MASSACHUSETTES
Nantucket Lighthouse



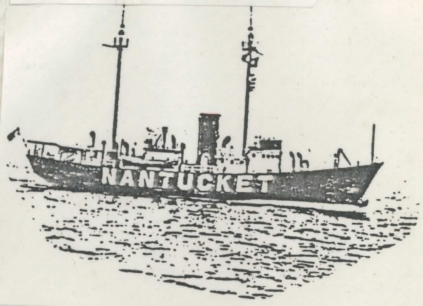
LV-112

After over 40 years of service on Nantucket Shoals, the lightship was moored permanently at STRAIGHT WHARF on Nantucket Island. It was replaced by a "Texas Tower" type structure.

The Nantucket Lightship (LV 612)

Lewis Wharf, Boston, Massachusetts

The Boston Educational Marine Exchange recently acquired one of the two last lightships owned by the federal government. You might say they got "our" lightship, ahem! Anyway, we have had pleasant and constructive correspondence with the group and wish them the very best with finding a creative use for this vessel. She is in excellent shape but needs lots of tender loving care to stay in tip-top condition.







Lightship BOSTON on weather station is passed by Lightship NANTUCKET enroute to her station during 1930s. (Photo courtesy of George F. Stewart, USLHS/Ret).

In 1820, almost a century after the British came up with the idea, the United States began using lightships to mark the approaches to important harbors and to guide mariners safely past offshore shoals where it was impracticable to erect fixed aids to navigation. At their peak, more than fifty of the floating lighthouses were stationed along the east and west coasts of the United States and in three of the Great Lakes. By 1939, when the Bureau of Lighthouses merged with the Coast Guard, only thirty lightships remained on station and since then, all except one — the lightship guarding Nantucket Shoals, have been replaced by "Texas Tower" type Offshore Light Platforms or Large Navigational Buoys (LNB) at a considerable savings in manpower and in construction/ maintenance costs.

Until recently, setting a buoy on Nantucket Shoals was deemed almost impossible due to the rotary currents in the area which would cause the buoy to spin continuously. But on August 10, 1982, a LNB equipped with a larger mooring chain and special swivels was anchored a few miles from the lightship station. If the LNB survives and provides satisfactory service over a period of two years or so, it will replace the lightship and permit it to sail off into the sunset and into the pages of history as the last of its kind.

Lightship duty was, and until NANTUCKET is replaced, still is a hazardous profession. In foggy weather, lightships are sitting ducks for oncoming vessels, homing on their fog signals or radio beacons, and changing course only at the last moment. In the process, a number of lightships have been rammed and sunk, others have been severely damaged and all of them have had instances of hair raising near-misses. Although NANTUCKET is equipped with radar and other electronic safeguards, the threat of collision still exists. A recent one-way radio conversation between NANTUCKET and an unidentified merchantship is a case in point.

While the Cutter DUANE was taking a disabled fishing vessel in tow, DUANE's Officer of the Deck (OOD) heard the following voice conversation on Channel 16, the ship-to-ship emergency distress frequency; "Vessel 1.6 miles from Nantucket Lightship, request that you change course. You are on a collision course with the lightship."

After a period of silence, NANTUCKET came on the air again: "Vessel 0.6 miles from Nantucket Lightship, you are directed to immediately change course!! You are going to collide with us!" In the background, DUANE's OOD heard the lightship's collision alarm and could imagine the turmoil as the lightship's crew scrambled to their stations. Suddenly, a faint voice was heard, evidently shouting across the lightship's bridge, at some distance from the radio's microphone: "Skipper, I think I see someone on the bridge (of the merchant vessel)." Then all was silent — no "MAYDAY."

DUANE's report of the incident concluded with the assumption that "...on some merchie the "iron mike" was taken in hand and the rudder put hard over."

Lightship #117, occupying Nantucket Shoals Station in dense fog on 15 May, 1934 was not as fortunate. Not being equipped with electronic devices to warn her that S.S. OLYMPIC was on a collision course, Lightship #117 lost seven crewmembers when the huge liner rammed and sank her.