New Point Comfort Light Station... A Story of Survival

by Candace Clifford



New Point Comfort Light Station in the 19th century. National Archives photo.

This article is based on a chronology prepared by the author for the Mathews County Historical Society, Inc., and is used with their permission.

A lone tower surrounded by water and rip rap, the lighthouse at New Point Comfort has weathered a constantly shifting shoreline as well as occupation by enemy troops in two wars. That the tower has survived for nearly two centuries is truly remarkable. The tenth oldest intact lighthouse in our nation, it was once part of an onshore station first lit in 1805.

The Chesapeake Bay reputedly had the highest volume of shipping in North America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, so it is not surprising that four of the early federal republic's lighthouses were built to mark that region. The federal government's first public works project, Cape Henry Lighthouse, was completed at the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia in 1792. Old Point Comfort was lit next in 1802 and Smith's Point in 1803—both also in Virginia. The station at New Point Comfort in Mathews County, Virginia, was called for in the same appropriation as Smith's Point, but was not lit until January 17, 1805. Located on the west side of the Chesapeake Bay and the north side of the entrance to Mobjack Bay, New Point Comfort station's nearest neighboring light at the time of construction was Old Point Comfort, about 18 miles to the south. (Eventually some 75 lighthouses were built to mark the Chesapeake; of these, only 34 remain standing—two built by Elzy Burroughs among them.)

A March 3, 1801 Act of Congress provided for "building a light-house on New Point Comfort and another light-house on Smith's Point." During this period, the U.S. Light-House Establishment was administered by the Commissioner of the Revenue within the Treasury Department. On May 1, 1801, Commissioner William Miller wrote to William Davies, Customs Collector for the Port of Norfolk and Superintendent of Lighthouses for that region, instructing him to have a suitable site determined and surveyed. Miller recommended that

"*Prior to your making a report to this office, it will be advantageous to have it understood what elevation the Lights ought to have, so that no expense may be incurred in raising them unnecessarily; and in forming a contract, it ought to be known, whether there are any and what kind of materials on the spot, or in the neighbourhood, whether water may be had with convenience, and whether the situations are accessable by land & water.*"

Miller also cautioned the Collector to stay within the $5,000 appropriated.

To learn more about the proposed site for the Light House, John Patterson Esq., surveyed the area and made the following report on May 30, 1801:

"*I have taken a view of New Point Comfort and surveyed every spot thereon that appeared to me in any way adequate for the reception of a Light House. New Point Comfort is an Island separated from the main land by a creek of three & a half to 4 feet water at high tide, with Mobjack upon the west side and the Chesapeake on the east. The Island is about 3/4 of a mile in length, exclusive of a long Sandy Beach at the upper end, running for a mile in along shore direction up the Bay to the mouth of the creek aforesaid. The width of the land varies from 350 to 500 yards, and contains about 100 acres, the property of Philip Tabb Esq. of Gloucester County. It lies generally low and much broken, and covered over with drifted sand hills. About the centre of the Island lies the most elevated firm spot to be found, of about 2 _ to 3 acres running quite across the point, commanding a good front upon each side. The shore from this place tends N.E. by N. up the Bay and W.S.W. to the end of the point. This is the most prominent site upon the Island. The long shoal makes from this place running down the Bay in an south east direction. The foundation is good and appears entirely secure against the drifting of the sand, having a pond of salt water upon each side. From the nature and situation of the piece of ground thus described, it appears to me that an acre & half to two acres will be quite sufficient to answer every purpose, and can be made a comfortable spot with a fertile garden. Good water may be procured in the greatest abundance by sinking a well at the distance of 30 yards from the building, but no materials of any kind can be had suitable for this undertaking. Good clay for bricks, with the greatest abundance of oyster shells for lime, may be procured convenient to brick. Wood at the distance of 2 miles on the main land, upon a creek that will afford a safe conveyance for the materials in scows or lighters, within about one hundred and fifty yards of the place described. The timber necessary of every description can be had in the neighbourhood. The elevation of the land does not exceed from 8 to 10 feet from the surface of the water, and it is my opinion that an elevation of 50 feet from the surface of the earth will be sufficiently high for the Light.*"

In June 1801, Commissioner Miller, agreeing with Mr. Patterson's recommendations, instructed Collector Davis to procure and survey the site for the lighthouse. It took three years of negotiations, however, to bring the asking price from an exorbitant $1,000 to an affordable $150. In the end, Elzy Burroughs, who had completed the Old Point Comfort and Smith's Point Lighthouses, bought the entire point and sold two acres back to the government. Burroughs went on to win the contract for constructing the station at New Point Comfort .

Burroughs was not the first builder considered, however; in November 1801, Commissioner Miller approached two well known architect/builders, Benjamin Henry Latrobe of Philadelphia and John McComb of New York, suggesting they might be "induced to offer a plan and proposals." There is no evidence that either builder seriously considered undertaking the proposed projects, and by 1803, it had become apparent that more funds would be needed to solicit a proposal. On February 11, 1803, Commissioner Miller wrote the Secretary of the Treasury:

"*The Act of 3rd March 1801 having authorized the erection of a Light House on New Point Comfort, and appropriated 5000 dollars for that object, I have endeavoured to obtain proposals for the erection of a suitable building at that place. As no offer has been made within the sum at which we are limited, I presume that a substantial building of the proper elevation, with its necessary appendages, cannot be expected; I therefore submit for your consideration, whether it would not be advisable to make an additional appropriation of about 3500 dollars. If this sum is provided during the present Session of Congress, you may safely calculate upon having the Light House Establishment on the waters of the Chesapeake completed in the course of the ensuing season.*

"*For your information I enclose herewith, an estimate which has been handed to me by an experienced stone mason, who was employed by Mr. Burroughs, the contractor for the Smiths Point Light House, and executed the work at that place during last season, from which it appears that about 8000 dollars will be necessary for the buildings. My reasons for mentioning an appropriation which will exceed this estimate by about 500 dollars, is that sufficient provision may be obtained for purchasing a lot of about 4 acres, and for covering incidental charges attending the inspection of the work, etc.*"

Additional funds of $3,500 were appropriated for the erection of the lighthouse at New Point Comfort in an act approved March 2, 1803. On March 14, 1804, additional legislation indicated, "For the erection of a light-house on New Point Comfort, five thousand dollars, being the amount of a former appropriation carried to the credit of the surplus fund." An additional $127.20 was appropriated in 1808, bringing the total for completing the station to $8,627.50.

The octagonal 58-foot, ashlar-sandstone tower was similar in design to the tower on Old Point Comfort and others previously completed; Cape Henry Lighthouse, Virginia, and Montauk Point Lighthouse, New York, were both octagonal towers built of sandstone. The 1804 specifications called for a "Light House to be hewn stone; the form to be octagon"; a brick oil vault with "six strong cedar cisterns with covers, capable of containing 200 gallons of oil each"; a two-story brick dwelling house; and a brick kitchen "to be placed at the distance of not less than 6 feet from the house, with a covered way between."

Francis Armistead, Collector of Customs, District of East River, Mathews County Courthouse, was appointed to superintend the work. On March 19, 1804, he reported to Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, "*My last respects was under the date of 24th ultimo. since which Elzy Burroughs has executed his bond to the United States for the per-*

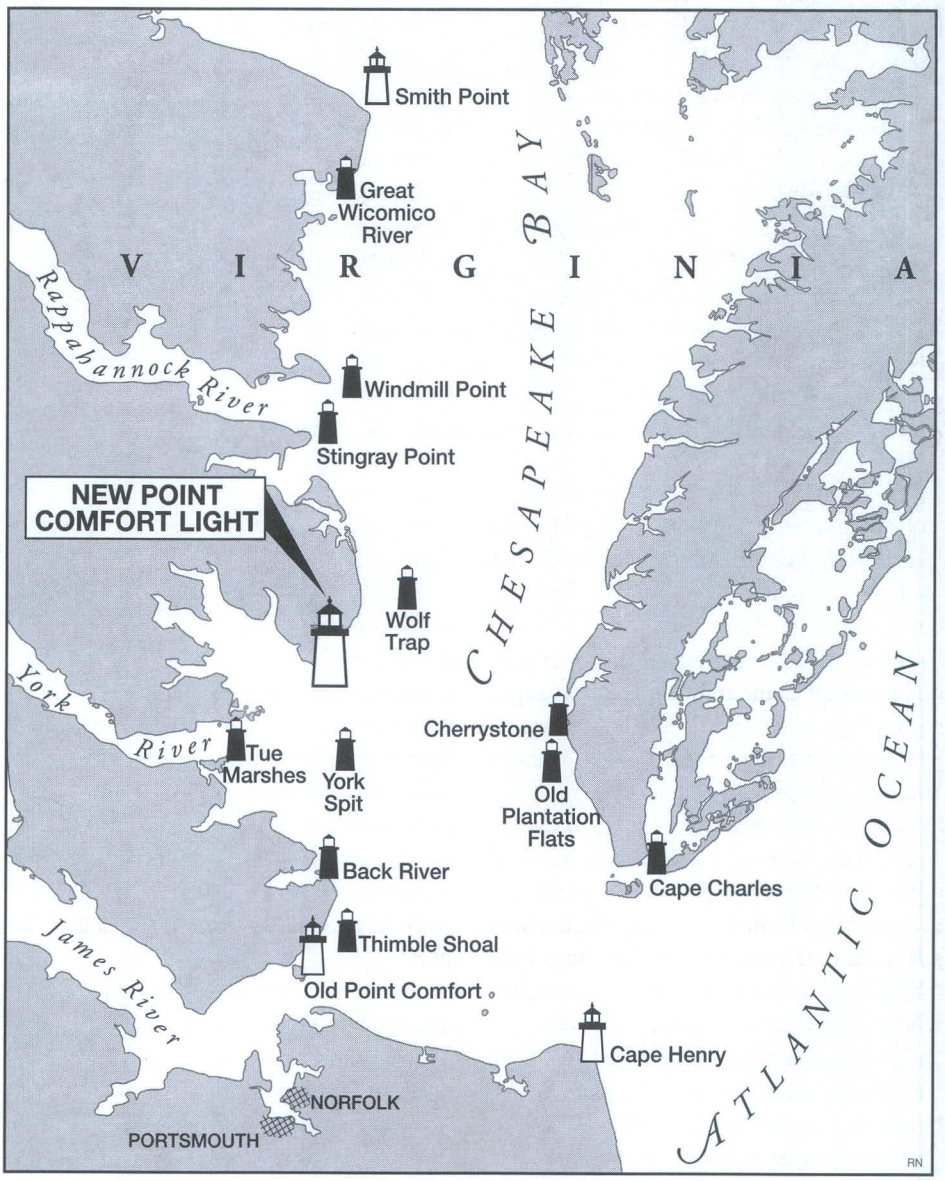
formance of contract therein refer'd to, for building the light house on New Point Comfort & has also executed to the United States a deed for the two acres of land on which the public buildings are to be erected. In processing this deed, due attention has been paid in tracing all the former titles in & to the said land in full and compleat fee simple to Mr. Burroughs. So that the title now from Mr. Burroughs to the United States will be free from any incumberance from any other person whatever. The deed will be recorded in the Court of Matthews County, at June Court. Immediately thereafter it shall be transmitted with the clerks certificate and seal of the Court annexed. I now transmit the bond with a receipt for fifteen hundred dollars paid as directed in your letter of the 10th last month enclosing said documents. Mr. Burroughs has removed his family to the Point & is now engaged in preparing material & labourers to execute the work, he has already landed a considerable quantity of stone & appears desirous to forward the work with as much expedition as possible. You may be assured of my attention to this business & keeping you regularly advised of the progress of the work."

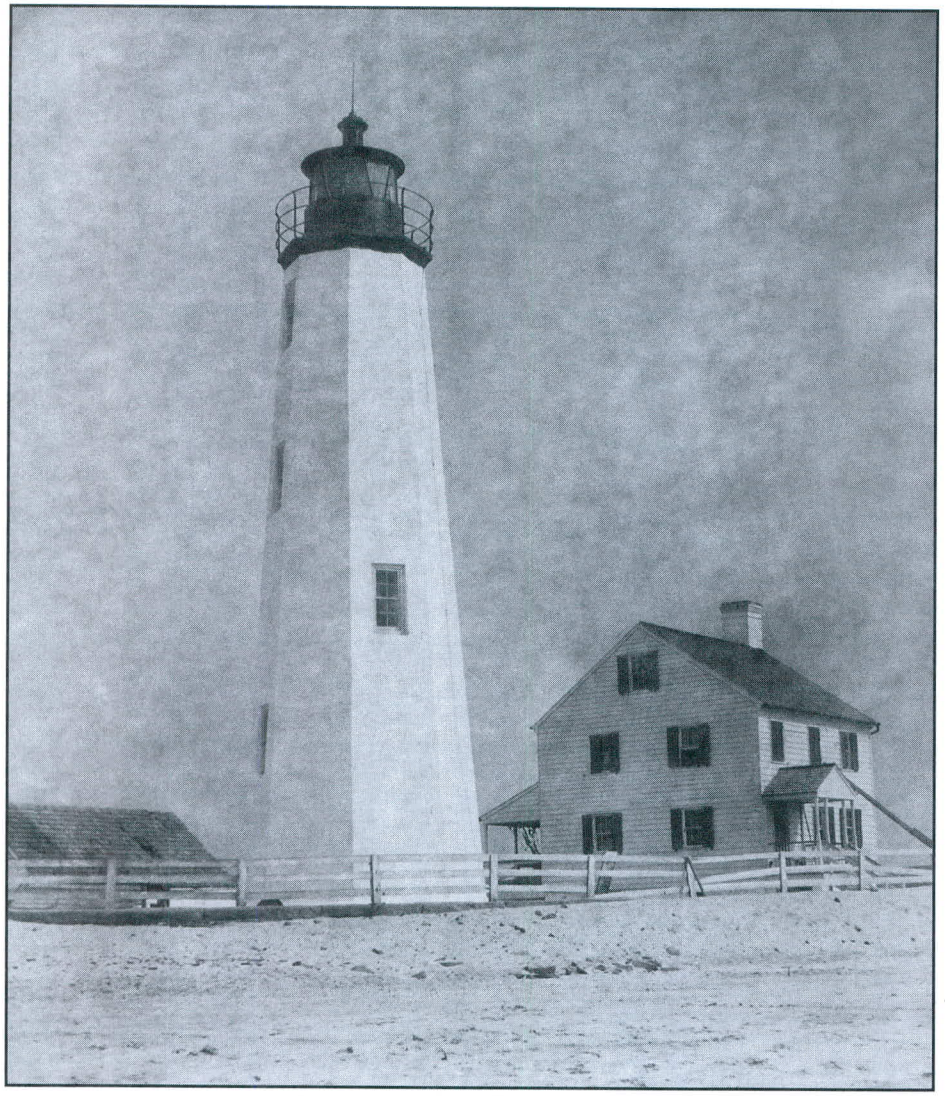
On June 23, 1804, Collector Armistead again wrote Hon. Albert Gallatin and reported that Burroughs had subcontracted with a Mr. Samuel Stubbs for the building of the dwelling house and kitchen. "Mr. Burroughs has got the light house from the foundation up to the base 6 _ feet." Samuel Wheeler of Philadelphia was subcontracted to make the lantern and cisterns at a cost of $1,000. The lantern was constructed of copper and the cisterns of cedar and copper.

On November 2, 1804, Collector Armistead indicated to Secretary Gallatin that all that was needed to complete the tower was the arrival of the lantern from Philadelphia.

"My last respects to you upon the subject of the Light House building upon New Point Comfort was dated July 28th last. Since which Mr. Burroughs has run up the Light House as far as he can, untill the lanthorn arrives to lay within six feet of the extreme height exclusive of the lanthorn & has been waiting eight or ten days for its arrival from Philadelphia to compleat it. The vault for the oil will be finished early in the ensuing week, with the kitchen and covered way to the dwelling house. The wall is also in a state of forwarding & will be finished in the course of next week. If the lanthorn arrives in time Mr. Burroughs will compleat the Light House, oil vault, well, kitchen, covered way within the time limitted in his contract, but am apprehensive the dwelling house will be in an unfinished state at that period; but I must do Mr. Burroughs the justice to say that he has taken the most cautious measures to enable him to comply with his contract in time. He let out the building of the dwelling house, kitchen and covered way to Mr. Samuel Stubbs one of his securities, a man much to be depended upon as any workman in this part of the County, for a stipulated sum. Mr. Stubbs was unfortunately taken sick and was confined to his bed for six weeks, in which from the inattention of his people . . . bricks [intended for the dwelling house were] spoiled in the burning . . . which has been the only cause of the backwardness of this part of the contract. The season is now so far advanced that I think it will be very injurious to the work to finish it while the weather is cold. I expect that he will not be able to finish the dwelling house until March in consequence of the backward state & the approaching season of cold weather.

"Mr. Burroughs has settled his family upon New Point Comfort in a house which he has built for their accommodation near the Light House & he has requested me to mention that if you think proper to commence the Light this winter he will attend to it untill the dwelling house is finished & the whole ready for delivery. I have mentioned this at his particular request as he wishes to do everything he can to place the United States in the same situation as if the whole work was compleat by keeping the Light until he closes the contract. I will beg leave to observe that the brick & plastering if done in cold weather cannot be made durable & will be injurious to the building—I have kept in view to Mr. Burroughs the bad quality of the bricks & plastering at Old Point Comfort. It seems to have had the proper effect by his attention to the execution of the





New Point Comfort Light Station in the 19th century. Note the lantern astragals (bars holding glass) are trapezoid shaped and the lantern vent is the old style. National Archives photo.

work & goodness of the materials of the present contract. He wants a payment of $2500 I expect from the heavy expenses he has incurred since the receipts of the last sum. He must be under acceptances for considerable sums...."

Burroughs, already having built lodging on New Point Comfort, was appointed Keeper of the soon-to-be-completed lighthouse by President Thomas Jefferson on November 10, 1804. On December 12, 1804, Collector Armistead wrote to Secretary Gallatin, indicating the arrival of the lantern by revenue cutter and the anticipation of lighting up soon. All work on the keeper's house was suspended until spring "to avoid the injury which would be done by the severity of the winter season."

Lighting was postponed until January 17th according to a letter dated January 18, 1805, from Collector Armistead to Secretary Gallatin:

"*... I have now to inform you that the light was raised in the Light House on New Point Comfort last evening for the first time, & Mr. Burroughs being furnished by the Collector at Norfolk with a stock of oil & wick, it will be continued. The iron floor directed to be made with the lanthorn in Philadelphia is compleatly fixed & must certainly be a very great improvement for it prevents every kind of danger of communicating fire from the lamps. The light would have been raised about the first of January, but the severity of the weather added to a disappointment in a small package of the lanthorn being left at Norfolk by mistake prevented it. The light house with the oil vault & cisterns are now complea....*"

Completion of the dwelling house met with further delays. According to a letter dated September 7, 1805, from Collector Armistead to Secretary Gallatin, Armistead reported that

"*... As soon as the warm weather commenced I pushed on Mr. Burroughs to finish the house and close his contract with the United States. Every thing within the limits of his power has been done but he has got his affairs in a deranged situation. His circumstances are now so limited (having latterly be compelled to take the benefit of the Act of Insolvency) that it is now entirely out of his power to procure either materials or labourers, & nothing can be expected from him but what work he can do himself. Mr. Samuel Stubbs who undertook by contract with Mr. Burroughs to build & compleat the dwelling house, kitchen & covered way & who has received compensation from him for the full am't of his undertaking except $320, has delayed so much of his time, although frequently called on by Mr. Burroughs & with the aid of repeated application from myself that it is now reduced to certainty that this work will not be finished until the cold weather commences again, if it remains to be finished by him. The kitchen and covered way is finished. The roof is on the dwelling house & the walls up, the gable ends & chimneys are not finished. The locks, hinges, glass are principally procured & upon examining all the materials on hand for this work, I find it will take from five to six hundred dollars to finish it. The estimate of the work to do & materials wanted has been carefully made & I find the above sum will be sufficient to do every thing.*

"*As yet the United States has sustained no injury Mr. Burroughs having built a comfortable dwelling house for himself on the point sufficiently near the light house to attend to his duty as keeper of the Light. From the best information I can procure of the causes which occasioned the ruin of Mr. Burroughs I have not the least doubt but it has arisen from his contracts for building the Light Houses on Smiths Point and Old Point Comfort. I shall use my best exertions to get all the work done by Mr. Burroughs and his friend Mr. Stubbs that I can, but if it continues in their hands I see no prospect whatever of getting the building finished before cold weather, & I take the liberty of giving it as my opinion that the balance which would be due Mr. Burroughs had better be immediately appropriated to the purchase of materials wanted & hiring a workman to do the unfinished work.*"

In February 1806, threat of legal action pressured Burroughs into completing his contract. On April 15, 1806, Collector Armistead wrote Secretary Gallatin,

"*Mr. Burroughs leaves this morning for the city of Washington to close his contract entered into*

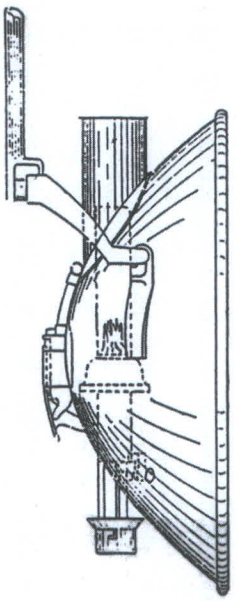
with you in behalf of the United States for building the Light House and other buildings stipulated . . . and has requested of me, as the superintendent of that work, to report to you its present state to enable him to procure a final settlement of his accounts and a release from said engagement. I have examined the Light House dwelling house, kitchen & covered way with the well & oil vault and compared the dimentions & conveniences of those buildings with the stipulations expressed in his contract & find them correctly attended to, the work well executed & of good materials...."

The earliest found reference indicates that New Point Comfort was a fixed light using nine lamps and 9-inch reflectors. The tower was whitewashed to make it a visible daymark. No fog signal was ever required at this station. In 1841 the light was refitted by Winslow Lewis with 10 lamps and 14-inch reflectors. A fourth-order Fresnel lens was installed in 1855; presumably a new lantern was installed to accommodate the larger optic. The light was extinguished by the Confederates in 1861, and replaced and relit after the Civil War in 1865. In 1919 the illuminant was switched to acetylene gas and the characteristic changed to a flashing white light with a one-second flash every five seconds. At that time the keeper position was eliminated and a lamplighter maintained the light on a periodic basis. In 1950 the light was first powered with electricity. The light was discontinued in 1963.

Two Wars Interrupt Service

New Point Comfort survived the occupation of enemy troops during both the War of 1812 and Civil War. The first known report of damage by the British during the War of 1812 came in a letter to Chas. K. Mallory, Collector of Customs, Norfolk, from Christopher Tompkins, of Mathews, Virginia, dated March 25, 1814:

"*The enemy left New Point Comfort on Sunday last after four weeks possession. Yesterday I went on the Point & such a scene of wanton destruction I never beheld. You have heard before that they burnt the Keeper's house & oil vault—they have also broke every pane of glass in the lanthorn, taken out & carried off all the window frames, also the door & frame from the Light House—pulled down the Franklin & all the wire around the lanthorn, broke the steps to pieces & injured the house as much as possible. If the war continues, I am clearly of opinion that we should compleat the destruction which they have begun & pull the Light House down; for they use it as a watch tower from whence they can see every thing moving within three or four miles of them & consequently prepare them from any attempt on our part to annoy them. At all events I would not advise the repairing [of] the Light House where it now stands as the water already washes its base & in a few years will undermine it—indeed it was very improperly placed at first. It might be put a quarter of a mile nearer the end of the point & in a perfect secure situation. There is about two thousand gallons of oil belonging to the Light House—it was removed last summer to a place of safety, but it is wasting very much by leakage—it would perhaps be better to sell it should there be no prospect of wanting it this summer. . . .*



An Argand-type reflector initially used in the New Point Comfort lantern room. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

"*Mr. Lithburn applied to me yesterday for a letter of recommendation as Keeper of the Light House. I had no hesitation in granting his request as I believe he will make as good a keeper as can be got here. However I do not know what service he can render under the present circumstances. I shall be at all times happy to receive your commands in any way that I can be serviceable to yourself or the public."*

Robert Lithburn replaced Elzy Burroughs as the official keeper on April 14, 1814. On July 21, 1814, Collector Mallory wrote to Commissioner Smith:

"*It is perhaps proper to inform you here that by letter received a few days since from the Keeper of New Point Comfort Light House, I learn the unpleasant fact that the house in which the oil is stored was on the night of the 25th ultimo broken open & a considerable quantity of oil stolen there from—how much is not stated. It is not improbable that some, if not the whole of it may be recovered, as the batteau in which it appears to have been taken away can be identified & three bbls [barrels] of it have been traced to Fredericksburg & Port Royal where it has been sold. The Keeper has taken steps to detect the perpetrators of the robbery & to discover if possible the residue of the oil."*

On October 3, 1814, Collector Mallory wrote Commissioner of the Revenue L.H. Smith a follow-up indicating that the quantity stolen was 200 gallons which the keeper traced to Fredericksburg, and that perpetrators had been apprehended.

In early 1815 steps were taken to repair the damage done during the war in several Chesapeake Bay lighthouses, and Elzy Burroughs was contracted to complete the task. On February 23, 1815, Collector Mallory wrote Commissioner Smith:

"*Your circular under the date of the 18th inst. directing renewal of the lights in the Light Houses under my superintendence is this moment received. Such however is the condition of nearly all these buildings as well as those attached to them as to render it impracticable to carry your instructions into full or immediate effect. They shall be complied with as far as soon as possible. At New Point Comfort there is perfect desolation, every house being entirely demolished except the Light House, as I am informed, & that site . . . considerably damaged as to be scarcely susceptible of being repaired.*

"*It being of importance that the Lights should be renewed as speedily as circumstances will admit & as some time will elapse before I can get an answer from Washington, I shall, in anticipation of the orders which will no doubt be forwarded to me from the Treas. Department respecting the repairs which will be necessary, direct Mr. Burroughs, under whose management most of the Light Houses were erected & who is now here, to proceed forthwith to survey the whole establishment—make an estimate of the damage sustained & the probable expense of thoroughly & permanently repairing it & where it may be practicable to refit for the present, at a small expense, the lanthorn, lamps etc. so that the Lights can be immediately renewed, to do so."*

On April 15, 1815, Burroughs received a contract for "repairing Light Houses in Virginia

& building Keepers House at New Point Comfort," at a cost of $3333.00. According to a report written by Winslow Lewis on March 21, 1821, New Point Comfort was refitted and lit with 9 lamps in August 1815.

The light was extinguished again during the Civil War by Confederate troops in 1861. It was several years before the damage could be evaluated. On June 29, 1865, Lighthouse Engineer Newman from the Fifth District Offices in Baltimore, Maryland, reported to Rear Adm. Shubrick, Chairman of the U.S. Light-House Board:

"*There being now no obstacle (save perhaps the financial one) to the reestablishment of the Light at New Point Comfort, Chesapeake Bay. I have paid the place a visit and have the honor to report upon its condition, and also to enclose my estimate of the sum needed to put it in good repair, amounting to $3300.21.*

"*The tower is built of coursed masonry and has within it a spiral stone stairway all in good condition. The lantern (a modern cast iron one with diagonal astragals) is uninjured and but one of the panes of glass destroyed. The sashes in the window openings are gone, and the entrance door is damaged.*

"*The Keepers House which is a frame structure is sound. It is sheathed with weather boarding which needs repairs. The porch is decayed and must be renewed. The roof requires reshingling. All the sashes and doors have been stolen. The floors have been wilfully injured in some places and the handrail to stairs entirely destroyed. The plastering needs some repairs.*

"*Both the house and tower are in a filthy condition and a general scraping, whitewashing and painting is required.*

"*The rain water tank is a fine one built of brick and arched over, it is uninjured but is filled with rubbish.*

"*All the gutters and conductors leading the rain water to it from the roofs must be renewed. The platform leading from the house to the tower about 80 feet long is entirely gone, and there remains a very small portion of fencing round the lot.*"

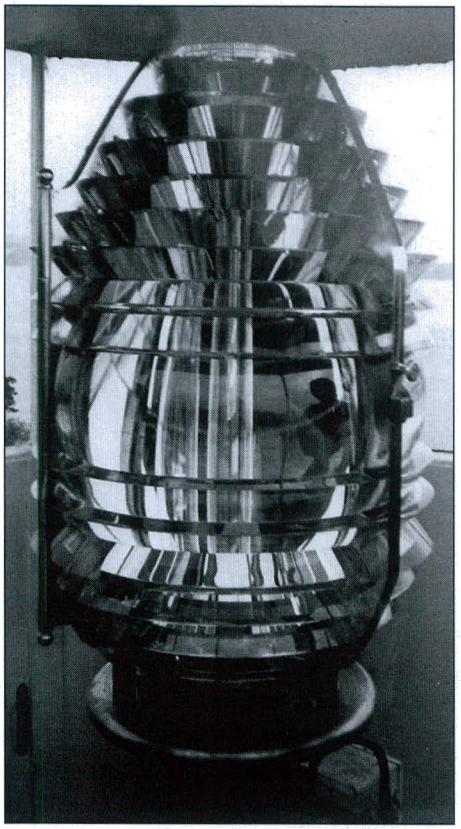
On September 15, 1865, an oath of office of Joseph S. Allen, Keeper of New Point Comfort Light, was transmitted. On Sept 30, 1865, Engineer Newman wrote Chairman Shubrick

"*... In the month of July repairs were commenced at New Point Comfort Light Station, it being also one of those that were extinguished in 1861. At this station the injuries were extensive and the 4 years of neglect had left its marks on the buildings and their surroundings. The repairs are completed and the station is in perfect order. New sashes and in most cases frames have been fixed in the tower and keepers dwelling, also all new doors, locks and furniture. The floors and stairs have been repaired, a new store room and cistern house built, the porches restored, all the weather boarding renailed and the whole painted 3 coats. The roofs thoroughly repaired. The lot cleared up, path ways formed and entirely refenced. The Lantern and lightning conductor put in good order and a new fourth order lens fixed. The tower was scraped, pointed with cement, and whitewashed outside and in.*"

Shifting Sands Threaten Stability

Shoreline erosion and threats to the foundation of the lighthouse have been continuous at New Point Comfort. Concerns about the insecurity of the foundation can be found less than a decade after construction. On October 30, 1815, Collector Mallory wrote Commissioner Smith:

"*It is now with much regret I have to add that I found 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, the water every full tide entirely reaching it. Something must be done, & that without delay, to secure the foundation, which in some places is quite bare, or I seriously apprehend it will not stand the winter out. Mr. Burroughs, who was with me, concurs in the idea that by digging a semicircular ditch in front of the Light House, at a proper distance from it, driving down therein a double row of piles, filling it well again & the space between that & the Light House with tops of trees, brush, rubbish, sand etc., a good temporary barrier at least, will be formed against the further encroachment of the water, & which may probably last for some years. Nothing else can effectually be done before the next spring. He has at my request submitted a rough sketch of several plans upon this subject which I transmit herewith for the consideration of government whose instructions I shall await. His estimate with respect to the temporary plan may be considered as entirely disinterested—as he states it will be impossible for him to undertake its execution....*"



A fourth order Fresnel lens, similar to the one pictured, replaced the reflector system at New Point Comfort. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

The following appears to be Burroughs' estimate referred to in the letter above.

"*I give it as my opinion the only security for the Light on New Point Comfort this winter is to have about one hundred and fifty piles drove to the depth of six or seven feet in the sand, say from five to six above, and in the senter of the half circul about one hundred piles oposite the house and it, well filled in with pine tops rubish sand etc. so to prevent the foundation of the Light House from being washed from under it, this winter and have apertained the coast & expence of each pile, that may be drove, will be three dollars each, is $750.00; the other expence will not exceed $150.00; [the total being] $900.00.*

"*I also state the cost of a stone wall to secure all the publick building[s] at New Point Comfort, three hundred & fifty long, six feet wide at the bottom, six feet high and two feet wide at the top, will cost five thousand four hundred dollars—agreeable to former contracts, tho stone & fraight are higher at this time.*

"*I also state the cost of moving the Light House at New Point Comfort to secure it from the danger of falling will cost about six thousand dollars, that sum having been estimated and contracted for the moving of Smith Point Light House.*"

Commissioner Smith chose the first option and authorized Collector Mallory to expend $900 to temporarily secure the lighthouse.

The sum of $7,000 was made available for rebuilding the lighthouse at New Point Comfort on April 27, 1816. A solicitation for proposals was drafted on June 1, 1816, which included a description and specifications for the tower envisioned. At least one proposal was submitted; however, the funds were never expended. On June 14, 1816, Collector Mallory assured Commissioner Smith that

"*... from every information I can derive respecting the present condition of that building, I am satisfied the work done to the foundation of it last year will supersede the necessity of removing it for many years, if not entirely. I understand the sand is collecting about it & that it is generally considered by those who have seen it since the execution of that work, to be as secure probably as it ever was. It is therefore respectfully submitted to you whether the expenditure of the money appropriated by Congress for removing or rebuilding this Light House might not be suspended untill time shall afford us some better test whereby to judge of the durability & efficacy of the work above mentioned. It may ultimately be a saving of so much to the U. States.*"

Reports of continuing erosion were numerous and frequent. Shifting sand eventually made what was once a peninsula connected to the mainland by a sand bar into an island. A boat was requested in 1839 when the mainland was no longer easily accessible by way of the sand bar. Over the years, numerous plans were suggested to rebuild or move the tower, but none was carried out, either because of the expense or the lack of a better site on which to place the structure. Protective measures included stone walls, fences, breakwaters, and loose rock. Finally, in 1933, a major hurricane and related tidal flooding damaged light station and shoreline to the extent that water action created a swath between the lighthouse and the island where it once stood.

Variety of Keepers

There were 21 official resident keepers at New Point Comfort Light Station serving periods ranging from one to sixteen years. Serving the longest term, from 1830 to 1846, Keeper William R. Brownley was removed because of "repeated unfavorable reports of his conduct." Stephen Pleasonton remarked in his letter to Supt. Whittle, dated July 28, 1846, "Such persons never reform and it is too important a charge to commit it to such careless and filthy hands."

New Point Comfort is an unusual station in that two of its keepers were African American. One was an unofficial assistant to Isaac Foster, described in 1852 as a "negro woman," probably a slave; the other, J. McHenry Farley, served from 1871 to 1873. He is one of the few known black keepers given an official appointment. Citing the isolation of his post and the difficulty in obtaining supplies, Farley pleaded with the U.S. Light-House Board for an assistant or rations.

"*... relative to the condition of this light station; Dear sirs this is an isolated island, and only about 3 or 4 months in the year, is there any one on the island at all, while the fishery is being carried on, after which during the remainder part of the year; this is a lonely and dreary place. Sirs from the personal experience of the last winter; (although the old inhabitants of the place some 3 or 4 miles off) said that the last winter was the severest that had been in this section for 20 or more years & from this great difficulty I had and the constant & watchful care both night & day to keep a brilliant light as the law requires; it was almost too much for one keeper. Many nights had I to remain in the lantern tower for hours to keep the frost from the glass. Therefore gentlemen would it be too much for me as Keeper of this station to ask the favor of your body to grant to this place an assistant keeper, for many reasons . . . if I cannot succeed in getting an assistant keeper—would it be too much to ask to have this station placed for the coming year in the list of stations for ration, as everything is so high & hard to be gotten on this island; and especially wood for I suffered here last winter on account of the creeks & river being frozen for weeks so that I could not get any wood, & the cost of wood is from $4 to $5 per cord etc.*"

We do not know that the author of this letter is black until he is identified in remarks made by the Lighthouse Inspector to USLHB Chairman Joseph Henry on June 29th, 1872:

"*In reply to your letter of the 24th inst., accompanying the communications from the Keeper of New Point Comfort Light House, returned to me for remarks thereon, I beg leave to say, that, in my Inspection Report of the 1st Quarter of 1872, I recommend that New Point Comfort Lt House and twelve other stations be allowed assistant keepers or be supplied with provisions. New Point Comfort Lt House is situated on a very isolated point, remote from any source of supplies—thus rendering it difficult for the keeper to procure provisions & requiring protracted absences from his station when gone in search of them. Again, the keeper is a colored minister of the gospel & he feels deeply the privation of church priviledges. He is proud of his position as Light Keeper—faithful in the performance of this duty & careful to do nothing that will involve neglect of his light...*"



New Point Comfort on June 27, 1928 before the area around the tower broke away from the larger island. Note the lens still in the lantern room. The dwelling has been removed but the barn remains. Photo courtesy of the Coast Guard.

No paid assistant was ever appointed at New Point Comfort Light Station.

In 1919, the keeper position was downgraded when the light at New Point Comfort was automated by switching the illuminant to acetylene gas. According to the 1919 the characteristic was changed and the intensity increased on September 19, 1919, "The light is now flashing white every 5 seconds, flash 1 second duration, of 750 candlepower." The previous year's indicated a fixed white light with a candlepower of 490. On October 6, 1919, Henry L. Dow of New Point, Virginia, was contracted as Laborer in Charge, New Point Comfort Light, for $120 per annum, effective October 1, 1919. The keeper's dwelling was put up for sale in 1920, the minimum bid set at $300. George Hunt of Port Haywood, Virginia, paid $310 to reportedly use the old timbers for building his home on the mainland.

In 1954 the U. S. Coast Guard took over maintenance of the facility when Henry Dow retired. In 1963 the light was discontinued and replaced with an offshore aid called the Spit Light, although the tower at New Point Comfort continued to serve as a daymark. In 1976 the Coast Guard reported the property excess and it was acquired by Mathews County.

Since 1976, the tower has undergone several restoration efforts focused primarily on stabilizing the structure. Through a recent cooperative agreement with the county, the Mathews County Historical Society is developing a long-term preservation plan for managing and maintaining this important local landmark. In 2001, the New Point Comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force was formed and defined their mission statement as "to develop a plan to preserve the New Point Comfort Lighthouse as a permanent historic sentinel representing American navigation, transportation, commerce, craftsmanship, engineering, and American's perseverance through peace and war." Working with many governmental agencies, these new keepers are gathering information on the history of the site and past preservation efforts, collecting coastal erosion studies, and studying public access and security matters, as well as raising funds for engineering and architectural surveys.



New Point Comfort in recent years. The landing platform is for the Coast Guard servicing unit. Photo courtesy of the Coast Guard.