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NEW POINT COMFORT LIGHTHOUSE

New Point Comfort Lighthouse, the lonely sentinel at the southern tip of Mathews County, traces its history from the earliest days of the United States. First lighted in 1805, the lighthouse has survived war, hurricanes, abandonment, and for every year of its life, the clawing, eroding grasp of the sea. It stands as a reminder of the nation's first efforts to establish commerce during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson.

Congress in 1801 authorized the construction of lighthouses at strategic points on Chesapeake Bay; among these was New Point. It was the fourth lighthouse built on Chesapeake Bay in a federal program to make the Chesapeake Bay safer for commercial shipping; and it is the third oldest survivor, behind Cape Henry and Old Point.

Three years passed before the work of building began. Numerous letters passed back and forth between the government and agents of the property owner, Philip Tabb, and his associates. They negotiated over a price, which dropped from the initial \$1,000 to \$150; the location; and

the rights reserved to the seller, who wished to maintain control over the fisheries and a tavern located on the small piece of land.

Eventually Elzy Burroughs cut through the red tape. He purchased two acres, received a contract to

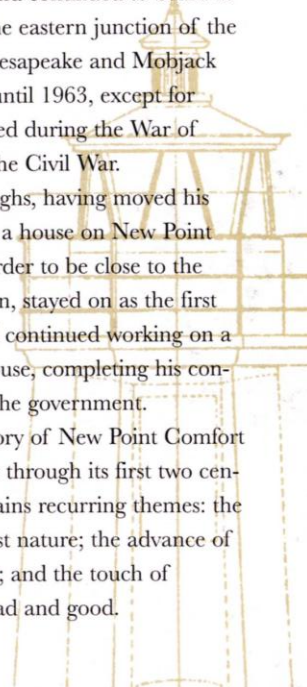
build a sandstone lighthouse 58 feet high, and went to work in mid-1804. Bad weather delayed

the planned illumination at the turn of 1805. The light first shone on Jan 17, 1805, and continued to beam at the eastern junction of the Chesapeake and Mohjack

Bays until 1963, except for being doused during the War of 1812 and the Civil War.

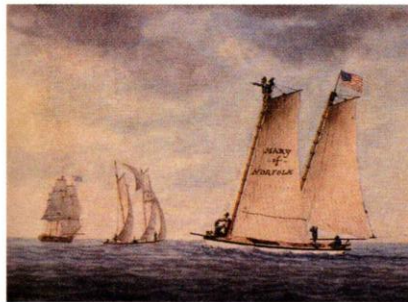
Burroughs, having moved his family into a house on New Point Island in order to be close to the construction, stayed on as the first keeper and continued working on a keeper's house, completing his contract with the government.

The story of New Point Comfort Lighthouse through its first two centuries contains recurring themes: the fight against nature; the advance of technology; and the touch of humans, bad and good.



THE LIGHTHOUSE VS. NATURE

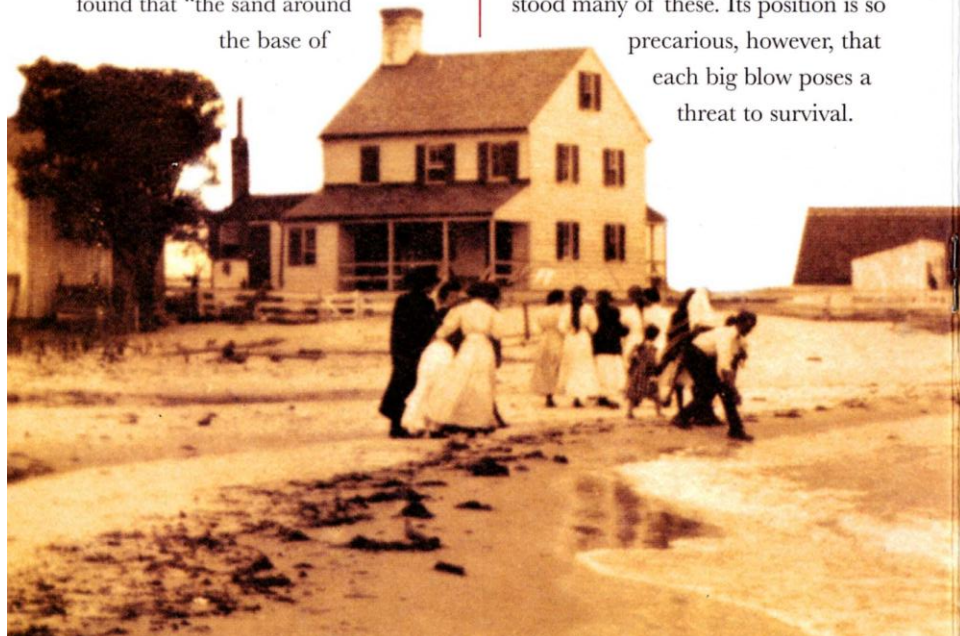
From the first decade until the present, erosion has threatened the light's foundations. It was built on an island, a sizeable island accessible by



foot at low tide, but an island all the same. Records show that materials for construction had to be brought by boat. Just 10 years beyond its opening, a lighthouse inspector found that "the sand around the base of

the Light House at New Point Comfort had washed away so much during the recent severe gales as imminently to endanger the safety of that building..."

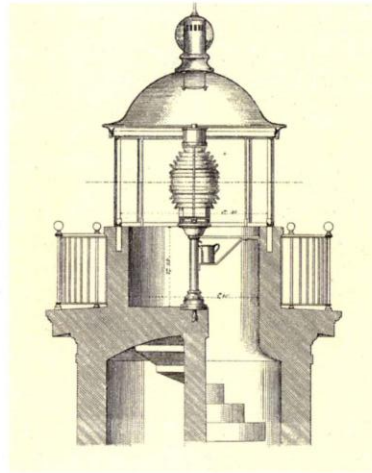
Remedies to check erosion began with crude brush fences that would catch sand, advanced to walls built of poles and stone to check the waves, and finally, due to the steady disappearance of the land area, settled on rocky reinforcement around the foundation itself. Today the lighthouse stands far from any sandy beach, and is surrounded by riprap, which is its only defense against the daily tides, the winter northeast storms, and the occasional hurricane—it has withstood many of these. Its position is so precarious, however, that each big blow poses a threat to survival.



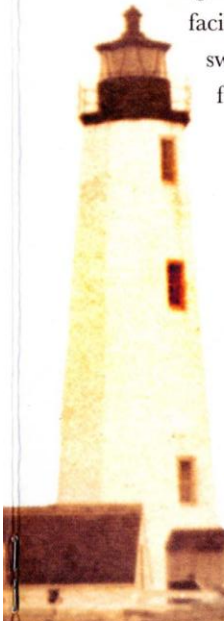
THE MARCH OF PROGRESS

Improving technology made the lighthouse more powerful and more efficient. An early system of lights employed nine lamps and nine reflectors, later increased to 10 lamps and 14 reflectors. A Fresnel lens, providing even stronger light, was installed during repairs after the Civil War.

Technology also doomed the lighthouse as a functional facility. Illumination was switched to acetylene gas from oil in 1919, and a resident keeper being no longer required, the keeper's quarters were sold and demolished for use elsewhere. Henry L. Dow of New Point was hired to take



care of the gas light when needed. An automatic light was in place by 1930. It was discontinued in 1963 and replaced by an offshore beacon; and in 1968, with no further use for it, the Coast Guard abandoned New Point Comfort Lighthouse.



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THE HUMAN TOUCH

Built as a tool for navigators, New Point Comfort Lighthouse has also been intricately involved in the lives of persons who live on and use the bay. It is also the pride of Mathews County and its residents, who rallied to save it after abandonment. For two centuries now the human touch, good and bad, has impressed itself upon the use and fate of New Point Comfort Lighthouse.

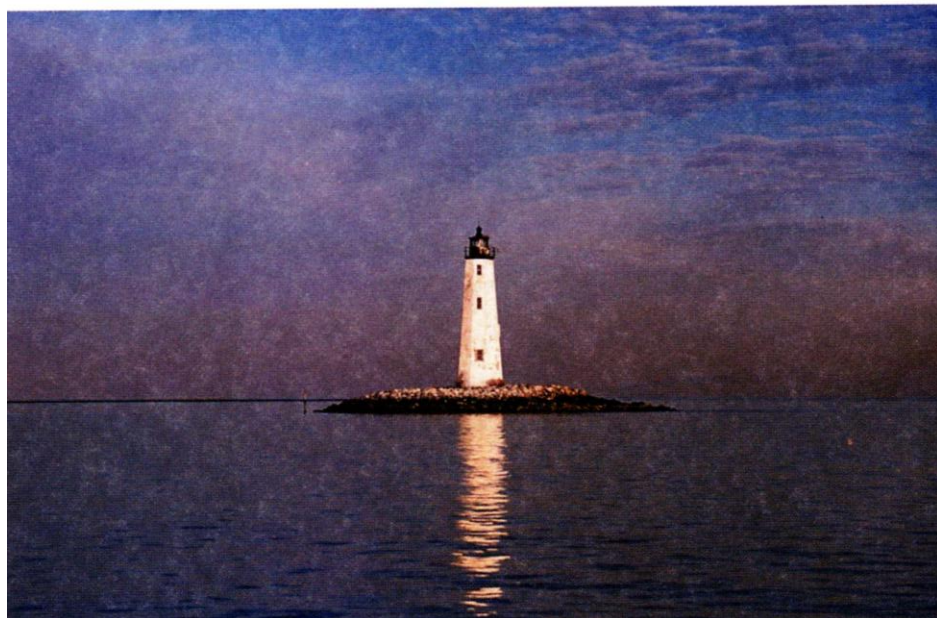
On the dark side: ransacking by the British during the War of 1812;

neglect during its unlighted years during the Civil War. Both conflicts caused a need for extensive repairs to make it operational

again. The bad—theft of valuable oil from its storage containers in its earliest years, and continuing vandalism for the past half-century.

Vandals have broken in doors and windows,

increasing exposure to the elements; thieves have taken anything of apparent value, even a bronze plaque installed in 1981 as a memorial to res-



New Point Comfort Lighthouse Keepers

1805-1814	ELZY BURROUGHS
1814-1815	ROBERT LITBURN
1815-1819	JAMES B.H. JOHNSON
1819-1830	WM. JOHNSON
1830-1846	WM. R. BROWNLEY
1846-1854	ISSAC FOSTER
1854 (REVOKED)	JAMES B. WHITE
1854-1861	EDWARD S. WHITE
1861-1865	[NO KEEPER]
1865-1869	JOSEPH S. ALLEN
1869-1871	SYLVESTER H. WOLHISER
1871-1873	J. MCHENRY FARLEY
1873-1876	JOHN D. HUDGINS
1876-1879	LEONARD SMITHERS
1879-1881	A.F. HUDGINS
1881-1883	WM. F. RIPLEY
1883-1888	C.W. FORREST
1888-1899	OLIVER R. HUDGINS
1899-1901	JAMES B. HURST
1901-1906	RICHARD W. MARCHANT
1906-1915 OR 1916	WESLEY F. RIPLEY
1916 OR 1917-1919	EDWARD A. SIBLEY
1919-1954	HENRY L. DOW

idents of Gloucester and Mathews Counties who lost their lives at sea.

The good—New Point has always been a popular destination. The keepers who faithfully tended their remote outpost for many generations welcomed visitors. A Mathews Journal article in 1905 reported on “a delightful sailing party” to New Point Beach, during which the keeper, Capt. Richard W. Marchant, “made the trip double pleasant by taking us up

in the lighthouse.” The lighthouse continues to attract positive attention. Restoration began three decades ago, and succeeded in stabilizing the tower. State and federal agencies are studying ways to stabilize and restore the land around the structure. The future of New Point Comfort Lighthouse, if not certain, is brighter now than at any time since the inexorable progress of modernization rendered it obsolete as a working aid to navigation.

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New Point Comfort Lighthouse Booklet

The New Point Comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force was formed to assist the County of Mathews develop plans for the long term preservation of the lighthouse. The major challenge is to find the best method to protect the lighthouse from the continued loss of the land around the structure as a result of storms over time. The historic structure is threatened. The task force is working with the U.S. Corps of Engineers, private coastal erosion engineers, and with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. As soon as a plan is accepted by the county the task force will assist with raising funds to complete the project.

*For further info about the history of the lighthouse and the work of the task force go to:
www.newpointcomfortlighthouse.org*

*To assist financially, please send donations to:
New Point Comfort Lighthouse Fund
County of Mathews
P.O. Box 839
Mathews, Virginia 23109*



**NEW POINT
COMFORT
LIGHTHOUSE**
Preservation Task Force

