

Four lighthouses have marked the point where the Niagara River joins Lake Ontario near Youngstown, New York. The river has been an essential harbor for ships and a point of strategic planning for military operations since before the French and Indian War. The area attained importance in the late 1600's for French fur traders, who needed to complete an overland portage to Lake Erie. A predecessor to the current stronghold was built in 1679 by the French, and was named Fort Conti and then Fort Denoncille. In 1726 the still-standing "French Castle" was built, intended as a gathering and lookout point for colonists to protect themselves from Native American tribes. In those days bateaux (flat bottomed, shallow drafting boats) and canoes were used to move goods and people. The fort served as a daymark before it was illuminated, joining the vapor cascading off of Niagara Falls (which could be seen from 40 miles away out on Lake Ontario).

The British captured the Fort in 1759 during the French and Indian War. After a siege of 19 days. Due to the increase in vessels on the Great Lakes after this conflict, the British placed a beacon on the roof of the Fort in 1781. This was the first unofficial lighthouse on the Great Lakes, and like most of its contemporaries was probably illuminated with whale oil. The light's primary purpose was to keep vessels from drifting too far west of the Fort at night. In order to save fuel, the light was probably only kept when a ship was due to arrive.

Fort Niagara was relinquished to the United States after the

Revolutionary War, and the tower light was decommissioned in 1796. The Fort George British garrison constructed the nearby Newark Light in 1804 (the second lighthouse to serve the area). While this establishment was not destroyed in the fighting of the War of 1812, at the conclusion of hostilities it was decommissioned and never re-lit. The next light appeared in 1823, this time a wooden tower, once again located on top of the "French Castle." A pedestal and lamp arrangement was at the top of this tower, but the traffic to the area began to suffer with the introduction of the Erie Canal in 1825. This tended to eliminate the need for the antiquated and difficult Niagara Portage. In 1829 the Canadians opened their Welland Canal to the booming city of Buffalo, further diminishing the need to haul canoes overland. Directly linking Lakes Erie and Ontario, the privately-financed canal bypassed the rapid currents created by Niagara falls. Despite this improvement and the obsolescence of portaging, sufficient sailing and steam vessels remained on river to justify a light.

The second light at Fort Niagara was 70 feet above mean high water, "situated at a point convenient for the mariner, and the excellent order in which it is conducted gives high credit to the keeper." This board report of 1838 goes on to mention that the beacon was lit with 9 lamps and a corresponding number of fixed reflectors. In 1855 the tower and other buildings at Fort Niagara were damaged by a tornado, and by 1868 there were complaints that the wooden tower was "old and out of repair..." The dilapidated

condition of the tower tended to let nature's corrosive elements into a building also used for officer's quarters below. Moreover, four chimneys surrounded the tower, and a board report notes that this caused a potentially dangerous fire one winter. Besides "the danger of having the valuable lens destroyed by an accident," the tower was poorly situated in that it required resupplying through "the stairway and passages of the officer's quarters..." An 1870 report mentioned that the tower lacked an oil house, and should be torn down. Plans for a new stone structure with an oil room were drawn up in 1871, to be placed at the "extreme eastern end of the Light house lot." The blueprints called for a 50 foot tower made of rubble stone, measuring 18 feet in diameter at its base, and 11 feet at its top. The light's focal plane above the water level was 45 feet, though this was raised an extra 11 feet in 1900 when the tower was extended and a watch room was installed. This improvement extended the light's visibility to 25 miles onto the lake. That same year, an oil shed was built and a desk for the keeper was added to the new watch room.

One significant improvement to the structure was added in 1872, when an inspection of the riverbank revealed that the shoreline was constantly eroding due to the water's currents and winter ice floes. A "thick, low rubble stone wall" was constructed along most of the length of the shore, and the beach behind this wall was fortified with clods of earth and terraced. Six large wooden, stone filled jetties were "run out from the wall perpendicular to the shore. These have caused the water to shoal, and, it is believed, now

perfectly protect the lot."

Other improvements to the station included cementing the cellar floor in 1880, and rebuilding 215 feet of fence from the keeper's quarters to the river embankment. In 1890 the military's water main at the Fort was tapped to provide water to the station. Also that year, the station's barn roof was re-shingled and a wagon shed measuring 12 by 16 feet was constructed for the convenience of the keeper. In 1891 three of the wooden jetties holding back erosion were refurbished; the bolts for this project were recycled "from the destroyed superstructure of the pier at Owsego, N.Y." In 1894 the ditch in front of the military reservation was filled in, and a wooden bridge offering entrance was constructed. The Fort's steel water tank was removed to a point where it no longer obstructed the view of the light from various points out on the lake. It was noted around this time that the keeper's quarters were "old, in bad condition, and unsuitable." Three years later, the dwelling was rebuilt, and the "grade of the lot around the dwelling was raised." A driveway covered in gravel was also added at this time. In 1899 an iron handrail was added to the tower's interior staircase, and 289 feet of sidewalk were installed on the grounds.

At this point a request was made for a second, smaller beacon "at the mouth of the river where it empties into Lake Ontario" was recommended. The board report noted that ports for deep draft vessels along Lake Ontario's South Shore were in scarce supply, and asked for \$2,000 to establish a 25 foot tower at the river mouth.

This request was apparently not granted, for it was repeated at least five times annually. In 1905 the metal work to build an iron oilhouse was acquired, and the following year this 540 gallon structure was completed.

The lighthouse and fort were involved briefly in the William Morgan affair, a political scandal during the 1820's. Edward Giddings was keeper of the light at the time. A renegade Freemason named William Morgan threatened to go public with obscure Masonic rituals; before he vanished in 1826, he was detained by the Army at Fort Niagara. It is possible that Giddings had something to do with Morgan's detainment; the lighthouse keeper was also suspected, along with several other people, of killing the man. The incident caused a national sensation in regards to Masonic conspiracies, and an Anti-Masonic political party was even formed.

The lighthouse was decommissioned by the Coast Guard in 1993, just as the Army withdrew from the Niagara Fort in 1963. A light on a nearby Coast Guard radio tower replaced the structure, which was about to be shrouded by growing trees. It was estimated that about 50 trees would have to be removed to preserve the lighthouse's lines of sight. Currently, the property is under lease to the Old Fort Niagara Association. This organization keeps a museum and gift shop on the grounds, and holds a number of interesting historical events every year. Periods from American heritage that are covered include the French and Indian, Revolutionary and 1812 Wars. Activities include soldier duty, barracks and mess hall life in the 18th century

and musket and cannon firing. Open year round, Old Fort Niagara boasts both a very thorough collection of 18th century military architecture, as well as splendid instances of military engineering.

Resources

Burdette-Watkins, Mary and Tinney, James. (2000). Seaway Trail Lighthouses.

"Fort Niagara Lighthouse Discontinued." Keeper's Log, Fall 1993.

"Historic Old Fort Niagara." Lockport Tourism Pages. Retrieved October 9, 2007 from: <http://www.lockport-ny.com/Tourism/ftniagara.htm>.

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