

**The Mohawk Island**

**Lighthouse**

Unknown

Author

## The Harbour

During the settlement of Canada, water was the easiest and fastest mode of transportation. However on the Great Lake's ship wrecks were increasing. Shoals, reefs, shifting sand bars, fierce, fast approaching storms and narrow uncharted passages with no navigational aids made travel a mariner's nightmare. Seasoned captains relied on memory, instinct, and poor maps and charts. Simple lanterns on poles were used to mark harbours. Lighthouses, an indispensable aid to navigation for all lake craft, were built only after pressure was brought to bear on the government of the day. In 1803 a duty of three pence per ton was levied on shipping entering any Upper Canada Port to help toward the erection and maintenance of lighthouses. In 1817 Colonel Robert Nichol of Port Dover pressed the Upper Canada Legislature for a lighthouse on Long Point, but to no avail. After four American ships went down off Long Point in a storm in 1827, the United States Congress demanded that Britain either build a lighthouse or permit the US to do so. In March 1829 £1,000 was appropriated for construction of the light on Long Point. Built of stone on white oak cribs and standing 50 feet high, it went into operation on November 3, 1830. Port Dover had its first lighthouse in 1832.<sup>1</sup>

Port Maitland where the Grand River empties into Lake Erie was a natural harbour but the entrance to this port was hindered by a sand bar and a treacherous reef. After the War of 1812, The Grand River Naval Depot was built there to protect the north shore of Lake Erie from the threat of an American Invasion. Several ships from the Naval Depot ran aground on the sandbar and some were wrecked on the reef. Plans were made for a lighthouse to prevent further accidents. Blueprints were drawn up but the project did not come to fruition.

After the completion of the first Welland Canal in 1829, eastern Lake Erie gained significant navigation al importance. A Feeder Canal was dug to bring water from a dam across the Grand River at Dunnville to "feed" water into the main Canal. The original Feeder Canal was really a ditch but as early as July 1830 the Feeder took on a more important role. It was made deeper and wider so that canal barges could run on it. In 1841 the government decided to enlarge the Welland Canal. Plans included adding a branch of the Feeder Canal from Stromness to the mouth of the Grand River. In 1842 the section between Stromness and Port Maitland was excavated. A stone lock measuring 200 feet in length, 45 feet in width with a 9 foot mitre sill was built by a Scottish stonemason, John L. Brown. This lock when first built, was said to be one of the best on the Welland Canal.

Port Maitland Lock permitted navigation between the Welland Canal and the River below Dunnville making the Feeder Canal a regular branch of the Welland Canal. The construction of the lock created a second outlet to Lake Erie for the Welland Canal. This branch turned out to be very useful during the period of 1845 to 1850 when renovations made the main canal between Port Robinson and Port Colborne unavailable. During the years that section was closed to traffic, the Feeder Canal provided an alternate route to Lake Erie. As many as 575 vessels passed up and down the Feeder each year, carrying grain for Cleveland, lumber for building Chicago, sand and gravel for building piers and roads throughout the Great Lakes, and plaster of Paris for Buffalo. Cheese manufactured at Stromness was shipped throughout the United States as was cord wood to heat homes.<sup>2</sup>

\* - THE COMB TO REBUILD CHICAGO AFTER THE GREAT FIRE WAS FROM DUNNVILLE AREA.

As the Welland Canal and the Feeder Canal increased travel on the eastern part of Lake Erie the entrance to the Grand River gained significant navigational importance. The Port Maitland Harbour was in dire need of a lighthouse to mark the treacherous rocky reef at its entrance which endangered life and property.



## The Lighthouse

The government decided to build the lighthouse to mark the Port Maitland Harbour and its treacherous reef on Mohawk Island, a small rocky bit of land about 5 kilometres (3 miles) east of the harbour. A survey of the proposed site for the Naval Depot in 1815 by Captain William Fitzwilliam Owen and Captain Robert Harris mentions the small island at the entrance of the Grand River which they claimed and named Mohawk Island.

The government of the Province of Upper Canada contracted with John L. Brown of Thorold to build the lighthouse in 1846. John Brown was born in Loneyshire, Scotland in 1809 and apprenticed as a stone mason in Glasgow. He came to New York in 1832 where he worked on the last stone locks of the Erie Barge Canal, the Niagara Flour Mill in Lockport and the Cataract Hotel in Niagara Falls, New York. He immigrated to Canada in 1838 and opened the Queenstown Quarry. He constructed the bridge and culvert abutments for the Erie and Ontario Steam Railway and replaced 40 wooden locks in the Welland Canal with 27 lime stone ones. In 1842 he began the construction of several sections of the second Welland Canal and built Lock 27 on the Feeder Canal between Stromness and Port Maitland.<sup>3</sup>

When Brown was contracted to build the lighthouse on Mohawk Island he was given the blueprints that had been drawn up in 1816 for the Grand River Naval Depot Lighthouse.

In the spring of 1846, a four-man crew started the temporary shelter for the men, then the stone tower. John Brown used stone from the Queenston quarry to build the 19.5 metre (64 foot) tower and keeper's dwelling. The limestone was split at the quarry and transported overland to Port Robinson then by ship through the Welland Canal. It was then transferred to Port Maitland via the Feeder Canal and then out on Lake Erie to the Island. The construction took two seasons.

The Mohawk Island lighthouse was completed in 1848. One of the 11 in Ontario built in a unique "imperial tower" design, it was the first lighthouse to be built on an island in Lake Erie. The structure consists of a tower and dwelling. The walls are 3 to 4 feet thick. The circular stone tower, which tapered slightly, held an octagonal iron lantern 8 feet high surmounted by a cupola.

The keepers' quarters had a single bedroom, a kitchen with a cook stove and a sitting room with a brick lined corner fireplace. There was a central hall from the only entrance into the tower.

The original revolving light was ordered by engineer George Keefer from England in February 1848 along with the new light for the Long Point Lighthouse. The light enlisted 10 coal oil lamps with 8 catoptrical reflectors revolving a beam light visible for 10 miles. The Mohawk Island was seen for 225 degrees only, so it would not aggravate the local settlers on the mainland of Sherbrooke Township. The access to the lantern room was a series of stairways through six wooden floors, the keeper had to climb every six hours in order to "change the works" which entailed pulling up a counter weight the distance of sixty feet to keep the light rotating.

Lighthouses advanced with technology. Early lights used whale oil for fuel. After coal oil, the use of kerosene increased illumination by a factor of four. The oil lamps on

— Pic of BROWN

LOCATION  
OF  
BLUEPRINT

1 AS CANADIAN INVENTION

the top of the tower produced a beam 64 feet above the water. This strong revolving white light, placed as a warning to mariners had a range of 10 miles. The Mohawk Island Lighthouse employed a birdcage lantern, each side with many small panes of glass and mirrors held in place by metal frames. To support the lantern metal bars curved up over, and around the lantern.

The circular stone tower tapers slightly and stands over 18 metres (60 feet) high. It held an octagonal iron lantern, 2.5 metres (8 feet) high, surmounted by a cupola. Ten oil lamps with reflectors produced a beam 18.5 metres (64 feet) above the water with a range of about 16 kilometres (10 miles), the same as the light on Long Point. The new Mohawk Island light served to guide mariners to the southern entrance of the original Welland Canal.

After building the Mohawk Island Light, John Brown built the Burlington lighthouse and six more stone tapering lighthouses on the shores of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay for the Department of Public Works. These circular stone towers referred to as "Imperial Towers" were built within two years of each other, and have lasted to the present day. His work was so fine that samples of his plaster and cement won him medals in the Paris exhibition in 1855 and London's World exhibition in 1862. John Brown was the stone contractor for the Welland Railway and his company assisted in the construction of the Third Canal. The Welland Avenue United Church, the jail, and the opera house in St. Catharines, the Niagara Flouring Mill in Lockport and the Cataract Hotel in Niagara Falls saw the mark of his chisel. He was also concerned with promoting tourism in Niagara Falls. He once loaded an old paddle wheeler with animals and sent it over the Falls to attract tourists.<sup>4</sup>

THE 4TH ORDER FRESNEL LENSE WAS SHIPPED FROM FRANCE UNTIL THE ONE FOR LONG POINT.  
 AS WELL BUILT TO SUPPORT TOWERS FOR THE WORLD'S LONGEST  
 SUSPENSION BRIDGE AT CLIFTON  
 HE BUILT - BROOKS MONUMENT



## The Keepers

For over a century, a succession of keepers manned the Mohawk Island Lighthouse, which guided cargo vessels and fishing boats to safety. Most Canadian lighthouse had only one keeper. Lighthouse keepers were federal employees. They were poorly paid, poorly trained and had few instructions to guide them. Most keepers operated their lighthouses only during the navigational season from spring thaw in late March to freeze up in mid-December. A family man was preferred because he could manage longer in an isolated location and his family provided free labour. He should have a mechanical aptitude and it was a good thing if he had served as a sea captain or mate. Canadians looked for a man between nineteen and forty years old, with a good reference from his last employer, a certificate of good health who could operate a boat, read, write, know his arithmetic, and had a good moral character.

Duties of lighthouse keepers included putting the light operation in the mid-April and discontinuing it in mid-December. The lamps were to be lighted at sunset and kept burning at their full brilliancy until sunrise; but whenever the weather was foggy the light keeper was to light the lamps earlier or keep them lighted later as necessary for the security of navigation. As soon as the lights are put out in the morning the wicks had to be trimmed and the glass of the lantern polished both inside and outside with linen towels. Canadian keepers had to provide their own food supplies but were given soft linens and chamois for wiping and polishing lenses. The lighthouse building had to be kept in repair and periodically repainted by the keeper.

American keepers were given uniforms but Canadian keepers had no uniforms. All keepers were supposed to be on call twenty-four hours a day. The keeper was not on any account to absent himself without leave in writing from the Department, except to draw his salary and attend church. Every keeper was required to be sober, industrious, attentive to his duties, and orderly in his family. Drunkenness and letting the light go out were both causes for dismissal.<sup>5</sup>

The lighthouse keeper's life was lonely because he was on duty during the entire shipping season. He slept during day light hours, and worked through the night to keep the light lit and turning every 10 seconds. Revolving lights required rewinding a clockwork mechanism of cables and heavy weights. The chores never ceased. A typical day might include tending the light, washing windows, cleaning the lens, and whitewashing the walls with a concoction of lime, salt, whiting blue and boiling water. He used sand to filter impure or contaminated oil for the lighthouse lamps. He continually trimmed the wicks to prevent the lamps from smoking. For recreation light house keeper read, corresponded, built models, hunted, played cards, collected rocks or learned taxidermy.

### John Burgess 1848 - 1870

LIGHT KEEPER 1848 - 1870

John Burgess, a farmer from Burgess Point now the location of Rock Point provincial Park, was the first person hired to man the light. Born in Orkney, Scotland, he went to sea at the early age of fifteen. After several year's experience in the stormy seas that surrounding the islands around the north of Scotland, he was engaged for seven years



in the Greenland whale fishery. He was then employed in the trading in the West Indies, South America, and Honduras. He was for a number of years in the employ of the Dutch West India Company. He moved to Canada in 1835 where he engaged in sailing, commanding some of the largest vessels then on the lakes and was one of the widest known captains on these waters. In the spring of 1848 he was appointed by the Government to take charge of the newly erected Mohawk Island lighthouse.<sup>6</sup>

EACH 6 HOURS

He was paid £65 per season. The light was run on chains and weights, much like a grandfather clock and had to be wound every morning. One day, the mechanism failed. Unless that light turned as it was supposed to, captains of ships on Lake Erie might wreck their vessels on the reef. So all night long, Burgess and his son waved a blanket in front of the light, "making and breaking the flashes every few seconds as recorded on the charts." Afterwards, when the mechanism was working again, they were commended for their efforts.<sup>7</sup>

During his tenure, the lakeshore was in fear of an invasion from the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenian Brotherhood was an Irish-American organization dedicated to freeing Ireland from British rule by conquering the nearest British colony, Canada. Their plan was to march across the border and seize control of a portion of British North America. The Welland Canal, the Feeder Canal, and the Grand River were Fenian targets. A woman in a tavern in the United States overheard men discussing plans to land 60 Fenians on Mohawk Island in preparation for an invasion of Canada. When that story reached Dunnville, the citizens were in a state of panic. Every night local men took turns hiding behind bushes on the shore overlooking Mohawk Island to watch for the Fenians. There were several false alarms but no invasion from the Island.

### **Richard H. Smithers 1870 – 1895**

Richard Hudson Smithers was born in Kingston Ontario. When he was eighteen years of age he began work on vessels that sailed on the St. Lawrence River and later worked on the Erie Canal fleet. Within a few years he owned a small schooner which supplied bolts, wood, and grain to the American and Canadian sides of the St. Lawrence. In 1852 he bought a 50 acre farm in Sherbrooke Township and settled there with his family. He became the Captain of the steamer *Caledonia*, a Grand River freight and passenger boat. In 1854 he was mate of the *Plowboy*, a boat running between Port Stanley and Buffalo, and two years later was captain of the Steamer *Dover*. When the *Dover* burned to the waters edge in 1859, Smithers raised the boat and assisted in rebuilding it. For several years the *Dover* steamed down the river from Cayuga towing scows with lumber wood, and grain, saw logs and plaster. In 1865 he became Captain of the tugboat *Mary Ann*, owned by Lachlan McCallum and in 1867 took charge of McCallum's tug *The W. T. Robb*. Both boats were used for lake trade.

In 1870 he received an appointment from the John A. MacDonald government as lighthouse keeper at Mohawk Island.<sup>8</sup> Captain Smithers who was a man of kindly disposition loved to entertain visitors to the island by telling thrilling tales of ship wrecks on the reef. One was the *Westwind*, which he described as "a very classy yacht."<sup>9</sup>

He also told the story of another unsolved mystery of the sea: A farmer noticed a ship anchored near Mohawk Island one morning. Curious, he rowed over to the island in his boat. After searching for some time, he found a place where the earth had been



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moved. He started to dig and unearthed a dead woman's body. He reburied it and told the Reeve of the township who had it removed and interred in a local cemetery. They never knew her identity or whether or not she was murdered.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1880's a period of high water forced the threshold of the door of the keeper's house to be raised about fifteen inches and a concrete porch was added.

### **Richard O. Smithers 1895 – 1921**

When Smithers retired to his farm in Sherbrooke his son took over the post. Richard O. Smithers was appointment by the Mackenzie Bewell government to keep the light in 1895. He was born in Kingston in 1850 and moved to Dunnville with his parents in 1852. As soon as he was old enough Richard worked under his father on the *Dover*. He conducted a boot and shoe business in Dunnville for many years. Smithers was a member of the Live Oak Hose Company and played in the Live Oak Band.<sup>11</sup>

The *Dunnville Chronicle* described daily excursions to Mohawk Island during Richard O. Smithers' time. An account written in 1900 said a vessel "carried about 50 people down [to Mohawk Island] on Thursday evening, where an enjoyable time was spent with lighthouse-keeper Smithers. The party returning well pleased with the trip."

### **Richard J. Foster 1921 – 1932**

Richard Foster was appointed lighthouse keeper in 1921. Foster was born in Liverpool, England and immigrated to Canada in April 1911. After living in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, he moved his family to Dunnville in 1915. A short time later he enlisted with the 114<sup>th</sup> Haldimand Battalion, and served overseas in World War I, taking part in the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Every December at the end of the shipping season, he shut off the revolving light, turned on the stationary light and returned home until spring. In December 1932, his son James rowed over to the lighthouse to help close up for the season.

Richard Foster wrote in the lighthouse log: "7:45, Wednesday December 14, summer light put out and winter light left burning." The two men threw the remaining food supplies outside for birds and wild animals, locked up and started two mile boat journey back to shore. A heavy wind was blowing out of the southwest and the lake was filling with slush ice. It was hard going, and slow, the pair realized they were not making any progress. The slush ice was solidifying making control impossible. No matter how hard they pulled on the oars. The Fosters could not make headway. They drifted wherever wind, water and the pressure of the ice carried them. And through it all, they were never out of sight of the shore and the safe harbour.

Meanwhile the rest of the family was waiting for the men. When they did not return on schedule, Richard Foster, Jr., notified Constable Hayes of the Ontario Provincial Police, who in turn contacted the Coast Guard and the Welland detachment of the OPP. Police officers, fishermen, and others searched the shoreline between Port Colborne, and Port Maitland, but the ice piling onto the shore make it difficult of see any distance into the lake. When the missing alarm went out on Dec. 17, the communities of Dunnville and Port Maitland mobilized hundreds of men. They sent boats including the tug "Maitland 'Rose' and other craft into the water and people along the shoreline to look



for the missing men. Hundreds of citizens followed the shoreline in an endeavor to spot the boat and its occupants. Canada and United States coast guards also became involved.

When conditions improved, Richard Foster, Jr., and Ovide Charette rowed out to the island, only to find his father and brother gone.<sup>12</sup>

Exhausted and starving and numb from cold, the two men were losing their battle for survival. On Friday, two days after leaving the island and two miles off Port Colborne, the boat came close to land. Slush ice was turning to anchor ice and the bottom of the boat was being covered with an ever thickening layer which took the boat wherever it would, despite frantic pulling on the oars. Exhausted with, no food, they pulled against the waves for hours. But they kept drifting even with the shore and safety always in their sight. Two miles east of Port Colborne, the boat hit ice close enough for Jim in whom the final spark of life was still burning to crawled slowly over the ice toward safety.

He probably shouted feebly, trying to attract attention from a farmhouse faintly visible in the gathering dusk. Frantically he fought to make it to the top of a sand bank, its sides showing the signs of the terrific struggle, only to collapse at last and die, face down in the sand 20 yards from an occupied dwelling.

Eleven day later father and son were found, dead from exposure. Their small boat had been caught on an ice foe and carried down Lake Erie 27 miles to Point Abino. On Saturday afternoon Dec. 31, 1932, Mrs. Roger Hayes of Buffalo was walking along the beach at Lorraine, having visited her summer cottage when the barking of her dog attracted her attention. She found the body of a young man 75 yards from shore, face down in the sand near the steps leading up to a summer cottage. It was the body of James, 25 years of age. His 61 year old father's body was found a short distance away the Monday morning after. – His arm frozen fast in the ice 100 yards from the son. Pieces of the boat, oars and a blanket were found in the ice 2 miles east of Port Colborne. The boat was swept down the lake from Mohawk Point. James Foster still had dry matches in his pocket. He was dressed in a suit and light oxfords and his father also wore only a suit.

Double funeral services attended by a large number of people were held the following Tuesday conducted by the Rev. I. W. R. Hadley, rector of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Dunnville. On route to Riverside Cemetery the procession was led by the 37<sup>th</sup> Haldimand Rifles firing party. They were followed by the hearse carrying the father's body attended by members of the Legion. Then came the Orange Fife and Drum Band, and the hearse with the son who had been a member of the band. After the religious ceremony at the graveside had been concluded, military honours were given by a firing party and a bugle sounded the Last Post.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Foster was the last light keeper on to live on Mohawk Island. Had he lived the lighthouse may have continued to be manned for years after, and his son James might have followed in his footsteps as a keeper of the light.

### **Earl Siddall 1932 – 1964**

After the death of Richard Foster and his son, it was decided that the Mohawk Island Lighthouse should be unmanned but still kept operable. The last man to keep the light on a part time basis was a Port Maitland fisherman, Earl Siddall. In 1934 the oil light was replaced with an acetylene burner. In 1958 the burner was changed to an

electric light. Earl maintained the batteries to keep the light flashing which continued to guide fishing vessels and pleasure craft until 1969.<sup>14</sup> The light was then decommissioned and replaced by a navigational buoy still in service southeast of the island and the lighthouse was abandoned.



## Survival

In 1911 the Ontario Department of Lands, Forests and Mines recommended that ownership of Mohawk Island be transferred to the federal Department of Marine and Fisheries for lighthouse purpose. The island remained under the control of that agency, later called the Department of Transport or Transport Canada until 1969. In that year the Department of Transport transferred control of the island to Canadian Wildlife Service but formal transfer to title was not completed until 1976. In that year Order in Council transferred the Island to the Minister of Environment for use as a Migratory Bird Sanctuary.<sup>15</sup>

In the years following the Foster tragedy, the Mohawk Island Lighthouse has been in danger of destruction. The unoccupied lighthouse dwelling had been vandalized as early as 1938. In 1960 Long Point Gas and Oil Ltd., Simcoe, applied for drilling rights for natural gas on Mohawk Island. In 1964 Moffatt-Beckon Enterprises Ltd. of St. Catharines requested permission to lease Mohawk Island for the purpose of rebuilding the lighthouse and incorporating the island into a marina. Permissions were not granted for either of these applications on the recommendation of Lands and Survey Branch of the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests because the island was a large nesting colony of gulls and terns.<sup>16</sup> Deterioration of the structure continued and a fire set by vandals burned the stairs to the top of the tower and gutted the interior on October 17, 1969.

Mike Walker who owns a marina in Lowbanks recalls a night he spent on the Island as a boy. He and his father went fishing west of the island when Lake Erie decided to put on one of its performances of sudden winds and rain. Their small boat, a 3 horse power Johnson was no match for the waves. So the father and son spent the night in the abandoned keeper's house. It was then that Mike realized "that this stately tower should shine once more."

One day in the 1970's Mike was asked to give a ride on a boat to the island. The man turned out to be a contractor by the ministry of Transport to arrange for the demolition of the lighthouse. A boy climbing on the lighthouse fell and broke his arm and his dad who was a lawyer was suing Transport Canada. Mike told the contractor that he would not give him a ride out there to blow up the lighthouse.

The *Hamilton Spectator* reported that the lighthouse would be blown up in July 1977. The Canadian Coast Guard marine supervisor, Hugh Jones stated that the lighthouse was slowly falling apart and was a hazard to children playing around it. "It really isn't feasible to repair it, because it isn't used anymore. There are a lot of loose stones that could fall and hurt someone"<sup>17</sup> Jones, stated that the lighthouse would be dynamited since this method was quick and would not create any long term disturbance for the gulls that make the island their home.

The Dunnville Chronicle reported that the light beacon that has warded ships off its shoals and hidden reefs would come down that summer. Jerry Bell with the Ministry of Transportation stated that his department was being pressed by the federal government to get rid of the stone and cement structure because it is an eyesore. Another official at the Department of Transport also stated that the lighthouse is not much of a historical monument and actually is a hazard to people, especially young people who go exploring on it. "One of these days someone is going to get killed on that island and we're

liable.”<sup>18</sup>

Boaters, commercial fishermen lakeshore residents raised a storm of protest when the plan to demolish the lighthouse was made public, protested the plans. Maurice Edgar, a past president of the Dunnville Power Squadron was one of several local residents who circulated a petition against demolishing the lighthouse. He also gathered information about the lighthouse which he submitted to Welland Member of Parliament Dr. Vic Railton for his assistance.<sup>19</sup>

Many local people call Mohawk Island Gull Island because of the thousands of gulls that occupy it. The proper name is *Mohawk Island* because there is an island called *Gull Island* on the western part of Lake Erie between Middle Island and Kelleys Island. That island is a submerged shoal when the lake is high. A poem was written by James Rollo communicates the public feeling of support for preserving the lighthouse.

It stands just off Lake Erie's shore  
Its beacon flashing out no more,  
This silent sentinel once proud  
Is now Gull Island's stony shroud.  
'Twas built in eighteen forty eight  
To warn all those who navigate  
That perilous stretch of murky deep  
That seldom settles down to sleep.  
And through those years it's stood the test  
Sending its signal without rest,  
Steering countless seafaring souls  
Safely from Lake Erie's shoals.  
Till late in nineteen thirty one  
When keeper Foster and his son  
Set out to cross the ice in haste  
And died upon the frozen waste.  
It's been abandoned since that time  
'Cept for the gulls who reign sublime.  
There's talk of using dynamite  
To rid us of that spattered sight,  
But I've no doubt this would enrage  
All those who love our heritage.  
So let your hearts rule o're your skulls  
And leave Gull Island to the gulls.

Mike Walker went to the town hall in Dunnville to get information about the lighthouse. He discovered that Transport Canada had no claim to it. In 1976 the Governor General of Canada had transferred the management and direction of Mohawk Island from the Minister of Transport to the Minister of the Environment for use as a migratory bird sanctuary.<sup>20</sup> At the last moment the Department of Transportation discovered it did not own the property and so had no legal authority to demolish the building.

The public feeling in support of preserving the lighthouse delayed demolition and when Canadian Wildlife Service became aware of the demolition order, as owners of Mohawk Island they stopped the order. The *Dunnville Chronicle* reported the happy news that the lighthouse was saved from destruction. The federal Department of Transport was forced to abandon its plan to demolish the lighthouse after discovering at the last moment that the island belongs to Environment Canada. The superintendent of fixed aids for navigation had to admit that "We don't own the island the lighthouse is on."



C. A. Margison, superintendent of operation at the DOT field office in Prescott said that his office found this out "through the grapevine". When asked why the decision had been made to demolish the lighthouse, he replied "We're not in the business of maintaining antiques." He added that the main reason for not demolishing the lighthouse was "The DOT no longer owns it."<sup>21</sup>

Aside from the historical significance of the lighthouse, many still used it as a landmark, a useful reference point in navigating the reefs around Mohawk Island. James E. Hall, a Port Maitland commercial fisherman was glad they saved it. "I've lived round here all my life and I'd sure miss it. Even on a foggy day you can pick things up so far but with the island you can pick up the lighthouse," he said.

In a press release when he got the news, Welland MP Dr. Vic Railton said "It is hoped that one of the federal ministries will accept a commitment to preserve the lighthouse as a monument of local interest."<sup>22</sup>

There were once over 350 lighthouses on the Great Lakes. The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway to ocean-going vessels in 1959 sounded the death knell for many of them. Huge sea-going vessels with depth gauges and modern satellite navigational systems could travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the western part of Lake Superior with no need for a light house. In 1991 the last manned Canadian lighthouse on the Great Lakes at Battle Island on Lake Superior was automated and left without a keeper.

Today lighthouses are almost lost to history. Canadian lighthouses have been automated and decommissioned. Lighthouses have been burned, blown up, or torn down to prevent costly maintenance, vandalism, and liability. Only recent public outcry has made people aware of their heritage and the need to preserve these irreplaceable structures. These structures serve as monuments to a bygone era. Modern technology has rendered them obsolete and unwanted but they have earned the right to be preserved as part of our heritage and to grace our waterways for future generations.

The shallows around Mohawk Island are as dangerous to the weekend boater as they were danger to large ships with minimal navigational aids of 150 years ago. Earl Siddall, who was the last to maintain the Mohawk Island light, said before he died in 2000 that the light should be put back in operation. He noted that, despite the fact the island is on navigational charges and that a lighted marker buoy is near by, the island cannot be seen in the fog and at night. A light would also serve, as it did in the past, as a key navigational aid by boats far out in the lake. Several large boats are pulled off the reefs and shoals surrounding the island each year.

The Long Point Lighthouse built in 1830 was replaced by a second lighthouse in 1842 and a third in 1916. The Mohawk Island Lighthouse still stands thanks to the excellent work of John Brown. It is apparent that years of exposure to Lake Erie winds and waves have done less damage to it than human vandalism. John Brown's craftsmanship that went into the construction is impressive. It is evident that stones and mortar of the highest quality was used and that the Mohawk Island Lighthouse was built to last.<sup>23</sup>

All that is left of the Mohawk Island Lighthouse is the tower, the lighthouse turret and the four walls which once made up the lighthouse keeper's house. It stands as a hallow masonry ruin. The roof and lantern room and the stairs which took the keeper to the top of the tower six times a day are gone now as are the six 10 foot floors which separated the landings. The tower gives pigeons a place to nest. The lantern from the



tower is now in the Port Dover Museum.

The old stone structure has not had a light on it since 1969 when vandals landed on the island, scaled the tower and demolished the beacon. The interior of the tower has been taken over by waterfowl and their dung, as there is no roof on the lighthouse keeper's quarters. The floor is long gone and is now replaced with rubble and thick grass. Restoring the lighthouse to his glory days as a warning post for a reef located between Lowbanks and Port Maitland would be a tremendous undertaking. Lake Erie storms have taken their toll on some areas of stone work causing erosion and cracking of some mortar joints. Repairs are needed on the keeper's house. New lintels are needed over the doors and the walls need to be fortified.

It is not within Environment Canada's mandate to repair or restore the building but only "to retain the historic lighthouse structure without active preservation or repair."<sup>24</sup> At the present time a group of concerned citizens led by Mike Walker are working to restore repair, protect, and preserve the Mohawk Island Lighthouse. The Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association has worked to bring life back to this once vital aid to mariners.

The Association plans to repair fallen stone and mortar on the keeper's house wall, mill eight - 16 foot long roof rafters out of white pine, and install concrete roofing. The original roof was slate or cedar, but the Preservation Society plans to use a fireproof product to combat vandals. Then they will excavate the keeper's house floor to accept a new pine floor and remove 40 years of bird droppings from the tower base. They will fabricate a new door and four steel shutters to secure the windows of the keeper's house to safeguard against a forced entry. In order to insure vandals can not burn down the building, all the exterior surfaces will be of a non-burnable material.

The lantern room will be rebuilt and a new lantern installed. The beacon which replaced the lighthouse beacon stands on a buoy three kilometers south of the island. The Division of the Canadian Coast Guard that oversees navigational aids such as lighthouses has given assurance that if the tower can be made safe and secure the a solar powered flasher could be installed as a navigational light.

A commemorative "cairn" will be built on the north-west facing shore to recognize the courageous men that kept the light on Mohawk Island. The monument will have a bronze plaque telling the story of the Fosters and list the keepers who tended the light.

The Mohawk Island Lighthouse is of considerable historic interest in the local area. It has guided vessels of sail, then steam-driven paddle wheelers, and later diesel powered propeller vessels. It serves as a navigational landmark for pleasure boats. It stands today as a landmark and a reminder of the region's navigational history.<sup>25</sup>



### Wildlife Area

In 1977 the Island was formally recognized as a National Wildlife Area. Mohawk Island is a small sparsely vegetated rock outcrop located approximately 2 kilometres south of Lake Erie's Ontario shore. Situated in Mohawk Bay the island is in the eastern basin of Lake Erie where its waters are deepest. Lake Erie storms can create waves higher than Mohawk Island itself. Bare limestone constitutes much of the island surface, but a thin layer of soil has developed on some higher areas and in crevices. The island is diamond shaped and contains between 2 and 3 acres depending on the level of the lake. The north east shore is a fine pebbly beach; the remaining shores are flat fringed with tall grass growing out of crevices. There is a depression of the rock on the south west shore which permits a neck of water to stretch up onto the island forming pond which makes the island appear to be in the shape of a horseshoe. Amid the brush and rocks on the island are hundreds of eggs and thousands of zebra mussel shells. The shoals are excellent spawning grounds for fish.

Few permanent wildlife residents survive the exposed conditions but every spring the rock comes alive with the arrival of the vast number of gulls that breed on the Island or that rest there during the summer. Various species of waterfowl frequent the area, and in spring and autumn the Island is a stopover for migrant birds, especially shore birds and waterfowl.

The Mohawk Island National Wildlife Area is managed by Environment Canada for the conservation and protection of nesting habitat for migratory birds. The management philosophy for Mohawk Island is to protect and preserve the nesting habitat of fish eating birds, and to permit public use of the Island when uses will not interfere with nesting. Birds that visit or nest on the island include Double-crested Cormorants, Brant and American Black Ducks, Mallards, Red-breasted Mergansers, Dunlin, Bonaparte's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, Herring Gulls, Great Black-backed Gulls, Caspian Terns, and Common Terns, Blue Herons, Ruddy Turnstone, and Semipalmated Sandpipers as well as red winged blackbirds and song sparrows. Eastern garter snakes live in the ruins of the lighthouse.

Public access to Mohawk Island National Wildlife Area is permitted from August 1 through March 31 only. Entry to the Mohawk Island is not permitted during those times of the year when human activities interfere with the bird nesting, April 1 through July 31.<sup>26</sup> The best way to see the lighthouse is by boat. In order to see the Mohawk Island Lighthouse from land, take Regional Road 3 East (Not Highway 3) from Dunnville through Stromness. East of Stromness the road bends to the left. After the bend turn on Pyle Road toward the lake and at the end there is a good view of the lighthouse.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "Lighthouses of Lake Erie", Author unknown, Dunnville District Heritage Association collection.
- <sup>2</sup> Agnus Scott, "Uncovering Feeder Canal's Lock 27", *The Dunnville Chronicle*, October 28, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Wayne Sapulski, "John L. Brown: Lighthouse Builder Extraordinaire", *Great Lakes Cruiser*, Royal Oaks, MI, Vol. 2, Issue 3, March 1995, p., 30.
- <sup>4</sup> Bob Mossman, "Tragedy ended era of keeping the light", *The Tribune*, Welland, May 6, 1995.
- <sup>5</sup> Rules and Instructions for the Guidance of Light Keepers, Dominion of Canada, Government Printing Bureau, 1905.
- <sup>6</sup> Obituary, *Dunnville Gazette*, June 11, 1885..
- <sup>7</sup> W. M. Rowe, *Memories of Dunnville Pt. Maitland & Vicinity*, Limited Edition Book, p. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Hudson Smithers Obituary, *Dunnville Chronicle*, June 9, 1905.
- <sup>9</sup> Letter to Mike Walker from Betty Garbritt.
- <sup>10</sup> Rowe, p. 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Obituary Richard O. Smithers, Sr., *Dunnville Chronicle*, September 22, 1933.
- <sup>12</sup> Two are Feared Victim of Ice Waters of Lake" *Welland Tribune*, December 18, 1932, "Double Drowning is Feared", *Dunnville Chronicle*, December 23, 1932.
- <sup>13</sup> "Death Wins 3 Day Race with Ice", *Toronto Star*, January 3, 1932, "Bodies of Richard Foster and Son James are Recovered", *Welland Tribune*, January 4, 1932.
- <sup>14</sup> Management Plan: Mohawk Island National Wildlife Area, Environment Canada, Canadian Wildlife Service, March 1985, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Management Plan, p. 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Letter from J. N. Ballinger, Department of Transport to The Surveyor General, Lands and Survey Branch, Ontario Department of Lands and Forest, National Archives of Canada.
- <sup>17</sup> Kevin Cox, "Lake Erie lighthouse will be snuffed out" *Hamilton Spectator*, July 2, 1977.
- <sup>18</sup> Ralph Ventresca, "Demolition of Gull Island lighthouse may come soon", *Dunnville Chronicle*, July 6, 1977.
- <sup>19</sup> D'Arcy Jenish, "Lighthouse saved", *Dunnville Chronicle*, July 13, 1977.
- <sup>20</sup> Privy Council Document 1976-2544, 14 October, 1976, National Archives of Canada
- <sup>21</sup> "Lighthouse saved".
- <sup>22</sup> "Lighthouse saved".



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<sup>23</sup>Wayne Sapulski, "Remote Treasurers of the Great Lakes: Mohawk Island Lighthouse", *Great Lakes Cruiser*, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup>Management Plan p. 2.

<sup>25</sup>Management Plan, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup>Management Plan, p. 7.

His last and great contracts were on the New Welland Canal, having sections 14,15,16,21,22,31 and 33 and the dredging of the Port Dalhousie harbor. He was the largest contractor on the new canal, the estimates of his contracts being close to \$2,000,00

Mr. John Brown was known all over Canada and his fame spread to the United States, and even to the old country, and he no doubt will be missed by many in these places. It is in our midst, however, that his loss will be most keenly felt. Ever since he came to Thorold in the year 1843, his name has been associated with the town, and he has been mainly instrumental in making Thorold what it is now. He employed a large number of men on his contracts, and besides these his quarries, limekilns, cement and plaster mills, plaster beds, give occupation to many more. It is said that there were five hundred men employed at the time of his death on the canal works alone. As an employer he was highly respected and loved by his men. One feature in Mr. Brown's position as an employer was that he had in his employ men who had been with him for thirty and forty years steadily. He made a rule that if he found a good man to endeavor always to keep him.

Like many other great men Mr. Brown was adverse to having his will made. Though urged repeatedly by his most intimate friends to do this most important duty, he always put it off. It is said that his estate is worth over \$500,000. This cannot well be administered in the usual form as the parties administering estates are required to furnish securities to double the amount of the estate. In all probability, the estate will be thrown into Chancery. In the meantime the sureties and assignees can carry on the contracts on the canal, if the Government choose to let it be done.

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