

S.O.S. for the Nantucket Lightship / LV-112

by Robert Mannino Jr. and Donald Whitehead

For 39 years, the Nantucket Lightship, *LV-112*, guided international transAtlantic shipping to and from US East Coast ports, through some of the busiest and most treacherous shipping lanes in the world. For thousands of immigrants, her bright red hull was the first symbol of America they encountered. Many famous vessels, such as *SS United States*, the *Queen Mary*, *Normandie*, as well as lesser-known naval and cargo vessels, depended on her as a navigational aid to steer them clear of the infamous Nantucket Shoals.

LV-112 was built in 1936 at the Pusey & Jones Shipyard in Wilmington, Delaware, and her \$300,956 bill was paid by the British Government as reparations after *RMS Olympic* rammed and sank *LV-117* in dense fog two years earlier. At 1,050 tons displacement and nearly 150 feet long, *LV-112* was the largest lightship ever built. She was put on station at Nantucket



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On station in February 1975. *LV-112* was decommissioned a month later and was replaced by *WLV-612*. Between 1979 and 1983, two lightships (*WLV-612* and *WLV-613*) alternated duty at Nantucket Shoals. In 1983, the Coast Guard replaced them with a Large Navigational Buoy (LNB), and so ended the lightship service in the United States.

"Onescarynightin,Ibelieve,1958,webrokeouranchorchainanddidnotknowit.WewoundupoffthecoastofNewJerseythenextdaywithourradiobeaconstillgoing.Iremembergoingonthebridgethatnightandwatchingtheshipthroughtheportholegoingupwallsofwaterthatlookedlikefive-toten-storybuildingshigh,thentakinganosedivestraightdown." —Bob Gubitosi, 2nd VP, USCG LSA, *LV-112* Commissaryman 1957–61

Shoals in 1936 and served there without incident until 1942, when she was temporarily replaced by a lighted bell buoy for the duration of World War II. For those years, the ship was painted battleship gray and used as an examination vessel, armed with one three-inch gun and serving at Portland, Maine. She returned to lightship duty at her old station in 1945 and would keep watch there for thirty more years with

one exception: from 1958-60 she was withdrawn and assigned to "Relief" duty at other east coast stations. Before she returned to Nantucket Shoals, she was sent to the Coast Guard yard at Curtis Bay, MD, for a major refit and modernization. *LV-112* was retired from active duty in 1975 and replaced by *WLV-612*.

In retirement, *LV-112* has served as a museum ship and traveled to New York

City to participate in the 1986 celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty in New York; in 1989 she was designated a National Historic Landmark. Today, despite her long history of service and the relatively good condition of her hull and systems, the Nantucket Lightship *LV-112* stands at grave risk of being sent to the scrap yard. Though she stood in harm's way for decade after decade



The Cunard-White Star limited liner *RMS Olympic*, sister to the *Titanic*, passing close aboard the *LV-112*'s predecessor, *LV-117*, on the Nantucket station in early April 1934. Nantucket Shoals was particularly hazardous because many of the large steamers, using the beacon as a navigating aid, steered directly toward the lightship. A month after this photo was taken, on 15 May 1934, *LV-117* was rammed by *Olympic*. Nearly 75 times larger than the lightship and traveling at about 20 knots, *Olympic* struck the lightship broadside in heavy fog and drove it to the bottom. Boats from the liner were immediately put over, but the lightship sank within minutes, killing seven of the eleven crewmembers.

to protect our shipping—and the people and valuable cargo in those ships—from danger, she now relies on all of us to save this historic and venerable vessel from being reduced to scrap. With the help of the general public—who are responding with gifts of all sizes—an emergency fundraising effort is underway to move *LV-112* to safe harbor and return her to her former glory for everyone to appreciate.

Lifelines on the Sea

Lightships were stationed at the most dangerous areas along the US coast and in the Great Lakes in places too deep or too dangerous to build lighthouses. These floating sentinels served as part of a lifeline that played an important role in the development of our country.

Lightship duty for crewmembers was extremely hazardous, especially on the Nantucket Shoals station—considered the most dangerous lightship assignment



COURTESY USCG

Radio room. In 1936, LV-112 put to sea equipped with a radio, radiobeacon, and short-range warning radiobeacon; in 1943, she was equipped with detection radar. Until 1960, the Nantucket was propelled by a steam-compound reciprocating engine. As part of her 1960 refit, her stack was removed and she was repowered with Cooper-Bessemer 900 HP diesel main engine. Aloft, a 500mm lens lantern was mounted on the foremast; her mainmast was equipped with high-intensity light consisting of twenty-four locomotive headlights mounted in groups of six on each face of a four-sided revolving lamp housing.



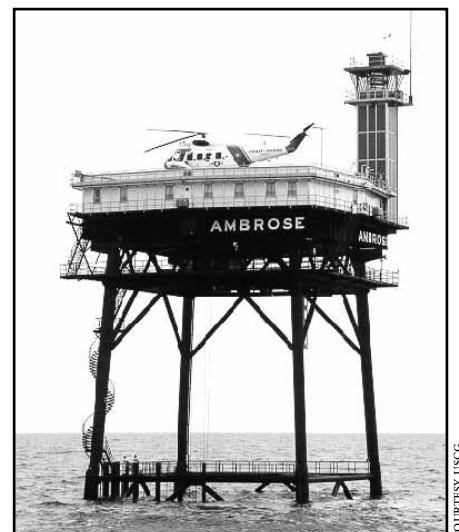
(above) Replacing navigational lights on the forward mast. (below) Soviet fishing trawler. It was not uncommon during the Cold War for the ever-present Soviet fisherman and the lightship crew to trade items, such as coins, cigarettes, etc. for boxes of frozen fish. "The fisherman were our only neighbors." These photos were taken by crewman Rich Racicot between 1964 and 1966.



in the USCG and the world. During the winter months, Nor'easters could last for days. Howling winds and mountainous seas tossed lightships so violently, even the most seasoned sailors succumbed to seasickness. The ever-present diesel fumes didn't help them any. If ear protection wasn't worn on deck, the ship's piercing and incessant fog signals caused intense ear pain and even deafness. A lightship station at night was a profoundly lonely and dangerous place to be, especially during foul weather. Located over the horizon in the pitch-black isolation of night at sea, the ship's only contact with civilization was the ephemeral passing of ships.

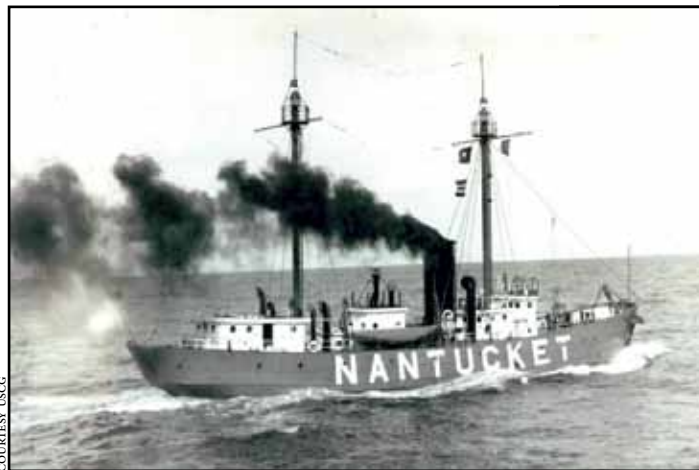
Nantucket Shoals' thick fog is infamous, and while the lightship was stationed there for the very purpose of alerting ships to the dangers ahead and of their location, its position in the shipping lanes put her at real risk of being rammed by huge freighters, tankers, or ocean liners trying to navigate in poor to zero visibility. Numerous accounts of near misses and actual

collisions involving "the Nantucket" paint a grim picture of the dangers of lightship duty. On 25 July 1956, for example, the ill-fated *Andrea Doria* passed within one mile of the lightship's station. On that day, *LV-112* was not on station—she had been temporarily relieved by "Relief," *LV-114 / WAL 536*. (*LV-114* later became the "New Bedford" but was scrapped in 2007 after she sank at the pier after a long period of neglect. More than \$200,000 of taxpayer money was spent raising her, only to have her sold to a salvage



COURTESY USCG

The Coast Guard began replacing lightships with Large Navigational Buoys and "Texas Towers," like this one (right) which replaced the Ambrose Lightship in 1967.



Then and Now: (left) 14 September 1936 under steam power; (right) her current location in Oyster Bay, New York.

company for just \$10,000.)

In all, 179 lightships were built in the United States between 1820 and 1952. At one time, fifty-six lightships were stationed at various locations around the US coast. In the 1970s, the US Coast Guard began replacing lightships with “Texas Towers” (structures resembling an oil rig) and large navigation buoys (LNB). In 1983, *LV-112*’s successor, *WLV-613*, the “Nantucket II,” was the last lightship to be decommissioned. Today, only seventeen lightships still exist; eight have qualified for National Historic Landmark status for “possessing unique characteristics of historic significance” and are currently operated as public museums.

Moving and Rescuing the Ship

The Nantucket Lightship presently sits idle at an unsecured public pier in Oyster Bay, New York, where she has been berthed for several years. The ship has fallen victim to

varying degrees of vandalism and is rapidly deteriorating from neglect while she awaits a new steward. Oyster Bay town officials have been patient and accommodating during the search for a new owner, but ultimately they want *LV-112* to vacate. If a new owner is not found to transport the ship to an alternate port soon, she faces the real possibility of being scrapped.

Since *LV-112*’s decommissioning in 1975 at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston, the historic ship has been used as a museum and has changed ownership and ports several times. Past owners were well intentioned, but *LV-112* repeatedly fell victim to politics, lack of adequate marketing and media coverage, and most importantly, funding. The current owner, the National Lighthouse Museum, is searching for a qualified non-profit organization to adequately implement a strategy that includes *LV-112*’s continuation as a non-profit 501(c)3 lightship museum with a primary

focus on showcasing the remarkable history of this ship and the broader history she represents. Fortunately, the transfer of *LV-112*’s ownership includes a covenant intended to prevent the ship from being sold for scrap or used for anything other than a non-profit museum. Nonetheless, she appears to be at the end of her historic lifespan—unless ownership can be transferred to a committed and adequately funded organization that will provide the perpetual stewardship she deserves.

As a result of the nation’s current economic crisis, early fundraising prospects for this non-profit initiative have hit rough seas. Some private donors who initially had come forward to fund the ship lost most of their pledged donations in the recent stock market decline. Nevertheless, there are other options. A grass-roots effort is underway to raise money via thousands of small donations, which would add up to the total needed to stabilize and move

Then and Now—On the Bridge. Most of LV-112’s working equipment is in place and intact. Clearly everything onboard needs attention after years of neglect, but, overall, her hull, systems, and equipment can be cleaned up, tuned up, and put back in working order.



the ship. Once those seed funds are in hand, private and government grants and endowment funds will be garnered to keep *LV-112* a perpetual beacon of our nation's seafaring history. An estimated \$175,000 to \$250,000 is needed to begin restoration and stabilize the ship from further deterioration. Additionally, as a long-term goal, an \$8–\$10 million endowment will secure the ship's future.

LV-112's Restoration

There is cause to celebrate. *LV-112* appears to be in nearly original intact condition. After several years of neglect, she obviously needs some attention, but the hull is sound and much of what she needs most are a thorough cleaning throughout the ship and below the waterline, plus painting and miscellaneous repairs. Until a marine survey is conducted in drydock, the full extent of her repair needs is unknown.

In the engine room, the main eight-cylinder 900 HP Cooper-Bessemer diesel engine has not been operated for four years, but it appears to be in good condition and can be restarted. Of the six other smaller GM 3-71 diesel engines (three electrical generators and three air compressors that start the main engine and operate the navigational fog signal), two are currently in running condition. The others need varying degrees of repairs, and two of the electrical generators need extensive repair and restoration. The repair list is manageable, and what it will take to get her running again is a far cry from the price tag many other historic ships require.

Throwing the Ship a Lifeline

One organization being considered as a new steward for *LV-112* proposes to bring the ship home to Massachusetts waters. They already have found a berth in Boston Harbor, arranged through the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport). An alternative site is the famous fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where the mayor and business leaders have expressed strong interest in providing a homeport for the ship. The Gloucester Maritime Heritage Center offered dock space, but it was determined that the dock is not strong enough for *LV-112*, so another berth is being sought. The organization's next step is to find funds to stabilize *LV-112* and to assume non-profit ownership.

LV-112 has tremendous potential and could be converted into a successful income-producing educational institution and museum. If *LV-112* is re-established as a new museum, she has high potential for receiving private, federal and state grants.



Chart table and navigation station—today

Federal and state authorities have recognized the historical value and significance of former lightships and have awarded generous grants to these historic landmarks. The Overfalls Maritime Museum Foundation in Lewes, Delaware, is one example of a successful lightship museum that has received substantial federal and state funding. Unlike the Nantucket Lightship, it is not registered as a National Historic Landmark, although an application for this designation has been made.

LV-112 could be more than just an institution that draws only the interest of maritime history buffs. It could include a cooperative membership program that shares information with other lightship museums. It could involve weather and marine science and historic maritime programs affiliated with a wide range of educational institutions and foundations.

The immediate goal of raising \$175,000 will provide necessary seed money and buy the time to apply for more comprehensive and time-consuming grant applications. If everyone who reads this article would donate even a small amount of money, that goal could be reached.

The USCG Lightship Sailors Association International, Inc. (USCG LSA), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, has offered to accept donations specifically for *LV-112* until another qualified non-profit organization can assume ownership. At that point, the USCG LSA would transfer the funds to *LV-112*'s new owners.

Donations may be made to: Nantucket Lightship / *LV-112*, c/o USCG Lightship Sailors International, Inc., 1107 E. Saguro Drive, Globe, AZ 85501. For more information and to send donations via the internet, visit the web site www.nantucketlightshiplv-112.org. ⚓

Robert Mannino Jr., of South Hampton, NH, is spearheading the effort to save the Nantucket Lightship, LV-112. He is a marketing communications and public relations consultant, specializing in development programs for non-profit organizations including maritime museums, historical societies and shipbuilding preservation projects. His experience also includes chairing municipal historical commissions. Donald Whitehead is an author and underwater photographer from Salem, MA. They would like to thank the USCG Historians Office, USCG Lightship International, crew members of LV-112, USCG Art Program, and Overfalls Maritime Museum Foundation for their assistance in preparing this article.

Lightship Museums in the United States

- LV-83 "Swiftsure," Northwest Seaport, Seattle, WA
- LV-87 "Ambrose," South Street Seaport Museum, New York, NY
- LV-101 "Portsmouth," Naval Shipyard Museum, Portsmouth, VA
- LV-103 "Huron," Port Huron Museum, Port Huron, MI
- LV-112 "Nantucket," (inactive/closed) Oyster Bay, NY
- LV-116 "Chesapeake," Baltimore Maritime Museum, Baltimore, MD
- WLV-604 "Columbia," Columbia River Maritime Museum, Astoria, OR
- WLV-605 "Relief," Lightship Relief, Oakland, CA
- LV-118 "Overfalls," Overfalls Lightship Museum, Lewes, DE

Two other "Nantucket" lightships, LV-613 and LV-612, are still in existence and privately owned.