

The Lightkeeper

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The objectives of the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society are to promote and to support the preservation and awareness of Nova Scotia lighthouses; to assist community groups in leasing or taking ownership of the lighthouse sites; to provide access to written research and photographic documentation; to initiate oral history research; and to classify and monitor the status of historic lighthouse sites.

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Cape Sable Lighthouse

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Membership News!

We're excited to announce that community groups supporting their local lighthouses will now have their affiliate fees waived.

Contact ask.us@nslps.com for more information.

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Cape Sable

By: Betty June Smith

Betty June is an NSLPS member, who has kindly contributed a story for the Lightkeeper. Her story will be split over a two editions of The Lightkeeper, so please stay tuned!

On a clear day at Chapel Hill, looking south you will see, 9 miles away, the slim white lighthouse tower at Cape Sable. This beautiful light is one of Canada's tallest, and its most southerly East Coast light and fog alarm station. The islet it stands on is so low you see only its higher dunes; seamen must be close inshore to "raise" it from a low deck viewpoint, so its light is high and its foghorn loud to guide ships away, or through shoals and ledges made more dangerous by strong, erratic tides, and heavy fogs that last days and weeks.

From seaward, Cape Sable appears part of the mainland; only the Mi'kmaw knew how inside passages separate it. The first Europeans here charted it as the SW tip of what is now Nova Scotia, or even as the whole peninsula; indeed, on some early charts "Cape Sable" meant large parts of the northeastern New World. On the southern hillside below the observation tower on Chapel Hill lay Lomeron, the first trading station in greater Cape Sable; the post brought the Mi'kmaw into happy contact with Europeans, as it lay on their traditional migration route. Going out in tough, seaworthy canoes to gather fish trapped in the shallows, dig clams and hunt seabirds' eggs, the Mi'kmaw rounded the cape close inshore.

However, the first deep-sea sailors passed this hazard well offshore; it soon became notorious. Imagine the square sails and high prows of Viking ships coming into view, scudding fast on a following wind, for in 1000 A.D., Norse adventurers did sail past. A leader inscribed a message on a boulder at Green Island; years of weathering broke down the surface and the runes have not been conclusively translated so we do not know if they tell how a knorr struck the ledges, with wreckage and passengers driven ashore by wind and waves? Or did the navigator chisel in with pride and thanks to God that he had safely passed the dreaded Cape?

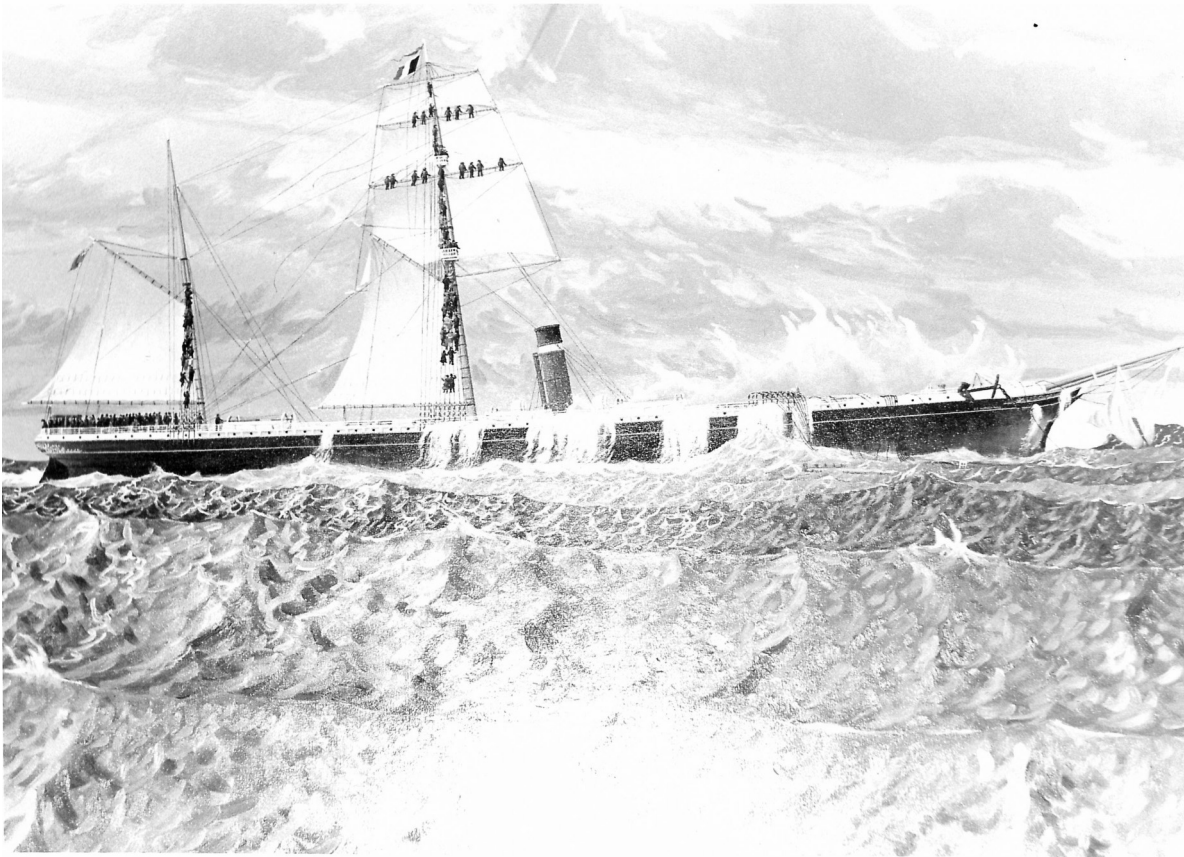
Then picture small fishing boats from Portugal and Spain, that came before Columbus's time to fish here, their hulls and stubby masts bobbing over wave crests, dropping into troughs, and some of them inevitably lost. During hurricane season they would be deeply laden with good cod, easily swamped or smashed on the lee shores.

"Little ships", less than 200 tonnes, poop-decked and ornate, struggled past in 1604. By then, seasonal European fishing-stations had reached southward from Newfoundland; control of fisheries, lumbering, trading and mining in the New World was desired by powers in the Old. Now comes geographer Samuel de Champlain with a French expedition looking for permanent settlement sites, recording many features for the first time. Southwest of Cape Sable, already well-known, this old map-maker added, "ille ans tous marains" - "this bend is all shoals".

Still exploration and trade grew, though for more than 200 years yet, captains tried to pass this cape on just compass and sextant readings, their inaccurate charts scratched over with notes - information gotten by the trial-and-error method. The errors meant lost ships and men: financial ruin for owners, hardship and grief for families. By 1800, lighthouses at other headlands helped navigators set courses to clear Cape Sable, but still its horrendous weather and strong tides caught too many vessels.

The area sent petitions begging the Provincial Government for a light right at Cape Sable. Legislation of 1850: "Enacted ...(b) Grant of 2000 pounds (\$10,000±) for lighthouse at Cape Sable or Baccaro...". Probably as construction is easier and cheaper on the mainland than on an island, this light went to Baccaro Point; for years, further petitions for Cape Sable went unanswered. **Continued on pages 4-7**

Wooden hulls gave way to steel; sails, hard to maneuver with, to steam power, paddle wheels, and propellers. All improvements - but all more expensive to build and to run. Owners urged faster trips; captains cut as close as they dared to shore around the major head-lands. Of many wrecks over those years, one in particular is the immediate impetus for a light at Cape Sable. "On a night in February, 1860, the steamship HUNGARIAN was caught up in the fury of the wind and sea, and was destroyed on the reef that runs out from Cape Sable...Nova Scotians were alarmed at the great loss of life - over 200 - and of cargo valued in the millions.



"Hungarian" - Painting by Gerald Smith, Ottawa, formerly of Cape Sable, from eyewitness accounts, Feb. 20, 1860: "As soon as anything could be discerned through the heavy frost vapour, we saw a large steamer... Her foremast was gone but her smokestack, main and mizzen masts were still standing... we could make out people in the rigging." Soon after, waves poured in cataracts over the hull, the mainmast fell with its human burden and bitter cries went up from the watchers on the shore. When that flood tide turned ebb, the great ship was nothing but wreckage.

Next year the government came to a different decision from that of 1850, and on November 12, 1861, a light shone out from the top of the new, wooden, 60' lighthouse.

It was a red light! Lamps burning seal oil behind lantern windows of ruby-red glass present a beautiful picture to our minds today, but a signal far weaker than needed to shine far seaward. To this day Cape Sable is undergoing the series of changes to equipment that began (as far as we know) in 1868, when new Canada's Department of Marine and Fisheries took over the administration of light stations, and reported, "The light at this station is of the greatest importance. An improvement has been made in the light by changing the glass in the lantern from red to clear, and substituting red chimneys for clear ones. It can be seen from four to five miles further since the alteration was made." (2)

1874: Old oil lamps replaced by a compound series of nine large circular burners with 25" reflectors (each costing \$90! a newsman reported ... probably catadioptric (reflecting) Argand lamps...' (3) Now the signal was white, and much brighter, but still fixed.

Strangely, the most significant advance in light signals had been made 50 years before; in 1823 Augustin Fresnel of France built a lens that collected and focused light beams. Observers ran a test proving that 17% of a reflected light reached them at sea, and 83% of lens-directed light. Later Cape Sable did receive a beautiful lens, made in Birmingham, England. About 6' high, four-sided, each side was made up of many individual prisms set in thick brass, with a bullseye lens about 8" in diameter centered in each side. From a distance, viewers saw a flash of light when the bull's-eye of the turning lens directly faced them. The lens enclosed the light source: wick lamps changed to kerosene-vapour burners with mantles. Electric generators powered electric lamps of ever-changing types after 1960, a much safer method.

Lens and light source were mounted on a heavy cast iron deck, cut away at one point so the keeper's upper body could be inside as he cared for or lit the lamps - indeed, he entered the lens bodily to clean its interior. Lens and mount weighed several thousand pounds, and must turn at a precise and unvarying speed night after night. A great basin filled with mercury floated it effortlessly; clockwork mechanisms maintained the speed prescribed to regulate the flashes. In the yard below, the turning beams were visible overhead all the time, rather like the arms of a giant ceiling fan, and loveliest when filled with snowflakes. Cape Sable's signal, 1 flash every 5 seconds, was easily distinguished from any other lights near it -that is, if it could be seen at all.

No matter how bright the light, it can't reach far through fog or precipitation, so wrecks continued. In 1876, another building went up, for a steam-powered whistle, Nova Scotia's tenth, and likely its most needed. Typically, the new fog alarm "...soon received an extended test when Cape Sable was blanketed with heavy fog for two solid weeks. From this time...reports on fog horns at this and other stations generally occupy as much space in the annual reports as do those on light towers." (4)

Certainly, the horn here was of major importance to navigation and also the more difficult of the two signals to operate, requiring 200 tons of coal, plus some firewood, per year. The fuel was landed from supply ships at the natural landing some distance from the station, stored there in a large shed, and hauled to a sub-depot attached to the whistle-house - hauled by ox and cart, so the steam-engineer/lightkeeper must also be a farmer, maintain barn, field and fences, make hay, haul seaweed dressing to fertilize the soil (which is almost all sand and easily depleted), and keep up that hauling road with the mountains of ash from the steamer!

Also, the whistle's daily care could be much harder than the light's. At that time, the light was lit at sundown, watched and tended several times during the night, extinguished at sunup, cleaned and refilled. Though this was time consuming, it was a routine. The fog alarm, on the other hand, might run 24 hours out of the day, or worse, need to be started and stopped many times, a laborious process.

In 1906 a diaphone fog horn (operated by compressed air vs steam) replaced the whistle; the steam equipment continued in use to run the air compressors. In 1925, an improved, "type F", diaphone went in, being more complex, reliable, and louder. Very loud - but its regular note was deep and pleasant, adding its own something to the overall feeling that this was an important and efficiently functioning station.

The whistle house was demolished in 1990; the blueprints, though interesting, cannot bring to life the atmosphere so striking within that building. At first it housed a sunken reservoir and steel coal-fired boilers that converted the water to steam. Keepers from that time later spoke with much nostalgia of this system and the shrill blast produced to pierce the fog with one 10-second blast per minute, to identify it as Cape Sable's signal.

In 1953, when I went to Cape Sable as Sid's wife, I learned that this building and several additions were called the engine room: the original boiler room, about 30' square 12' high, with floor and walls of greying brick, now used for

storage and workshop, the steam works removed and rusting a few yards away outside. Next, a room holding towering tanks for fuel and compressed air and stairs leading up two storeys to the horn room; there, the diaphone workings were inside for servicing, and the trumpet of the horn, 51" long, of cast iron, reached out through the wall, about 15' above the beach.

Storms had moved the naturally-formed cobblestone seawall against the building's seaward side, so this comparatively small device seemed to be throwing its warning right into the teeth of the offending weather, an especially gallant and moving stance when hurricane winds lashed it with salt water torn from the tops of waves, which broke within feet of it, and seaward nothing could be seen but more crashing breakers. Their own smother, and the fog, cut off visibility close inshore, but ocean swells from deep water began breaking on ledges about 5 miles out, rebuilt briefly over deeps, then broke again, and through the fog we sensed the forces and fury as if we could see it all.

Anyone then within hearing of the brave signal, from the south, was doomed; but it could be useful to seamen west or east of the Cape. The keepers would never have let the horn stop if they could prevent it. A winter storm in the early '30s flooded the entire station yard and floated the fuel tanks in the engine room, breaking fuel-line connections and stopping the engines.

To keep the engines running and the horn blowing under ordinary conditions, the keepers gave on-going care, repairs and replacements, adjustments and oilings. The horn must not only blow, it must blow to the second, for right duration of blast, and at the right air pressure. A fine hand and ear were needed here for too much air or wear to the diaphragms or other variable, interfere with the final action of the vibrators, which was to produce a "grunt" at the end of the signal. At a great distance, especially in calm weather, this phenomenon might be the only part heard.

During World War II a German U-boat apprehended the fishing vessel LUCILLE M., Percy Richardson, Master. Before sinking the vessel, the enemy ordered the crew into dories and left them to make shore as best they could. Knowing their position, 110 miles S of Cape Sable, they set compass course towards it. Rowing is a quiet means of travel; sea and wind were calm, permitting smothering-thick fog to lie unbroken, but adding to the stillness; being right on the water, the crew had the benefit of any sound-conduction it may have provided. At any rate, while still 45 miles from land, they heard "something". Listening hard, they could hear a low note sometimes, then they could time it, and be sure it was their well-known guide.

The marvelous horn depended on the engine-room equipment, two diesel generators and two air-compressors running alternate 48-hour shifts. A network of belts, pulleys, pipes and valves brought fuel in, carried air out to the storage tank, thence to the horn, regulated air pressure and roughly adjusted timing and length of blast. The first diesels generated 1200 watts, enough DC current to light the engine room; until 1960, this was the only electricity on the station and was of great value, because the engine room equipment was unguarded. Keepers walked among fly-wheels whizzing at 680 rpm, and the heavy leather belts zipping and flapping between engines and compressors. When the system broke down at night, the start-up of the alternate equipment was done by flashlight, with all haste to get the station "on the air" again.

The routine to change over from a functioning system to its relief called for fast hand-and foot-work to maintain the signal's timing - not miss a blast. The keepers acquired



Cape Sable Lightstation c. 1909. Left to right, whistle-house & engine room; original light; 2 sheds; barn; original dwelling. Telephone poles, extended from Marconi Station elsewhere on the island. View from north.

this skill through making many switchovers during running time, because the "two solid weeks" of fog is no record here; a really solid stretch of 28 consecutive 24-hour days of operation, in July, 1967, may be the record for East Coast stations. (Of the 3 remaining days, 2 had considerable fog; one was clear all day.)

Who knows how many wrecks the lights and fog alarms prevented? We do have records of most that happened in spite of aids to navigation, and this one has an amusing side:

"The ABERDEEN was a Canadian Government Steamer built in 1894, and used to supply light stations and to attend buoys ...She stranded in a dense fog off Seal Island on October 13, 1923. The ABERDEEN was carrying the new light apparatus for Cape Sable..." (All 48 souls on board survived.) (5)

The old lens and apparatus continued to function splendidly for years atop the new 86' tower, built in 1923, the one you now see. With its lantern, its height is 101'. The construction method, of reinforced concrete, was used to its best advantage here. While other towers built then often had distracting flying buttresses outside, or interior framing members, Cape Sable's "...relied on an overall grid of horizontal and vertical bars to resist stresses of various types, including stresses produced by wind forces, and the compressive stresses produced by the tower's own weight and that of the lantern on top. The tapered design of the tower's shaft contributed to the strong support of the lantern." (6)

Credits:

General information: Crowell's History of Barrington Township

*References: (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6): Joan Mattie, Federal Heritage Building Review Office Report
(5) The Wreckwood Chair, Evelyn Richardson*

Illustrations: "The Hungarian" - photo courtesy of Kathy Johnson

**Stay tuned for Part 2 of "Cape Sable"
by Betty June Smith
in our Spring/Summer 2022 edition of "The Lightkeeper"**



“Climb to the Top” at Cape Forchu Lighthouse

By: Denyse Contrasty

Were you one of the 1,500 people that climbed the 77 steps to the top of the Cape Forchu lighthouse this summer? Visitors were greeted outside by a guide who gave a brief history of the lighthouse before leading all to the bottom of the stairs. The lighthouse having a unique apple core tower structure with a diameter of 1.5 metres (5 feet) meant there were no landings for people to rest before continuing their climb. This did not bother the four-year old child who raced to the top with his parents ahead of the author's party! Fog limited the visibility from the lantern room but clearly demonstrated the original need for a lighthouse and a fog horn in that area. ***Continued on page 9.***



Cape Forchu, continued: One side of the keepers' duplex was open for viewing, the other side in use as a café. There is a groomed nature trail with excellent interpretative signage from the base of the lighthouse to the end of the Cape. At one stop you could see on the small beach below the lighthouse the remnants of the 1891 fog alarm building that was demolished to make way for the existing fog alarm building.

If you missed this summer's chance to climb to the top of the lighthouse, you can still climb to the top off season by booking a private tour – see the Cape Forchu Facebook page for details. Alternatively, this summer's climb has been such a success that it will be offered again starting June 2022.



Devil's Island Lighthouse

By: Howard Eaton

There are hundreds of islands on the eastern shores of Nova Scotia, all of whom have their own stories of heartbreak and tragedy, pirates tales and lost treasures!

One such island has for many years been regarded as a place where strange happenings have taken place and there are many who would rather not spend a night on its bleak and windswept land. A place where in the early years of Halifax, many a poor sailor met his demise in the wind and storm tossed seas and the shoals around it.

The island I am speaking of is located on the seaward entrance to the Eastern Passage of Halifax Harbour.

This 12 hectare Island is known as Devil's Island and the name almost automatically conjures up spooky ideas of nefarious dealings, ghosts and bad happenings.

The name is actually derived from an early French merchant named Deville who had either title or connection to the island and it was thus named Deville's Island.

It has had several other names over the years, such a Rous Island, Ile Vert and Wood Island. Apparently the island was covered with trees at one time!

Like most French names in Nova Scotia it got converted to an English pronunciation and we have Devil's Island today.

The first permanent settlers came to the island in the 1830's and by the middle of the century there were several homes and a small school. By the early 1900's there were 18 residences on the island and 28 families living and working there!

During World War 2 most of the residence were moved off the island for their protection and the last occasional resident is believed to have been around 2000.

The first lighthouse was built on the island in 1837 to help ward off ships trying to enter Halifax harbour in bad weather. Many ships have foundered on the shoals around the island and on the nearby shores.

This light was replaced in 1852 after a group of merchants and sailors petitioned the Lt. Governor to build a more suitable aid to navigation which could be seen after dark and further away.

In 1852, an octagonal lighthouse with an accompanying mirrored light was constructed near the shore on the southwest corner of the island. In 1877, a second lighthouse was built 175 yards east of the first one. The western light "was open all round, while the eastern one was dark on its northern side".





Both white lights were visible from a distance of thirteen miles. In 1949, the first lighthouse erected was demolished and the light in the second was changed to flashing red and was visible for thirteen miles. In 1959, it was changed to a flashing white and amber light and was visible for eleven miles.

In 1967, an automatic beacon flashing white was installed making the lighthouse keeper unnecessary, and all permanent human habitation on the island ceased after this event. Devils Island has been deserted for many years now and the buildings have all fallen in after being exposed to a continuous onslaught of wind, rain and spray. While under the care of the Canadian Coast Guard, the cupola of this second lighthouse was dismantled and discarded.

Today, the only building left standing on the island is the 1852 lighthouse, minus the lantern house, which has a pole and light installed in its place.

The lighthouse we see today is in rough shape, the entrance way has fallen off and the exterior of the building is bare of paint and exposed to the whims of the north Atlantic.

Famous Nova Scotia folklorist Helen Creighton is reported to have visited Devils Island on a number of occasions, compiling information for her book "Bluenose Ghosts". She wrote about a haunted house with mysterious footprints appearing on freshly painted floors, fires that gave the illusion of burning but did not consume anything, sounds of knocking and dragging, foul smells, apparitions of a man in oilskins and a baby dressed in white. Creighton described the house as "bleak and unfriendly... and was glad to leave it to the wind and the weather and any family unfortunate enough to have to live there.

The drive to Hartlen's Point is a great place to observe the island and perhaps see the light flash its warning of the treacherous shoals awaiting the unwitting mariner, or maybe a mysterious fire burning or an apparition wandering over the broken remains of the settlement!

The lighthouse, unless it gets repaired soon will probably join the rest of the buildings in a rubble pile on the shores of this barren and windswept isle.



“Foreign” Lighthouses seen this summer

By: Denyse Contrasty

The old Queens Wharf Range Light was relocated in 1929 to a TTC streetcar roundabout near the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Now landlocked it makes an interesting contrast to the cityscape about it.



The Range light is topped with a Bird's Cage lantern and was not suitable for lighthouses having a Fresnel lens. It is said that lightkeepers draped netting over the steel rod structure to keep birds from crashing into the lantern windows when the lighthouse was lit.

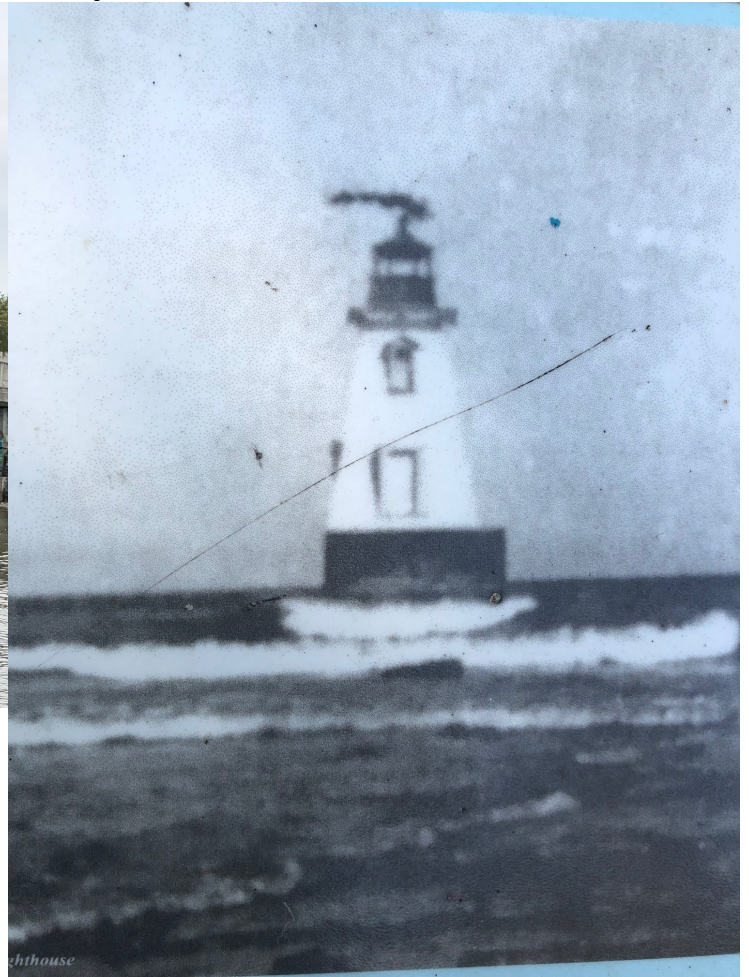
This unusual example of a Fresnel lens (right) has a square frame and called a Box Lens. It currently resides in the Port Burwell Marine Museum. Once it housed a rotating light that could be seen up to 30 km away.





The original Port Credit Lighthouse (right) built in 1883 was located at the mouth of the Port Credit River on Lake Ontario in hopes of attracting business to the area. It burnt down in 1936.

In 1991 it was decided to build a working replacement (above) but upstream near the marina on the Lakeshore Road bridge crossing the Port Credit River. Well within in reach of the Mississauga Fire Department!



Port Burwell Lighthouse (left) built in 1840 is the oldest wooden lighthouse in Ontario. Requiring major repairs, the lighthouse was disassembled in 1986 and each piece numbered. Once done, the lighthouse was reassembled like a giant Lego set using the numbered pieces.

Farewell: Ernest “Rip” Irwin 1933-2021

By: Chris Mills

I first ran across Rip Irwin in 1986. I don't recall the circumstances that led to that first meeting, but I was about to embark on a year's university study in Scotland. Rip, a former Chief Petty Officer First Class in the Canadian Navy, was about to embark on his own exciting adventure – to visit and document every lighthouse (165 or so!) in Nova Scotia, as the Coast Guard slowly but surely automated and closed down our last few staffed stations. It was a daunting task, considering the remote and dangerous locations of some of our lights, but Rip was committed to the idea, and we agreed to keep in touch while I was overseas.



Upon my return in mid-1987, Rip and I reconnected. Rip had purchased a small zodiac and outboard, which he'd already used to visit several offshore lights. Travelling alone, and in sometimes dangerous sea conditions, Rip had a number of close calls. While he attempted to land at one isolated island, his zodiac capsized in heavy surf, spilling Rip and his belongings into the surging waters. He hauled his boat ashore, gathered its scattered and soaking contents, and wandered, sans vetements, around the abandoned lightstation, all the while hoping that no other unexpected visitors would show up at this rather inopportune moment.

For some of the larger offshore stations, Rip engaged local fishermen to land him. On a few occasions, we travelled together to visit the last of Nova Scotia's island keepers. In 1987 we visited Robert and Geraldine Spears, the final keepers of Scatarie NE light in Cape Breton. The next year we sat around George and Ethel Locke's kitchen table on Cross Island, off Lunenburg, listening to their stories of family life on four Nova Scotia lightstations. That trip was even more special with the company of three Scottish Lightkeepers, who'd won a British TV quiz show. The prize? But of course! A holiday to visit other lightkeepers at work!

Rip's quest to visit every lighthouse in Nova Scotia took about eight years to complete. However, his work was not done. He spent the following years re-visiting and documenting many lighthouses around the province. He catalogued his photographs and he organized his research. Much of this activity took place in what Rip affectionately called "The Pit", in the basement of his Bible Hill home. I spent many happy hours visiting with Rip in the pit, reminiscing, researching, laughing and planning more lighthouse visits. In 2003, Nimbus published Rip's Lighthouses and Lights of Nova Scotia, the first comprehensive guide to and history of the province's guiding lights. In 2006, Rip donated his entire collection, including an estimated 18,000 photographs and some 20 volumes of research, to the Lighthouse Research at Interpretive Centre at the Northumberland Fisheries Museum in Pictou.

In the early 1990s, Rip and I, along with lighthouse enthusiasts Graham McBride and Patricia MacDonald, visited Sambro Island, site of the oldest operating lighthouse in the Americas. As we tramped around the deserted island and looked at the decaying lightstation buildings, we decided we needed to form a society to preserve Sambro Island and Nova Scotia lighthouses. In 1994, Rip became the founding president of the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society. His tenacity and his passion for Sambro Island led in large part to federal protection for the lighthouse, a legacy that continues to this day.

Rip was a passionate defender of Nova Scotia lighthouses. He was strong-willed and he was a polarizing figure at times. But first and foremost, he was my friend and my partner in lighthouse adventure. In 1991, when I was working as a lightkeeper on Gannet Rock N.B., Rip decided he'd like to visit. Launching his tiny zodiac from Seal Cove on Grand Manan Island in a thick fog, Rip drew some interest and not a little head-shaking from skeptical fishermen who thought he was "f'n nuts" to attempt the eight mile crossing to Gannet. Later that morning, The Bay of Fundy's tides swept Rip and his tiny zodiac well west and south of Gannet. Happily, our foghorn alerted him to this, and likely saved him from a one-way trip into the open Atlantic. Rip landed safely (well, his zodiac was punctured on our landing in a bit of a swell, but that's another story for another time) on Gannet Rock.

Rip told me once he made it a point to hug every lighthouse he visited. That's just the kind of guy he was. It was an honour to know Rip Irwin. We owe him a debt of gratitude for all of his lighthouse adventures and for his desire to save as much of the history of our guiding lights as he possibly could. He certainly did that.

(Rip is survived by his partner Maxine, and by his children Cathy, David and Jimmy, as well as his brother Robert and his sister Lois. His wife Anita pre-deceased Rip in 2005)

