

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

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Item number 7

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1. NAME: Historic - Prudence Island Lighthouse
Common - Prudence Island Light Station
2. LOCATION
East end of Sandy Point on Prudence Island
Portsmouth, Rhode Island
Newport County
3. CLASSIFICATION
Category - structure
Ownership - public
Status - unoccupied
Present Use - government, transportation, other: active
lighthouse
4. OWNER OF PROPERTY
U. S. Government, Department of Transportation
First U. S. Coast Guard District Headquarters
150 Causeway Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02114
5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
U. S. Government, Department of transportation
First U. S. Coast Guard District Headquarters
150 Causeway Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02114
6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
Historic American Engineering Record
Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites in
Rhode Island, 1978
Historic American Engineering Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240
7. DESCRIPTION

Condition - good / altered / moved

Established in 1851, the Prudence Island Light stands on a 1-1/2-acre site at Sandy Point on the east side of the island. The active light continues to serve as a guide for ships passing throughout the East Passage of Narragansett Bay en route to the Providence River and Mount Hope Bay.

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The 28-foot tower sits on a 3-foot grass-covered octagonal fieldstone base approximately 25 feet in diameter, ringed with a cement retaining wall. The tapering octagonal white tower, which consists of 10 courses of smoothly cut granite blocks, has a diameter of 13 feet at the base. A window opening at the bottom of the tower on the east side and another on the north side directly underneath the gallery have both been covered with plywood. The black lantern features a total of 35 panes of glass arranged in three rows from floor to ceiling and held in place by a cast-iron frame. A dome of copper panels riveted to 16 iron ribs caps the lantern, and an iron railing surrounds the cast iron gallery deck. Above the lantern is a copper ventilator cap. An automatic fog whistle with a sound deflecting screen sits on the east edge of the deck.

Attached to the west side of the tower is a 6-by-9-foot, one-story, hipped-roof cement block engine room added in the late 1930s or early '40s. A small wooden shed roof addition attached to the north side of the engine room provides access to the tower.

Inside, the tower is finished with smooth faced stone, painted white. An open circular stairway of roughly cut granite steps with an iron railing hugs the walls of the tower. The window frames and roof of the lantern are both painted white while the iron floor of the deck is black. A plaque which replaces one of the panes of glass at the base of the lantern refers to the construction of the tower on Prudence Island. It reads,

Erected under the superintendence of E. W. Lawton, Collector of the Port of Newport, 1851. Mason work by H. Vaugh, deck and lantern by I. N. Stanley & Brother, iron founders, Newport, R. I.

The fourth order light, 28 feet above sea level, has a range of 9 miles. Its green light flashes every six seconds and the fog horn gives one blast every fifteen seconds. The tower was reported by a Coast Guard Inspection of September 1980 to be in good condition.

8. SIGNIFICANCE

Period: 1800-1899, 1900-

Specific Dates: 1823, 1851-52

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Originally built on Goat Island in Newport Harbor in 1823 and moved to its present location in 1851, Prudence Island Lighthouse is significant as the oldest surviving tower in Rhode Island. The light is also important in that it is the only one in the state, and one of the few in the country, that has served as an active light at two different sites. Located along the main shipping route to Providence and Fall River, Prudence Island Light continues to serve as an important navigational aid for shipping on the East Passage of Narragansett Bay. As a moved structure, the light would not ordinarily be eligible for the National Register. In the case of the lighthouse, however, the second site and use reproduce the original setting and use of the structure more closely than is the case for most moved buildings. Additionally, the light is primarily significant for its architectural quality, and for its ability to document an early period of lighthouse construction.

The Prudence Island light was originally erected in 1823 at the northern end of Goat Island in Newport Harbor and lit for the first time on January 1, 1824. The light was abandoned in 1838 after the completion of a nearby but better located new light.

In 1850 a light was authorized for Sandy Point on Prudence Island and the following year it was decided that instead of constructing a new tower on the island, the old 1823 light at Goat Island would be taken down and reerected at Sandy Point. The old tower was marked, numbered, disassembled, and then rebuilt on Prudence Island so that it closely resembled its earlier appearance. The original lantern was also reused.

On October 15, 1851, a contract of \$900 was awarded to Horace Vaugh to take down, move and rebuild the tower on a one-acre parcel at Sandy Point which had been purchased earlier that year for \$250. I. N. Stanley & Brother, iron founders from Newport, were responsible for replacing the deck and lantern at the top of the tower. The light was first lit on January 17, 1852.

In addition to the light, a one-and-a-half-story clapboarded keeper's dwelling was built about 200 feet to the west of the light, and connected to the tower by an elevated boardwalk. Beside the light stood a fog bell on a wooden frame.

In 1908 a 1-1/2-acre plot of land adjacent to the west end of the original reservation was purchased. A plan of the station grounds made the following year showed a garden, chicken house,

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shed, oil house, barn, and boathouse in addition to the light tower, keeper's house, and bell.

The 1938 hurricane destroyed all structures on the station grounds except for the tower. During the storm, the wife of the keeper, her son, two guests, and a former keeper were all drowned when the dwelling was swept out to sea. The keeper, who was also in the house during the storm, managed to escape when a wave carried him back to shore. Although the foundation of the tower was undermined and its windows blown out, it survived the storm relatively undamaged.

Rather than rebuild the keeper's dwelling, the light was automated the following year in 1939. A cement retaining wall was constructed around the tower's fieldstone base and engine room for a generator was built of the west side. A new fog bell was installed on two cement foundation piers in front of the tower but this was removed in 1961 and replaced with a diaphragm horn mounted on the lantern gallery deck.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage: 1.5 acres

Quadrangle name: Prudence Island, RI

Quadrangle scale: 1:24,000

UTM References: A 19 308090 4608350

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated property is Plat 81, lot 5, which encompasses the resource and its immediate setting.

Level of Significance:

SHPD ~~FPO~~ Certification:

Frank R. Williams

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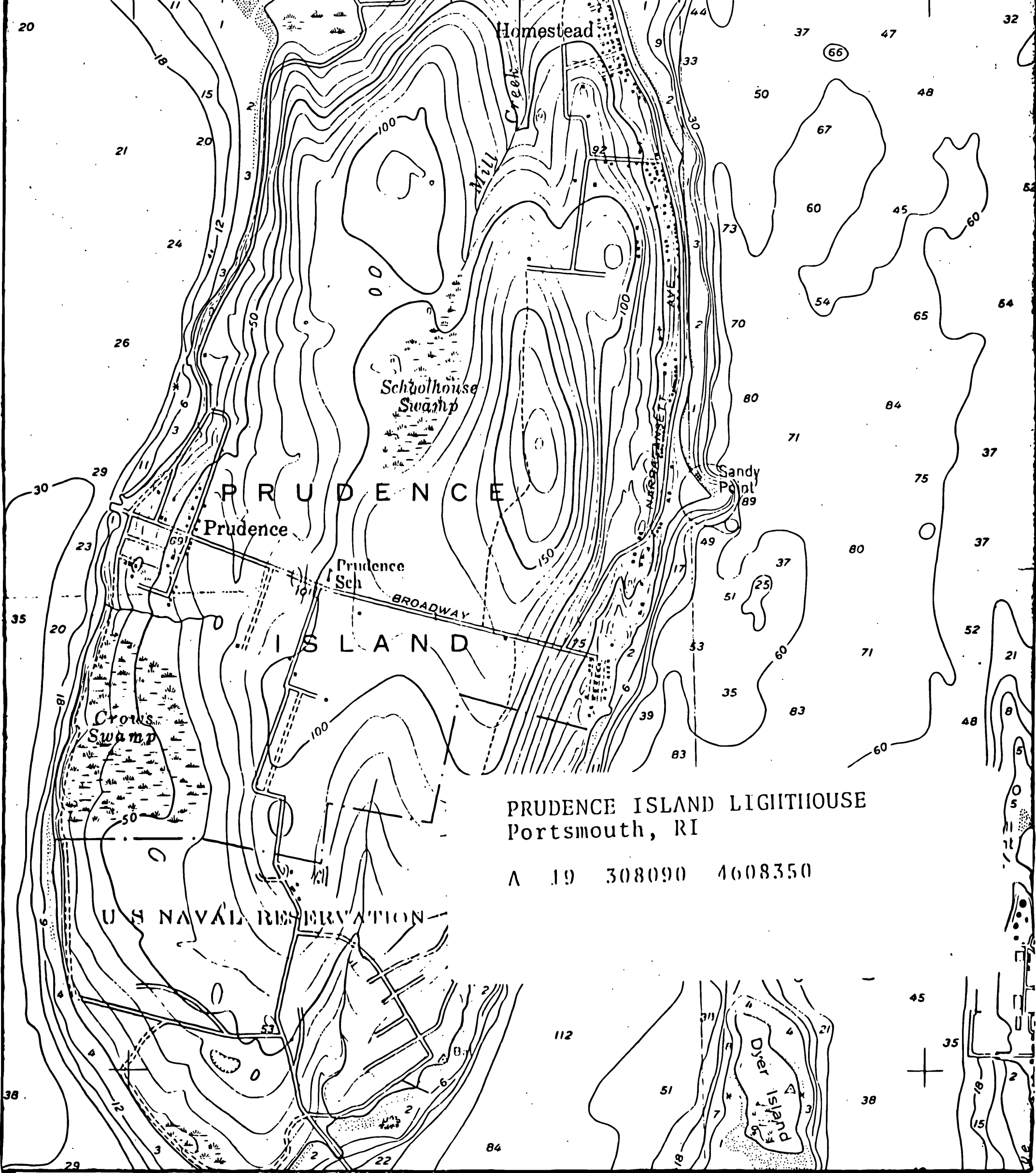
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Period of Significance: The period of significance extends from 1851, when the light was reconstructed on Prudence Island, to 1938. The Prudence Island Light actually dates from 1823 when it was constructed on Goat Island; in 1851 the light was disassembled and reconstructed on Prudence Island; while the light appears to retain the general appearance of its earlier (1823-1851) stage, the extent to which alterations occurred during reassembly is not known. The disassembly and reconstruction of the lighthouse documents an interesting and unusual process, but the significance of this process is not clearly documented. The significant role of Prudence Island Light in Rhode Island commerce and shipping is well documented for the period following 1851; and thus, its period of significance is defined from that date.

Level of Significance: State

05 20' 306 307 6767 1 NE (BRISTOL) 308 17'30"



PRUDENCE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE
Portsmouth, RI

Λ 19 308090 4608350

U.S. NAVAL RESERVATION

