

The Professional Captain

Some Cruising Chronicles of Captain Don Fleming



Captain Don Fleming is well known on the Hudson River and the Sound for his on-board training in docking, maneuvering, navigation, and electronics. He holds a USCG Master of Oceans license for power and sail up to 100 tons and has over thirty years experience as a professional captain. For additional information visit www.captaindonfleming.com or call 914-941-3998.

Watch Hill to Newport

The Morning Watch

The lazy August morning was exquisitely quiet. We were anchored snugly in nine feet of water in Little Narragansett Bay behind beautiful Napatree Beach, a stone's throw away from quaint Watch Hill, Rhode Island, where we had spent two delightful nights. The low sand dunes a hundred yards to the south, forming the backbone of the peninsula and barrier beach protecting the anchorage, stretched out a mile in each direction; and the only sound to be heard was the muffled crash of surf rolling in from the Atlantic through Block Island Sound. Over the sea grass topped peaks, I could see the gold sand beaches and rolling hills of idyllic Fishers Island sprinkled with green fields and an occasional summer estate, some three miles away to the southwest. Block Island was shimmering on the horizon some fifteen miles to the southeast appearing as two separate islands due to the low elevation of the Great Salt Pond Harbor lying low in the middle, below the horizon. We were relaxing in the cockpit enjoying a second cup of coffee after my usual routine of wiping down the morning dew, the modern equivalent of swabbing the decks for a coastal cruising boat. The sun was burning off the remaining haze, and Jan and I were glad to be aboard DUET, "out east" away from the heat and insanity of the New York metropolitan area.

With a mere forty mile cruise to Newport and the excitement of the famous Jazz Festival ahead of us, we were enjoying a leisurely morning soaking up the hushed beauty like a pair of thirsty sponges. The forecast was for temperatures to

reach the high eighties by mid-afternoon with ten to fifteen knot winds out of the southwest and the usual threat of scattered thunderstorms later in the day. We decided to forego the advantage of carrying the current and the disadvantage of an early first light departure for "the good life." After a hectic spring and early summer work schedule, we figured we deserved it. We were counting on the afternoon sail to put us on the cooler water for the warmer part of the day, and the adverse current would only be significant for an hour or two as we pulled away from Fishers Island Sound towards Point Judith.

Navigating out of Fishers Island Sound

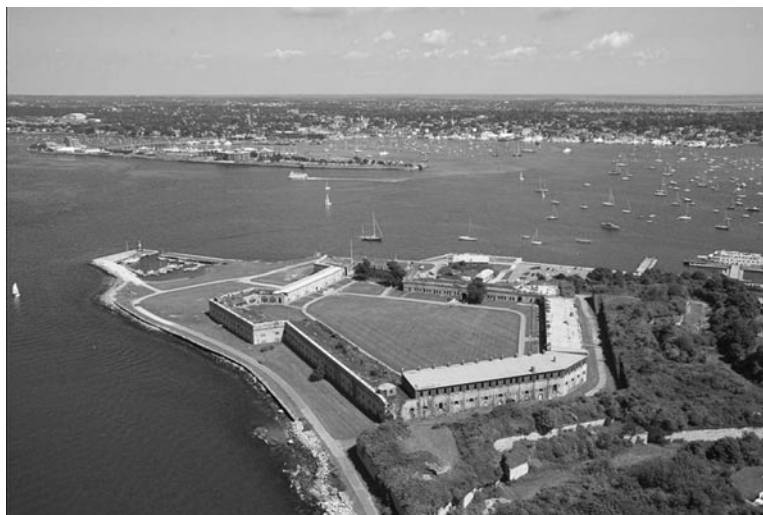
Fortunately, we had the more difficult part of the trip plotted from our cruise in from Port Jeff a few days earlier, so I added a few more dead reckoning courses on the paper charts and entered a few more waypoints into the GPS route for the easier run across Rhode Island Sound and up into Narragansett Bay. As usual, I matched the two independent sources so that each confirmed the other. Everyone trained in my hands-on navigation and electronics program, as well as regular readers of my column, understands my firm belief in this sound procedure of checks and balances.

We carefully threaded our way out of Little Narragansett Bay, inching our way through the very skinny waters at both Sandy Point and Academy Rock out to Red Nun 2 just south of the outer breakwater of Stonington Harbor, reversing the route described in last month's column. If you missed that episode, and want to catch up, you can read it along with the entire

series starting from the Hudson on my website @ www.captaindonfleming.com.

The eastern end of Fishers Island Sound is a bit tricky with a total of five separate passages leading in from Block Island Sound; they are: Wicopeset, Lords, Catumb, Sugar Reef and Watch Hill passages. They're definitely worth knowing in case you're ever making a run into the relatively calm waters of Fishers from a "Victory at Sea" crossing back from Block Island or someplace further east, but that's another story. After rounding Red 2 from above we left Red 6 in the main Fishers Channel to port and headed out the widest and easternmost Watch Hill Passage, leaving Green 1 to starboard and Red/Green "WH" to port, keeping the Watch

Photos and Charts courtesy of Maptech.com



above: Fort Adams, below: Chart for Block Island Sound



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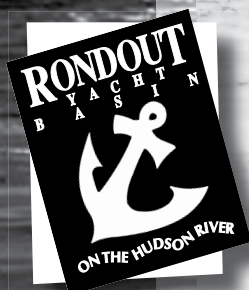
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into a few years ago in the Ambrose Approach Channel to New York Harbor at the end of a long ocean passage. A combination of fatigue and elation got him in the middle of the Traffic Separation Zone. It was near sunset and by the time he realized his error twilight and a thickening haze had further reduced visibility. An inbound cruise ship and an outbound oil tanker, each with a line of other ships stacked up behind them, signaled that they were having a hard time figuring out his intentions. He immediately placed a "securitay" call on VHF 13 to arrange safe passage to the correct position, avoiding a close quartered situation before it became a real problem. He says he'll never forget the sound of those signal horns bearing down on him. The story always reminds me of the respect these important shipping lanes are due.

After rounding Point Judith as described above, we stayed close to Point Judith Neck on the western side of the bay on a northerly course for about four miles, and then headed north-east directly for Castle Rock Light on Newport Neck, crossing the entrance to Narraganset Bay well north of the Traffic Separation Zone at nearly a right angle and ending up well over on the starboard side of the East Passage of the Bay, where we belonged.

Welcome to Newport: The Yachting Capital of the Northeast

From Castle Rock Light it's an easy run close in along Newport Neck to Fort Adams, the actual site of the Newport Jazz Festival, at the western tip of the harbor. It's pretty spectacular with rustic Conanicut Island off to port and the mansions or "summer cottages" as they are more properly termed to starboard. Several, if not many, exquisite, famous, classic yachts are usually motoring and sailing in the East Passage as harbingers of the scene ahead. After rounding the thirty-two foot flashing red fixed light "2" at Fort Adams it's an easy run of under two miles to the east side of Newport Harbor where most of the action is. On the way in you'll pass Brenton Cove to starboard and Goat Island to port. Be sure to keep Red "6" marking "little Ida Lewis Rock" to starboard as you head into town and the marinas. There are mooring fields on the south side and in the center of the harbor with yachts, tour boats and ferries of all sizes and descriptions sailing and motoring in every conceivable direction, so make sure you have an accurate course plotted to your destination and a working knowledge of the Rules of the Road as it's easy to get distracted or even confused, especially on your first time. I would suggest heading directly for Red "6" above and then swinging north in front of the famous wharves and marinas that front America's Cup Avenue, keeping the large mooring area in the center of the harbor to port.

Our first and primary purpose in being there was to attend the famous Newport Jazz Festival so that we could try to act cool hanging out with all the other hipsters there assembled. It was not a difficult task, and we had a great time blending into the spirit of the event. We got a mooring right in heart of the downtown action off Bannister's Wharf and had some friends

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join us on the boat for the weekend. After taking the water taxi directly to the Festival, we settled into the great variety of outstanding music that included among others, Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Clark and Jean-Luc Ponty on the main stage and The T. S. Monk (Thelonius' son) Sextet and the incomparable piano of McCoy Tyner and his trio in the pavillon. We enjoyed the entire day sampling some good food, cruising the festival booths, and thanking the Lord for Beauty of Life.

Secondary goals were to visit a mansion or two (we try to hit a different one on every trip), walk the three mile cliff walk, do the shops, eat some more good food, and continue to act cool hanging out with all the other hipsters there assembled. A reasonable degree of success was achieved in all categories. There are, of course, many other activities for just about all tastes and interests. With a little research and the necessary reservations, you can easily fine tune your visit to suit your personal sense of adventure and pleasure. We actually returned two weeks later for a second delightful long weekend, joined by my daughter and son-in-law who drove up to meet us. We attended the annual Wooden Boat Show, visited the International Yacht Restoration Institute, browsed through The Armchair Sailor Bookstore, and had a great sail through the harbor and in the bay. No wonder they call Newport "the yachting capital of the northeast".

"Stay the course, mate." I'll see you next month in Cuttyhunk.

The above comments are general suggestions. They are not intended to be used for navigational purposes. Individual captains are ultimately responsible for setting proper courses and safely navigating their vessels by relying on their own knowledge, judgment and experience to determine the correct action in any given situation

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"My wife and I have been traveling on many of the great rivers such as the Mississippi, Tennessee, and others the past year and a half. We hate to see our trip up the Hudson River coming to an end. The people we have met when we stopped for the night or visited were polite and exceptionally helpful in offering their kindnesses. Especially so at the Tarrytown Boat Club and in Rhinecliff. My wife made eight trips into Rhinebeck and loved every one of them. The Hudson River is outstanding in beauty, charm and wonderful people!"

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