

Cape Henry during the American Revolution

By the end of 1775, any attempts to build a lighthouse at Cape Henry had ceased. With Lord Dunmore isolated aboard his flotilla and Patriot militia units forming throughout Virginia, all the British could do was blockade the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. Blockading ships would use smaller tenders or boats, armed with a small cannon or swivel gun, to intercept any suspected shipping. The smaller vessels had the speed and maneuverability needed in the confined waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Faced with a growing number of vessels being captured at Cape Henry, merchants and ship owners recommended a warning station and defenses at the proposed lighthouse site. The construction materials that had been delivered to the site would prove to be far from an abandoned venture.

Col. Thomas Reynolds Walker, a member of the lighthouse board of directors and now an officer in the Princess Anne Militia, was detailed to oversee construction and operation of a signal mast. The mast, through a series of day shapes and lighted signals at night, would warn ships of British presence. The materials for the lighthouse construction were readily appropriated to build the signal mast.

A militia company, referred to as the “Princess Anne Minute Men,” was already stationed at Cape Henry under Walker. Conveniently, the “Minute Men” were housed in the worker lodging that had been built to support the lighthouse’s construction. Aside from the task of warning ships, the militia stationed there could protect merchant vessels that ran aground while evading the blockade, as well as keeping the British from landing for water or other supplies.

In 1777, for example, an unnamed schooner entering the bay had run aground near Cape Henry while trying to evade both the pinnace and armed cutter of the HMS *Solebay*, which was on blockade duty. The crew of the pinnace and cutter went ashore to attempt to free the vessel to capture or destroy it. Instead, the pinnace was destroyed in the attempt, stranding the pinnace crew of a lieutenant, three petty officers, and 15 men. They soon surrendered to the Princess Anne Militia. The HMS *Emerald* then captured two men in a boat crossing the Chesapeake Bay from the Eastern Shore. The capture was intended to try and force a prisoner exchange for the *Solebay* crew, with the British threatening to “detain every person” until the crew was released.

After the war was over, it was not until 1792 before an operational lighthouse finally graced the shore of Cape Henry. It was the first public works project funded by the new United States of America government.