

GODERICH HISTORICAL AUDIO TOURS

By Paul Ciufo

West Street to Lake Huron

From The Square, walk along West Street for two minutes to reach Goderich Town Hall on the south side of the street.

Originally the West Street Post Office, the building was constructed in 1889. Known as the stone castle, it was designed by Thomas Fuller. Fuller was called The Dominion Architect, and was one of the designers of Ottawa's Parliament Buildings. Characteristic of the building's Romanesque architecture are the rusticated cut-stone exterior, recessed round-headed windows and doors, and decorative stone work. French architectural features were also incorporated, such as the slate mansard roof.

The building was almost lost to the wrecking ball in the late 1950's as door-to-door mail delivery was introduced in Goderich and a new post office was needed. Some members of town council approached the federal government about a land swap. Dozens of business owners and the local newspaper opposed the swap, but the feds and a public referendum supported it. The dilapidated municipal offices on East Street became the post office, and the stone castle became Goderich's new town hall.

To continue the tour, walk west for about five minutes to reach The Park House Bar & Restaurant, on the north side of West Street.

The Park House is the town's oldest standing building and one of its most legendary. It was built in the late 1830's for Canada Company Commissioner Thomas Mercer Jones and his wife Elizabeth Mary Strachan, daughter of Bishop John Strachan of Toronto, the most powerful person in the province at the time. The house was the most substantial building in Goderich, and also served as the Canada Company's headquarters.

In 1840 Elizabeth arrived at the head of 21 wagonloads of furniture and took up residence in the elegant mansion. In an effort to replicate English high society in the wilderness, Mrs. Jones often staged lavish social events. The house was lit from garret to cellar, and the latest London music was played as well-dressed guests danced in the first-floor dining room. Elizabeth was the Queen of it all. Wearing a fine silk dress with pearl ornaments, she held court in the upstairs drawing room. Invitations were highly sought after. One mother of several daughters invited to a ball was distraught since silk evening gloves were required but could not be bought on the frontier. She sent them in woolen mittens.

But the party did not last. In 1852 the Canada Company dismissed Jones for over-spending. The residence was bought by the Bank of Upper Canada. By 1862 the Grand Trunk Railway owned the property and surrounding stables. The GTR converted the house into an inn called the Maitland Hotel. A bed and meals cost \$1 per day. The manager was accused by the local newspaper of tying up his water pump to force guests into buying beer and other drinks at the bar. The Maitland was also suspected by the U.S. Consul of being involved in smuggling operations.

In the August 1872 election campaign, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald spent three nights at the Maitland Hotel. On his first night a torch light parade marched him down West Street to the hotel where he dined and made merry with 60 invited guests until midnight.

By 1874 the hotel had passed through other hands and then was abandoned. The town realized the need for a summer hotel to attract the growing American tourist trade. When mayor John Davison called a public meeting to debate buying the property, opponents claimed the presence of Americans in Goderich would harm the town's morals. Others demanded the hotel be run on temperance principles. The town held a referendum and a small majority supported purchasing the property now known as Lions' Harbour Park.

A grand summer hotel was built on the parkland beside the old Maitland Hotel and it was called The Park House. It had at least two towers, marble fireplaces, fine furnishings, and could accommodate over 200 guests. After just two summers fire razed the Park House in November 1880. Reportedly the massive fire was seen in Exeter, a town over 40 miles away. The fire brigade barely saved the old Maitland Hotel from the flames. The disaster's cause was a mystery. In Detroit, in April 1881, an infamous local criminal made a death bed confession claiming someone had paid him \$100 to set the blaze. No one knows who paid him.

In May 1881 the old Maitland Hotel was purchased and became known as The Park House. It continues to serve as a restaurant and tavern, and is the gathering spot for musicians and fans every year during Lions Harbour Park's Celtic Festival, Goderich's most prominent festival, and the largest Celtic Festival in the world outside of the U.K.

Beside the Park House is Lions Harbour Park, so called due to the Lions Club's ongoing contributions to the park. The park itself has a rich history that stretches back to the town's beginning. It was the spot that Tiger Dunlop, the first European to settle here, chose for his residence. He built a shanty here that became known as the Castle and it had a magnificent view of the lake, harbour basin, and river valley. It was in the shanty, here in this very park, that Dunlop and Canada Company Superintendent John Galt formally established the town of Goderich, on June 29, 1827. They toasted with a bottle of champagne Tiger had dragged through the wilderness for just such an occasion. The settlement was named Goderich after British politician Viscount Goderich, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and soon to be Prime Minister of the U.K.

To learn more about John Galt and Tiger Dunlop, listen to the tours “The Square”, and “Menesetung Bridge and Tiger Dunlop’s tomb”.

To continue this tour, hit pause, and walk six minutes west along Cobourg Street to Lighthouse Park.

High atop bluffs, this is the site of the oldest Canadian light station on Lake Huron. For nearly two centuries lights have swept out across the great lake, beckoning to ships in need of a safe harbor. The first lights were put in place in the early 1830s.

Goderich harbour was originally just the mouth of the Menesetung River (later re-named the Maitland River), but in the 1830s the Canada Company built two stone-filled wooden piers to protect the anchorage. The current lighthouse was completed on July 1, 1846. The construction was headed by Adam MacVicar, a stone mason from Scotland who had worked on the Welland Canal in the early 1800’s. The square tower was made of stone and stood just twenty feet tall to its lantern room. However, given its perch on the bluffs, its light had a focal plane of 150 feet above Lake Huron. The lantern had to be repaired in its first year after severe gales damaged it in November 1846. Improvements were made in 1883, to the delight of the lighthouse keeper, McDonald. Five panes of thick French plate glass were installed, and the light source was upgraded to ten mammoth flat-wick burners. On November 10, 1888 a steam fog whistle was put on top of the town’s waterworks building on the beach just south of the piers. It was an eight-inch whistle that gave a ten-second blast each minute.

In 1904 work began on the harbour’s outer breakwaters, which required adjustments to the lighthouse to avoid these offshore barriers. Originally a lantern was just hoisted atop a mast. However, in 1908 a 64-foot steel tower was erected. The following year a gas-lighted beacon was built on the north breakwater.

In November 1913 two massive storm fronts converged on the Great Lakes and caused the Big Blow, the worst natural disaster to ever strike the region. Hurricane force winds caused blinding snowsqualls and 35-foot waves on Lake Huron, sinking eight freighters and killing their crews. Over 200 men died. The Wexford, a freighter with a cargo of grain, sank off Goderich, and the bodies of her crew washed ashore. An inquest was held to find out whether more could have been done to help the Wexford and other ships. One issue raised at the inquest was the lack of urgency and responsibility for the sounding of the foghorn. A better fog alarm was established on the northern breakwater and the fog whistle on top of the waterworks building was no longer used.

The inquest also faulted the lights at Goderich, so improvements were made to the lighthouse. The stone tower atop the bluffs was made five feet higher. The tower received a new lantern room and a more powerful light. The old stone deck was replaced by a new concrete deck. The wreck of the Wexford was finally found in the year 2000. To hear more about The Great Storm of 1913, listen to the “Harbour” tour.

In 1945 a small tower topped with a flashing red light was built on the south breakwater. That same year a radio beacon was established. In 1952 the present concrete tower was built on the

southern breakwater, with a light and the fog alarm from the north breakwater.

In 2009 the Marine Heritage Committee restored the lighthouse's exterior to its original condition. The tower's paint was stripped, and its mortar replaced with period mortar. A new door and windows were installed. The exterior was repainted. Signage about the site's history was installed and gardens were planted. A grand public opening was held in June 2010.

Curious about the cannons in the park? For information about the weapons, and to hear more about the history of the harbour and lakeshore, listen to the "Harbour" tour.