

The Abino Light

On October 14, 1820 navigator James Flint wrote in his journal “the treacherous swells at Point Abino are so high as to cause considerable sea sickness among the passengers.” The next year Flint's 330 ton paddle wheeler, “Walk in the Water,” the first steamer on the Great Lakes, foundered in a storm off the Point and went aground. This wasn't an isolated incident, and for the better part of a century fixed buoys were placed in an attempt to warn mariners of the danger from the extensive limestone reefs extending southwards into Lake Erie from Point Abino on the Ontario shore, but shipwrecks continued.

On August 3, 1912 the United States Coast Guard moored a Lightship in the approaches to Buffalo Harbour, midway between Point Abino on the Canadian side and Sturgeon Point on the American side. Light Vessel 82, more commonly called the Buffalo Lightship, was a brand-new 187 ton, 29m / 95' long, 6.5m / 21' wide, steel hulled vessel with a 9m / 30' light beacon mast.



The following year, November 10, 1913 the Buffalo Lightship sank with the loss of all 6 crew members during the worst storm ever to sweep the Great Lakes, which claimed more than a dozen vessels and over 250 lives, and thus became the only light vessel ever to sink in the Great Lakes. Two years later the hull was found, salvaged, refitted, and Lightship 82 went on serve as a relief lightship for another 20 years..

The Canadian Government determined that a replacement was necessary because of the dangerous shoals and because of the larger ships and greatly increased traffic using the newly-opened fourth Welland ship canal. Although U.S. Light Vessels 96 and 98 took the Buffalo Lightship's location temporarily, a land-based lighthouse was considered a better long-term alternative in light of the tragedy in 1913.

As Point Abino was the primary hazard to navigation between Port Colborne and Buffalo, the Department of Marine and Fisheries acquired property on Point Abino for

the lighthouse and associated boat dock and lighthouse keeper's residence. Introduction of a ten-storey high lighthouse, complete with foghorn and bright rotating light, into an established residential community was a rare event, and to reduce the noise impact and ensure that the design of the new structures would fit in with existing Point Abino homes, the Department turned to Lieut-Col. William P. Anderson C.E., C.M.G. During his 39-year career as Chief Engineer and Superintendent of Lighthouses of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, Col. Anderson designed and built more than 335 lighthouses and fog-alarm stations across Canada.

During the design process in 1915-1916 a great deal of care was taken to give this structure an actual architectural style. The building is classical revival in form, with temple-like features facing the shore. It is approached by a prominent staircase leading to a platform surrounding the lighthouse and to a formal entry porch. The porch has a pitched roof fronted by a pediment showing the building's construction date of 1917.

There is classical detailing on the building's base and tower. The light tower portrays a classical column with a base, shaft and capital. The shaft is defined by corner pilasters. The platform flares out from the shaft and is surrounded by a decorative cross-braced balustrade which was popular in the 1910s and 1920s, as evidenced by the almost identical original railings of the Peace Bridge, built a few years later.

Due to the exposed nature of the location, cast concrete was chosen as the construction material. The lighthouse structure is not really on land, being located 100m / 300' from shore on part of the limestone reef itself, and its foundations are frequently under a meter or more of water with waves reaching up the walls of the building during the storms that were the primary cause of its construction. Cast concrete was durable and could be used to form the lighthouse's decorative features. The Point Abino lighthouse was one of Anderson's early concrete cast designs, and contrasted with the wooden lighthouses constructed in more sheltered locations such as Port Dalhousie. The design shows flair by using the cast concrete window surrounds with their exaggerated keystones to imitate masonry. Likewise, a bracketed cornice, decorated with curves, reflects the arched lintels of the major windows. Construction followed the usual practice of the day for maritime work such as the Buffalo and Port Colborne breakwalls, and was conducted with materials, heavy machinery and cranes brought to the site on barges as shown in contemporary pictures.

In addition to the classical design elements, Anderson rendered the structure aesthetically pleasing by incorporating the foghorn and the foghorn's associated machinery into the lighthouse itself. Foghorns were normally housed in a separate building on light station sites because they created an unbearable level of noise. The distinctive Point Abino foghorn, three blasts followed by 48 seconds of silence, came

from a diaphone which blasted the signal from the lake side of the tower's rectangular base. The diaphone's compressor mechanism was also located on the lake side, directly below the tower. An electrical horn replaced the original diaphone during its last decade of operation and the foghorn became somewhat less audible from the land.

The Point Abino lighthouse is capped with a cast iron lantern, the glass-windowed structure which housed the light itself. The bright red painted lantern is polygonal in shape and contains 12 rectangular panes of heavy clear glass. The lantern contained a Third Order Dioptric light (Fresnel Lens). This category of 'sea light' was intended for moderately important coastal sites. The rotating lamp cast a beam that extended 28 to 32 km / 16 to 20 miles on a clear day. Both the lighthouse and its boat dock were completed in 1917. The light was put into service in 1918 and was reached by climbing steep ladder like steps. Access to the lighthouse and keeper's residence was initially by water, and later the Coast Guard paid an annual fee for use of the private right-of-way. The dioptric light was dismantled and replaced with an automated light in 1969, after which time the workers who maintained and repaired the lighthouse and its machinery arrived by helicopter.

Even with the lighthouse in operation, maritime disasters did happen from time to time. In 1927 the 90m / 296' steel steamer "Briton," on its way to Buffalo with a full cargo of grain, sank a few hundred yards off the Point. Long-time local residents recall that the grain washed ashore and grew on the beach in considerable volume, while local farmers took the grain to feed their hogs.

In its 72 years of manned operation, the Point Abino Light had only two lighthouse keepers, with Patrick Augustine serving as keeper from 1918 -1953 and Lewis Anderson serving from 1960 -1990. Lew Anderson said the foghorn made the whole tower shake, "and you'd just have to get out of there!" The lighthouse was last operated in 1995 and was closed in 1996. The Lighthouse was designated a National Historic Site in 1998, was designated as a property of cultural heritage value by the Ontario Heritage Ministry in 1999, and acquired by the Town of Fort Erie in 2003. In 2011 the Town of Fort Erie sold the keeper's residence to raise funds for the exterior restoration of the lighthouse. The restoration of the exterior began in June of 2011 and was completed in the spring of 2012. The project was funded by the Town of Fort Erie and the Government of Canada.

Regular guided tours of the Point Abino Lightstation, including the interior, are conducted by the Point Abino Lightstation Preservation Society (PALPS) on the second and fourth Saturdays of June, July, August and September. Visits to the outside of the site only are available to pedestrians, bicycles, and motorized handicap scooters from mid-June through Labour Day between the hours of 3 pm and 6 pm weekdays and 10

am to 6 pm weekends, with the exception of tour days. Visitors must stop at the gate; vehicles and pets are not permitted. As visitors make the 3.2 km / 2 mile round trip from the parking area to the lighthouse they pass through the front yards of 31 residents of Point Abino, traveling on the private driveway owned and maintained by the Point Abino Association since its inception in 1892.

Although the foghorn blasts and the piercing beam of light sometimes woke residents and frightened small children, residents of Point Abino share with the entire Town of Fort Erie great pride in this special lighthouse. Many families have fond recollections of the lighthouse and its keepers, who were part of life on the Point, and most Point Abino homes contain photos or paintings of the lighthouse.



More information on the Point Abino Lightstation may be found on the Point Abino Lightstation Preservation Society ([PALPS](#)), [Town of Fort Erie](#), Parks Canada, and Buffalo History Works websites.

This piece was assembled and edited by Curt Montgomery from various sources, with major contributions from Cam Williams and Cathy Wettlaufer. Any errors are entirely his own.