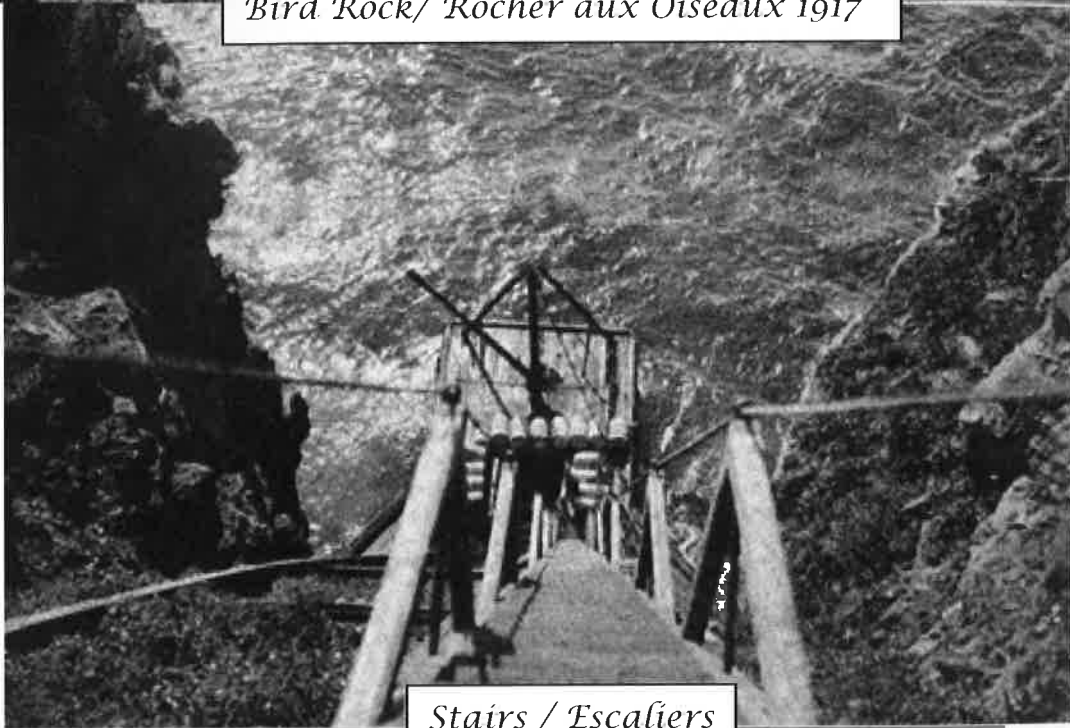


Bird Rock
Rocher auxoiseaux



Bird Rocks 1917

Bird Rock / Rocher aux Oiseaux 1917



Stairs / Escaliers



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Beverley Owen, in a 1933 article in Maclean's, was unsparing in his description of the small island off the northeast tip of the Magdalens. "Bird Rock is one of the malicious pranks of Nature," he wrote. "It rises straight up on all sides to a tabular summit 115 feet above the tossing waves... All around it are deep, jagged crevices made by the violence of the waves... It would be harder to find a lonelier, bleaker or more detestable spot... [It is] a repulsive blot on a majestic seascape."

Engineer John Page addressed the proposal of a lighthouse on Rocher aux Oiseaux in 1860. "It appears to me," he remarked, "that the construction of a light house on this islet will be one of the most difficult pieces of work that has ever been undertaken by the Department."

The construction by the Department of Public Works took place only during summer, and a path had to be cut into the rock in order to transport the materials to the island's summit. An 1870 report stated, "...at Bird Rocks... the most difficult place in the Dominion on which to erect a lighthouse, owing to the surf which continually breaks around it, and the danger of approaching it and effecting a landing thereon - the efforts of the Department have been entirely successful."

The lighthouse was a stocky 32-foot wooden tower (heightened to 50 feet in 1908), and a keeper's dwelling and oil house were constructed nearby. A second order lens showed a fixed white light. A cannon was installed, to be fired at regular intervals during times of fog or snow.

The Litany of Suffering

The litany of suffering of the keepers and families at Rocher aux Oiseaux may be unparalleled in North America. The first appointed keeper understandably refused the position. A Mr. Guitté then arrived as keeper and stayed for about two years. A newspaper account claimed that the "solitude preyed so upon his mind that he went insane." A later keeper, Wilfrid Bourque, wrote, "According to a popular legend in the islands, this first keeper predicted that no man would ever keep this lighthouse more than ten years without misfortune." Guitté was replaced by Peter (sometimes reported as Patrick) Whalen.

The hunting of harp seals has been a major industry in the Magdalens since the early 1800s, and it was no different at Rocher aux Oiseaux. In early April 1880, Keeper Whalen, his son, and an assistant keeper went seal hunting, leaving the keeper's wife alone at the light station.

A storm blew in suddenly, and the three men were set adrift on the ice. After what must have been a sleepless night, Keeper Whalen's wife was greeted the next day by the assistant keeper, Thomas Thivierge, who had somehow returned to the Rock despite being nearly frozen to death.

Thivierge, who eventually recovered, brought the sad news that the woman's husband and son had died in the storm the night before. It wasn't long after this that the government first installed a submarine cable providing telegraph communication with Grosse-Isle, also in the Magdalens archipelago.

Charles Chiasson of Havre-aux-Maisons in the Magdalens became keeper after the death of Peter Whalen. In August 1881, Chiasson was with his son, an assistant named Jean Turbide, and two visitors — Paul Chenell and his ten-year-old daughter Sarah.

During a tour of the station, the visitors asked the keeper to fire the old fog cannon. As Chiasson obligingly lit the fuse, there was a terrible explosion. Some claimed that the explosion was caused by the forbidden practice of the keepers' keeping a full barrel of gunpowder near the cannon instead of only bringing a small amount as needed.

Chiasson and his son were killed instantly. Paul Chenell died from his wounds two hours later, while according to one account, Jean Turbide was blown into the sea and swam back to the island relatively unharmed. Sarah Chenell was unhurt but was said to have nearly died of shock. Assistant Keeper Téléphore Turbide didn't know how to operate the telegraph but somehow managed to contact an operator over 30 miles away at Cap-aux-Meules, and a vessel was dispatched to the Rock.

Téléphore Turbide was soon named keeper, and he stayed for an amazing 15 years. During his time on the Rock, communication with

the rest of the world was often lost, and in 1890 the government officially withdrew the telegraph cable.

During the following year, Keeper Turbide suffered an accident with the fog cannon and lost part of his hand. With no means of communication, he had to wait in agony until a passing vessel stopped at the Rock and took him to Cape Breton for medical attention.

In 1896 Turbide had a serious fall, and he decided to resign that September while he was still ahead, or at least alive. Pierre Bourque was appointed keeper but was unable to land at the Rock until the following spring, so Arsène Turbide served as interim keeper.

He spent the winter with his cousin, Téléphore Turbide's 17-year-old son Charles, along with an assistant named Damien Cormier and his wife.

In March 1897, Arsène Turbide, Charles Turbide and Damien Cormier went seal hunting, and an almost exact replay of the 1880 tragedy played itself out. A storm took the trio by surprise, and Charles Turbide and Cormier died during the night. Arsène Turbide miraculously walked across 60 miles of ice over three days and three nights, arriving nearly dead at Baie Saint Laurent, Cape Breton. It was said that as he was taken to a hospital. Turbide expressed deep concern for the wife of Damien Cormier, who was alone at the Rock. Turbide died a short time later, but a government vessel that cut through the ice rescued Cormier's wife.

Pierre Bourque arrived as keeper that May, and just a few weeks later, his assistant Hippolyte Melanson was seriously injured in another accident with the fog cannon.

In July 1897, Bourque's son Wilfrid became assistant keeper. Pierre Bourque complained about the quality of the water the keepers and families used, which was rainwater no doubt contaminated by bird droppings. "Any medical man would condemn the water we have to use here," he wrote. But Pierre survived to leave the Rock in 1905, leaving his son Wilfrid as the new keeper.

Wilfrid Bourque complained bitterly about the lack of a telegraph connection from the Rock to the outside world. "In reading the history of the lighthouse, you must have noted that whenever there was some accident, the lack of communication resulted in great sufferings," he wrote to the Department of Marine and Fisheries in Quebec. In 1908, one of his children dislocated an arm, and Bourque wrote, "Had I been able to send a ten-word message to the mainland, even at the cost of a year's salary, I would gladly have done so."

In March 1911, Wilfrid Bourque went seal hunting on the ice near the island. He was gone for a longer time than expected, so his wife sent her nephew to look for him. The nephew and Assistant Keeper Daniel Turbide found Bourque dead, standing upright in water near the edge of the ice. One account of this story in a 1912 newspaper claimed that Bourque's widow kept the light lit for the next ten days, also caring for a small child as she waited for help to arrive. "For a time I thought I would go mad," she said, "but I knew I had to do my duty." Officials pronounced Mrs. Bourque's courage unsurpassed in the Canadian Lighthouse Service.

Wilfrid's nephew Elphège Bourque became the next keeper, and a quiet decade passed before tragedy again visited the Rock. In late 1922, Elphège Bourque, his brother Albin, and Assistant Keeper Philius Richard all became deathly ill, apparently from drinking contaminated water. The warnings of Pierre Bourque were borne out as Albin Bourque and Philius Richard died.

When writer Beverley Owen visited Rocher aux Oiseaux in 1932, he was the first person the keepers had seen in two years besides an occasional government official and a few fishermen. Owen described the access to the island, a choice between vertical ladders and a stairway of 147 steps at the north end. Owen chose the stairway. "The thought of climbing it produces a funny, gulping sensation in the throat," he wrote. He was instantly nauseated by the stench of the omnipresent birds "that swarm like locusts - gannets, guillemots, kittiwakes, puffins, gulls, razor-billed auks. Bedlam." Keeper Montague Arsenault told Owen that it was necessary to always keep the windows and doors of the keeper's house closed, and that it was a constant struggle to keep the occupied part of the island free of birds' nests.

Arsenault also told Owen that he had killed 80 seals during his decade on the Rock, and that he had once had a close call similar to the incidents that took the lives of several before him. He said that a predecessor had brought a cow to the island, but the cow went mad and jumped to its death. How a cow was brought ashore in the first place is anyone's guess.

Time Moved Much Slower There

The last family left the Rock in 1961. In 1985, Tony Leighton interviewed the Canadian Coast Guard's keepers for an article in the magazine *Equinox*. By that time, the stairway, ladders and dock had been abandoned, and transportation on and off Rocher aux Oiseaux was exclusively by helicopter. Two two-men teams took turns spending 28-day shifts on the island. Keeper Luc Arsenault told Leighton, "I soon learned that time moved much slower there. You feel like you are living on a cloud... Sometimes I just want to stand at the edge of the cliff at night and howl at the moon."

Keeper Louie Hubert told Leighton that he had tried to jog around the island, but the birds made that a messy proposition — "I had to wash my hair twice a day." Jim McLean, a veteran of 23 years on the Rock, added, "It blows double out there! We've had more windows broke than you can count. Rocks fly right up off the cliffs and whacko!" The upside of the harsh life was clear to McLean. "To me, it's sort of a feeling... that you're helping someone all the time."

Mercifully Automated

Rocher aux Oiseaux was mercifully automated and destaffed in 1987. The Magdalen Islands Municipality is working to acquire four of the six lightstations in the Magdalens, but Rocher aux Oiseaux is not among them. The original lighthouse was replaced by a hexagonal concrete tower in 1967. Now only a portion of that tower stands, surmounted by a skeleton tower with a solar-powered light. The other remaining buildings are in poor condition and the island is protected as a bird sanctuary under the Migratory Birds Convention Act, making any preservation efforts problematic.

Today

Today the Centre Nautique de l'Istorlet is developing public tours of the Magdalens and their lighthouses, including Rocher aux Oiseaux, in a 38-foot Zodiac boat. This organization also runs a summer camp and kayaking tours in the area, and is involved with the Corporation pour la Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Bâti de l'Île-du-Havre-Aubert, a local heritage committee, to insure public use of the Anse-à-la-Cabane Lighthouse (also known as Ile du Havre Aubert Lighthouse), the tallest in the Magdalens. That lighthouse was opened to the public for the first time in its history for three days in September 2003. The goal is to have the Magdalen Islands Municipality acquire the lighthouse and for the heritage committee to maintain it and to develop a permanent exhibit of Magdalen Islands lighthouse history.

The Future

The future isn't promising for the remaining structures on Rocher aux Oiseaux, but this may be a case where it's best to give the place back to its true owners, the birds. It's almost as if the island simply shrugged off its human occupiers like a case of fleas. Beverley Owen — clearly not a bird lover — described his exit from the island, a fitting epitaph for the history of humans on Rocher aux Oiseaux: "Overhead a vast chorus of feathered imps of Satan gave a raucous farewell."

