

The edge of the Virginia Peninsula has long been recognized as a vital point for both strategic and navigational reasons. Marking both the mouth of the James River and the westerly shore of the entrance to historic Hampton Roads, Old Point Comfort has seen the construction of a number of forts. The Civil-War era Fort Monroe was preceded by Fort George from colonial days, and this in turn "was probably preceded by another fortification." The importance of the Point as a light beacon was also not lost on authorities; in 1775 "a man named John Dams, a former caretaker of the ruins at fort George, received the sum of 20 pounds annually for showing a light there." Some historians even believe that Native Americans kept wood fires burning at the Point for the benefit of Spanish ships during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

With the establishment of the United States government and its ensuing lighthouse projects at places like Cape Henry, pressure mounted to build a permanent aid to navigation at Old Point Comfort. An early edition of the American Coast Pilot notes the law passed by the U.S. Congress in 1798 calling for the light, and proclaims: "We wish, for the security of navigation, that the important work may soon be undertaken, for the safety of our mariners." Between 1800 and 1801 Congress appropriated \$5,000 for construction costs, and contracted the services of the prolific builder Elzy Burroughs to complete the

octagonal stone structure. By 1803, he was mostly finished. The lighthouse is short in stature, standing only 54 feet. It possesses a spiral staircase "made of hand-cut stone, stacked strategically one upon the other." The stairs lead one to a ladder, which ascends to a trap door, beyond which is the lantern room. "Before being outfitted with a Fresnel lens, the signal required eleven oil lanterns (consuming 486 gallons of oil annually), and a like number of fourteen-inch reflectors." This arrangement produced a light signal visible for fourteen miles.

In 1812 the lighthouse temporarily fell into British hands, when Jack Tars and Royal Marines sailed into the Chesapeake. Frustrated in their efforts to seize the town of Norfolk, the invaders landed at Old Point Comfort and used the tower as an observation post. From there they went on to take and burn Hampton. This was really the first and last time the lighthouse would experience any of the trauma of warfare or instability. For the remainder of its existence, the Old Point Comfort tower would enjoy excellent care and the benefits of being located in a prestigious resort area.

After the war the Virginia Peninsula was vastly transformed by both the federal government and private investors. The government erected Forts Monroe and Calhoun, the former on shore and the latter on a manmade island called 'Rip Raps' situated in

the middle of Hampton Roads. Entrepreneurs built several resort hotels and otherwise made the area into a vacationer's paradise for the leading lights of a young American society: "Travelers roamed the Point and examined all the attractions. Smartly dressed military officers, dignitaries, the parade of passing sailing ships and incoming steamers created a holiday atmosphere."

In 1855 the lighthouse received a companion structure; Congress had appropriated \$6,000 to build a fog bell tower for navigation in inclement weather. The bronze bell was forty inches around and three feet high, and its ringing could be heard up to three miles away. Soon thereafter a beacon light was added to the station, in order to guide ships docking at Fort Monroe.

While most east coast lighthouses were damaged, destroyed or at least put out of commission during the Civil War, the tower at Old Point Comfort remained undisturbed. The clever Robert E. Lee, Lieutenant of Engineers, "was instrumental in the construction of the fortress, which was completed in 1834. Fort Monroe was one of the few Union Military posts that was not captured by the Confederates..." An observer perched on the deck of the lighthouse would have seen an impressive procession of historical events during the conflict. President Lincoln once landed at the wharf to Fort Monroe; he had come to witness

the Union troops take Norfolk. The legendary battle of the first ironclads, the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia, took place just offshore. Finally at the end of the war Confederate President Jefferson Davis was imprisoned in an artillery room behind the light station.

After the war the lighthouse was in danger of being closed; an 1869 report contended that it was "no longer of any service to navigation." Evidently a number of festive establishments were putting out candlepower that dwarfed the little light. Among these were the Hygeia Hotel, the Sherwood Inn, the Chamberlain Hotel and the Adams Express Company. Given the increasing sophistication of the area, it is likely that the historic and aesthetic value of the light was taken into account. Instead of being decommissioned, the lighthouse grounds were vastly improved upon. A new keeper's house replaced the original 1823 structure, and various buildings such as a stable, new oil house and iron railings were added as well. In 1901 the station was hooked up to a modern sewer line, and the resulting dug-up grounds were substantially re-landscaped. Fifty cart loads of topsoil were spread amongst the premises; these were accentuated by sixty- three varieties of plants and grasses.

Improvements to the station continued to be made into the new century. The oil fuel lanterns were replaced by electric

power, and the beam increased in intensity to 3,300 candlepower. With advances in aeronautics the station was designated as an aerial landmark. One of the buildings' roofs was painted in a distinctive pattern, part of a chain enabling pilots to find their way from Washington DC to Norfolk. In 1936 an experimental apparatus was added to control the fog signal. A beam of light was shot every two minutes from nearby Fort Wool, onto a photoelectric cell at Old Point Comfort. If the beam failed to arrive, that meant it had been impeded by rain, fog or snow, and the fog signal was activated.

In 1954 the problem of competing coastal lights from hotels and attractions was tackled in an innovative manner. A Coast Guard officer keeping the lighthouse attached five 250 watt bulbs on poles extending from the guardrails, so that they resembled spokes on a wheel. While this may have made it more noticeable, an article in The Keeper's Log laments that "it made the light look like an amusement park ride...rather than a noble lighthouse."

The light was completely automated in 1973, and over the years its characteristic was altered several times. In 1905 the Light House Board reported that "the light was again changed to a fixed red through the entire arc of visibility." In the 1950's the ruby-red glass was still in place in the lantern room, but the present automated signal shows a mixture of red

and white. It flashes a signal of two seconds dark, two seconds light and then six seconds dark. The white beam covers 132 degrees of the circle and the red occupies the rest. The glass is arranged in such a way that if a ship sees only red the crew knows that it is on a "danger course."

Today the lighthouse tower is a freshly painted white, topped by "a dull red, domed copper roof" with a lightning rod. The structure has four large double-paned windows, with bright green doors, sashes and frames. "Rumor has it that this particular shade of 'eye-catching' green is most likely a contractual error and should soon be toned down." A solid steel door guards the base of the lighthouse, alongside a plaque denoting it as a Virginia National Landmark. Beneath the lantern deck "there is an exterior cornice molding, visible in photographs." The keeper's dwelling housed the families of two Coast Guardsmen until automation in 1973; presently it is the house of an Army Major. The house has been described as stylistically eclectic, "exhibiting influences from the Shingle Style of the 1870's, the Stick Style of the 1870's, a touch of Queen Anne, and a soupcon of Eastlake."

In the last twenty years or so the Coast Guard has undertaken various measures to maintain the lighthouse. In 1989 they scraped loose paint from the interior of the tower "to help the walls breathe." One year later the interior was pressure

washed to remove the algae coating that had built up over two centuries. "On the whole...the exterior stonework and mortar joints were found to be in good condition." The interior masonry "was found to be crumbling," however, and the Coast Guard recommended tuck pointing the mortar joints.

Besides its Civil War pedigree, the Old Point Comfort lighthouse has been privy to events of great military importance. The Jamestown Exposition of 1907 brought battle cruisers from many foreign nations to the James River, and saw the launching of Teddy Roosevelt's 'Great White Fleet.' On November 14, 1910, a plane was launched from the USS Birmingham stationed in Hampton Roads. This was the first instance of an aircraft taking off from the deck of a battleship. More recently, American aircraft carriers left their ports at Norfolk, embarking for the Persian Gulf War.

#### Resources

Trask, Benjamin. "Two Points of Comfort." The Keeper's Log.  
Fall, 1997.

Zaccaria, Anthony and Jessie. "Old Point Comfort Lighthouse."