

The Narragansett Towers:

Restoring a Landmark of the Gilded Age



NARRAGANSETT, RHODE ISLAND

CASE STUDY: August, 2019



A lovely ocean view on site.

Warm breezes from Narragansett Bay filter across a very special part of southern Rhode Island. Overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, historic Narragansett Pier is home to spectacular beaches, Victorian summer cottages, and an iconic structure spanning Ocean Road known as “The Towers”, one of the nation’s finest examples of French Medieval design.

The Towers resides in a place of grand history.

Rhode Island's founder, Roger Williams traveled to the area in the 1630s, after he was banished by the Puritans in Massachusetts for his belief in religious freedom. In this newly discovered region, he found a vibrant settlement of “Narragansett” Native Americans. Williams established a fond relationship with the tribe

and especially, Miantonomi, their sachem. In the years to follow he would serve as the Narragansetts' primary negotiator with the leaders of Boston and Plymouth colonies.

After some years and a conflict between the colonists and the tribe known as “King Phillips’ War,” conditions improved and more colonists began to move to the area. Fertile soil, large tracts of land and proximity to water transport ensured a bustling agricultural economy. By 1695, produce was already being sold to

Newport and livestock to the West Indies, and southern Rhode Island had become an integral contributor to the the Providence Plantations.



The Towers in past, casino and hotel.

By the middle of the 19th century, visitors discovered Narragansett's beautiful beaches and began to stay for the summer season. By late in the century, Narragansett's agricultural economy had shifted to the cultivation of summer visitors. In the five years following the Civil War, ten hotels were constructed near the Pier, attracting prosperous guests from the East Coast and the Midwest. It was a genteel, innocent time, featuring popular pursuits such as sea bathing, fishing, croquet and "being seen."

The Gilded Age



A popular gilded age seaside destination.

Fortunes made in the Industrial Revolution as well as the advent of the railroad led to the heyday of "The Pier." Wealthy summer visitors flocked to the seaside to escape the sweltering heat and the pressures of city life. While some chose to build extravagant mansions across the bay in Newport, others preferred



Extensive history is recorded from the area.

architectural historian Vincent Scully, "the architecture of the American summer."

The most prominent new structure of all, built between 1883-1886, was the Narragansett Pier Casino, designed by America's most illustrious architects, McKim, Mead and White. The Casino was a massive shingled complex, featuring hotel rooms, restaurants, a ballroom, a bandstand, an array of sporting activities, as well as the Towers, a monumental granite porte-cochere spanning Ocean Road. A harmonious stone structure, the Life Saving Station, was added after 1887 on the ocean side, and

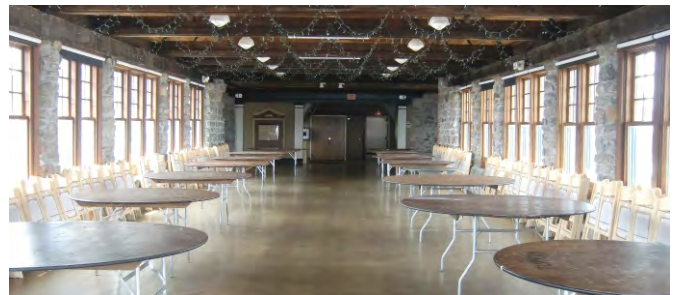
used as a Coast Guard station until 1937.

Guests at the Casino enjoyed a lively schedule of parties and dances. Social events featured

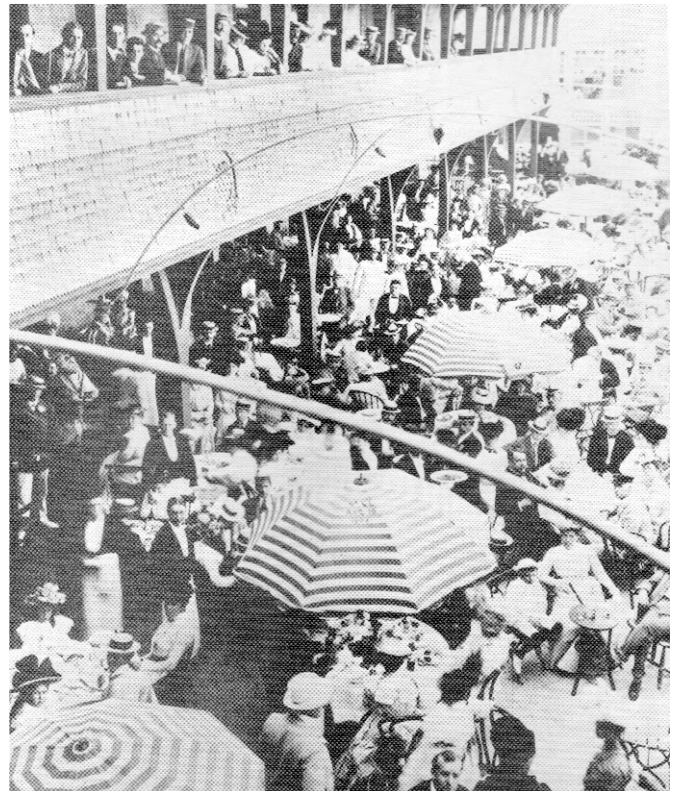


High society gala events were popular on site.

a sea of straw hats for the men, long, pale, corseted dresses for the ladies, and modest sailor suits for the children. Fashion-conscious young people tried out the latest fads, to the chagrin of one doctor who warned that roller-skating to music simply was not for delicate ladies "... of not robust constitution." (**The Narragansett Pier Towers & Casino at the Turn of the Century, 100th Anniversary 1883-1983**, Rush, B.J. [written and researched by] and Wilson III, F.J., [designed and edited by], Wilson Publishing Company, 1983, p.35).



Upstairs hall with lights, windows and balcony.



Socializing at the casino during dinner hour.

In her heyday, the Casino boasted the following amenities for its well-heeled guests:

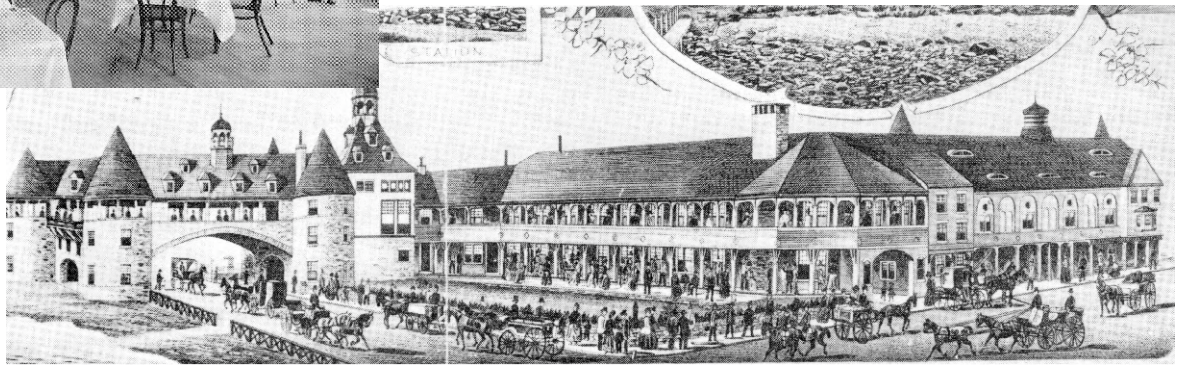
Tennis courts, covered walkways and viewing stands framed by fancy gardens to stroll; Bowling alley, billiard and reading rooms; Casino Restaurant Theatre (a venue for Broadway shows from New York after their opening season); Full complement of shops under the theatre offering groceries, flowers, barber shop plus a handy bank and stock office linked by direct wire to New York.



Fancy Gardens.



Casino Restaurant.



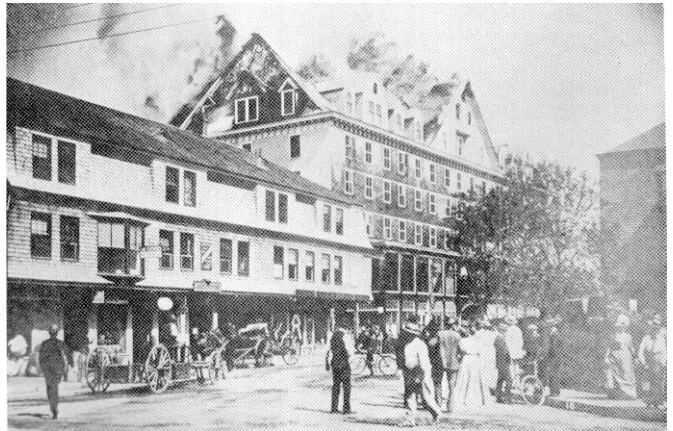
Casino in its entirety.

The Darkest Day

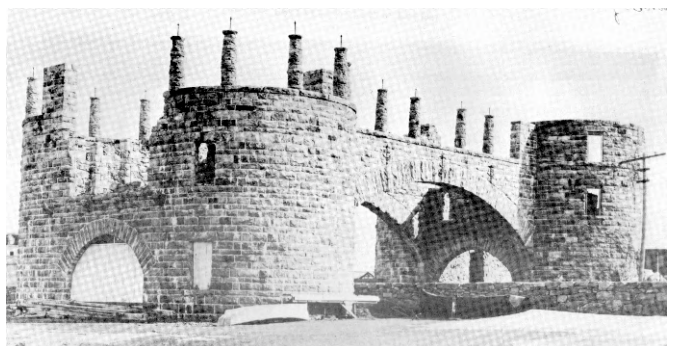
September 12, 1900 was the end of an era for Narragansett. A fire began in the Rockingham Hotel and, fanned by a westerly gale, spread next door to the Casino.

Despite the firefighters' efforts, the sprawling resort and the Rockingham both burned to the ground. Only charred remains and the stone sections of the Towers were left.

In 1910, a new, smaller casino was built and the towers partially restored. Narragansett hosted the national polo championships during this era, but times were changing. Once a destination for out-of-state residents who stayed for the season, with the advent of the automobile, Narragansett became popular with day trippers. Demand for hotel rooms dropped. The private, for-hire bathhouses on the beach were shunned by the middle-class day trippers; instead they changed into swimsuits in their cars and surreptitiously clambered under, over or around fencing to reach the beach. Struggles over beach ownership ensued. Bathhouses fell into disrepair. The stock market crash of 1929 and the resulting Depression, plus the devastating hurricane of 1938, were further blows to Narragansett's prosperity.



Street-goers watching fire.



Men's life work went up in flames on September 12, 1900; a very sad day for all.

Back to Wood Shingles

The Towers stood in disrepair for decades, “a ruin that looks historical and rather noble,” according to Richmond Barrett, who had known the Pier at its height. In 1965, interest in restoration was rekindled. Rhode Island Governor John Chafee facilitated the Towers' purchase, with the understanding that the town would assume ownership once proper reconstruction was completed. This was achieved in 1967, followed by placement on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969. The Towers were well on their way to surviving under new community leadership.

The Towers were originally roofed with cedar shakes. A move to dark, charcoal-colored asphalt shingles was made when the Towers were reroofed in the late 1990s. Due to the conical shape as well as high winds on the coastline, the asphalt started to scour (lift) almost immediately. It was difficult to get a proper seal on the asphalt material as the curved design turned out not to be suited for this type of roofing material. Spot repairs were made and a new roofing fund was begun. Finally a large percentage of the roof was lost to Superstorm Sandy in fall of 2012. Funding for the new roof was secured from the Sandy Relief Fund and insurance proceeds.

In May 2013, the asphalt roof was torn off and replaced with elaborately specified Pressure impregnated, preservative treated, by **Western Wood Preservers, Ltd, Certi-Last® Premium Grade 18" x 5/8" Certi-Sawn® tapersawn Western Red Cedar shakes** manufactured by **Crawford Shake & Shingle Ltd. Bob Dwyer, co-owner of Dwyer Hardwoods** stated that this particular product dimension was selected, as “product thickness is your friend”. 100 squares of material were supplied by **Capital Forest Products Inc.** When CSSB representatives visited the job site, the roofing Company, **Abcore Restoration Company, Inc., led by foreman Steve Dillon**, had just started the southern turret work. Wood roofing was not a tough sell, but it took a strong volunteer commitment to ensure that funding was available to restore this historic landmark to its original beauty. Town of Narragansett Historic District Commission Chairman **Keith Lescarbeau** and Narragansett Historical Society Officials both lobbied hard to make certain a wood roof would be specified. They were able to move the entire town behind the belief that, “the biggest waste of money would be to let The Towers sit and decline. We owe it to the public and the kids to preserve it and the best way to preserve it is to use it.”



The reroofing job in progress.



Celebrating 125 Years in 2013.



Certi-Last® preservative treated products were used.

With a clear vision statement, it was time to get to work. After many individual and corporate donations, grants, volunteer time, committee meetings and tourism initiatives, a new era for The Towers was born.

The Jewel of Rhode Island: 21st Century Uses

Today the Towers are a popular events venue. Over 100 weddings are typically booked annually. The Towers hosts mid-week business meetings and community events. Tourists arrive each year to learn about the building's history, shown on an expansive diorama. The history display room was also home to the celebration of The Towers' 125th anniversary.

From the balcony, one can watch ospreys diving for fish, as well as the hive of activity at the Chamber of Commerce and the Coast Guard House restaurant.



125th Town Anniversary Cake.

The Towers are Narragansett's proudest landmark: an enduring reminder of the Gilded Age and in the 21st century, a civic center and an icon for the entire state.



Historic Fact Sources other than those noted above:

Historic and Architectural Resources of Narragansett, Rhode Island, by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1991.

Narragansett-by-the-Sea, by Sallie W. Latimer, 1997

Special thanks to **Keith Lescarbeau**, Chairman, Historic District Commission for the Town of Narragansett, is recognized for his historical fact checking and review of the final document for accuracy. **Mike DeLuca**, Town of Narragansett Community Development Director, provided the "Towers Centennial Book" and was instrumental in helping the CSSB prepare this case study.



Historic courtyard marker.



Written by:

Lynne Christensen is the CSSB's Director of Operations. She has worked for the CSSB since 1998 and is involved in a variety of departments with a focus on marketing. Christensen holds a Master of Business Administration degree as well as the Certified Association Executive credential. She resides in British Columbia.



All Photos by (except where otherwise marked):

Tony Bonura is the CSSB's District Manager, Northeast. He has over 47 years of technical, sales and marketing experience in the forest products industry and shares his immense knowledge with a wide range of marketplace participants. Bonura is the

Past Chairman of the Joint Forest Products/Coatings Committee, headquartered at the Forest Product Laboratory in Madison, WI. He resides in New York State.

Historic photos: Narragansett Historical Society.



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