

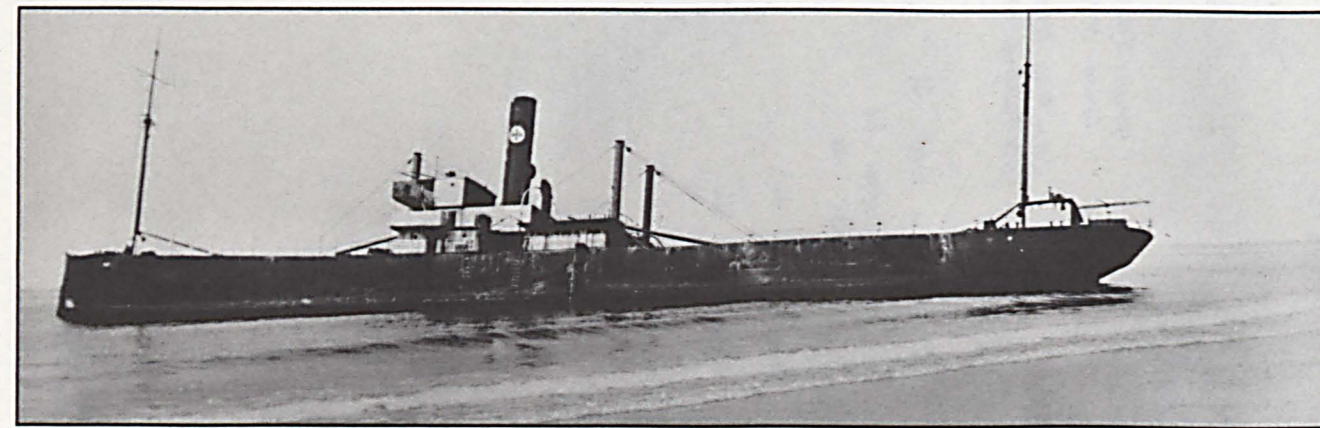
The Humane Establishment— 150 Years of Lifesaving

Public concern about the fate of shipwreck victims on Sable Island led to the first lifesaving station in 1801. This "Humane Establishment" was active on the island until 1958. Many shipwreck victims owed their lives to the skill and courage of the lifesaving crew. They were ordinary folk, doing a tough job on an island that was sometimes very beautiful, but more often cold, damp and uncomfortable. They were remarkably successful at saving lives.

Before the Humane Establishment, wreckers salvaged the island's shipwrecks. Rumours of ships deliberately lured onto the sand and passengers murdered helped lead to government action.

The Humane Establishment brought help in many ways

Lighthouses: The East and West Lights were first built in 1873. As the island eroded, the West Light was moved in 1883, 1888, 1917, and 1951. Keeping the light shining meant having a lighthouse keeper awake to watch it during all the hours of darkness. The light, the lens and the rest of the mechanism all needed tending.



British steamer *Skidby*, wrecked in 1905, is still visible. Her crew walked ashore at low tide.



The aptly named trawler *Gale* is swallowed by sand after running aground in 1945.

Houses of Refuge: These shelters for shipwreck survivors were scattered along the island. Inside, the cold, wet survivor found firewood, food (suspended beyond the reach of rats) and directions to the nearest lifesaving station.

Lifesaving Stations: The lifesaving communities were Sable's first permanent settlements. A steamer brought supplies a few times each year, but mostly the men and their families made do with what the island

provided. The entire coast could not be patrolled from a single station, so by 1895 there were 5 stations along the island's 44 km length. The Main Station had a Sailor's Home where shipwreck survivors could wait for the next steamer to Halifax.

The lifesaving crew's work included maintaining buildings and equipment, picking cranberries to help finance the operation and hunting ducks and seals for fresh meat, as well as drill and practice and actual rescues.

The Humane Establishment ended in 1958, after 11 years without a shipwreck. Now, the lighthouses are automatic, the Main Station in ruins. Sable's only year-round residents are half a dozen weather observers, sometimes with their families.



1. Watching for wrecks: On clear days the crew looked for ships in distress from the tower at each station. In fog or

storms, they patrolled the coast on horseback. Horse patrol was no picnic. Damp and cold cut through you like a knife. Wind blew sand in your face. You couldn't see because the fog was often as thick as soup and it was nearly impossible to hear anything but the roar of the surf.

3. Shooting a line out to the wreck:

If the wreck was close to shore, a line was shot across the rigging with a special gun. The line-throwing gun, or Lyle Gun, could shoot a light-weight rope up to 200 meters. Survivors had to pull on this rope to haul out a heavy hawser which actually carried the breeches buoy and multilingual instructions.



5. Rescue by clothesline:

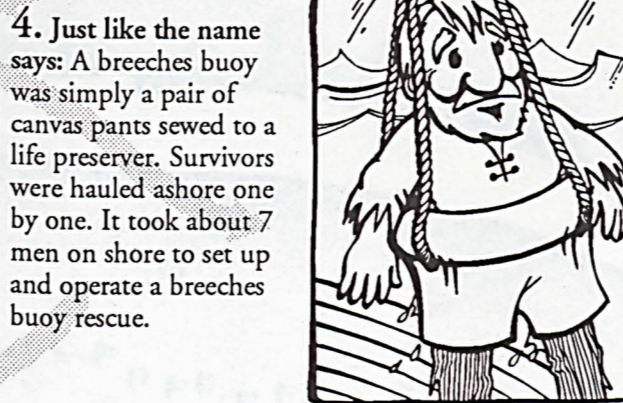
The breeches buoy hung from the hawser on a travelling block. Lifesaving crews on shore could move the block either way with a second line, the whip-line. The survivor was often dragged through the surf as the hawser sagged. This sag limited the breeches buoy's useful range to about 70 m, but it was safer than rowing to the wreck in lifeboats.

6. Rescued sailors were taken to the Sailor's Home to recuperate.

The Sable Island Lifesaving Crew at Work



2. It's a long island: The lifesaving crew might have to pull their heavy equipment 20 km through soft sand to get to a wreck site. The lifeboats were hauled close to the wreck site in horse-drawn wagons.



4. Just like the name says: A breeches buoy was simply a pair of canvas pants sewed to a life preserver. Survivors were hauled ashore one by one. It took about 7 men on shore to set up and operate a breeches buoy rescue.



Special boats for a special job:

In 1892 Beebe McLellan self-bailing lifeboats replaced metal lifeboats donated by American humanitarian Dorothea Dix. They were filled with cork and had hinged flaps along the side let water out, but not in. You can see one from Sable Island at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax.

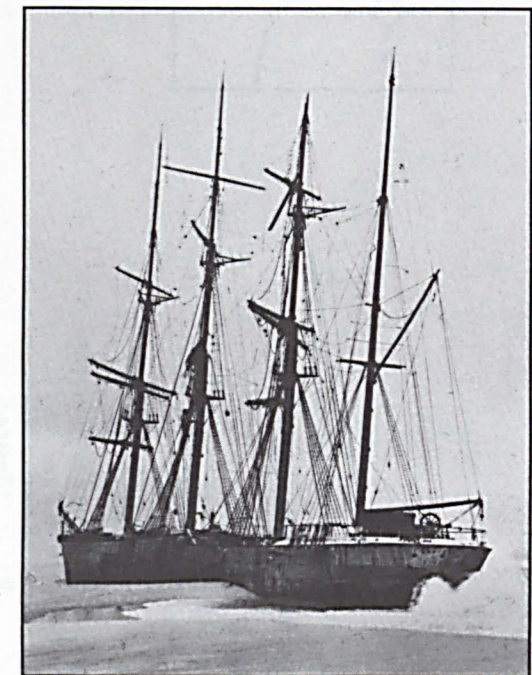
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Nova Scotia Museum 1747 Summer Street Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6

Sable Island: Shipwrecks and Lifesaving

*"Dark Isle of mourning! — aptly art thou named,
For thou hast been the cause of many a tear..."*
Joseph Howe

Sable Island, a 44 km long sand bar about 160 km east of Nova Scotia, is renowned for its wild horses. For sailors, it was the Graveyard of the Atlantic — an island hidden by waves, storms and fog that meant only death and destruction. Since 1583 there have been over 250 recorded shipwrecks on Sable Island. Very little now remains of the ships that wrecked on the island — a shoe buckle, a few coins, ship name boards, timbers buried in the sand.



The British barque *Crofton Hall* stranded 3 miles from the east spit in thick fog. All were saved, some with the breeches buoy.

Why So Many Wrecks?

Location: Sable is on one of the world's richest fishing grounds. It is also near one of the major shipping routes between Europe and North America. Hundreds of vessels sailed past each year.

It's a very stormy place: Sable lies right in the path of most storms that track up the Atlantic coast of North America. Storms were extremely treacherous for sailing ships. Vessels were simply blown onto Sable.

Fog shrouds the island: in summer, warm air from the Gulf Stream produces dense banks of fog when it hits air cooled by the Labrador Current around Sable. Sable has 125 days of fog a year. Toronto has 35.

The currents around Sable are tricky: Sable lies near the junction of three major ocean currents — the Gulf Stream, Labrador Current and Belle Isle Current.

There have been no shipwrecks on Sable since 1947. Until recently, sextants were the instruments used to figure out a ship's position. Sextants are accurate, but they worked by taking a sighting from the sun or the stars. They were useless in dense fog or cloudy skies.

In bad weather, the Captain navigated by "dead reckoning" — using ship speed and direction to estimate his position. But even in good conditions this was educated guessing. Currents and storms confused the calculations

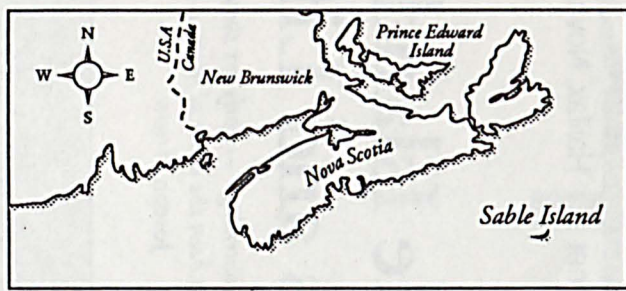
of the best skippers. Many accounts of shipwrecks report that the Captain simply lost his way — he misjudged his ship's position and bumped into Sable Island by mistake.

After World War II, radar and other advanced navigation equipment became widely used on commercial vessels. Sable ceased to be a major threat to shipping.

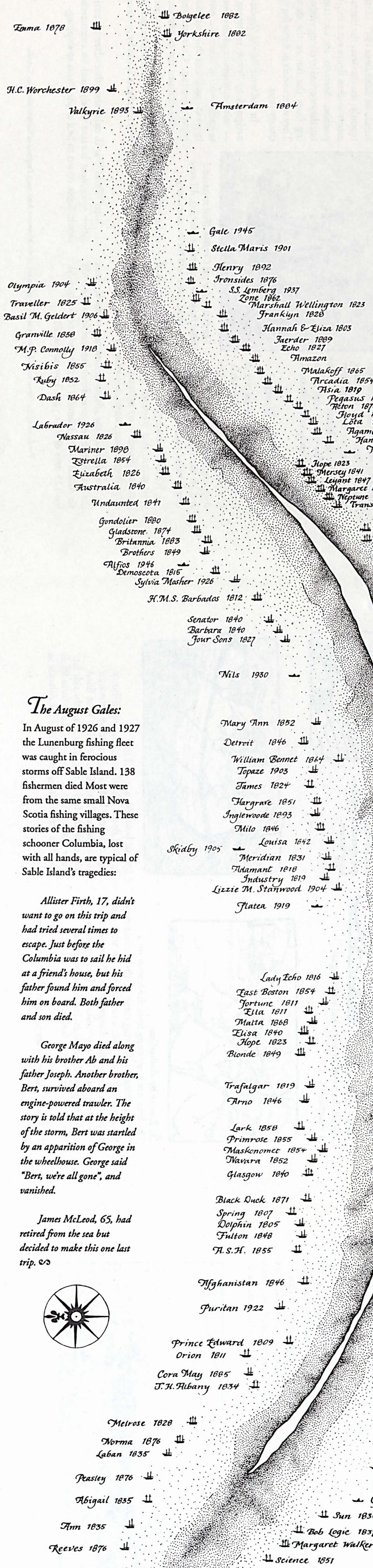
Sable Island

Nova Scotia

Known wrecks since 1583



Sable Island is a 44 km long sand bar about 160 km east of Nova Scotia



The August Gales:
 In August of 1926 and 1927 the Lunenburg fishing fleet was caught in ferocious storms off Sable Island. 138 fishermen died. Most were from the same small Nova Scotia fishing villages. These stories of the fishing schooner Columbia, lost with all hands, are typical of Sable Island's tragedies:

Allister Firth, 17, didn't want to go on this trip and had tried several times to escape. Just before the Columbia was to sail he hid at a friend's house, but his father found him and forced him on board. Both father and son died.

George Mayo died along with his brother Ab and his father Joseph. Another brother, Bert, survived aboard an engine-powered trawler. The story is told that at the height of the storm, Bert was startled by an apparition of George in the wheelhouse. George said "Bert, we're all gone", and vanished.

James McLeod, 65, had retired from the sea but decided to make this one last trip.



- Key**
 Légende
- Ship
 - Navire
 - Barque
 - Schooner
 - Goëlette
 - Brig
 - Brick
 - Brigantine
 - Steamer
 - Vapeur