



# The Lightfoot Tower

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## Background Information

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Prepared by: Glen MacLeod  
Librarian  
Zoé Vallé Memorial Library  
63 Regent Street  
Chester Nova Scotia  
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What we know today as the Lightfoot Tower, was built by Alfred Ross Lightfoot after his wife, Zoé Vallé Lightfoot, bought the property that is now a library in her memory, in 1903. The Lightfoots lived in Manhattan at the time, where Alfred was a lawyer.

Alfred Ross Lightfoot, was born in Pass Christian, Mississippi on June 2, 1852 to William and Sarah Lightfoot. William Bernard Lightfoot, originally from Port Royal, Virginia, was a graduate of the University of Virginia and became a large cotton planter and had a fine estate with many slaves, living the life of a southern gentleman previous to the Civil War. He married Sarah Bee Ross of Mobile, Alabama, who was the daughter of Jack Ross, the first State treasurer.



Alfred Ross Lightfoot

© Missouri Historical Society

An antebellum seaside community, Pass Christian was in Alfred's day an internationally known resort and the Gulf Coast was called the American Riviera. His father, William, was Recorder(mayor) of Pass Christian and the family had a home on the Gulf Coast next to the Pass Christian Hotel. William and Sarah moved to Mobile after the Civil War and are buried at the Old Church Street Cemetery there.

It's easy to understand why Alfred would have wanted to build the tower to get a better view of sailing activity in Mahone Bay. He grew up next to the home of the "birthplace of yachting in the south".

"When Pass Christian was incorporated in 1848, it was already famous for its gallant and gracious charm and the courteous service given to its summer guests and residents. That was the era when the "Pass" had nearly a hundred private piers jutting out a thousand feet into the Sound. The Pass Christian Hotel, had its start in 1831, having expanded its structural growth through the years; and when taken over by the affable hotelier R. H. Montgomery, further embellishments and renovations were made.

Montgomery was its host from 1847 to 1855 and through whose adroit maneuvering the early formation of the Southern Yacht Club was organized within its portals in 1849. Yachting in the South was born at Pass Christian. The first regatta was promoted at the Pass Christian Hotel, being held on July 21, 1849. Citing a New Orleans'



The Pass Christian Hotel, around 1865, when it was a Catholic Boy's College.

newspaper article from the "Crescent" on that date, "It was a gala day at the Pass. The quiet harbor was thronged with boats, gay with streamers, and manned by athletic crews..." "

([http://yacht.passchristian.net/yacht\\_club\\_history.htm](http://yacht.passchristian.net/yacht_club_history.htm))



Pinehurst Observatory

When it was built, the Lightfoot Tower would not have been unique. It has been said that there were perhaps five such towers in the Chester area at one time. One can see an example of these towers, the Pinehurst Observatory, on an old postcard of the era.

When the Lightfoot Tower was new, it would have had a commanding view of the Bay around Chester. The land throughout the village was not as heavily treed as it is today. Today, one can get an idea of the original panorama in the winter, when the trees are without their leaves.



View from the Lightfoot Tower in winter.



A view, from an old postcard, showing the original tower on the grounds of the Vallé summer residence.

There has been speculation at times that Alfred Lightfoot had the tower built so he could get away from the garden parties and teas that were a part of summer life in Chester, although it was more likely that it was because of his interest in yachts and sailing. The late John Dimick once remarked that Dr. Andrew Anderson of St. Augustine, who built 'Over The Way', would often join Lightfoot for drinks and cigars on the tower and watch the races in the Bay. Alfred Lightfoot died in 1911 and his remains are buried in the Vallé family plot at the Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis.

Apparently the top was blown off the tower during a storm in 1918 and Zoé had a simple roof put on. The stairs eventually rotted away and the basic shell remained untouched until the Chester Municipal Heritage Society got involved in the early 1980's. The Chester Municipal Heritage Society was formed in 1981 by a group of Chester residents who were concerned about the preservation of local heritage buildings after the demolition of the old school on King Street. Their first project was the Chester Train Station. In the early days of the Society, they helped the Library in various ways as best they could. They built bookcases, repaired stone foundations and did some repainting. By far, the biggest Society effort on the Library property was the restoration of the Lightfoot Tower.

CMHS collection



The Tower in 1983, before restoration.



The Lightfoot Tower after restoration.



The watercolor used by the Heritage Society to design the Tower restoration. It probably dates from Zoé's time, as there is no addition to the back of the building.

Working from a small watercolour that had probably been in the Library since Zoé's time, they rebuilt the observation deck and roof, replaced the stairs and reinforced the internal structure of the tower itself in order to make sure that the roof was secure. The restored tower was re-opened by Lt. Governor Abraham at a ceremony in August 1985.

For many years the Society decorated the tower for Halloween and members dressed in spooky costumes to greet those children who were brave enough to approach and climb the tower for treats. By agreement with the Library Board, the Heritage Society is responsible for the maintenance of the tower, as the Library Board felt they had enough to be concerned with looking after the Library building itself.



The re-opening ceremony, August 1985.



Halloween in the Tower.

Today, the Lightfoot Tower remains one of the most unique features of the village. Cars constantly slow and sometimes stop to take a look at the Tower. Many have photographed it as they passed or as part of a wedding photo shoot. There are always questions as to what it is for... "Is it a lighthouse?". There are always those who wander through the Library garden towards the Tower with a childlike curiosity, wondering how something, as if from a fairy tale, can be solid right in front of them. In this aspect, the Tower represents the village as a whole and its heritage of enchantment.

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