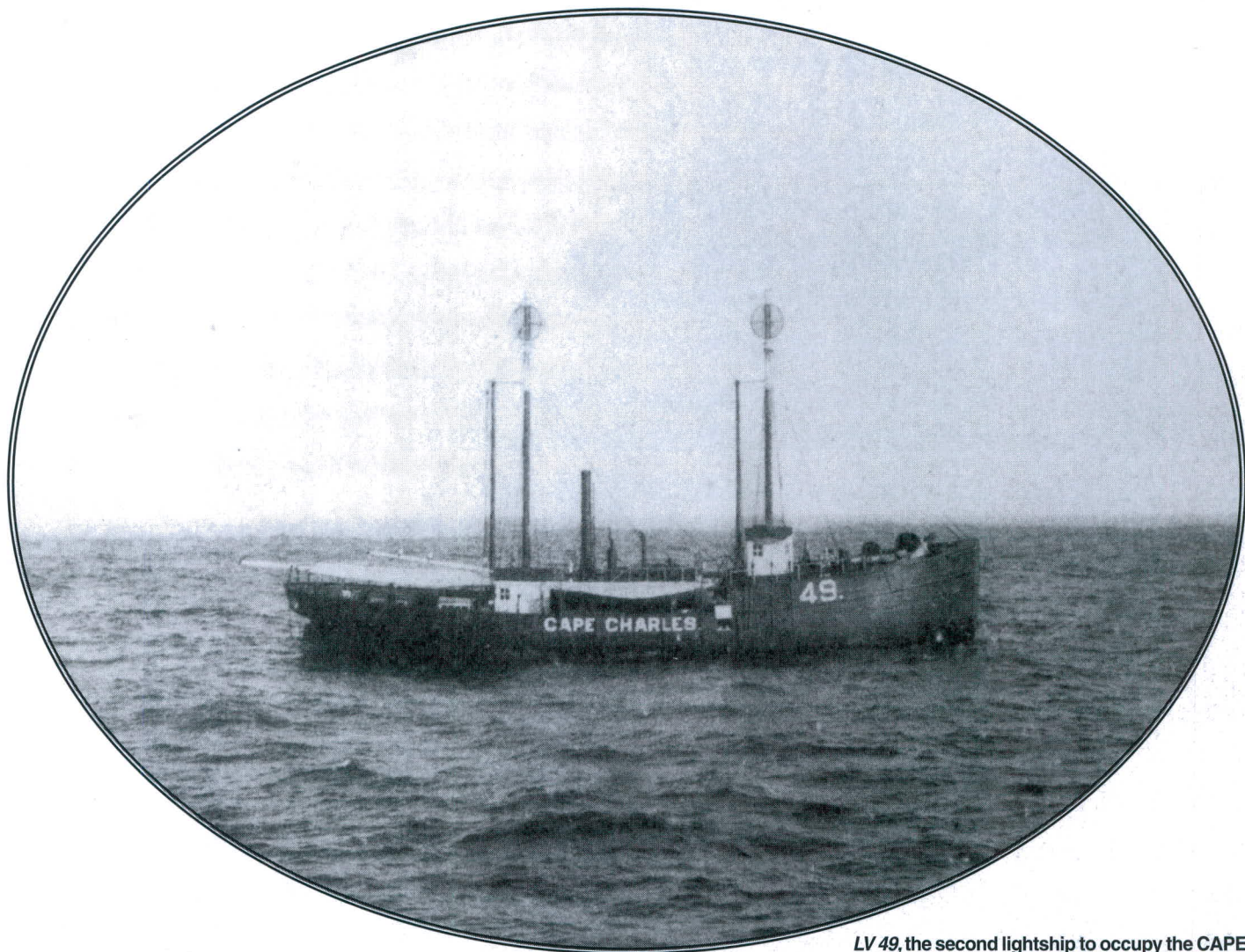


# Cape Charles Lightship

By Wayne Wheeler



**LV 49, the second lightship to occupy the CAPE CHARLES station. Circa 1900 photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.**



In 1888, to assist mariners find the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, the Lighthouse Service established a lightship station east of Smith's Island (and the Cape Charles Lighthouse). The *1888 Report to Congress* reads, "Cape Charles Lightship, No. 46, off the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, Virginia – This vessel was placed in position just outside of Smith's Island Shoal on February 17, 1888. She has ridden out several heavy gales and proved herself an excellent sea-boat and a valuable aid to the navigation of the coast."

LV 46, constructed in 1887, was a 400-ton, 124-foot-long, schooner-rigged sailing vessel. Although she did not have propulsion machinery, she did have a steam plant for the fog signal. Three years later LV 46 was replaced by LV 49, constructed in 1891 and also a schooner-rigged sailing vessel. She lasted at that station until 1916 when LV 101 was constructed and assumed the position. She was only 101-feet in length, but was the first propelled (4 cylinder kerosene engine) lightship on the station. From 1924 to 1927, a steam propelled lightship, LV 80, took over the station and she was replaced by LV 72 (steam-screw vessel) which served from 1927 to 1933

when she was replaced by LV 116 (Coast Guard designation WAL 538). WAL 538 maintained that station until it was discontinued in 1965. The station name was changed from CAPE CHARLES to CHESAPEAKE in 1928.

All the vessels experienced severe storms while on this station. LV 49 was the first lightship on the Cape Charles station to experience a very heavy gale. The Board reported in the 1888 Report to Congress, "This composite light-vessel was built in 1890-91; is of about 298 tons burden and has a steam fog signal.

On October 11, 1896, the Board reported, "... during a severe gale she parted her moorings and drifted off station, although every



Left – LV 46, the first lightship to man the CAPE CHARLES station. She is shown here at the end of her service life having last served as a RELIEF lightship for the Fifth Lighthouse District. The vessel served as CAPE CHARLES (1888-1891), BUSH BLUFF, VA (1891-93), WOLF TRAP, VA (1893-95), SMITH POINT, VA (1895-97), laid up for repairs (1897-98), OVERFALLS, DE (1898-1901), TAIL OF HORSESHOE (1901-1922) and RELIEF in 1923. Shore Viillage Museum photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.



Above – LV 72 served at CAPE CHARLES in 1927 and 1928. She also served on the DIAMOND SHOAL station (1900-22), as RELIEF (1922-27), CHESAPEAKE (1928-33), and ended her career on the CROSS RIP station, MA (1934-37). An August 4, 1915 photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Left – LV 80. The vessel served on the CAPE LOOKOUT, VA station (1905-24), CAPE CHARLES (1924-27), and as RELIEF (1927-34).

effort was made by the crew to hold on. About 6 p.m. on that date, when 16 miles to the southward and eastward of Cape Henry light, the cruiser Raleigh tried to get a line to the light-vessel, but without success. The U.S.S. Columbia was more successful, and got a steel hawser aboard and towed the vessel into Hampton Roads (in Chesapeake Bay). Both anchors and 150 fathoms (900 feet) of chain were lost . . . On November 11, she was towed back to station . . .”

She remained on her station until April 7, 1898, when she parted her moorings in a heavy northeasterly gale and went adrift. The following is an abstract of the report of the casualty, made by the master of the ship: “At 8 a.m. on April 27, the wind increased to a heavy gale, the ship labored heavily and shipped a sea that carried away the boat chocks and lashings, the door of the pump house and the cabin windows, besides doing other minor damage. At 10:30 p.m. the [anchor] cable parted, and as the wind was blowing fresh from the NNE, the vessel was put under close reefed main sail, foresail and the jib, and stood in on the starboard tack. At 2 a.m. Cape Henry light bearing W. by N. distant about 4 miles; wore ship and stood to the eastward . . .” The ship sailed back to station at 4:30 a.m. and with the gale subsiding anchored in about 42 feet of water SSE from Cape Henry Lighthouse and far south of her assigned station. At 9 a.m. the gale increased and the anchor cable again parted. The Captain made sail and they made off to the northeast. The next morning at 6 a.m. the ship headed southwest and at noon, with the wind moderating the Captain reported, “. . . at about noon spoke the steamship *D.H. Miller*, which took the vessel in tow, being then between Currituck Beach and Bodie Island lights, and towed her inside of Cape Henry. From there the tug *Apollo* towed the vessel to the buoy depot at Portsmouth, Va., where new cables and anchors, boat chocks and main boom were furnished, and the damage to the deck house repaired. She was replaced on her station by steam light-vessel, No. 69, on May 5.

While on her station slight repairs were made by her crew, the most important of which was the replacement of the entire piping of the steam windlass. She was furnished with coal, wood, rations, fire buckets, medicines, valves . . . new mainsail, window glass . . .”

On March 7, 1899, in a heavy snowstorm the LV 49 again parted her mooring and went

adrift and again ended up off Currituck Beach Lighthouse, NC. The steamship *Deremore*, bound from Cuba to Philadelphia, took her in tow and took her to Hampton Roads in Chesapeake Bay. The lighthouse service tender *Maple* towed her to Portsmouth the next day. The lightship was eventually towed to the yard in Baltimore for a complete overhaul. She was towed back to station on July 1, 1899. In the interval a 3<sup>rd</sup> District lightship temporarily assumed the station as the 5<sup>th</sup> District didn't have a RELIEF lightship available.

The Board reported, “. . . During the hurricane of August, 1899, she remained on station without accident, but in a severe gale on October 31, 1899, she strained so hard that the starboard chain stopper broke and carried away all castings and connections. A rope stopper was put on the chain . . . but the starboard chain parted, when 90 fathoms of chain and the mushroom anchor were lost. In making sail the jib and foresail were torn and split, and the main boom was broken, but with such sail as could be made she was worked inside of Cape Henry . . .” the vessel received a tow to the depot. It was repaired and lost items were refurbished. It resumed station on November 12, 1899.

Poor LV 49, she continually gets battered by storms and parts her moorings. Having a propulsion system would have helped the vessel keep station and being able to run the engines at, say two knots, would take the strain off the anchor chain.

In 1914, on December 5, she was again driven from station losing her mooring chain and mushroom anchor, and again ended up well south of her station, off Virginia Beach and almost aground. The Captain let go with the spare anchor, but the storm was so severe that they continued to drag anchor. The Captain reported, “. . . I let go the remaining anchor with 150 fathoms [900 feet] of 6-inch hawser, but the vessel was slowly dragging. Forty-five fathoms of 2-inch chain, which was left in starboard chain locker, was hove out to help keep the vessel from dragging; but she was dragging all night, we blowing our whistle off and on for assistance. We expended 80 gallons of mineral oil [kerosene] during the night and the next day to keep the breakers down [apparently they were in the surf line and the kerosene calmed the waves]. At daylight on December 6, I set the signals for assistance. At 1:30 p.m. tender *Orchid* arrived to our assistance and took the vessel in tow for Ports-

mouth . . .” Singed A.M. Thistel, Master.

The District Inspector asked the skipper of the *Orchid* to send a report of the incident. He wrote, “As directed by your letter dated December 7, 1914, to make a special report of the maneuvers of this vessel in rescuing Cape Charles Light Vessel No. 49, I would report that this vessel left the Buoy Depot, Portsmouth, VA at 10 a.m. . . . December 6, 1914 . . . arriving in the vicinity of the light-vessel at 2 p.m. . . . I anchored the tender about 300 feet to the north and eastward of the light-vessel, which was then about 500 or 600 feet from the beach. Both the light vessel and the tender were in the breaker at the time, as it was then breaking in 7 fathoms of water [42 feet]. I found the lightship to be in about 9 feet of water. She was dragging her anchor, which was made fast to a 6-inch hawser, and going astern when I reached her. A very strong current was setting to the southward . . . it was the opinion of the master of Light Vessel No. 49 and myself that the ship would have been beached in another hour or two if the *Orchid* had not gotten to her assistance when she did . . . [we] lowered out dingy and attempted to get a small line to the light vessel. I did not deem it prudent for the safety of the tender to approach the light vessel any nearer, owing to the heavy sea that was running, and also the strong current, which I judged was running four knots. In our attempt to run a small line to the ship, the current being so strong, and with the high winds, the dingy, with Second Officer Manyon and Seaman F. Luick and G. Benson in same, were unable to get to the light vessel, about 300 feet away. I then had them pulled back to the tender, weighed anchor, and went more ahead of the light vessel. The boat was then sent again with the line to the light vessel. This time the boat was successful, only though by the assistance of the crew of the light vessel, which trailed a line astern with life ring attached, which I instructed them to do. After letting out about 200 feet of line, the crew of the dingy were able to attach same and haul themselves near enough to the light vessel and then bend on the line from the *Orchid*. This was quite a perilous trip owing to the conditions, and the men deserve credit for so doing. The dingy then returned and was hoisted on board with great difficulty. She was damaged considerably before we could secure her . . . I then weighed anchor and moved further ahead of the light vessel, as I knew the crew of the light vessel could never haul our

9-inch hawser across the current that was running. After moving ahead I again anchored the tender and sent the hawser to the light vessel, which was accomplished successfully. I had instructed Mr. Manyon to tell the master of the light vessel that after he had our hawser on board and secured he was to signal that fact and then I was to blow three blasts of our whistle and he was to cut his hawser, which he was riding to. When all was set this was done and I set ahead with the light vessel in tow at 3:10 p.m. . . . after passing through the breakers I proceeded to Portsmouth, VA . . . Undoubtedly the light vessel would have beached before dark if the *Orchid* had not arrived when she did, and the light vessel was dragging on the beach as the crew of the *Orchid* was getting the hawser to her . . .” respectfully, H. Almy, Captain..

Finally, the Lighthouse Service decided that a vessel with propulsion was required on the CAPE CHARLES station and assigned *LV 101* which had a 200 h.p., 4-cylinder, 2-cycle, direct reversing, kerosene engine. She could make up to 8 knots. This vessel was replaced by the *LV 80* in 1924 which was propelled by a steam engine. Having a vessel with an engine made a difference. In January 1925, the vessel's captain, F.L. Dixon, reported, “I respectfully request to report the following information: On January 1, 1925, the vessel parted her moorings at 9:30 a.m., losing

anchor and about 130 fathoms of chain, wind at this time being northeast and blowing a gale and seas very heavy. It took us three hours and 15 minutes to get back and take up station. No damage except the anchor and chain [loss].”

In 1927, *LV 72* relieved *LV 101* on the CAPE CHARLES station. On December 2, 1927, the master of the *LV 72* reported, “On December 2, thick, bad weather set in, with strong northeast winds. On December 3, the gale increased very rapidly, with heavy seas breaking all around us and breaking over at times.”

At 4 a.m. on the 4<sup>th</sup> took a breaker right over on the port side which moved everything on deck; took two life rings hanging on straps on the railing aft; also the hose rack, and broke the glass on the forepart of the after house; flooded the radio room and rushed down the steps to the deck below.”

At 5 p.m. took another breaking sea full force right on the bow. That was the time the casting broke and parted the heavy rope lashing in the chain locker, and mooring chain went right on through the hawse pipe and overboard. Immediately ordered the engineer to come ahead on the engine and swung ship around and let other anchor go. Did not get more than 1 ½ miles off station and were anchored before 6 a.m.”

All day Sunday and Sunday night gale continued, but ship held fast as she was helped

along by main engine.”

This morning, December 5, after weather moderated so could handle the anchor, we hove in and anchored on station at 11 a.m.”

I expected to find the other chain snapped, but that is some strong chain – the casting broke in two places. Am sending that into the depot by tender.” - C.L. Swanberg, Master

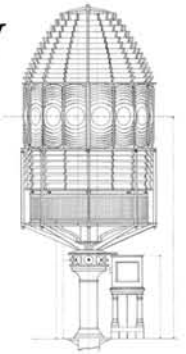
The last light vessel to man the CHESAPEAKE (formerly CAPE CHARLES) station was the *LV 116* (WAL 538). The station was discontinued in 1965 and the WAL 538 assumed the DEALWARE station until 1970 when the vessel was decommissioned and given to the Baltimore Maritime Museum where she is open to the public. The *LV 101* (WAL 524) served as RELIEF, and on the OVERFALLS and STONEHORSE SHOAL stations before being decommissioned in 1963. She is now located ashore, in a pool of sorts in Norfolk, VA and named *Portsmouth*, although no such lightship station ever existed.

***LV 101* (Coast Guard designation WAL 524) shown in her "bathtub" in Portsmouth, VA. She served on the CAPE CHARLES station 1916-24, as RELIEF vessel 1925-26, OVERFALLS, DE (1926-51) and as STONEHORSE SHOAL, MA (1951-63). There never was a Portsmouth station. 1989 photo by Candace Clifford, courtesy of the National Maritime Initiative.**





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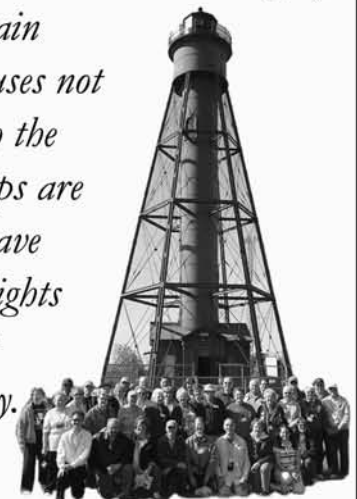
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