



Heritage Notes

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LOUISBOURG NAVY LEAGUE HUT (A Provincial Heritage Property)

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In May 1994 the Louisbourg Navy League building was designated a Provincial Heritage Property. Cecil Crant, President, and Michael Burke, Past President, of the Louisbourg & Area Lions Club recognized the heritage value of the Lions Den, formerly the Louisbourg Navy League Hostel. At a meeting held in November 1993, I explained the process to the Lions Club membership. As a result, the Lions asked the Louisbourg Heritage Society to prepare the application to the Advisory Council on Heritage Property.

Introduction

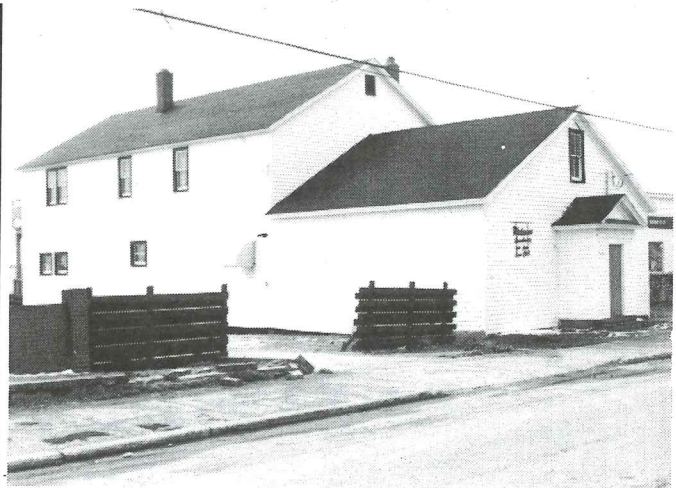
Louisbourg harbour has been a destination of seafarers for hundreds of years. The earliest recorded European visit to the *English Port*, is that of Captain Leigh who sailed into the harbour in the summer of 1597.¹

Thousands of anonymous fishermen - Portuguese, Spanish, French, English and Basque - fished out of this harbour in the 17th century. From 1713 until 1758, with one period of English occupation, Louisbourg was the capital of the French colony of Isle Royale, the centre of a significant fishery and an important transhipment point.

Throughout the 19th century Louisbourg harbour was a stopover for fishing schooners and coal boats. Its significance was marked by a lighthouse in 1842.²

In 1895 the harbour became the focus of industrial activity as the terminus of the Sydney & Louisburg Railway (the S&L Station is a Provincial Heritage Property). The construction of a coal loading pier and a freight wharf brought regular employment to the town. A fleet of Dominion Coal Company boats loaded coal year round and sailed from Louisbourg to New England, Newfoundland, Quebec and Montreal.

World War II saw a serious effort at securing the harbour because, "*The ice-free haven of Louisbourg was to be a reserved anchorage whenever Sydney Harbour was closed off by ice or enemy mines.*"³ Louisbourg was also a terminus for coastal convoys and the base for a refitting operation for corvettes, frigates and other naval craft.⁴



Navy League Hut/Lions Den in April 1994. (W. O'Shea)

As a result, in 1942, the Navy asked that Louisbourg be secured by a coastal artillery unit during the winter months. This led to Wolfe Battery with two 18-pounder guns and two search lights staffed by 41 personnel.⁵ There was also a Naval detachment and an Air Force group. One of the purposes of the naval detachment was to monitor and manage the anti-torpedo net which was installed in Louisbourg Harbour in August 1943.⁶

The Louisbourg Navy League - 1941

A local women's group anticipated this increased activity in and around the harbour. In September 1941 the Louisbourg Community Club called a meeting to discuss, ". . . ways and means of providing entertainment for the men (of) the merchant navy who visit Louisbourg, particularly during the winter months." This committee consisting of Mrs. A. W. Cameron, Mrs. D.M. Johnston, Mrs. William MacKinnon and Mrs. L. H. Cann invited the Sydney Branch of the Navy League of Canada to send a delegation to Louisbourg.⁷

The Navy League began in England in 1895 as a Society, ". . . with the primary aim of ensuring adequate naval defence." The first Canadian branch was formed in 1895 and was soon active in making submissions to the Federal government on the need for maritime defence and a naval reserve training programme. During World War I the

League was involved in the, ". . . recruiting of naval and merchant navy personnel, operation of hostels for seafaring personnel, provision of services to the dependants of seamen and, in the final stages, the rehabilitation of naval veterans." Between the wars the League continued to support a Canadian-flag merchant marine and maintained hostels. During World War II the Navy League operated 24 hostels in various ports on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.⁸

Two days after the initial public meeting in Louisbourg there was another meeting of citizens called by the Community Club to discuss, ". . . the questions of organizing a branch of the Navy League in order to provide recreation and reading room and other means of entertaining the men of the merchant marine who visit Louisbourg during the winter." The Reverend George Arnold, Reverend Thomas N. Mitchell and Walter Jewell were elected as a committee to pursue the possibility with the Sydney Branch.⁹ The meeting in Sydney was successful and the Louisbourg Navy League was officially organized on October 16, 1941. David Gibson, National President of the Navy League, was in Louisbourg and addressed the meeting. The first executive included several of the women responsible for getting the movement started in Louisbourg, local politicians, some interested men and all the local clergy. Wilfred Covey was elected president. The building and furnishings, estimated at \$7,000.00, was provided by the Navy League of Canada. Membership was \$1.00 and associate membership \$.50.¹⁰

J. W. Stephens Ltd. of Sydney obtained the contract to construct the building and began work on November 3, 1941. According to Melvin S. Huntington, the Mayor of Louisbourg, the main building was to be 60 feet by 30 feet with a 20 foot by 30 foot leanto at the back.¹¹



Louisbourg Sea Cadets in the Navy League Hut late 1950s. L-r: Duncan Beaver, Ken Fox, Cletus Fleet, Lt. Charles Peck, Commanding Officer; Allan MacKay, Charles Lewis, Jr., Charles Peck, Jr. (Louisbourg Heritage Society)

The Navy League Hut opened on January 6, 1942. National President David H. Gibson noted that, ". . . with the opening of this latest hostel it may now be truthfully said that operations of the N.L.C. is Trans-Canada wide in scope - extending from Victoria on the Pacific Coast to Louisbourg, most easterly point on the Dominion's Atlantic Shore."¹² Indeed by 1944 there were hostels in Louisbourg, Sydney, Halifax, St. John, N.B., Three Rivers, Quebec, Montreal, Vancouver and Victoria.¹³ Mayor Melvin S. Huntington presided at the opening. Other dignitaries attending included Rev. Fr. Ronald MacLean, Naval Chaplain in Sydney, Messrs. Lou Moffat, John M. MacLeod, M. W. Buchanan and H. M. Isreal of Sydney and Wilfred Covey, President of the Louisbourg Navy League.

The Navy Hut when completed was 80 feet by 30 feet and contained a kitchen, dry canteen, two showerbaths, three toilets and a reading and writing room. The main room of the building was for dancing and entertainment.¹⁴

The building was a focal point for the wartime town of Louisbourg and the civilian community participated in the operation of the facility. A.D. Cann, a member of the Navy League executive, described this involvement in a speech prepared in 1960. He remembered that, "For the duration of the conflict the Navy League was the only place of entertainment for the men. It was open from 9:00 AM to 1:00 AM every day. Sleeping accommodations were provided and entertainment given to them. The crew of any naval ships in port for a long or short stay was looked after . . . recall if you will the merchant seamen, the naval personnel, the RCAF men of the Radar station about 60 in number, the military station at the Battery at the lighthouse. All were well provided for. Even on Sunday evening after church the Navy Hut rang with voices raised in sing song. Lunches were provided by volunteer groups of women in the town . . . For every crew member of the ships bound overseas from this port the Navy League provided Ditty Bags filled with small gifts from Captain down. We would indeed be remiss in our duty if we did not pay our tribute to the faithful workers. During those trying days a tremendous work was undertaken and accomplished by the citizens of this small seaport town."¹⁵

Perhaps the most dramatic time for the Navy League centred on the events of January 21 and 22, 1943. On January 21, a United States submarine chaser (SC-709) covered with ice grounded on the Bar at the entrance to Louisbourg Harbour. The next day, after initial attempts at rescue had failed, local fishermen and the crew of a visiting schooner rescued the SC-709 crew. The sailors, all suffering from exposure, were taken to the Navy League Hut to an emergency hospital set up by local women, several of whom were Registered Nurses. The Louisbourg effort was recognized in August 1943 by the Robert Simpson Company of Montreal in an advertisement appealing for support for the Navy League. D. H. Gibson, who had been in Louisbourg at the official opening of the Hut in January 1942, is quoted as saying, ". . . these . . . men were exposed on the upper deck during the howling gale and fierce blasts of the winter wind and icy spray coating their clothing. They dared not go below for fear of their ship keeling over with the weight of ice. Rescued by gallant Louisbourg fishermen, they were

brought into the Navy League . . ."¹⁶

After World War II the Navy Hut continued to be used by merchant seamen visiting Louisbourg. In 1955/56 the Navy League reported that there were 369 ocean craft cleared by local Customs and that the hostel and facilities were always available to crew members.¹⁷ In 1955 the building became the base for the Royal Canadian Sea Cadet corps in Louisbourg.¹⁸ The Sea Cadet, Navy League Cadet and Wrennette movement have provided training, comradeship and good memories for many young men and women of Louisbourg over almost 40 years.

Other organizations using the facility during World War II included the Red Cross, Women's Institute, Community Club and Junior Red Cross. After the war there was a Well Baby Clinic, Kinsmen Club meetings, and Library. In the later 1950s and early 1960s the Catholic Women's League sponsored weekly dances for community youth and the Brownies and Girl Guides met in the building. In the 1970s and 1980s the Navy League was used by the Pentecostal Church, Married Couples Club, Senior Citizens, Scouts and the Louisbourg Lions. Ongoing uses include wedding receptions, retirements, square dances, New Year's dances, citizens meetings, 18th-century military drumming instruction of the Fortress of Louisbourg Volunteers, and a polling station for municipal, provincial and federal elections.

The Navy League Hostel continued in the possession of the Navy League of Canada until 1986. Bill and Pat Mullins, Gerry and Christina Gartland and Jean Kyte were active in their efforts to maintain the building during the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1986 the Navy League sold the building to the Louisbourg & Area Lions Club. A condition of sale was that the Navy League would have use of the building at no cost for a ten year period.¹⁹

At present, in addition to serving as the Lions Den, the building is still the headquarters of the Navy League Cadets. This is fairly unique situation for, according to Douglas J. Thomas, the National Executive Director of the Navy League of Canada, *"To the best of our knowledge it is the last such building of its type still standing. It is indeed unique that Sea Cadets are still making use out of the structure. Its importance in caring for our sailors in the Second World War should not be overlooked."*²⁰

A. D. Cann talked of intangibles that make this unadorned structure important for both Louisbourg and Nova Scotia. He said, *"When one is dealing in human lives it is not possible to picture the effects, the influences that people exert on others and thus it is difficult to assess accurately what this branch of the Navy League has meant to countless thousands of merchant seamen, of the personnel of the three armed forces and of the citizens of this Atlantic port . . ."*²¹



Some of the ladies who initiated the move for a Navy League Hut at the official opening in 1942. L-r: Mrs. Winnie Kyte, Mrs. Catherine Lewis, Mrs. Elda MacKinnon, Mrs. Norma Covey, Miss Blanche Cross, Mrs. Mirian Cameron, Mr. D. H. Gibson, Mrs. Jennie MacDonald, Mrs. Ruby Stewart, Mrs. Eva Lewis, Miss Hattie MacDonald, Mrs. Weir Martell, Mrs. Annie Dickson, Mr. John M. MacLeod. (Jean Kyte)

Structural History

The Navy League Hut is a simple frame building with the gable end facing on Main Street. Structural history is difficult to establish in detail since the record is sparse. Construction was by J. W. Stephens Ltd. of Sydney starting in November 1941 and ending in January 1942. There are no extant plans.²²

As described by M. S. Huntington the original structure was planned with the main building and a leanto structure on the back measuring 20 feet long by 30 feet wide. The evidence of the leanto construction can still be seen in the sloped ceiling of the kitchen in the rear of the building.

There was an addition to the building made in 1944. This was probably an extension over the shed-roofed kitchen, though there are not details in the Minutes or any financial data to support the nature of the work. There is just a brief comment at a 1944 meeting that, *"The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the painting of the interior of the Navy Hut also plumbing the new addition."*²³ However, a photograph of the building, taken between 1947 and 1950, shows a distinctive line in the asphalt siding along the east side of the building. This line suggests that the addition in 1944 included the modification to the kitchen leanto roof and an extension of the second floor. The extent of this second floor addition is not clear since there was already a second floor on the structure as indicated in the Minutes in 1942 which directed that, *" . . . officers of Navy League be*

authorized to have upstairs of Navy League Hostel work completed with flooring where necessary to convenience (the) Red Cross Society.²⁴

The front of the building included two doubled windows on either side of a small pedimented porch entrance which was supported by wooden columns. Over the porch roof there was another window. On either side of the entrance there was a veranda with a waist high wall. On the basis of photographs it is evident that a storm porch was constructed in winter. The side verandas were removed by the Navy League sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s. At about the same time the entrance was completely closed in, retaining the pedimented roof but removing the supporting pillars. During renovations in the late 1980s the front windows which were in a deteriorated state of repair were closed in. The Lions added a fire escape in the rear and an access ramp on the west side of the building. Neither of these have modified the original structure. The original siding material was asphalt simulating brickwork. This was on the building until the mid 1960s when it was replaced by wooden shingles painted white.²⁵

The Navy League Hut has undergone some limited modification since it was first constructed in 1941/42. In most instances, these changes were made by the Louisbourg Navy League organization as it sought to increase its serviceable area or cope with the costs related to normal structural deterioration.

The designation of the Navy League as a Provincial Heritage Property is a credit to the initiative and foresight of the Louisbourg & Area Lions Club. At this point in time the Navy League is the youngest building on the provincial registry and the first civilian World War II building to be designated.

Endnotes:

1. J. G. Bourinot. Historical and Descriptive Account of the Island of Cape Breton and of its Memorials of the French Regime. Montreal, W. Foster Brown & co., 1892, pp. 137 - 138.
2. John R. Dunn. The Louisbourg Lighthouse. Manuscript Report Number 32. National Historic Sites Service, National & Historic Parks Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, July 1971, p. 7.
3. Peter Moogk. "From Fortress Louisbourg to Fortress Sydney," in K. Donovan, ed., Cape Breton at 200 (Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785 - 1985). University College of Cape Breton Press, Sydney, Nova Scotia. pp. 157 - 158.
4. Louisbourg Branch, Women's Institute of Nova Scotia. History of Modern Louisbourg 1758 - 1958. 1958. Louisbourg District Planning & Development Commission. 1988. pp. 47- 48.
5. Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson. The Gunners of Canada - The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery. Vol. II, 1919 - 1967. McClelland & Stewart Limited, Toronto/Montreal, 1972. pp. 457 - 458.
6. National Archives of Canada. Record Group 24, Accession 83-84/167, Box 4061, File S-9080-166/10, Part 1.
7. Melvin S. Huntington. Diary. Louisbourg, Nova Scotia. 27 September 1941.
8. Navy League of Canada. National Council, 305 Rideau St., Ottawa, Ontario. Brief history to W. O'Shea. 25 January 1994.
9. Huntington. Diary. 29 September 1941.
10. Louisbourg Branch of Navy League of Canada 1941 - 1942. Minutes. 16 October 1941. Huntington Diary. 16 October 1941. The first executive included M.S. Huntington, Honourary

- President; Wilfred Covey, President; George D. Lewis, 1st Vice-President; Hugh Lynk, 2nd Vice-President; Mrs. A. W. Cameron, 3rd Vice-President; Dan F. Nicholson, Secretary-Treasurer; and Walter Jewell, Jr., Donald Wilson, James Crowdis, Mrs. Fred Connington, Rev. Joseph Cathcart, Rev. George Arnold, Rev. D. H. Doyle, Rev. Thomas N. Mitchell, Mrs. D. W. MacKinnon, Duncan MacKay, Mrs. William Phalen and Mrs. Frank O'Keefe.
11. Huntington Diary. 3 November 1941.
 12. Sydney Post-Record. Sydney, Nova Scotia. "Navy League Home Opens at Louisburg." 7 January 1942.
 13. Stephen Leacock, Canada and The Sea, Vol I. Alvah M. Beatty, Publications (1943) Limited, Montreal 1944. pp. 87 & 92. The Navy League clubhouse in Halifax was opened on January 3, 1942. (Thanks to Allister MacDonald for identifying this source)
 14. Huntington Diary, 6 January 1942.
 15. A. D. Cann. Speech in Scrapbook at Louisbourg Library.
 16. Jean Kyte. "Rescued by Gallant Fishermen." Heritage Notes, No. 3, January 1993, Louisbourg Heritage Society. footnote #1.
 17. Louisbourg Hostel Committee. Year Ending May 31, 1956.
 18. Women's Institute History. 1958. p. 67.
 19. Navy League of Canada. Louisbourg. Minutes. 23 Sept 1986.
 20. Douglas J. Thomas. National Executive Director, The Navy League of Canada, National Council, 305 Rideau Street, Ottawa, Ontario. Memo to Louisbourg & Area Lions Club. 3 Nov. 1993.
 21. A. D. Cann, Speech. Louisbourg Library.
 22. Personal communication. John (Jack) Stephens, Superintendent, Alexander Graham Bell NHS to William O'Shea. January 1994.
 23. Louisbourg Branch of Navy League of Canada 1941 - 1942. Minutes. 28 August 1944.
 24. Ibid. 21 October 1942.
 25. The false brick siding was on the building to the mid 1960s. James Steylen, Louisbourg, lived upstairs in the building from around 1959 until 1964 and remembers the siding in place during this time. Conversation, Steylen with W. O'Shea, 29 January 1994. See also a photograph from 1962 showing the building with white shingled front and asphalt brick on the west side. Fortress of Louisbourg NHS, Archives. RB #22, File #23, Photo H.5.



Navy League Hut in the late 1940s. (LHS)

Louisbourg Heritage Society

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