



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.

“Port Jeff to Watch Hill” - Early Morning Reverie

It was early morning of our third day out from Haverstraw Bay during our annual summer cruise, and I had just slipped the moorings and was steaming out of Port Jeff Harbor. The sun had not quite risen, but the beauty of the morning twilight was evident even to a groggy helmsman such as myself. My lovely wife Jan and I were bound for Watch Hill, the exquisite, quintessential little New England summer resort poised on the western peninsula of Rhode Island’s ocean beaches, some 65 nautical miles away.

I was alone in the cockpit, concentrating on my steering, weaving through the mooring field on the east side of the mile long harbor, checking out the fleet, and doing some window shopping- -one of my favorite pastimes. The boat to starboard has a really cool RADAR array, the little beauty to port has a perfect sheer line: you know the drill. One can easily drift off under these transcendental conditions, as I had a few years back when I had my serenity rudely interrupted by nearly snagging a vacant mooring tether in our prop. Sips of delightfully strong coffee and thoughts of possibly entering the cold predawn water with mask and snorkel kept me from completely giving into the Zen of the present moment.

Welcome to Port Jeff

Port Jefferson, about midway out on Long Island North Shore is a convenient stop over for any trip out East or as a destination unto itself. It’s an easy entrance in all but the most horrendous northerly conditions, with twin jetties, and a large basin protected by hills on three sides. There are quiet anchorages immediately to port and starboard of the entrance behind some outstanding beaches, and it’s a straight shot down to the marinas which range from the upscale Danford’s Inn & Marina (631- 928-5200) to the Port Jefferson Town Marina (631-331-3567). Moorings are also available along with water taxi service from Port Jefferson Silver Bay Marine Services (631-642-0849) and the Setauket Yacht Club (631-473-9890), our favorite, which also has clean restrooms and showers. All the docks are right at the foot of town, which is always great, and a wide variety of restaurants, food supplies, and shopping is available. The inner harbor’s a bit noisy with the huge ferries coming in and out from Bridgeport and the electrical plant on the western side, but rarely is it a perfect world we live in, and a one night’s stay is the usual for those heading to the real playgrounds further east.

Navigation Procedures and Plans

As is our usual habit, we had plotted our dead reckoning courses on the paper charts and entered our waypoints and route in an exact match into the GPS chart plotter giving us two independent sources of determining the boat’s position, each confirming the other. Everyone trained in my onboard, hands-on navigation and electronics program, as well as regular readers of my column understands that as convenient as modern GPS navigation is, it is still easy to place a waypoint in the wrong spot and not realize it when there is no other reference.

We planned to start out with an adverse current for the first leg of the trip so that we would be able to pick up the favorable current in the last when we would be passing by The Race and through Fishers Island Sound where the currents are much stronger. Hence, my early departure. The 65 mile leg would take us nine hours at seven knots in our 38 foot sailboat “Duet”. This would be a mere three plus hour run in most cruising powerboats that may not be so concerned with the currents except for fuel economy and the possibility of steeper seas when the wind opposes an adverse one. But I figure, “what’s the hurry.”

Threatening Weather Looms on the Horizon

We were motoring down the Sound heading to our first waypoint, buoy "TE" a green and red located 29 miles from Port Jeff mid-way between the North Fork of the Island and the Connecticut coast. Jan had gotten up around 8:00 am and we had a light breakfast underway. As forecasted, the picturesque sunrise had been replaced by increasing cloudiness and the wind had gradually picked up to 12 to 15 knots out of the southwest so we set sail and shut down the beast. The forecast was for a series of low pressure cells to move up from New Jersey with a line of thunderstorms. We could see a series of purple storm cells well to the south, and NOAA Weather Radio confirmed that the south shore of Long Island was getting hammered. Our plan was to run into Duck Island Roads just west of the Long Sand Shoal on the Connecticut coast or into Old Saybrook or New London if they started moving our way. As it was, we had luck on our side and flew out of the Sound at 7.5 knots under gray skies with a 20 knot wind and 2 to 3 foot seas on our starboard quarter. Great conditions in any boat, power or sail!

Our waypoint for the western entrance to Fishers Island Sound was just north of North Dumpling Island with its prominent 94 foot lighthouse marking the approach. We were picking up an extra 2 knots with the current, nearly a 30% increase in our speed.

Welcome to Fishers Island Sound

The main channel through Fishers Island Sound begins on eastern end near Watch Hill Point so with a western approach we were coming in the back end, outbound through the Sound. Therefore, the reds were on our left with the first buoys having the higher numbers and each succeeding one decreasing as we cruised through. After North Dumpling Island, we were headed toward red "R 20", just south of Ram Island Reef; and, as luck would have it, the skies were starting to clear.

Fishers Island Sound, approximately 8 miles long and 2 miles wide, is a truly delightful area with Fishers Island affording protection from the rougher conditions of the nearby Race and Block Island Sound. The island, which offers several scenic anchorages on the north shore, consists of idyllic rolling hills spotted with the summer retreats of the well to do. To the north lies the Connecticut shore with the beautiful harbors of the Mystic River, Stonington and Watch Hill, a true cruising paradise if there ever was one. Maybe I'll tell you more about some of the others in later articles.

Weaving Through the Narrow Watch Hill Channel

The entrance to Watch Hill will challenge your navigational skills. Its difficulty makes it that much more desirable because it keeps the faint of heart from even trying. The seclusion, beauty, and challenge of it all are part of its charm. I'll tell you how we did it; but, at the end of the day, you really need do it yourself. It might be good to follow on a detailed chart if you can; MAPTECH Region 3, pages 34a and 35 give the best detail. From red "R 20" we cruise our way through Fishers Sound to the fifty-five foot Lighthouse at Latimar Reef and headed northeast at red "R 12" into the Stonnington Harbor Channel, keeping the Noyes Shoals to port and the outer Stonnington breakwater, marked by flashing red fixed light "4" to starboard.

To get to Watch Hill you have to go directly to the entrance to Stonnington and bear east at red and green nun "SP" off the Stonnington Point, leaving the buoy to port. From there it's a narrow but do-able squeeze leaving red "R 2" to starboard to pass between Academy Rock and the five foot shoal and rock clusters off Stonnington Point close-by to port. From there its red "R 4" to starboard and an impossible looking tight squeeze between green "G 5" to port and the sand bar on the north end of Sandy Point to starboard. Favor green "G 5" but watch out for boats coming the other way around the point. Better to wait and let an outbound boat go through than to have to pass each other at this crucial spot. From there it gets easy by comparison. It's a long narrow channel cut thru the sand bars and rocks in Little Narragansett Bay to red "R 22" off Pawcatuck Point and Seal Rock. You definitely deserve to hum a few bars of "Popeye the Sailor" as you head through this one.

From "R 22" above it's a straight shot on a southerly heading to the Watch Hill Cove Channel keeping away from the four and five foot mounds off Rhodes Point. Once inside, you can dock in the limited space in the harbor, or try a mooring from the Watch Hill Yacht Club which offers launch service or just anchor anywhere south of Dennison Rock marked by red "R 24" and Napatree Beach.

One of the best things to do in Watch Hill is to dinghy into the beach and climb the low sand dune and hang out on the ocean beach. It's incredible. The water is crystal clear and the fine grained sand is smooth and clean. The next best thing is to head into the quaint little town and take a stroll and have an ice cream. There's an antique carousel for the kids and some interesting shops and restaurants. Nothing too big or too tacky. We spent two nights there last year and the only thing that tore us away was the lure of the Newport Jazz Festival for which we had tickets and reservations.

"Stay the course, mate." I'll see you next month in Newport. By the way, if your interested in reading any of my previous cruising chronicles they're available on my website @ [www. captaindonfleming.com](http://www.captaindonfleming.com).

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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