



Heritage Notes

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The Louisbourg Library - 50 Years

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The Louisbourg Branch of the Cape Breton Regional Library opened on October 6, 1950. It was on the ground floor of the Navy League building on Main Street. Christine MacLean was the first librarian.¹

Deputy Mayor Charles Bagnell chaired the official opening. The guest speakers included Rev. J. T. Turner of St. Bartholomew's Church, Rev. C.C. Walls of First United Church, Rev. Michael J. MacSween of Stella Maris Church, William Hilchie, the school principal, and Miss Ruby Wallace. A month before, Miss Wallace had come to Sydney as the first Regional Librarian.²

A regional library service was not a new idea to the people of Louisbourg. In September 1937, Mayor Melvin Huntington chaired a meeting in the town office attended by Miss Nora Bateston who was carrying out a provincial survey of the feasibility of establishing regional library boards. There were twenty people at the meeting including: Rev. D. A. MacMillan, Rev. D. H. Doyle, Beecher Spencer, Mary Campbell who was the principal of Louisbourg school, Annie Pope, Mary Hiltz, Blanche Cross, Margaret Campbell, Donald Wilson, D. M. Johnston, Mrs. MacPhail, Mrs. A. W. Cameron, Mrs. Roy Ingraham, Mrs. George Lewis and Rev. Alexandre Poirier of Main-à-Dieu.

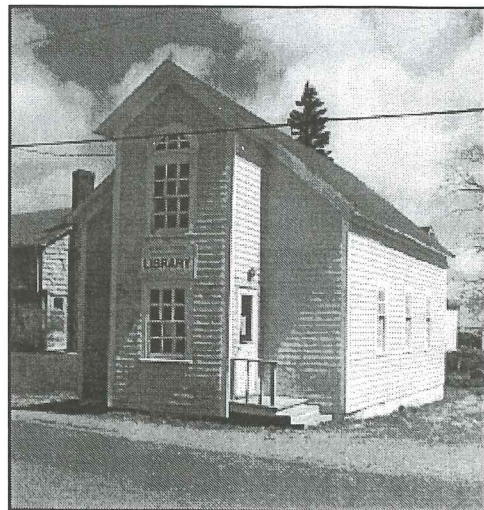
It was because of the encouragement of interested people in Cape Breton County that a provincial act was passed in 1937, giving municipal governments the power to tax to support regional library services.³ One of the forces behind the regional library movement was Rev. J. Tompkins who opened a "People's Library" at Reserve in the 1930s. Still, the establishment of a regional library was some way off. At a meeting of the mayors of the municipalities in 1939 it was decided that the idea was not financially viable.⁴

After World War II the cause was taken up again and the Cape Breton Regional Library Board was established in 1950 along with a number of branches.⁵ Mayor George Lewis of Louisbourg was present at the first meeting of the Library Board on March 14, 1950, as was Rev. J. T. Turner, of St. Bartholomew's, who was a member of the library campaign committee. Mayor Lewis and his local committee established the location of the Louisbourg library by August.

Placing the library in the Navy League was appropriate since the building was the centre of activity in the town. The library was in the room to the right as you entered through the front door. It was open 8 hours each week: Tuesdays and Saturdays from 3 to 5 P.M., and 7:30 to 9:30 P.M.⁶

On November 6, 1950 the *Post Record* reported that the Louisbourg branch "has started with gratifying success which is indicated by the membership and books read for the first month." There were 47 adult members and 50 junior members of the library, with 127 books taken out by adults and 159 taken out by juniors. By December 1950 there were 111 new adult members and 48 young members. Christine MacLean recalled that when the library opened that first year there were only 112 books in the library.⁷ A year later, according to the Board minutes for January 1952, there were 651 books in stock, 215 adult members and 181 children. The total circulation was 6402 books. So successful was the library that by May 1951 the hours had increased from 8 hours a week to 12 hours.

Gerry Gartland remembers the Navy League library. He says that when he moved to Louisbourg he was pleasantly surprised that there was a library with a good selection of books.⁸ Clara Beaton, who was the Assistant to the Branch Supervisor, recalled the first library. She said that "It was very small, tidy and right on the main street. . . One side was mainly children's books and the other side was a mixture of various adult books and magazines."⁹



W.W. Lewis Memorial Library



Christine MacLean (1950-1971/2) with students Alberta Bates and Barry MacLeod, October 1950 (Post-Record)

The library remained in the Navy League building until April 30, 1964 when it moved into the present location on Upper Warren Street. George D. Lewis purchased the new building in memory of his father, W. W. Lewis the first mayor of Louisbourg, and gave it to the Town.¹⁰ The municipality maintains the W.W. Lewis Memorial Library building and provides services, while the Regional Library Board supplies the books, pays the librarian and purchases supplies.

Clara Beaton said, "I was there the day the books were moved from the old library to the new one. Miss Ruth McDormand was the Branch Supervisor and I was her assistant. We went out to Louisbourg and a truck was rented or borrowed from the town. Miss McDormand worked in the new building and I packed all the books in boxes . . . We started at one in the afternoon and were through at 3:30. Still, the books were not shelved in proper order until the next day."

Donna MacDonald, the Branch Supervisor from 1967 until she retired in 1999, spent many years working with the Louisbourg library. She remembered her first contact vividly. "It was a small church, a lovely bright building. It was so very pleasant. Mrs. Christine MacLean was the librarian. She was a teacher and came up after school to the branch. The hours for the library were Tuesday from 3 to 5 and 7 to 9, Thursday 7 to 9, and Saturday 3 to 5 and 7 to 9. There was a heater in the middle of the floor and it could be very cold. . . I remember Mr. George Lewis very well. He was such a font of information that I looked forward to him coming over. He always had lovely stories."¹¹ The new library was made particularly attractive by the addition of flower boxes and petunias donated by the Women's Institute.¹²

The library building was constructed around 1860 as St. James Methodist Church. It was replaced in 1916 by the present First United Church. Between 1916 and 1949 the building was owned by the Independent Order of Good Templars. Known as the IOGT Hall, it had many community uses including political smokers, Women's Institute meetings, and the Home Guard headquarters in WWII. In 1949, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Louisbourg purchased the building and used it as a place of worship. It was empty for several years before becoming the library in 1964.¹³

In the 1969 Annual Report, Mary Fraser, the Chief Librarian of the Library Board, reported that microfilmed copies of the Melvin S. Huntington Diaries had been added to the Nova Scotia Collection at the McConnell Library in Sydney. The microfilm was produced by the Provincial Archives from the original diaries held in the Louisbourg library.

Christine MacLean retired at the end of 1971 or early in 1972.¹⁴ Jean Chisholm became the new librarian in 1972 and remained so until December 1974.¹⁵ It was in 1972 that paperback books were first placed in the Louisbourg library. Paperbacks were introduced at the McConnell Memorial Library in Sydney in 1967 to attract high school readers. They proved so popular that, beginning in 1968, they were sent to other branch libraries. According to Donna MacDonald, "these books are very popular in the small libraries as they provide a greater selection of titles especially in the fiction collection." About this time, as well, the Louisbourg library got a collection of French language children's books. This was the result of a drive to teach local children French to better prepare them for possible work at the Fortress of Louisbourg. Louisbourg was one of the first branches with a French collection.



*Jean Chisholm (1972-1974)
photo courtesy Jean Pearl*

Helen O'Shea was the librarian from December 1974 until May 1977.¹⁶ During this period the library was open 10 hours a week: Tuesday 2 to 4 P.M. and 7 to 9 P.M., Thursday 2 to 4 P.M. and 7 to 9 P.M. and Saturday from 2 to 4 P.M. The library was no longer open on Saturday evening.

Helen recalled the oil stove and having to go down to the library a couple of hours early in the day during the winter to turn up the heat to have the building warm when she came to work. Her chair was as close to the stove as possible and the desk faced the door. There was no washroom in the building, the closest being in the home of Mrs. Eva Lewis. She said that Annie MacLeod, Bill Skinner and Gerry Gartland were frequent library users. School children came regularly for projects and they usually came with their parents.¹⁷ Students were allowed to sign out only three books out at a time, so parents would sign out any additional children's books.

Helen remembers that the library began to receive large print books from the Regional Library collection in 1976. These books proved so popular in Louisbourg and the North Sydney branches that there were plans to put them in more libraries. This practice lasted in the Louisbourg library until January 2000 when the large print books were discontinued because there was no longer a demand for them.

Marjorie MacDonald, began work at the library in April 1977. As of September 2000 she is working on her 24th year at the Louisbourg branch - the longest serving librarian.

In the Annual Report for 1978, Chief Librarian Mary Fraser wrote about an oil heater malfunction which scattered soot throughout the Louisbourg library. It took several weeks for repairs and cleanup. Marjorie MacDonald remembers the incident clearly. As was the usual practice, she had come a couple of hours earlier to start the oil heater so that the library would be warm that evening. When she arrived for work the first thing that she saw the stove pipe glowing a bright red. There was no telephone, so she ran into the street where she met Harold and Jessie Rudderham and asked them to call the fire department. The fire department arrived and quickly took care of the danger. Marjorie recalls that "The soot was stuck to everything, black oily soot everywhere. We were closed for a long time, for the cleanup. After that is when we got electric heat."¹⁸

The 1981 Annual Report notes that Eileen Kingsbury was appointed to the position of Co-ordinator of Children's programming. Beginning that year until the present there are several special reading programmes for the Louisbourg library each year.

In 1982 Mary Fraser retired. Ian MacIntosh replaced her as Regional Librarian and remains in that position to the present day.

In 1986 a washroom was added to the Library though the librarian waited for two more years before water was actually connected. In 1986 the windows were repaired and additional shelving was installed. In 1987



Helen O'Shea (1974-1977)

the weekly hours of the Louisbourg library were increased from 10 to 15. Towards the end of 1989 the library got a telephone and the town also arranged to install a metal front door and to buy 3 study tables and a new desk for the librarian. In 1989 the library hours changed to 21 hours each week: Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 2 to 5 P.M. and 7 to 9 P.M. and Wednesday and Saturday from 2 to 5 P.M.

With the 1990s came some major changes. In January 1990 the video lending service began. A kinderbox and new shelving were also added to the library.



Marjorie MacDonald (1977 to the present)

The building underwent a major renovation in 1993 with the result that it was closed for much of March and April. Renovations included a new roof, thermal pane windows, carpeting, painting, new curtains and a clock. The original Palladian window at the back of the library was left intact and is protected by plexiglass.

The dissolution of the Town of Louisbourg in August 1995 brought an end to almost 50 years of participation by a representative from Louisbourg on the Regional Library Board. The Louisbourg representatives from 1950 until 1995 included the following people: Mayor George Lewis, 1950-1954; Mayor Daniel Johnston, 1954-1957; Mayor Guy M. Hiltz, 1957-1963; Mayor George Lewis, 1964-1975; Mayor Guy M. Hiltz, 1975-1979; Mayor Harvey Lewis, 1979-Dec. 1982; Councillor John MacRury, Dec. 1982-Dec. 1985; Councillor Gary Peck, Dec. 1985-Oct. 1988; Councillor Jim Steylen, Oct. 1988-1991; Councillor Bill Bussey, 1991- May 1993; Councillor Allister MacDonald, June 1993-July 31, 1995.

In the 1996/97 fiscal year, the branch librarians went into Sydney for training on the NcompasS catalogue which is accessed through computer. At that time most of the branches, including Louisbourg, were provided with reconditioned computers from the Department of Education. The Louisbourg computer, and those in other branches, never worked properly and had to be replaced. In that year a new exterior sign was installed. During a leave of absence by Marjorie MacDonald, Juanita Paige worked in the library.

The Louisbourg library has always had a healthy membership and circulation of books. At the end of the 1999-2000 fiscal year there are 202 adult members and 86 young or juvenile members. Book circulation for the year included 2669 adult books and 2474 children's books. Unfortunately, there has been a drop in the number of young members to the library in the last two years. This echoes a change in the population of the town.

Clare MacKillop, the Branch Supervisor since the fall of 1999, noted that there is a good collection of books in the Louisbourg library. The adult collection gets new additions regularly and is completely changed about every four years. The paperbacks are not on the automatic exchange but they do get replaced as they wear out. Eventually the Louisbourg branch will be part of an electronic circulation system. Using the computer, individuals will be able to order books held in other branches. She talked of the popularity of the Internet access in the library and speculated that use would grow once a printer was installed.¹⁹ A new computer and printer was installed on May 11, 2000 courtesy of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. New plastic library

cards with bar codes were introduced in the summer and eventually all library users will have one.

In addition to housing a collection of books, the Louisbourg library building contains an informal archives and museum. It is home for the original diaries of businessman, history enthusiast and mayor, Melvin S. Huntington. His Louisbourg diaries begin in 1906 and with a break of several years continue until 1961. There are also many books that were in Huntington's personal library and other documents of local heritage value. There are a number of artefacts of local significance including the bell, lectern and chair from the old St. James Methodist church and trophies from the Louisbourg Yacht club. The model of the S.S. Shekatika, for many years located in the library, has been restored by the Louisbourg Heritage Society. Before the renovations in 1993 there was a collection of photographs of the community begun by George Lewis with help from the Fortress of Louisbourg. These were moved to the Sydney & Louisburg Railway Station.

Thanks to Marjorie MacDonald of the Louisbourg library for suggesting this project. Thanks as well to Ian MacIntosh, the Regional Librarian, Donald Ward and staff of the Cape Breton Regional Library, the Beaton Institute - UCCB, Helen O'Shea for help with research, Heidi Moses for the digital photography and scanning, Donna MacDonald, Clare MacKillop, Harvey Lewis, Gerry Gartland, Clara Beaton, Jean Pearl and Kwik Kopy Printing in Sydney.

¹ The position is library clerk, but everyone in town uses the term librarian.

² Melvin S. Huntington, Diary, 7 Oct 1950 and 1 Sept 1950.

³ Nora Bateston, Library Survey of Nova Scotia, 1938, Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, MG 10-2.

⁴ Huntington Diary, 27 Sept 1937 and 17 Jan 1939.

⁵ Robert J. Morgan, "Libraries and the Intellectual Development of Cape Breton," 1978. Speaking notes. Beaton Institute, MG 12, 82, 22.

⁶ Huntington Diary, 6 Oct 1950.

⁷ There are Annual Reports of the Cape Breton Regional Library at the Cape Breton Regional Library office in Sydney, N.S. There is a complete set of the minutes of the Cape Breton Regional Library Board held at the Beaton Institute, MG 14, 203. Most references to the Louisbourg library originate in these two sources, hence the limited number of footnotes.

⁸ Gerry Gartland, telephone conversation, 12 March 2000.

⁹ Clara Beaton, telephone conversation, 15 March 2000.

¹⁰ Womens Institute Meeting Minutes, 24 March 1964, Louisbourg Library. History of Louisbourg 1958 - 1982, Draper Art Gallery, p. 74.

¹¹ Donna MacDonald, telephone conversations, 12 and 15 March, 2000.

¹² Womens Institute minutes, March 24, May 19 & 25, June 16, 1964. Louisbourg Library.

¹³ Louisbourg Heritage Notes, *Louisbourg Seagull*, Nov 1987. History of Louisbourg 1958-1982, pp. 49-50. Telephone conversation with Harvey Lewis, 12 March 2000. Registry of Deeds, County of Cape Breton, Book X, page 494; Book 208, p. 591; Book 499, p. 55; Book 716, p. 656.

¹⁴ The C. B. Regional Library Annual Reports, 1971 and 1972.

¹⁵ C. B. Regional Library Board Minutes, 16 Oct 1974

¹⁶ Board Minutes, 16 Dec 1974 and 1 April 1977.

¹⁷ Helen O'Shea, personal communication, 12 March 2000.

¹⁸ Marjorie MacDonald, 16 March 2000, Louisbourg Library.

¹⁹ Clare MacKillop, telephone conversation, 2 May 2000.