



Cape Henry Towers circa 1900—original tower on the right.

Photo courtesy of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities

**T**he tower of the old Cape Henry Lighthouse still stands, gaunt and silent, perched atop a dominating sand dune at the edge of the sea at the junction of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Though its light is gone and repairs would be helpful, it continues as a noted, familiar and ancient landmark. Such it has been since its construction was begun in 1791.

The location is at the south entrance to Chesapeake Bay some ten miles east from downtown Norfolk and only a mile, or two, north, up the Atlantic coast from the heart of Virginia Beach. Fort Story Military Reservation encompasses the lighthouse grounds as it does the nearby (almost adjacent) Cape Henry Memorial, a part of Colonial National Historical Park.

The construction of the Cape Henry light stemmed directly from the act which created the lighthouse service, one of the initial acts of the First Session of the 1st Congress in

1789. It was made the duty of the Secretary of the Treasury to see that the necessary contracts, to be "approved by the President," should be prepared.

A few days after passage, Washington forwarded a copy of the new act to Governor Beverly Randolph of Virginia. The Virginia authorities, long in pursuit of the Cape Henry Lighthouse project, moved rather quickly. On November 13, the Virginia General Assembly, by act, provided for the conveyance of land "to the United States for the purpose of building a light-house." This was public land, not exceeding two acres, "lying and being in the County of Princess-Anne, at the place commonly called the head land of Cape Henry." This act went to Washington who later, on January 5, 1790, passed it to the Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. The new project moved along with some aid from Washington, for, on January 27, 1790, he entered in his diary

that he "Did Business" with the Secretary of the Treasury "respecting the appointment of Superintendents of the Light House, Buoys, etc., and for building one at Cape Henry."

**A** year lapsed between the initial Congressional appropriation and the letting of the contract for the Cape Henry Lighthouse. It was ready and duly signed on March 31, 1791, by Alexander Hamilton, representing the government, and John McComb, Jr., "of the State of New York, Bricklayer," as builder and "undertaker."

This contract is an interesting document and rather rich in descriptive detail. (ed. The complete government contract, specifications, appears at the end of this article.) It called for McComb, with "all convenient speed, [to] build and finish in a good workman like manner a Light House of Stone, Faced with hewn or hammer dressed Stone...from the bottom of the Water Table up to the

top of the Stone Work." It was to have the shape of "an Octagon, having three Windows in the East & four in the West." In view of persisting prejudices, it is of note that "Electrical conductors to secure it from the effects of Lightning" were a contract provision.

me many have offered," and that he look into their character. It was reported that the first keeper was one Laban Goffigan, very probably a Norfolk area man, and that the fish oil burning lamps of Cape Henry were first lighted late in October 1792.

protects the keeper from the storms, renders his habitation one of the dreariest abodes imaginable."

As the years passed, repairs, replacements, and additions were made as deemed necessary. The lantern at Cape Henry was completely reworked in 1841 at a cost of \$4,000 by Winslow Lewis of Boston. The work, described in detail in the agreement, with its appended completion endorsement, including replacement of the wooden deck by "a brick arch on which is laid a soapstone deck and the placement of a new lantern with the same diameter as the old." The lantern was glazed with plate glass (each octagon containing 12 panes of 24 by 16 inches). It was of "the same manner...as the one now at Cape Henlopen Lighthouse [Delaware]." The lantern was equipped with "18 lamps with brass burners and fitted with oil Heaters, & eighteen full twenty one inch reflectors on three tiers of circles."

The lighthouse, in common with others of the same period, passed through various stages of development, the principal changes being in the kinds of oil burned in the lamps. Sperm whale oil was the principal illuminate until the 1850s when colza oil (a wild cabbage) was used for a brief period. This oil was replaced by lard oil which was replaced in turn with kerosene toward the end of the century. Another, major, improvement was the substitution of the reflector system with a Fresnel lens in 1857.

In the early 1850s Congress appointed a board to investigate the lighthouses and the lighthouse administration of this country. Part of that investigation entailed the random inspection of various light stations. Cape Henry was one of the light stations visited. The inspection of 10 June 1851 is both interesting and rich in operational items of that time. It covered a wide range of detail as the following excerpts illustrate.

*(continued on next page)*

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## It was to have the shape of "an octagon, having three windows in the east and four in the west."

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Further provisions called for a "frame House," 20 feet square, being "two stories high, with a frame Kitchen" and to have "Lath & plaster." This was "for the occupation and residence of the keeper of the Light House." There was provision, too, for oil storage. McComb was to construct at "a convenient distance from the said Light House a Vault, twelve feet wide and twenty feet in length, for the storage & safe keeping of the Oil belonging to said Light House, which vault shall be arched and covered over with Sand or Earth." McComb was to provide and furnish all materials for this and other items for which he contracted.

It was necessary to revise the foundation plans and to go 20 feet, rather than the specified 13 feet, below the water table since at the 13-foot level there was only loose sand. The base diameter was increased [from 27 feet, 6 inches] to 33 feet with an 11-foot thick wall and "laid circular for four feet high." This required a contract adjustment of \$2,500, a sum to be added to the original price of \$15,200.

On August 8, 1791, McComb estimated that he would complete the project in October 1792, and this appears to have been a sound estimate. It was on October 1, 1792, that Washington took a personal interest in the appointment of a keeper. He prepared two letters, one to Tobias Lear in Philadelphia and one to Alexander Hamilton. He requested that Lear get out the "List of Applications,...if my memory serves

Benjamin Latrobe was at Cape Henry in 1798 and fortunately, as natural for an engineer, was interested in the topography and nature of the area. He made two sketches. One dated November 1798 was of the lighthouse showing it much as the contract had specified complete with weather vane and ventilator as well as lightning rods. He sketched too, the keeper's house although this is in part obscured by sand. A low structure shown on the left may be the "vault" which had been prescribed. Of the lighthouse, he wrote, in a note to Samuel Harrison, "one of the Secretaries of the American Philosophical Society": "It is a good solid building of Rappahannock freestone, but has the unpardonable fault of a wooden staircase, which being necessarily soaked with oil, exposes the light to the perpetual risk of destruction of fire." Evidently the calamity which he predicted never came although the staircase was destined to serve another 60 years.

Latrobe spoke of the lighthouse as "an octangular truncated pyramid of eight sides, rising 90 feet to the light" and being "6 or 7 hundred yards from the beach." Having been "placed upon the highest sand hill at the Cape" the lighthouse caught the wind as it swept in and created "a perpetual whirl around it, which licks up the sand from the smooth surface of the timber [surrounding pavement], and heaps it around in the form of a basin. Where the platform ceases, the sand accumulates. The sandy rim, while it pro-

*Main sea-light...on sand-hills near point of cape, and 600 to 800 years from beach; site preserved by open board fence. Basement of stone around lighthouse... James Atkinson, only keeper—appointed five years ago; hires an assistant himself... Tower built in 1791, of sandstone...outside; soapstone coping; rubblestone inside; common masonry; mortar pretty good; two iron conductors...whitewashed once in two years; no other repairs; none on keeper's house, except such as he puts on himself...ducks sometimes break glasses of lantern...no regular lamp scissoring for trimming...lime for whitewashing from collector; white paint for sahes; dome red inside, black outside... Interior of lantern painted with Spanish brown... Soapstone floor to lantern; very dirty with oil; warm in lantern...tower whitewashed inside and out; steps also, but now worn off... Supplied by oil, &c. once a year... Trims when they (burners) get cool; does not wait until sunrise to put out lights, Trims when he thinks it necessary; can tell from the window of the chamber where he sleeps; goes to bed at 10 o'clock; trims twice before 10 o'clock; sometimes afterwards. Frequently wakes assistant, and sends him up to trim, &c; no regular watch kept. Have one copy of printed instructions at home; none hung up... keeper's house fenced in; fences by present keeper; some of them six feet high. Six hundred gallons of oil consumed last year.*

During the Civil War, in April 1861, the illuminating apparatus was removed and the lantern destroyed. Shortly afterward a lightship, under military protection, was anchored between the two capes (Henry and Charles). In 1863 the lighthouse was again in operation, protected by a military guard.

**I**t was during an inspection in 1872 that the stability and safety of the old tower was first ques-

tioned. Eight years earlier it had been described as a "fine cut-stone tower...in excellent order..." Nonetheless it was now observed that there were "large cracks or openings" in the original masonry of six of the eight faces. "At present the tower is in an unsafe condition, and there is no way of repairing the damage satisfactorily, and a new one must be built. The old tower has done good service, having been built in 1791, and is now the oldest tower on the coast south of Cape Henlopen."

These recommendations of 1872 did not get immediate attention, or at least approval, and were repeated yearly. Finally, an initial appropriation of \$75,000, on June 10, 1878, paved the way for the start of a new tower and its associated facilities. These were completed at a site some 350 feet southeast from the old tower late in 1881. The last keeper of the old light and the first of the new facility, Jay D. Edwards, lighted the new beam on December 15, 1881.

**A**fter the new lighthouse was placed in operation at Cape Henry, it was duly reported, in 1882, that: "The old tower remains a day-mark, and it is also used as a basis for coast survey triangulation." It ceases to be noted otherwise for any lighthouse purpose. It did continue as a landmark and, on April 29, 1896, the president and other officers of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities journeyed from Richmond "down to Cape Henry and, placed upon an old lighthouse, the use of which has been granted us by the United States government, a tablet marking the first landing of the English colonists on Virginia's soil..." Thus, the old tower became a forerunner of the Cape Henry Memorial to which its shadow will reach on a late summer afternoon. It is reported that there was assistance from the Norfolk

supporters, especially in affixing the tablet to the tower walls, and that the "ceremonies connected with unveiling were beautiful and impressive." The tablet even now remains attached.

The Association maintained its interest in the old lighthouse and this interest led to the transfer, by the United States, of the old tower and 1.77 acres of ground associated with it. The authority came from an act of Congress of June 18, 1930, which was implemented by deed of August 1 the same year, reserving only a water main route and access to it. The act described the area as "the site for the Old Light Tower at Cape Henry," including the "abandoned lighthouse tower and gave metes and bounds which were recorded in the deed. Clearly, the Congress recognized the "historic interest" of the structure and sought to insure "public" use.

The Norfolk Branch of the Association has remained proud of the old lighthouse tower. Often the chief hindrance [of maintenance] has involved a lack of funds but not a lack of cooperation for the Fort Story post officials as the annual reports of the Association show.

*This article was condensed and edited from a 1962 Survey Report by the late Mr. Charles E. Hatch, Jr., Chief Park Historian, Colonial National Historical Park. It is reprinted with kind permission of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.*

In 1983, after several years of leasing the Lighthouse to the City of Virginia Beach, the APVA itself decided to manage daily operations. Even though it is off the beaten path for most Virginia Beach visitors, the popularity is obvious since approximately 20,000 visited the site during the last 7 months of 1983.



## THE FIRST CONTRACT FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

AGREEMENT made and concluded the thirty first day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety one. Between John McComb Junior of the State of New York, Bricklayer of the one part, and Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury in behalf of the United States of America, and by and with the approbation of the President of the United States of the other part.

The said John McComb Junior for himself his Heirs Executors & Administrators doth hereby covenant promise and agree that he the said McComb shall with all convenient speed erect build and finish in a good and workmanlike manner a Light House of Stone, Faced with hewn or hammer dressed stone, upon the Lot of Land on Cape Henry in the County of Princess Ann and State of Virginia lately Ceded for that purpose to the said United States of the following form & description—That is to say.

First, The foundation of the said Light House shall be of stone and sunk to the depth of thirteen feet below the water table, over the top of which the pavement shall be laid. The diameter thereof shall be twenty seven feet six inches with a vacancy of about nine feet in the Centre.

Secondly, The diameter of the Base shall be twenty six feet, at which place the Thickness of the Walls shall be six feet. The height from the bottom of the Water table to the top of the stone work shall be seventy two feet, where the Diameter is to be sixteen feet six inches, and the thickness of the Walls three feet. The form of the said Light House shall be an Octagon, having three Windows in the East & four in the West and the same shall be faced with hewn or hammer dressed stone from the bottom of the Water Table upwards to the top of the Stone work.

Thirdly, On the top of the Stone work shall be a floor of Joist, bedded therein planked over and covered with Copper, extending about two feet eight Inches beyond the Wall thereby forming an Eve which shall be finished with a Cornice, and the whole shall have a descent from the Centre sufficient to throw off the Water.

Fourthly, The Lantern shall be supported by eight Posts of wrought Iron, of three inches square and twenty feet in length, ten feet of which shall be wrought into the wall in the inner part at each corner. The Diameter thereof shall be ten feet, leaving a platform on the outside thereof of about six feet in width. All the work above the Lantern shall be of Iron & Copper. The Lantern shall be ten feet high, and have a semicircular roof of five feet more, with Iron rafters covered with Copper. The whole space between the posts supporting the Lantern shall be occupied by the Sashes, which shall be made of Iron, and each sash shall have twenty eight panes of glass, twelve by fourteen inches. The sash on the Southwest side shall be hung with hinges for a door to go out upon the platform, from the outer part of which to the roof of the Lantern, shall be a frame of Iron, covered with a net work of strong brass wire, so as to preserve the Glass in the lantern from injuries by Hail, or flights of Birds in the Night.

Fifthly, the rafters of the Lantern shall be well fastened to an Iron hoop, over which shall be a Copper funnel, through which the smoke may pass into a large Copper ventilator to be made in the form of a Man's Head, capable of containing

one hundred gallons. This Head shall be so placed as to be turned by a large Vane which shall be fixed on the spire above it so that the hole for venting the smoke may always be to leeward, and eight dormant ventilators of six inches diameter shall be fixed in the roof of the Lantern.

Sixthly, A close stove shall be provided and fixed in the Lantern, which shall be furnished with eight lamps, each capable of containing six quarts, and shall be hung in two tiers over each other transversely. There shall be six flights of stairs to ascend to the Lantern, the entrance to which shall be by a door covered with Copper, and the building shall be furnished with two Electrical conductors, to secure it from the effects of Lightning.

AND the said John McComb Junior doth hereby further covenant and agree that he the said McComb shall and will erect, build and finish in a good and Workman like manner in & upon the said lot of Land a frame House twenty feet square and two stories high, with a frame Kitchen for the occupation & residence of the keeper of the said Light House, and shall & will finish the same with Lath & plaister; And also, that he the said McComb shall and will erect, build & finish with stone at a convenient distance from the said Light House a Vault, twelve feet wide and twenty feet in length, for the storage & safekeeping of the Oil belonging to the said Light House, which vault shall be arched and covered over with Sand or Earth; also shall and will erect, build, and finish over the said vault, a Shed, and furnish the said vault with eight strong Cedar Cisterns with Covers, each capable of containing two hundred gallons of Oil, and secure the entrance thereto by a strong Door. And also that he the said John McComb Junior shall and will provide and furnish all and every the materials requisite and necessary for the doing and performing of the work aforesaid. In Consideration whereof the said Alexander Hamilton for and on the part and behalf of the United States doth hereby covenant promise and agree, to and with the said John McComb Junior his Executors & Administrators that the said United States shall and will for the doing and performing of the work aforesaid, well and truly pay or cause to be paid unto the said John McComb Junior his Executors and Administrators, the Just and full sum of Fifteen thousand two hundred Dollars in manner following, that is to say.

Four thousand Dollars part thereof at and upon the Sealing and delivery of these presents by the respective parties hereto, for the purpose of purchasing materials for the said work; Four Thousand Dollars, other part thereof, when the Water Table aforesaid is laid; Three Thousand Dollars, other part thereof, when the Lantern aforesaid is raised; Two Thousand Dollars other part thereof, when the stonework is finished, and the Lantern completed. And Two thousand two hundred Dollars the remainder thereof, when the whole of the said work is completed and finished.

(Signed)  
JOHN MCCOMB JUNIOR  
(SEAL)

(Signed)  
Alexander Hamilton, Sec'y of the Treasury.