

By Charles Elliott



Back Bay Light Station circa 1905. The second story has been added by this time. Photo courtesy of the author.

In 1829 the U.S. Government purchased 4 acres of land from Preson Watson and his wife for \$100. The site is located at the confluence of Chesapeake Bay and Back River, about six miles north of the Old Point Comfort Light Station.

Soon after the land was acquired, the government realized a need for a drainage ditch. A second parcel of land 3 feet by 1200 feet was purchased from the Watsons for \$10.

Proposals for construction of a lighthouse were solicited. The lighthouse was to be "...built of brick, the form round. The foundation to be sunk three feet, or as deep as may be necessary to make the fabric secure, to be laid in good lime mortar. The height of the tower to be thirty feet. The diameter of the base eighteen feet and that of the top nine feet. The thickness of the wall at the base to be three feet, and to uniformly graduated to

twenty inches at the top....the outside walls to be white washed twice over...the door posts cap and stool to be dressed stone, at least ten inches square...a sufficient number of circular stairs to lead from the ground floor to within six feet of the lantern, connected by a center post and guarded by a good hand railing...on the top of the tower to be an iron lantern of the octagon form...the lantern and the woodwork of the tower

to be painted twice over with white lead, except the dome which is to be black.

The contract also called for "A well to be sunk sufficiently deep to procure good water...to be stoned and furnished with a curb, windless and iron chain, with a stong iron hooped bucket.

"The dwelling house was a one story affair 43 by 20 feet and constructed of brick. It was divided into two rooms with a fireplace in each room connected to a central chimney. The interior was lathed and plastered and the contract called for it to 'be finished in a plain decent style, with good seasoned lumber.' A cooking fireplace and sink was included, as well as a detached outhouse four by five feet."

Contractor John Donohoo, who built the Cove Point Lighthouse, bid \$4,725; Thomas Vans, of Baltimore who constructed the Bodkins Lighthouse, bid \$4,500; and Winslow Lewis of Boston submitted the winning bid of \$3,500. Lewis had never constructed a lighthouse on Chesapeake Bay, although he had in other parts of the country and they generally were of poor quality. He was the supplier of the, then in use, lamp/reflector systems used in American Lighthouses as well as most of the supplies...

Lewis was not familiar with the area and thought the site three miles farther north, where the water was deeper and where he planned to land supplies. Instead his materials had to be transferred to a small boat and then carried 800 feet to the site. He requested an adjustment for this extra effort, but was refused because the contract read "at or near" Black River Point. The project was completed late in 1829.

The tower was constructed near the water's edge, but the dwelling was located back some 144 feet. At the request of the first keeper, William Jett, Lewis constructed a small porch on the front of the dwelling for an additional \$15. The keeper also asked for a fence to to "keep the cattle out." It was provided.

Jett remained keeper until he retired from the service in 1852, the year the U.S. Lighthouse Board assumed control of the service. In fact the Back River Lighthouse was one of the lighthouses inspected by the ad hoc Lighthouse

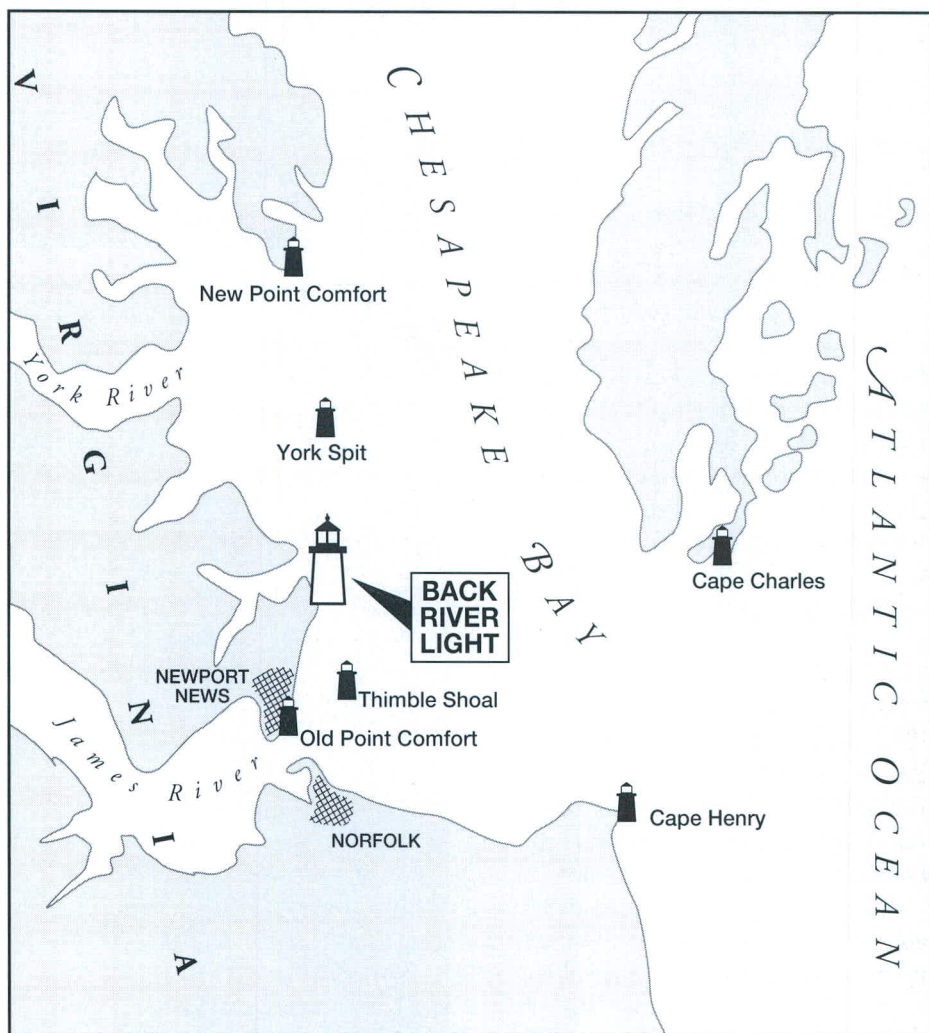
Board, before it became the controlling instrument. The report noted:

"Revolving Bay light; also for Back River Harbor. William Jet principal and only keeper; twenty-two years keeper. Questions generally answered by son, who does not reside here (son about 30 years of age) assistant appointed by keeper - negro man. Brick tower, leaks on platform above; wooden stairs; wooden tube for weight; revolving light without air-fly to regulate it...is not now in good order....lamps arranged in two opposite parallels, three below and two above ... establishment moderately clean; tower white-washed inside and out; woodwork lead color; keepers dwelling in very good order; wants whitewashing; bridge to lighthouse, say, 60 yards long. In a late storm, water washed away the garden; lights up at dark and puts out after daylight; wipes off the snuff, trims at ten and two o'clock; winds up clockworks at the

same time; sits up until ten o'clock; no regular watch watch kept; no place to stay in...does not know of instructions... The colored man has been engaged in light-keeping since his boyhood...site of lighthouse in danger from the sea...

That last statement eventually proved to be true.

It's strange that a revolving reflector system was installed in this tower in 1855. One of the first orders of business of the "new" Lighthouse Board (1852) was to substitute Fresnel lenses for the old ineffective reflector system. Perhaps they had so many lighthouses to refit, they used an old revolving reflector system as an improvement in small back water stations, until enough Fresnel lenses could be procured from Europe. By 1860 all U.S. Lighthouses had Fresnel lenses. In fact in that year the Back River station received a Fresnel lens and a new lantern as well.



Over the years the waters of Chesapeake Bay made constant inroads around the tower. In 1868 rip-rap was placed around the tower to protect it from high tides and storms. But only ten years (1878) later the tower was reported to be in poor condition, "...a portion of the front having been undermined and thrown down by the action of wind and waves..." The tower was repaired in the year and more rip-rap added. And, again, in 1888 more stone was added.

In 1894 the two room house was finally enlarged by the addition of another story as it was deemed..."too small to accommodate his family.."

Mother Nature kept coming and in 1904 the concrete protection wall around the keeper's dwelling was completely wrecked by a storm. A 459 foot long bulkhead composed of sheet piling was constructed on the front and sides of the dwelling. 30,440 feet of lumber was used in the structure. An elevated walkway of 144 feet was constructed between the house and the tower. A few months later a storm nearly destroyed the dwelling and walkway, but repairs were made.

Finally, the government gave up and abandoned the station as a manned unit in 1912. The house was sold and dismantled, but the tower continued to support a lighted aid until 1936 when it was abandoned. During the years between 1912 and 1936 the keeper lived in Fox Hill and made daily trips to attend the lens. In 1950 the property was sold and hurricane Hazel finally demolished the tower in 1956. But before the tower was destroyed, and even before it was abandoned, it was the site of drowning and suspected murder.

A young wife, named Jenny Kane, was taken to a Fox Hill, VA hospital in May of 1931 by her husband. She was pronounced dead. Her husband, Dr. Elisha Kane, stated she had slipped on the rocks surrounding the Back River lighthouse and drowned. His in-laws thought otherwise and had him arrested for murder.

The trial was one of the sensational trials of the era and made news in west coast papers. Her family accused Kane of having an affair with another woman and killing their daughter, Jenny. Her brother, Walter

Graham, charged he had read a letter in which the supposed paramour, Betty Dahl, urged Kane to "to get rid of Jenny."

Elisha, a professor of romantic literature at the University of Tennessee, maintained it was an accidental drowning. He stated she slipped on the rocks, fell into the water, and had a heart attack. His father, a medical doctor, stated Jenny suffered from a bad heart and that he had treated her for 13 years. A druggist attested to the fact he had filled prescriptions for Jenny Kane for digitalis, a heart medicine. Others also testified to her heart condition. The sensational trial lasted for a week ending in his acquittal based on lack of solid evidence.

Back River Lighthouse fought the elements for 127 years before succumbing to a hurricane in 1956 and for one brief moment it was the focus of a sensational murder trial which seems like...Only Yesterday.



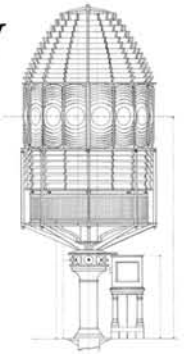
Left — A Flapper at Back Bay in the 1920's.

Below — The tower in 1950 all but destroyed by erosion. Note the rubble stone construction and old style lantern room. Photos courtesy of the author.





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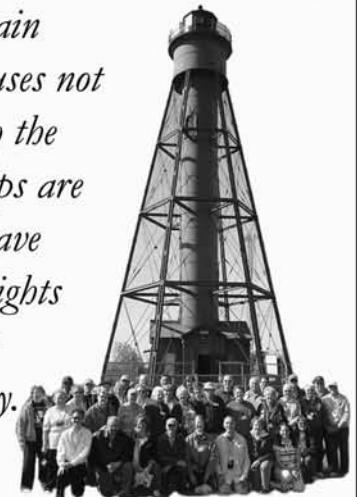
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