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Welcome aboard Island Life. One Thousand Islands ... One Thousand Stories. Make that more than a thousand stories. An estimated 1,865 islands dot the St. Lawrence River between Brockville and Kingston and Morristown and Cape Vincent. Like snowflakes, no two are alike. And like people, every one of them has a story to tell.

I’ve spent the last two years touring the Thousand Islands with a waterproof nautical chart, camera and notebook to chronicle them and I haven’t run out of stories yet.

Island Life magazine takes readers on a tour of this amazing archipelago starting off along the shores of Brockville: ‘The City of the 1000 Islands’. The Brock Isles are the jewels in the crown of the city’s waterfront with 16 municipally-owned islands at its doorstep, making it a boater’s paradise and diver’s delight.

The Thousand Islands are home to fairy tale castles, some long forgotten. There’s the lost castle of Calumet Island near Clayton which more than a century ago stood before Boldt Castle on Heart Island and Singer Castle on Dark Island were built. While all that is left of Calumet today is a staircase and rubble, Boldt Castle with its tragic love story and its Boldt Yacht House endures along with Singer Castle’s secret passageways and Royal Suites – as top tourist attractions.

Pullman Island was one of the first islands to have a castle retreat in the Thousand Islands known as Castle Rest built in the late 1800s.

Islands are as unique as their owners, past and present. Fancy Rock Island near Rockport once was the retreat for two glamorous American actresses and a famous Broadway theatre critic. His son, Ward Morehouse III of New York city, is a playwright and author who has penned books on grand hotels including New York’s Plaza and George C. Boldt’s Waldorf Astoria.

Nearby Pine Island was home to American author John Keats, who wrote Of Time and an Island there in his writer’s cabin standing on the same bluff overlooking the St. Lawrence River today and a cottage frozen in 1950’s nostalgia when he raised his children there during six months of the year with his wife Margaret. Their classic wooden boat pictured on the cover of this magazine heading towards Pine Island from Rockport is called the Margaret. Their daughter, Margaret, took me aboard the Margaret to see the very island that inspired Keats’ ‘Thousand Islands’ classic.

Rock Island was home to notorious Patriot ‘pirate’ Bill Johnston while President Ulysses S. Grant’s visit to Pullman Island near Alexandria Bay – also known as Castle Rest Island – in 1872 put the Thousand Islands on the map.

I visited these islands and more, exploring Bostwick’s Island’s historic Sunday services at Half Moon Bay in the Admiralty Group, the grand estates of Cherry Island and its resident author and antique boat expert Anthony Mollica Jr. and Sugar Island, the Canadian island near

Voyaging past Dark Island’s Singer Castle aboard Ottawa’s Bytown Brigantine’s tall ship Fair Jeanne

Voyaging past Dark Island’s Singer Castle aboard Ottawa’s Bytown Brigantine’s tall ship Fair Jeanne
Gananoque that has been owned by the American Canoe Association for more than a century. I discovered lesser known ones including Little Angel Island, Black Ant Island and Willie Nelson Island along my travels along the St. Lawrence River.

This place is a moving canvass, its picture ever changing with its snapshot scenery. A blue heron in flight. Fabled castles. Gingerbread cottages. Windswept pines on granite. Mighty freighters and tall ships. Two countries. One River. And much more than a Thousand Islands.

Thousand Islands photographer and author Ian Coristine captures its magic like nobody else in his aptly titled new book The very best of Ian Coristine’s Thousand Islands. The aerial photographer, who has spent nearly two decades documenting the beauty of the Thousand Islands from air, water and land including the shores of his own island just west of Brockville, releases his fourth book this month. See a preview of Coristine’s ‘very best’ in a photo essay starting on page 26.

Coristine and Susan W. Smith, author of The First Summer People The Thousand Islands: 1650 to 1910, and editor of www.thousandislandslife.com, continue to highlight this magnificent region in memory of the site’s founder, the late Thousand Islands author and architect Paul Malo. It’s an honour to work with them as a regular contributor to the website which celebrates the Thousand Islands community in a new online issue every month.

I’m grateful to those who kindly invited me on to their islands to share their stories of this place and all the River Rats and skippers I have encountered as a nautical hitchhiker along the way. There is no other place in the world like the Thousand Islands. Beyond its beauty lay storied shores.

And thank you to all the Thousand Islands businesses and advertisers who helped put this issue of Island Life magazine into readers’ hands. So pull up a deck chair and do a little island hopping – just in time for summer. The more than One Thousand Islands have more than One Thousand stories to tell. These are just a few of them. Enjoy,

KIM L UNM AN

Sugar Island
Imagine a place where you can commute to an island in a matter of minutes for a picnic, swim, scuba dive or simply admire a sunrise over one from the mainland. Then you’ve imagined the Brock Isles.

Brockville may officially be known as “The City of the 1000 Islands” but it’s actually home to more than a dozen of the Thousand Islands. The municipality owns 16 islands that dot the Brockville N arrows in the St. Lawrence River.

All islands have their mysteries and the Brock Isles are no different. They are only a short boat ride away from downtown Brockville but transport you worlds away. These tranquil escapes set against a backdrop of passing ships and picturesque shorelines.

This city’s waterfront has always been its heartbeat, especially in the summer months when boats line its harbours and freighters and tall ships pass in the channel in a never-ending nautical parade. Kayakers and scuba divers take to the waters and sailboats drift along its warm breezes.

“We’re looking at resort living every day,” said the city’s Director of Economic Development David Paul. “Where else in Canada does a municipality own this many islands?”

The city of Brockville purchased a total of 29 islands and one barren reef for park purposes in 1933 for a mere $3,631. Today, 16 of those islands have been developed for the public.

The islands include the Twin Sister Islands, North Twin and South Twin, Molly’s Gut Island, De Rottenburgh Island, Battersby Island, Snake Island, Black Charlie Island, Little Black Charlie Island, Sparrow Island, Harvey Island, Chub Island, Refugee Island, Mile Island, Skelton Island, McCoy Island and Cockburn Island.

The Brock Isles – like Brockville which is one of Ontario’s oldest cities – are steeped in history. In fact most of the names of the islands can be traced back to the War of 1812. Many are named after officers who fought in the British campaign under the command of the community’s namesake: Sir Isaac Brock.

Sparrow Island is named after Major E.P. Sparrow, Battersby is likely named after Lieutenant Colonel F. Battersby, and De Rottenburg is named after Major General Francis Baron de Rottenburg. Skelton Island is named after Major Henry Skelton. Cockburn Island is named after Major Francis Cockburn who was appointed as governor to the Bahamas in 1919 and later knighted. Harvey Island is named after Major John Harvey. He later returned from Britain to North America to become lieutenant governor of New Brunswick in 1841 and later held similar posts in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

The federal government offered Prescott, Brockville and Gananoque the opportunity to buy undeveloped islands in the late 1800s when some of the islands were being evaluated for as little as $15. Brockville was the only community to take advantage of the offer, leasing the Brock Isles and later buying them.

The Brock Isles lie at the eastern end of the Thousand Islands starting across from Morristown N. Y., where 70 islands and 60 shoals comprise the Brockville N arrows group. As the name implies, the
River narrows considerably here to a width of only 1.4 kilometres. The small islands offer a scenic and relaxing route for day trippers while some have campsites. Stovin Island, the most easterly gateway to St. Lawrence Islands National Park, is also located in the Brockville Narrows.

The Brock Isles make up a fraction of the actually 1,865 Thousand Islands. The River was discovered by French explorer Jacques Cartier, who named it after Saint Lawrence, nearly five centuries ago. Natives here long before the European settlers called the Thousand Islands Manitouana, Garden of the Great Spirit.

Some of the most spectacular sites here are underneath the River’s surface. The Thousand Islands’ are becoming known as an international diving destination with about 30,000 divers exploring the shipwrecks of the Brock Isles annually.

Cockburn Island is near the site of the wreck of the J.B. King, a dynamite-laden drill boat which was struck by lightning on June 26, 1930. Thirty of the 42 crew members on board that day were killed. Seventeen of them were never found.

Other dive sites in the Brock Isles include the Lillie Parsons near Sparrow Island which sank on Aug. 5 1877 and the Robert Gaskin wreck, which sank off the city’s shores in August 1889.

The proliferation of zebra mussels in recent years in the River has resulted in water clarity for divers while warm water temperatures in the summer months also attract the underwater tourists.

“It’s renowned as world-class diving,” said ABUCS Scuba Dive Charters owner Helen Cooper. “We’ve got wrecks that went down in the 1800s that are in pristine condition.”

It’s a popular destination for people drawn to the area to explore the Brock Isles above the water’s surface too in power boats, sailboats, Sea-Doos and kayaks as well as the city’s attractions and amenities on land nearby.

Refugee Island provides a perfect refuge for a picnic.
Scott Ewart, owner of 1000 Islands Kayaking, said the Brock Isles are getting a well-deserved reputation as a paddlers' paradise. “It makes it a much more unique experience to explore the islands,” he said, noting kayakers enjoy stopping on them to picnic, hike and swim. Brockville used to be known as River City and not much has changed about its residents' longstanding affection for their waterfront.

Today the City of the 1000 Islands is being touted as “Brockville-on-the-River” with several waterfront developments underway including Tall Ships Landing to include a spa, boutique hotel and waterfront restaurant as well as the Maritime Discovery Centre of the 1000 Islands, an anchor tourism attraction.

As much as there is a renaissance on the riverfront, the shores of Brockville remain lined with the city's rich history. Canada's first railway tunnel, which celebrates its 150th birthday this summer, is located at Blockhouse Island. St. Lawrence Park, a century-old city park along the River, is popular swimming spot, launching area for kayaks and dive boats. And Fulford Place, an Edwardian mansion owned by George Fulford – who made his fortune off “Pink Pills for Pale People” – has a quaint tea room patio overlooking the River.

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The city’s Blockhouse “Island” was once an actual island with a blockhouse on it but was never used for military purposes. It was known as Hospital Island in the 1830s for people on ships with cholera who were kept in isolation in a hospital there. In the earlier part of last century, factories lined the waterfront.

“You can’t separate Brockville from the River,” said Bonnie Burke, director and curator of the Brockville Museum, “They go hand-in-hand. We can’t tell the story of Brockville without relating it to the River. The story still goes on today.”

And, in the same way, it’s impossible to separate Brockville “the City of the 1000 Islands” from the Thousand Islands with 16 of them to call the city’s very own.

The natural wonders of the Thousand Islands have long been a source of inspiration for mariners, writers and artists. During an excursion through the Thousand Islands in the 1840s, Charles Dickens wrote: “The beauty of this noble stream at almost any point, but especially in the commencement of this journey, when it winds its way among the Thousand Islands, can hardly be imagined.”

Nearly two centuries later, it doesn’t take much imagination to see that beauty here in the Brock Isles today. After all, some treasures can’t be hidden.
The quaint riverside village of Rockport is alive with camera-toting tourists, international visitors disembarking from buses for a seat on a tour boat to take them to see fabled castles and cottages.

They are here to see the world famous Thousand Islands. I am boarding a classic wooden boat at a nearby marina to see just one of them.

The boat is called the Margaret. The 1935 mahogany Hutchinson has a storied history in these waters. My aptly-named skipper, Margaret Jenne, points the classic boat named after herself and her mother, towards her family’s cottage on the island she has known her whole life.

Pine Island is not nearly as well-known to tourists as nearby Heart Island with Boldt Castle or Dark Island’s Singer Castle but it is the subject of the classic Thousand Islands’ book Of Time and an Island.

Jenne’s late father, John Keats, wrote about this island in Of Time and an Island which was published in 1974 and is still in print. It is one of 13 books by the author and acclaimed social critic who made this island his family’s Canadian home.

“Our house,” he wrote in the forward, “is built on a rock in a river.” The autobiographical book is a love letter to the Thousand Islands and especially to life on Pine Island.

Of Time and an Island tells the story of a newspaper reporter from Washington D.C. who buys the island with his wife Margaret to spend summers there with their three children, Christopher, Margaret and Victoria in the 1950s.

The purchase seemed illogical to him at the time. “I was a Washington newspaper man. I had nothing in the bank.”

“Yet,” he wrote. “There is something about an island that stands outside rational discourse, just as, in a physical sense, an island stands apart from the rest of the world.”

The green-roofed white cottage which is perched on a granite cliff sits atop a two-slip boathouse on giant granite boulder dotted with sumac trees and windswept Pines.

“The River is its own country,” said Jenne, observing the panoramic view from its screened porch. The Canadian island is located close to the American border and you can see both countries here without having to look too far.

The living room has an embroidered map of the island – which is stitched with the words at top: “Map of the Pine Island Pirates” hanging on the wall. The map marks all sorts of spots on the island when Keats and his wife raised their children.
here. There's Rabbit's House, Secret Swing, Circle of the Dead Tree and Tour Boat Watch. And, of course, the Margaret.

“All our talk about our Canadian island in the summer was not about an escape from life but rather about the possibility of an escape to it,” Keats wrote.

Inside one of the bedrooms above the boathouse there’s a hole drilled in the floor. That, explains Jenne, was where the children dropped a fishing line into the water below.

The map shows other important destinations on the two-acre island including Take-A-Rest-Drop, Clean-A-Fish-Rock, the Big Tree, and the small writer’s cabin Keats worked in every day at his typewriter across the island from the cottage near Tour Boat Watch also known as Lookout Rock.

Keats, who was known as JK, died in 2000 at the age 79. But Pine Island remained a constant throughout his life.

He worked as a copy editor and reporter at the Washington Daily News, initially commuting to the island for weekends but left his job in 1953 to become a freelance writer.

The Keats stayed for half a year with the children even attending school in Rockport in early spring and late autumn months while the family spent most winters in Philadelphia.

Jenne, of Lancaster Pennsylvania, has been coming here since she was a child.

“It was a good place to grow up, that’s for sure,” she said. She rode with her older brother Christopher in The Little Red Boat sporting a pirate’s flag to attend the two-room school house in Rockport.

“Going to school was quite an adventure. For a six-year-old, that was a long way,” said Jenne. “My mother painted it red so she could spot it.”

Keats freelanced to 40 national magazines in the United States and Europe, as a correspondent for such magazines as Vanity Fair, Outdoor Life, Esquire, The National Geographic and Field and Stream. He wrote in the mornings on a typewriter in his office – a small cabin located at the other end of the island from the family’s cottage. He worked without electricity or a telephone. The cottage had no television or radio and editors who visited him were shocked he didn’t have any newspapers or magazines.

Some of his urban visitors provided a source of amusement. One unlucky literary agent in his suit carrying a brief case was left to cool his heels on a floating dock by his water taxi service from Rockport while the author waited for awhile to rescue the hapless New Yorker.

But Keats preferred the peaceful surroundings of Pine Island to literary circles in the city. He had a ready supply of honest critics here.
They Fought Alone which chronicled guerrilla fighting in the Philippines. He wrote The Skiff and the River and two biographies: Howard Hughes: The Biography of a Texas Billionaire and You Might as Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker.

“He was one of the best biographers of her,” said Ward Morehouse III, who befriended Keats in the Thousand Islands. His family owns Fancy Rock Island near Pine Island.

Morehouse III, a writer and author in New York City, credits Keats with helping him prepare for one of his first jobs as a reporter for the New York Post.

“He was a journalist first and foremost,” he said. “He was old school. He practiced his craft.”

Keats was born in Moultrie, Ga. He served in the Army Air Corps in the Pacific during World War II before embarking on a career in journalism.

His wife Margaret, whose grandparents owned a home in Rockport, introduced him to the Thousand Islands.

Keats wrote magazine articles and books including The Crack in the Picture Window which took aim at sprawling suburban housing developments, The Insolent Chariots criticizing Detroit automakers and

On Pine Island in 1957. John Keats, his wife Margaret, with children Christopher, Margaret and Victoria.

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On Pine Island in 1957. John Keats, his wife Margaret, with children Christopher, Margaret and Victoria.
“He wrote a love letter to the Thousand Islands but he would be the thorn in the sides of big business,” said Morehouse III.

The book is a dispatch of island life filled with river lore and littered with references to Grenadier Island, The Lost Channel, pike fishing and Rockport’s Ed Huck Marine and Andress Boat Works.

“He thought the place had a timeless quality about it,” said his son, Dr. Christopher Keats of Washington D.C. “He was very moved by that.”

As a younger man, Keats enjoyed fishing and telling stories on his island. “He was notoriously outspoken,” said his son. “He would always hold court. There was a lot of swagger to him. He would stand up to anything.”

The writer spent his summers on Pine Island but spent winters doing research places like Italy and the British Isles when he wasn’t in Philadelphia.

Keats said Of Time and an Island captures an idyllic age. “We didn’t know any different but we thought it was great,” said Keats of summers on Pine Island. “We just loved it.”

Keats accepted a position to teach magazine writing in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in 1974. The move meant he would only have a two-hour commute to Pine Island.

Former student Doug Brunk recalled Keats as a larger-than-life professor. “He could be humorous, self-deprecating and crude all in the same paragraph,” he said.

Brunk, of Spring Valley California, became friends with Keats while enrolled in the Masters Degree of Journalism program at Syracuse. He edited a book by Keats on non-fiction writing titled: What, in Ten Words or Less, is All This Nonsense About? He visited his professor on Pine Island in the early 1990s.

Margaret Bodine Keats also wrote a book: a biography about her grandfather, Edson Weeks, called The Grandfather Book. She died in 1993. JK retired from teaching writing in 1990 and lived in Kingston to be close to the island.

“Pine Island was just a haven for him,” said Brunk. “It let him be free. That was his domain. That was his den.”

Keats children own the island they grew up on as children and return for vacations every summer with new generations learning about the Thousand Islands.

“It made a big impact on our lives,” said daughter Victoria. “We’re like homing pigeons over on the island,” she said of the family’s returns to her father’s favourite place, his “house built on a rock in a river.”

It’s time to get back aboard the Margaret for the quick trip back to the mainland. “The view always looks the same,” said Jenne before departing for Rockport in the Margaret where she will quickly turn around and head back to Pine Island. “It doesn’t change. That’s the nice part of being on an island. It can’t really change.”

As her father JK wrote in Of Time and an Island: “Nothing has changed in this always new and infinitely old center of our lives.”
Some islands have names with stories that are just meant to be told. This little known Thousand Island off the shores of Rockport is one of them.

Fancy Rock Island has a red and white cottage sitting atop a hill of granite in a part of the River in Canadian waters near an island famously close to the American border.

There's also a tiny guest 'cottage' too with the framed portrait of one of the island's previous inhabitants: a glamorous Hollywood movie actress — on the cabin's wall.

Her name was Irene Purcell and she had a boat named Show Girl. Purcell was a stage actress but also went to Hollywood to appear in movies in the early 1930s. She was in a dozen or so films including Just a Gigolo, Bachelor's Affairs and The Passionate Plumber alongside Buster Keaton and Jimmy Durante. In 1939, the screen star appeared in the famous Broadway play The Women.

She came to the River to visit her paramour, a Montreal businessman named Yves de Villers. It is believed he gave Purcell, who lived in New York City and Hollywood, the island. The couple quarrelled and the love affair went sour. Purcell was returning to the island one afternoon and was astonished to see their home had vanished, with only the chimney remaining. He had the building removed and transported to Grenadier Island.

Some time later in the 1940's, Purcell was back in New York and attending a war bond benefit at the Waldorf-Astoria. She was seated next to another actress and friend named Joan Marlowe, who mentioned how much she would like a Thousand Island of her own.

Purcell reportedly turned to Joan and replied without hesitation: “Well, I'll give you mine.” Purcell would later marry Herbert F. Johnson, the chairman of the Johnson Wax Company and moved to Wisconsin to live in a 14,000 square foot home designed by renowned American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

She actually sold the island to Marlowe for $1. Marlowe is credited with naming it Fancy Rock Island, because it was, well, far from fancy. But Marlowe loved her rustic Canadian getaway. There's a framed portrait of the brunette beauty on the wall in the living room perched high above the River.

It's located across from author John Keats' Pine Island and next to Zavikon Island. Zavikon is the island widely photographed and incorrectly reported to have the smallest international bridge in the world (to Little Zavikon Island). Although all three are close next-door neighbours to New York state.

Marlowe was married to the famous New York theatre critic, Ward Morehouse II, when she first started going to Fancy Rock Island.

Morehouse II, was a famous theatre critic who penned the column Broadway After Dark for the New York Sun for 25 years. He also travelled on a US Navy destroyer to London and Paris during World War II to write columns called Atlantic After Dark, London After Dark and Paris After Dark.

A playwright and a screenwriter, he was a world traveller who drove across the United States over 23 times and visited 80 foreign countries in search of stories and interviews with such celebrity subjects as Eugene O’Neill and Shoeless Joe Jackson. He stayed in so many hotels he was once quoted as saying his epitaph should read: Room service please.

But Morehouse II was not as enamoured as his wife was with the Thousand Islands. He wandered around in his trademark blue suit and tie in summer, raising eyebrows once when he jumped off a dock in Alexandria Bay to cool off after a long drive. He preferred staying overnight in an Alexandria Bay hotel nearby rather than on the idyllic island of Fancy Rock.

The theatre critic was not the most tactful when it came to regional productions here, once summoning up the most flattering remark he could to an actress after her less-than-stellar performance by exclaiming: “Well why aren’t you on Broadway?”

For a time, his penchant for fancy hotels led him to take up residence at The Plaza — with a bear cub named Bangkok he brought home from Thailand. He gave the bear to the Ringling Brothers Circus after some of the hotel maids complained about the unwelcome guest.

Wardhouse II, a southerner from Savannah, often returned from his travels around the globe with exotic animals. He gave his young son Ward a lion cub for his birthday and Marlowe a silver fox after international jaunts.
Morehouse III would follow in his father’s footsteps, becoming a newspaperman at the Christian Science Monitor and Broadway critic for the New York Post.

His father would take the young boy along with him to review Broadway plays. “His notes made sense and my notes made no sense at all,” Morehouse III recalls with a laugh.

He also inherited his father’s appreciation of luxury hotels. Morehouse III is also the author of books on some of the world’s grandest hotels. His books include: Life at the Top: Inside New York’s Grand Hotels, Inside the Plaza, The Waldorf-Astoria America’s Gilded Dreams. He also wrote a book including his father’s columns as well as his articles on Broadway called Broadway After Dark.

Marlowe and Morehouse II, who married four times, would divorce. She adored Fancy Rock Island and kept coming back. “She just fell in love with the place,” said Morehouse III. “She loved to swim here.”

Marlowe was the daughter of a newspaper editor in Ithaca, N.Y. and a silent film actress. She left the stage eventually to become the co-publisher of New York Theatre Critics’ Reviews and Theatre Information Bulletin. Marlowe remarried Roderick Rahe, a chemist, and the couple enjoyed Fancy Rock Island with their family for decades. Both have since deceased.

“That island was a lifelong project of my parents, a lifetime partnership,” said their son, Rod Rahe. “They loved that island.”

Its name was always an inside joke, said Rahe, recalling how he used to have to read by kerosene lamps as a child. “She named it Fancy Rock, not because it’s fancy.”
Rahe, who works for IBM in New York, returns to the River as much as he and his family can each year.

As a college student, he spent summers as a tour guide for Uncle Sam Boat Tours. “I had the greatest time,” he said. “You really get to know the River almost like you know a person. There’s something about being a River rat. As child, it was an adventure. It was a world unto its own.”

Morehouse III also comes to Fancy Rock with his son Will. He is drawn back here by more than the island’s spectacular vistas from its steep granite bluffs overlooking the timeless waters of the St. Lawrence.

“It’s the history,” he said. “The whole thing about the River is the houses come and the houses go and the people come and the people go but the River never changes.”

Author and playwright Ward Morehouse III and his son Will visit Fancy Rock Island from New York City every summer. Morehouse is the son of late Broadway theatre critic Ward Morehouse II, right, and actress and publisher Joan M arlowe, who named the island near Rockport Fancy Rock Island.
Rockport is located just 2 miles east of the 1000 Island Bridge with easy access to/from USA. We are conveniently situated 3 hours east of Toronto, 2 hours north of Syracuse, N.Y., 1.45 hours south of Ottawa and 2.5 hours west of Montreal. Enjoy this easy drive to a unique area located in the Frontenac Arch Biosphere.
Dark Island attracts more than 20,000 visitors annually and its fairy tale setting makes it a popular wedding destination.

Castle historian Judy Keeler often takes overnight visitors on tours of the castle and its narrow labyrinth of tunnels accessible through several hidden entrances including one in the walnut-panelled library which has a secret button in the bookshelves.

The guided day tours here showcase Singer Castle and its enchanting grounds including a heritage rose garden. But the secret passageway tours give visitors a unique behind-the-walls glimpse of the castle.

It was famously dubbed the Castle of Mysteries by the New York Times more than a century ago and today it still holds more than its share of secrets.

Singer Castle majestically rises from Dark Island in Chippewa Bay N.Y. and its scarlet-tiled turrets can be seen from shores on both sides of the border. This castle was built as a hunting lodge for Singer Sewing Machine company president Frederick Bourne.

One can only imagine the looks on his family’s faces in 1904 when the millionaire took them to see his new summer retreat overlooking the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Construction on the 28-room medieval castle then called “The Towers” was completed a year later. The entrance known as the Great Hall has knights of armour, a majestic marble fireplace and a wine cellar. The castle is decorated with ornate furniture and chandeliers, mounted moose and elk heads. A grand terrace offers breathtaking views of the Thousand Islands.

Renowned New York City architect Ernest Flagg was inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s 1832 novel about Woodstock Castle in Scotland when he set out to design the estate for Bourne.

Today Dark Island Tours offers accommodation fit for a King and Queen in the Royal Suites. Part of the overnight stay for $725 US includes a tour of the castle’s secret passageways.
While Keeler says the only ghost that haunts Singer Castle is “the Holy ghost,” President George Bush Sr. remains a welcome guest.

“A past president wanders the hallways,” said Dark Islands Tours president Thomas Weldon with a laugh. “It started as a joke with some Royal Suite guests. It became such a fun thing we kept it around.”

Although there has long been speculation about Bourne’s tunnels and dungeons, Keeler said her research indicates he was just enjoying the novelty of designing his summer chateau with Flagg.

“He retired and he had fun,” said Keeler. The father of 12, married to Emma, was a former Commodore of the New York yacht club. “I think he worked hard to get where he was and was moral and decent.”

Bourne kept an office in a second-floor turret. This home office is far from regal. The cramped quarters hold his personal vault, and an Underwood typewriter sits on his desk.

Dark Island staff members continue to find occasional surprises in the castle including a trap door in the maid’s dormitory floor panel.

“I think it was a treasure room,” said Keeler, noting the Bournes had such a room with locked closets for jewellery and other valuables at their Long Island home.

“There were no stairs or other connections to the closet, just a space in which items could be hidden.”

Just another one of Dark Island’s secrets. This is, the Castle of Mysteries, after all.

These walls literally have eyes. Servants are said to have spied on guests in the tunnels through a grate and painting and used the tunnels for efficiency to oversee dinners and events, using them to travel between formal dining rooms and the kitchen.

Such passageways were considered “functional and common” in large estates at the time, Keeler said, noting Flagg “was very innovative and ahead of his time.” Water and heat pipes along with electrical and telephone wires went from the north boathouse through the tunnel and all of the passageways to service the rooms of the castle.

Singer Castle has long been a source of intrigue. Bourne bought Dark Island, for $5,000 in 1902 enlisting Flagg to build his less-than humble hunting and fishing lodge. But his castle was a cottage in comparison to his 110-room mansion in Long Island N.Y.

Bourne died in 1919, leaving behind a $43-million estate. Daughters May and Marjorie bought the castle from their siblings. Marjorie Bourne sold the island to LaSalle Military Academy of Long Island in 1961 for $100.

The estate was sold to Dr. Harold and Eloise Martin of Montreal in 1965 for use by the Harold Martin Evangelistic Society. They called the castle Jorstadt and invited visitors to attend Sunday worship services.

Several businessmen bought the property for $2-million in 2002. Dark Island Tours invested millions in renovations to open the castle to tourists in 2003 with overnight accommodations in the Royal Suite two years later.

One overnight “guest” stays in the tunnels. “Little Freddy,” named after Bourne hangs around in a less than palatial part of the castle with cobwebs and plastic spiders for company. The miniature skeleton was the idea of castle caretaker Scott Garris, who lives on Dark Island year-round and also conducts secret passageway tours.

In addition to Little Freddy, it is a little known secret that Singer Castle is, in fact, home to a U.S. President. While President Ulysses S. Grant first visited the Thousand Islands in 1872 he left the region after his famous campaign visit to Pullman Island.

Not President George Bush Sr. who appears to be enjoying an extended and comfortable stay at Singer Castle – haunting guests from an upstairs bedroom closet.

“It’s all a hoax stemming from some politically divided Royal Suite visitors who stayed overnight in the castle.

“People from Alexandria Bay were staying and one was a Republican and one was not,” said Keeler. “It was a joke and he has been there ever since. People love him.” On this summer day, it turns out President Bush Sr. has been decked out in a woman’s sun hat and pink silk scarf by some visiting children.
George C. Boldt, who famously built a castle for his beloved bride in what would become the most tragic love story of the Thousand Islands, also spared no extravagance in building his boathouse.

The millionaire proprietor of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York was extraordinary in his lavish spending and his ‘boathouse’ was beyond ordinary in every way. Today the century-old yacht house on Wellesley Island is as much a tourism attraction as his never lived-in castle built just across the St. Lawrence River on Heart Island.

Construction of the yacht house began in 1899 – a year before Boldt set out to build a 120-room castle on Heart Island – which he had renamed from its previous name Hart Island and dedicated to his wife. But in 1904, tragedy struck. Boldt telegraphed to command the workers to immediately stop all construction when Louise suddenly died at the age of 42. A broken-hearted Boldt could not imagine his dream castle without his wife. Boldt never returned to the heart-shaped island, leaving behind the chateau as an empty monument to his love.

He also left behind the Boldt Yacht House, now listed on the U.S. National Register of Historical Places. Boldt built the castle-like boathouse to accommodate his vast fleet of vessels including steam yachts, skiffs, motor boats and canoes.

The Boldt Yacht House on Wellesley Island is the new home to the 1892-built Kestrel, a 63-foot steam yacht. Kestrel was donated last August to the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority (TIBA) for public viewing. The vintage vessel has original mahogany, cabins, a wheelhouse, and coal steam engine.

During its 33 years of ownership of Boldt Castle and the Boldt Yacht House, the TIBA has invested nearly $29 million dollars in rehabilitation efforts and improvements to these historic landmarks. This year, the Kestrel is on display for visitors while Louise Boldt’s refurbished bedroom suite is the newest attraction at the castle. Millions of tourists have visited the castle since the TIBA acquired it in 1977 after it was left vacant for 73 years. Graffiti from vandals still cover some of its walls. Now it’s the biggest tourism attraction in the Thousand Islands with packages available for the castle and yacht house individually and combined discounted packages for tours of both the facilities.

At the time Boldt built his castle, he already owned properties on Wellesley Island. He had farms of 1,500 acres on the island, with beef cattle, sheep, pigs, prize bulls and polo ponies and the Bold Yacht House was already in use. While he built the castle he also amassed a fleet of boats including three steam yachts: the 120-foot Louise, an 81-foot yacht named Clover after the couple’s daughter and The Crescent, in addition to his motor boats, skiffs and Gold Cup Racers. He had a fleet of fifteen boats, captains, crews and craftsmen who built his famous racing craft, the “P.D.Q.’s” (Pretty Damn Quick).

It is widely reputed Boldt’s chef made an impromptu salad dressing which would become the world famous recipe for Thousand Island dressing while sailing aboard one of the steam yachts in the St. Lawrence River. Others contend it was the invention of a woman from Gananoque named Sophia Lalonde, who married a Clayton fisherman and first made the tangy dressing for shore dinners.
Business barons who built elaborate summer retreats in the Thousand Islands travelled in style on the River in steam yachts. Tobacco tycoon Charles Emery on Calumet Island near Clayton had one as did Brockville’s George Fulford I. The Canadian senator who built a 20,000 Edwardian mansion as a summer retreat overlooking the St. Lawrence River and made his fortune patenting “Pink Pills for Pale People” owned the steam yacht Magedoma.

“If you were wealthy at that time you had to have a steam yacht,” said Sanford.

Boldt also owned the most luxurious houseboat in the Thousand Islands. The 106-foot La Duchesse is now on display at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton.

La Duchesse was not your average houseboat by any measure with its fireplaces, Tiffany glass skylights, a ballroom and grand salon with a Steinway piano not to mention servants’ quarters. “It’s a virtual floating palace,” said Sanford.

And the Boldt Yacht House isn’t your typical boathouse. This is more of a boat castle. It is a nautical palace, a seven-storey cathedral-like structure, an architectural feat with pine, cedar, and a caretaker’s living quarters.

The 118-year-old Kestrel found its new home in the Thousand Islands last year. Owner John Luhrs of Ponte Vedra Fla., was looking for the appropriate place for the steam yacht when he found Boldt’s historical yacht house.

“He wanted an organization he felt would take care of it where the public could enjoy it,” said Sanford.

The Kestrel fits right in at this luxurious boathouse near Alexandria Bay where steam yachts were once a common sight on the River and castles were cottages with yacht houses.
One of the most luxurious steam yachts of the Thousand Islands was a floating fixture on the St. Lawrence River during the area’s Gilded Era.

Now the restored vintage vessel – which once sank in the Boston Harbor – is almost ready to sail back to Brockville. Today the majestic Magedoma is afloat again under its original name, the Cangarda, in California.

“The boat’s up and it runs fine,” said boat builder Jeff Rutherford of Rutherford’s Boat Shop in Richmond California. “It’s due to leave for New England soon.”

The 109-year-old steam yacht will sail from its current port at a marina in California to the Atlantic Ocean to owner Bob McNeill’s summer home in Maine after the remarkable restoration project.

The boat will winter at a maritime museum in Mystic Connecticut and McNeill hopes to sail the steam yacht back to the St. Lawrence as soon as next summer, said Rutherford.

“He wants very much to do a visit in the Thousand Islands,” he said.
The restoration of the 138-foot steam yacht is to be featured on a television program called Ultimate Restorations. The Cangarda is one of only two Victorian-era steam yachts left in the United States, said Rutherford and only one of three in the world.

It took a crew of 30 eight years and an estimated cost of $12-million US to bring the vintage vessel back to its original glory. It was an epic project for Rutherford, who restores classic yachts and specializes in marine woodworking. “I didn’t know the first thing about steam yachts until this came along,” he said, adding: “You just look at it one piece at a time.”

The Magedoma sailed the Thousand Islands for more than four decades. Senator George Fulford I bought the steam yacht for $100,000 in 1904 from owners Charles Canfield, a Michigan lumber mogul. The Cangarda was named after owner Canfield and wife, Belle Gardner.

Fulford rechristened it The Magedoma after his wife and children (Mary, George, Dorothy, Martha). The boat had a crew of up to nine men including a cook, steward and fireman. It had four double staterooms, drawing room, dining room, staterooms for the captain and engineer, and a bathroom with a shower.

The millionaire famously made his fortune by patenting “Pink Pills for Pale People” in 1890 and marketing them around the world. Fulford held lavish parties aboard the yacht which he kept outside his Edwardian estate in Brockville. But he didn’t get to enjoy the Magedoma for very long. He died in one of the first motor vehicle accidents in North America a year later.

The Fulford family kept the steam yacht for decades, entertaining dignitaries aboard including Prime Ministers and British royalty. High profile guests included Canadian Prime Ministers Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir John A. Macdonald. The Prince of Wales and the British Prime Minister. Fulford’s daughter Martha’s wedding to second husband Charles MacLean was also held aboard the Magedoma in 1908.

The family loaned the yacht to the Canadian Navy during World War II as a training vessel in the St. Lawrence River. It was returned to the Fulfords after the war with damages in need of $13,000 repair. They sold it shortly after and it has changes hands several times.

An attempt was made to restore the boat in the early 1980’s. The ship was disassembled and an effort was made to rebuild the hull but the project ran out of money. In 1999, the gutted hull sank at Boston pier. But it was rescued shortly thereafter and a search began for a new owner.

McNeil, a venture capitalist in Marin County California, bought the Cangarda in 2002 and the restoration project started at Rutherford’s Boat Shop. The yacht was disassembled and sent in bits and pieces to the West Coast where Rutherford and his team began their work. The hull was rebuilt, the Victorian interior was reinstalled complete with Cuban mahogany woodwork.

The vessel slipped into Richmond’s Marine Bay August 24th, 2007 and was finally afloat again. But the boat has required more work since then and is awaiting a certificate of inspection from the Coast Guard before it embarks on its journey back to the Atlantic Ocean and ultimately – the Thousand Islands.

Visit Fulford Place
A National Historic Site
287 King Street East, Brockville, Ontario
Public and Group Tours, Ghost Walks, Gift Shop and Tea Room, Corporate and Private Events
The grand 35-room mansion of millionaire George T. Fulford I, successful marketer of “Pink Pills for Pale People.”
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The plan is for the Cangarda to be on display at the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut during the winter and Maine during the summer.

Local historians are ready to welcome the steam yacht back to familiar shores. “We hope to host the Magedoma at some time in the future,” said Pamela Brooks, coordinator of Eastern Ontario Museum Sites, at Fulford Place. “We’d be very excited if it did come.”

But reminders of the antique yacht remain in Brockville. A former bedroom in Fulford Place is now dedicated to the Magedoma complete with a model of the steam yacht. It’s just one of many displays in the 35-room Edwardian mansion with 20,000 square feet which Fulford built in as a sprawling summer retreat for his family in 1901. Now a National Historic Site, Fulford Place first opened as a museum in 1993 when George Fulford II bequeathed it to the Ontario Heritage Trust.

A street in Brockville, Magedoma Drive, is even named after Fulford’s steam yacht.
But the steam yacht would sail the St. Lawrence River for nearly 40 years – and perhaps once again. A return would mark a legacy voyage for the vintage vessel which found a home port here in the Thousand Islands more than a century ago.
Aerial photographer Ian Coristine has been capturing the breathtaking beauty of the Thousand Islands for nearly two decades from all angles. The pilot from Hudson, Quebec first discovered the region while flying over it in his Challenger float plane 18 years ago and has been documenting this majestic archipelago ever since from air, land and water, power boat, kayak, tall ship and the granite shores of his own Raleigh Island retreat just west of Brockville. Coristine’s fifth book, The very best of Ian Coristine’s 1000 Islands will be available this spring. He is the author of the best-selling The 1000 Islands, Water, Wind and Sky, The Thousand Islands and the booklet 1000 Islands, published in 2007, which sold over 30,000 copies, winning a Premier Print “Benny” Award in the graphic arts industry’s largest and most prestigious worldwide printing competition.

The very best of Ian Coristine’s 1000 Islands lives up to its title. The high gloss or “liquid gloss” used to print the book has created “a book of covers” to showcase his photographs. Coristine is already at work on his next book: a memoir of life on his island called One in a Thousand. His fifth book is a compilation of his finest photographs, selected from a library which exceeds 30,000 images. Once again, Coristine showcases this place through a unique lens from pictures of its iconic landmarks such as Boldt Castle’s Heart Island and Singer Castle’s Dark Island, to historical Carleton Island and the Lost Channel. Coristine, who “lives in the assignment” showcases the scenery all around him, ships, lighthouses St. Lawrence skiffs, and the loons that circle his shores. His aerial photographs give, as he says, “a privileged view” of the islands.

The high gloss or “liquid gloss” used to print his latest “book of covers” required a search around the globe to find a printer willing to attempt this new technique. Enjoy a preview of some of his spectacular portraits of this special place and the stories behind them in Coristine’s own words in this photo essay. They are, indeed, some of his very best.

**The Lost Channel**

I’ve shot thousands of photos from my plane low from above, but one of the “aerial” scenes which resonates most strongly with me is this perspective of the Lost Channel which I’ve shot in all seasons. I discovered this spot not from the plane, but from the walkway of the Canadian span. If you’ve ever seen the historic print of the 1000 Islands done by W.H. Bartlett in the early 1800s, you’ll see the similarity with this scene.

On August 14, 1760, Britain’s HMS Onondaga was lured into the labyrinth by French and Indian attackers. Realizing they were becoming trapped in tight confines, they lowered a boat with 14 men to row back to warn HMS Mohawk away, but neither the boat nor the men were ever seen again. Eventually the Onondaga drifted clear so they lowered another boat to look for the first. On failing to find even where the first had been lowered, this spot became known as the Lost Channel.
Thanks to Simon Fuller, I have had the privilege of sailing many times on the Fair Jeanne, including a trip down the St. Lawrence to the Atlantic. Unfortunately, despite all the time aboard which included filming a music video of Great Lake Swimmers’ song Palmistry (from their album “Lost Channels”), conditions never had been right to set every sail. Also, despite plenty of coaxing, I had never managed to get the Fair Jeanne into the Lost Channel. The Captain kept saying “It’s not my ship and I’m not willing to risk her.” Fair enough, but …

Finally, last fall Simon brought a renowned tall ship photographer to the River with the plan of taking Fair Jeanne out on Lake Ontario with all sails set for photography for Bytown Brigantine who operate this and another tall ship as adventure camps afloat. I asked if I might go along in hopes of learning from the photographer and finally getting to see every sail set.

When we boarded in Gananoque, it was raining and worse, calm. There was no point in heading out onto the lake. I saw my opportunity and leapt at it, asking (or was it begging?) Simon to head downstream to the Lost Channel which with him on board, the Captain was willing to do. We jumped into a zodiac and ran well ahead, climbing up onto the bridge to wait.

Eventually, I spotted a tree moving behind one of the distant islands. It was the tip of the mast. For the first time in 249 years, a tall ship was entering the Lost Channel! A hazy sun cooperated while the sky threatened behind. Heart beating frantically in excitement, I snapped dozens of shots, but this is the one I liked the best. I may have photos that will please others more than this one, but I don’t think I’ll ever get a Thousand Islands shot that will please me more. I have a five foot wide canvas print of it above my mantelpiece at my winter home and find myself endlessly sitting in front of it, exploring the inlets and islands and the unlikely scene of a tall ship in full sail amongst them.
Reflections on Raleigh Island

Power boats are a must in the 1000 Islands, but the slower pace of a rowing skiff, canoe or kayak is the absolute best way to fully appreciate the islands’ beauty. While they are similar in makeup, each is remarkably different and from each, the River appears to be an entirely different place. Where waves have washed away the various lichens, you can see the pink hue of Frontenac Arch granite which is common to the vast majority of the islands between Brockville/Morrisstown and Clayton/Gananoque. Calm, foggy mornings like this are hard for me to resist, so you’ll usually find me out somewhere with my camera. The reward on this particular morning was finding a pearl in an oyster as the sun melted through the mist to be reflected in a small pool of water. Finding the real thing would not have pleased me more.

On River’s Edge: Tibbetts Point Lighthouse

I love flying amongst the islands in the River, but whenever I go near Lake Ontario I have a deep respect for it. Engine failures don’t happen very often, but any pilot who figures they won’t happen is a dreamer. I’ve had my fair share, including hundreds in gliders where the engine has already failed before takeoff. It teaches you to think ahead and not put yourself in harm’s way. With altitude, any plane can trade height for distance or airspeed, but when your height is spent, you’d better be where you want to be, because you’re not going to get a second try.

On floats, the freedom is much greater than on wheels because anything wet essentially becomes a runway. All well and good as long as land is near, but here at Tibbetts Point Lighthouse, where Lake Ontario meets the St. Lawrence just west of Cape Vincent N.Y., it isn’t River. If the wind is blowing the wrong way and you are forced down here, the next land you reach may be 300 miles away. For this reason, I never fly low at Tibbetts unless the wind is onshore as it was late on this summer afternoon.
Sailing Away

For most of my life I suffered from acute acrophobia. High ladders were not a place you’d ever find me but surprisingly, like many pilots I know, I had no problem in a plane. No problem that is until one day when I flew by the top of a tall tower and began contemplating the fact that there was little difference between sitting on it than sitting where I was. For a brief moment I was terrified, but once past, the anxiety passed too.

It bothered me that this fear was preventing me from enjoying a number of interesting experiences so I began working on it. Not recklessly where real risk was involved, but pretty much whenever the opportunity presented itself. To my surprise and pleasure I found that it seemed to be working. I began to think I might actually have conquered it, but it wasn’t until two summers ago when I had my first opportunity to sail aboard the Fair Jeanne that I could actually test the theory.

Interestingly, I discovered that high in the rigging or out on the bowsprit (where an off duty crew member is relaxing), became my two favourite places on the boat. I actually enjoyed spending time there without any fear whatsoever. What an incredible freedom it has been to know that I am no longer constrained in this way. The moral to this story is that if you suffer from a deep-rooted fear or anxiety, worry not. You CAN overcome it.

Baby On Board

I love loons, but find them very challenging to photograph, particularly while respecting their privacy as they are easily stressed. I always hoped to photograph a mother carrying her baby, despite only ever seeing it once, briefly. When I discovered a mother nesting on a nearby island, I thought the opportunity might have arrived. I managed to get several shots of her sitting on her nest, but never actually saw her carrying her baby. When she returned again the following year I couldn’t believe my good luck, but a single distant sighting of the baby on board was as good as it got, though I did get some reasonable shots of them swimming together.

Last summer was her third nesting here. Out one morning in my pedal-kayak which is very stealthy because there is no need to be waving a paddle around for propulsion, I finally got my chance. A strong telephoto lens is challenging to hand-hold still enough even in virtual calm like this, but the backlighting was perfect even if it complicates life by making the exposure tricky. I was doubtful as I pedaled home, but had hopes. To say I was delighted when I saw this shot doesn’t go nearly far enough.
Rain threatens these most Heavenly skies over Gananoque as a group of parishioners board a boat at the town’s municipal marina destined for what is billed as the World’s Tallest Cathedral.

This particular Sunday afternoon in July marks another summer of worshipping on the waters of Half Moon Bay, a tranquil crescent-shaped cove at Bostwick Island.

Margaret Eaton, 90, takes in the scenery in the Admiralty Group of islands, as the complimentary water taxi takes us to the historic church service. Parishioners have been worshipping here for 123 years.

It’s not the first time Eaton, a British war bride and Gananoque resident of many years, has taken in the sermons at the outdoor chapel.

“I find it very peaceful,” she said quietly as she surveyed light showers sprinkling over the River, the calming sound of water on water, as we pass cottages along Wanderers’ Channel. “It’s a beautiful place.”

As if on cue, the rain stops a few kilometres later as the boat turns into an idyllic grotto. A moon-shaped sign marked with the words of

Half Moon Bay is erected on one of the mossy cliffs that enclose the area. A female preacher wearing flowing white robes is preparing at a granite pulpit on an altar built into the landscape accompanied by sound equipment and an organist. Boats start to slowly pull into the bay as they have for more than a century.

The service’s music director Liz Tremblay, of Kingston O nt., prepares her hymn sheets at her organ under a canopy of towering trees. This chapel has its challenges.

Rev. Dr. Deborah Newcomb, from the Episcopal Church in Dexter N.Y., prepares for Sunday service at Half Moon Bay
She has been coming to the services with her husband Presbyterian minister Rev. Mark Tremblay for the past three summers. “It’s absolutely beautiful,” she said. “I just find it very inspirational, except for the bugs, which I hate,” she said with a laugh.

Worshippers have been coming to Half Moon Bay since 1887 when a group of island campers decided to worship here. More campers joined them and soon people from Gananoque started coming to Half Moon Bay for non-denominational Sunday services in July and August.

Today, ministers are invited from the United States and Canada to deliver sermons here.

Rev. Dr. Deborah Newcomb, from Episcopal Church in Dexter N.Y., looked up from the pulpit and out to boaters and described this “sacred space” as an “astonishingly beautiful gift of nature from God.” “This church on this tiny cover of his creation...is a place where we are allowed to hope,” she told the service.

Years ago, parishioners used to arrive here wearing formal attire and hats, filling the bay in skiffs and canoes to capacity. Today it’s more casual with parishioners showing up in zodiacs, canoes and motor boats, sometimes bringing their pet dogs along.

“It’s just wonderful,” said Raymond Pfeiffer, of Bay City, Michigan, who owns one of the Punts Islands at the head of the Lake Fleet group. The college professor grew up on Hickory Island and has been coming here for years.

“There’s a nice sense of community,” he said. “And it’s great people get picked up in Gananoque to come to Half Moon Bay. They get to see this extraordinary grotto.” Anglican retired assistant Bishop in Toronto, of nearby Mudlunta Island, Michael Bedford Jones, has attended the services at Half Moon Bay since he was a child.

He said legend has it that Half Moon Bay first became a place of worship in the late 1800s because it was a
safe shelter on the River for boaters caught in a severe storm. To brace themselves against the harsh weather, they huddled together to pray and sing hymns until the storm passed.

“They liked it so much they said: ‘Let’s come here regularly,” he said. “They found it a Holy place. It just sprang up spontaneously. The other version of how Half Moon Bay started is probably closer to the truth but I like that story better.”

The story of Half Moon Bay starts with the story of Bostwick Island. Bostwick was originally named Yorke after Sir Joseph Yorke, a commissioner in the British navy and a Rear Admiral in Owen’s 1815-1817 survey of the islands.

Some say that Bostwick was adapted from Boss Dick Island, a local name in reference to a man named Dick who ran a quarry there. Another story has it that it is named after a person named Bostwick, one of the first guests to stay at the Bostwick Guest House, which was run by the island’s first settler-farmer family.
In 1882, a Bostonian named David Wallace bought properties on Bostwick Island, including a cottage called Iroquois that still stands today.

Wallace bought the property around Half Moon Bay in 1901. He bequeathed Half Moon Bay to be held in trust as a place of worship in 1904 to the town of Gananoque.

Carolyn Pratt, of the Half Moon Bay Foundation which runs the outdoor chapel, attends the services regularly with her husband and fellow Foundation member, Geoffrey, of nearby Kitsyminie Island.

“People who lived here just wanted to get together for worship and so they did,” said Pratt of the service’s early days. “It’s a far cry now from canoes and rowboats.”

The Pratts, who spend winters in Kingston, enjoy helping to preserve the unique parish of Half Moon Bay where followers continue to arrive on their own floating pews to pray and worship on the water every summer.

For those without boats, the members of the foundation pick up parishioners at Gananoque Bay Dock for a free ride to Bostwick Island for Sunday service at the World’s Tallest Cathedral.

“I believe in fact, it is a church,” said Bedford Jones with a smile after the service ends as the other worshippers on the water head home in their boats. “It’s a floating congregation.”

Parishioners of all faiths – and their pets – are welcome to the interdenominational outdoor church known as the ‘World’s Tallest Cathedral’
Sporting a weathered Commodore’s cap to Sugar Island’s opening encampment ceremonies complete with traditional bugle playing, flag-raising and cannon firing, Larry Zuk is ready to race again.

By his own account, Zuk estimates this is his 88th year visiting the island near Gananoque owned by the American Canoe Association. At 87, he insists his math is right.

“I was conceived on Sugar Island,” he states matter-of-factly while seated at a picnic table in the pavilion at last year’s opening festivities held under a blue July sky over Headquarters Bay. That, he explains, is why is he named after the St. Lawrence River.

In any event, Zuk, of Concord Massachusetts, has been coming to this island since he was born. His parents raced here for years with other pioneering paddlers.

There is no doubt he is a veteran Sugar Islander. The American Canoe Association (ACA) has owned this Canadian island in the Gananoque Narrows for 109 years. Zuk has likely spent more summer days sailing around its shores than anybody else.

World champions come from across North America to compete in International Canoe Sailing while generations of families return to enjoy the regattas and camping in the scenic Thousand Islands.

Sugar Island is considered rugged by today’s standards but most of the ACA members here like it that way. There is no electricity. Rustic cabins were erected in the late 1940s against the fierce objections of purists who preferred tents.

Zuk stubbornly stays in a tent even though he finally retired his old tent for a new one last year on a rugged campsite perched high on a cliff overlooking the St. Lawrence River known as Hurricane Point. “Please don’t insult me,” he said, pounding the picnic table with his hand for emphasis, when asked if he uses a cabin. “I call it Cabin City. I paddle over here and I sleep on the ground and I race.”

The ACA is the oldest and largest paddle sports organization in the United States, promoting canoeing, kayaking and rafting. The organization has more than 50,000 members. It was first formed in 1880 and held national encampments including one on nearby Grindstone Island in 1884. The event was such a success the ACA soon after started looking for a permanent site in the Thousand Islands area.

The non-profit association bought Sugar Island in July 18, 1901 and has owned it ever since. It’s located in the Lake Fleet group near islands with names like Astounder, Axeman and Bloodletter on a wide
stretch of the River. It is believed to have got its name from the Mississauga natives who made maple sugar from the trees on the island in the 1800s.

The ACA billed Sugar Island to its members as the “Mecca for Canoeists,” and has attracted thousands of paddlers to the region over the past century. The 47-acre island is open to members year-round.

Many canoeing enthusiasts – Canadians are also welcome to join the ACA – have been coming to the island for generations.

Zuk’s father joined the ACA in Central Park New York and took his family to Sugar Island in the summers. A former ACA Commodore, sail canoeing has been a life-long love of Zuk who still enjoys sailing around these familiar shorelines. He has built sailing canoes throughout his life. Some are now owned by the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton.

“Many of the boats I raced here, I built,” said Zuk, an engineer and Navy veteran of World War II.

He’s also a veteran of a longstanding fight against modern-day amenities encroaching on Sugar Island like electricity and plumbing. He is still disappointed over the defeat that allowed cabins to be built over six decades ago. “We try to keep up the battle,” he said.

The first Sugar Island encampment was held in 1903 and until World War II, little changed. Zuk recalls how canoeists from New York would load their canoes on a New York Central Railroad boxcar and ride the train to Clayton New York where they took a steamer ferry to the island. Two-day regattas were held with as many as 200 Canadians competing. Single men and women had to camp at opposite ends of the island.

While most veteran Sugar Islanders set out in open sailing canoes, younger competitors – including world-class athletes in the sport – speed across the River in light-weight International Sailing Canoes. Champions in the sport come from as far away as California and Washington state to compete in the regattas.

International Canoe racer Del Olsen has competed in eight world championships and didn’t want to miss out on racing at Sugar Island last summer. “This has always been an East Coast vacation Mecca,” said Olsen, who lives in San Francisco.

The International Canoe is a one man boat which represents a long and complex evolution from a paddle canoe to a high performance racing dinghy. It is characterized by its sliding seat, a beam that slides on a track, enabling the sailor to hike out far windward.

Internationally the IC class holds a World Championship regatta every three years, with nations winning the right to host Championships. International Canoe sailors also compete for the second oldest (to the America’s Cup) International Sailing trophy, the New York Canoe Club International Challenge Cup.

Some Olympic canoe racers now bring their grandchildren to some of the same spots they sailed as youngsters. Sugar Islander Russell “Chick” Dermond and his wife Joan, have been coming here for decades and now return with their children and grandchildren.
decades and now return with their children and grandchildren.

He trained here as a young man and went on to become an Olympic canoe racer who competed in the 1956 Australia Olympics, 1960 Rome Olympics, and the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Like Zuk and Dermond, Marilyn Vogel, 64, has been coming to Sugar Island since she was a child.

Her father Richard Vogel started bringing her over to the island with the rest of her family when she was just five years old. He started visiting Sugar Island after he joined the American Canoe Association at a canoe club in Manhattan.

Vogel, who lives near Philadelphia, still races her open sailing canoe around the island. She enjoys the outdoors here with husband Chuck Sutherland and the views of the River and the comfort of a cabin over a tent.

“There’s no other place like it,” she said during a hiking tour of the trails from the main encampment area, to Canoe Beach, Hurricane Point and Mess Tent Cove. “It’s wonderful being on an island.”

Other points of interest on the island include Wilderness Bay, New York Bay, Sunrise Point and Buffalo Wallow. The rugged island is a naturalist’s playground with cedar, juniper, pitch pine, maple and hemlock trees towering over its trails populated with birds, beaver,
Marilyn Vogel enjoys a race around the island near Gananoque.

And while not much has changed here over the last century, the ACA is always looking for more people on both sides of the border to become members and enjoy the sweet life on Sugar Island. It’s still the Mecca for canoeists and outdoor enthusiasts.

New members can join by contacting www.americancanoe.org. Some Sugar Islanders canoe about one mile from the Canadian mainland. Others take a short water taxi from Misty Islands Lodge in Lansdowne to transport them to this rugged retreat.

It is a pristine place with crystal clear water, clean air, and beautiful sunsets. It’s not only a place to paddle and sail, it’s a place to swim, snorkel, fish and enjoy exploring Thousand Islands. But most Sugar Islanders prefer to stay close to their summer home spending time with old friends and sailing around its welcoming shorelines.

“It’s going back to nature and meeting people with similar interests every summer,” said Vogel. “It doesn’t change much. We like it that way. We like it rustic. It’s nice being on the water, sailing and kayaking.”

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Cherry on Top
Cherry Island, N.Y.

This island along Millionaire's Row features some of the most elaborate estates in the Thousand Islands reminiscent of the Gilded Era with epic names like Belora and Casa Blanca.

Today it is also home to a world-renowned classic boat expert and author who has made this island near Alexandria Bay N.Y. his family's summer retreat for more than three decades. These are familiar waters to Anthony Mollica Jr. and a perfect place for the retired Syracuse high school teacher to enjoy his favourite subject: antique and classic wooden boats. This summer, he releases his newest book titled Building Chris-Crafts.

Mollica became an author by accident when he left the classroom. What started as a hobby has become a career for the prolific writer who has combined his passion for boats and the Thousand Islands on the page. His first book came about serendipitously through a boating contact whom suggested he write a book on Gar Wood boats.

Today about 100,000 of his books are in print. They include Classic Boats of the Thousand Islands and Gar Wood Boats, Classics of a Golden Era and Castles & Cottages.

His discovery of his island retreat with wife Liz in 1975 also came about by chance. “It was kind of on a whim,” he recalls with a chuckle of the couple’s purchase. “We had no expectation of having it for more than two or three years.”

Cherry Island is one of the most photographed of the Thousand Islands noted for Casa Blanca's whimsical waterfront gargoyles, Belora's 55-room 'cottage' with its quaint storybook bridge. The island now also boasts one of the most luxurious remodelled 'boathouses' in the region.

This island’s historic homes Casa Blanca and Belora are grand summer estates. Casa Blanca’s owner Edith Amsterdam greets visitors on her veranda for annual public tours of the residence and its manicured grounds.
Casa Blanca was built in the late 1800s by a Cuban sugar planter while the neighbouring Belora was owned by Nathan Strauss, a philanthropist who made his fortune in the family business of Macy's, the largest department store in the world. The New York Times had a correspondent to cover social events of the season along Millionaire's Row and the American channel was known as “The Fifth Avenue of the St. Lawrence.”

Cherry Island overlooks the busy shipping channel, nestled among some of the most historic islands in the area including Pullman Island, some of the most mythical including Devil’s Oven Island, a popular swimming spot for children and infamous hideout of Patriot ‘Pirate’ Bill Johnston not to mention Jewel Island, which once had the misfortune of famously getting in the way of a ship.

“The freighters are right in your living room,” said Mollica, gesturing to the panoramic view of the channel from his porch on a postcard perfect summer’s day.

This marks the site of one of the very first cottages built in the Thousand Islands, he said. “I still find parts of it all over the yard.”

Mollica’s passion for classic wooden boats is evident at his family’s cottage, with historical photographs, memorabilia, and models lining its walls. His boats include a 1960 mahogany utility Lyman, which accommodates up to 18 people for Sunday outings to church in Alexandria Bay.

His gingerbread boathouse called Edgewater with cozy living quarters on the second-storey sailboat cut outs in its shutters and is a perfect shelter for a classic runabout.

His love of boats and the Thousand Islands started as a child when he first visited the area with his father. A trip out here as a boy scout at the age of 12 would find him marvelling on the vacated grounds of nearby Boldt Castle.

In a subsequent visit the young Mollica found an intriguing souvenir in a mound of debris on the Heart Island grounds. He found a tiny treasure; a tea cup and saucer from Limoges France featuring a U.S. flag and Boldt pennant. “I decided it would be foolish to leave them there so I rescued them and took them home with me,” he said.

Now they are displayed on a wall at his Cherry Island cottage and have remained a constant reminder of his life-long fascination with Boldt Castle.

His interest in the tragic Thousand Islands love story led him to write a book titled Boldt Castle: The Story of an Unfinished Dream with photographer George Fischer.

Boldt abandoned his dream castle when his beloved bride Louise died suddenly – apparently of heart failure – in 1904. He never returned to Heart Island. Mollica still marvels at the fact the 120-room castle remained empty for over seven decades before it was transferred to the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority in 1977.

“It was a do-it-yourself hardware store,” he said, adding: “Someone once said ‘Every toilet in Alexandria Bay is from Boldt Castle.’”

Mollica's first visit to the Thousand Islands with his family at the age of six sparked his passion for boats. His father bought him a Gar Wood racer when he was 13 which he learned to drive at Oneida Lake, north of Syracuse. He also got involved in sailboat racing and was hooked. “Boating was a constant in our life,” he said.

He passed on his love of all things nautical to his children Tony Jr., Margaret, and Mary during summers spent on Cherry Island. And his love of the Thousand Islands and education led him to publish his first children’s book.

“I got started by doing colouring books on classic boats,” Mollica said. “One was called Touring the Thousand Islands with Uncle Sam.
When the amiable author’s not busy writing, he retreats to his workshop to make plaques featuring models of classic boats.

Cherry Island is a popular site for tour boat passengers who can take in other historic properties along Millionaire’s Row including Hopewell Hall, which was owned by George Boldt’s daughter, Clover.

Mollica’s knowledge about classic boats resulted in phone calls from Sweden, England, France and Australia with inquiries from collectors and owners.

“I get calls from interesting people from around the world,” he said.

One of those callers suggested Mollica write a book on classic boats and put a publisher in touch with the retired high school teacher. That call came as he was reading a passage in a book which stated: “There is an author inside each of us.”

Within weeks, he had an offer from a publisher for a manuscript on Gar Wood boats and the coincidence was not lost on him. Mollica’s sister, fiction writer Helen Barolini, encouraged him to take the offer. He has been writing ever since.

He is also part nautical detective as well as a noted boating historian. Mollica, a trustee with the Antique Boat Museum and a member of the Alexandria Bay Historical Society, tracked down and interviewed builders of the classic Chris-Craft boats for his new book.

Some of that boat building history is being lost to time. “I almost have an obligation to do this because the people who built these boats are dying,” he said.

Backing his own classic runabout out of his Edgewater boathouse, Mollica reflects on his love of boats and the Thousand Islands. “It’s so much a part of my life,” he says with a smile as he steers past Little Angel Island and towards Alexandria Bay leaving Cherry Island – only temporarily - in his wake.
The Lost Castle
Calumet Island, N.Y.

It's one of the most familiar landmarks off the shores of Clayton, visible from the quaint village's waterfront patios along Riverside Drive and the town docks.

The century-old 82-foot water tower on Calumet Island stands as a symbol of the Golden Age in the Thousand Islands as the remains of a once celebrated castle now gone.

Before Boldt Castle on Heart Island and Singer Castle on Dark Island, there was Calumet.

And before George C. Boldt and Frederick Bourne would build their lasting legacies that stand as world-famous tourist attractions today, tobacco tycoon Charles G. Emery, of New York city, would build one of the very first castles in the Thousand Islands.

Emery was one of the early developers and promoters of the region in the late 1800s when he first set his sights on island properties. The multi-millionaire was a friend of Boldt and his wife Louise, attending the couple’s wedding in New York. The men were also members of the New York City yacht club as was Bourne.

"Everything Emery did, Boldt did," said Rex Ennis, author of new book on Emery and the businessman’s Hotel Frontenac on Round Island called Toujours Jeune: The Charles Goodwin Emery story. "It was like a contest." (Always Young was the motto of Hotel Frontenac which epitomized the region’s Gilded Era.)

Emery, founder of Goodwin ad Company Tobacco in Brooklyn, bought a small group of islands off Clayton. The largest of these was named Powder Horn Island. He renamed it Calumet, a Native term meaning Indian Pipe of Peace, because the island’s shape resembled a peace pipe.

He bought the island in 1882. Construction on the castle started in 1893 and was completed in 1894.

The ‘castle’ on Calumet was not as large or ornate as Boldt Castle or Singer Castle, but it was one of the first grand estates of its kind to inspire other luxurious retreats built by wealthy industrialists spending summers in the Thousand Islands as it became known as a popular cottage colony.

Not that it was modest. The castle had 30 rooms with a ballroom later added to accommodate guests for lavish galas with fireworks. One such event in 1902 attracted 200 guests and featured 10,000 Japanese lanterns hanging over the lush green lawn illuminating the River. Emery constructed a water tower, a lagoon for his boats, a guest house, skiff house, boat house and ice house and sailed the River in his steam yachts.

Back then, Clayton was a booming summer resort with as many as 13 trains arriving daily from New York, Syracuse, Albany and other cities.

Other wealthy New Yorkers soon followed suit building glamorous getaways in the Thousand Islands. In 1900, Boldt, owner of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, famously built his 120-room castle on Heart Island for his wife Louise, only to halt construction when she died of apparent heart failure at 42. He never stepped foot on the island again.

Now owned by the Thousand Island Bridge Authority, the castle is being remodelled and refurbished as the area’s largest tourist site attracting visitors from around the globe.

Bourne, president and director of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, built his castle on Dark Island which he initially described to
his family as a hunting lodge. Now owned by Dark Island tours, the region’s only lived-in castle is a popular tourism destination featuring a Royal Suite for overnight stays.

Like Boldt, Emery was a luxury hotelier. He owned the Hotel Frontenac on Round Island, one of the grandest hotels in the Thousand Islands with over 300 rooms. Its rich and famous guests included actress May Irwin, The Duke of Newcastle, J. D. Rockerfeller, and the Marashia of Barod, the world’s wealthiest man at the time. The hotel burned down in 1911 in a fire caused by a musician smoking in his room.

Emery’s life was touched by tragedy. His first wife, Francena, died in 1899 of breast cancer. The couple had five children and two of them died young. He and his second wife, Irene, had no children. But again personal tragedy would strike, and like Boldt, take him away from his castle.

He left Calumet Island for good when his second wife Irene died in hospital in New York on his birthday on July 20, 1907. She was granted her dying wish to spend her last days at the castle.

“He closed the castle when she died,” said Ennis. Emery died in 1915 at 79, leaving behind a $4 million estate. The castle was left in trust for his grandson Charles G. Emery II. His son, Frank had life use.

In a move blamed on high taxes, his heirs would later leave the castle a vacant curiosity for years before it burned down in 1956.

Ennis, whose family owned a cottage on nearby Grindstone Island, recalls visiting the abandoned castle as a child. Like Boldt Castle, it stood vacant for years.

“When you’re 10 years old and being taken to Calumet castle, it’s something. It was really an exciting thing.”

Emery went on to become owner and president of Goodwin Tobacco Co. in Brooklyn. His corporation was known for its chewing tobacco and ‘Old Judge Cigarettes’ that came with baseball cards in the packaging.

Ennis has a door, a sink and cupboard from the castle which was emptied of its contents which were put up for auction before the fire.

“There’s pieces of Calumet castle all over the place,” said Ennis, a retired telecommunications engineer who spends winters in Tennessee and summers on Grindstone Island.

The son of a dentist in Maine, Emery was among an elite group of business barons at the turn of the last century who built grand summer homes in the Thousand Islands, many of which still stand today. Some have not held up as well as others. Others have been reduced to rubble.

Today one of the few things left of Calumet’s castle is a massive staircase that leads up a grassy hill to the sky and an entrance long-vanished. Charred bricks from a wall from the castle lie in ruins on the ground nearby. The rest is left to the imagination.

Since the fire, Calumet Island has had several reincarnations including stints as a restaurant, bar and a marina.

But for the last 28 years, it has been the summer retreat of Rawson and his family from Princeton, New Jersey.

The entrepreneur and pilot bought it when the prior owner declared bankruptcy. The sheriff’s locks were still on the doors when he went to view the property. “It was a mess,” Rawson recalled during a tour of the auxiliary buildings including a century-old boathouse and ice house. “It was infested with mice and snakes.”

His family rented houses on Round Island and Clayton before the property came up for sale.

But once inside the yellow main lodging, Emery’s caretaker’s residence, Rawson was struck by the sun spilling inside the windows. “That light just sold me,” he said.
Reminders of Emery’s lost castle remain. A recently discovered wooden sign on the property marked ‘Charles G. Emery’ now has a spot on the home’s fireplace mantle.

And other parts of the original estate which features a sheltered 60-slip marina, remain. There’s a stone power house, boathouse, and skiff house that doubled as a barber shop and games room for Emery.

“He’d get his hair cut and shoot pool with his buddies,” said Rawson with a chuckle.

We climbed to the top of the inside of the water tower – first built in 1894 – for a spectacular view of the River from one of the most familiar sights from the mainland. Then it was time to set off in a classic wooden boat and head back towards Clayton.

Along the way, Rawson pointed out two nearby smaller islands he also purchased with Calumet Island, which he has renamed.

The former U.S. Air Force combat pilot renamed one Bernie Fisher Island, in honour of the Vietnam veteran and jet fighter pilot who received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

And he has also awarded recognition to singer Willie Nelson by renaming one of the Thousand Islands after the legendary pigtailed musician: complete with a sign: Willie Nelson Island.

“Why not?” said Rawson. “He’s given us over 720 songs.”

Rawson doesn’t need a castle to enjoy his historic piece of paradise. Neither do his children or grandchildren. “They’re all River rats,” he said. Every summer, they come back to Calumet Island, a royal retreat to call their own. ☺
One of the most historical Thousand Islands near Alexandria Bay is known for its striking architecture, namesake owner and its most famous visitor. In fact, you could say Pullman Island is presidential.

U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant spent time at Pullman Island in 1872 while campaigning for his second term in office as the guest of its owner, George M. Pullman. He was among the first millionaire industrialists to purchase islands here to build grand retreats.

The manufacturer’s business, which resulted in the model company town of Pullman, Illinois, revolutionized travel by inventing the railroad Pullman sleeping car also known as a “palace car.” In 1867, he introduced the President, a sleeper with an attached kitchen and dining car and soon after he launched The Delmonico, the world’s first sleeping car devoted to fine cuisine.

Pullman purchased what was then known as Sweet Island in 1864 and renamed it to his family name.

His invitation to President Grant to visit the Thousand Islands created a tourism boom leading to its Golden Age heyday in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The Thousand Islands started to be recognized as summer playground for business barons in New York City as early as the mid-1800’s. Some were sold for as little as $5 each but it was reported Pullman bought Sweet Island for the princely sum of $40.

The businessman recognized he could also promote development and use of his sleeping rail cars needed on trains for commuters from New York City to the summer resort.

Despite a world predating 24-hour news coverage, Grant’s entourage of journalists managed to dispatch stories on the beautiful Thousand Islands while they accompanied him on the River during his stay, shining an international spotlight on the region.

It didn’t hurt that his visit coincided with an annual convention of the New York State Editors and Publishers’ Association being held in Watertown.

More than 200 visitors took the train to

This distinctive chimney is part of the original caretaker’s residence
Cape Vincent, boarded steamers for Clayton and Pullman Island with receptions, bands, and steamboat tours and a large party of dignitaries including Civil War heroes Generals Henry Sheridan and William Sherman.

Politicians continued to enjoy the island in later years. Pullman’s daughter and her husband, Frank Lowden, who went on to become the governor of Illinois, inherited Castle Rest.

Today, Pullman Island – which is also known as Castle Rest Island – remains a testament to another time in the Thousand Islands. Its skiff house, original servant’s quarters and granite gazebo still stand. A tower was added a decade ago. It offers majestic vistas and as well as its stone terraces perched high above the River.

“It’s amazing,” said Richard Calabrese Jr. who has been coming here since he was a young child to play on the very spots where Pullman famously hosted Grant. The realtor from Rochester spends as much time as he can here in the summer and has occasionally walked over the ice for a winter retreat.

His father, Richard Calabrese Sr., bought the historical property in 1971 after taking a fishing trip in the area and learning Pullman Island was for sale. He and wife Marcia arrived at the island with five young children in tow.

Calabrese Jr. shares happy memories with three brothers and a sister of summers spent at Castle Rest. He and wife Marcia arrived at the island with five young children in tow.

One of the boats, an antique 38-foot cruiser, named Monitor belonged to Pullman’s son-in-law, Lowden. The other is aptly named in honour of a special Thousand Islands tourist: Ulysses.

Times and politics have changed but the 18th president of the United States is still a welcome guest in the waters of the Thousand Islands and, especially, here on Pullman Island. ¶
Rock Island is known for its lighthouse and one of its most infamous lighthouse keepers: Bill Johnston, Pirate of the Thousand Islands.

This historic lighthouse off Wellesley Island and its red cottage is a picturesque landmark on the St. Lawrence River. And it's charting some new history as New York state parks opens up the lighthouse and century-old cottage to regular visitors for the first time in decades.

The move to open it to the public will attract more lighthouse tourism to the region. Lighthouse tourists travel around the world to visit lighthouses and even brandish lighthouse passports with stamps of their most coveted sites.

American lighthouse lovers visited Rock Island last summer from across the United States for a unique view of the structure.

“It’s pretty remarkable,” said Kevin Kieff, Thousand Island Regional Director of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. “You almost feel you can reach out and touch the ships.”

The Rock Island lighthouse and 1880s cottage will open in 2011 to the public as part of a $1.1 million grant from the federal and state governments for a self-interpretive museum on the island and the Seaway.

“Tolighthouse aficionados, it’s a big draw,” said Kieff. The state park opened up the lighthouse last summer as special preview for lighthouse tourists – marking the second time in 39 years the facility has been open to the public.

Melissa Carr, a photographer from Virginia on her fifth lighthouse tour, said she started to take to the subject while professionally shooting lighthouses.

“I kind of fell into the hobby part of it,” she said. “Each lighthouse is different. Each lighthouse tells a different story.”

Lighthouse tourists travel the globe to visit and photograph lighthouses.

Glen Swigart, a civic centre administrator in Maitland, Florida, has taken 20 lighthouse tours in Denmark, England, Spain, Switzerland and Brazil.

“Most places where lighthouses are, are gorgeous,” said Swigart, noting the beauty of the Thousand Islands. “For me, it’s not only about the lighthouse.”

Today he is joining members of the United States Lighthouse Society and the Chesapeake Chapter U.S. Lighthouse Society to get a unique view from Rock Island’s lighthouse.

Others are fascinated with the stories of the lighthouse keepers. The most notorious lighthouse keeper at Rock Island Light was none other than Bill Johnston, the Pirate of the Thousand Islands.

Johnston, also called “Admiral of the Patriot Navy” was born at Trois Rivieres, Quebec in 1782. He was the son of an Irishman and a Dutch woman from New Jersey. After the war of 1812, he ran a tavern for awhile at Sackett’s Harbor and lived in Watertown.

He is infamous for his exploits during the Canadian Rebellion of 1838. He led 22 Patriots in an attack of The British steamer Sir Robert Peel on May 29, 1838, at Wellesley Island. After driving the passengers ashore and plundering the boat, Johnston’s band cast the vessel off shore and set her ablaze. Large rewards were offered for their apprehension. Several of the culprits were arrested, but none convicted. Johnston hid out in a cave on Devil’s Oven Island in an

On the Rock A Pirate’s Lighthouse
Rock Island, N.Y.
effort to escape capture and sentencing by the British in retaliation for his act of piracy.

“He was so intense about his hatred of the British rule of Canada,” said Norm Wagner, Clayton’s village and town historian.

In 1841, Johnston went to Washington and was successful in petitioning for a presidential pardon, returning home to the Thousand Islands.

He was appointed keeper of Rock Island Lighthouse in 1853, overlooking the same spot where he torched the Sir Robert Peel.

Receiving the pardon, he was given a commission on Rock Island. And the very government that had put a price of $500 on his head, was now paying him $350 a year as keeper of a lighthouse.

Today the Patriot pirate is celebrated at a festival in August in Alexandria Bay where participants dress up as pirates.

Mark Wentling started taking an interest in the Rock Island lighthouse at the age of 10. He wanted to know more a former keeper: his great-great-great-grandfather. He started a website dedicated to its history.

His great-great-great-grandfather had a heart attack at 48 while swimming in the River. Wentling’s great-great-great-grandmother Emma Rowe, a Brockville, Ont. native, was the only woman to ever run the lighthouse after her husband died. They had a son. She maintained the site for several months after his death.

“I’m thrilled,” said Wentling of its opening of the lighthouse station to the public next year. “I wasn’t just about the keepers. It was about their families.”

He said Johnston wasn’t keen to leave the keeper post he held between 1953 and 1961 when he was told to move on. “He was quite a character,” he said.

Other interesting stories include that of two keepers who had also been tent mates in the Civil War.

Wentling tracked the last lighthouse keeper, Pat Carroll, to Alaska. He’s now 80 but has fond memories of his time on Rock Island, he said.

The first Rock Island Lighthouse was built in 1847. The light was built to mark one of the many hazards facing vessels sailing up and down the St. Lawrence River.

In 1882, the current 40-foot tower replaced the old structure. The original tower was built in the center of the island, and could be difficult to see. The loss of two ships on a nearby shoal spurred the construction of the new tower.

Rock Island lighthouse is located off of Fisher’s Landing. The lighthouse was closed in the late 1950’s after more a century of service. Today, the island is maintained by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation.

Currently the island is accessible by private boat and the grounds are open for touring and picnicking.

“People love that lighthouse,” said Wentling. “Rock Island is such a beautiful place.”
One In The Thousand

Polaris Island in the Admiralty Group near Gananoque

Photo: Kim Lunman
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