



# THE Lightkeeper

The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society

Vol. 3, No. 1, March, 1996

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The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society is dedicated to the preservation of Nova Scotia lighthouses. We aim to create an awareness of our province's lighthouses and of our marine heritage, and to work with related groups to ensure the identification and preservation of coastal sites. Our first project is the preservation of Sambro Island Lighthouse, at the entrance to Halifax Harbour. **Meetings: 7:00 pm Fourth Wednesday of every month**, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, 1675 Lower Water Street, Halifax.

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## New Members

A welcome to the following people who have joined the NSLPS since December, 1995: The Municipality of Queens, Peter Klynstra, Isobel/Steve Swerling, The Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Pat Kingsbury, Lee Paul, Sean Fraser, Bill Towndrow, Mrs. E. Cooper, Donna/William Underwood, Ivan Kent, Clyde Burke, Bunny/Pat Turner, Marlyse Milburn, Douglas Anerson & Family, Monica, Marcella O'Connor, Joseph Hannigan, David/Paula Morgan-Sinclair, John O'Connor, Denise/Ralf Dreimanis, Karl/Pat Richardson, James Noorman, Tom Hettinger

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## Lighthouse News

### Lighthouses of the Lighthouse Route Interpretive Project *Bruce Inglis*

The South Shore Tourism Association is pleased to announce that our *Lighthouses of the Lighthouse Route Interpretive Drive Project* is now underway. The project was born as the result of an obvious need; our beautiful drive has for 30 odd years been officially designated the Lighthouse Route, and as of yet, little has been done to recognize these important structures. Imagine the frustration of our visitors who eagerly embark upon the 525 kilometer drive only to find that most lights are not easily found and fewer still provide any historical information to those fortunate enough to find them.

The first improvement which is obviously needed to improve signage and literature to help our visitors locate the lights. Literature could not only provide visitors with directions and drawings to

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unique history of each light. These tasks are the main focus of the project presently underway; researchers are developing information packages identifying the easiest routes for our visitors to access the lights, and documenting what is available at each site. We are also searching for details from the past, such as lists of keepers, old photos and any interesting lore.

Once we have developed the history for each of our lights, the potential for development of the sites is unlimited. One possibility for certain off-land sites is the establishment of scenic look-off points. Other locations would make excellent day use parks, with picnic and rest areas complimenting interpretive displays which would provide visitors with a glimpse into the life of the lightkeeper and family, and help us all appreciate the service provided by these individuals to the seafaring community.

The South Shore Tourism Association is presently making contacts with various community groups whose areas include these historic structures. For the full potential of each light to be realized, the motivation and ideas for development should come from within the community. It is hoped that groups will be found who are willing to help in the improvement, promotion and stewardship of these lights. Helping communities realize the importance of their lighthouse to their history and culture is the greatest measure we can take to ensure that the lights and their stories will survive to pass on to future generations.

The South Shore Tourism Association would appreciate hearing from anyone who has suggestions regarding our lighthouse project. We are presently collecting information or memories of any of these lights between Peggy's Point and Cape Forchu. If you have any information or memories of any of these lights, it would make our project all the more successful to document this knowledge. Please feel free to contact Debbie Goodick, researcher for Shelburne/Yarmouth at 875-3993 or Bruce Inglis, researcher for Queens/Lunenburg at 354-5741.

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### **The Halifax International Boatshow**



*Patsy MacDonald and Bruce Inglis*

Our first booth at this event was a complete success. We were able to raise over \$400 in the sale of books, pins and memberships, while meeting many people who have roots in Nova Scotia's lighthouse families.

Special thanks to all of those members who donated their time to staff the booth.

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## The Oldest Operating Lighthouse in North America: 1758

by Rip Irwin



*Photo Credit Unknown*

*Sambro Island Lighthouse Tower  
1864-1906*

Situated at the highest elevation of a twenty-five acre heap of granite at the entrance to Halifax Harbour, stands an octagonal, red-banded tower. Shortly after this lighthouse was built in 1758, its value was recognized by the legendary explorer and cartographer Captain James Cook as he referred to it in his 1762 directions for entering Halifax Harbour.

The original tower was built of granite blocks and rubblestone 5 1/2 feet thick at the base and 44 feet high, surmounted by a lantern of unknown height. The tower was 20 feet in diameter at the base and tapers toward the top. Inside had a constant diameter of 8 feet, 9 inches. A clockwise spiral stair lead to the top, built around a solid octagonal post that measured 18 inches through. The other end of the stairs were carried on stringers supported by 8 inch square corbels.

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In 1834, the lantern was described as having eight large wooden posts, nearly a foot square, as uprights which, together with wooden sashes for the 128 small panes of glass, greatly obstructed the light.

Strangely at this time, serious consideration was being given to lowering the height of the tower by 15 or 20 feet because it was so often stated by mariners that in the summer months, the lantern was frequently enveloped in haze (fog) and totally obscured, while the island an lower part of the tower could be plainly seen. A good and sufficient reason to have a fog alarm of some sort.

Sambro Island, at that time, was equipped with a cannon, used to answer ships signals as they felt their way through the haze, and thought themselves to be near this light station. Records show that there was, at this time, an Artillery Guard at the station for the purpose of firing the fog cannon. The name of one of the artillerymen, so the story goes, was a Scot by the name of Alex Alexander. One day he was sent ashore to Halifax to pick up the payroll and supplies, but fell in with bad company on the mainland and when he returned to Sambro Island several days later without payroll and supplies, he was, understandably, in a lot of trouble. On the cold, grey dawn of a morning after, Double Alex, as he had come to be known, was found hanging by the neck from a bridge that spanned the "yard." Whether by his own hands or by those of his compatriots, he was quite dead, and has been known to haunt Sambro Island from that day on. Different lightkeepers have told me stories of Double Alex's presence on the island and the things he would do. Nothing serious or harmful, just annoying noises in the night. Sounds of walking across the ceiling, knocking, doors opening and closing by themselves, lights turning on and off, and the toilet flushing. One keeper told me that he had put up with this for twenty-four years but there had never been any harm done.

Although many complaints were made, and the Commissioners report of 1834 stated that nothing more could be done to improve the light until a new iron lantern is placed upon this tower, it was not until 1864 that such improvement was undertaken. In October of that year, an improved lantern with plate glass and reflectors was imported from Great Britain. The top of the lighthouse was stripped, thoroughly repaired, painted and supplied with the new iron lantern, lamps and reflectors. This lantern was 9 feet 6 inches in diameter and 16 feet high. It had 12 sides, and the sashes on each side contained two panes of plate glass 60 inches by 30 inches and 36 inches by 30 inches respectively for a total of 8 feet in height. The tower, wood sheathed on the outside, shingled and painted white, now stood 60 feet high, base to vane.

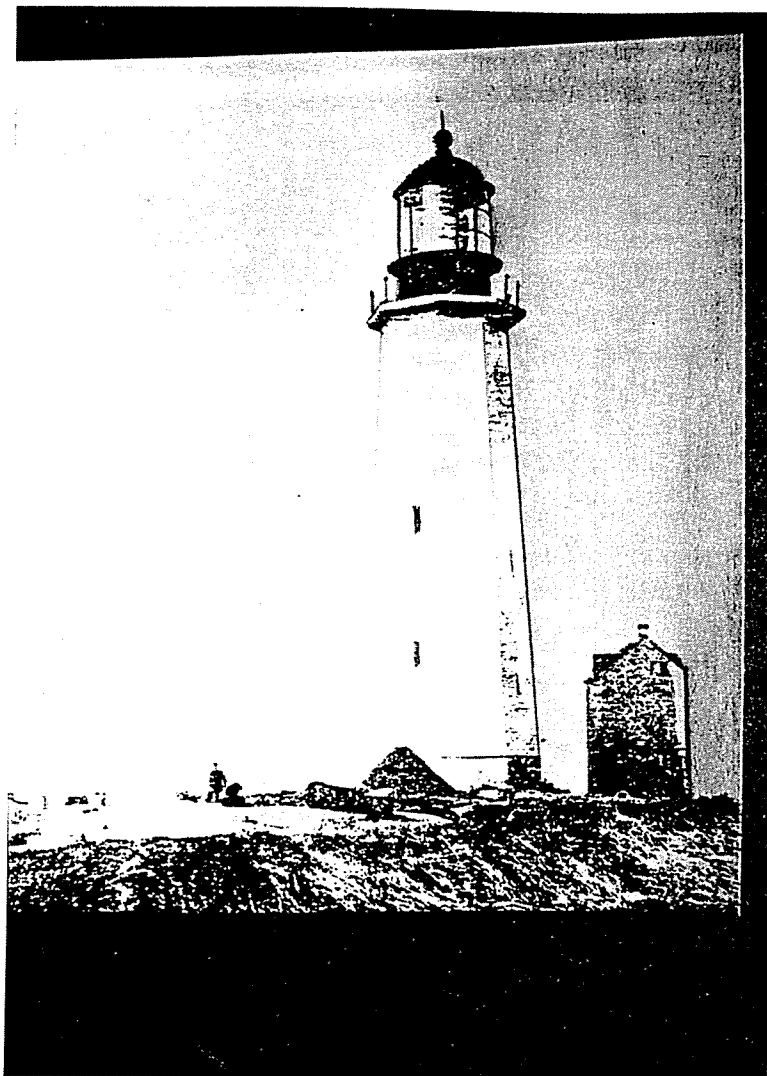
In 1906, the next big change in the appearance of the lighthouse occurred. An octagonal reinforced concrete wall, 22 feet high, was added to the top of the octagonal stone walls of the tower and surmounted by a first new order circular iron lantern. Inside the lantern, a curved iron ladder with 8 steps carried to a narrow gallery at the bottom of the glazing inside and extended externally about 18 inches. The glazing of the lantern was divided by 12 vertical mullions within which were set three pieces of curved glass. each 36 inches square, making each glass section 9 feet high by 3 feet wide. The cupola was copper with riveted gores, all topped with a large ventilator ball surmounted by a weathervane. Mr. Roy Gilkie tells me that as a young man in the 1920's, while greasing the weathervane, he enjoyed standing atop the ventilator Ball and holding onto the vane, 82 feet above the ground and 140 feet above high water. "It gave me the sensation of floating in space," he said, "because you couldn't see the lighthouse below you, just the top of the ball and the lantern roof."

The tower was then 82 feet high, base to vane. The sides all wood sheathed, shingled and painted white. The lantern was painted bright red.

Work was done by day's labour under the supervision of Mr. J.A. Legere. Completed in November 1906 and cost \$2,934.

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In 1908, it was decided that seven lighthouses in Nova Scotia, including Sambro Island, would be re-painted with white and red stripes or bands, to make them more conspicuous when snow was on the ground. Sambro lighthouse bands were alternately red and white, each 8 feet in width. In January 1950, Lightkeeper W.A. Will Smith observed the lighthouse was swaying or oscillating noticeably and was found to be 8 inches out of plumb. In May, the base of the tower was excavated in about eight different places to a depth of 18 x 20 inches, and it was discovered that the mortar was cracked with several different stones loose. In October of 1950, a wooden ramp was built from shore level near the gas-house to the level of the lighthouse base to haul equipment and supplies to the work site. Grouting pipes were fitted throughout the existing masonry of the supporting base of the tower, through which concrete grout was pumped under pressure. This solidified the existing base, but then, a new reinforced concrete wall was poured to form a collar 3 feet thick and approximately 6 feet 6 inches high around the base of the lighthouse. At the same time, the concrete haunching around and under the gallery was chipped away until sound concrete was exposed, then grouted to original surface and contour.



*Photo Credit: Department of  
Transport  
Sambro Island Lighthouse Tower  
1906-1908*

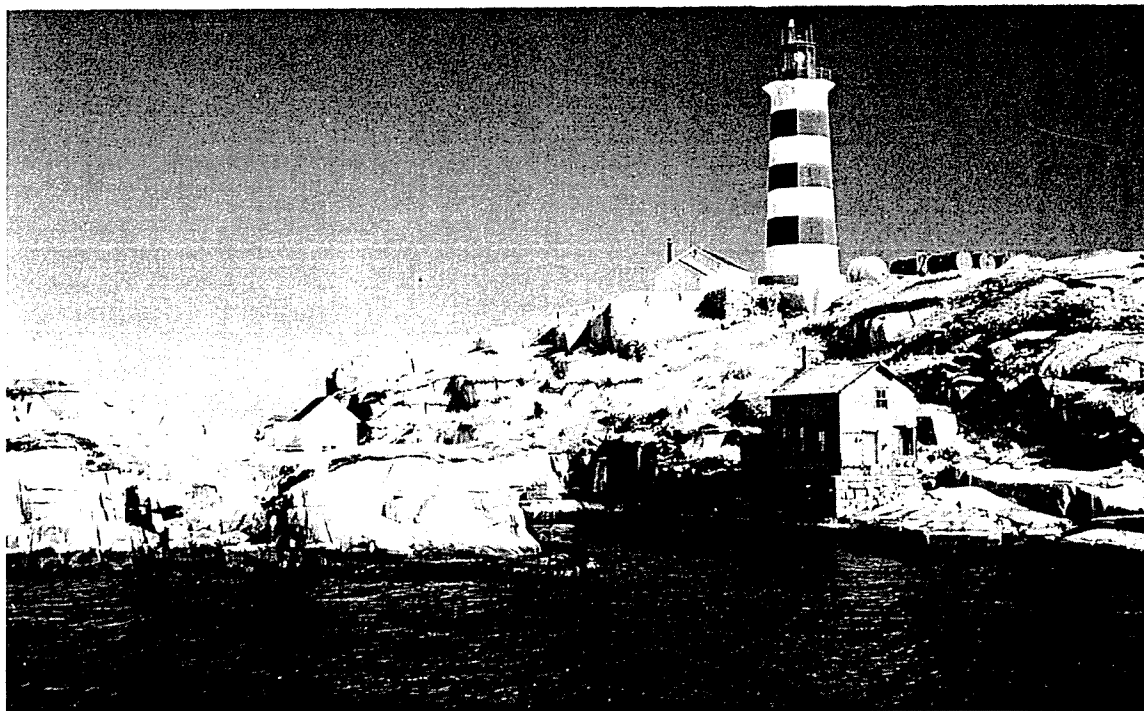


*Photo Credit: Unknown  
Sambro Island Lighthouse Tower  
1908-68*

In 1968, after 62 years of service, the first order iron lantern was taken down and returned aboard CGS Edward Cornwallis, to base stores. A new aluminum lantern was then installed to house the recently fitted D.C.B. 36 inch airport beacon. This lantern is 9 feet 10 inches in diameter and stands 12 feet 9 inches tall, base to vane. Each of the ten sides has two pieces of glass, each 40 inches high by 36 inches wide. The tower is now 74 feet high, base to vane.

This is pretty much the way you will find this historically significant tower today, and the way it was back in March, 1988 when it was still being kept by lighthouse keepers John and Marjorie Fairservice. It was at that time that Chris Mills, a fellow lighthouse enthusiast and author of **Vanishing Lights**, and I, went on Sambro Island for a few days visit. We stayed in the assistant keeper's house where relief keeper Gerry O'Neill was also bunked down. On our last night there, all was dead quiet as we slept peacefully, except for the muffled sound of the sea around us, when suddenly, in the wee hours of the morning, I awakened to a swishing sound followed by rustling. After hearing it a few more times and wondering what Chris was doing at this time of night, went to the top of the stairs, into Chris' room, and seeing him there, still in bed, and hearing nothing more, went back to bed myself. In the morning I asked Chris if he had heard anything. He said that he had, and what was going on? When we went downstairs and saw Gerry, the first thing he asked was, "what were you guys doing up in the middle of the night?" Later, we went into the living room, and there were all the charts we had been looking at the evening before, not neatly stacked as we had left them, but scattered helter-skelter all around the room.

It then struck us, the sounds we had heard were very much like a chart being pulled from among others and being tossed around the room. Was the lightkeeper having fun with us or was it Double Alex? Perhaps, if it was, he was curious as to why Sambro Island was going to be abandoned after more than 230 continuous years of lightkeeping. Did he think the answer could be found in our charts? I like to think it was Double Alex. I wish I could have met him.



*Photo Credit: E.H.Irwin  
Sambro Island, Nova Scotia*

Sambro Island lighthouse has seen a few alterations and additions throughout the years, however the original tower remains intact and very much the same it was when it was built over 237 years ago. It is the oldest operating lighthouse in North America and it wouldn't hurt to take a little pride in the fact. In September 1994, the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society took the initiative and requested, through the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office and the Canadian Coast Guard, that an evaluation for the purpose of having the lighthouse registered as a national historic building. A recent letter from National Historic Sites Directorate advises that an evaluation report should be available to us within the next few weeks. Let us hope the best.

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#### **MEMBERSHIP FORM**

#### **NOVA SCOTIA LIGHTHOUSE PRESERVATION SOCIETY**

**Single - \$10.00 (or more!) Family - \$20.00 Institution/Group - \$30.00 Patron - \$100.00**

Amount enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NEW ☐ RENEWAL ☐

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ POSTAL CODE \_\_\_\_\_

Family names for extra card(s): \_\_\_\_\_

I can volunteer time to work on Sambro Island \_\_\_\_\_ I can help in another way. Give details \_\_\_\_\_

Please make cheque payable to The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society

Mail to: THE NOVA SCOTIA LIGHTHOUSE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

c/o Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, 1675 Lower Water Street, Halifax, B3J 1S3

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## Lightkeeper Bulletin

The following members wish to contact others who are interested in trading lighthouse memorabilia, such as postcards and pins:

*Joseph Hannigan*  
34 Windmill Dr.  
Marlboro, MA  
01752

*Marlyse Milburn*  
3455 North Valencia Ave.  
San Bernardo, CA  
92404

Past President Rip Irwin will speak to the Mainland South Heritage Society on the subject of Sambro Island Light. This will be at the Society's regular meeting on April 25, 1996, at 7:30 pm, in the Captain William Spry Centre, 10 Kidston Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia

NSLPS member Timothy Churchill builds a unique product - a residential fire extinguisher cabinet. The cabinet is designed to install a fire extinguisher in a conspicuous location without taking away the appearance of the wall on which it hangs. The cabinet door is made of stained glass cut in the design of a lighthouse. The unique feature, however, is the emergency flashlight which is placed so that the night light shines in the dark from the beacon of the lighthouse. The same light will also flash giving notice of a power outage.

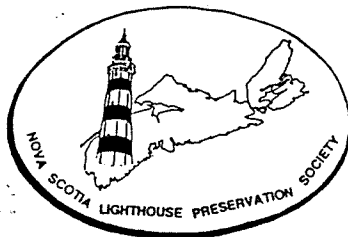
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## Lightshop

Order from:

**NSLPS**  
Maritime Museum  
6278 Cork Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 1Y9  
Please make cheques payable in Canadian funds to the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society, N.S. Canada B3L 1Y9  
Halifax, N.S. Canada B3L 1Y9

## NSLPS Membership Pins



**Coming Soon**

A beautiful pin! NSPLS logo on a blue background with an eye-catching red and gold lighthouse, and Nova Scotia in bright gold. \$6.00 (\$5.00 + \$1.00 pack and post)

The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society will have this beautifully detailed Pegasus Pewter keychain for sale about mid-April.

