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The Cape Hatteras Lightship

by Wayne C. Wheeler



***LV 72* hull as DIAMOND. The name Diamond Shoal was changed in 1913 to DIAMOND and remained with that daymark until the station was discontinued in 1966. Hull *LV 72* was replaced with *LV 105* in 1922. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.**

The lighthouse, with its reflector system of illumination, was not adequate for the job of warning mariners who navigated the Diamond Shoals, located 8 or 10 miles off-shore. Blunt's *American Coast Pilot* describes the area in his 1803 edition, "Cape Hatteras is the most remarkable and dangerous cape on the coast of North America. This point extends far into the ocean, from the coast of North Carolina . . . The water is very shoal at a great distance from the Cape, which is remarkable for sudden squalls of wind, and for the most severe storms of thunder, lightning and rain, which happen almost every day, during one half of the year. Some years since, the shoals in the vicinity of Cape Hatteras were found so dangerous, so extensive, and so shallow, many of them cover[ed] with not more than 5 or 6 feet of water, that no vessels in that latitude ventured within 7 leagues of the land (Ed. A league is generally said to be three miles].

"At present, the outer shoals, which lie about 14 miles S.W. of the cape, are but five or six acres extent, and where they are really dangerous to vessels of moderate draught, not above half that extent. On the [shallowest] part of these is about 10 feet at low water; and here, at times, the ocean breaks in a tremendous manner, spouting, as it were, to the clouds, from the violent agitation of the (Gulf] stream, which touches the eastern edge of the banks, from which the declivity is sudden, that is to say, from 10 fathoms to no soundings. On the spot above mentioned, which is firm sand, it has been the lot of many a good vessel to strike, in a gale of wind, and go to pieces. . ."

In 1823 Congress appropriated $25,000 to station a lightship off the Diamond Shoals. Established in 1824, the station was originally known as CAPE HATTERAS. The first vessel to occupy the station was blown off station repeatedly and in 1827, blown ashore and wrecked near Ocracoke Inlet. The station was then occupied by various buoys. In 1852, a bell boat was moored nine miles off shore (near the shoals) and

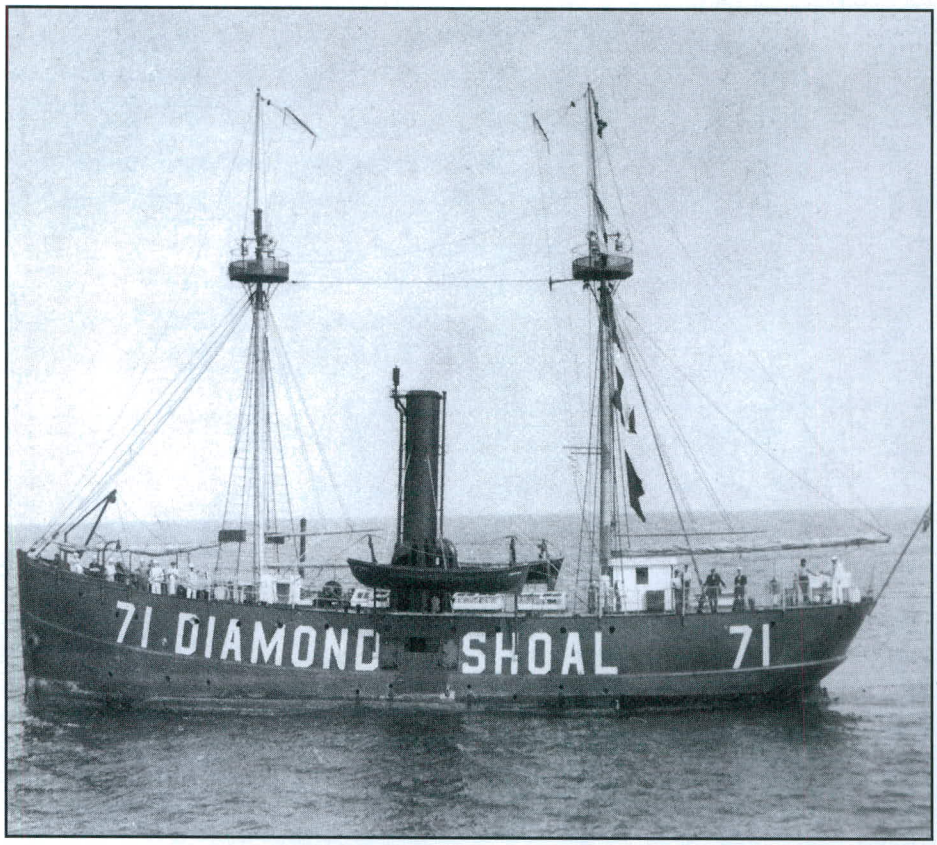
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another buoy three and a half miles offshore. Within four months, both had disappeared. In 1883, a whistle buoy was placed off the shoals. The next year a gas powered, lighted buoy was established. A Lighthouse Board Report stated, ". . . it remained in position but a few months and has since been drifting about the Atlantic", and "It is evident that such a buoy cannot be maintained at this point."

In 1891, the government attempted to have a caisson structure built on the Diamond Shoals, to no avail (see Keeper's Log Vol. 4, No.3). In 1897 the service tried again to place a lightship to mark the shoals when *Light Vessel 69* was stationed there and named DIAMOND.

The Diamond Shoal lightship station was never a happy place to be assigned. Various lightships assigned to Diamond Shoals were blown off station 22 times in severe weather, on one occasion driven ashore and on two other occasions, severely damaged. President Roosevelt commended the crew for their high order of seamanship during the hurricane of 1933.

An incredible amount of vessel traffic continued to pass the lightship station. In 1899, 5,146 vessels were logged as having passed the station. In 1912, the lightship was rammed by the schooner *John Bossert* damaging hull plating and in 1918, the assigned vessel, *LV 71*, was sunk on station by surface gunfire from the German submarine U-104. The lightship crew was given the opportunity to abandon ship in lifeboats prior to the sinking and made shore safely.



Above — *LV 71* was stationed on the DIAMOND SHOAL station from 1901 until she was sunk by a German U-Boat in 1917. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

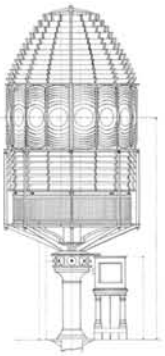
Below — *LV 69* was the first lightship on DIAMOND SHOAL since the original Cape Hatteras lightship 1824-1827 (no hull number). She maintained that station from 1897 until going aground in 1901 as seen in this photo. Note the Lighthouse Service tender standing off-shore. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo



The April 1919 edition of the Lighthouse Service *Bulletin* reported, "On August 6, 1918, Diamond Shoal light vessel *No. 71*, N.C. was attacked and sunk by a German submarine. At 2:50 p.m. on this date the submarine attacked a merchant vessel in the vicinity of the light vessel, and the light vessel then sent a warning by wireless [to other ships in the vicinity]. At 3:25 p.m., the submarine fired six shots at the light vessel, and at 3:30 p.m. twelve men on board the light vessel, including the mate, engineer, cook, three firemen, four seamen, and two radio operators, abandoned the vessel. The submarine then ceased firing on the light vessel and attacked a merchant vessel, later attacking and sinking the light vessel. No employee of the Lighthouse Service was injured. From reports it appears that about 25 other vessels took refuge in Lookout Bight as a result of the warning sent out by the light vessel. Relief light vessel *No. 72* was established on this station on March 30, 1919, replacing the sunken vessel . . ." It's interesting to note that a year passed before the Lighthouse Service reported the incident in their monthly *Bulletin*. Perhaps this was due to some national security measure.

In 1966, the lightship manning the station was replaced by a Texas tower.

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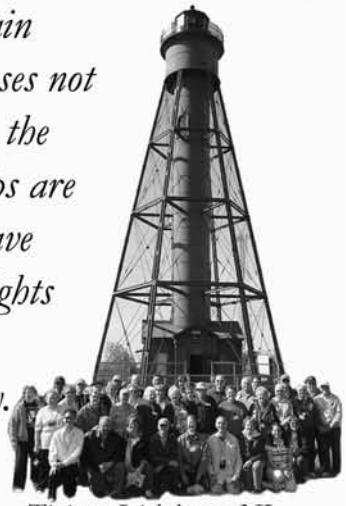
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