

The Chesapeake Bay boasted the greatest shipping volume in North America during the 1700's and early 1800's. The New Point Comfort Light Station joined Cape Henry, Smith Point and Old Point Comfort as part of the new federal government's efforts to illuminate the Bay and the vital ports therein. The tenth oldest lighthouse still standing in the United States, New Point Comfort is situated on the westerly shore of the Chesapeake and the north entrance to Mobjack Bay.

Funds for New Point Comfort were first appropriated in an 1801 Congressional Act that also commissioned a lighthouse at Smith Point, approximately thirty miles to the north. Five thousand dollars were earmarked for the project, and the Treasury Department's Commissioner of Revenue William Miller (who was responsible for the nation's lighthouses at that time) ordered a preliminary survey of the area. John Patterson completed this work and noted some of the features of the land:

"New Point Comfort is an Island separated from the main land by a creek of three and a half to four feet water at high tide...the Island is about 3/4 of a mile in length...the width of the land varies from 350 to 500 yards, and contains about 100 acres...it lies generally low and much broken, and covered over with drifted sand hills...about the centre of the Island lies the most elevated firm spot to be found, of about 2 to 3 acres running quite across the point, commanding a good front upon each side...*the foundation is good and appears entirely secure against the drifting of the sand...*"

In this last observation "appears" is the operative word, and Patterson's choice of location would subject the lighthouse to

repeated measures to save it from tumbling into the sea.

In June of 1801 Commissioner Miller ordered the procurement of the land, but it took three years of negotiations to obtain a suitable price. One Phillip Tabb of Gloucester County owned the 100 acres at the Point and demanded an exorbitant thousand dollars for the few acres needed for the lighthouse. While the Treasury Department attempted to talk some sense into him they also spoke with builders Benjamin Latrobe and John McComb (architect of the Cape Henry Light) about submitting proposals for New Comfort. Neither could be induced to do so, however, and it soon became apparent that the initial \$5,000 would not be enough to get the lighthouse built.

At this point Elzy Burroughs enters the picture; it was he who erected the towers at Smith Point and Old Point Comfort. At his estimate Commissioner Miller recommended to the Secretary of the Treasury that an additional \$3,500 be appropriated for the work, and this was done on March 2, 1803. It was Burroughs also who overcame the land obstacle at the Point; he simply purchased it whole from Phillip Tabb and sold the government its two acres. Burroughs was awarded the contract, which called for an octagonal, hewn stone lighthouse with "six strong cedar cisterns with covers...a two-story brick dwelling house and a brick kitchen...with a covered way between."

Elzy Burroughs moved to the Point with his family and

between March and November 1804 worked so diligently that the lighthouse tower was completed, save the arrival of the lantern. Burroughs subcontracted the lantern and cisterns to Samuel Wheeler of Philadelphia, which was a wise decision. He also subcontracted the dwelling house and kitchen to Samuel Stubbs, which was not. As the winter approached, Customs Collector Francis Armistead (appointed to superintend the work) anxiously wrote to Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin. Armistead was not optimistic that the house could be completed before the cold weather set in, as it seems Mr. Stubbs had taken ill for six weeks and his workers had ruined the bricks in attempting to fire them. Armistead was sympathetic to Burroughs, however, as the builder had volunteered to attend to the keeping of the lighthouse himself in lieu of a functional keeper's dwelling. Ominously, the Customs Collector mentioned Burroughs's urgent need for payment from the government, citing the numerous expenses the builder had incurred.

On January 17th, 1805 New Point Comfort was lit for the first time. The lantern had arrived in December from Philadelphia, along with an iron floor which "prevented every kind of danger of communicating fire from the lamps." Burroughs was furnished with oil and wick and he kept the lantern burning for the duration of the winter.

In the spring of 1805 Armistead appealed to Burroughs to

finish the house. This was not to be, however, as the architect "had got his affairs in a deranged situation. His circumstances are now so limited (having latterly been compelled to take the benefit of the Act of Insolvency) that it is now entirely out of his power to procure either materials or laborers..." In short, Burroughs was bankrupt, and Armistead had no doubts that this was caused by debts incurred meeting his lighthouse contracts with the federal government. Armistead further lamented that Mr. Stubbs, who had been compensated by Burroughs for nearly the entirety of his portion of the project, had nevertheless wasted much time and could probably not be counted on to finish the house by the next winter, if at all. The house remained unfinished for another year, until the threat of legal action compelled Burroughs to swallow his losses and complete his contract with the United States.

The 58 foot ashlar sandstone tower at New Point Comfort is similar in design to its sister tower at Old Point Comfort and other octagonal sandstone structures like Cape Henry and Montauk Point Lighthouse. The light originally was a fixed signal generated by nine lamps and cast out to sea by nine inch reflectors. In 1841 Winslow Lewis revamped the lantern and added fourteen inch reflectors; in 1855 a fourth order Fresnel lens was added. In 1919 the light was switched to gas power and

burned at a brighter candlepower; the constant light was changed to a flashing pattern once every five seconds. Powered by gas, it was no longer necessary to labor over maintaining the light, and the keeper position was replaced with a mere occasional lamplighter. In 1950 New Point Comfort was converted to electricity and in 1963 it was decommissioned, replaced by an offshore aid to navigation.

Throughout its rich history the survival of New Point Comfort Light was often in doubt. Most people know the British burned down the White House in the War of 1812; the redcoats were scarcely any kinder to this lighthouse. In a letter to the Norfolk Customs Collector one Mathews County man complained: "The enemy left New Point Comfort on Sunday after four weeks possession. Yesterday I went on the Point and such a scene of wanton destruction I never beheld." In summation, the redcoats burned down the Keepers house and oil vault, shattered the glass in the lantern, and diligently removed all the window frames and the door from the lighthouse. They also broke up the stone staircase inside and "injured the (light)house as much as possible." The man goes on to recommend that if the British didn't destroy the lighthouse utterly then the Americans should, as it was being used as to advantage by the enemy as an observation post. The letter to the Norfolk Collector also gives us our first indication of the perilous condition of the

land at New Point Comfort: "at all events I would not advise the repairing of the light house where it now stands as the water already washes its base and in a few years will undermine it- indeed it was very improperly placed at first."

After the war Elzy Burroughs's services were once again called upon, this time to repair damaged lighthouses along the entire Chesapeake Bay. As the NPC keeper's house had been fired by British soldiers, Elzy would get another chance to build that structure again. At about this time Burroughs was also consulted about the erosion problem around New Point Comfort lighthouse, as "the water every full tide (was) entirely reaching it." Burroughs recommended digging a ditch in front of the lighthouse, driving piles into the ditch and filling it with treetops, brush and rubble. The builder estimated this would cost \$900.00, which was actually a bargain considering the alternative was moving the lighthouse to a safer spot. This would have cost a whopping \$6,000; Burroughs knew this because a similar procedure had needed to be performed to one of his other lighthouses, at Smith Point. The ditch and pile method was successful, so much so that although Congress authorized \$7,000 to rebuild the lighthouse in 1816, this money was never expended.

Like many lighthouses during the Civil War, New Point Comfort was extinguished by Confederate soldiers hoping to

prevent the Union from using its vastly superior naval forces. An 1865 inspection showed the lighthouse grounds neglected and somewhat damaged, but all in all the Confederates showed far more restraint than what could have been expected from the Brits. For example, the lantern was intact and only one of its panes of glass was broken. After a general cleaning, repairing and painting the station was up and running without too much trouble.

The soil erosion at New Point Comfort was a constant source of trouble, however. "Shifting sand eventually made what was once a peninsula connected to the mainland by a sand bar into an island." In 1839 a boat was granted to the keeper as he could no longer walk across the sand bar. Over the years "stone walls, fences, breakwaters, and loose rock" were all employed to delay the ravages of the weather. In 1933 a tremendous hurricane and "related tidal flooding...created a swath between the lighthouse and the island where it once stood." A series of photographs of the lighthouse over time show it first standing on firm ground with its attendant house, kitchen and oil vault. In 1928 it is shown without the keeper's house, only a barn, and the water appears much closer. A recent snapshot reveals the lighthouse perched in solitude on a mere hundred yards of rocky rubble amidst the foamy sea.

Since 1976 restoration efforts have "focused primarily on

stabilizing the structure." The Mathews County Historical Society is involved with long term preservation plans, and in 2001 the New Point comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force was established. Their mission statement is "to develop a plan to preserve the...lighthouse as a permanent historic sentinel representing American navigation, transportation, commerce, craftsmanship, engineering, and American's perseverance through peace and war."

Resources

Clifford, Candace. "New Point Comfort Light Station: A Story of Survival. The Keeper's Log. Winter, 2003.