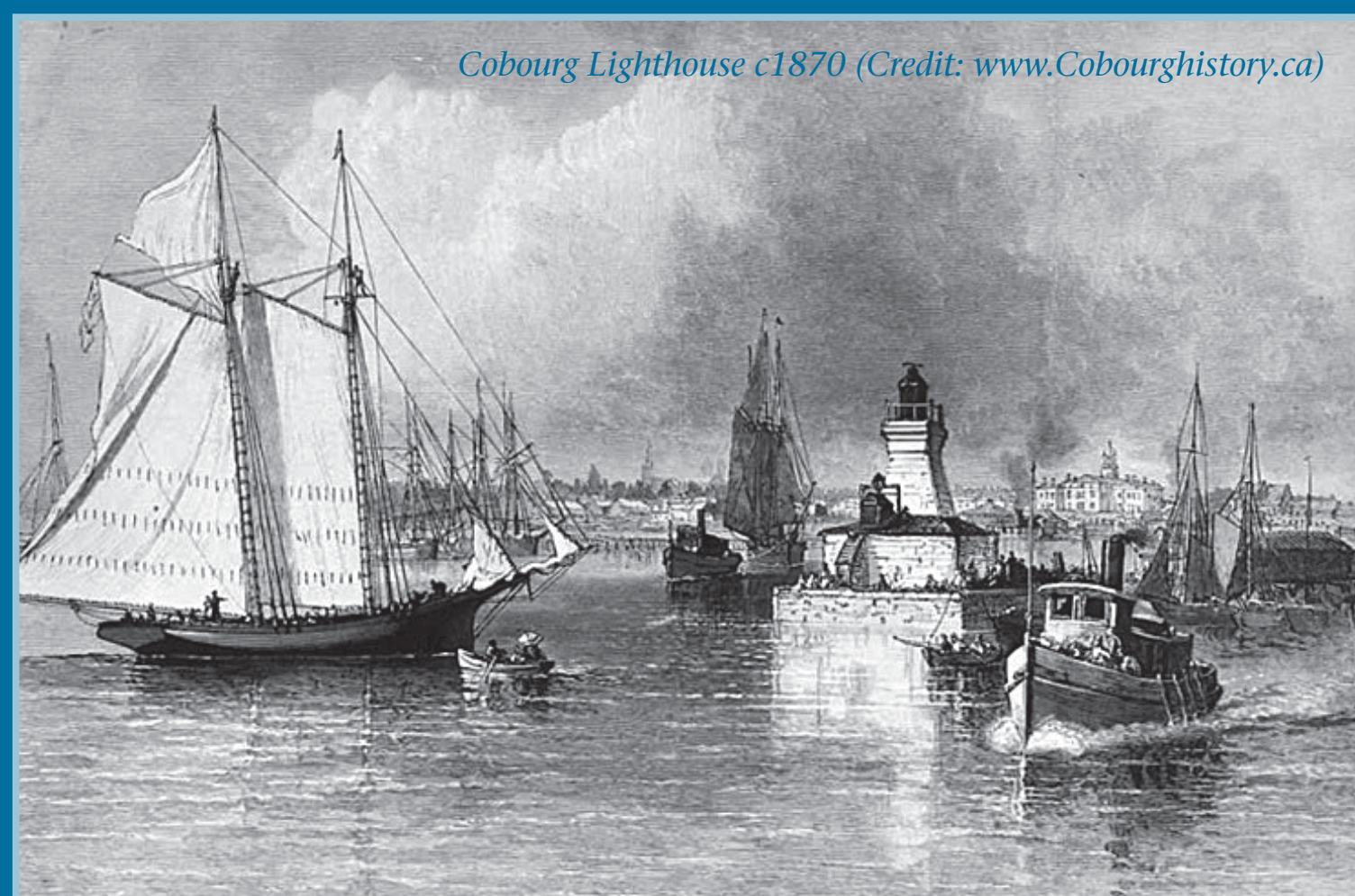


THE HISTORY OF COBOURG HARBOUR

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

At the end of the East Pier a lighthouse marked, as it still does, the beginning of the harbour entrance, which was deep enough to take ocean-going vessels, sail or steam. Peter Rock Light lies about 3 nautical miles to the west and marks a shallow area extending from the shore.

Lighthouse keepers were responsible for making sure that these two lights were operational, as well as ensuring the operation of the fog horn, and recording weather conditions and water levels. These were all of essential assistance to ships and boats navigating Lake Ontario.



Cobourg Lighthouse c1870. (Credit: www.Cobourghistory.ca)

The original lighthouse keeper's house spanned the entire width of the East Pier. One had to be vigilant with children to ensure that they did not fall over the edge. In the winter life was drab and cold, exposed as one was to horrible winds and adverse weather. Conversely, the house was like a summer cottage in the summer.

In the 1940s and 50s the lighthouse keeper was Gerry Harris. On one occasion, when he was sick in hospital, his brother-in-law, Lloyd Jackson, had to fill in. Lloyd moved into the house with his wife and two girls in good time for the arrival of Ontario's worst recorded hurricane, Hazel. Soon the swell was washing right over the house. It would be dangerous for the family to leave, but even more so to stay. To evacuate in safety Lloyd erected a safety line from the house to the shore, connecting it to all the bollards along the pier.

Murray Ribble, Cobourg's last lighthouse keeper, served from April 1, 1964 to May 1, 1980. Evelyn, his wife, recalls her husband scolding local teenagers who played around the harbour jumping off the docks and piers.* She also remembers her son, Larry Ribble Jr., racing around the coal piles on his scooter.

Murray would work twelve hour shifts with his assistant John MacIntyre. He would sometimes have to head to Peter Rock in his boat in the fog and bad weather to make sure that it was operational," explained Mrs. Ribble. "Murray had to do a lot of rescues and dealt with a few drownings too.



A postcard of Cobourg's East Pier lighthouse c1910.

Evelyn recalls that in 1965 the family moved to new quarters, now the Coast Guard building, down the pier. The pier was a small community unto itself and because of the activity in the harbour the Ribble family never felt isolated.

The era of lighthouse keepers faded away as technology took over – but technology can never fully replace people!

*(On March 4, 2013 Cobourg Council updated a bylaw prohibiting diving and jumping off the lighthouse to include doing so from the East Pier as well.)



The current lighthouse on Cobourg's East Pier.
Photo by Kiril Strax