

SWIMMING HISTORY

DEER ISLAND

BOSTON LIGHTS THE LIGHT

A storied harbour and lighthouse enticed intrepid marathon swimmers in the early years of the Boston Light Swim.

By Elaine K Howley



Peter S McNally

Apparently the first to attempt the Boston Light Swim, although no historical records corroborate this claim



The rush of plunging off a perfectly good boat, eight miles offshore, into the chilly waters of a working harbour just after sunrise and swimming back to the mainland across busy ferry lanes crisscrossed by recreational boat traffic is not a prospect for the faint of heart. But then, marathon swimmers are not exactly the kind of folks who avoid a challenge.

As such, the Boston Light Swim has attracted many top marathon swimmers and hopefuls over its 111-year history. And, no, that's not a typo – 2018 marks 111 years since the first running of the Boston Light Swim in 1907.

Full disclosure: I have co-directed the Boston Light Swim with Greg O'Connor since 2009, but we are mere stewards of this event, which has lengthy roots going back more than a century

and straight into the heart of marathon swimming's burgeoning beginnings.

SWIM TOWARD THE LIGHT

Interest in swimming from Boston's mainland to America's oldest lighthouse began in the late 1800s as the public's love for long-distance swimming and other spectacular feats (like tightrope walking over Niagara Falls) achieved fever pitch. The Boston Light had long beckoned to intrepid swimmers, but in 1898, Peter S McNally was apparently the first to make the attempt.

A native Bostonian who'd gained much attention for his near-completion of the English Channel in 1897, McNally, it seems, enjoyed the fanfare the press made of his near-success. Despite having been fished out of the Channel about three miles shy of his goal, he nevertheless adopted the title "long distance champion of the world," a claim that needed other top marathon swimmers of the day. Although it's long been repeated that

SWIMMING HISTORY

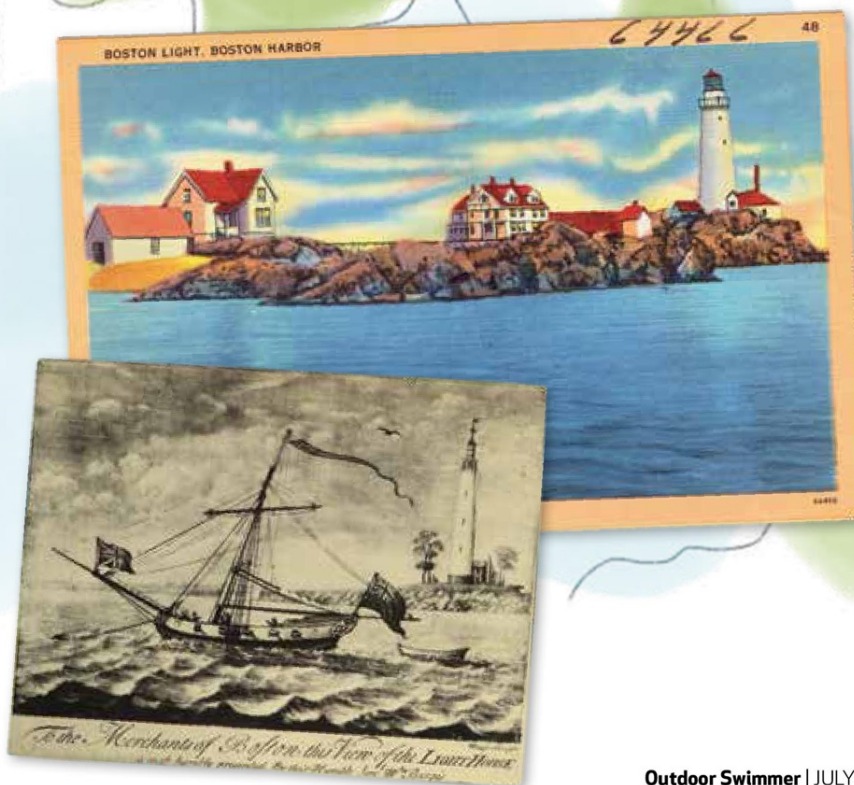


McNally was the first person to swim the Boston Light, no historical records have yet surfaced to corroborate this claim.

Records of those early days are spotty, but some members of the L Street Brownies, a local troop of year-round swimmers with skin bronzed "brown" by their daily dips, began making farther forays into the harbour. A few determined that the ultimate prize would be to swim the 12 miles from Charlestown Bridge to the Boston Light on Little Brewster Island, a beacon if ever there was one.

TOWERING HISTORY

Writing in "Discovering the Boston Harbor Islands: A Guide to the City's Hidden Shores," historian Christopher Klein notes that "before Boston Light, crude navigation beacons – some mere lanterns or lit bales of pitch hung from tall poles – were erected on Hull and the harbor islands as early as the 1670s," to help guide mariners through the



← narrow channels among the 34 scrub-covered, rocky Boston Harbor Islands and safely into port.

As commerce to the new colony grew, so did the need for a more reliable navigational aid, and “in 1713, John George, Jr, a prominent Boston merchant, petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to build a permanent lighthouse at the entrance of the harbor to prevent the loss of lives and goods, ensure the seaport’s continued growth, and provide Boston with a competitive advantage against commercial rivals such as New York City.” At the time, Little Brewster Island was known as Beacon Island, and formed the northern edge of the safest channel for ships to pass through to the port of Boston. Thus, Little Brewster was designated as the best location for America’s first lighthouse.

Construction commenced and in 1716 the Boston Light was kindled for the first time. It guided mariners for the next 59 years until the Revolutionary War, when the lighthouse became a “strategic target for both the colonists and the British,” Klein reports. On 20 July 1775, colonial soldiers burned the lighthouse to the ground. British soldiers quickly began rebuilding it, but 11 days later, the colonists again destroyed the Light. It would only be rebuilt in 1783, and a fancy French Fresnel lens was added in 1859.

Since its rebuilding, the Boston Light has stood sentinel over the islands that now form the Boston Harbor Islands National Park. During times of war, these drumlin-shaped islands served as outposts, jails and forts. One island even housed the “father of rocket science” Wernher von Braun after he defected from Germany at the close of World War II. Today, they mark the course for the Boston Light Swim. But, as Capt. Tim Johnson writes in his 2005 book, “The History of Open-Water Marathon Swimming,” as pretty as these natural course buoys may be, they can also pose challenges to unwitting swimmers. “The picturesque islands that mark your course create eddies and crosscurrents that complicate the swim.”

LAUNCHING THE BOSTON LIGHT SWIM

With such a richly embroidered historical backdrop and a towering challenge, it’s no wonder swimmers yearned to reach the Boston Light. In 1907, McNally organised the first Boston Light Swim race, with 27 swimmers toeing the line. Not one finished, but Louis Jacot, a 32-year-old Revere, Massachusetts, man came the closest to finishing and was awarded first prize. In 1908, the world-famous Australian actress and activist Annette Kellerman got within a half mile of the Light, shining her own beacon on the abilities of women – a precedent that would reverberate repeatedly down the history of the Boston Light Swim. Women regularly outswim the men in this event.

On 20 August 1909, then 40-year-old Alois Anderle of New York City (originally from Austria) hauled his tired body onto the rocks at Little Brewster Island. The Olympic swimmer who’d failed to finish the men’s 4,000-metre freestyle at the 1900 Games in Paris, had redeemed his open water credibility by enduring the 5-hour, 35-minute trek across busy Boston Harbor. In the process, he’d survived a sudden thunderstorm that made the journey all the more perilous. But there was a catch.

Even in 1909, back when marathon swimming was a nascent, spectator sport that dazzled audiences the world over, it was well known that touching the boat or walking along the bottom

would disqualify a swimmer from having officially completed a swim. And thus, the first person to make the journey from Charlestown Bridge to the Light would forever have a dreaded asterisk next to his name. It was reported after the swim that Anderle’s navigator had guided him over Nix’s Mate, a small shoal that’s exposed at low tide. Anderle was forced to walk several yards in water too shallow to swim, and so his effort can’t strictly be counted as a completion.

But the following year, the Boston Globe would exuberantly report on the success of a 15-year-old swimmer who finally achieved the Light without qualification: “Girl succeeds where men experts failed.”

EVERYTHING IS COMING UP ROSE’S

Whomever first said good things come in small packages could well have been referring to Rose Pitonof. The plucky, pint-sized powerhouse who never stood much taller than four-feet-10-inches high began her journey in open water at a startlingly young age. A native of the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, Pitonof made her first of many appearances in newspapers around the world at age 10 in 1905 with a mile-and-a-half swim across an inlet of Boston Harbor. The swim took her just 33 minutes, which broke the previous record by three minutes and would be a respectable time for any swimmer today, let alone a 10-year-old wearing the woolen swimming costume typical of the era. In just over half an hour, Pitonof had announced her arrival on the open water swimming scene, and she would hold a position of prominence within the sport for much of the next decade, augmented by her becoming the first official finisher of the Boston Light Swim.

Pitonof made her first attempt at swimming the Light on 1 August 1910, but was thwarted by a changing tide after 4 hours and 23 minutes. Undeterred, she launched her second attempt six days later alongside 20 other swimmers in the Boston Light Swim race. The water was very cold that day; in an oral history published in 1980, Pitonof said it ranged from 49 to 54 degrees F (9.4 to 12.2 degrees C). All of the other swimmers quit before reaching Long Island, some four miles shy of the Lighthouse, but Pitonof soldiered on, making landfall at 6:13

PITONOF
PROVED THAT
WOMEN HAD A PLACE
AT THE FOREFRONT
OF MARATHON
SWIMMING

Bob
McCormack,
Kim Garbarino
and Greg
O'Connor



SWIMMING HISTORY

p.m. after spending 6 hours and 50 minutes in the water.

Her success electrified the world and proved that women had a place at the forefront of marathon swimming. "When the news got back that I had accomplished this, well, there were about 1,000 people gathered around my house to welcome me home. All of a sudden I became very famous," Pitonof said.

The following week, she was offered a position as a diver and demonstration swimmer with a traveling vaudeville performance troupe. A 1909 Boston Daily Globe article described Pitonof's flair for performance as a natural talent she'd been honing since childhood at a local pool. "There is little or no swimming by the amateurs when Pitonof appears. Everybody sits and shivers on the marble steps or stands and slaps the water in disgust at their own inefficiency. All are enjoying 'the act,' however, and can't help loving the mermaid, she is so sunny and wholesome."

But it wasn't all sunshine and success for Pitonof. She was unable to complete several big swims for various reasons, and weather prevented her from having a crack at the English Channel despite her having spent more than two months in England in the summer of 1912. "I was ready to start twice but the weather conditions were so bad that they wouldn't let me. Finally, they called it off..." she said.

Pitonof was also involved in at least two lawsuits pertaining to her swimming career. One was brought by Pitonof's father, Eli Pitonof, against another young woman swimmer, 17-year-old Alsie Aykroyd of East Boston, over how she was labelling herself.

Pitonof and Aykroyd had been friendly rivals who competed against each other for years, beginning in at least 1909 when both girls raced in a meet at Dewey Beach in Charlestown. The problem came when Aykroyd became the second woman and fourth person to complete the Boston Light Swim, which she did in 1911 while Pitonof supported her from the escort boat. Buoyed by her recent success, Aykroyd began referring to herself as the "Champion Woman Swimmer," a title Pitonof had already been using and felt was hers alone.

In February 1912, a Boston judge dismissed the suit, ruling that Pitonof

wasn't entitled to sole use of the word "champion" with regard to swimming engagements. Judge Hardy said he couldn't determine who was the better swimmer and shouldn't be asked to make the determination of who could use the title champion.

Both women were in court to hear the judgement and greeted each other cordially, but immediately after, Aykroyd challenged Pitonof to a 10-mile "endurance contest in any public bath in the city." The very next day, Pitonof placed a notice in the Boston Journal challenging Aykroyd to a 25-mile race to determine who should wear the champion's crown. Neither match ever took place.

INTO A MODERN ERA

The L Street Swimming Club continued to host the annual Boston Light Swim until 1941, despite changes to the course. Some years swimmers followed the traditional 12-mile route, which is no longer swimmable because of infill and other construction that has altered Boston's waterfront. Other years, the swim started from Little Brewster Island and finished in South Boston. Still others went the opposite direction. But the lighthouse always played a constant role as either start or finish point.

America's entry into World War II saw the suspension of the Boston Light Swim, and the event wouldn't be restaged until Jim Doty, a marathon swimmer who pioneered routes across New England and lasted more than 11 hours in a near-miss bid to swim the English Channel revived the annual tradition after a 35-year layoff.

Author and historian Robert L. McCormack, who became the oldest finisher of the Boston Light Swim when he completed it in 2005 at age 67 and has written several books about the history of the swim says: "Jim Doty was a terrific hero of mine. He did a lot for me back in the old days, and he started the Boston Light up again in 1976," making the water accessible to so many from Boston and farther afield. Doty ran the event for nearly 20 years and is fondly remembered as a towering figure in the New England marathon swimming scene who brought the world to Boston and the Boston Light Swim to the world 🌐



ANNETTE KELLERMAN

In 1908 the world-famous Australian actress and activist Annette Kellerman got within a half mile of the Light



ROSE PITONOF

15-year-old Pitonof's successful Boston Light Swim in 1910 made her a star



Alsie Aykroyd

In 1911 Aykroyd became the second woman and fourth person to complete the Boston Light Swim