

***Birth of a Lighthouse, Birth of a Nation:
Point Prim and the 1864 Charlottetown Conference***

Amidst the excitement of Slaymaker & Nichols' Olympic Circus which came to Charlottetown in late August of 1864, three vessels steamed their way into the bustling Island harbour. The *Heather Belle* was the first to arrive, followed by the *Princess of Wales* and, finally, the *Queen Victoria*. While the first two had put in from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, respectively, the *Queen Victoria* had come from Canada (at that time consisting of legislative union of Ontario and Quebec). Unlike the many people who had ventured from across the Island to take in the circus, however, the politicians on board these steamships had not come for animals and acrobats; rather, they'd come for a conference, one that would ultimately change the course of Canadian history.

As the steamships put into the Northumberland Strait, the politicians would have been greeted by sights similar to those admired by tourists today: bright red cliffs, rolling fields, and scattered hamlets. But there was something else that would have caught their attention as they neared Charlottetown: A light, to the east.

Situated on the tip of Point Prim in eastern Queens County, with a commanding view of the Northumberland Strait, is Point Prim Lighthouse. Standing majestically eighty feet above sea level, it is Prince Edward Island's oldest lighthouse, its only brick lighthouse (albeit covered with wooden shingles), and one of only three in all of Canada constructed in that medium. Built in 1845, it was designed by one of the Island's premiere architects, Isaac Smith, responsible for such perennial masterpieces as Province House and Fanningbank. It is the forefather of all lighthouses on the Island, and so it is only fitting that three individuals involved in its construction be considered forefathers as well. Forefathers of Canada.

At the conference in Charlottetown, held to discuss the idea of Maritime Union (but which quickly became dominated by talk of Confederation), the Island was represented by five delegates. Three were from the governing Tory party, while two were selected from the opposition Liberals. Two of the delegates, George Coles and Edward Palmer (and later Thomas Heath Haviland, Jr., chosen as an additional delegate for the subsequent Quebec Conference) had, in 1845, been part of an effort of a different sort. While Coles and Palmer were sitting members of the Island's legislative assembly, and Haviland was set to begin a career as a lawyer, all three men were shareholders in an outfit known as the Prince Edward Island Steam Navigation Company, a group of individuals based largely in Charlottetown, and composed for the most part of prominent merchants, shipowners, barristers, and politicians. Its purpose being to secure the government's lucrative mail contract by operating a steamboat between the Island and the mainland, the company all but dissolved in the span of a few short years - but not before its directors and shareholders successfully petitioned for the erection of a lighthouse at Point Prim in order to safeguard their vessel's interests.

Of the three men, George Coles would find himself most involved in the project. In March of 1845, he was selected as a member of a survey party (along with Joseph Pope and Thomas Haviland, Sr., fathers of future Island Fathers of Confederation William Pope and Haviland, Jr.) that ventured across the ice from Charlottetown to Point Prim to locate a suitable site for the lighthouse on land provided by Lord Selkirk through his land agent William Douse Esq., M.P.P. Little time was wasted in construction, and in early December of that year the structure was operational.

By the time of the Charlottetown Conference in 1864, Point Prim Lighthouse had been a guiding light for mariners for nearly twenty years, and as it approaches its 170th birthday in 2015, continues to shine on. On a plaque outside the Legislative Council Chamber in Province House marking the 50th anniversary of the conference, the Fathers of Confederation are credited with “building better than they knew”. The same could also be said of the fathers of Point Prim Lighthouse.