

# Welcome to Georges Island National Historic Site

**Parks Canada** welcomes you to Georges Island National Historic Site in the heart of the place the Mi'kmaq, who have inhabited these shores for thousands of years, called *Kjipuktuk*, or "The Great Harbour." Explore the island and discover its complex story, from the D'Anville expedition of 1746, to the establishment of the first fortifications in 1750 and the internment of Acadian prisoners during the Deportation of 1755-64, to the later development of technologically advanced harbour defences in the Victorian era, and finally the continued use of the island by the Canadian Army during the First and Second World Wars.

Use this brochure as your quick guide to the island and its many points of interest. If you have questions or want more information, do not hesitate to speak to any of our interpretive staff.

## The Halifax Defence Complex Family of Sites

**Georges Island** is one of five national historic sites in Halifax which are known collectively as the Halifax Defence Complex.

These five sites represent the best examples of the many fortifications in the Halifax area that the British and Canadian militaries built over a 200-year period. Parks Canada administers these sites on behalf of all Canadians as part of a larger nation-wide family of national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas.

### The other four sites in the Halifax Defence Complex are:

**Fort McNab.** Primarily used during the First and Second World Wars, this fort is located on the south end of McNab's Island, directly across from York Redoubt.

**York Redoubt.** Originally constructed in the 1790s on a high bluff overlooking the entrance to the harbour, this sprawling fort served until the end of the Second World War.

**Prince of Wales Tower.** Located in Point Pleasant Park, this tower was built in the 1790s, the first Martello-type tower in Canada and one of the earliest Martello Towers in the British Empire. There were five towers in Halifax, including one on Georges Island.

**Halifax Citadel.** This imposing stone fort is the fourth to occupy Citadel Hill and is the premier site in the Halifax Defence Complex. Completed in 1856, the current fort was an active military site until the end of the Second World War.

*We invite you to explore all five historic sites within your reach.*

## Who We Are

**Parks Canada** manages one of the largest national park systems in the world. This system includes national parks, historic sites, heritage canals and marine conservation areas. Parks Canada strives to present these resources in a manner that fosters understanding of their value to all Canadians while protecting them for future generations.

### Our Partners

**The Halifax Citadel Society** is a charitable, non-profit organization created in 1993 whose purpose is to raise awareness and understanding of Canada's past, specifically the rich history associated with the Halifax Citadel and its related sites such as Georges Island. On behalf of Parks Canada, the Society administers the living history, fee collection and visitor orientation programs on the island.

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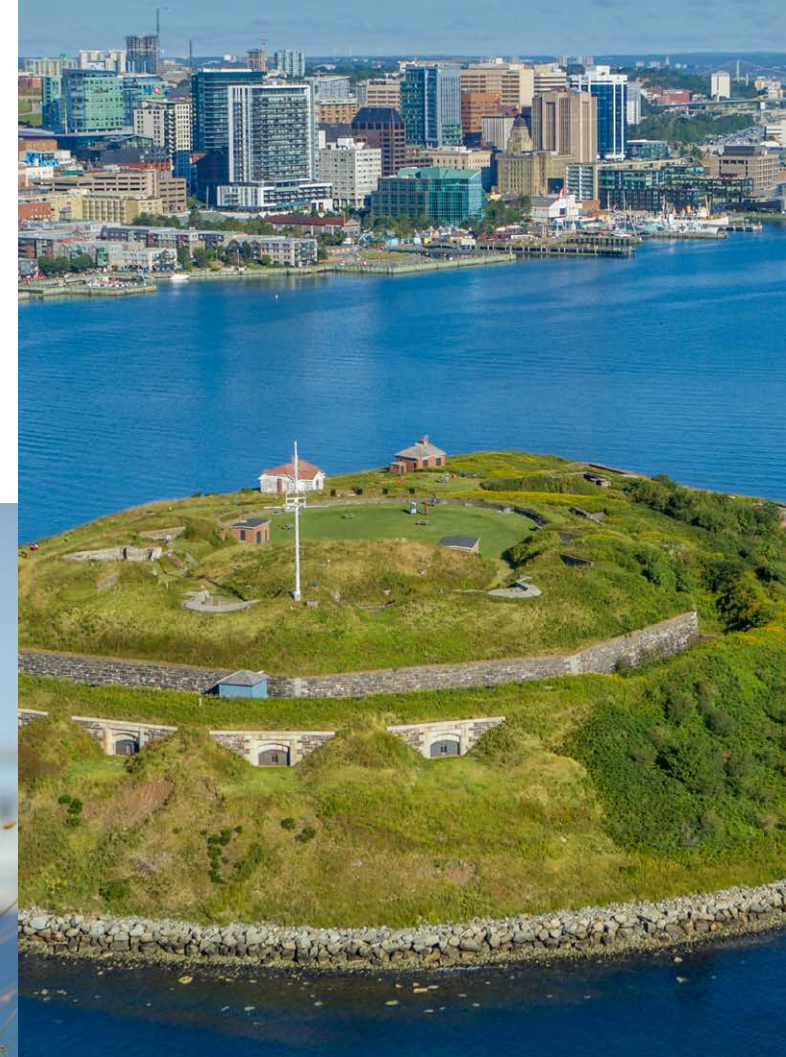
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*Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.*

# Georges Island

Historic Guide  
& Walking Tour



# The story of Georges Island

## History to 1748

The Mi'kmaq were the first people to live in the Halifax region, which they called *Kjipuktuk*, or “the Great Harbour,” having arrived after the last ice age, more than 10,000 years before, following the receding glaciers. The ice had scoured the land and left behind large oval-shaped piles of earth known as “drumlins.” Georges Island is one such drumlin, an island the Mi'kmaq call *Elpaqkwitk*, “Water splashed on it by the waves.” *Kjipuktuk*, part of the larger Indigenous landscape known as *Mi'kma'ki* (the area generally covering the Maritime provinces), was a key gathering place, harvesting area, and travel way for the Mi'kmaq before Europeans arrived, and long afterwards. It is home to numerous Mi'kmaw cultural sites.

The French, who began arriving in the region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in pursuit of fish and furs, called the little island “*île de la Raquette*” or “*île Ronde*” (Snowshoe or Round Island) because of its tapered oval shape. The island also featured prominently in a French attempt to recapture the Fortress of Louisbourg. In 1746, France assembled a massive armada of warships under the command of the Duc d'Anville. Unfortunately, the armada was scattered by storms and ravaged by disease. The remains of the fleet limped into *Kjipuktuk* where d'Anville himself soon died and was buried on *île de la Raquette*.

Many Mi'kmaq, who attempted to help the ailing French sailors and soldiers, perished from the same diseases that had killed so many in D'Anville's fleet. In 1748, Louisbourg was returned to France by treaty, and D'Anville's remains were moved to the chapel there.

## 1749 - 83

The British came to *Kjipuktuk* in 1749 to build a naval base to counter the continuing threat that Louisbourg posed to New England. They called the new town Halifax and this little island “George's Island,” in



honour of King George II, and almost immediately built fortifications there due to its strategic location for harbour defence. From this time onward, the island would be home to many members of the Royal

Artillery and other British regiments, and in later years, members of the Canadian Forces.

The Island also served as the town's first prison as well as an internment camp for Acadians during the eight years of the Deportation. Between 1755 and 1764, the British captured and then detained an estimated 900 Acadian men, women, and children on Georges Island, before they were forcibly deported to other destinations around the world. At its peak, there were about 300 people confined on the island at one time. Acadians were kept in at least two large sheds on the western side of the island in harsh conditions, especially during the winter. People died here. For the Acadian community, this is a sacred and culturally significant site.

While the Seven Years War ended in 1763, the next major conflict followed soon afterwards. After the American Revolutionary War began in 1775, the fort on Georges Island was expanded. By the end of that conflict, Halifax was the last naval port on the eastern seaboard remaining loyal to Britain.

## 1793 - 1850

When Britain and France went to war again in 1793, after the start of the French Revolution, Halifax's role as a strategic naval base came to the fore once more. Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and a son of George



III (later the father of Queen Victoria), arrived in 1794 to take command of military forces in the region. Edward set about improving the harbour defences, including building a stronger fort on Georges Island, which he named Fort Charlotte for his mother, Queen Charlotte. Construction began in 1798, resulting in a compact oval gun battery ringed by a defensive ditch.

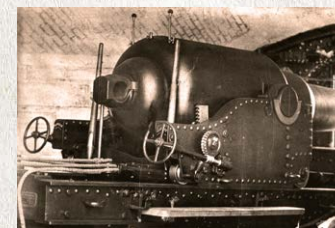
The oldest remaining structures on Georges Island date from this period.

During the War of 1812 with the United States, a stout Martello Tower was added to Edward's fort, one of five towers in Halifax. By this time, British military authorities had recognized Georges Island as the key to the defence of Halifax Harbour.

## 1850 - 1906

Aside from the addition of several “bomb proof” rifle galleries called caponiers, Fort Charlotte remained unchanged for several decades until advances in military technology required another significant rebuild. The introduction of ironclad warships in the 1850s led to the development of more powerful rifled artillery, which fired shells farther and with greater accuracy. These new rifled muzzle-loading (RML) guns necessitated a wholesale change in harbour defence strategy. The coastal defences in Halifax, including Georges Island, were re-armed and reconstructed to make use of this latest technology.

Work on the new Fort Charlotte began in 1864 and continued until 1873. The old Martello Tower was torn down and the south end of the fort



became a two-tiered artillery battery, with a maze-like underground system of ammunition storage and distribution. Eight 9-inch calibre RMLs were installed in an upper battery and four 10-inch RMLs in the underground lower battery.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the rapid pace of weapons development continued, this time rendering Fort Charlotte's RML guns obsolete. In response, the British installed a state-of-the-art submarine mine (or sea mine) system, which could rapidly deploy submerged mines across the harbour channel on either side of the island in the event of an attack by an enemy fleet. New artillery in the form of modern breech-loading Quick-Fire guns was also mounted in the upper battery as a defence against fast torpedo boats.

## 1906 - 65

The Government of Canada assumed responsibility for the Halifax defences from the British in 1906. By then, the increasing ranges of artillery had made Georges Island less important than the newer



coastal forts that had been built farther out toward the mouth of the harbour. Nevertheless, some of the first Canadian troops mustered for service during the First World War were deployed to Georges Island, where an anti-submarine net was erected on both sides of the island to prevent German U-boats from entering the inner harbour.

During the Second World War an anti-aircraft unit was stationed on the island, the last soldiers to serve there. The island was declared a national historic site in 1965.

### Georges Island Lighthouse

A lighthouse was built on Georges Island in 1876, but was destroyed by fire in 1916. The current lighthouse was built as a replacement in 1917. In 1972, the last lighthouse keeper, David Barkhouse, left the island with his family after the lighthouse became automated. In 1974, a remote radar tower, disguised to look like part of the original Fort Charlotte, was raised to assist with harbour traffic control.

### Is there a Tunnel from the Citadel to Georges Island?

A persistent folk tale, going back more than a century, tells us that a tunnel links the Citadel with Fort Charlotte. However, no evidence of such a tunnel has ever been found!

## Points of interest

- |                                      |                                |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Submarine Mining Establishment     | 12 Caponiers                   |
| 2 Gun Cotton Tanks                   | 13 Forge                       |
| 3 Dry Primer Store                   | 14 Artillery Store             |
| 4 Married Officers Quarters          | 15 RML Laboratory              |
| 5 Lighthouse Keeper's House          | 16 Upper Battery               |
| 6 Former Prison Shed Location        | 17 9-inch RML Gun Emplacements |
| 7 Former Prison Shed Location        | 18 Quick-Fire Gun Emplacements |
| 8 Lighthouse                         | 19 Tunnels (Magazine Complex)  |
| 9 Fort Charlotte Gate and Guard Room | 20 Ditch                       |
| 10 Parade Square                     | 21 Lower Battery               |
| 11 North Battery                     | 22 Central Caponier            |



### For Your Safety

Georges Island is a fortification that features steep masonry walls, surrounded by a ditch up to 9 metres deep. Please do not climb up on the walls or earthworks or out into gun openings.

These areas are especially dangerous when wet. Young children should be under close supervision at all times. Be aware of steep inclines and watch out for low doorways, uneven steps, and floors.



Please note there is no smoking permitted on the island.

## Services



Boat Dock



Water Transportation



Shore Launch



Information



Public Toilets



First Aid Station (Coal Shed)



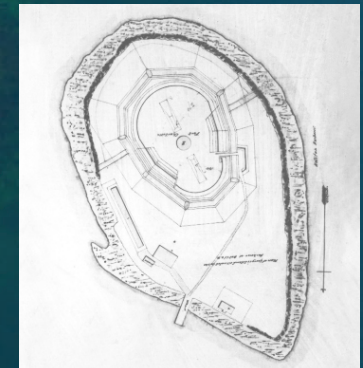
Picnic Area



No Access



1755



1812

# Take yourself on a tour

Use this handy map and guide to take yourself on a walking tour of the island. Explore the interpretive panels and other displays, and ask our interpretive staff for more information.

Begin on the shore near the end of the wharf. Turn and look toward the city, and try to imagine how this place appeared when only the Mi'kmaq lived here for millennia. Listen to the waves lapping the shore.

## 1 Submarine Mining Establishment

Now leap ahead centuries in time to discover one of the last structures to be built on the island. The submarine mining establishment was first constructed in the 1870s and expanded in the 1890s, and represented the height of harbour defence technology at the time. Submarine mine (or sea mine) cases were stored and only assembled and deployed for drills or in case of an attack. A mini railroad was used for transporting the heavy mines. The tracks and base of a turntable remain.

A wooden barracks for married soldiers once stood just to the left of the existing brick buildings.

## 2 Guncotton Tanks

The explosive used in the submarine mines was guncotton (nitrocellulose). Because it was so volatile, it had to be stored in water in these concrete tanks.

## 3 Dry Primer Store

The igniters for the mines were stored separately in this small magazine. The roof no longer exists. The blast wall around the outside of the building was meant to contain an explosion in the event of an accident.

## 4 Married Officers Quarters



This little brick house was built in 1901 as quarters for Royal Artillery officers and their families. The house contained a kitchen, parlour, two bedrooms, and an outside sentry post.

## 5 Lighthouse Keeper's House

One of the newest structures on the island, this house was built in 1947 as quarters for the lightkeeper and his family. It was abandoned in 1972 when the lighthouse was automated.

## 6 Former Prison Shed Location

## 7 Former Prison Shed Location

In the 1750s, two large sheds or barracks stood close to this location (6 and 7). These sheds and several other buildings that no longer stand were part of the prison where Acadians were held during the Deportation of 1755-1764.

## 8 Lighthouse

View the lighthouse from the road, and be careful of the steep slope!



The current lighthouse dates from 1917 and replaced an earlier one that was destroyed by fire. Several lighthouses of this octagonal design were built in Nova Scotia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 9 Fort Charlotte Gate and Guard Room

The gate to Fort Charlotte dates to the final rebuild of the fort in the 1860s. A sentry, part of the Guard detachment, was posted here. The wooden bridge was retractable and controlled from inside the Guard Room, to your right as you enter. The Guard Room was the security office for the fort.

## 10 Parade Square

This grassy oval was the assembly area for the fort's garrison, and also a small drill ground.

## 11 North Battery

This low slate wall is the oldest structure on the island and dates from the 1790s. The cannon mounted here protected the rear of the fort and were originally 24-pounders (guns that fired a 24 pound ball). Massive 68-pounders were mounted here in the 1860s.

## 12 Caponiers

These short stairways lead to rifle bunkers known as caponiers. These two caponiers were added in the 1820s and were shelters for riflemen to fire from cover in the event of an attack.

## 13 Forge

This brick forge was used by artillery artificers for making and repairing various metal objects such as pieces of gun carriages.

## 14 Artillery Store

This building was used to store equipment for loading and firing the guns, and was later used as a cookhouse.

## 15 RML Laboratory

This building was a special laboratory for manufacturing gunpowder cartridges for the RML (rifled muzzle-loading) guns.

## 16 Upper Battery

One of the key elements in the reconstruction of Fort Charlotte in the 1860s, the Upper Battery featured eight 9-inch RML guns arranged in a horseshoe. Each massive cannon had a range of about two miles and was capable of sinking the new "ironclad" warships.

If you stand in the centre of the battery, you can see how these guns had a clear shot all the way to the mouth of the harbour.

## 17 9-inch RML Gun Emplacements

These are the five remaining RML emplacements.

## 18 Quick-Fire Gun Emplacements

In the 1890s, three of the RMLs in the Upper Battery were replaced with 4.7 inch calibre Quick-Fire guns. Another example of evolving military technology, these guns utilized a self-contained brass shell and could fire five to six shots a minute.

## 19 Tunnels (Magazine Complex)

Head back down to the entrance to the magazine complex. Here the ammunition needed for the Upper and Lower Batteries was stored in a protective network of underground tunnels. This facility consisted of a central magazine for gunpowder storage, surrounded by a system for delivering cartridges and shells to the Upper Battery.

The tunnels are best explored in company with one of our interpretation staff.

## 20 Ditch

The tunnel complex brings you to part of the defensive ditch that surrounds Fort Charlotte. The ditch was an obstacle protecting the fort from potential attacking enemy troops. It was defended by five caponiers, or rifle bunkers.



## 21 Lower Battery

This second layer of powerful RML guns added massive firepower to Fort Charlotte. Buried inside these arched stone chambers, these four 10-inch guns were well protected from potential enemy fire.

## 22 Central Caponier

The largest of the fort's five caponiers, this one also houses the main stairway that will lead you back from the Lower Battery to the Upper Battery.

**This concludes the tour. Feel free to continue to explore the island, take in the views of the harbour and city, and talk to our interpretation staff.**