Fort Niagara NY History

Historical Information:

- During the colonial wars in North America, a fort at the mouth of the Niagara River was vital. It controlled access to the Great Lakes and the westward route to the central part of the nation. It attained importance during the late 1600s when French fur traders used the Great Lakes to transport goods. Niagara Falls transferred the supply of furs from the west to the demand of these goods to the east. Bateaux (flat bottomed, shallow draft boats) and canoes were used to move the furs around the falls, which made the mouth of the Niagara River an ideal point for transferring the furs to larger ships for transport. The strategic value of Fort Niagara diminished once the Erie Canal was completed in 1825. It did remain as an active military post well into the 20th century.
- Three flags are flown daily above the parade ground to symbolize the nations which have held Fort Niagara. They all competed for the support of a fourth nation: the Iroquois Confederacy. The French were the first to establish a post here, Fort Conti, in 1679. Fort Denonville was also short lived, being active from 1687 to 1688. In 1726, the French erected a permanent fortification with the construction of the “French Castle.” This building was intended to be used as a gathering place where colonists could find protection from hostile Native American tribes. The fort and vapor of Niagara Falls served as useful markers during the day. Unfortunately, night mariners in the area were unable to use these makers to find their way. Britain gained control of Fort Niagara in 1759, after a nineteen-day siege during the French & Indian War. The British placed a beacon on the roof of the fort in 1781 due to the increase in vessels on the Great Lakes after this particular conflict. This beacon was the first unofficial lighthouse on the Great Lakes. The primary purpose for this light was to keep vessels from drifting too far west of the fort at night.
- The British held the post at the fort throughout the American Revolution. In 1796, they were forced by treaty to yield it to the United States. In 1813, the British recaptured the Fort. The United States reclaimed the Fort for a second time in 1815 at the end of the War of 1812. The roof light remained active until 1803. The British garrison across the river at Fort George erected the Newark Light in 1804. This was the second lighthouse to serve the area. While it was not destroyed in the fighting of the War of 1812, the light was demolished in 1814 to clear a site for the construction of Fort Mississauga. In 1823, Congress approved funds for a new

lighthouse the previous year. A wooden tower, housing a pedestal and lamp, was erected atop the “French Castle.” The need for the light diminished after the Erie Canal opened in 1825.

- After the War of 1812, Fort Niagara served as a peaceful border post. It expanded beyond the walls after the Civil War. It became a barracks and training station for American soldiers throughout both World Wars. The last army units were withdrawn in 1963, and today the U.S. Coast Guard represents the only military presence on the site.
- In 1829, the Canadians opened the Welland Canal, which was privately financed. It provided a navigable link between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, which eliminated the need to haul vessels over land. Despite this improvement, sailing and steam vessels still remained on the Niagara River to justify a light at the river’s mouth.
- The Fort was restored between 1926 and 1934. It is currently operated by the Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc., which is a non-profit organization. It works with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.
- Around 1855, the keeper’s dwelling and other buildings were damaged by a tornado. In 1858, the tower received a new lantern room and Fresnel lens. The number of panes in the lantern room were reduced from 150 to 9 of larger size. This helped increase the visibility of the light.
- In 1868, there were complaints that the tower was “old and out of repair” and let the elements into the underlying building, which was at the time used as officers’ quarters. Four chimneys surrounded the octagonal tower, and a Lighthouse Board reported noted that one winter a spark from a fire in the fireplace caused a dangerous roof fire. Luckily, there was no damage to the lens. The tower was poorly situated, and required using “the stairway and passages of the officers’ quarters as a thoroughfare for the supply of the light.” Due to these deficiencies, a new lighthouse was recommended at Fort Niagara.
- Congress approved $16,000 in 1871, and plans for a new 50 foot octagonal limestone tower with attached oil room were drawn up. Work on the structure began in July 1871, which was to be placed outside the fort’s walls near the stone keeper’s dwelling. Masonry work had to be suspended on November 30th due to the early arrival of cold weather. Work resumed on April 15, 1872. The Fresnel lens was transferred from the old tower and was exhibited on June 10, 1872. The focal plane for the light was raised to 11 feet, 4 inches in 1900 when a brick watch room was added between the top of the stone tower and the lantern room.

- In 1889, the military's water main at the Fort was tapped to provide water to the light. The same year, the roof of the station's barn was re-shingled and a wagon shed was constructed for the convenience of the keeper. The wagon shed measured twelve by sixteen feet. In 1894, the Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board noted that the keeper's dwelling was in bad condition and unsuitable for use. A new dwelling was built two years later. The "grade of the lot around the dwelling was raised," and a driveway covered in gravel was also added.
- In 1899, a request was made for a second, smaller beacon to be placed "at the mouth of the river where it empties into Lake Ontario." It was noted by the Lighthouse Board that no port for deep draft vessels existed along Lake Ontario's south shore between Genesee River and Port Dalhousie. The Board asked for $2,000 to establish a twenty-five foot tower to better guide vessels into the river. The request was repeated annually for six years, but went unfulfilled. An iron oil house with a capacity of 540 gallons was constructed near the lighthouse in 1905.
- The Coast Guard decommissioned the lighthouse in 1993 rather than remove or trim roughly 50 trees that began to obscure the lighthouse. The Coast Guard replaced the light with a light on a nearby radio tower. Nancy Price, who lived in the keeper's dwelling while her husband, Richard, was the Officer-In-Charge of the Coast Guard station from 1968 to 1975, was given the honor of throwing the switch to activate the new light. Her grandson was permitted to pull the plug in the lantern room of the lighthouse.
- The lighthouse is currently under lease to the Old Fort Niagara Association. At times, it has kept a small museum and gift shop in the tower. The Fresnel lens was removed in 1995, and is currently being stored at Old Fort Niagara.