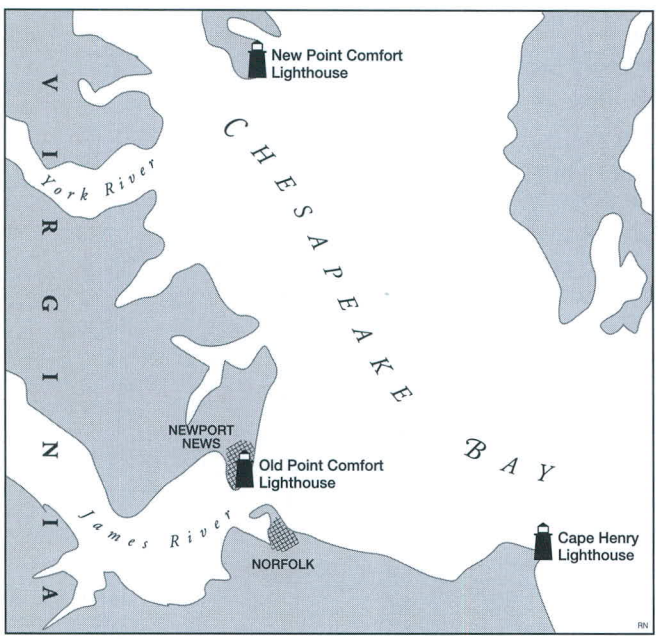
New Point Comfort Light Station
The Other Point Comfort

By Benjamin H. Trask



A turn-of-the century image of the New Point Comfort Lighthouse and keeper's house. Note the head of an individual in the middle second story window. Photo courtesy Mariners' Museum Research Library and Archives.



Few light stations were better named than the eight-sided tower that shone from New Point Comfort in Mathews County, Virginia. The light station stands at the south-eastern end of the Middle Peninsula in the Chesapeake Bay. Nearby Gwynn's 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 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 Commonwealth, its name distinguishing it from Old Point Comfort to the south at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula.



New Point Comfort Light Station circa 1890. National Archives photo.

To better assist navigation between Norfolk and Baltimore, federal authorities decided in 1801 to construct the fourth Chesapeake Bay light station at New Point Comfort. With the cooperation of the Virginia General Assembly, the government paid Elzy Burroughs, of Mathews, approximately $8,750 to construct the tower and the keeper's dwelling. The agreement also included two acres of land. In November 1804, President Thomas Jefferson approved Burroughs's appointment as the first light keeper.

The alabaster-colored sandstone structure stands 63 feet tall. One resident of the county recalled that Burroughs may have imported stone from England for the lighthouse's construction; however, another source indicates the stone was quarried at Aquia Creek, considerably closer to New Point Comfort. For most of its career, the tower was one of the many installations of the fifth district, which embraced "the coasts from Metomkin Inlet, Virginia, to New River Inlet, North Carolina."

The lighthouse's companion structure was a white, two-story keeper's house. A survey of the dwelling taken in the summer of 1880 shows a small front-porch entrance before a hallway which led to stairs and the parlor. The kitchen was in the back. The partially-sunken cellar protected the whale oil for the lamps. Upstairs there were two bedrooms and a storeroom. Above the bedrooms was a garret. Four fireplaces, one in each of the major rooms, were serviced by a single chimney. Connected to the kitchen side of the house was a large, open porch with an adjoining storeroom and cistern.

The maritime guidebook *Description of the Lighthouses, on the Coast of the United States*, published in 1817 in Boston, described the lighthouse as a fixed light. The lens was 57 feet above sea level. When properly cleaned and polished, the beam covered a 297-degree arc seen as far as 13 nautical miles. Prior to 1810, the illumination could be severely hampered by of the use of common lamps and small window 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, mechanics fitted the tower with a new lantern system: fifteen lamps with 21-inch reflectors. The modifications cost $3,500. The reflectors were most likely the new highly-polished models cast in molds, plated with 16 ounces of silver.

Retired sea captain Isaac Foster assumed the duties of the principal and only keeper in late 1846 and remained on station for about eight years. Official documentation indicates all the keepers were men, many of them local residents. Yet the 1852 lighthouse report noted Foster "has a negro woman of his own to assist him in keeping the light." This passing reference to the use of slave labor in the antebellum South provides a peek into the often obscured role women and African Americans have played in our maritime heritage.

Soon after Foster's tenure, an inspector lamented the need for serious 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." A year later a new illuminated apparatus was installed. 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 Comfort Light Station. After the conflict, the installation demanded extensive repairs involving "much time and expense." At the close of 1865, the lighthouse beamed with a new lens, and other refurbishing projects continued. Crews whitewashed the house, tower, and fence, and installed a new pump for the cistern and glass in the windows.

When peaceful days returned to the Bay, the light station attracted picnickers on church outings to the region's sandy beaches and whispering pines, and drew boat masters to the surrounding inlets. As early as 1847, storms began to sever the thin land bridge from the mainland, but waders could still reach the light station at low tide. Special excursion boats like the *Hampton Roads* would start by picking up

passengers at 6:45 a.m. at High Street in Portsmouth, go to Norfolk, Atlantic City, and then leave the wharf at Old Point Comfort at 8:00 a.m. before heading north to Mathews County. In 1912 the fare was $1.10. A pilot's manual from around the same time claimed that boats "come to anchor for the night inside of New Point Comfort Lighthouse" in the draft of 12 to 21 feet of water. During the Depression, harsh weather and hurricanes further separated the installation from the shoreline. Nevertheless, day-trippers still journeyed to the island.

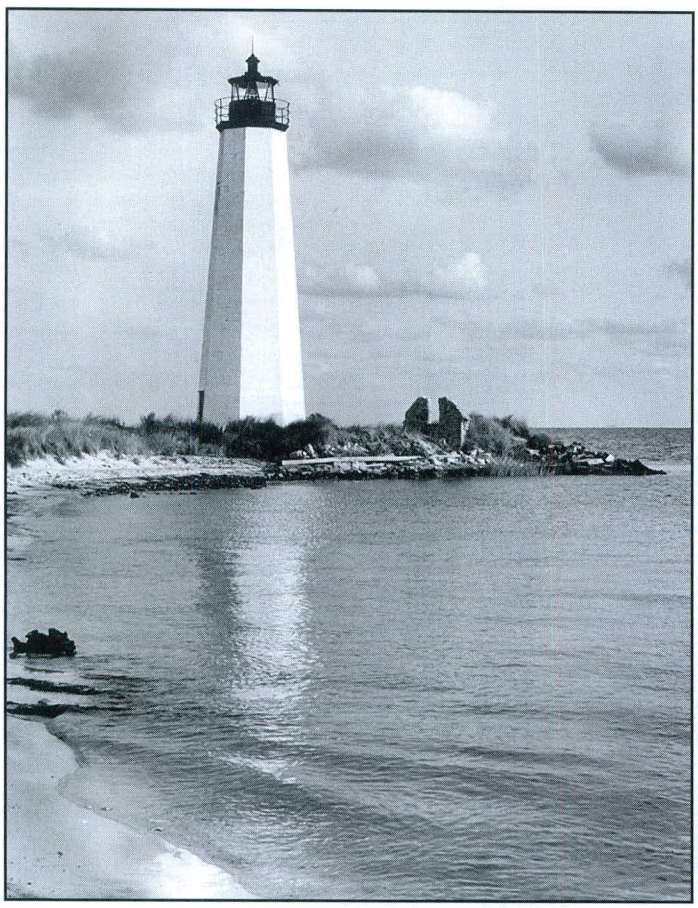
Along with the alterations of the seascape by natural forces, progress and governmental changes reshaped the appearance of the establishment. In 1919, the keeper's house was disassembled. A resourceful native used the old timbers for his own dwelling on the mainland. Shortly thereafter, automatic acetylene gas fixtures replaced the kerosene lamps.

The Department of Commerce chose the light station 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 Comfort, 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 civilian keeper. Thereafter, the Coast Guard enlisted personnel assumed responsibility for the facility.

The Coast Guard suggested that the lighthouse be closed in 1960, but strong objections by neighboring residents helped to keep the light shining for a few more years. The closing was not halted in 1968 when Coast Guardsmen abandoned the installation. A beacon at New Point Comfort Spit replaced the lighthouse, bobbing just a little more than 1,000 yards from the venerable obelisk. The new signal flashed a 90-candlepower light and from September 15 until June 1 sounded a horn blast every 20 seconds. Despite its retired status, the tower remains a daymark for all passing craft.

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

In April 1976, the county acquired the property from the federal government. Through hard work and matching state and private funds, $80,000 was raised in five years. Volunteers toiled from top to bottom of the light. Repairs included: improving the iron railings, restoring the lighthouse's cage, replacing windows,





Left — The New Point Comfort tower in 1950 from the shoreline near Bavon, VA. By this date the house has been destroyed and the light station property reduced to a thin spit of land. Note the barn at right. Photo courtesy of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA. Right — A contemporary aerial view of the New Point Comfort lighthouse on its tiny islet. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

extensive painting, and re-pointing 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 labor completed, a ceremony celebrated the restoration.

Sadly, exposure to the elements and damage by vandals continue to hurt this historic landmark. A new round of repairs required 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, helped support preservation efforts. The tides, however, are ever shifting and the need for upkeep remains constant. With this thought in mind, the county government manages the New Point Lighthouse Restoration Fund to channel tax-deductible, private contributions for the light station's maintenance. Trenton Funkhouser, the director of zoning and planning for the county, says another round of repairs is scheduled and a push is under way to secure a historical marker from the state.

The New Point Comfort Light Station is more than a historical fixture in the county. It is a structural symbol of the county's tie to the Chesapeake Bay and is a source of inspiration to numerous local artists. The lighthouse is one of the tallest structures in a rural county that has no stoplights or four-lane roads. For these reasons, it attracts attention and visitors. Tourists may obtain the key to the house by contacting Lynn Anthony, planning technician, at 757-725-4034. There is a small handling fee for the transaction and visitors are asked to report on the condition of the light station.

Along with the long-standing worry about the structure, a new concern developed for the area's wooded wetlands and two of its natural residents. In 1989, observers noted the presence of the least tern and the rare beach tiger beetle along the shoreline. The seabird, which is the smallest North American tern and is on the Federal List of Threatened Species, may even nest on the island.

To preserve this naturally significant region, the Virginia Chapter of The Nature Conservancy purchased a 95- acre tract of land now called the New Point Comfort Preserve. The chapter's newsletter explained that the long- term strategy is "to create a string of protected sites along the western shore of the bay, securing habitat for beetles, migratory birds, and other species." More recently, Ralph Vincent, Inc., a land-development firm, donated an additional 13 acres to the Preserve.

In that same spirit, the county earned a matching grant of $15,000 to construct a boardwalk and observation points along the shore. Construction on the New Point Observation Area will include signage that identifies the local flora and fauna. With all these plans in place, along with care and community cooperation, the light station and the island's wildlife will have a fighting chance for survival.

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