

The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society

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# 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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## **NSLPS Executive 2022/23**

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Denyse Contrasty

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Joe Flemming

### **Treasurer**

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### **Membership**

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NOVA SCOTIA LIGHTHOUSE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

c/o Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

1675 Lower Water Street

Halifax, Nova Scotia

B3J 1S3

[askus@nslps.com](mailto:askus@nslps.com)

## **Welcome New Members**

Alexander Glenn

Nadine Helta

Shauna MacDonald

Mike McLellan

### **Cover Photo**

Castle Point Lighthouse, New Zealand

Taken by Denyse Contrasty

## **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](mailto:ask.us@nslps.com)  
for more information.



# A win-win solution for all!

By: Denyse Contrasty

I thought the handover to becoming NSLPS President in 2020 was done until I was asked to pick up thirteen assorted-sized boxes from outgoing President, Joe Flemming. Glancing inside these boxes, I saw a mix of lighthouse magazines from various associations, NSLPS newsletters, stationery, awards, and tourist rack cards plus many, many manila folders. There being little room in my two-bedroom condo to hold such a collection, it was obvious that I needed to take the time to make a detailed inventory of the boxes' contents.

Imagine my surprise in reading correspondence going back 30 years when Rip Irwin, Chris Mills and Patty MacDonald decided in 1993 that a non-profit Society should be formed to save Nova Scotia lighthouses from demolition. It was an education to learn what had been the original goals of the Society, for example, buying lighthouses "as may be necessary"<sup>1</sup>. How these intentions evolved into the Alternate Use of Lighthouses that were to be owned and operated by local community groups, and the promotion of a federal heritage status just for lighthouses. This status came into existence with the enactment of the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act (HLPA) in 2010.

The volunteer time spent by past Board members, especially Barry

Macdonald, to get the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act passed in Parliament was

astounding. Therefore, I felt that all Nova Scotians should be made aware of their valiant efforts as their perseverance is the reason why so many lighthouses are still standing today and, in many cases, continuing to operate as an aid to navigation in partnership with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. With the approval of the NSLPS Board in 2021, I approached the Nova Scotia Archives with the offer of fonds (materials) covering the period 1993 to 2008.

Nova Scotia Archives replied that they were very interested and I started preparing for a transfer of material by deleting personal information on fonds in accordance with the Privacy Acts of Canada and Nova Scotia. After getting the NSLPS Deed of Gift accepted and signed by the Provincial Archivist, I made the delivery of three boxes of fonds to the Nova Scotia Archives on November 4, 2022.

Does this mean I still have ten boxes left in my spare bedroom? No, I was able to repackage the remainder into five banker's boxes and expect that NSLPS will make another donation of fonds to the Nova Scotia Archives in the foreseeable future. Making those early NSLPS files available to the public and recovering floor space in my condo is in my opinion, a win-win solution for all!

<sup>1</sup> Memorandum of Association of NSLPS, August 31, 1994



*Above: Archivist John MacLeod accepts the NSLPS finds.*



*Above: The exterior of the NS Archives building.*

# Castle Point Lighthouse, New Zealand

By: Denyse Contrasty



At the end of an hour's drive along a narrow two-lane road hugging the steep mountain side, there stands a white lighthouse tower 23 meters (75 feet) tall on a high, rocky headland called Rangiwhakaoma (where the sky runs) by the local Maori and later given its English name, Castle Rock, by Captain Cook in 1770. Built in 1913, its construction consisted of materials internationally sourced: Second order Fresnel lens from Paris, France; a mercury bath to allow a flashing light from Edinburgh, Scotland; and its lighting apparatus fueled by kerosene from Birmingham, England. Only its cast iron plates were locally made in Wellington,

New Zealand (NZ).

Castle Point Lighthouse was constructed later than many lighthouses around the world as its guiding light was needed to accommodate the change in shipping routes to and from New Zealand in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially the eastern coast of North Island was not a popular route and it was a dark coastline stretching 212 nautical miles (409 kilometers or 244 miles) from the Cape Kidnappers Lighthouse south of Napier, NZ, to the Cape Palliser Lighthouse located east of the Wellington Harbour. However, with the installation of refrigeration in ships, it became both possible and profitable to send shiploads of frozen meat to customers around the world. Consequently for marine safety, it was decided to build a lighthouse half way that distance at Castle Rock.

Unlike our Nova Scotian lightkeepers who appeared to have been given on-the-spot training, New Zealand counterparts received more formal instruction. They were taught Morse code to operate Morse lamps along with signal flags; learned weather principals to send detailed data to regional and national weather stations; and later on, used radio phones to report distress calls heard on their listening watch to the Sea Air and Search Organization. During World War II, they were tasked with coastal watching for the enemy. Unlike Canadian lightkeepers, Evelyn Richardson and her spouse, Morrill, who had to check every four hours for coded messages on the radio in addition to the numerous daily tasks they already had at the Bon Portage Lighthouse, the Marine Department in New Zealand hired extra people to do this work. In the 1960s, seismic equipment was added to make Castle Point Lighthouse part of the national NZ network for recording earthquakes.

There were unique challenges for the lightkeepers stationed at the Castle Point Lighthouse. To start their shift, they had to climb over slippery rocks to a height of 52 meters (171 feet) to the lighthouse and down again at the end of the shift. They also had to deal with the mercury bath spilling its contents onto the floor whenever a significant earthquake hit the area. Today there is a boardwalk with staircases for visitors to climb, but a local civil defense sign noting tsunami



protocol to follow, reminds all of the potential of earthquakes around the New Zealand coastline.

As technology changed, lighting powered by kerosene was converted to electricity, at first supplied by a diesel generator and now hydro generated. The mercury bath was replaced by roller bearings and then a slew ring. There were a principal lightkeeper and two assistant keepers assigned to the lighthouse in 1913; downsized to a principal and one assistant keeper in 1923; then just one lightkeeper in 1970; and finally unmanned in 1988 when the lighthouse became fully automated and monitored from Wellington.

Today Castle Point is a favourite summer home for many New Zealanders, given its lovely sandy beaches, the rolling Pacific surf, and panoramic views from the lighthouse atop Castle Rock. While I was not impressed by the road access and was relieved that my adult children handled the driving there and back, I must give New Zealand credit for continuing to maintain 23 out of their 33 original lighthouses as aids to navigation.

One could argue that New Zealand is a smaller country with less coastline than Canada and had much fewer lighthouses to tend. However, their government made the decision to adapt new technology to keep the lighthouses working as opposed to Canada's approach of replacing those without a community group willing to conserve them, with a metal post, airport beacon and solar panel. New Zealand lighthouses are viewed as being contemporary beacons while ours have become heritage icons dependent on the good will and support of the local community. How I wish Canada had gone New Zealand's way, especially with such historic lighthouses such as Sambro Island, the oldest operating light in North and Central America since 1759.

*For those who may be planning a trip to New Zealand to look at their lighthouses,* I can recommend two sources of valuable information: <https://maritimenz.govt.nz/content/public/history/lighthouses/default.asp>

Beaglehole, Helen. *Lighting the Coast – A history of New Zealand's coastal lighthouse system*. Canterbury University Press, 2006.



# And then there was one

By: Chris Mills

A boxy, metal tower with a flashing LED on top. Anchored to a rugged granite point, it sports bright red and white day marks to allow mariners to see it during the day. It's a stark, utilitarian structure, barely showing that this place has been home to a guiding light for more than a century and a half.

The first light on Betty (known locally as Betty's) Island, near Terence Bay (south west of Halifax), shone from atop a wooden tower attached to a modest keepers dwelling. The year was 1875. Keeper Patrick Christian started work in the fall of that year, lighting the lamps each evening and weathering countless storms with his family on Brig Point. It was a way of life for the Christian family: three generations tended the light until a Mr. Clancey moved into the lighthouse, in 1921.

By then, the old tower was showing its age, so in 1939 the government built a new combined light and dwelling, with the lantern at the apex of its roof. Until the summer of 1983, keepers and assistants cared for this lighthouse and its foghorn on the point. Harry Major was the last. He'd started his job as a lightkeeper later in life, after working at the Halifax Shipyard. In an interview from 2003, Harry's daughter June said working on Betty Island "...was sort of like re-living his childhood dreams. He *absolutely* loved it. Every moment of it."

"The lighthouse that Daddy lived in, it was like a big old farmhouse", she remembered. "It was beautiful. It was very nice and cosy, lovely. In the kitchen he used to have a little cot, right against the window, where the sun would come in and you hear the water and the spray hitting the rocks. It was just beautiful."

By 1981, the "big old farmhouse" out on the point was starting to show signs of almost half of century of exposure to wind, waves and salt. The Coast Guard tendered constructed of a new lighthouse next to it. The square tapered structure was one of four traditional-style wooden towers put up across the province in the







early 80s; the last of their kind to be built in Canada.

After a couple of years the Coast Guard decided to de-staff the light. Harry and his assistant Max Dorey left the island in June of 1983. Crews demolished the station outbuildings and in 1986, they put a match to the Major's old home. A bare, crumbling foundation remains today.

Years passed. Successive storms had their way with the lone lighthouse, stripping siding from it and infiltrating its sheathing. Rot set in. By 2010, there was major structural damage, and a few years later, the Coast Guard set up a simple galvanized skeleton tower next to the lighthouse, topped with an LED light. At some point workers removed the red lantern from the

old tower. It sat, lightless and headless, next to its skeletal, blinking replacement.

On February 21<sup>st</sup> of this year, someone in the Terence Bay area reported seeing smoke from Brig Point on Betty Island. Communications on marine VHF radio that day and the next, revealed that a Coast Guard helicopter had made several trips to and from the island, no doubt to deliver and retrieve a crew sent to burn down the third Betty Island lighthouse.

And then there was one.

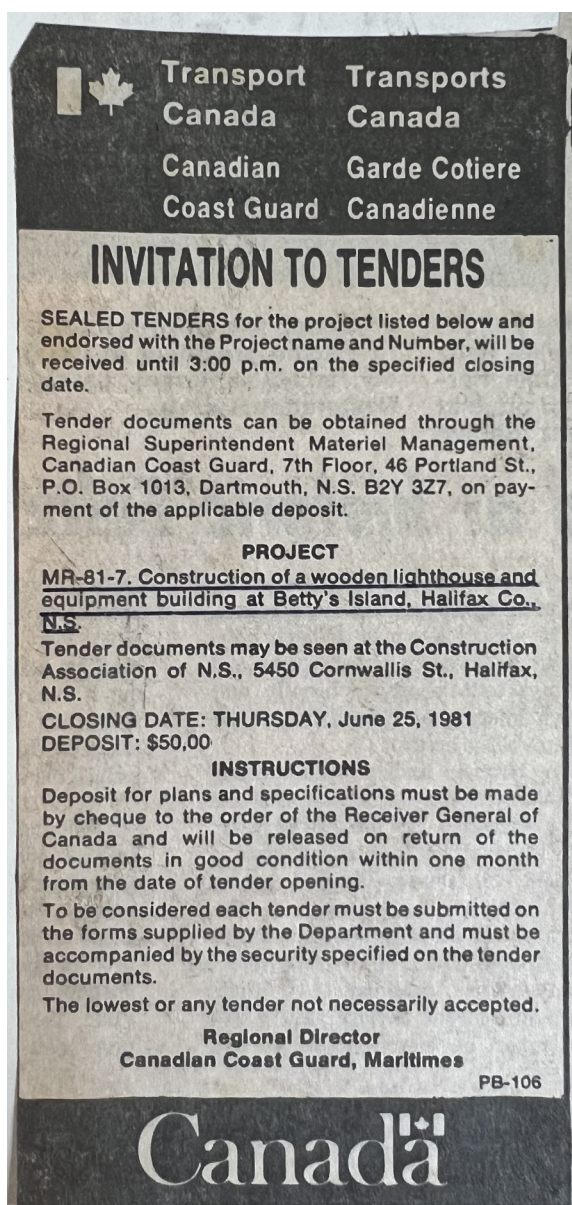




## PHOTOS

In order from page 6 to 8

- 1 The original Betty Island lighthouse in 1902. *Lighthouse Friends*
- 2 Lightkeeper Harry Major and his grandchildren standing near the lightless 1939 lighthouse/dwelling, with the new tower nearby, circa 1982. *Courtesy June Richardson*
- 3 Lightkeeper Harry Major coming into the landing cove at Betty Island with his daughter June and her sons. *Courtesy June Richardson*
- 4 Betty Island light, showing storm damage, in 2009. *DFO/CCG*
- 5 Interior of the 1981 tower taken in 2010, showing water damage and rot. *Chris Mills*
- 6 All that remains on Brig Point, Betty Island, in late February, 2023. *Chris Mills*
- 7 Tender published in a Halifax newspaper for construction of a new wooden lighthouse on Betty's Island. Blunden Construction completed the tower by November of that year. *Chris Mills*
- 8 The new tower, circa 1982. *DFO/CCG*

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