At Dutch Island, ghosts of past settlements

By Arline A. Fleming/Special to the Independent

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NORTH KINGSTOWN — Scott Chapin spent a long-ago summer day living what some might consider a Hardy Boy's adventure on Dutch Island – or depending upon how you look at it, a "Twilight Zone" episode.

It was during his 1960s boyhood, when summers on the Saunderstown shoreline were spent outdoors and local children would wake each morning looking Dutch Island square in the face. Separated from the shore by a ribbon of Narragansett Bay, Dutch Island's 81 acres seemed close enough to field a tennis ball whacked from any Saunderstown front yard, and it was often the site of family picnics and campouts.

Dutch Island Lighthouse, the most visible landmark on the island, was restored and relit in 2007. (Photo by Michael Derr)

"It was like one big playground," said Whit Hill, 46, a lifelong summer Saunderstown resident (year-round since 1982) who recalled casual excursions to Dutch Island that were as much a part of his summer as the Fourth of July.

It was sometimes called Treasure Island partly for the artifacts easily uncovered, and partly for the novel fantasy of having an uncivilized island available to them, just a boat ride away.

So on the day that Scott Chapin, 56, of South Kingstown went there for one of his many boyhood adventures, it was a time of climbing into ancient earthen tunnels left over from the days when Dutch Island housed an active military installation called Fort Greble.

The fort once had barracks, a hospital, a post office, a fire station, stables, bakery and stately officer's quarters, and underground there were cisterns and trenches, some possibly dating to the Civil War.

The military personnel had long since departed, but their ghosts remained in the minds of young boys, their attraction to Dutch Island resting as much in what it didn't have – adults – as in what it did: traces of forts and garrisons, bullets and gun mounts.

Chapin and two other Saunderstown boys didn't have computerized games with on-screen action figures and sound effects during their boyhood.

They didn't need them. They had the real thing.

"There were these manhole covers that looked like giant flying saucers," Chapin recalled, referring to cisterns that held water. They'd lift up the covers and climb down metal ladders into total darkness. Then they'd shout and listen to their own voices echo off the cool, black walls, their only source of light coming from the hole they entered.

On this particular day, as Chapin recalls, when the three boys had enough of listening to themselves and were ready to move on to another island adventure, they started back up the ladder. Scott watched his two friends climb ahead of him.

He was the last one, alone, he thought, down in the blackness.

"Just as I started to go up the ladder, someone grabbed my ankle, and I mean grabbed it."

Screaming and scrambling ensued, until laughter came from someone in a wetsuit who had been hiding in the island basement.

"He saw us coming," Chapin recalled of that day, and the warped stranger decided to play a trick on these boys who had come to the overgrown island where they felt comfortable and carefree enough not to really expect anything to be lurking in the darkness.

"We'd go off and your mom would just say 'Don't fall in a manhole,' " recalled Marjorie A. Johnston, a lifelong summer resident of Saunderstown.

"It wasn't nearly as overgrown as it is now," added Chapin.

But that was summer almost four decades ago, and according to Larry Mouradjian, associate director for natural resources at the state Department of Environmental Management, the island is off-limits to the general public, because of the liability presented by the very cisterns Chapin and his friends played in.

"We get calls from people saying they see people on the island all the time, but the official policy of the department is that there is no trespassing," he said, though lighthouse workers and the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society have been allowed on the island to conduct repairs. The island is managed by DEM and is part of Jamestown.

Mouradjian said things could change in the future, especially with continued interest in the restored lighthouse, but the entire island would need to be addressed in terms of safety and stabilization.

Abcore Restoration owner Keith Lescarbeau of Narragansett has spent many hours on Dutch Island working on the lighthouse, and when he and his crew had to approach the island from the opposite end due to certain weather conditions, he also has walked it.

"It's actually kind of eerie," Lescarbeau said. "There's a whole footprint of what was there. Foundations, posts of fencing, steps, pathways to steps, a water tower, bunkers."

Though overgrown, the island still has some field areas reminiscent of the former encampment and marching areas.

"It's hard to believe it went from what it was to nothing at all," Lescarbeau said, adding that it reminds him of a lost civilization, "like someone just shut the lights off and left."

He described Dutch Island as being "beautiful, though you have to squint sometimes" to visualize its possibilities.

Looking out from the Chapin family's summer cottage, Dutch Island appears primitive and wild, apart from the lighthouse recently saved by the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society to which Chapin and Johnston and scores of other local residents belong to and support.

The first lighthouse went up on Dutch Island in 1827, but it was eventually demolished. The present structure, which is 42 feet tall, was built in 1857 and served through the Civil War. The lighthouse has undergone more than $250,000 in restoration during the past decade, with a $120,000 grant from the state Department of Transportation and $135,000 raised by the Dutch Island Lighthouse Society.

It had been abandoned and vandalized since it was discontinued by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1979, replaced by offshore buoys. A keeper's cottage went down in the 1960s, though traces of its foundation remain.

In 2007, the Coast Guard approved a request by the Dutch Island Lighthouse

Society, allowing it to install a battery-powered solar-charged light that stays lit. The original Fresnel lens was moved to Maine.

Narragansett's Abcore Restoration, led by Lescarbeau, painted the structure, removed years of guano, replaced floors and stairwells and erased graffiti just prior to the 2007 lighting. Fund-raising events planned by the all-volunteer Society continue, including one planned for later this summer, on Aug. 13. (See dutchislandlighthouse.org.)

But the recorded island's history pre-dates that first 1827 lighthouse. According to the Images of America book, "Dutch Island and Fort Greble" by Walter K. Schroder of Jamestown, the island was originally known as Quetenis Island. Schroder writes that the site was sold to the Dutch West India Co. by the Narragansett Indians around 1636.

"They used the area as a trading post for approximately twenty years," he wrote.

But starting with the Civil War, the island served the federal government and the state as a coastal defense in the West Passage of Narragansett Bay.

Photos in his book show beautiful houses and buildings with slate roofs, barracks the size of the large hotels, and soldiers lined up in crisp uniforms and white gloves.

The terrain in those old photographs show clipped grass and thinned out trees.

 "It's so overgrown now, you'd need a machete to get through," said Chapin, and ticks are said to be abundant. He recalled pulling ticks off his arms and legs as a kid with the thought, "Big deal, it's a tick," before Lyme disease was an issue.

Johnston says parents sent their children off to Dutch Island with expectations of being responsible, and children left for the island with the ability to handle a sailboat and their own sharp imaginations.

With all that, and a packed lunch, said Johnston in earnest: "What was there to be afraid of?"