

The old masonry light at Cape Henry was a long time in coming. For seventy years the Colonial Assembly of Virginia heed and hawed, passing resolutions and attempting to convince reluctant authorities in Maryland and Great Britain to assist in the construction of a beacon at this vital Cape. Standing at the juncture of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, Cape Henry is the entry point to the ports of Norfolk, Newport News, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. For many years preceding the birth of our nation, pirates were far more appreciative of the importance of Cape Henry than was the Virginia House of Burgesses. Lacking a proper light, beacon fires were used as a makeshift navigational aid. Unscrupulous men would capture those in charge of the beacon, however, moving the light southward to bring the ships aground. As the wreckage continued to mount, men like Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood petitioned the Assembly to take action. In 1720 this body resolved to construct the light, "Provided the Province of Maryland will contribute..."

Receiving little but passive cooperation from their neighbors, the Virginia Assembly was further hampered by the reluctance of the British Board of Trade to grant its permission to proceed. Since the lighthouse was to be financed in part by shipping duties, the consent of this August body was required. Governor Spotswood argued a strong case, describing

the plight of merchants too frightened to venture into the Chesapeake during foul weather. He reasoned: "If such a lighthouse were built ships might then boldly venture, there being water enough and a good channell within little more than a musquett shote of the place where this lighthouse may be placed." Yet it was only in 1758, and at the behest of concerned tobacco merchants, that the Board threw their weight behind the project.

In 1772 the Maryland assembly got on board as well, and the project was underway. Workers' quarters and stables were built and over 4,000 tons of stone were delivered to Cape Henry. In the summer of 1775, however, the initial allotment of funds was nearly depleted and an additional 5,000 pounds was requested. At this point The American Revolutionary War intervened, and the valuable stones lay forgotten and buried in drifts of sand while more pressing matters were attended to.

In many respects the Old Cape Henry lighthouse is inextricably linked with the birth of our nation. The aquia sandstone for its base was gathered from the same Virginia quarries that provided material for Mount Vernon, the U.S. Capitol Building and the White House. The lighthouse was commissioned at the first session of the first Congress in 1789, when an act was passed which placed the lighthouse service under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Treasury. Included in

this act was the provision for the construction at Cape Henry, giving it the distinction of the first lighthouse ordered and financed by the federal government. The Virginia Assembly, mindful of its own difficulties in building the lighthouse, moved rapidly and ceded two acres in the County of Princess Anne to the United States. President Washington himself took an interest in the construction, noting in a 1790 diary entry that he had spoken with Alexander Hamilton (the Secretary of the Treasury), "respecting the appointment of Superintendents of the Light House, Buoys, etc, and for building one at Cape Henry."

Secretary Hamilton contracted with a New York bricklayer named John McComb, Jr to undertake the project at a cost of \$15,200. The contract called for McComb, with "all convenient speed, (to) build and finish in a good workman like manner a Light House of Stone, Faced with hewn or hammer dressed Stone...from the bottom of the Water Table up to the top of the Stone Work." The contract also specified a two story frame house of 20 feet square, for the keeper, as well as a buried vault for the storage of lamp oil.

The construction proved to be a difficult task, though Hamilton's representative on the scene describes a highly motivated and uncomplaining John McComb: "He is persevering and merits much for his industry, the drifting of the sand is truly vexatious, for in an instant there came down fifty cart loads at

least, in the foundation after it was cleaned for laying the stone, which he bore with great patience and immediately set to work and removed it without a murmur as to the payment for the additional work..." The builder did have to be compensated an additional \$2,500, however, as the foundation had to be laid at twenty feet rather than the planned thirteen, owing to the sandy condition of the ground. McComb estimated that he would finish the lighthouse by October of 1792, and this is indeed when it was first lighted.

Engineer Benjamin Latrobe visited Cape Henry in 1798 and provided us with detailed descriptions and sketches of the light in operation. One of his drawings shows Old Cape Henry complete with the weather vane, ventilator and lightning rods called for in the contract with McComb. Latrobe described the lighthouse as "an octangular truncated pyramid of eight sides, rising 90 feet to the light...and six or seven hundred yards from the beach..." This design is basically the same as that of the Cape Henlopen, Delaware tower constructed in 1767. The tower is twenty six feet in diameter at its base, and the walls there are six feet thick. At its summit it shrinks to a diameter of sixteen feet. The tower is composed of an attractive rosy Rappahannock sandstone which caught Latrobe's fancy, although he did find fault with the structure on two key points. First he decried "the unpardonable fault of a wooden staircase, which

being necessarily soaked with oil exposes the light to the perpetual risk of destruction of fire." He also sympathized with the plight of the keeper, noticing that the lighthouse, which sits at the summit of a 56 foot high sandy dune, creates a whirlwind about it which "licks up the sand...and heaps it around in the form of a basin. The sandy rim, while it protects the keeper from the storms, renders his habitation one of the dreariest abodes imaginable."

Like most of its comrades, the light at Cape Henry underwent numerous repairs and technological upgrades in the ensuing years. In 1835 a new house was built for the use of the keeper. In 1841 the lantern was completely redone with eighteen new lamps with brass burners and eighteen reflectors. This work was performed at a cost of \$4,000 and included replacement of the wooden deck near the summit with a soapstone deck laid over a brick arch. In 1844 a 15 foot high wall was built around the tower's base and that area was paved over. In 1855 a fog bell tower was added and in 1857 the reflectors were replaced with a second order Fresnel lens. In this same year the tower also received a new brick lining. Other innovations included the types of oil used in the lantern; these varied from sperm whale oil to cabbage, lard and kerosene oil, which was adopted near the turn of the century.

The American Civil War temporarily put Cape Henry out of

commission. In April of 1861 men from Princes Anne County seized the tower and destroyed the lamps and lens. It is likely that the Confederate states (including Virginia), feared the formidable sea power of the Union and sought to make it difficult for them to enter the vital Chesapeake. In 1863 the tower was placed under military guard and was back in operation once again.

In 1864 an inspector finally corroborated Latrobe's observation, remarking that Cape Henry was endangered by its oil soaked wooden staircase, which was at this point "greatly decayed and insecure." The inspector recommended a cast iron spiral staircase, and this was subsequently installed. The tower remained strong for another eight years, but in 1872 the Light House Board noticed large cracks from the "base upward" on six of the eight masonry walls comprising the octagonal structure. The inspector concluded that some of these cracks were inconsequential, but those on the north and south faces were compounded by the presence of windows. The inspector concluded that the tower was unsafe and in danger of being thrown into the sea. It took six additional years for the funds of \$75,000 to be appropriated for a new lighthouse, and in 1881 keeper Jay Edwards transferred his attentions to the new cast iron structure. Standing 350 feet southeast from the old tower, it was lighted on December 15, 1881.

"Somewhat to the surprise of everyone, the Old Cape Henry lighthouse has neither crumbled nor been swept away in a storm." Today it stands in silent idleness, next to and somewhat higher than its replacement, owing to its location on the summit of the dune. It remains an indelible landmark, and in 1896 was graced with the presence of the members of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. They placed upon the old light a plaque commemorating it as the site of the first landing of the English colonists on Virginia soil. It thereby became the predecessor of the Cape Henry Memorial, "to which its shadow will reach on a late summer afternoon." On June 18, 1930, the U.S. Congress ceded the light and land to the APVA, to be preserved in perpetuity as an historical landmark. In 1939, the Old Cape Henry Lighthouse was selected as the site to celebrate 150 years of the Lighthouse Service, and it was this same year that lighthouse maintenance was transferred from the Treasury Department to the Coast Guard. Today the lighthouse grounds are encompassed by Fort Story Military Reservation, and are a noteworthy destination for visitors to the nearby Colonial National Historic Park. Old Cape Henry is the third oldest lighthouse still standing in the United States.