

1955  
F. RITZEN  
*View of New Point Lighthouse in 1950 from Bavon, Virginia.*

## ***New Point Comfort Lighthouse: The Shining Symbol of Mathews County***

*by Benjamin H. Trask, Reference Librarian*

Few lighthouses were better named than the eight-sided structure that shone from New Point Comfort in Mathews County, Virginia. The beacon stands at the southeastern end of the county on a small island in the Chesapeake Bay. Nearby Gwynns Island and tributaries such as Milford Haven and Mobjack Bay add to the sense of calm afforded by the surrounding waters. In years past and still today, vessels plying the Bay often tuck into the inlets offered by the coast of Mathews. The location named "newe Poynt Comfort" appeared as early as 1641 in colonial records of the area, distinguishing it from Old Point Comfort at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula.

To better assist navigation to and from Baltimore, federal authorities decided in 1801 to construct the fourth lighthouse on the Chesapeake at New Point. With cooperation from the Virginia General Assembly, the government paid Elzy Burroughs, of Mathews, \$8,750 for the beacon and a keeper's dwelling. The agreement also included two acres of land. In November 1804, President Thomas Jefferson approved Burroughs's appointment as the first lightkeeper.

The alabaster-colored sandstone structure stands sixty-three feet tall and is located 37 degrees 18 minutes north longitude and 76 degrees 2 minutes west latitude. One native of the county recalled that Burroughs may have imported stone for the lighthouse's construction from England; however, another source indicates the stone was quarried at Aquia Creek, considerably closer to New Point.

The light's companion landmark was a white, two-story keeper's house that protected the whale oil for lamps in its cellar. As part of the fifth district of the Lighthouse Service, the tower was part of a series "embracing the coasts from Metomkin Inlet, Virginia, to New River Inlet, North Carolina."

The guide's fixed lens flashed fifty-seven feet above sea level. When properly cleaned and polished, the beam covered a 297 degree arc as far as thirteen nautical miles. Prior to 1810, however, the illumina-

tion could be hampered severely because of the use of common lamps and glass cut in small panes. The grid of sashes obscured some of the light, and soot from the lamps darkened the glass. Various modifications made throughout the nineteenth century increased the light's candlepower. In 1841, the staff of the Service fitted the tower with a new lantern, fifteen lamps, and fifteen twenty-one foot reflectors; the modifications cost \$3,500. The reflectors were most likely the new models cast in molds, plated with sixteen ounces of silver, and highly polished.

An inspector in the 1850's noted the need for routine maintenance. The illuminating mechanism was in "bad condition being old and almost worn out [and] the keeper's dwelling of this light station requires immediate repairs." About the same time, a "second class nun buoy was planted on the southwest bar off New Point" at the entrance to Mobjack Bay.

The fury of the Civil War disrupted the mission of the New Point Lighthouse. After the conflict, the installation demanded extensive repairs involving "much time and expense." At the close of 1865, the house beamed with a new lens, and other refurbishing projects continued. Crews white-washed the house, tower and fence, and installed a new pump for the cistern and new glass in the windows.

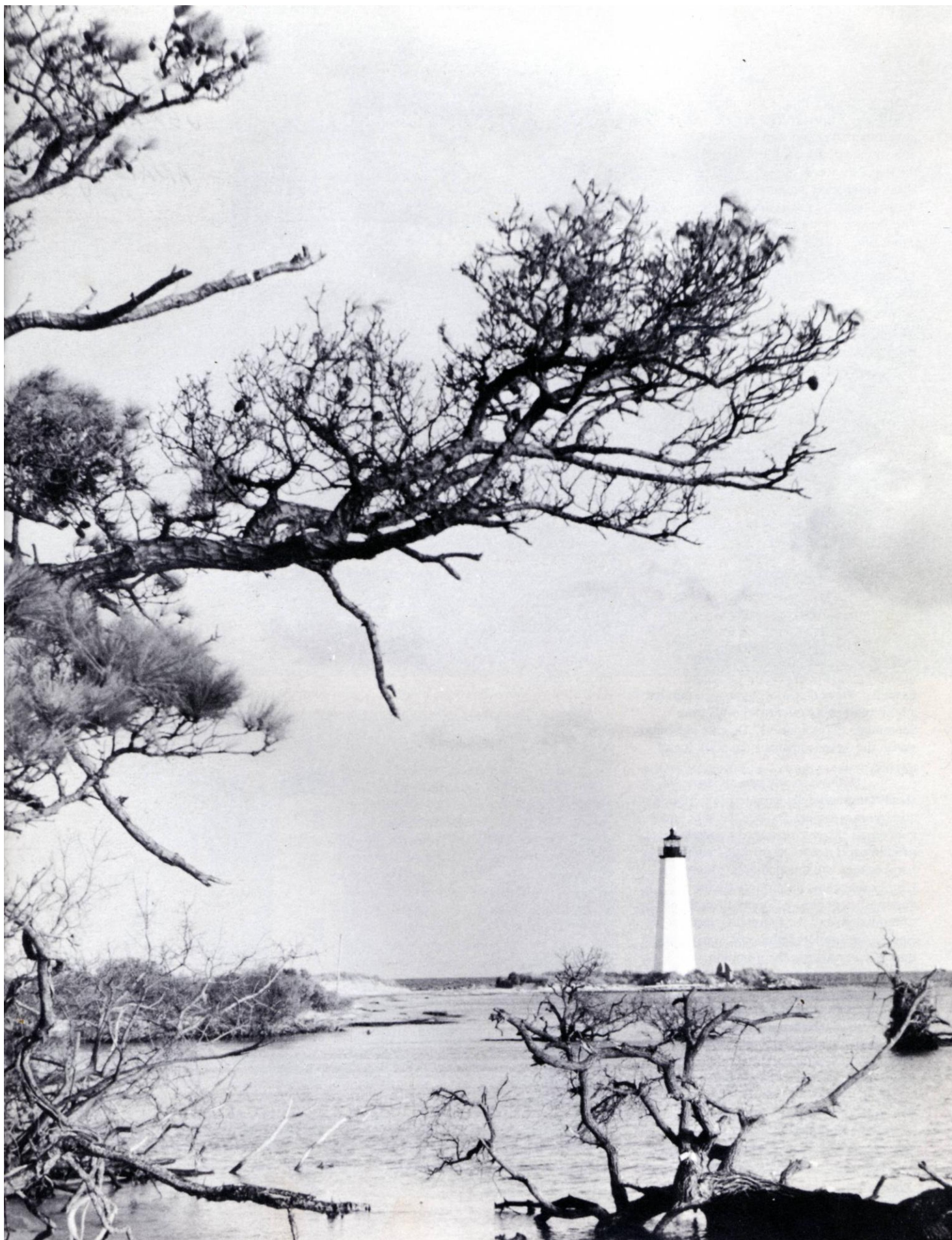
When peaceful days returned to the Bay, the beacon attracted picnickers to the region's sandy beaches and proud oaks. Storms had severed the spit from the mainland by 1847, but waders could still reach the light at low tide. Church social goers and vacationers from as far away as Hampton Roads made the trip to the point to enjoy the salty air and admire the attractive lighthouse. A 1902 pilot's manual claimed that boats "come to anchor for the night inside of New Point Comfort Lighthouse" in the draft of twelve to twenty-one feet of water. During the Depression, harsh weather and hurricanes further separated the installation from the shore line. Nevertheless, day trippers still journeyed to the landmark.



Photograph from the collections of The Mariners' Museum.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse: The Shining Symbol of Mathews by Benjamin H. Trask. The Mariners' Museum Journal. Summer 1989. Volume 16, Number 2





Along with the alterations of the seacape by natural forces, progress and governmental changes reshaped the appearance of the establishment. In 1919, the keeper's house was disassembled. Shortly thereafter, automatic acetylene gas fixtures replaced the kerosene lamps. The Department of Commerce chose the lighthouse as a day beacon for aerial navigation between Washington, D.C., and Norfolk. Atop the lighthouse was to be the code "W (number) N" to map the route between the two cities. Older residents of New Point, however, do not recollect that the lighthouse ever actually received its own designator.

More changes ensued when the Lighthouse Service switched to the control of the United States Coast Guard, and in 1950, electricity powered the light for the first time. Four years later, Henry Dow retired as the lighthouse's last keeper. Thereafter, the Coast Guard assumed direct responsibility for the beacon.

The Coast Guard suggested that the lighthouse be closed in 1960, but strong objections by neighboring residents helped to keep the light shining for three more years. Nevertheless, the closing was not halted and in 1968, Coast Guardsmen ceased to care for the installation. A signal light at New Point Comfort Spit replaced the beacon, bobbing just a little over 1,000 yards from the venerable obelisk. The new signal flashed a 90-candlepower light and sounded a horn blast every twenty seconds from September 15 until June 1. Despite its retired status, the tower remains a daymark for all passing craft.

Without steady maintenance, the stately landmark fell victim to nesting birds and rough weather. To save the structure, concerned citizens organized to obtain the property and restore its pristine beauty. Local bodies like the Mathews County Historical Society, the County Board of Supervisors, Mathews County Bicentennial Commission, and the Committee to Preserve New Point Comfort Lighthouse spearheaded the drive to preserve the monolith.

The county acquired the property from the federal government in April 1976. Through hard work and matching state and private funds, efforts reaped \$80,000 in five years. Volunteers toiled from top to bottom of the light. Repairs included improvements to iron railings, restoring the beacon's cage, replacing windows, extensive painting, and finishing of the masonry. Community members also added an oyster shell pathway, a small dock, and 600 tons of rip rap to help check erosion. In August 1981, with the



Photograph from the collections of The Mariners' Museum.

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NO 4256

*Bird's-eye view of New Point Lighthouse before erosion separated the point from the mainland.*

labor completed, a ceremony celebrated the restoration. However, the tides were shifting and the need for upkeep remained.

Exposure to the elements and damage by vandals hurt the tower. A new round of repairs included a new door, windows, and interior and exterior painting. Rising to the challenge, in September 1988 county officials secured a grant from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Historic Resources. This gift, along with other funds, should help keep conservation efforts current.

Ironically, along with worry over the structure, a recent concern has developed for two natural residents of the region. Observers have seen the least tern and the rare white coastal tiger beetle along the shore line. The seabird, on the Federal List of Threatened Species, may even be nesting on the island. With care and community cooperation, the lighthouse and the island's wildlife will have a fighting chance for survival. ■



Photograph courtesy of Captain Alvon Forrest.

*Painting of New Point Lighthouse by Captain Alvon Forrest, of Bavan, Virginia.*