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Louisbourg Lighthouse – Canada's First

By George Worthylake

Drawing of the second Louisbourg lighthouse circa 1758 by Gerry Sevier, based on a print in the Canadian Public Archives, National Map Collection.

Until well into the 18th century the seacoast of North America was a largely uncharted and dangerous prospect for mariners. From the rocky shores of eastern Canada and New England to the shoals of the Carolinas and reefs of the Florida Keys mariners were faced with constant danger.

In 1716, the Massachusetts Bay Colony erected a lighthouse on Little Brewster Island in Boston Harbor, North America's first lighthouse. The second lighthouse to be established was at Louisbourg, on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. The lighthouse assisted mariners navigate the Cabot Strait between Cape Breton and Newfoundland enroute the St. Lawrence River. Early on, open-fire beacons were established in a vain attempt to guide mariners, much like the stone beacon established at Point Allerton in Hull, Massachusetts which predated the Boston Lighthouse.

These crude open fire beacons proved inadequate and in 1727, after several shipping accidents, St. Ovide, the French governor of Louisbourg, and two of his staff (the engineer and minister of marine affairs) held several meetings to determine the best Louisbourg location for a lighthouse. Their investigation resulted in two potential locations: construct a lighthouse on a promontory on the east side of the Louisbourg Harbor next to the fort or adapt the clock tower in town. The minister of maritime affairs favored the clock tower because of the lower construction costs to modify the tower, but the other members of the committee finally convinced him that the eastern promontory was the best site for a lighthouse. The proposal was approved by France and in 1730 a grant of $14,000 was authorized to begin construction that spring. The lantern section was completed and installed in 1733 and the lighthouse went into operation that year. The three-year wait was caused by a delay in the shipment of the glazing from France (400, 10 by 8 inch panes of glass). To pay for the construction and finance the operation of the lighthouse, light dues were levied on vessels sailing in the area; 25 cents per ton on ocean going vessels (for each passage) and six dollars a year on coastal vessels.

The initial optic was a round, bronze (some documentation states it was cast-iron) receptacle three feet in diameter and 10 inches deep. About 55 gallons of codfish oil was placed in the basin. A cross-braced copper ring, slightly less than three feet, was floated on the oil and supported by several pieces of cork attached to the underside. Soldered along the top of the ring were 31 hollow tubes about an inch long with a cotton wick inserted into each tube. The final cost was $21,222. The light was reported to be seen at 18 miles.

The Port Director noted that there was little or no vessel traffic during the winter months. Thus, to save operating costs he ordered the light to be displayed only between April 1 and

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December 31. The first few years light dues to the port actually showed a profit, over double the operational costs. This rosy start came to an end on September 11, 1736 when the lantern of the lighthouse was destroyed by fire and the tower gutted. The fire was so intense that the cast iron reservoir was fused by the heat.

To continue collecting light dues, the port erected several open-fire beacons fueled by wood and coal. The new lantern room consisted of a brick dome supported by six 20 foot high cut stone pillars. Iron window frames were installed between the pillars and the entire dome of the lantern was sheathed in soft English lead. The means of illumination was modified to be safer than the previous one, but remained similar. The reconstruction cost $13,000 and the modified lighthouse went back into operation in July 1738. The delay was caused by a shortage of skilled iron artificers in the colony.

Like many lighthouses, the number of keepers employed at Louisbourg varied over the years. During construction of the first tower, the port director appointed two keepers. A small two-room apartment was planned to be constructed in the base of the tower to accommodate them, but later evidence indicates that a small house was built next to the tower. Pay receipts show that five men were employed shortly after the lighthouse was completed, however by the time of the fire, only two were listed as keepers. After the fire three men were employed, with one being in the lantern at all times when it was lit.

The governor suggested that the head keeper be paid $700 a year and the assistant $600. The Port Director thought these amounts were exorbitant and modified their compensation to $15 a month, a soldier's daily ration of food and a soldier's clothing allowance (clothing). This was equal to about $350 a year.

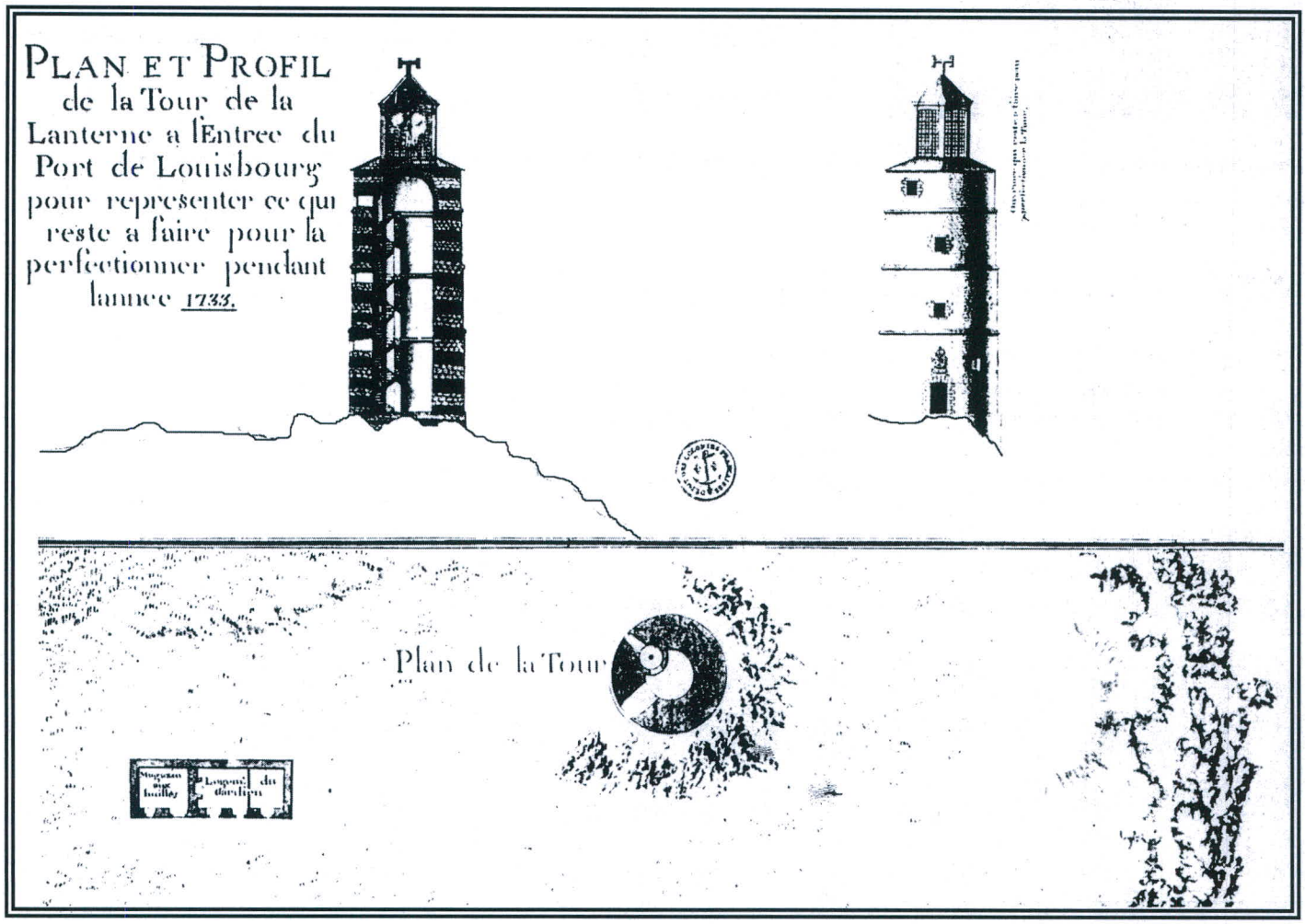
The British operated the lighthouse during the period 1745 – 49 and no doubt collected light dues as well as it was the practice of Trinity House to do so, even today.

During the second French period, in 1751, the Port Captain, in charge of the lighthouse, was directed by the governor to visit and inspect the lighthouse at least once a month. Each month he informed the keeper the number of hours the light was to burn.

The lighthouse played a part in the military history of the area. Batteries established near the lighthouse were instrumental in the defeat of the fortress in both sieges. During the sieges, because of the topography of the land around the harbor, and the design of the fort, the lighthouse became a liability to the defenders. When attacked the defenders retreated behind the walls of the fortress. This left the lighthouse on the heights, outside the walls, accessible to the attackers.

During the first siege in May 1745, the British general realized that the best way to destroy the island battery of the French was to establish a battery on the promontory next to the lighthouse, which had been abandoned by the French. The British were successful and the harbor entrance was open to their fleet.

When the French returned to Louisbourg in 1749, they established a battery of three 18-pound cannons at the lighthouse. But when the British attacked again in 1758, the French



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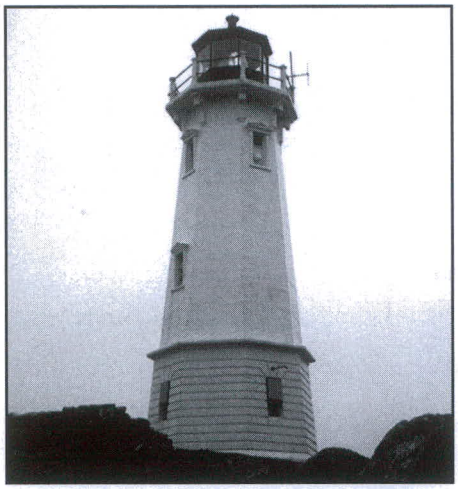
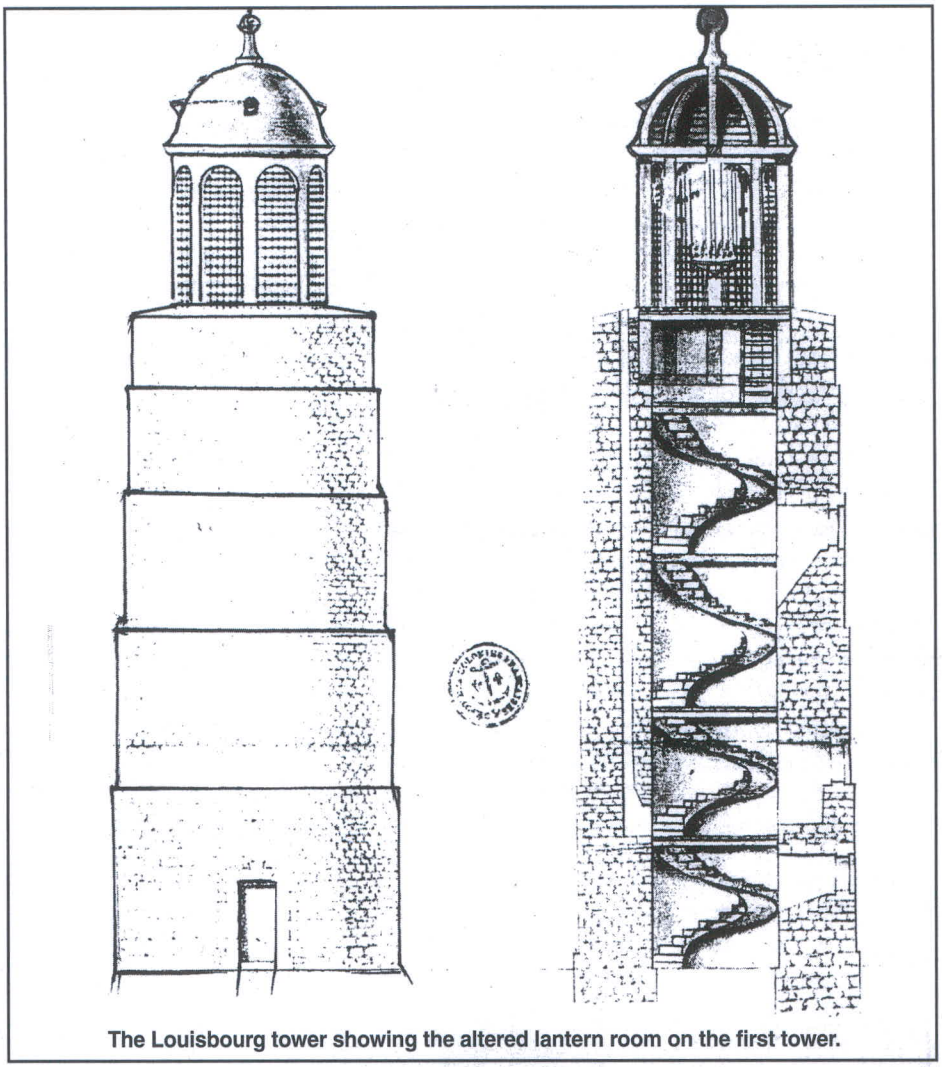
destroyed the site and retreated to the fort. The British again established a battery next to the lighthouse and again destroyed the French battery on the island at the harbor entrance.

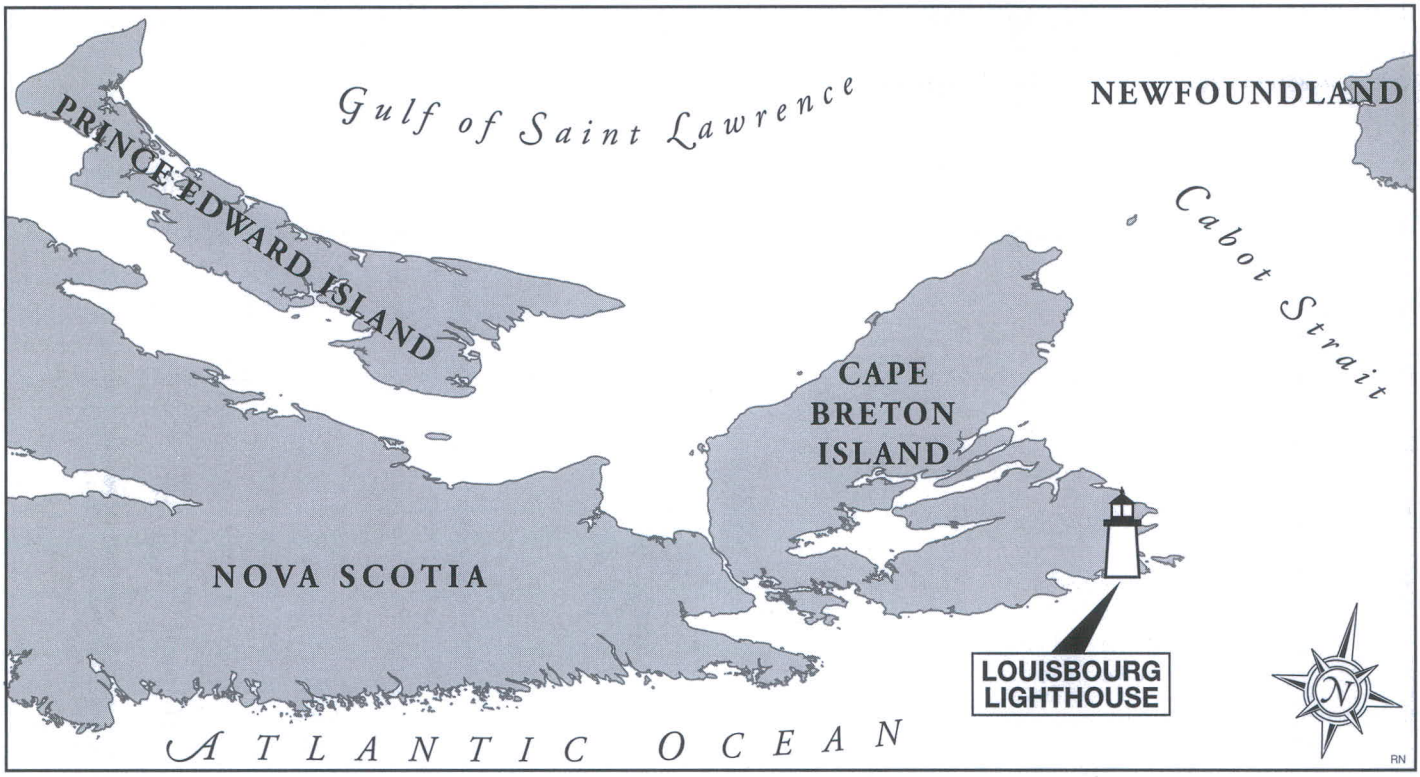
Apparently the lighthouse was badly damaged during the final siege and was never relighted. It is thought that it was razed between 1758 and 1798. The activities of the port declined. However, a 19th century revival of the fishing industry and coal exporting crated a need for a new lighthouse. The new lighthouse was completed in 1842 and lasted until it burned down in 1922. A replacement was immediately constructed which is in operation today.



The present day Louisbourg lighthouse. Photographer unknown.



The Louisbourg tower showing the altered lantern room on the first tower.



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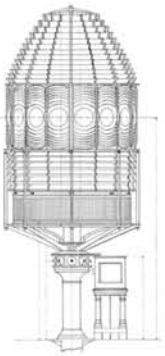

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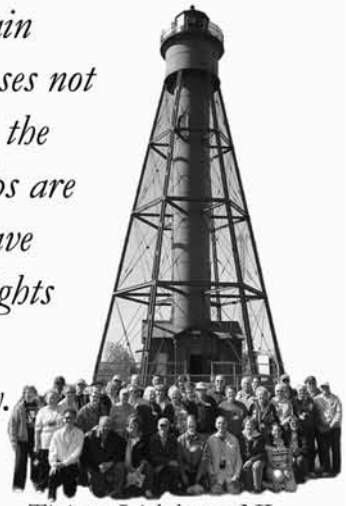

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