

The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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John L. Brown and his Mohawk Island Lighthouse

Mohawk Island Lighthouse

by Mike Walker

When we think of six storey buildings, we never think of a building constructed without electricity, or on a four-acre island and never think of a six-storey structure built as early as 1846. Let me introduce you to the Mohawk Island Lighthouse. Shortly after the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, setting forth post war conditions of regiments, boundaries and vessels, the British Admiralty charted Mohawk Bay and in 1816 contracted the design of a lighthouse. The mouth of the Grand River had proven a significant natural harbour. Therefore, the protection of vessels from the hazardous Mohawk Reef was paramount.

As our country grew in homesteading and commerce as did the United States, both countries were preoccupied with transportation by water. In Canada, the young entrepreneur and visionary, William Hamilton Merritt convinced others to help him with his dream of linking lakes Ontario and Erie with a "Great Ditch" to compete with the American Erie Barge Canal in New York State.

Few people knew when or where Merritt's early surveys were taken. Numerous options of entry were available

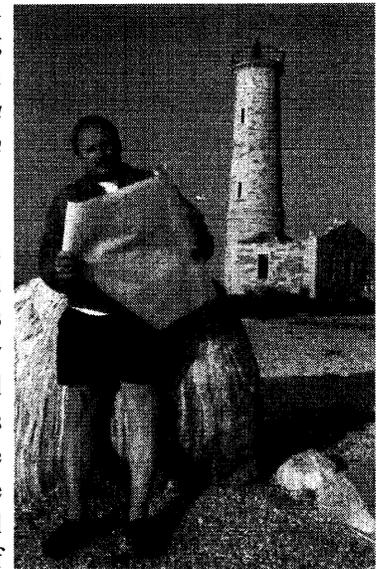


Courtesy Mike Walker

besides Port Colborne. The east side of Point Industry (now Morgan's Point) and the east side of Point Selkirk (now Mohawk Point) were both considered for the Lake Erie terminus of the second Welland Canal. The need for sufficient "head waters" to lock ships through the canal was critical and since there was little historical water level data then, they decided to create higher levels in the Grand River and flow water from Dunnville through Stromness and on through the Welland Feeder Canal. If not for Merritt's ditch, we may never have had the development of Dunnville.

One of Merritt's directors of the Welland Canal Company was a Scottish stone mason and contractor John L. Brown, a man capable of building stone lighthouses on remote locations. (*Ya see where I'm headed?*)

John Brown, born in Loneyshire Scotland in 1809, at 20 years immigrated to New York where he worked on the last stone locks of the Erie Barge Canal. These stone locks far outperformed the wooden locks of the first Welland Canal. After the purchase of the



Mike Walker looking at drawings of Mohawk Lighthouse.

Mike Walker collection

Queenston Quarry, Mr. Brown was awarded contracts to build locks, bridge abutments and roadways for the second and third Welland Canal. Being somewhat of a risk-taker, John Brown bid on the construction of the Mohawk Lighthouse, contract # 442.



Mike Walker collection

In the spring of 1847, a four-man crew started the temporary shelter for the men, then the stone tower. The Queenston blue shale and limestone were split in Queenston, transported overland to Port Robinson then by ship through the Welland Canal, transferred to Port Maitland via the Feeder

Canal and then out to the island. The construction took two seasons. One unusual aspect of the design of this structure is that the original drawings are dated 1816, and not built until 1847. This information compels us to consider that the original purpose of the Mohawk Light may have been more for the benefit of the naval station in Port Maitland than Great Lakes Ships, since the Welland Canal did not cut through Humberstone until 1833.

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. These lights enlisted ten coal oil lamps with 'catoptric reflectors' revolving a beam of light visible for ten miles. The Mohawk Light 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, that the keeper had to climb every six hours in order to 'change the works,' a method of pulling up a counter weight the distance of sixty feet to keep the light rotating. Lighthouses advanced with technology. After coal oil, the use of kerosene increased illumination by a factor of four, and was used until a Canadian development, we still call acetylene, revolutionized lighthouses the world over.

Mohawk's first keeper was a local farmer, John Burgess, hired on at the portly sum of 65 pounds

sterling per season. Mr. Burgess kept the light bright from 1848 until 1870, followed by Richard H. Smithers who in 1895 past the job to his son, Richard O. Smithers. Richard J. Foster took the light in 1921 and kept it until 1932 when tragedy hit Richard and his son Jim. At the end of the navigational season, due to a cold spell that covered Mohawk Bay in thin ice, the two headed to shore early. It was assumed that they were caught in the ice and unable to do anything, but hope the drifting ice would take them close to shore. Fish tugs and many others tried to find the cold and helpless pair without luck. On New years day, a woman walking her dog at Point Albino found young Jim under a cottage frozen to death. Richard was found later, he had perished in the small boat. Their lives were given so ships could safely reach their destinations.



A 1900, photo of the lighthouse showing modified roof. It seems that Mr. Smithers liked to swing.

Photo courtesy Mike Walker collection

The last man to keep the light on a part-time basis was Earl Siddall of Port Maitland, who just recently passed-on. Earl maintained the batteries to keep the light flashing until it was replaced in 1964, by a navigational buoy 'EA4' still in service southeast of the island. The 'keepers' quarters, as illustrated in a drawing, had a single bedroom, a kitchen with a cookstove and a sitting room with a brick lined corner fireplace. There was a central hall from the only door into the tower. In the 1880's, a period of high water forced the threshold of the door to be raised about 15 inches and a concrete porch was added, which has since broken apart thanks to the fury of Lake Erie.



Ruins of Mohawk Island Lighthouse as it looks today.

Photo courtesy Mike Walker

Presently, our lonely lighthouse stands as a reminder of an age of great growth. It guided vessels of sail, then steam-driven paddle wheelers and later diesel powered propellers. It has out lived the Fenian raids, the American Civil War and two world wars. For a decade the Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association has vowed to bring life back to this once vital aid to mariners. The shallows around the island are as dangerous to the weekend boater today as they were danger to large ships with minimal navigational aids of 150 years ago.



Ruins of Mohawk Island Lighthouse as it looks today.

Photo courtesy Mike Walker

Through the sale of limited edition prints of the lighthouse, painted by marine artist John Marshall, funds have been raised for the construction of the lantern room now in progress. Most local residents are unaware that the island is presently under Federal authority of the Canada Wildlife Service. Due to the nesting of birds such as the Ringbill and Herring Gulls, the Common and Caspian Turns, and recently the Common Cormorants,

the public is asked to keep off the island until August each year. This past winter, mother nature has taken her toll on some areas of stone work, causing erosion and cracking of some mortar joints. It is time to effect repairs to the keepers' house. This fall a crew of masons with experience in stone reconstruction will be fitting new lintels over the windows and fortifying the walls. If interest can be found, a fundraising dinner will be held in the near future to set in motion the finances required to rebuild the roof and finish the lantern house. Since our display at the Dunnville Library last winter, thanks to the Dunnville District Historical Society, the Provincial Government indicated this project could receive some assistance through the Ontario Trillium Foundation. This paper work is now in progress.

Keeping the public involved is paramount. Should you or anyone you know have old photos or just historical information on the lighthouse, we would be excited to hear from you. Let's strive to allow our grandchildren to see the Mohawk Lighthouse as it was build never to be forgotten. The End.

Mike Walker is the President Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association. You may contact Mike at R. R. # 2 Lowbanks, ON N0A 1K0. You also may order a print by John Marshall of Mohawk Island Lighthouse from Mike at Mohawk Marina in Lowbanks.

From Old Newspapers and Books Etc., Etc.

Lake Erie Fishermans Assessment Report; 176 years ago (1825) Pickering sees some old vessels of war sunk and rotting at the Naval Depot. Gull Island (Mohawk Island) near by refuge for ships.

The Dunnville Gazette; 116 years ago (1885) Port Maitland, Obituary for Captain John Burgess, . . . In the spring of 1848, he was appointed by the Government to take charge of the Mohawk Island lighthouse, then newly erected. He held this position until the fall of 1873, when he was superannuated and placed on the retirement list. Deceased leaves two sons and two daughters and a large number of relatives to mourn his loss.

The Dunnville Chronicle; 101 years ago (1900) Stromness, The Bay View Fish Co. are running excursions daily to Mohawk Island and receiving a very liberal patronage. They carried about 50 people down on Thursday evening, where an enjoyable time was spent with lighthouse-keeper Smithers. The party returning well pleased with the trip.

The Dunnville Gazette and Chronicle; 69 years ago (1932) Port Maitland, There is a lengthy story of the two missing Foster men Richard age 61, his son James, 25. It tells how the family waits anxiously daily and that another son Richard Foster Jr., and Mr. Ovide Charette made a visit to Mohawk Island and found it closed for the winter with the light fixed in a stationary position for the winter. It further tells of that what made this even more tragic is the two men had been returning home to assist the family after there had been a fire in the home. It tells about the search effort by local fisherman as well as the United States Coast Guard.

In Memoriam

McKeown, Maitland,: Died June 23, 2001. Maitland was born in Port Maitland 97 years ago. In 1915 his family home was purchased by the TH&B Railway and the house was moved across the river on the ice. Mait

was a regular contributor to the Grand Dispatch.

Jones, Kenneth,: Died June 27, 2001. Ken was a long-time summer resident of Beckley Beach (Lot 34). He married Norma Denman who's family had a cottage at lot 40A for many years. Ken and Norma have three grown children, all of whom are married. They are Judi Donley, Karen Redding (lot 67), and Cathy Johnson. They also have four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Do you know anyone who wants a Dispatch?

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1. Note; different date for Captain Burgess's retirement in 'From Old Newspapers and Books Etc.'