



Heritage Notes

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Louisbourg's Lighthouses – Bill O'Shea

French Lighthouse 1734 - 1758

Sailing across the Atlantic from Europe in the 1730s often led to disaster on Cape Breton's rocky coast. Sailors sighed with relief when a spark on the horizon became the steady yellow glow marking Louisbourg's light and safe haven.

The French claimed Cape Breton Island in 1713 and Louisbourg flourished because of the cod fishery and its location on the shipping lanes between France, the West Indies, and North America. By the 1740s more than 130 ships visited the harbour yearly.

Building a lighthouse might seem logical for a busy port, but the priority was to complete the fortifications. Instead, it was local fishermen who erected a wooden cross on the point of land at the eastern entrance to Louisbourg as a guide for ships. For a time it was called Cross Point.

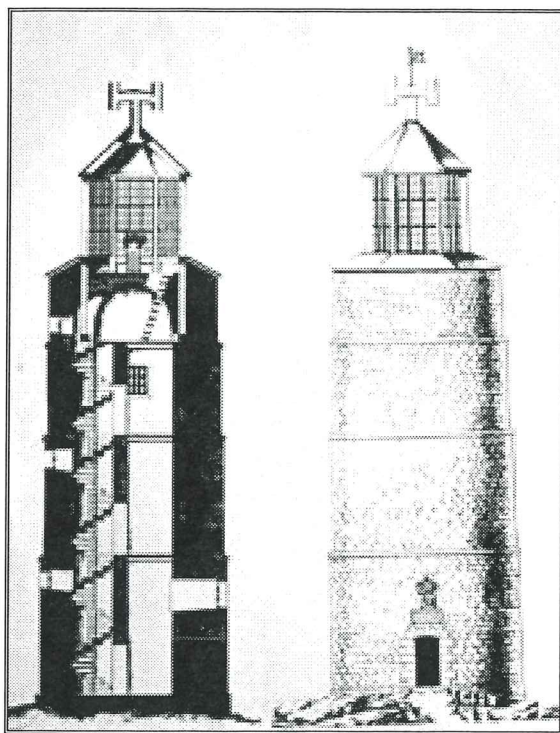
The cross marked a dangerous coast. In 1725, the French ship Chameau wrecked just east of Louisbourg with the loss of over 300 lives. But it wasn't until the fall of 1727, when the King's ship *Profond* barely escaped disaster near Louisbourg, that a lighthouse was considered.

Though most officials wished to build the light at Cross Point, it was not a unanimous choice. One believed that it would be hard to land supplies, including the coal that was planned as the fuel for the light. He suggested placing the light in the tower of the new barracks being built across the harbour. However, the engineer wrote that the tower was not strong enough to carry the weight of the light. For several years, letters and opinions crossed the Atlantic, before it was decided to put the light at Cross Point.

The light, designed by engineer Etienne Verrier, was expected to cost 14,000 livres. The builder was civilian contractor, Francois Ganet.

By 1733 the light was almost complete and, in August, a coal and wood fire was lit on the tower to welcome a King's ship. Soldiers were hired to tend the fire.

But, it wasn't until April 1, 1734 that the light became officially operational. Visible from



The French lighthouse, lit in 1734, before the fire of 1736 destroyed the wooden lantern on top of the tower. The light stood 22.3 metres high (74.6 feet).

four leagues at sea (16 kilometres), it was the first lighthouse in what was to become Canada, and the second on the entire coast of North America after Boston's Little Brewster Island light built in 1713.

The completed lighthouse stood 22.3 metres high (74.6 feet). The tower was mortared fieldstone topped by a six-sided wood-framed lantern containing large windows. The lantern was covered by a slate roof. A lead plaque recording engineer Verrier's and contractor Ganet's role in constructing the lighthouse was set over the door, and a medal commemorating the founding of Louisbourg in 1720 was buried in the foundation. It was a magnificent structure and worthy of the capital of the Ile Royale colony.

The fuel for the light was cod oil. About 90 litres of oil (23.4 gallons) was held in a bronze basin 1 metre (1.1 yards) across and 25 cm (10 inches) deep. A copper ring slightly smaller than the basin, was floated on the surface of the oil by pieces of cork. Thirty-one copper tubes with cotton