The Sandbar Saved Saybrook

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS May, 2022)

The sandbar at the end of the Connecticut River has influenced the character of Old Saybrook from its beginning until today. Early on it was an inconvenient navigational hazard for the early Dutch and English explorers. Later it proved to be a major deterrent to establishing a viable commercial port at the end of the river. Today it is one of the reasons why the lower river remains one of the country's most significant natural estuaries. But if the Connecticut Valley Railroad had not gone bankrupt, it could have been a much different outcome for the town.

NASA Landsat photo of the silt washed down-river by the rains of the 2011 September storm Hurricane Irene.

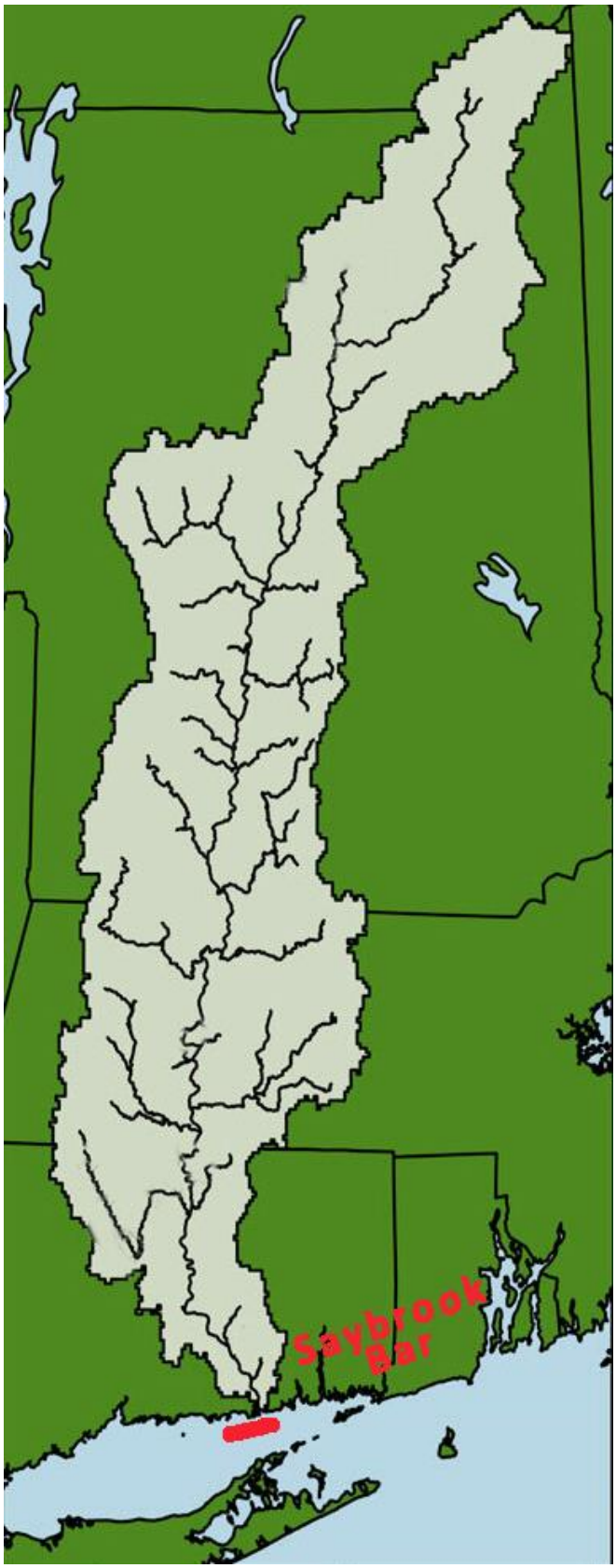
Note the lack of silt washed down the adjacent Thames River on the right.

Centuries of silt have formed the sandbar off Saybrook Point called "Long Sand Shoal" or the "Saybrook Bar"

Connecticut River history

The 410 mile Connecticut River starts in a small lake in Maine, a few miles from the Canadian border and is elevated 2,700 feet above Saybrook. It flows south between Vermont and New Hampshire, cuts Massachusetts and Connecticut in half, and empties into Long Island Sound at Old Saybrook. The tidal flow from the ocean pushes salt water upriver as far as Hartford. The resulting tidal marsh ecosystem is now nationally recognized as one of the most pristine, least developed estuaries in the country. The tidal marshes and native grasses support not only fish and shellfish but also many species of native and migratory birds and small animals.

The river's enormous watershed, shown on the right, drains 12,000 square miles of land. The entire river was the home to numerous native tribes who for 1,000+ years lived off the river's fish, eels, oysters, clams, snails and local fowl and flora. They also planted beans, corn and tobacco on their riverside lands. The silt from these rich lands washed down the river during annual spring floods called freshets. That silt filled in coves along the river and ultimately flowed into Long Island Sound forming the bar that exists today. Now over 1,000 dams exist on the tributaries and 16 other dams control the flow of the main river. Yet spring freshets still deposit sediment into the Sound onto the Saybrook Bar.

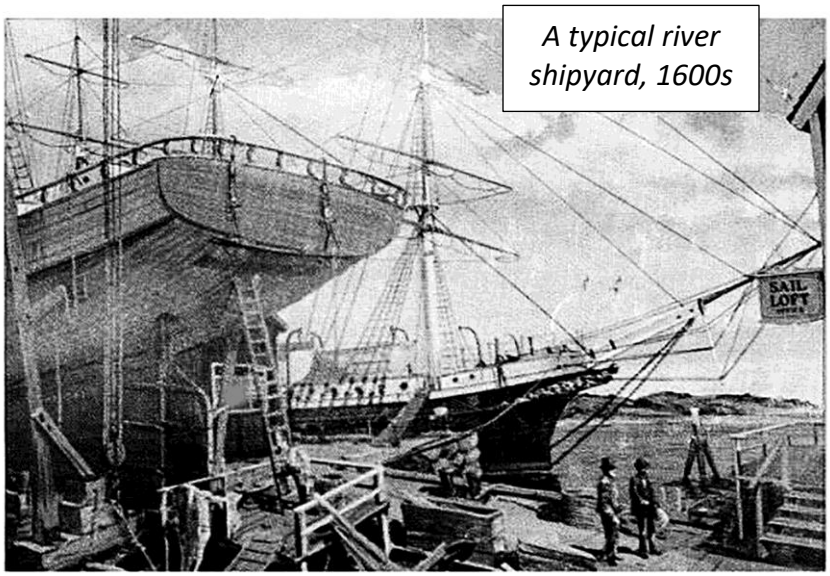


The Saybrook Bar was always a problem

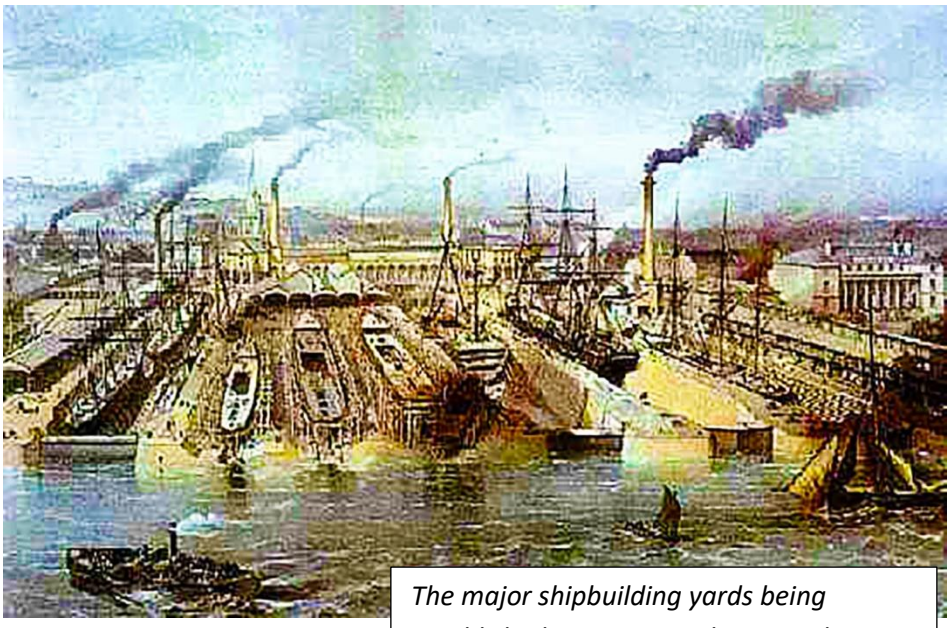
John Winthrop the Younger, founder of the Saybrook settlement, described the Saybrook Bar and the problems with the river's silt in 1636 when he wrote the following: *The river is not to be gone into but by small pinnaces, having a bar affording but six feet at high water and no vessels can get in for seven months in the year, partly by reason of the ice, and then the violent stream and shoals.* Over 100 years later in the 1770s, the Connecticut General Court was still dealing with the still unsolved problem of the Saybrook Bar: *The navigation into and out of said river is difficult, expensive and dangerous, by reason of bars and shoals of sand not sufficiently defined and known at the mouth. It is critical that buoys or water-marks might be erected on these bars and maintained by a small duty (tax) laid on the vessels sailing into and out of said river, and praying for a committee to examine into the matter.* Still nothing was done for another 100 years.

The 1600s: River commerce develops despite the sandbar

As early as the 1600s, the colonial New England coast had only two major seaports, Boston and New Amsterdam (New York). In comparison, Long Island Sound was a maritime backwater, with only two marginal harbors, New London and New Haven. But the commerce of both of these harborside settlements could not match the amount of trade sailing down the Connecticut River past Saybrook. The virgin timber growing upriver from Saybrook was a valuable resource and the river towns took advantage of it. Shipbuilding industries began in almost every town bordering the Connecticut River in order to compete with the shipyards in Boston and New York. In 1642, the Connecticut General Court took action to secure the industry by ordering the cultivation of hemp for furnishing the cordage for the rigging of ships. Shipyards provided work to sawmills, shipbuilders, sail and rope makers, shipyard workers, and especially farmers who were raising livestock, grains and produce for export trade.



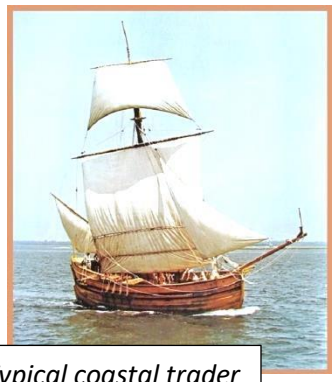
A typical river shipyard, 1600s



The major shipbuilding yards being established in Boston and New York

Much of this trade was destined for the English-owned islands in the Caribbean. It started as early as 1647 when Hartford and Wethersfield merchants built the sailing ship *Tryall* to trade with Barbados. It carried livestock, fresh produce, grain, seeds and lumber which were then traded for molasses and sugar. While this island trade was critically important to Connecticut merchants, it was still minor in comparison to trade in and out of both Boston and New York. The reason for this was Hartford's location so far upriver and the Saybrook Bar. Amazingly it would often take ships just as long to travel down the Connecticut River from Hartford as it would to travel from Saybrook all the way to Cuba, Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. Crews would often be forced to sink an anchor or tie a line to a tree at a bend and literally pull the ship along in order to make headway against either the wind or tide.

Additionally the river's silt was constantly creating shifting shoals in the river as well as constantly moving the location of the sandbar off Saybrook. Unlike the shipyards in Boston, New York, or even New London and New Haven, this problem was unique to the Connecticut River shipyards. Getting the larger vessels out of the river and over the sandbar, especially when fully loaded, often meant waiting for extremely high tides, or spring freshets. With large newly built vessels it sometimes meant leaving the required amount of ballast out of the ship's hold in order to float the vessels over the sandbar and then completing the final rigging of the ship in the deeper harbors of New London or New Haven. This would prove to be a major impediment to Connecticut River trade for the next 300 years and limit the possibility of Saybrook ever becoming a major maritime seaport.



Typical coastal trader

Despite the changing river shoals and sandbar, maritime trade expanded on the river. By the 1700s, Hartford and Middletown were the major trading ports on the river.

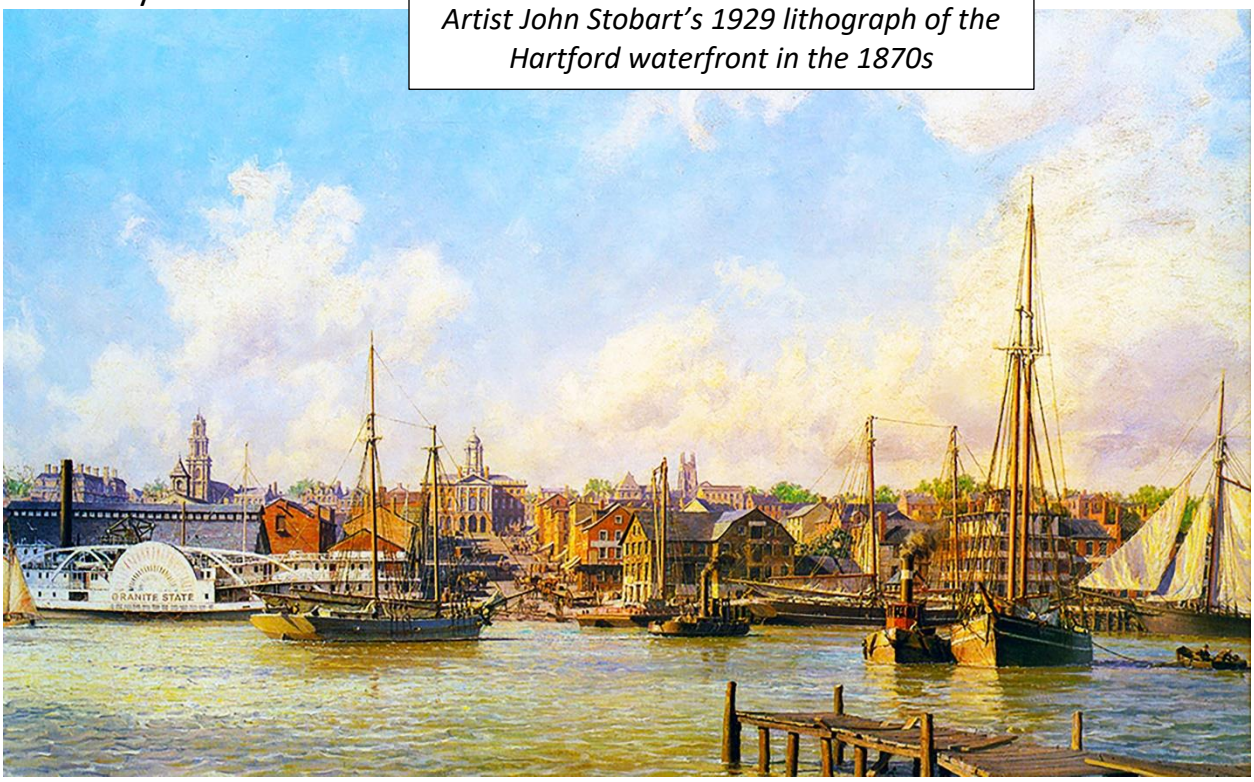
Typical West Indies trader

According to historian Brenda Milkofsly, *cargo typical of the island trade were barrels of salted beef, pork, shad, and pickled codfish. There was cheese, butter, beans, potatoes, corn, onions, and apples, barrel staves, hoops, hoop poles, lumber, shingles, and oak planks. Live animals included geese, turkeys, hogs, and sheep. Every year between 1796 and 1820 an average of 500 cattle were shipped to the West Indies "live on deck" from these Connecticut River ports.*

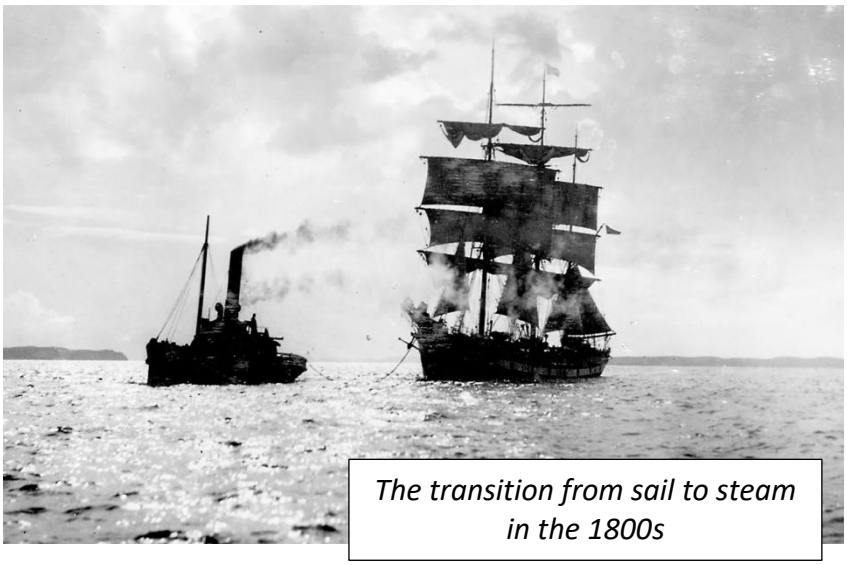
1800s: The river is transformed from good to bad

Everything began to change in the 1800s when Saybrook had a chance to become a competitive maritime port. The change started with the steamboat and ended with the railroad. Both would alter life on the river and force changes to be made at the Saybrook Bar.

Artist John Stobart's 1929 lithograph of the Hartford waterfront in the 1870s

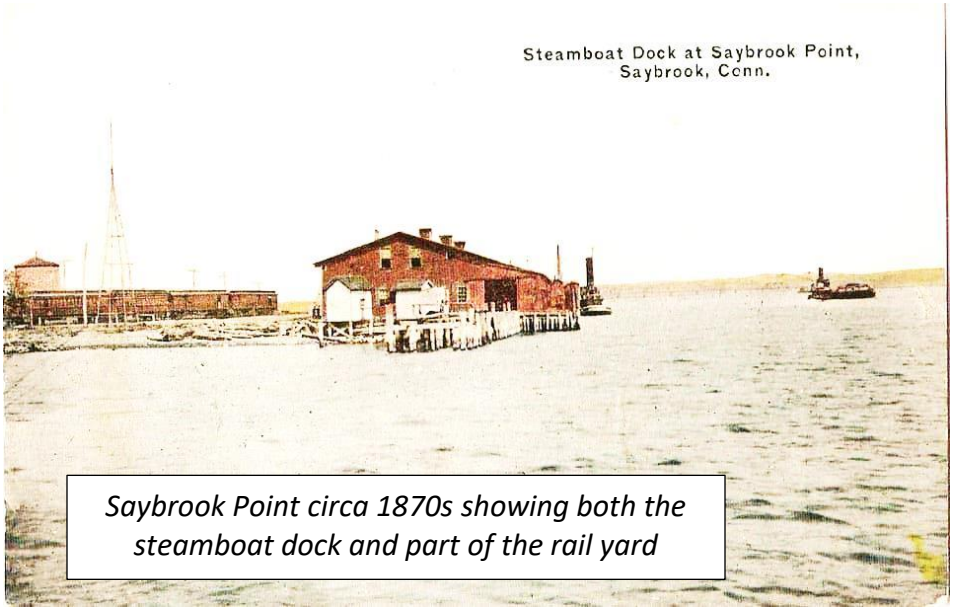


While logging, shipbuilding, and farming and had originally dominated river trade, widespread industrialization in the 1800s introduced an entirely new array of influences that reshaped how people utilized the river. Steam power in particular would accelerate change on a massive scale and force attention be given to the shifting sands of the Saybrook Bar.



The transition from sail to steam in the 1800s

Steamboat traffic on the river and especially at Saybrook Point increased dramatically every year in the 1800s. The last stop for steamboats coming downriver from Hartford was Saybrook. During the winter when ice closed those routes, coastal steamboats from Stonington heading to New York, would also stop at Saybrook. In the 1820s one steamboat company recorded 228 arrivals at Hartford. Twenty years later that number was over 2,000 vessels arriving and departing Hartford alone. Middletown had a similar amount of traffic, both passenger and commercial in nature. For almost all of this traffic, their first and last stop on the river was Saybrook. Then in the 1870s the Valley Shore Railroad extended its tracks to Saybrook Point, bringing on its rails both freight and passengers to and from Saybrook. Saybrook Point was finally becoming a substantial port for river commerce, and the Saybrook Bar still needed to be addressed.

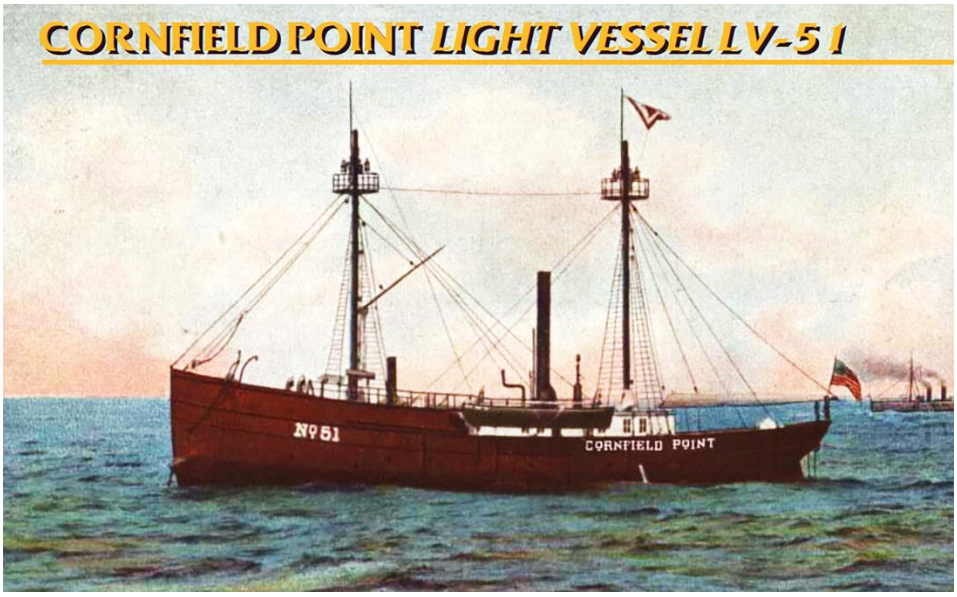


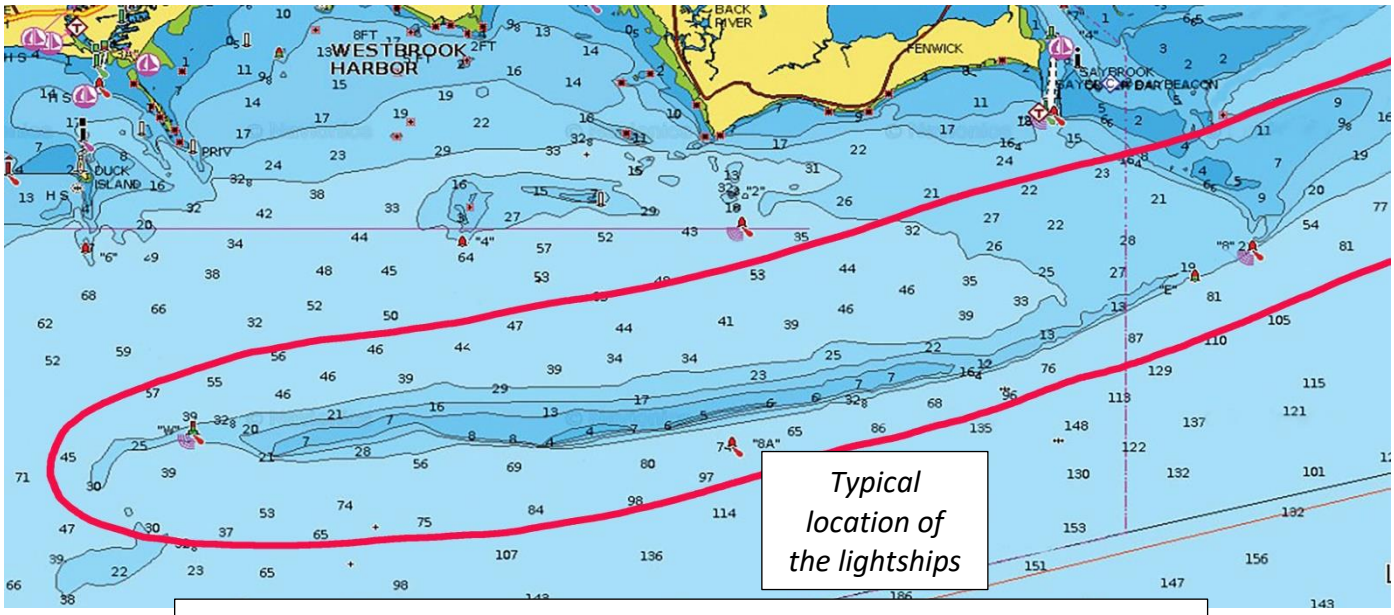
Saybrook Point circa 1870s showing both the steamboat dock and part of the rail yard

First a lightship was stationed off the Saybrook Bar, moored south of the center of the sandbar, offshore from Cornfield Point. The vessel was therefore designated, "Cornfield." It helped mark the channel across the sandbar and the vessel's location was moved occasionally as the sandbar shifted. But the lightships were labor intensive and cumbersome to maintain. During severe storms or with winter ice, the vessels were often blown off their location, once shifting as much as five miles, and had to be repositioned. Over the years several were rammed by ships in the fog and the last one was rammed in 1919 by an oil barge that was being towed into Saybrook, sinking the lightship.

(Top) Wooden lightship #23, 94 feet long, stationed off Cornfield Point from 1882-1892. All the lights were oil lamps. (Left) The lightships were later made of iron, then steel, always painted red and named for the station hazard where they were positioned, e.g. "Cornfield"

(Right) Lightship #51 positioned off Cornfield Pt. from 1892-1894. Made of steel, 118 feet long, and was the first fitted with electric lights. Later transferred to Sandy Hook but then reassigned to Cornfield as a relief vessel when in 1919 it was struck by an oil barge being towed into Saybrook. It sank in 8 minutes, without loss of life. Located in 2003, two miles south of Saybrook Bar, in 190 feet of water.



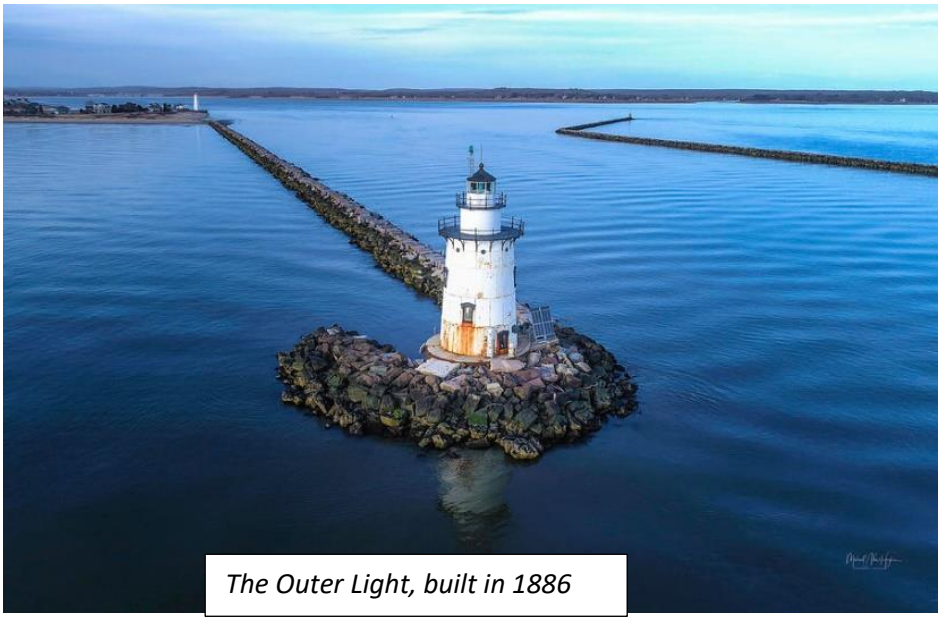


Present day navigation chart showing Long Sand Shoal, "The Saybrook Bar," the sandbar that saved Saybrook, located off the shoreline of Westbrook, Cornfield Point and Fenwick.

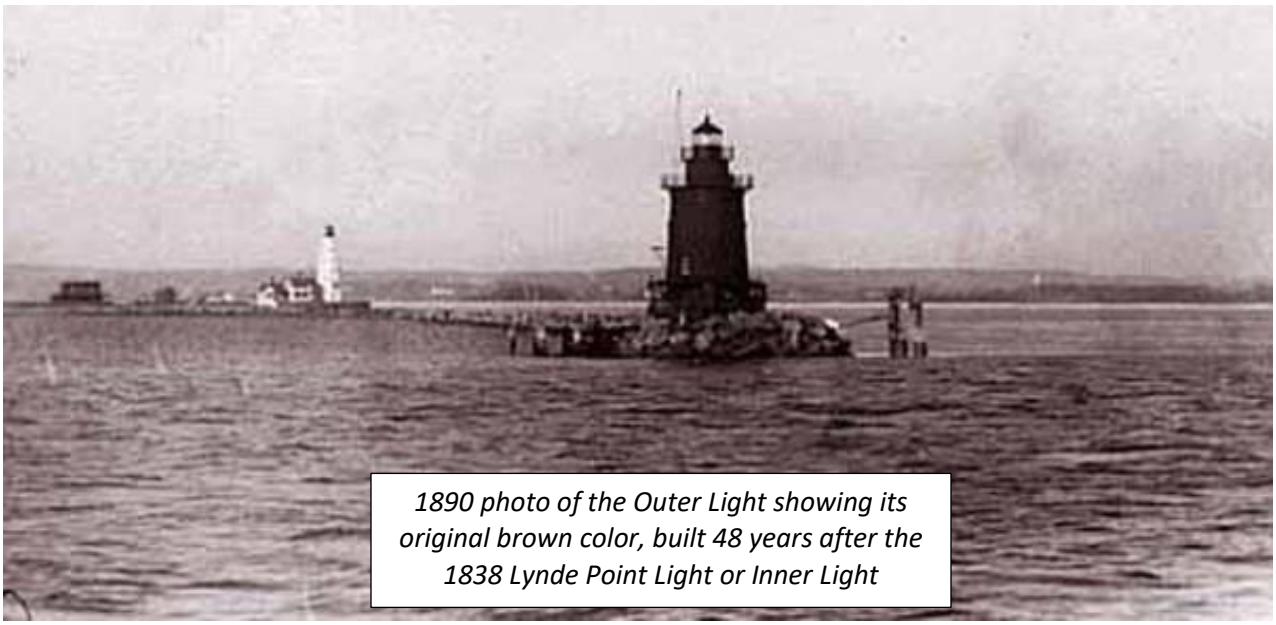
Just south of this sandbar was the typical location of the lightships stationed there from 1856 until 1957

Twenty years after the lightships were positioned, the jetties were built to mark the river's entrance to Saybrook Point. Much previous work, financed by the steamship companies, had been done upriver to dredge the shoals and mark the deep water channels. But it was not until 1872 that the United States government began building the jetties at the river's mouth and dredging the deep-water channel into Saybrook Point.

Lighthouses on the west jetty somewhat lessened the need for the lightships but it was not until 1957 that the last "Cornfield" vessel was taken off station, replaced by floating, battery-powered lighted buoys.



The Outer Light, built in 1886

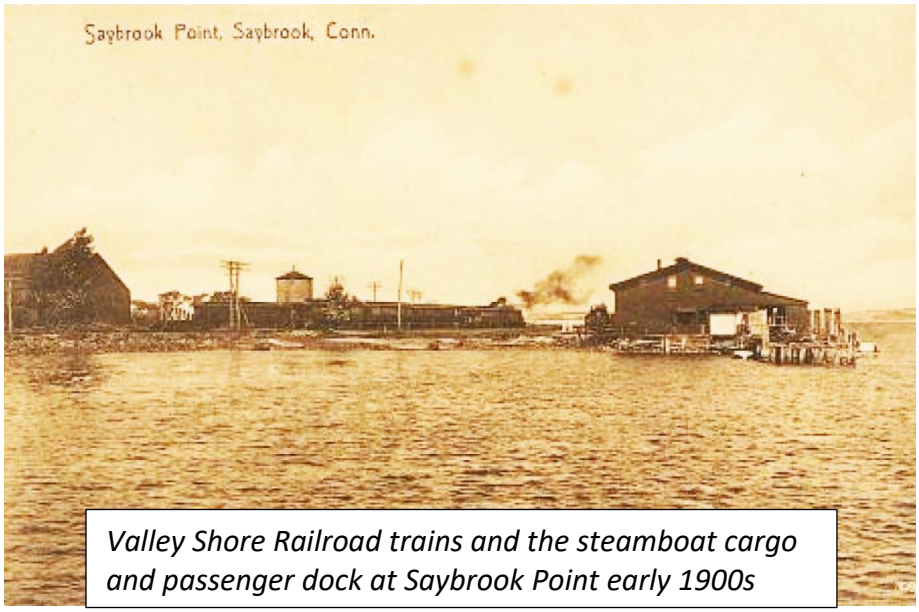


1890 photo of the Outer Light showing its original brown color, built 48 years after the 1838 Lynde Point Light or Inner Light

By the late 1800s Saybrook Point was beginning to look like a legitimate commercial maritime port but the river was beginning to look like an industrial waste site. The industrialization of the 1800s caused industries to divert the natural flow of the river in order to generate power, while dumping industrial wastes that threatened to destroy fragile ecological environments downstream.

1900s: The river is transformed again, from bad to good.

The pollution heaped upon the river continued into the 1900s. Agricultural run-off from commercial farming and in particular the valley's thriving tobacco industry further polluted the river. The end of the Second World War brought with it the introduction of new chemical dyes, pesticides and toxins which the river proved incapable of assimilating. The once pristine waterway became a river of flowing pollutants and especially sewage.

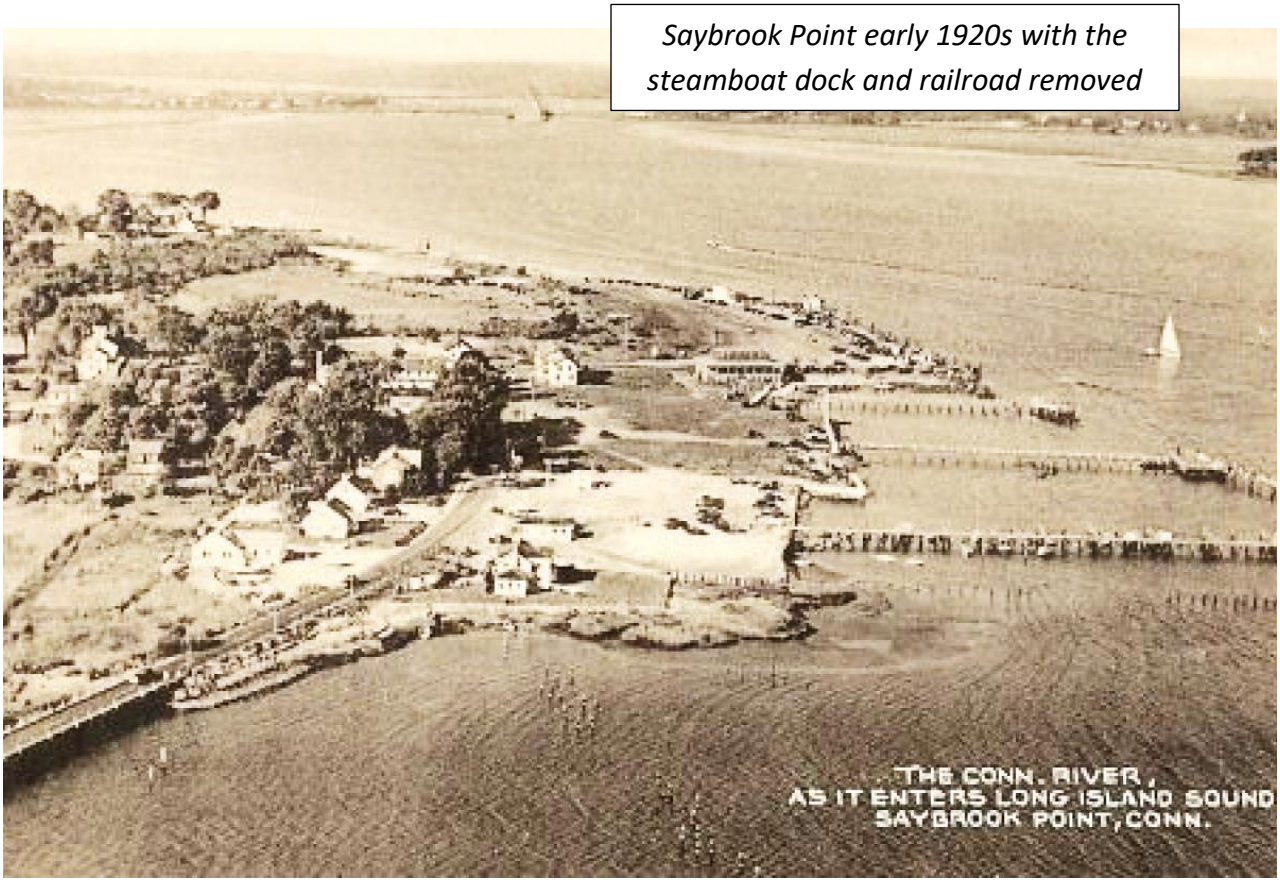


Valley Shore Railroad trains and the steamboat cargo and passenger dock at Saybrook Point early 1900s

The burgeoning commercial port of Saybrook Point was also transformed. In 1900 Saybrook Point was not the scenic riverside locale it is today. It was a dirty, gritty, crowded, commercial terminal area with not only the steamboat dock facilities but also the Connecticut Valley Railroad facilities, which were considerable. In addition to the train station there was a rail yard with roundhouse and turntable, brick engine barns large enough for six engines, a complex network of 13 tracks, a signal tower, a heavy equipment storehouse, ice house, coal bins, and a switching tower all built on the point. Saybrook Point at last held the dubious potential of matching the commercial traffic and fuel-oil storage facilities of other deep water harbors like New London, New Haven, Bridgeport, Norwalk and Stamford.

But that dubious potential disappeared when in the 1920s the bankrupt Connecticut Valley Railroad removed their tracks and totally abandoned Saybrook Point. Commercial steamboat traffic had also disappeared and only an occasional diesel-powered tugboat tied up next to the old steamboat dock. Eventually the Terra Mar resort and then the Saybrook Point Inn & Resort were constructed and all vestiges of a commercial maritime port were eliminated.

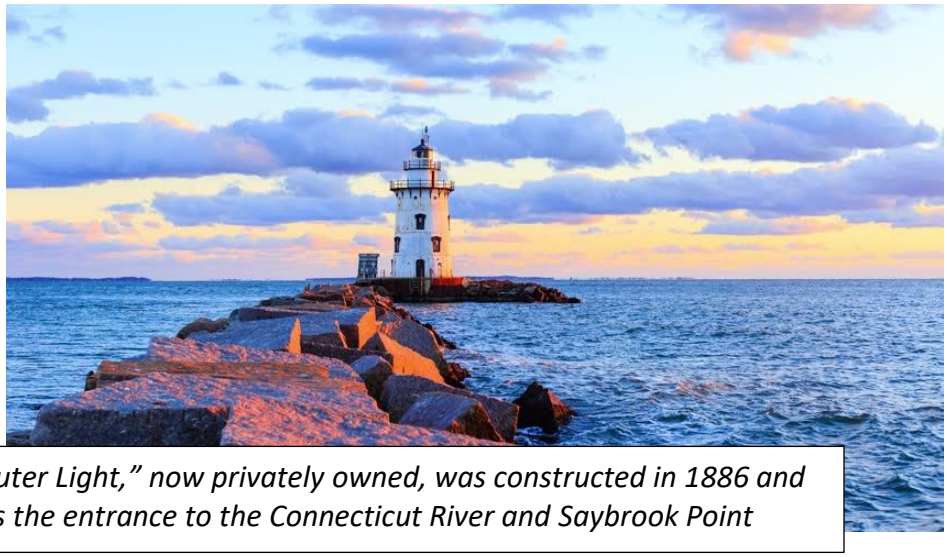
Saybrook Point early 1920s with the steamboat dock and railroad removed



There was a considerable amount of barge traffic, mostly fuel-oil barges, being towed upriver, but by the late 1990s they too had all but disappeared, due to more restrictive environmental regulations imposed upon the storage tank locations upriver from Saybrook Point.

In 1965, major efforts to clean up the polluted river began. Old Saybrook's Katharine Hepburn narrated the documentary *The Long Tidal River*, in which she called the Connecticut River "the world's most beautifully landscaped cesspool." This film helped spark a burgeoning environmental movement in New England that called for the creation of more sewage treatment plants and tighter restrictions on industries polluting the environment. A consequence of this was that commercial tugboat traffic pushing oil-barges upriver diminished and a decade later had disappeared. Today the river's tidal ecosystem is now nationally recognized as one of the most pristine, least developed estuaries in the country.

Saybrook Point became a scenic locale without any trace of its short-lived era as a commercial maritime port on Long Island Sound. The other deep water harbors along the coast of Long Island Sound had no such protective sandbar. As a consequence they easily became convenient locations for commercial docks, marine transfer depots, fuel storage facilities and sewage treatment plants. Their waterfront reclamation projects are still ongoing and in many cases these projects are meeting with limited success due to the efficiencies of marine-delivered fuel.



Saybrook's "Outer Light," now privately owned, was constructed in 1886 and still guards the entrance to the Connecticut River and Saybrook Point

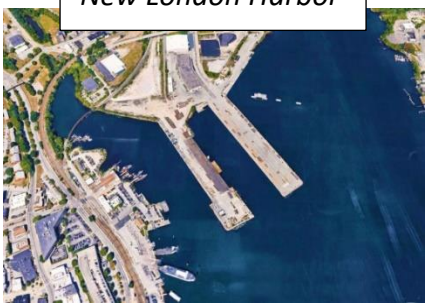
(Upper far-right corner) Saybrook Point and the Borough of Fenwick

Stamford Harbor

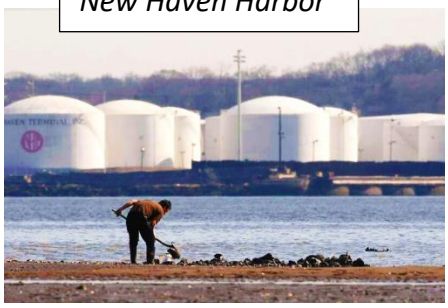
Bridgeport Harbor

Groton Harbor

New London Harbor



New Haven Harbor



Norwalk Harbor