



Block Island doctors heralded its salubrious summertime climate in late 1800s

Cottages, small hotels, sanitarium catered to seasonal visitors

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The creation of a channel and new harbor into Block Island in the 1870s allowed steamships to safely transport visitors to its rocky shores in summertime. **C.H. HADLEY, MD**, described it as “a natural sanitarium...a harbor of refuge for those battling disease,” in an 1885 article in *The New England Medical Gazette* (vol. 20) titled “Block Island as a Resort for Invalids.”

He wrote: “In regards to consumptives, a short sojourn in the summer months is very beneficial,” and in his experiences as a practitioner on the island, observed a “reduction in night sweats, harassing coughs, and lack of appetite.” He credited the



The pathway and front of the Hygeia Hotel in a 1901 postcard published by the A. C. Bosselman Co. [CREATIVE COMMONS, RHODE ISLAND COLLECTION, PROVIDENCE PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS.]

VAILL HOTEL AND COTTAGES, SOUTH BLUFFS, BLOCK ISLAND, R. I.



View of the Vaill Hotel and cottages on the South Bluffs of Block Island.

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climate, where “the heat is never oppressive and the nights cool and the mosquitos, the pest of summer resorts, is hardly seen.”

He also noted the freedom from epidemics among the 1,300 residents, with no outbreak of measles, no cases of diphtheria or croup, and an average of two cases of typhoid fever a year, malaria unknown, and a rare case of dysentery, cholera-infantum, and acute inflammatory rheumatism with a low mortality rate, citing the 10 years from 1873 to 1883 as less than 8/10ths of 1 percent.

Dr. Hadley also owned a small hotel on the island. According to the National Register of Historic Places, the Hygeia House, originally constructed by Dr. Hadley as the Seaside House, was built in 1885 and moved to its present site in 1907 with several additions. A small room in the rear, the record states, was “originally the office of the hotel’s owner, a medical doctor.” Ten guest rooms, later expanded to 15, were located on the second floor and were regularly rented to summer visitors.

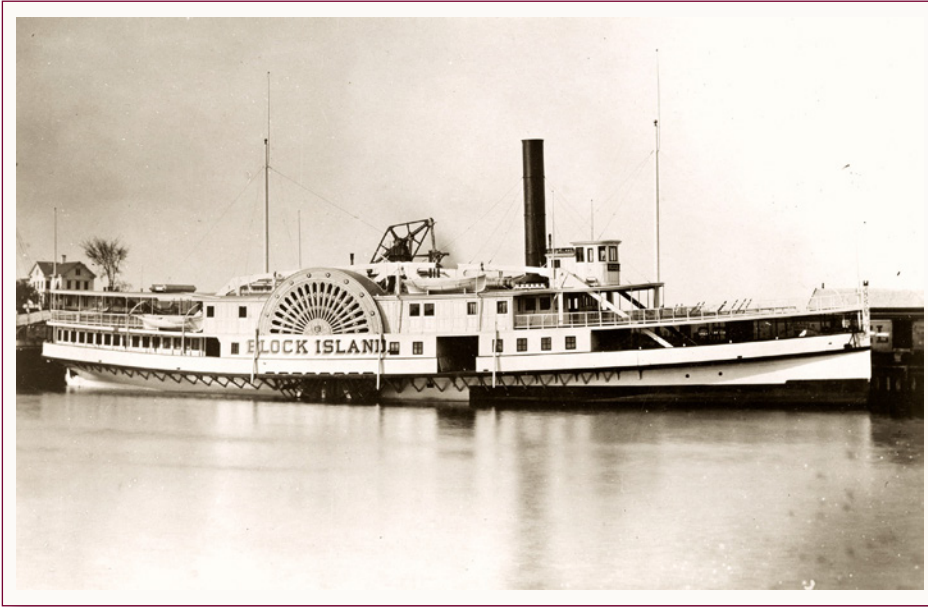
In 1887, Dr. Hadley sold his practice to **DR. JOHN CARDER CHAMPLIN**, and moved to Brooklyn, NY, according to a 1991

(Top) This screenshot is from a Block Island Historical Society film, which presents an overview of the island’s history and the museum’s collections, available at: <https://www.blockislandhistorical.org/our-collection>

document published by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission in cooperation with the Block Island Historical Society.

Dr. Champlin was an island native and the island's physician, and moved the Seaside House to the grounds of his own hotel, the Hygeia, and renamed it the Hygeia Annex. In 1916, the large hotel burned down, and Dr. Champlin moved his offices to the Annex and renamed it the New Hygeia.

The National Register summarizes the Hygeia as "reflecting a minor theme in Block Island's history as a resort – the association of seaside vacations with health and vitality."



The SS Block Island steamer began operations in July 1882 and is shown here at Block Island harbor. [CREATIVE COMMONS, RHODE ISLAND COLLECTION, PROVIDENCE PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS.]

Sanitarium complex

During its heyday, another physician, **ABBY EVEREST VAILL, MD**, arrived. Records at the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission state that in 1884 Dr. Vaill purchased 16 acres on the south side of the island and the following year erected three cottages – two for patients and one for herself.

The National Register of Historic Places documents the 1885 construction project as a "sanitarium complex, which included two small cottages and a 3-and-a-half story hotel." The hotel was built in 1893.

Dr. Vaill (sometimes spelled in historical records as Vail), was a native of Litchfield, CT, who practiced in New York. Archival records from the University of Michigan indicate she was an 1877 medical graduate of the College of Surgery and Medicine and passed away in 1897 in New York at the age of 59. One can surmise that she spent her summers on Block Island, tending to patients who arrived at the complex for its salubrious effects.

Upon her death in 1897, advertisements in *The Brooklyn Eagle* and other New York newspapers advertised the Vaill Cottages for summer rental, with proprietors listed as her sister, Julie Vaill, and a nephew.

The legacy of these physicians in the late Victorian era can be seen in the extant cottages and hotels in which they lived and worked, and in the records, videos and memorabilia housed at the Block Island Historical Society. What has not changed, of course, is the sea, sand, and summertime escape the island still offers visitors. ❖