

Surviving The Ravages Of Time

The Incredible Story Of A Community's Will To Succeed

by Katherine McIntyre

Once neglected and forlorn, Chantry Island, just offshore from the small Ontario town of Southampton on Lake Huron, has emerged as a proud heritage site, a popular tourist attraction and a valuable learning centre. The light keeper's stone house, resurrected from a century of accumulated debris, has been authentically restored to its original appearance where it sits at the foot of the lighthouse now resplendent with fresh paint.

For over 140 years, the Chantry Island lighthouse and keeper's home have stood guard over the ragged underwater shoals and rocks that extend a mile north and south from the island—a deadly trap for unknowing sailors. In 1954, when the lamp was converted to electricity, a light keeper was no longer needed. Abandoned, the buildings and docks suffered from the ravages of time and vandals.

The initiative to salvage Chantry Island from further ruin came from David Douglas, a specialist in rural development at the University of Guelph. At a joint meeting of the local Marine Heritage Society and the Southampton Town Council, he convinced members that Chantry Island—the most important bird sanctuary south of James Bay with its famous round stone lighthouse and light keeper's residence—could become the town's feature tourist attraction.

Before such a towering undertaking could begin, much preliminary work needed to be done. A steering committee was formed, spearheaded by Michael Sterling, a member of the Marine Heritage Society and a former high-tech executive. It was agreed that the light keeper's house, which was in ruins, would require the most time and effort to restore.

Estimates by professionals to complete the job amounted to a daunting \$800,000 or more. To overcome this financial obstacle, the committee decided that volunteer labour would have to be used and funding obtained by private donations and local money-raising events.

Mr. Sterling, using his CEO skills, prepared a strategic plan that defined the committee's long-term objectives:

- Restore the light keeper's house, paint the interior of the lighthouse, plant a garden, clear the island of trash and build a dock.
- Prepare a long-term budget.
- Source funds for the project.
- Establish a timeline with yearly goals and monthly and weekly objectives.
- Generate an ongoing rapport between the community and the island.
- Use the island as a controlled tourist destination.

With the fundamentals for development in place, the committee placed an advertisement in the local paper calling for interested volunteers to sign up by category, such as for construction, clean-up, painting, gardening and administra-

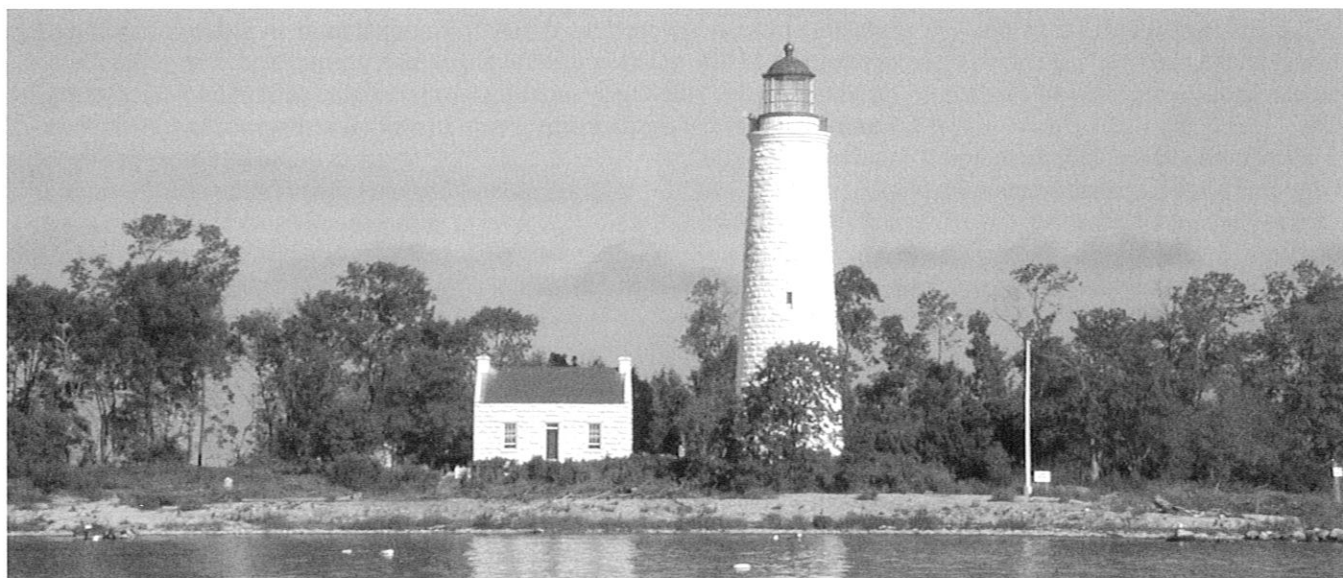


PHOTO: GEORGE PLANT AND JOHN EAGLESON

The people of Southampton successfully undertook the restoration of the 140-year-old lighthouse keeper's house, creating a heritage tourism destination along the way.

tion. The response was overwhelming. "Most of the work was labour-intensive," explained Mr. Sterling. "We needed a few volunteers with real building skills and as long as we had at least one person who knew a trade, the others could help."

And so preparation for the restoration of the light keeper's house began. William Neish, a retired architect, sent to the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa for the house's original plans. Designed in 1855 by A. G. Robinson, chief engineer for the Department of Public Works, it was built by John Brown, a well-known Scottish stonemason. Mr. Neish measured the foundation, which was still intact, and prepared a list of all the materials necessary for restoration, from the size of new stones to rebuild the walls, to suitable roofing materials and trim for the interior.

Before work could begin, however, the team needed a serviceable boat to transport people and materials to the island. The Town of Saugeen Shores donated *The Peerless*, a former rescue boat that had been in dry dock for twenty years. During the winter of 1998-1999, energetic volunteers scraped, painted and rewired it back to life.

As soon as the ice had melted in the spring, the heavy work began. Following Michael Sterling's long-range plan, the goals for 1999 were set:

- Stabilize the walls and the gable ends of the house.
- Re-build the floors, rooms and loft.
- Install the roof.

Bill Robinson, a professional stonemason from nearby Tara, took on the task of duplicating John Brown's original masonry work. As challenges arose with every stage of the

project, people from Southampton and neighbouring communities stepped forward to help find solutions. Volunteers took on the Herculean task of transporting 900 kg of dolomite stone, quarried in nearby Wiarton, to the site of the restoration using a scow, makeshift rafts hauled by *The Peerless* and, for the final stage, a wheelbarrow. Some of the stones weighed up to 180 kg (400 lbs.), with the lintel above the door weighing in at 340 kg (750 lbs.).

Maintaining historical accuracy meant the wood was unobtainable from any modern lumberyard. However, John and Bob Trelford donated thirty-one hemlocks—220-year-old trees—from the woodlot on their farm. The trees were felled, dried and milled on the property during the winter into boards of 7.3 m by 28 cm by 7.6 cm (24 ft. x 11 in. x 3 in.) Outsize planking for the roof came from a local mill that had on hand spruce logs cut from the property of the founder of the Town of Durham. Slate for the roof was too expensive, so rubber shingles that resembled the original slate were substituted—one of the few non-authentic materials in the restoration.

By the end of December, despite metre-high waves and temperatures hovering at zero, the volunteers had completed all their scheduled tasks for 1999, and the project was closed for the winter.

The spring of 2000 brought renewed vigour, and work started again. A stairway built by Danny Vooght, a volunteer, was brought to the island by barge. Ray Fenton, a former high school teacher and volunteer, made the window and door-frames. Mr. Robinson returned to construct a Rumford fireplace, similar to the original, which is shallow



PHOTO: GEORGE PLANT AND JOHN EAGLESON

Volunteer Barb LePage shares the story of how 220-year-old hemlocks were donated and custom milled to maintain historical accuracy in the reconstruction.

and almost parabolic in shape.

To preserve the authenticity of John Brown's design, capstones on each gable-end were installed 10 cm (4 in.) above the roofline. Volunteers whitewashed the house with a mixture of salt, lime, water, a little rice and Portland cement. They then cleared the site of 45,000 kg of rubble that included broken stones from the walls, heaps of brush and old lead batteries thrown from the top of the adjacent lighthouse. At last, the gigantic cooling stone revealed itself in the cellar floor. This stone, which retained a constant temperature of twelve degrees centigrade year round, served as the refrigerator for the light keeper's family.

Continuing with the original strategic plan, the goals for 2001 were:

- Paint and furnish the interior of the light keeper's house.
- Restore the gardens.
- Paint the stairs and the inside walls of the lighthouse.
- Clear the island of a century of accumulated garbage.

Donations of authentic period furniture came from attics, barns and the Bruce County Museum. Local designers Donna McQuarrie and Debbie Bender advised the committee on the paint colours, fabrics and curtains available in the 1850s. An octogenarian from Cambridge, Ontario, knotted the rope springs for the beds. Volunteers who loved to garden restored the circular beds in front of the light keeper's house, filling them with herbs, flowers and vegetables. Debris was removed from the site by the boatload. Finally, a sturdy dock measuring 48 m by 90 m (160 ft. by 300 ft.) was installed.

With the bright red door and windows in place, herbs drying by the fireplace and patchwork quilts on the beds, the light keeper's house was complete, and a light keeper's family could again take up housekeeping, just as it had in bygone days.

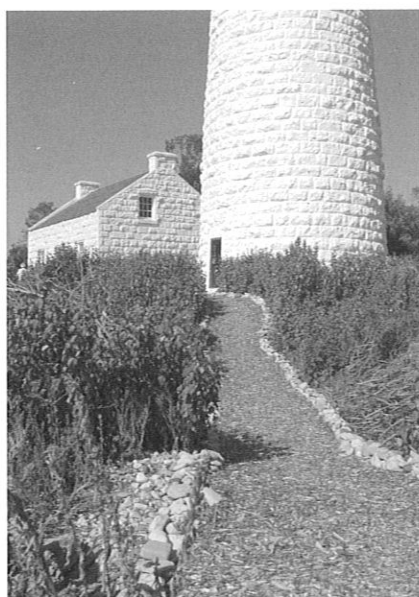
During the three years it took to finish the project, the daily log recorded over 250 persons ranging in age from 16 to 85 giving more than 29,000 volunteer hours. Local fundraising events such as fish fries, golf tournaments and music festivals, as well as private donations, raised over \$180,000, making the project entirely self-supporting. "Most of the money was spent on supplies or for craftsmen with special technical skills," said Michael Sterling. "The whole project would have foundered without Bob Trelford, who masterminded the daily construction details, the mayor, the council and the incredible volunteers," he added.

The long-term benefits to the community are ongoing. *The Peerless*, now updated to meet Department of Transport standards, is in action every day during the summer ferrying tourists to the island. Thirty-four businesses in the Southampton area now use the lighthouse as their logo. It appears on gift cards, placemats and hooked rugs, as well as in shop windows. The Chantry Island Institute has been formed with a long-range plan to use the island as a resource centre for the study of birds, vegetation, geology, archaeology and freshwater marine life, with particular emphasis on the delicate balance between tourism and the unique island wildlife that must be protected.

Michael Sterling sums up the work on Chantry Island by saying "we tried to preserve the history of the generations that have gone before us and to leave a legacy for those who will follow." Without question, that honourable goal has been achieved!

Katherine McIntyre is a writer living in Toronto who is passionate about historic buildings.

For more details about the restoration visit www.chantryisland.com.



PHOTOS: GEORGE PLANT AND JOHN EAGLESON

Left: A view of the lighthouse keeper's house and garden that sit at the foot of the island's lighthouse. Right: The interior was faithfully restored using period furniture and fabric styles.