

Foghorns Warn Sailors in Straits More Than 100 Years

A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

Foghorns



The first lighthouses were built in the Mediterranean Sea before the time of Christ, and the first "modern" lighthouses, with Fresnel lenses to concentrate a light into a powerful beam, rose in Europe during the first decades of the 19th century. Soon afterwards, seamen began asking for a warning signal that could pierce through haze and fog. The British Empire conducted various experiments intended to create a durable and standardized sound signal for the purpose of warning ships and boats against navigational hazards. At various points of danger, the authorities placed signal guns and posted artillerymen who were ordered to fire blank shots over and over on foggy days and nights. Sextons in harbor towns were paid to ring the church bell over and over. Nothing worked.

One of the most fog-shrouded regions of the Northern Hemisphere is the Atlantic coast of Canada. This region, together with the American state of Maine, is where the cold Labrador current from Greenland runs head-on into the warm Gulf Stream. The meeting of these two currents has historically produced one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, but also creates nearly ideal conditions for atmospheric moisture.

It was one of our Canadian neighbors who invented the foghorn. Robert Foulis, of New Brunswick, was a brilliant man who fought against demons all his life, both in himself and with others. Even those who hold his memory in honor admit that he crossed the Atlantic under clouded circumstances. Having suffered an emotional breakdown after the tragic death of his wife in childbirth, young Foulis abandoned his newborn daughter to an aunt's care and abruptly emigrated to Canada in 1818. He would never return to Scotland.

For almost five decades, Foulis' brain teemed with ideas

for building a fortune from the rock-filled land of Atlantic Canada. At various times, he invented or promoted ideas for a tidal-powered sawmill, a line of river steamboats, a kind of illuminating gas generated from local coal, a plant for distributing the gas, and an illuminating-gas lighthouse. Foulis' work with lighthouses, lights, and steam engines in the Bay of Fundy placed him in a good location to conceptualize a steam-powered sound signal.

One of the most dangerous barriers to safe navigation into and out of New Brunswick's largest seaport, Saint John, is the Bay of Fundy's Partridge Island. In 1852, Foulis wrote to the local lighthouse commission to suggest that they build a steam engine on Partridge Island and connect it to a large horn that would sound a mechanical blast at frequent and regular intervals. If the machinery worked right, a ship passing nearby in the fog would not only know that it was in hazardous waters but, because of the precise timing of the blasts, it would know that the danger was Partridge Island. This was the lighthouse idea converted into sound.

The governmental authorities in charge of lighthouses considered Foulis to be an outsider and a crank, and they ignored his suggestion. The taxpayers continued to pay someone on Partridge Island to ring a large, loud bell on foggy days. The clang of the bell was lost in the pea-soup fogs of the Bay of Fundy.

Foulis lobbied for seven years for his steam engine and horn idea. In efforts to be helpful, he submitted precise plans and specifications. The lighthouse commissioners were meanwhile hearing agonized complaints from local shipowners. Finally someone in the government office slipped Foulis's foghorn plans and specifications to someone else. This third party



Steam used in the fog horn system rises from Round Island Lighthouse. (Photograph courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

made a few minor changes and came forward with a claim that the invention was his own. The commission immediately granted a contract to the interloper, who built the world's first foghorn in 1859 on Partridge Island.

The ensuing uproar was covered by a local newspaper, who in an effort to help Foulis get compensation, spread the news of the new invention far and wide. There was a rush to the patent offices of the United States and Great Britain. After intellectual-property rights to the foghorn had been distributed to all the well-connected parties who had scrambled for them, Foulis was left with nothing. He died in 1866 and was buried in a pauper's grave.

The fight between the fog bell and the foghorn continued for several more decades in the United States. As late as the 1880s, the fog bell still had influential adherents. Here at the Straits of Mackinac, the railroads that set up a pioneer railroad car-ferry service from Mackinaw City to St. Ignace in

1884 placed a fog bell on the Mackinaw City dock. If it was coming toward the dock in fog, the car ferry would whistle, and the dock-master would ring the bell. This fog bell survives to this day in Conkling Park on the town's waterfront.

It was becoming obvious, however, that a steam-powered horn would be heard out in the Straits of Mackinac, and the bell would not.

In 1890, the federal government built the first steam-powered foghorn northwest of the car-ferry dock, at Old Mackinac Point, very close to the northern tip of the Lower Peninsula. This foghorn, meant to guard traffic through the increasingly busy Straits of Mackinac, was actually the first federal hazard warn-

ing erected in Mackinaw City. The familiar lighthouse was not erected until two years later, in 1892.

In further improvements, the lighthouse service built a one-and-a-half-story red-brick building in 1907 next to the lighthouse to shelter and enclose the Old Mackinac Point steam engine and foghorn.

This small, house-shaped structure, with a thick smokestack that will remind older visitors of the age of coal, survives to this day as the Fog Signal House and Lighthouse Information Center.

During the 1900s, engineers discovered how to make all sorts of loud sounds with compressed air-horns and, later, with electronic noisemaking machinery. These modern foghorns and fog signals could be operated without human supervision, and all present-day operating fog signals, such as the one on the Round Island Channel light tower at the entrance to Mackinac Island's harbor, are members of these two classes.

The old-fashioned Mackinaw City foghorn was silenced with the closing of the lighthouse in 1957. The fog signal's housing survives, however. At Old Mackinac Point, the Fog Signal Building and Lighthouse Information Center will be open from 9 a.m. until 7 p.m. until August 21, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. thereafter until October 9, when it will close for the year.

The former fog signal building now sells tickets for the lighthouse (which closes one hour before the information center) and offers space for a small gift shop that sells books and souvenirs of the Great Lakes.

The lighthouse itself contains a visitor-operated display that reblooms four of the classic foghorns of the Straits of Mackinac.

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