

Canada's *Cape Spear*

by Wayne Wheeler

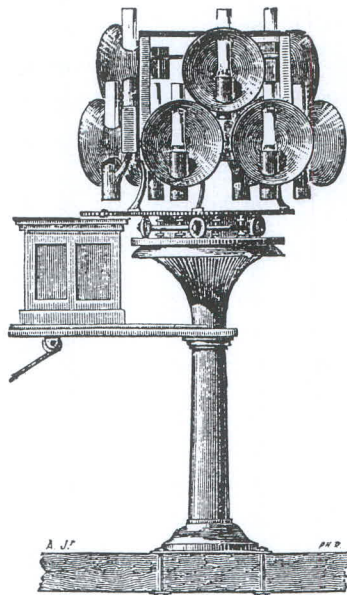


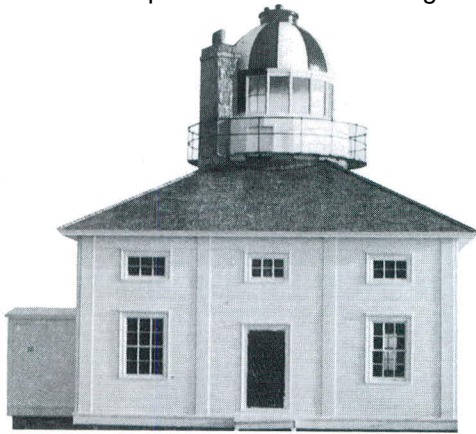
Cape Spear
Photo courtesy
Parks Canada

Situated on a rocky promontory, 225 feet above the sea, Cape Spear Lighthouse has served as an important approach light to St. John's Newfoundland for more than a century. Because this rugged area of coast presents numerous navigational hazards, the government was very early aware that there was a need for a lighthouse in the area. Around 1810 a light was established at Fort Amherst at the entrance to St. John's Harbor. The design of the structure, a tower rising through the roof of the dwelling, was to be used at other Newfoundland locations, among them Harbour Grace Island, Cape Bonavista and Cape Spear.

Fort Amherst served as Newfoundland's only navigational aid for more than two decades. After representative government began in 1832, the legislature passed an act authorizing additional lighthouses to safeguard shipping. Among the suggested sites were Ferryland Head and Conception Bay, but Cape Spear was considered to be the most important location for the lighthouse because of its position on the approaches to St. John's (4 miles to the south).

Work began on Cape Spear late in 1834 or early 1835. Although the official plans are lost to the ages, we do know that it was a square two story design with a stone tower through the center. The lens, which went into operation on 1 September 1836, was transferred to Cape Spear from the Inchkeith Lighthouse in Scotland. It consisted of seven Argand burners placed in front of parabolic reflectors. The burners were whale oil fueled lamps with concentric wicks and quite similar to those used in the homes of the era. The lamps and reflectors were arranged in a metal frame which was rotated to produce a 17 second flash of white light followed by 43 seconds of darkness. The lens or optic was powered by a weight driven clockworks. The first major change to the optic didn't occur until 1921 when, at that late date, the original optic was replaced by a Fresnel lens. It wasn't until 1929 that electricity was introduced.





During WW II Cape Spear assumed strategic importance because of the danger of German submarines which threatened Allied shipping off the east coast of Canada. Two gun emplacements were constructed at Cape Spear, the most easterly point of North America. A series of underground passages connected the gun sites with barrack, a mess hall, magazines and attendant buildings.

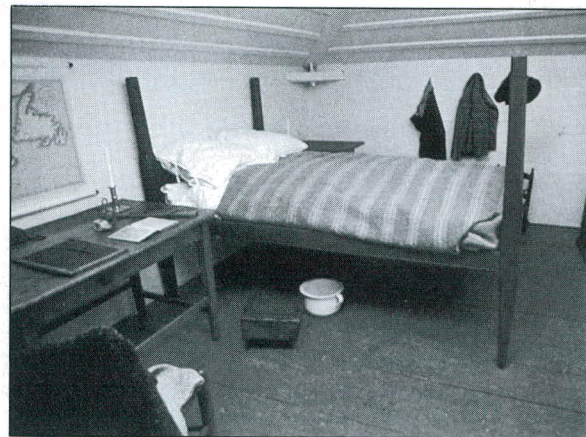
Until improvements in road transportation were made most lighthouse keepers in areas like Cape Spear lived very isolated lives. Often the sea was the closest link to civilization and a spell of bad weather could mean weeks of limited supplies.

The first keeper at Cape Spear was Emanuel Warre who was appointed, before the lighthouse was completed, on October 25, 1834. Following his death in 1845 a St. John's pilot, James Cantwell, was appointed. Members of the Cantwell family have continuously tended this lighthouse and its replacement since 1845 (a modern tower equipped with a radiobeacon was established in 1951).

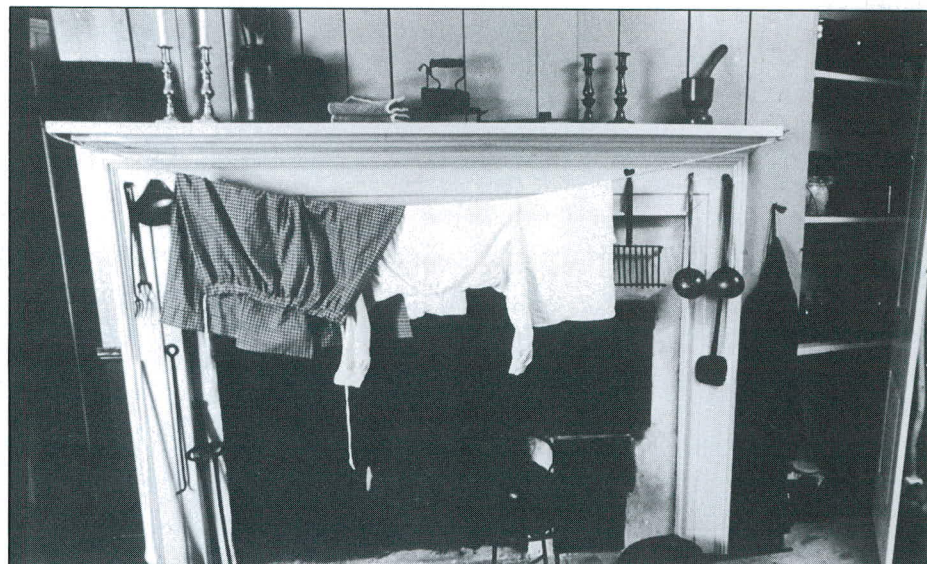
In recent years the Cape Spear Historic National Park has spent considerable effort to restore the lighthouse to its original appearance. The interior has been fitted with period furnishings to reflect the life of the keeper in the late 1830's. The keeper's salary in this era, by the way, was 100 pounds sterling, an income substantially larger than that of the average Newfoundlander of that time. Additionally, unlike many of his countrymen, he was paid on a regular basis and not subjected to bad weather, fluctuation of fish prices, etc. In addition to his salary he was provided his lodging and a fuel allowance.



The new Cape Spear tower. Built 1951



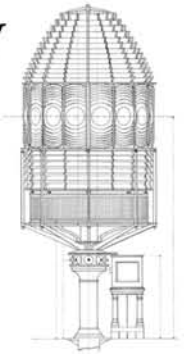
The children's bedroom



View of the fireplace in the kitchen of the restored 1835 lighthouse. Photos courtesy of Parks Canada



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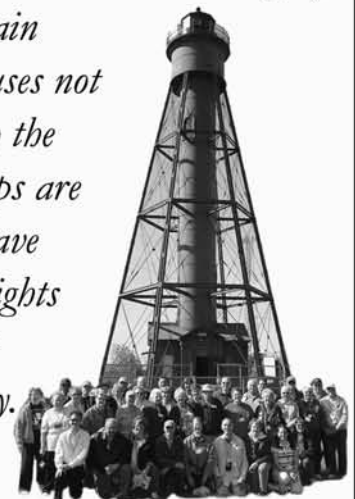
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