

“Nantucket South Shoals Lightship” - Part II

by Bob Bachand

Long periods of boredom and sudden terror were typical for the men that served aboard the Nantucket South Shoals Lightship. These men were always willing hosts for those stranded at sea, and they never hesitated, even at great risk to themselves, to go to the rescue of shipwrecked sailors.

When coming up on deck, crewmen frequently searched the nearby waters for the red buoy located some two miles west of the lightship. Out of sight of land, the buoy may have given them some sense of attachment to the rest of humanity. Too often, however, it was masked by the fog that frequented Nantucket Shoals. On occasion when the buoy was swept away, the men were said to have felt as if they had lost a friend. Crewmen also paused to watch the seagulls or Mother Carey's chickens - storm petrels as they were then called - feed on the wing, snatching up small crustaceans from the ocean's surface. But these isolated sailors soon found another way to while away their time. They started a small industry.

The men began creating Nantucket Lightship baskets sometime around 1856. Wooden bottoms were turned while ashore and when aboard ship, the men prepared strips of wood - white oak or hickory - and rattan. Together, they were assembled to form graceful round or oval baskets. The finished products were then sold for a small profit on Nantucket Island. But more importantly, despite their dour circumstances, the lightship's crewmen never faltered in their mission to serve as an important navigational beacon.

For vessels crossing the Atlantic bound for American ports, the Nantucket South Shoals Lightship was the first sight encountered along our coast, but without



Lightship “Nantucket” (LV-112) moored in Oyster Bay, NY.

a radio-direction finder or more modern devices, it was easy to miss its twin lights in fog or stormy weather. On the evening of December 23, 1887, the British steamer *City of Newcastle* was bound for New York from Newcastle. As the steamer neared the shoals, the vessel encountered driving rains and large waves. Southwest of the lightship, she went aground in barely 18 feet of water; the vessel's draft was 25 feet. She “took bottom,”

her captain later reported to the press and the aft compartment began to take on water. The engines were immediately reversed, but within an hour the fire room floor was filled with seawater and the boilers were extinguished. With his vessel totally unmanageable and taking on more water, Captain Thornton gave the order to abandon ship. As two of her lifeboats were being

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lowered, they were immediately lost, but the entire crew of 25 was able to get away in the remaining two boats. A short time later, the steamer slipped to the bottom, stern first, in 16 fathoms of water. (By this time, the crippled steamer had been driven a few miles north of the lightship.) Manning the oars, the men struggled against heavy waves as they made for the lightship. Eventually, with help of the floating beacon's crewmen, the shipwrecked men were taken aboard.

In a later incident, the lightship's lookout spotted a small raft drifting several miles off in the distance. A man aboard the raft had made a feeble wave to get his attention. Despite being in the midst of a severe January storm, lightship crewmen immediately set out for the raft. When it was finally reached, they found the frozen corpse of one sailor and two other men near death from exposure. The two sailors were taken aboard and survived their ordeal; their companion was buried at sea. During the Civil War, a number of sailors also had been given refuge aboard the lightship after their fishing vessels were destroyed by the Confederate cruiser *Tallahassee*.

In the early 1900s, wireless telegraph made it possible for operators aboard the lightship to communicate with other ships and to announce the arrival of trans-Atlantic ships bound for New York. The public marveled at the technology of the day. When a steamer noticed that the lightship's revolving light was not operational, its radio operator signaled "Have you two fixed lights?" The lightship immediately responded about their problem. "Such feats would have seemed in-

credible some years ago," wrote a reporter for the *New York Observer and Chronicle*. "They would have been listened to as an idle tale of a Jules Verne." In December of 1905, the wireless was instrumental in saving the lives of *Nantucket Lightship, Relief #58's* crewmen.

On December 10, 1905, *Relief #58* at Nantucket South Shoal was on station while *LV #66* was in port for repairs. During the day, the relief vessel was struck by a severe nor'easter. As the storm grew in ferocity, a leak developed in the engine room. Water began to rush in, and within a few hours, the engine fires were extinguished. The pumps were not able to keep up with the incoming water and *Relief #58* became the first American ship to request help using the wireless. "SOS" and "CQD" had not yet been established as universal distress signals, but the call for "assistance as soon as possible" was unmistakable. Just a half-hour after the call for help, all communications ceased.

For the next 24 hours, the lightship was kept afloat by hand-bailing. The tender *Azalea* was the first to reach the site, but she had to hold off for about six hours until the storm abated. When the seas finally calmed, most of the lightship's crewmen were taken aboard and *Relief #58* was taken under tow. But they had made only 18 miles before she had to be cut loose – the remaining crewmen had scarcely made it aboard the *Azalea* before their ship was lost to the sea. Some three decades later, radio transmission would instead prove to bring disaster to a Nantucket South Shoals lightship.

In early January of 1934, the United States liner *Washington*, bound for New York Harbor, sideswiped the lightship, tearing off davits, a lifeboat and antennas. "The fog permitted about as much visibility as an as-

bestos curtain," reported Captain John Jensen, the liner's master. The liner had been navigating by radio beacon. Prompted by the liner *Washington's* accident, the Bureau of Lighthouses soon released a bulletin warning navigators not to set their radio beacon courses directly for the lightship, hoping to hear its fog signal in time to clear the vessel. There had been so many near misses with the Nantucket lightship that her captain ordered that life boats be left ready for launching in case of a collision.

On the morning of May 16, 1934, Captain Braithwaite of *Nantucket Lightship LV #117* had gone below for a short rest; during the night, there had been two near misses with passing liners. The captain was lying in his bunk reading a novel for just a short time when the alarm was sounded; the British liner *Olympic* was bearing directly on them!

Navigating mainly by the lightship's radio beacon in a heavy fog, at a speed of between six to ten knots, the captain of the *Olympic* did not spot the 133-foot red-hulled lightship until it was just a short distance away. Captain Binks called for the engines to stop and then go full astern. He then ordered the bulkhead doors shut throughout the liner. It was too late. The bow of the *Olympic* sliced through the middle of the lightship, taking some of her crew to the bottom. Seven died; four including her captain were rescued. The British government later replaced the lightship with a vessel that could better withstand a similar incident.

The last lightship to serve at Nantucket South Shoals was *WLV-612*. It was on station from 1975 to 1983.



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