

Going Towards the Lights in Atlantic Canada: Highlighting Lighthouses on Canadian Register of Historic Places

“Few buildings,” observes Darin MacKinnon, “say ‘Atlantic Canada’ more than lighthouses.” As Registrar of Heritage Places with Prince Edward Island’s Department of Community and Cultural Affairs, MacKinnon sifts through and organizes information about historic places in his province to list on the Canadian Register of Historic Places. Lighthouses stand out. “Those lonely sentinels are iconic,” he says. “They’re beacons from our past.”

It is obvious that people from all over share some of MacKinnon’s appreciation for lighthouses from the array of books on the subject, as well lighthouse motif paraphernalia – watches, thermometers, rugs, bedding, dinnerware and lawn ornaments. Historic lighthouses are often star attractions in their regions. The octagonal lighthouse at Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia is among the most photographed buildings in Canada. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Provincial Historic Site with the most annual visitors is Cape Bonavista Lighthouse on the east coast of the island.

The lure of the lights:

“Lighthouses are alluring for many different reasons,” says Tim Harrison, President of the American Lighthouse Association and Editor of Lighthouse Digest, which has subscribers in more than twenty countries. He points to their architecture, beauty and associated tales of bravery, rescues and even ghosts, and notes, “One can learn more about a nation’s early maritime history by studying lighthouses than from any other single source.”

For some people part of the lure of lighthouses arises out of personal history as much as the history of the structures themselves. “I can’t remember a time when there wasn’t a lighthouse in my life,” says Carol Livingstone of O’Leary, Prince Edward Island. “Our house was the closest one to the West Point Lighthouse on the Island. I grew up hearing stories from my grandfather about his father, ‘Lighthouse Willie’ Mac Donald, who was the light keeper for fifty years. And I went to the lighthouse with other youngsters to visit Bennie Mac Issac, who was the keeper for thirty-eight years. He would light the old kerosene lamp while he told us tales which often sent us running home, delightfully terrified!” Today Livingstone is counted among the truest of lighthouse devotees – the volunteers working to preserve them.

Stories to tell, stories to save:

Considering the coastlines of the four Atlantic Provinces are punctuated with more than 300 lighthouses and related structures, one might think there are enough of these beacons to shed ample light on the past. But Tim Harrison points out, “Although many lighthouses may be similar in appearance, each is unique in its own way, from its location, to its history, to its style. Each lighthouse has a different story to tell.”

Harrison also issues a call to action: “Lighthouses were built for one purpose only – to save lives. Now it’s our turn to save the lighthouses.” Automation has led to the loss of historic lighthouses at a considerable rate. There were more than 800 lighthouses in Canada in the 1920s, and now there are just over 500.

In 2004, Parks Canada and its provincial and territorial partners launched the Canadian Register of Historic Places (CRHP). It is a searchable online source of information about historic places anywhere in Canada which have been formally recognized by the country's federal, provincial or territorial, and local governments. More than forty historic lighthouses and related structures are listed on the register.

Darin MacKinnon points to the listing for Point Prim Lighthouse, built in 1845 and the first lighthouse in Prince Edward Island, as an example of the type of information provided by the CRHP. "That lighthouse," he says, "was built to guide ships into Charlottetown's harbour. It evokes the age of sail, and is also part of the legacy of builder Isaac Smith. He came from England to the Island in 1817, when he was only twenty-two years old and started out as a carpenter. He went on to design the lighthouse, the Lieutenant Governor's house called Fanningbank, and the Province House."

MacKinnon's counterpart in New Scotia, the province with the most lighthouses in Canada, is Rebecca Kennedy. She is Senior Registrar with the Historic Places Initiative and offers Fort Point Lighthouse at Liverpool as a rare, surviving example of pre-Confederation lighthouses. In New Brunswick, Provincial Registrar Lawren Campbell believes the lighthouse at Head Harbour on the northern tip of Campobello Island is the most photographed lighthouse in the world. "Its distinctive red cross daymark has been on the lighthouse as far back as Confederation," he notes.

Light stations to dwell on:

Two of the most recently added CRHP listings from Newfoundland and Labrador highlight other buildings associated with lighthouses. The dwelling at Long Point Light Station at Crow Head, near Twillingate, housed the light keeping families upon whom fishermen, sealers and hunters historically relied for crucial weather information and navigation through an expanse of ocean now known as Iceberg Alley. The Town of Crow Head plans to restore the 1876 double dwelling, which was deemed a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador in December 2006.

The other recently listed historic place is on Newfoundland's Southern Shore and well known to Jill Curran. She operates a summer picnic service at Ferryland Head, where her great-grandfather was light keeper. "As you enter Ferryland from the south or the north, the first thing you see is Ferryland Head and Lighthouse jutting out into the sea," she says. "It looks beautiful from that viewpoint, and it seems people are drawn to it."

Curran has been involved with the restoration of the lighthouse at Ferryland Head, and when the local town council designated the light keeper's dwelling and surrounding land as a Municipal Heritage Site, she helped the Historic Places Initiative office in St. John's to gather information for its CRHP listing. "Worldwide, lighthouses hold a sense of wonder for people," she says, "and Newfoundland is blessed with such beautiful lighthouses. They are yet another reason for people to visit our province."

The staff working on the Historic Places Initiative in Atlantic Canada hope that the Canadian Register of Historic Places will help people discover and appreciate historic places like light stations, and perhaps be enticed to see them firsthand. Anyone who wants to learn about recognized historic light stations anywhere in the country can visit the CRHP online at

www.historicplaces.ca. Be sure to check out the listings for sites in Atlantic Canada, a stronghold of seafarers and the light stations that serve them.