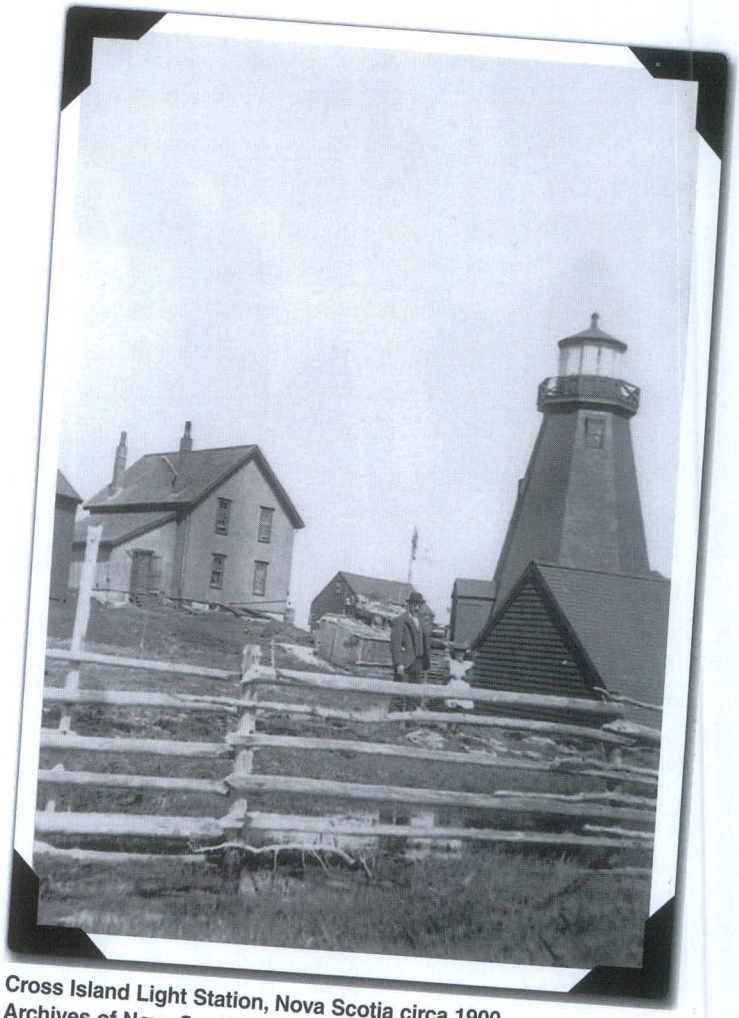
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Cross Island Light Station

A Photo Essay by Chris Mills



Cross Island Light Station, Nova Scotia circa 1900.
Archives of Nova Scotia photos courtest of Chris Mills.



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Cross Island, one of the many islands which dot the southwest coast of Nova Scotia, is located at the entrance to the fishing village of Lunenburg and about 60 miles southwest of Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia. Historically Lunenburg has been a prosperous fishing village. Its protected harbor is home to a fleet of lobster boats, draggers and long liners. At the turn of the twentieth century a large number of schooners sailed out of Lunenburg to fish cod off the Nova Scotia coast. In the 1930s and 40s the increased use of motor vessels, along with economic factors, led to the demise of the sail-powered fleet.

Cross Island played an important role in the history of Lunenburg and the surrounding area. The island is approximately 250 acres in size and runs roughly three miles north-south and 2 miles east-west. It is composed mainly of shale and has an excellent protected harbor on the northeast side and several small inlets around the island.

The first documented mention of the island was in the mid-eighteenth century when French and German settlers arrived in the area. By the early nineteenth century several families had settled on the island, fishing the rich waters around it. The settlement prospered until the mid-twentieth century, when power vessels allowed the families to live on the mainland and travel more quickly to the fishing grounds than was previously possible. Today, only one house from the original settlement remains, and in a few years it will collapse as the other abandoned homes have in the past.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw an increased need for aids to navigation along the Atlantic Coast of Canada to support the fishing industry and coastal trade. In 1832 a lighthouse was erected on the southeast end of Cross Island to guide vessels into the port of Lunenburg and assist vessels in the coastal trade. The first lighthouse was constructed of wood, as were most early Canadian lighthouses. Wood was plentiful and much cheaper than brick or stone. The original lighthouse had an oil burning lamp and reflector system displaying a fixed white light. This was later replaced by an I.O.V. lamp, which remained in use until the station was electrified in the mid-twentieth century.

After WWII a radio beacon was installed and an officer appointed to operate it. The radio operators lived on the island along with the three light keepers and their families. Eventually, the lighthouse keepers took over the operation of the radio beacon. In 1960, a fire broke out in an oil furnace and destroyed the lighthouse and engine room. A new lighthouse and an engine room were constructed. The lighthouse tower was a steel skeleton design, thirty feet high with an aero-beacon as the optic. A powerful diaphone fog signal was installed on the engine room.

Beginning in the 1960s the Canadian Lighthouse Authority and the Canadian Coast Guard initiated a program of semi-automation to reduce the manpower at all Canadian light stations, with a goal of ultimately removing all personnel by fully automating the stations.

In 1972, as part of this program, the diaphone on Cross Island was replaced by an electronic horn, controlled by a fog detector. The light, which had been turned on at sunset, and off at sunrise, was left on 24 hours a day. The two lighthouse keepers worked one eight hour shift each a day – 2:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., and 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., switching shifts once a week.

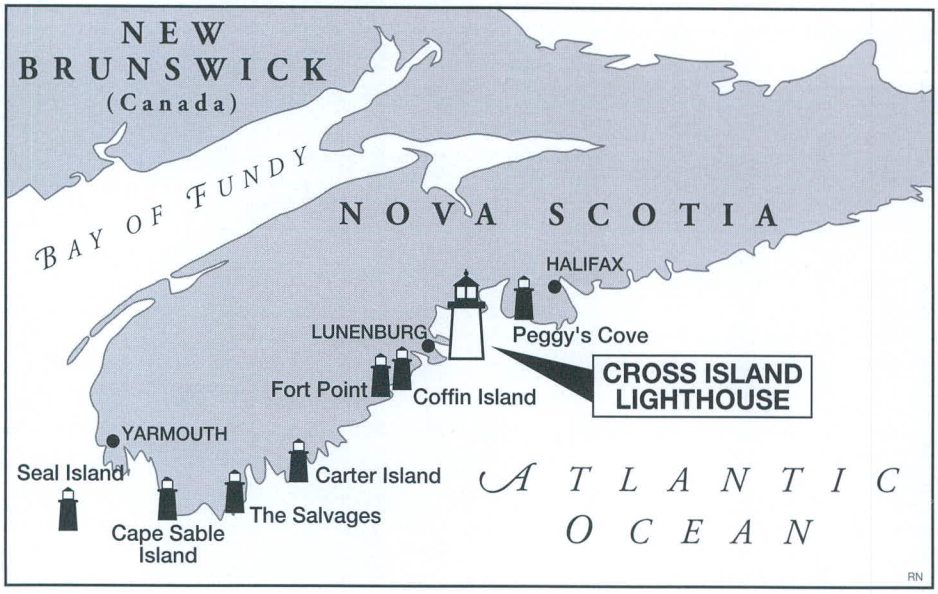
In 1983, one of three dwellings was demolished and a new fiberglass tower placed on a platform. The new tower, while not a traditional tower, is much more pleasing to the eye than the skeleton structure it replaced. Also in the 1980s, a submarine power cable was installed between the island and the mainland.

On July 10, 1989, Cross Island Light Station was fully automated. A helicopter removed the crew and furnishings. The windows on the island were boarded up, the engine room and tower were locked and an intrusion alarm turned on. The station is monitored by VHF link to the Canadian Coast Guard in Halifax and is periodically serviced by technicians via helicopter.

Today the solarized light and its deserted dwellings stand at the mercy of the elements on the exposed southern point of Cross Island. Twelve years of rain, wind, snow and vandalism have taken their toll on the abandoned wooden structures.

Although the historic structures are still structurally sound, they will not stand forever. The Cross Island Light Station illustrates the fate that has befallen dozens of Nova Scotia light stations. Without community support and governmental help through transfer of light station properties and buildings to public groups, more Nova Scotia light stations will be lost to the elements due to community and bureaucratic indifference.

Cross Island was my first lighthouse, beginning my nine-year career as a lighthouse keeper on the east and west coasts of Canada. In February 1989, a helicopter dropped me on the southern point of the island where I spent three weeks as a relief keeper in some of the coldest and windiest weather I have ever experienced. Later, in May, I returned to the island to serve as relief assistant keeper until the Canadian Coast Guard automated the light in July. I took most of the photos in this article during a trip I made to the island in September 2000. It was my first visit in ten years. The photographs speak for themselves.



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Top – The abandoned Cross Island station in 2000, doors open, windows destroyed.

Middle – What's left of the principal keeper's kitchen in 2000.

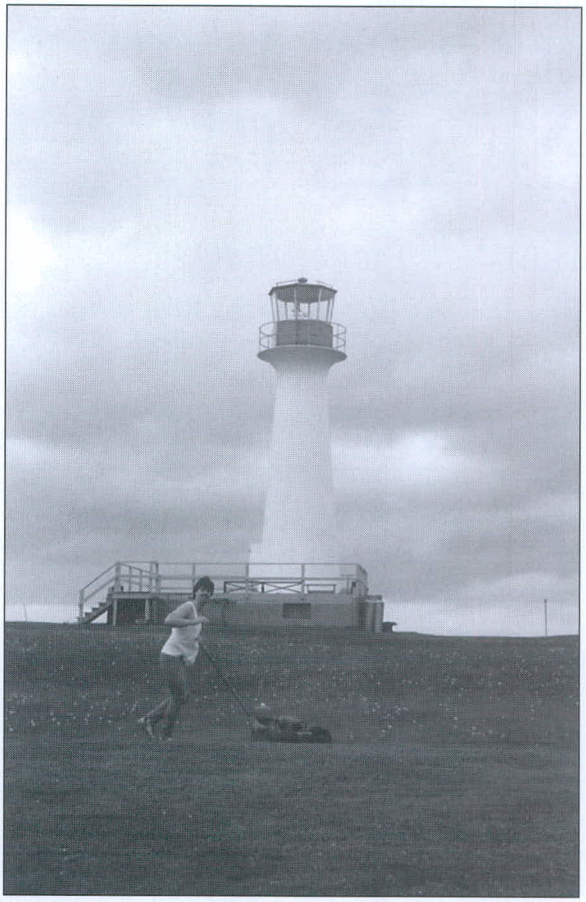
Right – Exterior of the principal keeper's house, September 2000.



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Keeper George Locke in the Cross Island lantern room November 1988. The optic is an American DCB-10 made for small airports, but used in this country and Canada for many years as aid to navigation optics.



The new Cross Island fiberglass tower and the keeper's wife keeping the grass trimmed, June 1989.



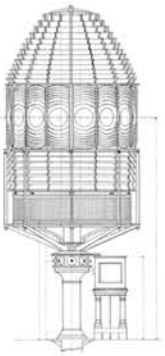
Above – The Cross Island station in winter's grip, February 1989.

Right – Cross Island Light Station keepers discussing events with two visiting Scottish keepers. Left to right: Rip Irwin, George Locke and Scottish keepers Ian Duff and Ross MacGilchrist.

All photos both pages by, and courtesy of, Chris Mills.



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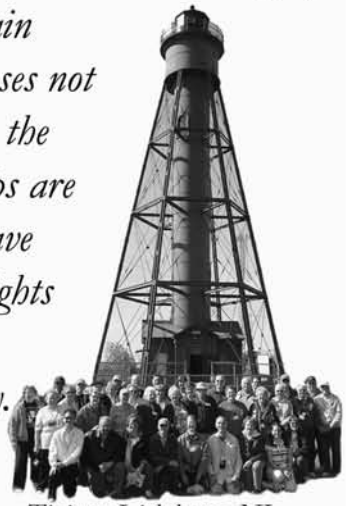
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