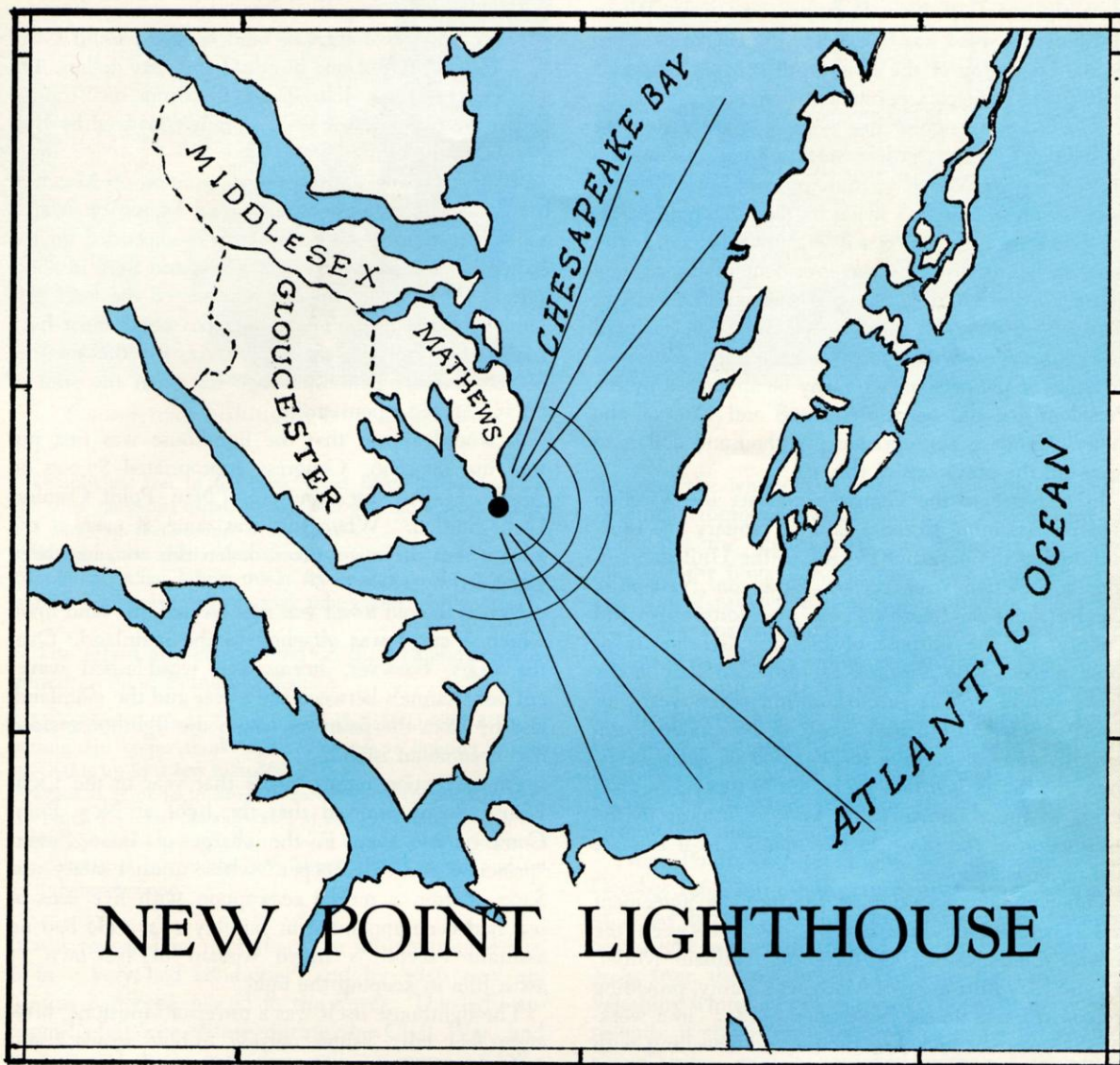


New Point Lighthouse by Martin Diggs. Virginia Cavalcade. Summer 1969



New Point Light Station in 1885





MARTIN DIGGS

**T**HERE is a peculiar fascination about lighthouses, those sentinels of the shallows and shoals of our waterways. Silently they stand by day, except when the fog creeps in on wet feet, cutting off sight and muffling sound. Then the blasts of the mighty horn go out across the waves, warning ships of the dangers at hand. By night a gleam of light cuts through the encircling darkness, pointing out the hazards ahead. When rain, snow or fog shut down in the darkness, the sonorous sound of the horn is again heard, and light and sound send their twin messages across the waters.

Such a shallow is located at the southernmost tip of Mathews County, where New Point Comfort juts into the water and serves as a boundary between Chesapeake and Mobjack bays. The point was given its name to distinguish it from Old Point Comfort on Hampton Roads. When New Point Comfort was first so called is not known, but the name was in use before 1690.

Since many vessels ply Chesapeake and Mobjack bays and their confluent rivers, and since others sail from them, headed for the capes and the broad expanse of the Atlantic, it was early found necessary to



mark the shoal off New Point in some way. When and how the shoal was first marked is not known, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century proposals were made to erect a permanent marker there.

An Act of Congress "for erecting light houses at New Point Comfort, and on Smith's Point, in the State of Virginia," of March 3, 1801, provided that, as soon as a cession of land was made by the Commonwealth, the Secretary of the Treasury was to negotiate a contract, to be approved by the President of the United States, for the building of lighthouses at those places. This officer was also "to furnish the same with all necessary supplies; and also to agree for the salaries or wages of the persons, who may be appointed by the President for the superintendence and care of the same." Congress appropriated five thousand dollars to carry out the provisions of this act.

In response to the Congressional act the Virginia General Assembly passed a law on January 15, 1802, authorizing the governor to cede to the United States "the jurisdiction over certain lands on New-point Comfort, and on Smith's Point" in Northumberland County, for the purpose of building lighthouses at those places. The Virginia act provided that if the lights should not be erected within seven years, or were "suffered to fall into decay, or be rendered useless . . . and so continue for a period of seven years, then . . . the jurisdiction over such territory . . . shall revert to the commonwealth, and be subject to the jurisdiction of the same, in like manner as if this act had never been made."

Following the adoption of this act, an agreement was concluded on February 16, 1802, between the federal Commissioner of Revenue, William Miller, Jr., and Elzy Burroughs of Mathews County, providing for construction before November 1, 1803 "in a workmanlike manner of a Lighthouse and Dwelling with their appurtenances." Burroughs agreed to "find all materials, labor, and objects of cost and expense of the work described in said proposals." In consideration of this agreement, the United States agreed to pay Burroughs \$8,750, of which one thousand dollars was to be paid immediately, to provide materials, while further payments were to be disbursed, "as the work progresses, reserving a balance until the whole is completed and approved."

On April 6, 1804, Elzy Burroughs conveyed to the United States two acres of land on New Point Comfort, for the sum of one hundred and fifty dollars. On October 22, 1804, John Page, Governor of Virginia, ceded the two acres of land, already conveyed by Burroughs, to the United States.

Congress made a further appropriation on March 2, 1803, of \$3,500, and an additional \$5,000 on March 14, 1804. During 1804 \$7,150 was expended on the structure, \$1,044 was spent in 1805, and \$306 in 1806; presumably the last amount represented the final payment to Burroughs. These later payments must have superseded the agreement of 1802, for the total of \$8,500 actually paid was \$250 less than the sum of \$8,750 agreed upon earlier.

It would appear that the lighthouse was first put into use in 1806. Congress appropriated \$7,000 on April 27, 1816, for rebuilding "New Point Comfort Light Station." When this was done, if ever, is not known, but there is no record that this sum had been expended by 1818.

When the old tower was first erected, the land upon which it stood was attached to the mainland. Over the years, however, storms and wind-lashed waves cut out channels between the tower and the mainland, and by 1852 the point on which the lighthouse stood had become an island.

An inspection report, made that year to the Light House Board, showed that the light at New Point Comfort was then in the charge of Isaac Foster, "principal and only keeper," whose annual salary was \$400. Foster, a retired sea-captain with five sons at sea, had been appointed in January 1847. He had no assistant except "a negro woman of his own to assist him in keeping the light."

The lighthouse itself was a tower of sandstone, fifty-eight feet tall, "ashlar outside, rubble inside," and "whitewashed inside and out." There was loose stone about the foundation, but the foundation itself was in "good condition."

Nearby the tower was the keeper's dwelling, "a frame-house, painted white." Oil for the lamps was kept in the cellar of the dwelling. There it did not freeze, but it tended to get thick during the winter.

The inspection report went into considerable detail on the equipment:







*Commercial Fishing in Chesapeake Bay*

Lantern six feet in the clear; fixed light; lamps, burners, and tube glasses, as usual, common; 6/7 of the horizon below, 4/7 above of the horizon, illuminated.

Reflectors scratched; want silvering as well as cleaning; two extra lamps, which keeper thinks not enough, as they give out and are not always well repaired; tube-glasses indifferent.

The report also commented on the procedure maintained at New Point Comfort:

Lights up at dark and puts out at daylight; turned down in putting out; keeper thinks there is no use in lighting at sunset! lights up in a few minutes.

Trims at 11 or 12 in summer; in winter at 10 and 2 o'clock. No watch kept, but always wakes at the right time.

Has the usual printed instructions; keeper says the light is not considered bad in the bay; keeper thinks curtains of no use! there are none.

It was reported in 1855 that "the illuminating device is in a very bad condition," and by 1856 new apparatus had been placed in the tower. The light apparently fell into disuse during the Civil War, and neglect and decay took their toll. A report of 1865 indicated that the "station required extensive repairs involving much time and expense." A new lens was provided, and the light reestablished. By 1868 extensive repairs had been made to the dwelling and to the light, and all woodwork, including window frames and sashes, were given two coats of paint inside and out. The dwelling was given a newly shingled roof and new gutters; doors, locks and hinges were repaired; the porches and the interior of the dwelling were painted; and a new pump cistern was provided. Both tower and fences were whitewashed, and the tower was repaired, with new glass being set in the windows. This was the most extensive repair job reported during the lighthouse's history.

In 1882 a new back porch was added to the dwell-



*Oyster Boats, Mathews County*

ing, and the whole station was "thoroughly painted." Another "thorough repair" job was carried out in 1896, but the repairs were not itemized. By 1900 much of the fence was in disrepair, and in that year, 184 feet of rail fence was put up; part of the plank walk was repaired and 32 feet of new walk was laid, "as well as various other repairs being made." A report of April 1, 1930, stated that the "usefulness of the property has not diminished. Appears to be no likelihood of it soon doing so." The land was then appraised at \$200, and the improvements thereon at \$3,300. In the same year, the station was equipped with an automatic light.

New Point Comfort Light was discontinued in October 1963, but the structure continued to be useful as a day beacon. At that time, New Point Comfort Spit Light was established, 1,050 yards and 223 degrees from the old tower. The new light sends out a flashing white light of ninety candlepower every four seconds; it stands on a four-pile structure fifteen feet above water, and is equipped with red triangular markers and red reflectors. It is also equipped with a diaphragm horn which sounds a two-second blast every twenty seconds from September 15 to June 1.

In December 1968, the United States Coast Guard announced that it was considering discontinuing maintenance of the old tower, relying entirely on the Spit Light established at New Point in 1963. In that announcement, the Coast Guard authorities stated that "present regulations require that any aid to navigation maintained and operated by the Coast Guard to serve the needs of commerce must be necessary for the safety of navigation, useful for commerce of a substantial and permanent character, and must be justified in terms of public benefit to be derived therefrom."