

United States
Lightship Museum

NANTUCKET LIGHTSHIP/LV-112

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Nantucket Lightships – A History



The Nantucket Lightship Station was the most distant and exposed lightship in the world. Its location was changed several times to best mark the treacherous shoals off New England; ultimately almost 100 miles southeast of Cape Cod. It also was the turning point on the transatlantic sealane for ships bound to and from Europe and the U.S., and was the first glimpse of America seen by immigrants arriving at their new homeland.

Twelve vessels occupied the Nantucket Lightship station during its 140 year service from 1854 to 1983. More than half of this period was served by just two ships - LV-1 from 1855-1892 and LV-112 from 1936-1975. All, however, contributed to the chronicles of the Station and maritime history in general. This includes the first ever radio message from a ship - the LV-66 in 1901; the first radio distress signal from a U.S. vessel (and the 2nd in the world) - the LV-58 in 1905; development of the marine audio oscillator leading to the fathometer and ultimately sonar - on board the LV-106 in the 1920's; and the largest and best known lightship ever built - the LV-112. The first two - the LV-11 and LV-1 were wooden sailing vessels; and the remaining ten beginning in 1892 were iron and steel ships with first steam and finally diesel engines.

With the mission to remain on station at all times in all weather, the Nantucket Lightship, as with all lightships, was especially vulnerable to hurricanes and winter storms. On 33 occasions during storms the ship's anchor chain parted and the vessel was blown off station - in 1878 the LV-1 was driven 650 miles to Bermuda. Two Nantucket Lightships were lost in storms - the LV-11 stranded on Montauk Point in 1855, and LV-58 sunk in a storm in 1905.

The earliest lightships had only oil lanterns and hand operated bell fog signals for navigational aids. As technology developed, the ships became equipped with high intensity electric lights - visible to 23 miles, powerful automatic steam and air foghorns, radio beacons, and underwater sound ranging transmitters. However, radar, loran, GPS, deepwater light towers and buoy technology reduced the need for lightships, and in 1983 the last Nantucket Lightship - also the last of all U.S. lightships - the LV-613 was replaced by a large navigational buoy.