

Cape Point Lighthouse (Old)

When a perpetual quitrent for the land around Cape Point was granted to farmer John Osmond in 1816, an unusual clause was included in the lease. It stipulated that the owner or occupier of the land would permit the authorities to erect a lighthouse on the Cape Point peninsular, and to allow all necessary access. But this commendable foresight did not translate into action until 1857, when a decision to proceed with the building of a lighthouse was first approved.

Various sites were considered, but ultimately a location on top of Cape Point Peak, 238 meters (781 feet) above sea level, was selected. Alexander Gordon of the British Lighthouse Authority was appointed as the architect, Victoria Foundry Company was contracted to supply the cast iron tower, and London-based lamp manufacturer James De Ville was chosen to engineer the lantern components. Construction work began on the 16th of March 1859, under the supervision of Gordon himself.

It was not an easy build. All of the parts had to be shipped out from England to Simon's Town, before being transferred to a smaller boat and ferried to Buffelsbaai. From there they were loaded onto a modified gun carriage and transported to a camp near the Cape of Good Hope, then dragged up a steep slope to the peak using a bullock-drawn sledge. Convex cast iron plates were bolted together to form an 8 meter (26 feet) high tower, topped off with a 16-wick lantern apparatus which produced a luminous intensity of 2,000 candelas. Despite the difficulties, the build was completed on schedule, and the lighthouse was commissioned on the 1st of May 1860.

But the siting turned out to be less than ideal. The remoteness of the area and the difficult terrain made the supply of provisions and oil an arduous task, and the lighthouse keepers grumbled bitterly of sometimes nearly starving to death. Soon after it was commissioned, complaints began to flood in from mariners that the light was often not visible, because its height above sea level meant that it was shrouded in cloud or fog for up to 900 hours a year. The Lighthouse Commissions of 1872, 1890, and 1906 all recommended that it be moved, but it was only after the SS Lusitania had been wrecked nearby in 1911 that a proposal to build a new lighthouse at a lower altitude was finally accepted. The lamp was extinguished for the last time on the morning of the 11th of March 1919.

The shell of the cast iron tower and the keeper's quarters are still in place. Visitors can easily access the site, although the tower itself is not open to the public. The views from this location are magnificent, and offer spectacular vistas over the entire Cape Point area, as well as over most of False Bay. For this reason, the old Cape Point Lighthouse is by far the most visited and photographed lighthouse in South Africa.

Cape Point Lighthouse (Old) Fact File

LSA Number	16
Name	Cape Point (Old)
Province	Western Cape
Location	Cape Point
GPS Coordinates	S34.353926 E18.490478 34°21'14.1"S 18°29'25.7"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-008
Admiralty Number	Not applicable
NGA Number	Not applicable
Active	No
First Established	1860
Commission Date	1 May 1860
Decommission Date	10 March 1919
Construction Type	Round cast iron tower
Daymark	Tower upper half painted white, lower half painted black; lantern painted white with a red dome.
Tower Height	8 meters (26 feet)
Focal Plane	Not applicable
Luminous Intensity	Not applicable
Nominal Range	Not applicable
Characteristic	Not applicable
Period	Not applicable
Pattern	Not applicable
Pattern Description	Not applicable
Manned	No
Site Open	Yes
Fenced	No
Tower Open	No
Accommodation	No
Access Method	Car + Hike
Access Notes	The road to the parking area at Cape Point is tarred. To reach the lighthouse, a fairly strenuous walk of about 700 meters up a steep hill is required. The walk can be avoided by catching a ride (for a fee) on the Flying Dutchman funicular railway.