

RUCKSACK Summer, Fall 1997

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QUO VADIS, McNABS ISLAND

If you haven't heard anything about the future of McNabs and Lawlor Islands in the news media lately, you haven't missed any pronouncement from the provincial or federal governments. We are still waiting for the release of the Joint Land Use Strategy for the two islands, two years after members of the public, including the Friends of McNabs Island Society (FOMIS) presented their desire for a natural park at public hearings.

On September 16, 1997 a delegation of FOMIS directors met with Kenneth MacAskill (MLA for Victoria in Cape Breton), the new Minister of Natural resources in the Russell MacLellan cabinet, responsible for provincial lands on McNabs Island. He replaced Truro-Bible Hill MLA Eleanor Norrie, whom we met previously. Mr. MacAskill and His Parks and Recreation staff reassured us that a draft policy exists, and that any delays are caused by the federal side. He promised to write to Ms. Sheila Copps, the federal Minister of Canadian Heritage, who is responsible for Parks Canada.

Since our meeting, the Parks and Recreation Division has been moved to the Department of the Environment under Minister Wayne Adams. It is not clear whether provincial parks will continue to be operated by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), but planning for them, and for other protected natural areas, will be done by the Department of the Environment.

An FOMIS delegation briefed Sackville-Eastern Shore MP Peter Stoffer, whose federal riding includes the three outer harbour islands, on September 18 about the **land use strategy** delay. He was very

supportive of our goals and is hoping to meet in Ottawa with Minister Sheila Copps' staff.

The Spring Beach Sweep, the Friends of McNabs Island Society's (FOMIS) seventeenth such event on McNabs Island, took place on June 6. Perfect weather helped to attract 190 volunteers, who collected 320 bags of refuse and twenty bags of recyclables. FOMIS started to clean the island's beaches in 1991, and has collected so far an impressive - or unimpressive, depending on how you look at it- 6,000 bags of beach litter. The event is part of a province-wide campaign under the leadership of The Clean Nova Scotia Foundation, with Moosehead Breweries being the major corporate sponsor.

The McNabs Island event receives financial support from the Halifax Defence Complex, a unit of Parks Canada, while Murphy's-on-the-Water provides a discount on charters of their flagship, the Haligonian III. The N.S. Department of Natural Resources provided invaluable material support in the person of David Seaboyer, the island's caretaker, and boatmen Mike Tilley of McNabs Island Ferry Company and Chris Naugle and Dave Phelps ferried the bagged garbage to a dumpster, provided free of charge by waste hauler BF1, on the mainland. A big "thank-you" to chief organizer Catherine McCarthy and to all sponsors and participants.

Dusan Soudek

BURNING MUNITIONS CARRIER SCUTTLED OFF MAUGERS BEACH

November 3, 1943, started out as an ordinary workday in wartime Halifax Harbour. One of the many ships in port at that time was the **Volunteer**, an aging U.S. freighter of 12 000 tons. It had arrived the night before, and was about to leave for the Middle East. On board were 500 tons of light ammunition, 2 000 tons of highly flammable magnesium, 1 800 tons of heavy ammunition, plus undetermined tonnage of depth charges and dynamite.

The Volunteer was riding at anchor in Bedford Basin when a small explosion in the engine room, triggered by a clumsy stoker, ruptured a fuel line, spewing oil. The fire started at 5:15 AM. The crew were unable to reach the naval signal station by radio (wrong frequency) and received no response to light signals (wrong direction).

At 6:50 AM the crew took to lifeboats, abandoning the ship and its officers. It wasn't until two hours after the fire started that it was reported to the authorities. The burning ship was surrounded by fireboats, pumping a fire retardant into its holds. An armed launch boarded the ship, finding its Master, Chief Officer, and Chief Engineer intoxicated, following a drunken all-night poker session in the Master's quarters.

The American captain wouldn't or couldn't provide a cargo plan, and apparently none of the ship's officers could remember what was on board. Moreover, the captain refused to cooperate with Canadian naval authorities. It wasn't until the arrival of a U.S. Navy liaison officer, who formally stripped the captain of his authority, that the harbour authorities could take control of the stricken **Volunteer**.

By this time a heavy cloud of cordite fumes surrounded the ship, and a steady pop-pop-pop of exploding small-arms ammunition could be heard from below decks. The firefighting crew had two alternatives: sink the ship in Bedford Basin or scuttle it in shallow water off Maugers Beach.

Since the fire was limited to a single hold and there was a reasonable chance of saving the ship, the second plan was chosen. The burning ship was to be towed through the Narrows to McNabs Island.

A naval party severed the anchor cables and another crew put a few bullets through the overheated barrels of magnesium, causing a controlled burn rather than an explosion. The ship was then slowly towed past downtown towards McNabs.

By 3:45 PM it reached a position "off Maugers Beach on the South end of McNabs", its seacocks were opened, and shortly after 4:00 PM it had settled to the bottom in shallow water. It had been aground for an hour when the captain, still drinking, realized that his ship had been on fire...

The **Halifax Chronicle** had little to say about the incident, no doubt due to wartime censorship. On Nov. 4 it had a measly four paragraphs on page 14 ("Fight Fire on Vessel in Harbour"), stating that "large billows of smoke caused a great deal of excitement along the waterfront during the morning" and that "at times flames issuing from the ship were clearly visible", while giving neither the ship's name nor its nationality. The next day (Nov. 5), on page 12, it had an equally short article ("Fire Subsides on Sunken Ship"), informing its readers

that the ship had burned for 18 hours and that a fireboat stood by all day.

Like the April 1942 intentional sinking in Bedford Basin of the burning munitions carrier **Trongate**, there was not a repeat of the disastrous 1917 Halifax Explosion. There were several injuries aboard the burning **Volunteer**, with only one person, stoker George Shatford of Lunenburg, later succumbing to his injuries.

And what happened eventually to the Volunteer? Terence Robertson's authoritative article ("The Short Heroic Cruise that Saved Halifax") in **Maclean's** Magazine (Feb. 24, 1962, pp.19 and 36-40) does not say. Presumably its cargo was salvaged and it was refloated.

Dusan Soudek

SEWAGE TREATMENT AND HALIFAX HARBOUR - WHERE ARE WE NOW?

For 253 years, raw sewage has been dumped into Halifax Harbour. At the present time the daily amount of sewage is equal to the volume of about 40 Olympic sized pools, or about 180 million litres.

Many committees, commissions and panels have been appointed to address this problem over the past century. In 1924, a study identified the pollution problems related to sewage discharge and recommended a course of action.

Different solutions to the problem have been heralded throughout the years. The problem, as it stands now, is a harbour with high bacterial levels, resulting in closure of public beaches and shell fishing grounds, raised levels of heavy metals, a plethora of visible floatables, and limited marine life, demonstrating a less-than-healthy harbour.

During the late 1980's, Halifax Harbour Clean-up Inc. (HHCI), was established to design a regional sewage treatment plan. The final recommended site for a primary sewage treatment plant was Ives Cove on McNabs Island. Sewage would be pumped through an undersea pipeline to an artificial island that would be constructed in Ives Cove by infilling thirty metres of water and shoreline.

This plan was submitted to a joint federal-provincial environmental assessment panel. The panel concluded that HHCI choose Ives Cove

with little public involvement. The panel asked HHCI to consider three alternatives, and assess the sites again. Ives Cove was recommended again. The final report suggested many recommendations, including more consideration for alternative sites of the sewage treatment facility.

During this period, the Friends of McNabs Island Society (FOMIS) joined the Metro Coalition for Harbour Clean-up to protest the selection of McNabs Island, because of its historical significance and because it is home to hundreds of species of birds, plants, and other wildlife. There was then, and still is, an effort afloat to have the island declared a protected parkland. The Metro Coalition for Harbour Clean-up also addressed other siting, technology, and economic issues.

The joint environmental assessment panel and the two governments did finally approve the project, with some conditions. But because the proposed plan would cost almost double (400 million instead of 200 million) of what was originally estimated, financing for the entire scheme could not be found before the multi-level government funding arrangement expired in 1995.

A conference of over 120 representatives of a variety of Halifax Harbour stakeholders met in Halifax on November 8&9, 1996. Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) coordinated this conference, designed to gather input for a renewed attempt at designing and building a sewage treatment system.

This summer (97), a source control program was revealed and a stakeholder advisory committee of representatives from various levels of government, individuals, environmental groups, and technical representatives was appointed to provide advice on ways to deal with harbour pollution.

FOMIS remains a member of the Metro Coalition for Harbour Clean-up. It will continue to assess forthcoming harbour cleanup plans.

For more specifics on the 1996 Halifax Harbour Solution Symposium, visit the HRM's [\(HRM\)](#) home page.

Rochelle Owen

A VISIT TO McNABS ISLAND...IN 1816

Editor's note: *The following are entries from the 1816 "journal" of young John E. Fairbanks (1793-1860), later a prominent Halifax merchant, politician, and owner of Woodside on the outskirts of Dartmouth. He was a business partner of James McNab, whose father Peter McNab II was present on the island during the 1816 visit. It was published in the Archives of the Nova Scotia Historical Society # 90. Spelling of certain words has been somewhat updated. The diary has been brought to the attention of FOMIS by Jim Simpson.*

May 25th Left Halifax in the schooner Minerva, Nathan Utly (?) master, bound for Yarmouth. Wind at SW. Came to at 6 o'clock at Major's (sic) Beach.

May 26th - Got under way from the Beach. Light wind at SW. Beat down to the Cape. 12 pm, entirely calm. 6 o'clock, gale of wind at SE. Stood out all night - very heavy sea and rain but couldn't weather the Sisters. Daylight found ourselves near Thrum Cap Shoals.

May 27th - Wind at S, heavy sea running. Bore away for the SE Passage and came to in it about 9 o'clock. Went on shore with Messrs. Harding and Moody. Passengers remained at Mr. McNab's all day and night.

May 28th - Came on board the schooner about 10 o'clock and got under way. Stood up the Eastern Passage and came around the N end of McNabs Island. 6 o'clock the wind at NW to W and stood out sea of the beating about all night without being able to weather the light. Were under the mortifying necessity of putting back for the beach where we arrived about 9 o'clock in the morning of the 29th.

May 29th - Went on shore to Mr. McNab's about 11 o'clock. Found Mr. Peter there who went with me to old Mr. Hawthorn's where we found Mr. Wentworth Moody and Mr. Harding seated at a comfortable breakfast provided for them by Mr. Harding's unblushing brass (sic). We find him an excellent spunger (sponger?) and never dispute the bread with him when in want of a good meal at a stranger's house. In fact he is an old traveler and well calculated to make his way in the world.

Returned to Mr. McNab's and remained there till 11 o'clock at night when we had the felicity of escorting Misses Hawthorn and Ebsie (?) across the cove. In point of personal charms the preference is certainly to be given to the latter though the former is not without animation, tho' she has the misfortune to have what is called a hickory face.

However, we landed them safe and arrived on board the Minerva about 12 o'clock and found all snoring. Poor Moody, cheated out of his berth and obliged to turn in with me. However, the narrow space I had to allow him and the hardness of the mattress very much discomposed him and he manifested his uneasiness by a continued roaring which but ended with the rising of the sun.

May 30th - Got under way with the wind at SW and arrived where we had set out from after a most tedious trial of six days. Remained at home until 4 o'clock. Embarked once more and set sail at six. Stood off a SW course all night.

The schooner **Minerva** finally made it out of Halifax Harbour and reached LaHave at 8 PM on the following day. On June 1 John E. Fairbanks "wrote to McNab", probably a thank-you note.

Dusan Soudek

BEAVER: A NEW MAMMAL SPECIES ON McNABS ISLAND

Our 1995 guide to the island, **Discover McNabs Island**, lists 16 mammal species known to be living on or visiting the island. Another species, the northern long-eared bat (**Myotis lucifugus**), was discovered roosting in the Conrad-Davis House on the island on July 18, 1996, by a team from Dalhousie's Biology Department during a study sponsored by Parks Canada.

Discover McNabs Island mentions mammals which do not occur on the island (e.g. beaver, porcupine, skunk) despite the presence of suitable habitat, and suggests the possibility that they may at some time colonize (or re-colonize?) the island.

This is exactly what happened in the case of beaver, first seen on McNabs Island in McNabs Pond by a party of canoeing FOMIS members on September 14. We saw a number of fresh alder twigs with foliage in the water, not seen during previous canoe paddles through the pond. A careful search of the pond's shoreline resulted in the sighting of a beaver, aside from discovery of several hardwoods bearing the unmistakable signs of beaver damage. No lodge was found.

A repeat visit, again by canoe, on October 5, resulted in the discovery of more 'beaver sticks' in the pond and more grazed alders. The

beaver was seen again, but there was no trace of a beaver lodge in McNabs Pond.

A brand-new lodge, with a small pile of fresh twigs nearby for winter forage, was discovered during the FOMIS Fall Foliage Foray on October 19. By November 23 the lodge grew to a massive size, as did the brush pile. Curiously, the beaver(s) chose probably the most visible and accessible portion of the pond's shoreline, near the junction of Garrison and Lighthouse Roads. The tell-tale signs of their activity are plainly visible from the most-frequented road on McNabs Island.

The water body known today as McNabs Pond was formerly a saltwater cove. Peter McNab I built his homestead, including a wharf, near its head following his purchase of the island in 1782. It appears that the opening of the cove gradually silted up, but a 1867 survey of the south end of McNabs Island, made at the time of its purchase by the Imperial War Department, still shows a wharf near the homestead. By this time the pond was a lagoon, connected to the sea by a lengthy tidal stream.

The lagoon is still remembered by oldtimers as the perfect place to swim: warm yet clear. During World War II a road was built along the sandspit prior to construction of Strawberry Battery and of the new Mauger's Beach lighthouse, bridging the tidal race. According to an eyewitness account, reported in John Jenkins' unpublished history of recreation on McNabs Island, a bulldozer fell through the bridge in 1955. The bridge was never rebuilt, but rather replaced by a tiny metal culvert.

In the absence of any maintenance, the culvert has long since plugged up with silt and sand, cutting off the tidal stream. In 1966 and 1985 biological surveys described the pond as "brackish", but no salinity measurements were made to back up this assertion.

The McNabs Pond of today is a shallow nutrient-rich body of freshwater, supporting a typically freshwater vegetation, and totally unsuitable for swimming. It is not known when McNabs Pond became suitable habitat for beaver, a species restricted to freshwater. The beaver colonization likely took place naturally, from one of the dozens of freshwater lakes in the vicinity of Halifax Harbour, but the possibility of an unauthorized release of captive animals cannot be completely dismissed. In all likelihood at the present time there is only a single young individual in McNabs Pond, desperately in need of a mate.

Dusan Soudek

WHO IS BURIED AT McNAB FAMILY CEMETERY

The small cemetery [Cemetery 1](#) , [Cemetery 2](#) at Fort McNab, called by Thomas H. Raddall, "the world's best defended graveyard", predates the Fort by many decades. It was part of the original McNab homestead on the island. It contains thirteen marked graves of the McNabs and their relatives as well as a number of unmarked graves. Seven of the original stone markers have been destroyed by vandals.

According to Ron G. Blakeney who visited the island cemetery in 1971 and recorded the inscriptions on the remaining ornate headstones, the damaged markers were replaced by the Halifax-Dartmouth Regional Authority which leased a portion of McNabs Island in the 1970's. He reported nine, small white wooden crosses at the cemetery in 1971, of which only five remain today. They are in poor condition. It is not known whose graves they mark. Perhaps those of deceased McNab tenants, soldiers stationed at the island's forts, unidentified bodies found on the island's beaches, or victims of the 1866 cholera outbreak? We may never know.

The following graves still retain their original elaborate headstones. The actual inscriptions are given in bold italics, whereas brief biographical notes, using information gleaned from the personal genealogical collection of Donald Ross, follow in regular type:

- o ***Erected/ in memory of/ Lewis Gibbens/ youngest son of/ James and Harriet McNab/ who died 24th August 1845/ aged 8 years and 6 months*** The youngest of eleven children of the above, born in 1837. The notorious Peter McNab IV (1834-1874) was his older brother.
- o ***Erected/ in memory of/ The Honourable Peter McNab/ died 1st June 1847/ aged 80 years*** Peter McNab II (1767-1847), oldest son of Peter McNab I (1735- 1799), inherited the entire island from his father.
- o ***This stone/ is erected/ to the memory of/ Mrs. Joanna McNab/ wife of Peter McNab Esq./ who departed this life/***

20th May 1827, aged 61/ and John Henry/ son of Peter and Joanna McNab/ who departed this life/ June 1817, aged 18 years Wife and young son of Peter McNab II.

- **In memory of/ Mary Susan/ daughter of Thomas and Ann Gibbs/ born 19 October 1808/ died 7th July 1809** Ann Gibbs, born Ann McNab in 1781, was a daughter of Peter McNab I. She later remarried and was known as Ann Hunter. This is the **oldest** grave in the cemetery.
- **Sacred/ to the memory of Sarah Ann/ wife of Lewis H. Jacobs/ and only daughter of/ William D. and Ann Hunter/ departed this life 19 August 1846/ aged 31 years** Another daughter of Ann McNab Gibbs Hunter.
- **Sacred/ to the memory of Mrs. Sarah Culliton/ who died 4th February 1833/ aged 78 years/ also/ Mr. Thomas Culliton/ died 12 December 1837/ aged 72 years** Parents of Joanna Culliton and parents-in-law of Peter McNab II.

In addition, seven graves are marked by identical slabs of concrete. It is not entirely clear who is responsible for replacing the vandalized original markers. Sources other than Ron Blakeney's manuscript, located in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia (call number MG5, vol.5, #30, microfilm reel 15075), suggest the late Mrs. Gladys Conrad (nee Lynch), the military, and Parks Canada.

- **Sacred/ to the memory of/ Roderick Hugonin/ died June 28, 1863/ aged 8 years** Son of Captain Roderick Hugonin and Harriet McNab (1829-xxxx), younger daughter of James McNab (1792-1871).
- **James John Hugonin/ died February 27, 1852/ aged 4 months** Older brother of Roderick Hugonin.
- **In memory of/ Mary Anne McNab/ died November 4 1855/ aged 49 years** Twin sister of Sophia Louise McNab and younger sister of Peter McNab III (1793-1856).
- **In memory of/ Edwin C. McNab** Younger son of Peter McNab III, born in 1828.

- ***In memory of/ Ellen McNab/ aged 91 years*** Miss Ellen McNab (1843-1934) was a daughter of Peter McNab III and his second wife, Anne Elizabeth Wade. She was the last of her family to own land on McNabs Island and the last person to be buried at the family cemetery.
- ***In memory of/ Charles E. McNab*** Young Charles (1826-1831) was a son of Peter McNab III.
- ***In memory of/ Peter McNab Sr./ died/ October 6, 1856/ aged 63 years*** Peter McNab III, owner of northern end of the island.

The internments range from 1809 to 1863, in addition to the 1934 grave of Ellen McNab. One of the original headstones, that of Sarah Ann Jacobs, recently broke in two. It has since been repaired by Parks Canada staff. The entire cemetery is fenced off and the gate locked. The Friends of McNabs Island Society, through an agreement with Parks Canada, maintain the cemetery.

A review of Parks Canada documents relating to its holdings on McNabs Island reveals several cryptic references to an agreement between His Majesty King Edward VII (ie: the Imperial War Department) and McNab descendant Alan Cassels (on behalf of the McNab family), dated 16 April 1904, stating that "the conditions of sale or transfer of the area known as Fort McNab must include right of access and egress and use of the cemetery by the living members of the McNab family"

The exact text of the entire agreement is not known, and the document itself has been misplaced. Most likely it remains in force to this day, long after the departure of the British Garrison from Fort McNab in 1906

Dusan Soudek