



- ▶ [Stories and Tales of the Weather Service](#)
- ▶ [Personal Tales](#)

## History of the Block Island Weather Station

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This history of the Block Island Weather Bureau Station was contributed by Mr. Gary W. Eddey, grandson of George Washington Eddey, a Weather Bureau Observer who had the longest tenure of all Block Island weather observers. This station history was constructed from records in the National Archives, historical records on Block Island, family records, and reference to Gustavus A. Weber's [The Weather Bureau Its History, Activities and Organization](#), Appleton and Company, New York, 1922.

It was all too common for fisherman to lose their lives to the sea due to unexpected severe weather and fog in the vicinity of Block Island from the time of its settlement until the early part of the Twentieth Century. George W. Eddey's wife's great-grandfather, Samuel Dodge, lost his life in this manner. In the 1800's, Block Island was a community in need of a local weather forecasting service for its fishermen. It is located 15 miles from the mainland and is prone to fog, wind, squalls, and storms. The Signal Service of the War Department opened a station on Block Island in 1880 under Observer Sgt William Davis when the first telegraph cable was laid between Pt. Judith and Block Island.

By the late Nineteenth Century, Block Island had become a destination for vacationers from New England and New York who expected safe transport via sailing and steam vessels to the island. In fact, several large hotels advertised that Block Island had a weather station where visitors could also telegraph messages home to family. On Block Island the Weather Station was an integral part of the business and local community and remained so until the early 1930's. The local public service function of the weather bureau offices have, unfortunately, not been well chronicled or appreciated. The weather station on Block Island was an excellent example of the importance of these stations to the local community.

Sgt. Davis left an important legacy to the Block Island community and was notable for a number of reasons:

- 1) he presided over the establishment of the weather service on the island in September 1880;
- 2) he returned to the island as an observer from 1888 until 1898, serving one of the longest tenures of any observer on the island;
- 3) and, he presided over the Block Island weather station during the hostilities of the Spanish American War, and, in fact, was ordered to remain on the island by the weather service during the war.

When Davis was eventually reassigned to the Cleveland Weather Bureau office in 1898, the business and local community published in the Newport Herald (May 17, 1898) a signed declaration regretting his transfer and expressing thanks for his contributions to the Block Island Community. Davis was clearly an integral member of the Block Island community -- as were many of the later observers.

When Davis opened the weather station on Block Island for the Signal Service it was located on Main Street in the Old Harbor area. The location of the office was in a room in a local (J. L. Dodge) store. In 1887, a small building was erected nearby to house the functions and equipment of the weather service. Until near the end of the Nineteenth Century, the station also functioned as the Block Island telegraph office and was frequented by local islanders as well as vacationers and hence, was quite busy.

The 1887 weather bureau building was built on land owned by L. Littlefield and built by him in partnership with C.W. Wallen; D.B. Dodge; J.C. Champlain, M.D.; U.B. Dodge; A.J. Rowe; and J.T. Dodge. The building was sited next to the National Hotel and was completed in November 1887. It was rented to the Signal Service for \$60.00 per year paid quarterly as noted in records of the War Department. Unfortunately, a January 1888 inspector's report uncovered in the National Archives did not give the new building a great review mentioning such things as "walls unframed" and "uneven" and "floors bad". This building burned on July 17, 1902 but all instruments were saved according to a January, 1934, article in the "Providence Journal".

In 1902 the Weather Bureau built a new weather station on Beach Avenue that was occupied on January 1, 1903 by the Weather Observer and his family. The lot was high and gradually roll-graded down in the back to meet Trims Pond. It was built across the street from the then new Hygeia Hotel and next to the home of the owners of the Hygeia, both of which overlooked the New Harbor. This Georgian style, two-story, flat-roofed building was similar to many other weather stations built by the Weather Bureau throughout the United States in the early part of the century and remains a landmark to the present day. The buildings served to house all internal equipment and served as the home of the Head Weather Observer at each local station. Currently the Weather House, as it was known to those who lived in it, is a bed and breakfast. The Hygeia Hotel burned to the ground many years ago.

In 1896, Schuyler Ball, of the Ocean View Hotel, requested that the Weather Bureau share some of the responsibilities of operating the telegraph services for vacationers with the government. It is doubtful whether this request was honored as will be seen below. It is well known that the builder of the Ocean View Hotel, Nicholas Ball, was instrumental in having the government fund the laying of the first cable to the island in 1880 - after lobbying for it for over 5 years. He was also on board the steamer that laid the cable. The second cable, with telephonic capabilities, was laid in Nov 1886. The Weather Bureau owned and operated these cables between the Rhode Island mainland and Block Island.

Checking the integrity of the cable was a daily assignment for the assistant weather observer on Block Island. In 1902 it became possible by means of wireless telegraphy to send forecasts of the weather to ships at sea. It is not clear when or if the Block Island station ever had this capacity; however, by the end of 1904 these responsibilities were handed over to the Navy department because of the potential military usefulness of wireless communications.

Back to the weather. Part of the functions of the local bureau was to record data to be used by the central and regional forecasting offices of the Weather Bureau. In turn, local forecasts were then made public and this was often done via signal flags. According to Weber, the cold-wave flag and many other weather signal devices were introduced in 1888 by the Signal Corps "all of which were eventually reduced to a simple system of flag signals, now called `weather flags'". The August 30, 1905, edition of the Mid-Ocean explained and described five of the flags used for this purpose:

- "1. A square white flag, = clear or fair weather.
2. A square blue flag, = rain or snow.
3. A square flag with the upper half white and the lower half blue = local

rain or snow.

4. A black triangular flag indicates the temperature. When placed above the number 1, 2, or 3, it indicates warmer; when below, colder; when not displayed the temperature is expected to remain about satisfactory.

5. A square, white flag with a black square in center, denotes a cold wave. During the late spring or early fall, it is also used to indicate anticipated frosts."

Three different government inspectors in 1890, 1891, and 1895 pointed out in their reports that the Block Island Station provided a needed public service as follows:

1. 1890 report - "The wind signals (are) displayed and closely watched and appreciated" & "telegraphy"
2. 1891 report - "The Block Island Weather Station's "principle service is displaying signals"
3. 1895 report - "The "storm signals displayed and (are) of use to passing vessels".

Of note was that the last inspector suggested that the office was spending too much time telegraphing local messages and urged the discontinuation of the service. By 1896, the task of some of the non-governmental telegraphy appears to have been turned over to the private sector, perhaps the Ocean View Hotel (see above). However, it was not until 1900 when two competing telegraph services, Western Union and Postal Telegraph-Cable Company, were given the rights to use the government cable between Block Island and the mainland that the public telegraphy function was entirely eliminated from the local Weather Station.

A quick reading of the weather observations in the old logs of the weather bureau from the late 1800's finds them filled with entries such as auroras, fog, pressure - rising or falling, frosts, hailstorms, lunar halos, meteors, northern lights, rain, gales, ice, solar and lunar halos, storms, thunderstorms, thunderstorms with lightning, and lightning alone. The raising and lowering of wind signal warnings was also recorded, although not consistently. In addition to the above entries, checks on the cable, leaves of absence, sickness, and notations about the batteries being cleaned also appear in the daily weather logs.

When a shipwreck occurred on the island, it was often chronicled. For example, on January 12, 1890, the daily log from Block Island noted the "wreck of the Pocahantas, 4 masted Schooner, coal from Balt to Portland. Lying hard on rocks and in a very dangerous place." Another entry of this sort was made by George W. Eddey on December 5, 1893. He noted in the station log that the Schooner Mowry was wrecked with an estimated loss of \$3500 in cargo with the same amount of damage occurring to the ship. A description of the wreck or its location was absent from his handwritten entry.

Another entry on Sunday, May 6, 1894, by assistant observer George W. Eddey recorded more information about a wreck as follows:

"Fog continues, warmer SW winds and heavy rain during the morning. Tern Schooner Bradford de French of Taunton, Mass. --Norfolk to Boston -- loaded with soft coal, stranded 9 o'clock on west side of Island during a dense fog; crew saved by the Life Saving service. Vessel lies easily on the beach and will probably be pulled off without damage."

Although there usually was not much information about these wrecks, the handwritten daily weather logs of the 1800's generally gave more information

than the later, typed logs. One exception to this is the following typed report by Observer W. Day. In the November, 1898, report from Block Island, he described the damage to the island and ships that occurred during a hurricane :

"Out of four fishing schooners and ten smaller craft which were anchored in the Salt Pond, or New Harbor, only one schooner held her mooring. The rest dragged ashore and were either totally wrecked or badly damaged. One man drowned from a small sloop in the New Harbor. The `Lexington', Capt. Thompson, a large three masted schooner, went ashore near Grove Point, at the north end of the island. She was loaded with piles and bound to New York. She was driven in so far by the wind and sea that her crew of six men jumped ashore and were saved. The oldest settlers declare it to be the worst storm within their recollections. It certainly broke record for velocity since the station was established in 1880, and this was accomplished beyond doubt before the true maximum velocity occurred."

Instruments used to make the observations included rain gauges, anemometers, anemoscopes, thermometers, and barometers. These were housed in outside equipment shelters designed for the purpose or in the office.

One 1913 document from the national archives of the Weather Service contained a drawing signed, and presumably drawn by, George Washington Eddey, that outlined structures on the grounds of the Weather House on Beach Avenue. The locations of the following structures were clearly marked on the property.

- \* Snow gauge

- \* Rain gauge

- \* Storm warning tower

- \* Instrument shelter which was 11 feet above ground at an elevation of 27 feet

- \* Garage at back of property near Trims Pond (built by George W. Eddey and his son Wallace).

- \* White picket fence on West and front sides, a stone wall was on the east side of the property. Trims Pond (tidal) bordered the back of the lot.

According to Weber, daily observations were taken from the instruments at 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM, 75th meridian time. The observer and his assistant regularly recorded the weather data which were telegraphed to the regional or central offices of the Weather Bureau. Handwritten and typed records document the recording of these observations. An article in the September 21, 1983, Journal Bulletin stated that after the Hurricane of 1938 "the schedule changed after the fast-moving storm struck the state's coast in mid-afternoon .... Its (rapid) approach escaped the attention of the weather observers, according to the Department of Community Affairs." The storm left everyone stunned and, henceforth, weather observations were sent four times each day instead of twice a day. Only an anemometer was destroyed in the 1938 hurricane according to the article.

As would be expected, the flags flown on the steel storm-warning tower could be seen by sailors and fishermen from both harbors of the island as well as passing vessels.

George W. Eddey was only one of many veteran weather observers who served on Block Island. Data from the national archives provides the following (incomplete) list of names and dates of their service:

Sgt. William Davis September 1880-1883

Pvt. J. F. Eiker 1883-1885

Pvt. J. G. Hines 1885-1885

Sgt. E. A. Beals 1885-1887

Sgt. P. J. Cahill 1887-1888

Sgt. W. J. Daily 1888-1888

Sgt. William Davis 1888-1898

W. L. Day\* 1898-1907

Not Clear 1907-1912

George W. Eddey\* 1912-1926

William B. Phelan\* ? -1953.

[\* indicates observer related to Block Islander.] Observer Walcott Day, who served as an observer from 1898 to 1907, asked for a transfer to the island in 1898 from Des Moines, Iowa, because his mother, an islander, was ill and he wished to be near her. He wrote two letters to the Chief of the Weather Bureau outlining the reasons for his request. One of the letters pointed out that the weather station still served the function as the island telegraphic office at the time of his transfer in 1898.

The weather service officially closed its office on Block Island in 1953. But the end of this local office being an integral part of the community undoubtedly occurred years before, perhaps following the Hurricane of 1938. After 1953, local weather data were recorded and sent from the Block Island Airport to the mainland by the airport managers. Mr. William Murray was one of the managers who operated the equipment for the weather service for many years following the official closing of the Weather Bureau in 1953.

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[- Top of Page -](#)

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