

**The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society**

**Volume 31 Number 1**

**Spring /Summer 2024**

**[www.nslps.com](http://www.nslps.com)**

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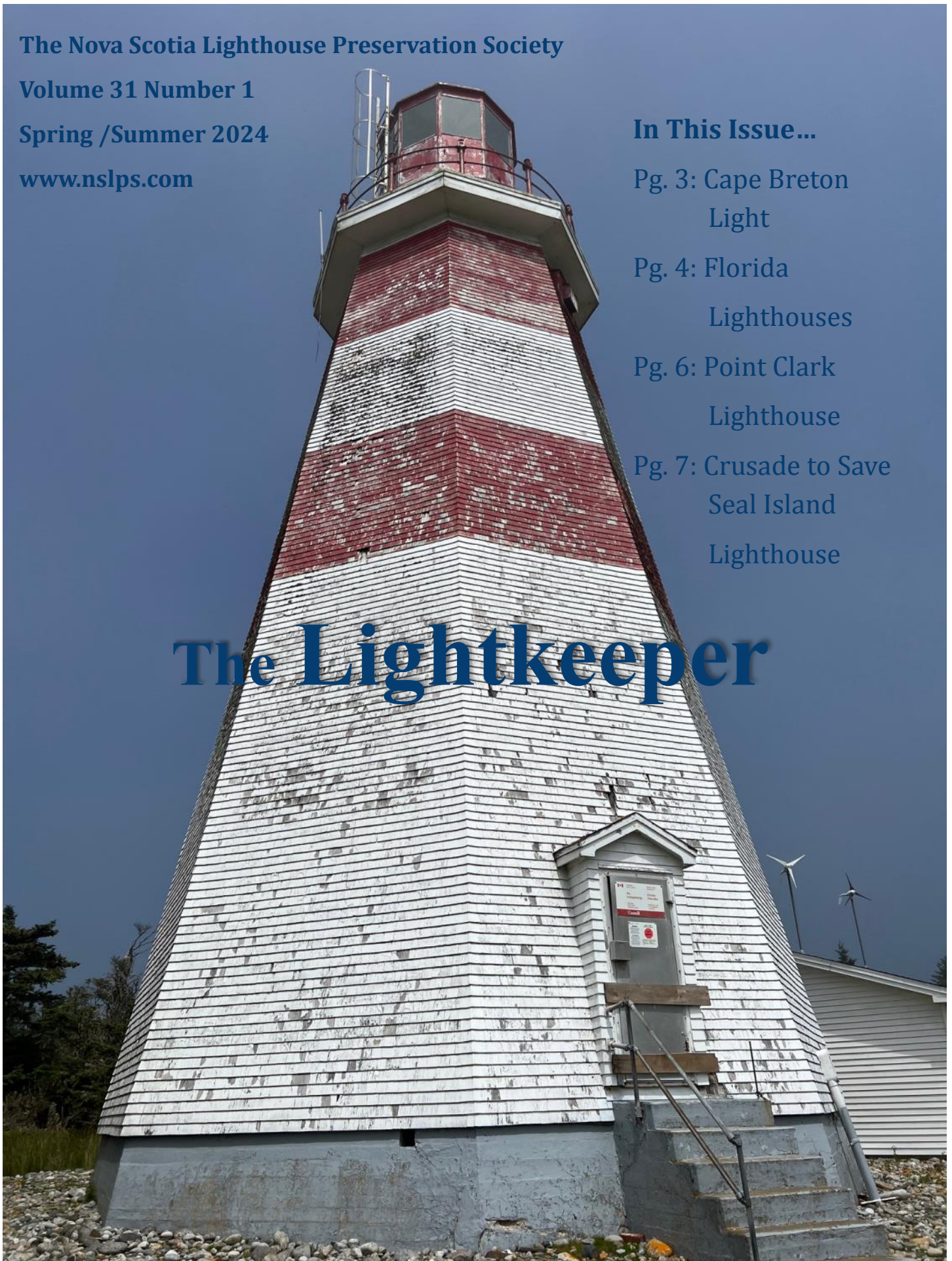
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# The Lightkeeper



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The **Lightkeeper** is published by the  
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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.

**Welcome New Members**

- |                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Karen Comeau    | John McCallum    |
| Stephen Grant   | Charles Mitchell |
| Ginette Jalbert | Linda Robinson   |
| David Malay     | Jean Stevens     |
| Alan Marryatt   | Mike Whitehouse  |



Low Point Lighthouse, Cape Breton, NS

Photo credit: Shauna MacDonald

Cover Photo: Seal Island Lighthouse 2023

Back Cover: Seal Island Lighthouse 2004

Photo credits: Chris Mills

**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 Cape Breton Light

By Shauna MacDonald

Did you know that Cape Breton has 50 lighthouses? I suppose you might if you're a Nova Scotia lighthouse aficionado. I am from Cape Breton, born and raised, yet I had no idea! Not even after moving "away" and spending 15 years studying the cultural significance of lighthouses in the U.S. The entire state of New Jersey has half as many lighthouses as our little remote island! After moving home in 2021, I realized how many lights I knew nothing about.

I'd like to tell you about my favourite, Low Point. While many people have favourite lighthouses, perhaps due to location, or architectural preference, or maybe even because of stories they've read, Low Point is my favourite for a more familiar reason. About ten years ago, I began creating a one woman show about lighthouses, lighthouse keeping, and memory. It's called *To Catch and To Keep*, and I hope to someday perform it in Nova Scotia. Here's how I begin to tell the story of my favourite lighthouse:

*I thought I knew a lot about lighthouses. I'm from Nova Scotia. We have more than 150 of them! My parents even met because of a lighthouse. See, the Georges (my mom's side of the family) lived on Brown's Road in New Victoria, and Brown's Road led to the Low Point Lighthouse. The MacDonalds (my dad's side) rented out their house in Gardiner Mines and moved to the lighthouse in the 1960s so my grandfather could work there. So, Archie worked at the light while Teddy fished in its waters and mined for coal out beyond it—and Archie junior and Linda became 13-year-old sweethearts. And Archie + Linda = (well) me! And my sister. I owe a lot to this lighthouse. I love this lighthouse. This lighthouse is in my blood. So...I thought I knew a lot.*

Now you know why Low Point is my favourite lighthouse. What I don't say in the show is that it is also my favourite because of time spent nearby picking blueberries with my mom, her mom my Nanny, my sister Lindsay and cousins especially Tammy. I love how it looks from the Newfoundland Ferry that passes it by each day. It's where we go to remember my grandfather, Poppy (Nanny's husband) who spent so much time fishing in its beam. Low Point is my favourite for numerous reasons, and it's been the inspiration for much of my lighthouse research and storytelling.

Perhaps ironically, I know more about other lighthouses than this one, aside from family lore. One of my favourite stories comes from my uncle, who used to take my Grampy's defunct or spare radio equipment (he was a radio man and jack of all trades; that's what brought him to work at the light) out to the yard, plug the parts into nothing, and pretend to communicate with ships offshore. At the time (mid-1960s), the head keeper would have been James D. O'Neill, but there is mention as well of a J.A. MacDonald from 1970-71, and given that these are indeed my Grampy's initials, I assume the records refer to him. The time my father and his parents and siblings spent living in New Victoria allowed for a wonderful interweaving of both sides of my large family, and we continue to make memories at the Low Point Lighthouse, generations later.

The lighthouse has a long and storied history, much of which is archived at the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University. The first lighthouse built at the entrance to Sydney Harbour was a wooden tower with a red lantern and lit in 1832. The second (and current) structure was built and lit in 1938. This one was octagonal like the first but made of much sturdier (and heavier) concrete. It's a few feet taller than the original, and remains an active aid to navigation (automated, of course).

Interestingly, the lighthouse has been known variously as Low Point and Flat Point Lighthouse, with correspondence to and from the keepers using "Low Point" in the late 1800s, and then officially changing it to "Flat Point" in 1909 (with the Superintendent of Lighthouses, a Mr. Johnson, informing Head Keeper, John G. Peters, via short memo). I have only ever known it as Low Point or New Victoria Lighthouse and it appears to have been changed back to Low Point sometime after 1928. Though the lighthouse has never moved, there have also been land and access disputes throughout its history, including what appears to have been a

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rather long and drawn-out disagreement between Head Keeper Peters and the Engineer for the foghorn, Thomas O'Neill, around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Who says lighthouse life has no intrigue?

In more recent years, the lighthouse has faced some of its biggest challenges: vandalism and erosion. The former was a rather intractable problem in the 1990s and early 2000s but has been since been mostly avoided. When my parents lived near the lighthouse, as they are fond of reminding me, "there was a road and houses, and a fog building, between it and the edge of the bank." In the 50 odd years since then, erosion has devoured much of the land where those buildings and road once stood. The bank drops off a mere 9 meters (30 ft) from the base of the light. The light's likely best hope is for it to be moved, but such a proposition is both expensive and arduous. The Low Point Lighthouse Society—the community group working to save it who have been working for years to solve this problem—won funding in the 2010s to hold the shoreline and reinforce the lighthouse structure, but time and tides will not wait much longer. As I say in *To Catch and To Keep*, to my father (with me in the scene), or maybe to the biting wind, "Just a few more storms, I say. A few more years, and this place is lost." Still, I am grateful for the work of the society, and of the NSLPS, both of whom are carrying the keeper's torch forward for Low Point Lighthouse, and for other lights in Nova Scotia. This is sacred work.

If you have information about Cape Breton lighthouses that you'd like to share, drop me a line at [shauna\\_macdonald@cbu.ca](mailto:shauna_macdonald@cbu.ca) or [ask.us@nslps.com](mailto:ask.us@nslps.com). I'm working on a research project about these lights, focused on what Cape Bretoners remember about them and how we tell their histories. Thanks!

More info on Low Point Lighthouse:

<https://www.nslps.com/about-ns-lighthouses/lighthouse-lists?c=low-point-lighthouse>

## Florida Lighthouses to Visit!

Article and Photos by Howard Eaton

In late February my spouse and I travelled down the New England Seaboard to Florida. On the 27th, we visited the St Augustine Lighthouse. The lighthouse is a privately maintained aid to navigation run by the St Augustine Lighthouse and Maritime Museum Inc. which is a non-profit organization. They have a large, vibrant and successful group of volunteers who have done a remarkable job of keeping the lighthouse in top condition and annually employ up to 50 people. Over 200,000 tourists visit yearly!

The lighthouse was built between 1871 and 1874 and is constructed completely of brick. It stands 165 feet (50 meters) tall and has a first order Fresnel lens which flashes every 30 seconds. The tower is painted white with a black circular stripe that runs from top to bottom that must be quite challenging to paint.

The climb to the top of the lighthouse is by way of an iron circular stairway consisting of 219 steps. The view from the lamp deck is spectacular to say the least. The lighthouse is part of a larger museum complex that houses the keepers' cottage, gift shop and grounds that tell the story of this lighthouse that spans from the Civil War to present day. You can read about the history of its lighthouse keepers to the Coast Guard administration and running of the light station.

The second lighthouse we visited was the Pensacola Lighthouse. It was built in 1858 and lit in 1859. It is 150 feet (46 meters) tall and sits atop a 40 foot (12 meter) bluff thus putting the light 190 feet (58 meters) above sea level. This is the third light in this area, the first being a lightship anchored there in 1823. In 1825 a more permanent 40 foot (12 meter) lighthouse was built on the south side of the bay and was not readily seen by shipping. The present light was moved to the north side and has been guiding mariners since 1859.

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St. Augustine Lighthouse in Florida

were placed on the US National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

The complex is run by the Pensacola Lighthouse Association, a non-profit with a large base of volunteers and a small paid staff. Tours of the lighthouse are run daily and you can climb the 177 steps to the lamp room and deck for a fantastic view of the Pensacola harbour. If your timing is right, you can watch the world famous US Navy Flight Demonstration Team, the Blue Angels, which are based at Pensacola Naval Air Station close by the lighthouse.

Both these lights are great examples of what a well-run volunteer non-profit association can achieve with dedication and hard work. Being in locations that have large populations and high numbers of annual tourists help too! Each lighthouse provides a great opportunity for a pleasant day visiting a wonderfully well maintained lighthouse brimming with glorious views and stories to tell.

At the start of the Civil War, Confederate authorities removed the lens from the Pensacola lighthouse as it was in the area they controlled, and at one point buried the same lens in the sand on the beach as Fort Pickens across the bay remained in Union hands. Most of the lighthouse supplies were requisitioned for the war effort. In November 1861 an artillery duel between the two forces damaged the lighthouse tower which is constructed of brick masonry.

Once Union forces took over the area from the Confederates, the Pensacola Light was relit using a fourth-order Fresnel lens in 1863 and a new first-order lens was placed in the tower in 1869. The tower was all white during the Civil War and later the upper two-thirds of the tower was painted black that is maintained to this day. Electricity was introduced to the lighthouse in 1939, eliminating the need to rewind the light rotation clockworks every 4½ hours. The light was automated in 1965. The lighthouse tower and associated buildings



Pensacola Lighthouse, Pensacola, Florida

## Point Clark Lighthouse, an imperial\* tower

Article and photos by Denise Contrasty



Point Clark Lighthouse

While Nova Scotia has many fine examples of Canadian lighthouse architecture, there are no imperial\* towers similar to the six that were erected along the shoreline of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay in Ontario to accommodate an increase in marine traffic resulting from the opening of the St Mary's Canal at Sault Ste Marie Michigan US in 1855. One of these six, Point Clark Lighthouse lit in 1859, was built with an inner and outer wall of limestone with rubble between, unlike Nova Scotia's Sambro Island Lighthouse that was built about 100 years earlier with a single course of granite blocks.

The composite wall of the Point Clark Lighthouse measures five feet thick at its base and tapers to two feet at the lantern room with an interior diameter of 3.2m (10.5 ft) and a height of 26.5m (87 ft). Its lantern room is twelve-sided and can be reached by climbing 114 steps. Each side has three panes for a total of 36 windows that its lightkeeper had to clean on a daily basis. Its first light was a 2nd order Fresnel lens that rotated with the help of a

"clock" weight mechanism that had to wound every three to four hours by the lightkeeper.

Unique are the twelve exterior lion gargoyles that reduced the amount of condensation running down the inside of the lighthouse windows by diverting the moisture outside. Did you know that one litre (0.26 gal) of water was produced for every 9.5 litres (2.5 gal) of oil burned? Another distinctive trait is the lovely semi-circular fan transom above the entry door.

There was supposedly a tunnel between the lighthouse and the basement of the lightkeeper's house where oil barrels were stored. Not having to go outside would have helped to keep water out of the oil and in an area known for its winter lake effect snow, not exposing oil to cold temperatures would keep the oil from thickening. However with repairs and renovations over the years, it has not been possible to confirm the existence of this tunnel.

There is so much to see and do at this National Historic Site that you can easily spend a day at the lighthouse and its adjacent museum, and at the same time picnic on the nearby sandy beach. One hour tours of the lighthouse are available from June 28 to Sept 2 for a fee of \$7.50CA per adult, \$5CA per child.



Point Clark Lighthouse detail, Lion gargoyle

Go to <https://secretsofthebackforty.com/point-clark-lighthouse/> for details.

\* According to Larry Wright, manager at Point Clark Lighthouse and co-author of the book, Great Lakes Lighthouses Encyclopedia, "imperial" is an adjective describing the style of lighthouse and means "majestic" or "magnificent". Therefore it is not capitalized.

## The Crusade to Save Seal Island Lighthouse! By Denyse Contrasty

Seal Island Lighthouse that was lit in 1831 to assist with the prevention of shipwrecks and the recovery of shipwrecked sailors, is in need of rescuing itself. The structure has deteriorated to the point where the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) will not enter the building as its current condition does not meet their Health and Safety regulations. Consequently CCG intends to install a tall metal tower with an airport beacon and discontinue using the lighthouse.

While this has been the fate of many lighthouses around Nova Scotia, this lighthouse was evaluated by the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO) and assigned "Classified" status on December 23, 2011. Getting FHBRO status means that the custodian federal department, in this case, CCG, cannot "demolish the building by neglect". However that appears to be the situation here and a local group, the Seal Island Lighthouse Preservation Society (SILPS), want to hold CCG accountable for repairs.

There has been an exchange of letters between SILPS and various Federal departments along with petitions submitted asking the Federal Government to do the right thing and repair the lighthouse in order for it to continue as a valued aid to navigation. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans have suggested that SILPS apply for ownership under the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act, but there is no mention of any accompanying funding to cover the extensive repairs that SILPS would then be mandated to do as the lighthouse's new owner.

The repair bill for Seal Island is said to be in the \$2.4 million range. Community owners of any Federal Heritage property are eligible for cost sharing funding, that is, a 50/50 split of costs with Parks Canada up to a maximum of \$250,000 per year. However, there is no guarantee that all applications for a particular year will be granted requested funding. In any case, it would be an incredible challenge for a small community group to raise their half, \$1.2 million, before the lighthouse collapses!

Updates on Seal Island Lighthouse can be viewed at the SILPS website: <https://sealislighthouse.ca/> and on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/958485755407980> .

Front cover of Seal Island Lighthouse shows its current state, the back cover, at its best Seal Island in 2004.

### **NOTICE: Membership Changes regarding "Renewal" and "Foreign members":**

*NSLPS membership runs from April 1 of the current year to March 31 of the following year.*

**Starting April 1 2024:** If you have not renewed by November 1 of the current membership period, you will receive just a reminder to renew your membership when the Fall-Winter edition of the newsletter is mailed. If you decide to renew after the Fall-Winter newsletter has been mailed, we will send you a copy once we have received your payment.

**Starting April 1 2024:** Foreign members who have either a Single or Family membership, will start to receive their newsletters as a PDF file via email. Those Foreign members with a Sustaining or Patron membership, will continue to receive a physical copy by mail.

These changes are necessary due to the increase in postage costs and the low number of membership renewals that NSLPS receives after November 1.

