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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

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See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Sakonnet Light Station

and/or common

2. Location

S of Little Compton on

street & number Little Cormorant Rock

N.A. not for publication

city, town Little Compton vicinity vicinity of #1 - Hon. Fernand J. St Germain
congressional district

state Rhode Island

code 44

county Newport

code 005

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	N.A. In process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: Abandoned

4. Owner of Property

name Carl W. Haffenreffer

street & number 188 Benefit Street

city, town Providence

N.A. vicinity of

state Rhode Island 02903

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Town Clerk's Office

street & number The Commons

city, town Little Compton

state Rhode Island

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Historic American Engineering Record

has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978

federal state county local

depository for survey records

Historic American Engineering Record, Dept. of the Interior

city, town Washington

state D.C.

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Sakonnet Light Station, now deactivated and abandoned, is a standard "sparkplug" type lighthouse of prefabricated cast-iron construction, anchored by a caisson foundation to Little Cormorant Rock, an outcropping off Sakonnet Point on the eastern side of the mouth of the Sakonnet River. The combined height of the caisson and tower is about 66 feet from the surface of the rock to the top of the lantern. The four-story tower is in the form of a tapering cylinder, with a diameter of 22 feet at the base and 19 feet at fourth-floor level. It is surmounted by a cylindrical watchroom and a decagonal lantern. Fenestration of the tower is irregular, combining plain portlights and windows ornamented with heavily scaled cast-iron pediments. The tower and watchroom are painted white and the caisson and metal portions of the lantern are painted black.

The caisson, 30 feet 5 inches in diameter, contains a basement room 18 feet in diameter with brick walls two feet thick. The exterior wall of the caisson is composed of 1½-inch-thick cast-iron plates and the 4-foot, 2½-inch cavity between these plates and the brick basement wall is filled with concrete. A gallery resting on top of the caisson surrounds the first story of the tower. The gallery has a reinforced-concrete deck, iron posts, and an iron or steel roof. Steel-framed platforms with derricks for landing boats originally extended off the first-floor gallery in south-southeasterly and north-northwesterly directions, and a steel ladder at the northeast ran down to a concrete platform on the rock below. These have since been removed, making access to the tower nearly impossible. A 134-degree arc of the gallery on the southwesterly side of the tower is enclosed with steel plates pierced by portlights. This enclosure, painted white, once housed fog signal equipment. The tower, watchroom, and lantern have exterior walls composed of ¾-inch-thick cast-iron plates. Two segmental-arch entrances into the tower--one original and the other probably a later alteration--are located in the gallery enclosure. The tower has two windows and a portlight at first-floor level and three windows each on the second- and third-floor levels, all irregularly spaced, and eight portlights spaced symmetrically around the perimeter of the fourth floor. The roof of the tower, projecting slightly beyond the walls with strut-like brackets supporting it, forms a gallery deck surrounding a 10-foot, 6-inch-diameter watchroom. Part of the balustrade around the watchroom gallery has rotted away but about 80 per cent remains intact. The watchroom is in turn topped by a roof deck gallery surrounding a lantern room about 7 feet, 8 inches in diameter. The lantern has ten vertical iron bars holding ¼-inch-thick glass plates measuring 36 by 27½ inches. It is capped with a polygonal conical roof topped by a ball finial.

On the interior, the basement within the caisson contains a brick-walled cistern for rain water, a coal bin, and a boiler (now corroded) to supply heat and hot water. A toilet originally located here no longer remains. The interior walls of the first, second, and third floors are of brick--three, two, and one course thick respectively--with a cavity between the brick and the iron exterior wall. The fourth floor and

(See Continuation Sheet #1)

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watchroom walls are faced with tongue-and-groove boards. A staircase with landings winds up from first to fourth floors along the curving wall of the tower, and ladders provide access from the fourth floor to the watchroom and from the watchroom to the lantern. The tower served as the keeper's and assistants' residence. The first floor was used as a kitchen and living area. The sink and the cabinets, minus their doors, remain but other fixtures have been removed. The second and third floors were used as bedrooms, and the fourth floor was divided into a bedroom and tool room. The lantern originally contained a 4th-order lens fitted with an incandescent oil vapor lamp, but the light no longer operates and this apparatus has been removed.

The lighthouse, decommissioned by the Coast Guard in the late 1950s and sold into private ownership in 1961, has been abandoned for the past twenty-one years. It is currently in poor repair. Paint has peeled off much of the exterior wall surface and the exposed iron is rusted. There is one large crack in the iron plating of the caisson. The first-floor gallery has holes in the wall and roof and numerous cracks in its concrete deck, and a portion of the watchroom gallery balustrade is missing. Inside, painted surfaces are peeling and the rooms are soiled with guano deposited by nesting birds, but the brick walls and tongue-and-groove sheathing are in remarkably good condition. In spite of the general deterioration, the lighthouse is structurally sound and could be repaired and restored.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) Navigation, Maritime History
Specific dates	1883-1884	Builder/Architect	Unknown	

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Sakonnet Light Station is significant for its association with the history of commerce and transportation in Rhode Island. Both alone and as part of a network of lights, it served as an aid to navigation, helping to ensure the safe passage of goods and travelers along the Atlantic coast and Sakonnet River, past the numerous small islands and rocks surrounding Sakonnet Point. It is architecturally significant as an example of nineteenth-century engineering and prefabricated construction and as a visually prominent man-made element of the seascape. It also stands as a symbol of the maritime heritage of the town and state.

Impetus for the construction of Sakonnet Light Station came from a report filed by a Lighthouse Board inspector in March 1882 (perhaps in response to petitions from local residents or mariners, though no documentation to corroborate this has been discovered). The report stated that a light here would improve navigational safety, marking the mouth of the Sakonnet River as a harbor of refuge for coasting vessels during storms, and serving as an aid to navigation along a long, then-unlighted stretch of coastline. The Lighthouse Board's Committee on Location concurred, reporting that "...the interests of commerce and navigation require the establishment of a light at the locality in question..." (i.e. at or near Sakonnet Point). The inspector's report had recommended that the proposed light be sited on West Island, but when members of a private club occupying the island expressed their disapproval of the scheme, it was decided to build the lighthouse on Little Cormorant Rock, about 900 feet northwest of West Island. Funding for Sakonnet Light was appropriated by Congress on 7 August 1882. Little Cormorant Rock was ceded to the federal government by the State of Rhode Island on 15 March 1883. The caisson foundation was put up before the onset of winter forced suspension of work, and the tower itself was erected and finished in 1884. The light was first shown on 1 November 1884. The inaccessible, exposed site of the station necessitated special arrangements for the transportation and support of materials and laborers, and the structure is a testament to the skill and ingenuity of the men involved in its erection. The light was established during a period of tremendous growth for the Lighthouse Board. The number of lights nationwide increased from 297 in 1850 to 661 in 1880 and 1397 in 1910, an expansion greatly aided by the development and use of the standardized, prefabricated cast-iron tower. Sakonnet Light is a representative example of this structural type, which played a pivotal role in the evolution of the country's lighthouse system, and is a notable survivor from the system's era of greatest growth.

9. Major Bibliographical References

First Coast Guard District, Civil Engineering Division files (include assorted drawings, photographs, inspection reports, and correspondence, 1900 to date).

(See Continuation Sheet #3)

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Sakonnet Point

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property encompasses Little Cormorant Rock at the mouth of the Sakonnet River, about 900 feet northwest of the north-westerly point of West Island.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
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state	code	county	code
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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Robert O. Jones, Jr., Senior Historic Preservation Planner

organization R.I. Historical Preservation Commission date November 1982

street & number 150 Benefit Street telephone 401-277-2678

city or town Providence state Rhode Island 02903

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Frederick R. Wilkerson*

title _____ date December 23, 1982

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date 2/10/83

for Belva Byers
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

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Sakonnet Light operated until it was disabled by the hurricanes of 1954. At that time the Coast Guard decided not to repair it, since additional aids to navigation in the area, including a light on the Sakonnet Breakwater and other beacons and a whistle buoy at the river entrance, had rendered the old light unnecessary. Coast Guard plans to demolish the light met with vociferous opposition from local residents. In 1956 the federal government offered to give the lighthouse to the town provided it remained unlighted, and the town voted to accept this offer. An editorial in the Fall River (Mass.) Herald News commended the town:

Too often landmarks or buildings which are of historic interest or importance are allowed to go into disuse and then disappear when the practical reasons for their maintenance has passed...

The sense of historic continuity on which it is now recognized a national culture depends for sustenance is based to a considerable extent on the links with the past old landmarks and buildings provide.

The town of Little Compton has averted this fate for at least one landmark by accepting the Sakonnet Point Light from the government...

The old structure will remain where it has always stood, and will, one hopes, serve as a picturesque reminder to generations yet to come of the way in which mariners were helped to safe harbor in the pre-mechanical age.

Misgivings concerning the responsibility and cost of maintenance subsequently deterred the town from taking the lighthouse. In 1961 the federal government sold the light station to Carl W. Haffenreffer, a part-time Little Compton resident interested in preserving the old structure. Since then the tower has been painted several times but it has become increasingly difficult over the years to engage contractors for maintenance work. Though the destructive effects of the weather pose a threat to Sakonnet Light, a concerted effort is now under way to find a means to repair and maintain the structure and identify a possible use that will ensure the preservation of this picturesque maritime landmark.

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Hall, David D., "Preliminary Inspection of Sakonnet Point Light Station, September 21, 1982" (unpublished typescript on file at R.I. Historical Preservation Commission).

Kulik, Gary and Julia C. Bonham, Rhode Island: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (Washington: Historic American Engineering Record, 1978), p. 110.

"Little Compton Will Preserve a Landmark," Fall River (Mass.) Herald News, 12 July 1956.

National Archives Project, Works Progress Administration, Inventory of Federal Archives in the States, Series X, Number 38, p. 41.

National Archives, Record Group #26, papers and clippings from Sakonnet Light Station file.

Putnam, George R., Lighthouses and Lightships of the United States (Boston & New York: 1933), p. 52.

Rhode Island Development Council, "Rhode Island Lighthouses" (no date; electrostatically printed typescript distributed by R.I.D.C.), p. 6.