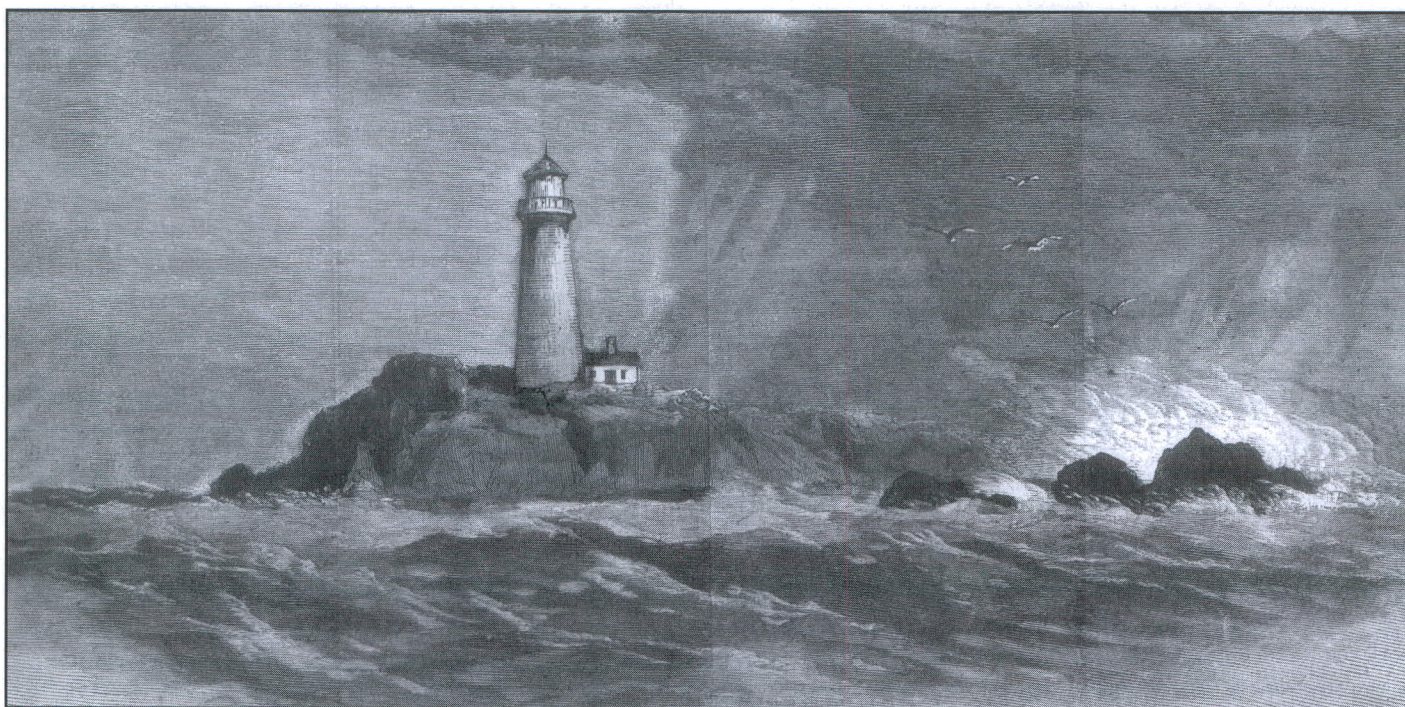


Sambro Island Lighthouse

Canada's Oldest Operating Lighthouse

By George Worthylake



In the mid 18th century Halifax, Nova Scotia was a major base for the British navy in North America. The port was large, deep and ice-free, a perfect location for a large fleet. The drawback was a number of shoals that extended out about two miles from the harbor entrance and the fact that the entrance was often shrouded by fog. Also guarding the entrance was Sambro Island. Although Halifax was founded in 1749, no lighthouse marked the vicinity until 1758.

In 1752, the local governor tried to raise funds to construct a lighthouse on Sambro Island – Cape Sambrough, as it was then called – by holding a lottery. But the effort was not successful. Finally, in 1758 the general Assembly passed an act which authorized 1,000 to construct a lighthouse on Sambro Outer Island. The construction funds were finally raised by a lottery, probably the only Canadian lighthouse constructed by funds from a lottery (Sandy Hook, NJ was constructed with lottery money).

The maintenance of the lighthouse, and pay for the keeper, was funded by taxing the importation of rum. Additionally, all vessels were taxed that entered and sailed from the harbor. "After Sept. 5th, 1759, every Merchant vessel had to pay 6 pence per ton when leaving

the harbor, except for coasters, fishing vessels and ships of His Majesty's Service. If a vessel was wholly owned by a Freeholder and Inhabitant of Nova Scotia, only 4 pence per ton." A description of the lighthouse follows:

"The Light-House is a stone building, 62 feet high, erected on the top of a rocky island, 72 feet above the surface of the water, so that the light is 134 feet from the water, and is about 12 miles from Halifax . . . The person who manages this light has undertaken to bear all expenses in consideration of receiving all the duties laid on shipping for the support of it. The business consists in measuring and examining the tonnage of vessels, collecting the duties and providing oil and other necessary stores for the light and the people attending, which is done at Halifax, and in keeping the lanthorn lighted every night, and firing [fog] signals at particular occasions. The first of this business is done by the principal, who has provided a pilot and two servants to reside on the island and do the latter. From this representation I hope it appears to your Lordship that there is no nominee, and that the charge is provided for and paid from an appropriated duty, which is 200 yearly, Halifax currency, equal to 180 sterling."

Mariners, who at first praised the light, had been recently complaining about the poor quality of the light. In May 1771, the loss of the sloop *Granby* and all hands on the Sambro Island reef brought the matter of the light being inadequate to a head. The official correspondence relating to the loss of the vessel states:

"Having received a letter from Captain Gambier, Commander in Chief of His Majesty's ships in North America, dated the 12th of last month, at Boston, giving an account of the loss of the *Granby* sloop off Halifax owing as is believed, to the want of a light being kept in the Lighthouse at that place, that the Captains of His Majesty's ships are frequently obliged to fire at the Lighthouse to make them shew a light: and that the masters of merchant ships complain heavily at being forced to contribute to the support of a thing from which they receive no benefit; and which more over is a great annual expense to the government."

Complaints concerning the effectiveness of the light included the smoking of the sperm oil lamps, which deposited a layer of carbon on the lantern glazing. This was a common failing due to insufficient combustion of all oil lamps before the invention of the Argand

burner in 1782 and, probably, the keepers not trimming the wicks often enough nor keeping the glazing clean during the night. In 1834 it is documented that the keeper had to clean 128 small panes of glass, probably the original configuration, similar to early American lanterns. The Commodore recommended that the government take over the operation of the lighthouse with the naval store operator in Halifax in charge. However, nothing became of this plan. At about this time fountain lamps with flues were installed, which improved the situation somewhat by carrying off the smoke. But it still wasn't totally acceptable and a commission reported that it would be necessary to install a new iron lantern with narrower astragals and larger panes of glass. This was finally accomplished in 1864 and an Argand type lamp with reflectors was installed.

1945 Light Lists states "GUN, one report every minute. In case of failure of gun, a bomb will be exploded every 4 minutes."

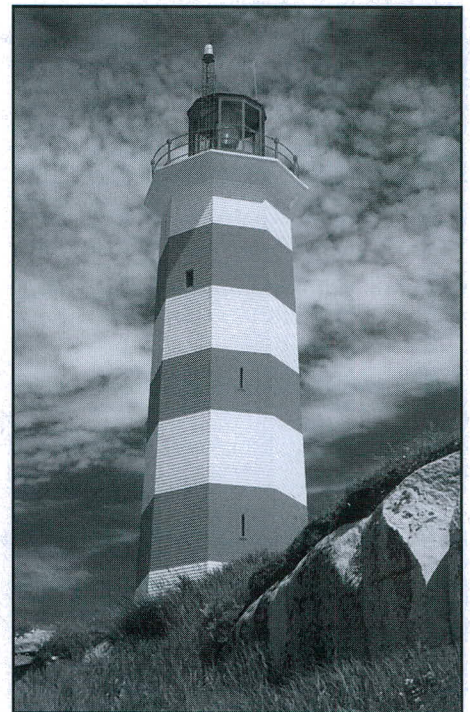
The Sambro Island Light Station was manned until 1988 when it was automated. It is one of five Canadian lighthouses listed by the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) slated for preservation. In 1998 the Canadian Coast Guard completed a major preservation of the tower. In recent years the oil house was damaged by a storm and the two keeper's dwellings are said to be deteriorating. The condition of the station was made known to the House of Commons in Ottawa by the members of Parliament for Halifax. It's hoped that the Canadian government will do the right thing and provide funding for the complete restoration of this station which has been a National Historic Site since 1937.

The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society maintains an excellent website at: <www.nslps.com>. Sign on and select "Lighthouse Lists" from the menu. Sambro Island Lighthouse can be found, in alphabetical order, on page 15. You'll find additional historical information and excellent photographs of "the oldest operational lighthouse in North America."

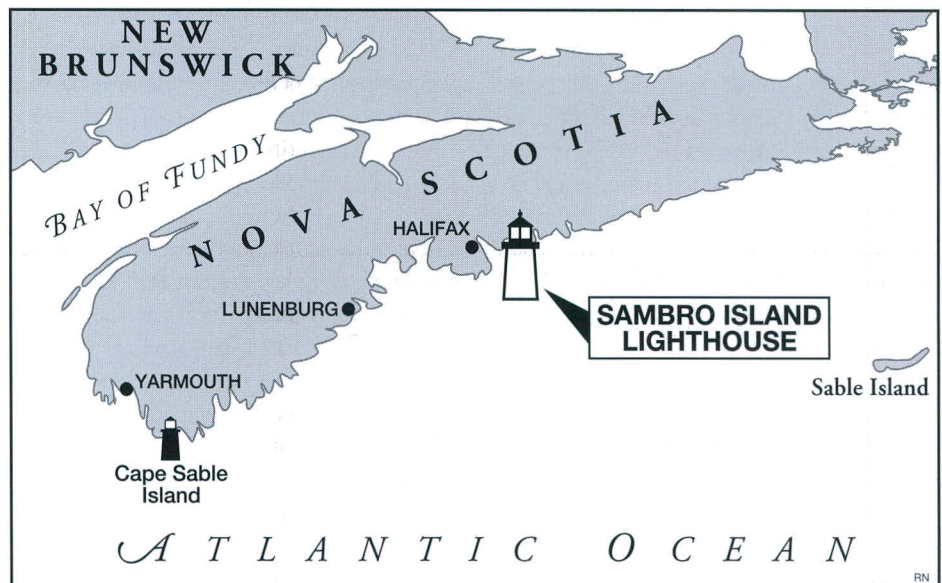


The initial fog signal at Sambro Island were cannons manned by a crew of the Royal Artillery which answered signals from entering ships during thick weather. Some of the cannon are still lying about the island. Later a Daboll trumpet signal was installed, then a steam-powered horn, followed by bomb rockets, acetylene-powered guns and finally, in 1963, a diaphone.

In 1906, the old stone tower was replaced with a new poured concrete tower of an octagonal design and painted with red and white stripes. It was equipped with a 1st order Fresnel lens. The fog signal was a gun, which consisted of a vertical cylinder with vertical tubes which were loaded with explosive cotton. The cylinder rotated and each tube passed over a firing mechanism at a timed interval. The

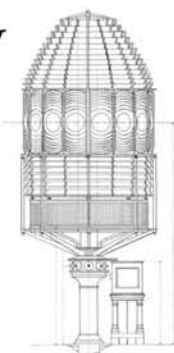


North America's oldest operating lighthouse sits at the southern approaches to Halifax Harbour in Nova Scotia. Construction of the tower began in 1758 and was completed in 1760. This view taken in the summer of 1999, just after completion of a \$250,000 (CDN) exterior renovation by the Canadian Coast Guard. Photo copyright Chris Mills.





Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

Help Support Our Important Mission!

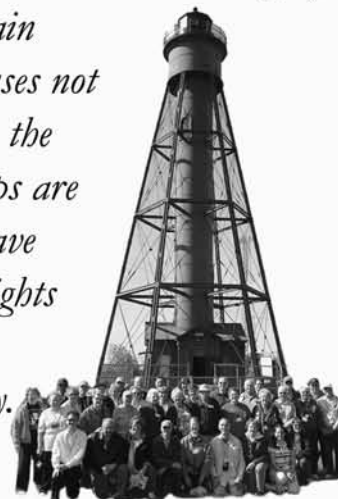
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-

winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ