

In recognition of the restoration of
New Point Comfort Lighthouse,
National Lighthouse Day, August 7, 2021

Supplement sponsored by the Mathews County Historical Society, Inc. (MCHS) with assistance from L.W. Wales Center of Antioch Baptist Church, Fairfield Foundation, Friends of the Mathews Memorial Library, Gwynn's Island Museum, Mathews County Visitor & Information Center, Mathews Historical Museum, Mathews Land Conservancy, Mathews Maritime Foundation, and Preservation Mathews.

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 illuminated in 1805, the lighthouse has survived war, hurricanes, abandonment, and the relentless 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.

In 1801 Congress authorized the construction of lighthouses at strategic points on Chesapeake Bay. Among these was New Point, the fourth lighthouse built on Chesapeake Bay. It was part of a federal program intended to make the Chesapeake Bay safer for commercial shipping. The New Point Comfort Lighthouse is the

third oldest surviving lighthouse, surpassed only by those at Cape Henry and Old Point.

Three years passed before construction began. Government agents and representatives of property owner Philip Tabb and his associates exchanged numerous letters, negotiating a price for the land, which dropped from the initial \$1,000 to \$150, and the location of the lighthouse at the eastern junction of the Chesapeake and Mobjack Bays. Also discussed were certain rights reserved to the seller, who not only wanted to maintain control over the fisheries, but also a small tavern that was located on the property.

Elzy Burroughs managed to cut through the red tape and purchased two acres. He also received a contract to build

a sandstone lighthouse 58 feet high, and commenced work in mid-1804. He moved his family into a house on New Point Island in order to be close to the construction. Records show that building materials had to be brought by boat. When the lighthouse was complete, Burroughs stayed on as the first keeper. He worked on building a keeper's house and completed his contract with the government.

The New Point Comfort Lighthouse's light first shone on January 17, 1805. Although its beacon was doused during the War of 1812, when it was ransacked by the British, and it went dark and was neglected during the Civil War, it continued to beam until 1963.

Excerpt from John Patterson's May 30, 1801, report:

"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 four feet water at high tide, with Mobjack upon the west side and the Chesapeake on the East."



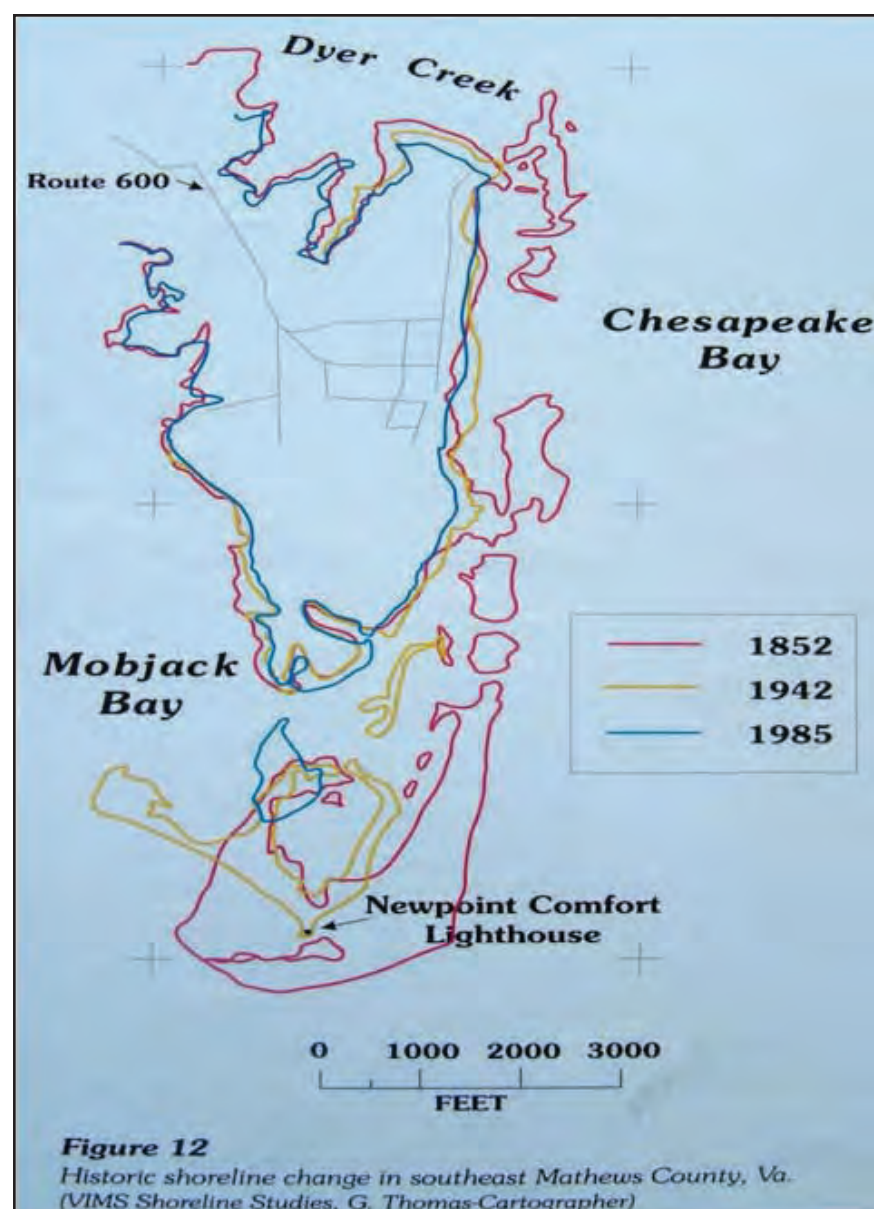
New Point Comfort Light Station ca. 1920. National Archives #26-LG-23-32A.

The Lighthouse vs. Nature

From the beginning, erosion has threatened the lighthouse's foundations, built on a sizeable island that was accessible by foot at low tide. Only 10 years after it became operational, 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 ranged from primitive brush fences that were designed to catch sand to walls built of poles and stone that were intended to check the waves. None of the strategies officials tried were able to protect the lighthouse from the ravages of nature. Finally, the decision was made to place rocky reinforcement around the foundation of the lighthouse.

Today the New Point Comfort Lighthouse stands offshore. The riprap that surrounds it is its only defense against the daily tides, northeasters, and hurricanes.



Shoreline Management in Chesapeake Bay by C. S. Hardaway, Jr. and R. J. Byrne. VIMS—1999.



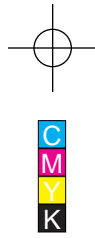
New Point Comfort Lighthouse, ca. 1910. Herman Hollerith photo.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse, ca. 1928. U.S. Coast Guard photo.



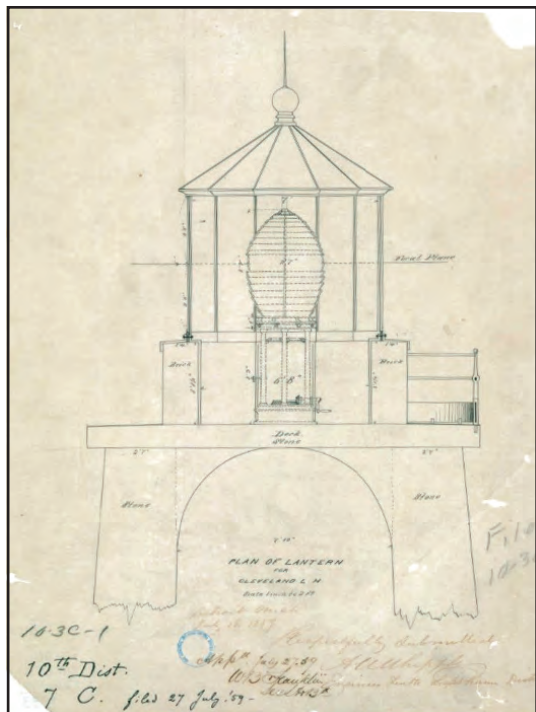
New Point Comfort Lighthouse, 2008. Gwilliam and Myjer photo.



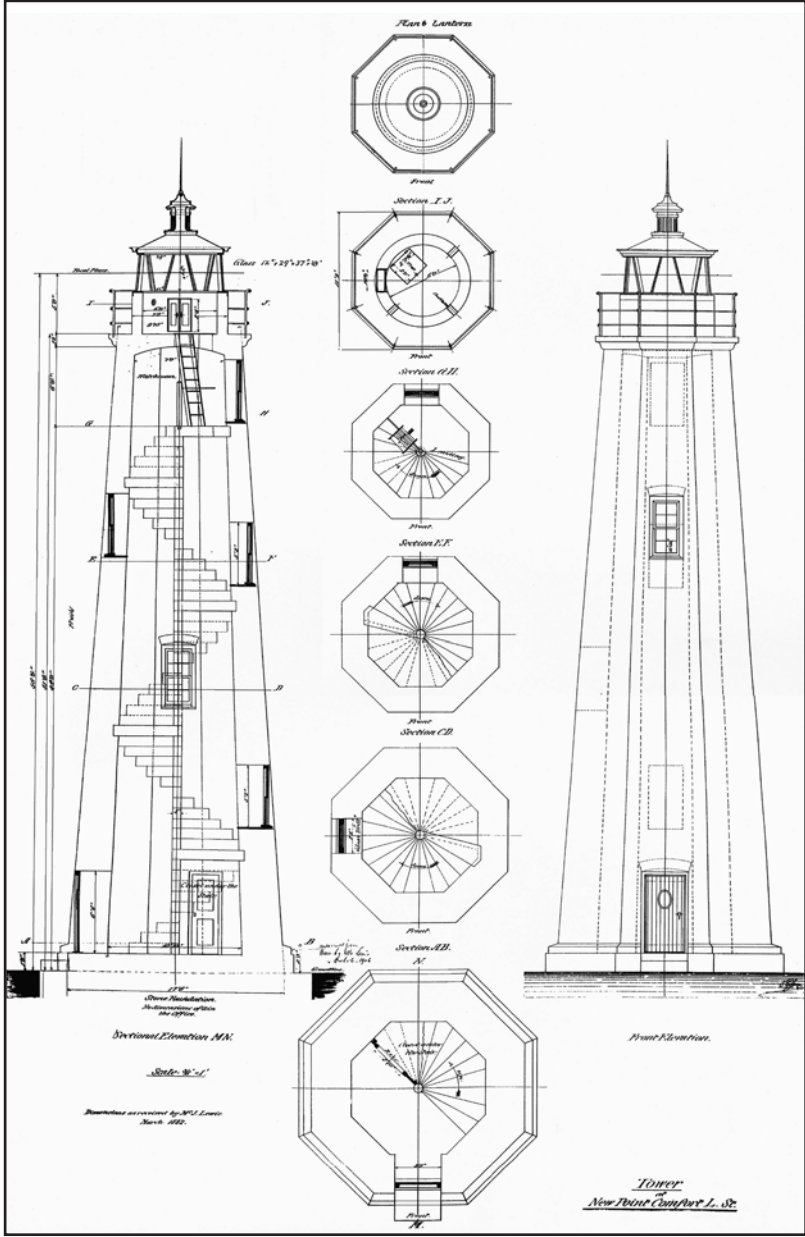
The March of Progress

Over time, improving technology increased the lighthouse’s power and efficiency. An early system of lights employed nine lamps and nine reflectors. Later, that was increased to 10 lamps and 14 reflectors. A Fresnel lens, providing ever stronger light, was installed after the Civil War. However, technology also doomed the lighthouse as a functional facility.

In 1919 the source of illumination was switched from oil to acetylene gas and Henry L. Dow of New Point was hired to maintain the gas light. As a resident keeper no longer was needed, the keeper’s quarters were sold and then salvaged for use elsewhere. An automated light was in place by 1930. It was discontinued in 1963 and replaced by an offshore beacon. Finally, in 1968 the Coast Guard abandoned New Point Comfort Lighthouse, which was no longer needed.



Lantern. National Archives #86454446.



1882 drawing of the tower. National Archives, Philadelphia regional branch.

The Human Element

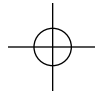
The New Point Comfort Lighthouse, built as a tool for navigators, has played an important role in the lives of those who use and enjoy the Chesapeake Bay. Traditionally, the lighthouse has been a source of concern for local residents, who rallied to save it after abandonment and vandalism.

New Point has always been a popular destination. The lighthouse keepers who faithfully tended their remote outpost welcomed visitors. For example, in 1905 the Mathews Journal 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 work, which began two decades ago, succeeded in stabilizing the island. Now, with restoration nearing completion, the future of New Point Comfort Lighthouse, if not certain, is much brighter and more secure.



First visual of lighthouse and keepers house from 1833 survey by Wm. M. Brownley for John Pritchett. Land Book 1; p. 154. Mathews County Clerk’s Office.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse Keepers

		Appointment Date	Reason to Departure
1805-1814	Elzy Burroughs	Nov. 10, 1804	Resigned
1814-1815	Robert Lithburn	April 4, 1814	Dismissed
1815-1819	James B. H. Johnson	June 12, 1815	Deceased
1819-1830	William Johnson	Feb. 24, 1819	Deceased
1830-1846	William R. Brownley	Oct. 11, 1830	Removed
1846-1854	Isaac Foster	Nov. 5, 1846	Deceased
1854	James B. White	Oct. 6, 1854	Appointment revoked
1854-1861	Edward S. White	Nov. 1, 1854	Civil War
1861-1865	No Keeper		
1865-1869	Joseph S. Allen	Sept. 4, 1865	Removed
1869-1871	Sylvester H. Wolhiser	July 9, 1869	Resigned
1871-1873	J. McHenry Farley	May 1, 1871	Resigned
1873-1876	John D. Hudgins	June 27, 1873	Removed
1876-1879	Leonard Smithers	Oct. 7, 1876	Removed
1879-1881	A. F. Hudgins	Nov. 21, 1879	
1881-1883	William F. Ripley	Dec. 30, 1881	Transferred
1883-1888	C. W. Forrest	Jan. 8, 1883	Removed
1888-1899	Oliver R. Hudgins	Nov. 15, 1888	Transferred
1899-1901	James B. Hurst	April 1, 1899	
1901-1906	Richard W. Marchant	Oct. 1, 1901	Death by suicide
1906-1916	Wesley F. Ripley	Sept. 1, 1906	Died Jan. 12, 1916
1916-1919	Edward A. Sibley		Transferred
1919-1954	Henry L. Dow	Oct. 1, 1919	Retired



New Point Comfort Light Station ca. 1885. National Archives #26-LG-23-31.

New Point Comfort Lighthouse Timeline

1801 – 1855

Construction of the New Point Comfort Lighthouse was authorized by Act of March 3, 1801. In 1804, Elzy Burroughs was hired to build the lighthouse, which became operational in January 1805. The light at New Point Comfort was extinguished during the War of 1812 and the Civil War. In 1855, the lighthouse was refitted with a Fresnel lens.

1919 – 1972

In 1919, the light was automated and the keeper’s house was dismantled and removed. The August hurricane of 1933 created a swath between the lighthouse and the island on which it stands. Offshore aids to navigation replaced the lighthouse in 1963. The New Point Comfort Lighthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register in 1972.

1975 – 1999

In 1975, Mathews County acquired the lighthouse property from the U. S. Coast Guard. The Mathews County Board of Supervisors established the New Point Comfort Lighthouse Committee in 1976 to commence planning restoration of the lighthouse. By 1981, that work was completed. Major repairs were underwritten by a Federal grant in 1988. Unfortunately, the lighthouse was severely vandalized in 1994. The NPCL Lantern Committee raised funds to install a solar light in 1999.

2001 – 2008

In 2001 the Mathews County Historical Society created the New Point Comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force, whose goal was to develop a master plan. In 2002, Preservation Alliance of Virginia placed NPCL on its most endangered historic building list. The New Point Comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force entered into an agreement with the county and in 2005 was moved to county control. In 2006, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which had concluded its three-year feasibility study, recommended denying protection of the lighthouse and habitat restoration. A year later, the Mathews County Board of Supervisors entered into an agreement with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, which agreed to develop a plan to stabilize New Point Comfort Island, work considered critical before restoration of the lighthouse could proceed. In 2008, the Virginia Institute for Marine Science’s plans to stabilize the island were approved.

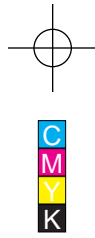
2009 – 2011

Transportation Enhancement Grant funds were received in 2009 to improve the island and a second TE Grant was received a year later. In 2011, a Phase I protection plan, which called for stabilization of the lighthouse, was completed and Phase II planning for restoration got underway.

2019 – 2020

Architectural plans were completed in Spring 2019 and in December, the county put the project out for bids. First Class Contracting of Richmond was awarded the contract in 2020 and work began in July.

Most of the highlights in the timeline of New Point Comfort Lighthouse were from New Point Comfort Lighthouse Its History and Preservation by Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford, published in 2013 by MCHS.



Rededication, 1981—New Point Comfort Lighthouse

The lighthouse was rededicated in August 1981 after undergoing restoration. From left to right, Miss Nan Hollerith; restoration committee member Ben Thompson; Naomi Thompson; Board of Supervisors chair Charles H. 'Sonny' Richardson, Jr.; and Capt. John F. Refo, restoration committee chairman.



Plaque Dedication—New Point Comfort Lighthouse

From left, Captain John C. Handy, U.S. Merchant Marine Ret., the first county NPCL Committee chairman and Captain John Refo, USN Ret., who chaired the project, put finishing touches on this plaque that was placed at the lighthouse in 1982. It was dedicated to the native-born of Mathews and Gloucester who lost their lives at sea.



Observation Deck—New Point Comfort Lighthouse

The observation platform with its interpretive signage was a joint project between The Nature Conservancy and Mathews County.

Citizens associated with NPC Task Force over the years:

Stuart Allen
Sherry Ashe
Dennis Baker
Becky Foster Barnhardt
Gary Wayne Brownley
Bill Burroughs
Wilbur Burroughs
John Lee Callis
Mindy Conner
Maxine M. Crockett
Betty Wrenn Day
J. Martin Diggs
Doreen Folzenlogen

Will Gwilliam
Mary Ruffin Hanbury
John C. Handy
Scott Hardaway
L. Wayne Hudgins
Peter Hunt
Thomas Jenkins
Adrian Jennings
Kevin Kiley
Jack Kloke
Reed Lawson
Robert Morgan
Alec J. Nuttall

Constance Ober
Robert Preston, Jr.
John Refo
Edwin M. Rosenberg
John Shaw
James Smith
Earl Soles, Jr.
Benjamin M. Thompson
Josie Thorpe
Martha Ellen Traband
Marion G. Trusch
Court Van Clief
Elsa Verbyla

David Vuich
Neil Webre
Dan Webster
Steve Whiteway
Steve Wilson
Doug Wilton



Conservation Plan—New Point Comfort Lighthouse

On May 19th 2008, Ivan Myjer of Building and Monument Conservation and Amy Cole Ives of Sutherland Conservation, working as a consultant to Building and Monument Conservation, surveyed the interior and exterior of the New Point Comfort Lighthouse. The survey team was assisted greatly by discussions with Earl Soles prior to the site visit and was accompanied by consultant Will Gwilliam on the trip to the island. Photos show severely weathered facing stone units and degraded coating, with open and failing mortar joints.



Phase I Restoration – New Point Comfort Lighthouse

In 2007 the Mathews County Board of Supervisors entered into an agreement with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in Gloucester Point, Virginia, to develop a plan for stabilizing the NPCL island before any restoration work on the lighthouse would proceed. This plan was approved by the Task Force and BOS in 2008. That year the county contracted with Vanase Hagen Brustlin, Inc. to undertake the preparatory work that was to precede stabilization. This included constructing a revetment around the lighthouse using 5,000 tons of granite, raising the ground level around the lighthouse, constructing a new entrance-way, providing a 20-foot pedestrian path around the lighthouse and constructing a new pier. Phase I work was completed in 2011.



Photo by Willie Brown. Courtesy of Mathews County Visitor & Information Center.

Phase II Restoration—New Point Comfort Lighthouse

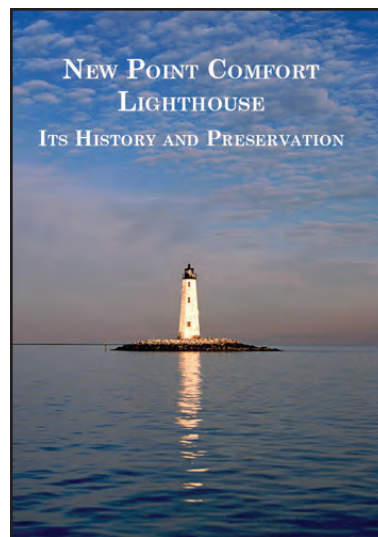
The restoration of New Point Comfort Lighthouse is nearing completion and the cap and lantern have recently been affixed to the top. Painting the sandstone exterior is the last task before scaffolding is removed. Phase II of this project, whose planning began in 2011, authorized cleaning, repointing and repainting all surfaces, restoring the lantern, replacing the door and windows, repairing the brick-work under the lantern, removing the lantern, replacing the flooring, restoring/replacing ironwork at the lantern, and installing grounding line. The photo below, taken in September of 2020, shows the beginning of final steps in this two-decades-long restoration.





Tribute to Earl Lumpkin Soles, Jr.

Earl Lumpkin Soles, Jr., Mathews native and lifelong student of history, passed away August 10, 2018 at the age of 82. He retired to the Middle Peninsula in 1993 after an illustrious career with the National Park Service and Colonial Williamsburg where he was instrumental in the preservation and interpretation of many primitive trades that were nearly lost in history. He was active in the historical society; he researched and provided programs on Mathews County history; he was instrumental in the publication of *New Point Comfort Lighthouse Its History and Preservation* in 2013. Earl served as chairman of The New Point Comfort Lighthouse Preservation Task Force. He was named Keeper of the Quarter in 2013 by the U.S. Lighthouse Society. The Mathews County Board of Supervisors proclaimed Aug. 7, 2018, which is National Lighthouse Day, to be Earl Soles Day. He was also named an Honorary Lighthouse Keeper in Mathews County at that time.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse Its History and Preservation

by Mary Louise Clifford and
J. Candace Clifford
published in 2013 by MCHS

This book is a tribute to the keepers who manned this lighthouse, their families, the County of Mathews, and its residents and their part in the maritime history of the Chesapeake Bay. The book is sold locally at the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center, 239 Main Street, and at the Tompkins Cottage Museum, 43 Brickbat Rd., Mathews, or can be ordered on Amazon. Soft cover book, \$20.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse Ornament

The MCHS will release its new ornament, New Point Comfort Lighthouse, on Saturday, August 7 at the Tompkins Cottage Museum, 43 Brickbat Rd. and at MCVIC. The \$25 ornament is also available online at mathewscountyhistoricalsociety.org.



In memory of Earl L. Soles, Jr. and in honor of NPCL Preservation Task Force,
an anonymous donation has been given for this publication.

