

Lighthouse Lore



With Jack Edwards

Some lighthouses are well known; others are familiar only to those who live in the immediate area — and perhaps even some of the locals may not know about them. In this issue we introduce you to one of the Great Lakes' lesser known lighthouses, Mohawk Island, located in eastern Lake Erie. Preservation and restoration is often a "grass-roots" effort initiated by an individual whose enthusiasm inspires a few others to pitch in and help. In the case of Mohawk Island, that individual is Mike Walker, a local marina operator.

The Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association, which Mike heads, discovered early on that the provincial government didn't have any money to restore the lighthouse. So they decided to fund the restoration work themselves. John Marshall, a local artist, contributed a painting of the lighthouse and the group raised money by selling signed and numbered limited edition prints. Mr. Marshall is a maritime artist renowned for his lighthouse renditions in oils. In 1990 his print of the Dunkirk Lighthouse at Point Gratiot in New York State was exhibited in the U.S. Senate Rotunda in Washington D.C. and was also on display at the National Archives. He has also painted the lighthouse at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. Funds raised thus far for the Mohawk lighthouse restoration have been used to purchase steel to fabricate a replacement lantern room.

If you're in the area, stop by and introduce yourself to Mike at Mohawk Marina. He indicated that the approach to the lighthouse is tricky and not well marked on charts — Mohawk Island is an outcropping of an extensive rock shoal. Mike is a member of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary and recalls each boating season in terms of the number of boaters who had to be towed back

after damaging their props on the rocks. But don't despair; there is a way to approach the island where the bottom is sandy. Mike will be glad to show you the safest approach and you probably won't have to twist his arm too much to get a personal guided tour. He can also be contacted at: Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association, RR#2, Lowbanks, Ontario, Canada NOA 1K0. During the boating season he can be reached at the Mohawk Marina (905) 774-1229. At other times call him at (905) 774-2590.



*Mike Walker on location at the Mohawk Island site:
"The government didn't have any money to restore the lighthouse,
so we decided to do it ourselves."*

By highlighting this little-known lighthouse and the effort underway to restore it, *Great Lakes Cruiser* hopes to inspire some readers to get involved and lend a helping hand to Mike and his group. Also, perhaps this example will inspire others to look around in their own areas and adopt a lighthouse that is in need of tender loving care. If you wait for someone else or for big brother [the government], it may never happen. You can make a difference if you just adopt the attitude, "If it's going to be, it is up to me."

The Kaplan Award

The selection committee for the Kaplan Award met, one recent snowy evening in mid-January, to choose the award's first-ever recipient. The committee was comprised of Bruce Jenvey, Ken Miller, Kay Champion, Chuck and Sue Glisch, Jack Edwards and Marv Slocum as well as Joyce Kaplan, Jon's mother and James Kaplan, Jon's brother.

It was no easy task sifting through the applicants as each and every one of them fostered a cause or pursued a project that would have benefited all who travel the Great Lakes. If you remember from our October issue, the Kaplan Award recognizes that group, organization or individual who has done the most to promote or benefit the Great Lakes as a culture, as a resource and of course, as a destination. And while all the candidates met this criteria, we feel this year's recipient best represents the goals and the spirit of The Kaplan Fund.

The Oswego Maritime Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Oswego, New York on the south-east shore of Lake Ontario.

For years, they have taught children the basics of boat handling and boating safety. They have brought physically and mentally challenged adults to the shore and given them the opportunity and the self esteem to sail upon the water. They have sponsored competitive racing teams at the high school and college levels providing those without the opportunity, a chance to make their mark. They have hosted Olympic tryouts and, in their own way, furthered America's

competitive hopes. They have even hosted trophy fishing seminars for the public so that everyone might enjoy the great water to its fullest extent.

Despite these accomplishments and honorable civic involvement, the effort that stands above the rest is a project simply known as "The Schooner." The *OMF Ontario*, as she is now named, is a replica of a 19th century lakes schooner in modern materials. The eighty-five foot hull has been built and launched entirely through donations and volunteer efforts.

When she is complete, the *OMF Ontario* will serve as a classroom for students of all ages, teaching future generations about the history, the culture and the ecology of these Great Lakes. It's something the Oswego Maritime Foundation calls their "Education Through Involvement Program," and it's something we would like to see completed as soon as possible.

So, it is with great pride that the selection committee names the Oswego Maritime Foundation as the 1995 recipient of the Ka-

plan Award. The award and cash grant will be presented to representatives of the foundation on Sunday afternoon, April 23, 1995, at an appropriate location here in the Detroit area. We feel this is an excellent choice and one Jon would have made himself...

If you would like more information on the ceremonies or would like to attend, please contact the offices of Great Lakes Cruiser at 810-545-5999 for more information.



*The launching of the OMF Ontario.
When finished, she will be a classroom for students
of all ages and all abilities.*

Remote Treasurers of the Great Lakes:

Mohawk Island Lighthouse

by Wayne Sapulski

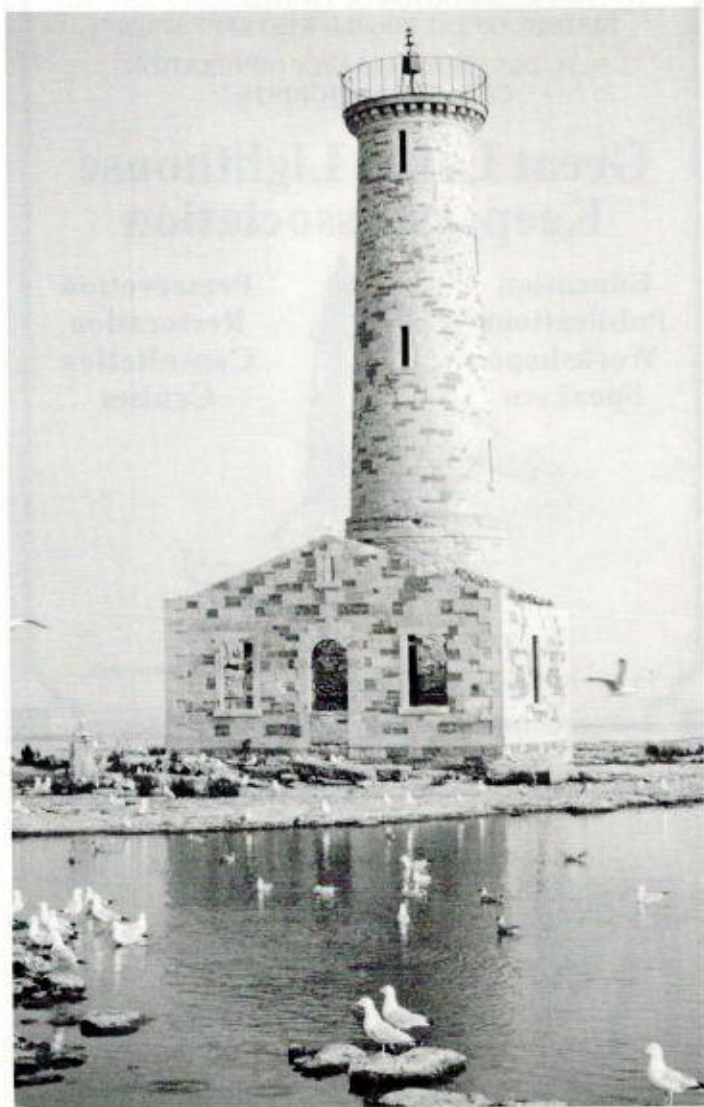
After only a little exploration of the Great Lakes, an enthusiast soon comes to realize there are many treasures to be discovered and savored tucked away in remote corners of the lakes. One just has to know where to look. Such a place is Mohawk (formerly called Gull) Island which lies in the Canadian waters of Lake Erie a little less than two miles east of Port Maitland, Ontario.

In and of itself, there is not much to recommend this island. It is small, barely two acres in size, rocky, almost flat, and generally barren. With a good sea running, much of the place probably goes awash. During the milder seasons of the year, there is enough land high and dry for the island to serve as home and rookery to hundreds of ringed-bill and herring gulls, cormorants and rock doves. It has been designated as a bird sanctuary overseen by The Canada Wildlife Service and is off limits to visitors during the nesting period, April 1 to August 1.

Visitors to the island will feel as if they have stepped onto a set from the Alfred Hitchcock movie "The Birds." Anywhere one cares to walk, birds will have to move and usually go up. Caution is advised. However, a visit is well worth the effort in order to see first hand one of the most unique lighthouses to be found anywhere.

Looking at the lighthouse, it immediately becomes apparent that 146 years of exposure to Lake Erie has done less damage than more recent human vandalism. It is a ruin, a hollow, free-standing masonry structure. The roof and lantern room are gone. All of the interior wood, including the tower ladders and landings was burned out years ago.

This is no rubble stone construction. One is impressed by the craftsmanship that went into the construction, the fit and finish of the dressed limestone. Note the architectural details used to set off the windows, doors, and corner edges of the building. The quoins [exterior corner stones] as well as the stones around the



Mohawk Island lighthouse as viewed from entry to keeper's dwelling. Note that the doorway was bricked up to window sill height — perhaps to prevent water from entering the dwelling. The architectural details used to set off the doors, windows and corner edges of the building (quoins) are readily apparent.
Photo by Wayne Sapulski © July 1994.

doors and windows are raised relative to the surface of the walls. The lower portion of the tower wall is constructed with rough faced stones, whereas smooth stones are used in the upper part. The dentils that project radially just beneath the lantern deck are stone. The inclusion of such functional ornamentation was not necessary, it reflects the pride of the builders.

Above all else, the continuing solidity of Mohawk Island lighthouse is most impressive. It is evident that stones and mortar of the highest quality were used; even today they have no cracks or fissures to let water in which would have led to cracking during cold weather. Mohawk Island lighthouse was built to last and last it has.



DEDICATED

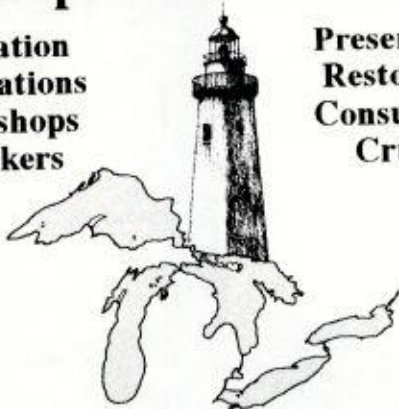
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A Brief History of Mohawk Island Lighthouse

After completion of the First Welland Canal in 1829, eastern Lake Erie gained significant navigational importance. In order to insure an adequate volume of water to float the vessels traversing this new canal, a feeder canal was constructed to bring the necessary water from the Grand River at Port Maitland and Dunnville. Although it had a draft of only four feet, the feeder canal was also used by smaller vessels as a subsidiary route through the Welland Canal. Port Maitland became a busy harbor. With a harbor to mark and a treacherous reef nearby to guard against, it became vital to construct a light beacon two miles east of the harbor.

By 1846 a contractor, John L. Brown of Thorold, Ontario (more about him later), was awarded the Mohawk (formerly called Gull) Island Lighthouse contract. After two years, this 64-foot tower of stone with its attached keeper's dwelling was completed. Mr. John Burgess, a farmer from Burgess Point (now Rock Point Provincial Park) was hired as the first lighthouse keeper at an annual salary of 65 pounds sterling per season. For nearly a century, a succession of four keepers manned this lighthouse, which guided cargo vessels and fishing boats to safety.

John Burgess	1848-1870
Richard H. Smithers	1870-1895
Richard O. Smithers	1895-1921
Richard J. Foster	1921-1932

At the end of the 1932 season, keeper Richard Foster and his son Jim became stranded on an ice flow on their way back to the mainland and died from exposure. For this reason, it was decided the lighthouse be unmanned, but still kept operable by use of a battery powered light. By 1969, vandalism had prompted the authorities to replace the light with a floating reef buoy. Eight years later, the Department of Transportation announced plans to demolish the lighthouse. Public protests and the discovery that the Department of Transportation did not legally own the property, saved the light.

In 1990, Mohawk Marina operator Mike Walker founded the *Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association* in an effort to stabilize, repair, and preserve this unique piece of maritime history. Through communication with historical societies, ornithologists, government agencies, and local residents, many interesting facts of the island's history have been uncovered.



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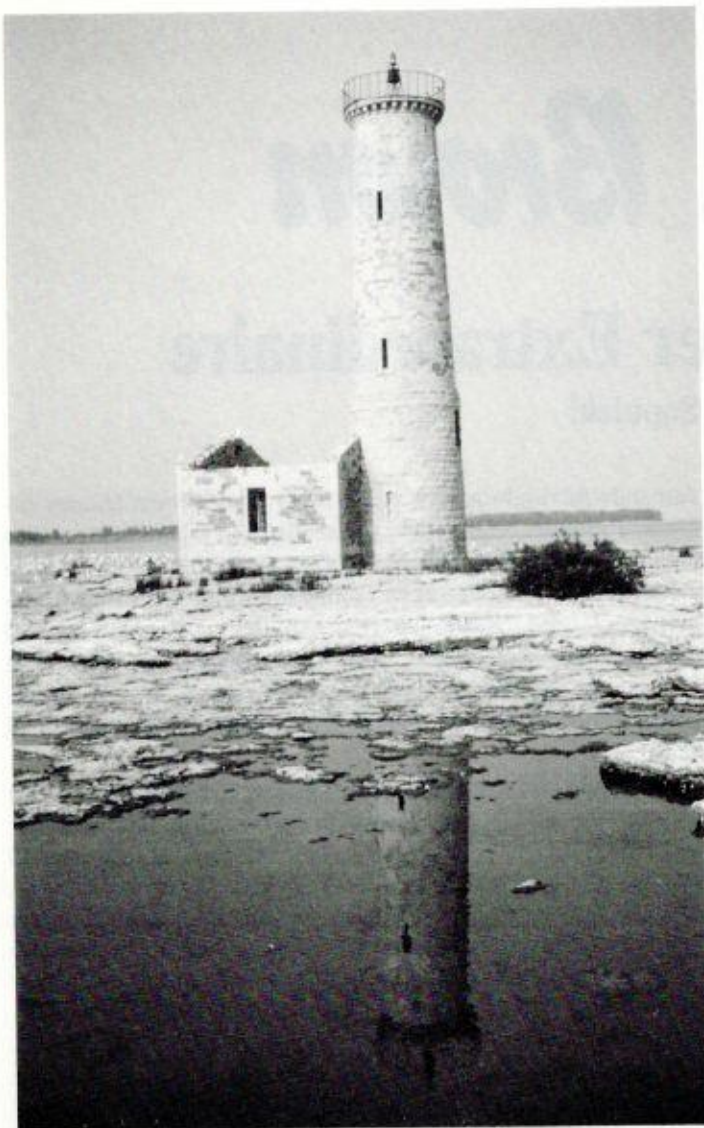
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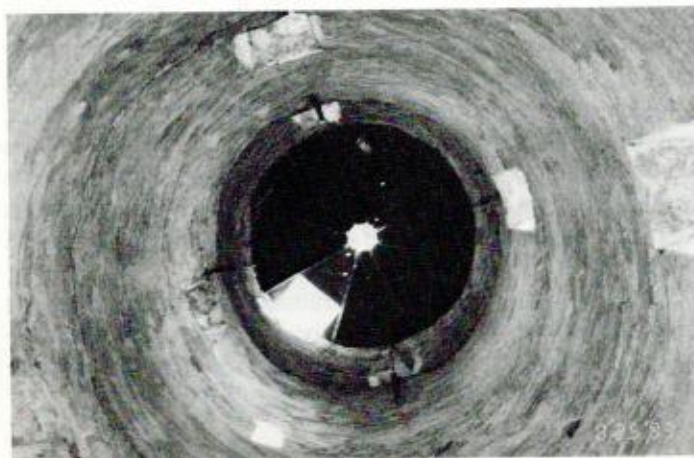
Side view showing the use of rough faced stones in the lower portion of the tower in contrast to the smooth faced stones in the upper section. The dentils that project radially just beneath the lantern deck are stone, whereas cast iron is used in many other light stations.

Photo by Wayne Sapulski © July 1994.



Vandalism has reduced the Mohawk Island Light Station to little more than a hollow free-standing shell.

Courtesy, Mike Walker, Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association.



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John L. Brown

Lighthouse Builder Extraordinaire

by Wayne Sapulski

John L. Brown was born in 1809 in Scotland. Coming from a poor family, he had little chance to gain a formal education and was soon apprenticed to a stone mason in Glasgow. Lured to North America at the age of 23, his first building contracts were secured in upstate New York. The Niagara Flouring Mills of Lockport and the Cataract Hotel of Niagara Falls, New York soon bore the mark of his chisel.

By 1838, John Brown had emigrated once again, this time to Canada, where he immediately seized the opportunity to open the Queenstown Quarry. This was a masterful stroke of planning and foresight, since canal and railway fever had gripped Upper Canada.

Though early contracts were small, such as constructing the bridge and culvert abutments on the Erie and Ontario Steam Railway and finishing stone for the rebuilding of Fort Niagara,

demands for high-quality stone from Queenstown Quarry increased rapidly. John Brown's acquisition soon began to pay dividends. The 40 wooden locks of the First Welland Canal were scheduled for replacement by 27 limestone ones, and the government demanded that stone from the Queenstown Quarry be used to the exclusion of all others. Besides furnishing materials for the locks, John Brown also undertook the construction of several sections of the Second Welland Canal (begun 1842, completed 1850).

By 1850, John Brown's reputation and wealth had grown considerably, and he had begun to branch out into related industries. With various partners, he opened plaster beds, cement and plaster mills, lime kilns, and a steam sawmill. He also built scows, dredges, and tugboats in his shipyards at Allanburg and Port Robinson. As a contractor, John Brown was highly regarded and worked almost exclusively on government, rail, canal, and harbor contracts until his death in 1876. His cement and plaster products won World's Fair medals in Paris in 1855 and London in 1862.

The Mohawk Island Lighthouse project would prove to be a humble prelude to much greater achievements in the area of lighthouse construction. During the 1850's the Department of Public Works contracted with John Brown to complete a series of six very tall, tapering lighthouses of graceful proportions on the shores of Lake Huron and contiguous Georgian Bay. These circular stone towers, all of which have lasted to the present day, are referred to as the "Imperial Towers."

The derivation of the label "Imperial Towers" has not been traced. Certainly all were built under Canadian authority. It may have been that the design originated in England; consulting engineers may have been English officers. One source indicates imperial is spelled with a lower case "i" and the word simply designates a tower of unusual size or excellence. The most likely explanation is that funds from the Imperial Treasury were necessary for their completion. Whichever, eleven such towers were originally planned, but only six were completed as the cost, delays, and tactical difficulties of transporting men and materials to the extremely remote building sites consumed the entire budget. The bank had been broken, so to speak. Thereafter, new lighthouses were smaller structures built of wood by various contractors, and utilizing less expensive lighting apparatuses.

Even today these lighthouses remain a sight to behold, with nothing of comparable design on the U.S. side of the border — much like the little lighthouse on Mohawk Island. The light towers of John Brown remain his crowning glory.

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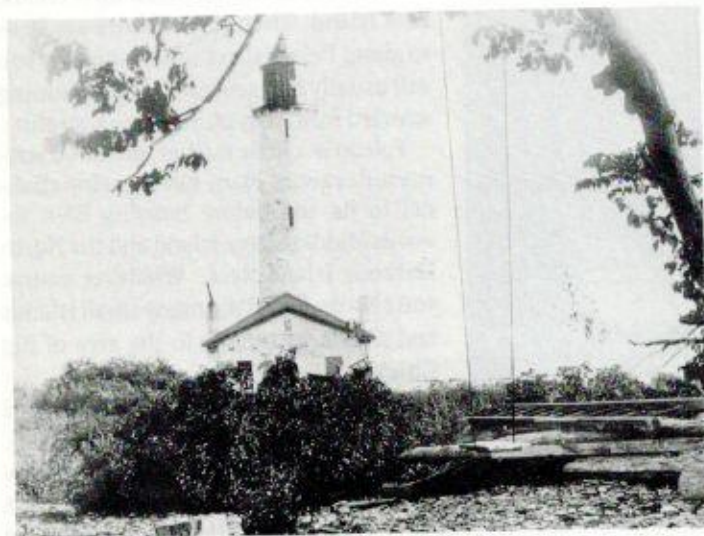
Antique Lighthouse Postcards

by Wayne Sapulski

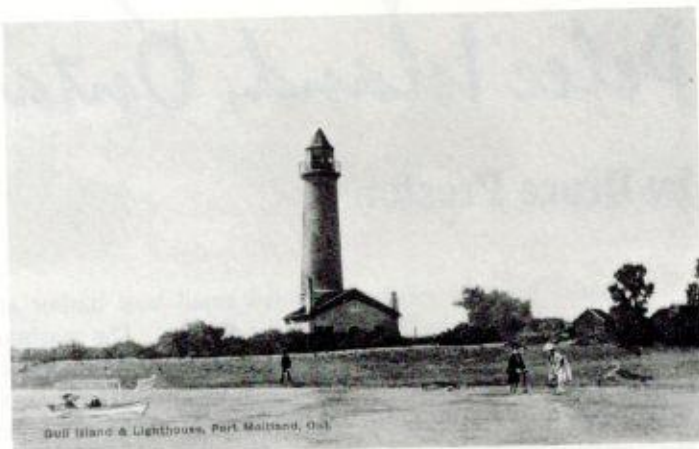
Mention collecting and such things as coins, stamps, baseball cards, and Barbie dolls immediately come to mind. Antique postcards are another popular collectible, a fact I didn't know until a year ago when I was drawn into collecting old postcards by a couple who revealed they had been collecting old postcard views of covered bridges, lighthouses, gristmills, and windmills for several years. The variety of topics covered is endless.

Anything done well usually gets expensive and I jokingly blame this couple for all the money I've spent expanding my collection of Great Lakes lighthouses postcards to its present size of about 1,000. Postcard prices range from \$1 to \$30 depending on the topic, age, rarity, and condition with "real" photo postcards fetching the higher prices. Most old postcards fall in the \$2 to \$7 range. Modern cards can be had for less than \$1.

An example of an antique lighthouse postcard is one depicting Mohawk Island around 1906. Comparing the view on this card with the photographs I took last summer, one immediately sees differences. The antique card shows considerably more vegetation. Note the presence of trees. An actual photograph taken around 1900 confirms that at the time trees did grow on the island. Of particular interest is the roof of the lantern room. Unlike most lantern room roofs which have a convex shape, Mohawk Island's was slightly concave. The people shown on the view card were apparently added by an artist. This is evident from the curious perspective; the people in the boat who are closer to the observer are smaller than the more distant ones on shore.



Mohawk Island lighthouse circa 1900. Note the lush vegetation and the swing in the foreground. It appears that some modifications were made to the keeper's dwelling. The roof line was apparently modified to increase the pitch and the chimney heights were increased. Courtesy, Mike Walker, Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association.



View card of Mohawk Island Lighthouse circa 1906. Note the concave top on the lantern room. From the collection of Wayne Sapulski.

Many old postcards were based on hand-colored black and white photos of the period and from an artistic point of view the pastel hues achieved remain beautiful. But the main draw is history as these old postcards offer a glimpse of places and things of the past that may no longer exist or that have survived into the present greatly modified.

Like any addiction, postcard collecting must be fed — through a circuit of local and regional shows held periodically throughout the year in places like Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Toronto. Go to one show and you will quickly learn of several more scheduled elsewhere. Want to get started? Contact **Marty Raskin Productions**, P.O. Box 48153, Oak Park, MI 48237 or call 810-968-5910. Happy hunting!



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