keeper" has never been identified - had the spirit of Kate Moore grown impatient for the restoration's completion?

*Much of the historical information in this feature was found in Black Rock: A Bicentennial Picture Book - A Visual History of the Old Seaport of Bridgeport: 1644 to 1976, edited and designed by Dick Jones and published by the Black Rock Civic and Men's Club, Inc. in 1976.*

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