

**New London, Art & Life, Tourism**

## Owning a Lighthouse is No Small Task. Just Ask New London's Keepers

— Clare Byrne, 6.29.2026



The base of New London Harbor Light (Contributed).

You may know what it's like to own and caretake a house. There are roof repairs, foundational waterproofing, paint jobs and more.

But what if your house is 89 feet tall? What if it is surrounded on four sides by 28 feet of water? What if your roof requires a 2.5-foot circling lens shining out of it?

In other words, what if you own a lighthouse?

Susan Tamulevich, director of the **New London Maritime Society**, delved into this and more in “Three Lighthouses Off New London,” a Sunday afternoon lecture at the **Pardee-Morris House** in East Haven, just down the street from New Haven’s **Five Mile Point Lighthouse**. The maritime society owns and stewards three of the many lighthouses surrounding New London’s harbor.

The talk was hosted by the **New Haven Museum** at Pardee-Morris, the Revolutionary-era home of 1700s businessman Amos Morris on Lighthouse Road. A farmhouse-museum, the Pardee-Morris House hosts a **series of talks and music concerts** on its large lawn through the summer months.

As Tamulevich noted, the entire Long Island Sound is a “treacherous bathtub” of surface-lying rocks and shallows; it’s precipitated rounds of shipwreck and lighthouse building throughout its history.

In fact, the reason why New London’s first lighthouse was built was because a Spanish cargo ship laden with gold, silver and indigo ran aground on the rocky shoals of Bartlett’s Reef in Long Island Sound in 1759. Its treasure was looted by New London residents, a serious loss not just for the ship but the city’s reputation. Lottery tickets were sold by the Connecticut legislature to gather resources to build a beacon to forestall future such occurrences.

Thus, **New London Harbor Light** was built in 1761. The original 64-foot-tall structure was replaced in 1801 by an elegant 89-foot-tall octagonal taper. It remains the oldest and tallest on Long Island Sound.

As the deepest natural harbor between Boston and New York City, New London has a panoramic view of more lighthouses than anywhere else in the world, Tamulevich noted. On a very clear day, you can see distant lighthouses at North Dumpling, Little Gull, Orient Point and Plum Island on Long Island, and Latimer Reef off Fisher’s Island.

New London Maritime Society caretakes three of the most iconic ones, one being New London Harbor Light.

Next, Race Rock Lighthouse, built in 1878, an engineering feat of granite masonry perched on a treacherous ledge eight miles out from New London.



Southwest Ledge Light in New London (Contributed).

The third is New London Ledge Light, the 1909 French mansard-roofed brick house located in New London's channel, visible from Interstate 95's Gold Star Memorial Bridge.

New London Maritime Society has its home in downtown New London in the former U.S. Customs House, which itself survived potential demolition in 1983 to be resurrected as a museum. But how did the nonprofit organization come to be in charge of three lighthouses?

It applied. According to the National Historic Lighthouse Act of 2000, decommissioned lighthouses can be acquired, at no cost, by individuals and organizations, many of which continue to light lamps to aid navigation.

As the United States Lighthouse Society's website notes, "It's probably a surprise to most people, but there are far more private aids to navigation in U.S. waters than government aids. Today the Coast Guard maintains about 35,000 aids to navigation."

Even when in private or nonprofit hands, the Coast Guard maintains the actual beacons. Some have remained old-fashioned Fresnels, but most are forms of LED at this point, Tamulevich said.

When a lighthouse is decommissioned by the U.S. government, it is listed by the **National Park Service's Maritime Heritage Program**. If there are no applicants for acquisition, the property is auctioned or sold to a competitive bidder. This is why, as Tamulevich noted, some lighthouses are bought by individuals. But in her opinion, lighthouses were "built by the people and should be in the hands of the people." More than just navigational aids, she said, they can be community centers, sites of education and civic pride.



Race Rock Lighthouse on Long Island Sound (Contributed).

Tamulevich described the outpouring of community effort in upkeeping New London's lighthouses. The 2013 repainting of the Harbor Lighthouse was accomplished in record time through local donations and volunteerism.

"Within 24 hours of the [fundraising] announcement, the local carpenters and painters unions and Brand Scaffolding donate[d] \$500,000+ in in-kind labor and materials," according to the maritime society website.

In 2024, one crucial rusted beam at Ledge Light was a \$250,000 fundraising project. And in 2025, the railing at Race Rock was rebuilt by a local steelworks company through a combination of private foundation money and public fundraising.

As Tamulevich wryly noted, “going shopping” for lighthouse lenses — currently on her “to-do” list as maritime society director — is not your average house-ownership chore.

And she strongly urged everyone to visit “our” lighthouses. The maritime society offers regular public or private **tours** to all three lighthouses.



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