

Canada Gets A New



The new replica of the Little Current Range South Lighthouse with the bridge looking east in Little Current Ontario, Canada. (Photo by Bill Caesar.)



By Bill Caesar

Lighthouses have historically been an essential part of Canada's westward expansion. In 1855, the wild rapids between Lake Huron and Lake Superior were finally overcome by the construction of shipping locks at Sault Ste. Marie. Traffic for fishermen, settlers, and the lumber trade was now open to Lake Superior and the west.

The main commercial route flowed from Collingwood in southern Georgian Bay, up through the Bay, along the North Channel, and into the St. Mary's Channel. A virtual graveyard of shipwrecks spurred the government of the day to employ Admiral Bayfield in the charting of the area and to construct navigational aids to assist area mariners.

Southern Georgian Bay and Lake Huron were first equipped with the magnificent lighthouses known as "Imperial Towers" to guide ships through treacherous passages. The huge costs of six of these light stations nearly bankrupted the government. In order to continue the program, simple, yet functional, light stations were constructed across the dangerous north shore of Lake Huron.

These were the "bird-cage" lighthouses.

These simple beacons were constructed using local materials and cost just \$605.20, compared to the \$222,564.00 for the Imperial lights. Consisting of a simple 20'x20' box, they were topped by an additional smaller box with a cast-iron cupola on top. The whole structure was held together with eight hoops connecting the top with the base. These hoops lent the name of "bird-cage" to the structure.

Above left, the Killarney West Lighthouse on Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, Killarney, Ontario, Canada was one of the Canadian lighthouses that featured a bird-cage design. The lighthouse was also known as the Killarney Northwest Light. This structure was demolished and replaced in 1909 by the pyramid "cookie cutter" or "pepper-box" style lighthouse that stands there today.

Historic image of the "bird-cage" style Little Current Range South Lighthouse in Little Current, Ontario, Canada, as it appeared in 1910. The lighthouse had a 7th order Fresnel lens, which is now in the possession of the Canadian Coast Guard.

Bird-Cage Lighthouse

Six of these beacons were constructed in 1866 and commissioned in 1867, the first year of Confederation. Two were erected in both Killarney and in Little Current, and another guarded the “phantom rocks” of the Robertson Reef off Clapperton Island. Another was built on Talbot Island in Lake Superior, 200 miles west of Sault Ste. Marie at the entrance to Nipigon Bay. They had a chequered career.

The shortest-lived was the Talbot Island light in Lake Superior. Known as the “Lighthouse of Doom,” it saw the premature deaths of all three lightkeepers assigned to it. The light was abandoned within six years. Even today, the area is considered to be haunted and is avoided by locals.

The Clapperton light wasn’t much luckier and was destroyed by a lightning strike. Twice replaced by improved lights, the last light keeper was lost in mysterious circumstances—foul play was suspected!

After fifty years of service, the two Killarney lights eventually rotted away and were replaced by the iconic “pepper-box” light structures still in existence today.

The Little Current Range South Lighthouse, first constructed on the waterfront at a time when there were only four settled families in the area, was gradually overwhelmed by the expanding town. It was decommissioned in 1922.

Over the next half-century, a wonderful variety of lighthouses of different styles were built across the upper Great Lakes region. Wonderful stories of the lighthouse keepers and their families abound and have become part of local heritage. Eventually, the onset of automation and the resulting de-staffing left the lighthouses alone and vulnerable.

The latest chapter in the story of the lighthouses opened with the recent announcement that the federal government wishes to divest itself of responsibility for these iconic structures and turn them over to others to care for them. In recent months, many municipalities along the North Shore and on Manitoulin have come together to try to preserve and protect their lights.

The town of Little Current (also known as Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands, or NEMI) has gone one step further and is reconstructing a replica of the original Little Current Range South “bird-cage” light of 1866 on its waterfront. Local businesses and craftsmen have come together to support the town in this exciting project, which will be completed this year.

Top right: Historic image of the Little Current Range North Lighthouse, which also had a “bird-cage.” Built in 1866, the same year as the Little Current Range South Light, it is no longer standing.

Center right: The new replica of the “bird-cage” style Little Current Range South Lighthouse that was built by the local community. The lighthouse is shown here with the town of Little Current, looking west. (Photograph by Bill Caesar.)

Right: “Bird-cage” style lighthouse were also built in other parts of Canada as is shown in this close up view of the “bird-cage” of the Inch Arran Lighthouse in Dalhousie, New Brunswick. This lighthouse is also known as the Bon Ami Point Lighthouse. (Photo by Timothy Jacques.)

