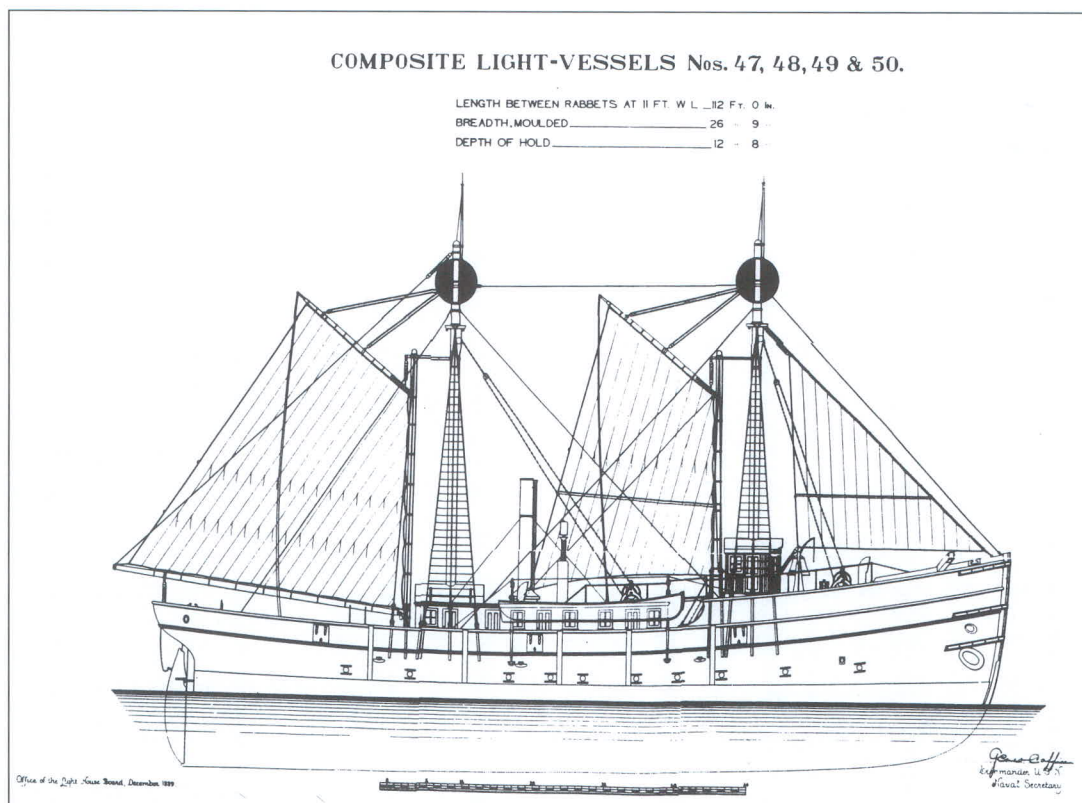




# LV 50—Columbia

By George Worthylake



The first lightship to occupy the Columbia River station was LV 50. She had three sister ships, which served on east coast stations. One, the LV 49, was rammed and sunk on station in 1925. She was eventually raised, repaired and returned to service. Plans for these four lightships appear on the rear cover of this issue.

A Congressional Act of 1889 provided \$50,000 to construct lightship LV 50, a composite vessel, to be moored at the mouth of the treacherous Columbia River Bar. Composite vessels were steel framed and wood planked. The frames, floors, keelsons, stringers, beams, sheer and bilge-strakes, keel plate, etc., were steel. The planking and other wood sections were made of Georgia and Florida pine, the sheathing of white oak.

LV 50, as COLUMBIA, was the first lightship stationed on the west coast and she served her entire career on the Columbia station, from 1892 until 1909 when she was laid up at Astoria pending further disposition.

The Congressional Act providing \$50,000 for her construction was short of the lowest bid and an additional appropriation of \$10,000 was passed the following year. The winning bid, the second time around, was \$60,150 and went to a San Francisco firm. The metal parts were fashioned at two Pennsylvania plants.

The Lighthouse Board Report to Congress of 1891 stated, "Each [of the new lightships] is to embody in herself all needed modern improvements, moving by her own steam, having the best fog signal and having illuminating apparatus specially adapted to the location she is to occupy." She may have had many "modern improvements," but she was not equipped to move under her own steam. Although the vessel was furnished sails, the standard practice was to tow her to and from station. LV 50 was equipped with a steam boiler for heat, the fog signal and to power various deck machines. The fog signal was a 12 inch steam whistle and the optics three 200mm lens mounted 120 degrees apart around both masts. The vessel was also equipped with a water distillation plant, providing fresh water from seawater.

LV 50 was launched March 26, 1892 and, after being outfitted, towed to Astoria, OR arriving "in good order" on April 5, 1892. On April 11 the tender *Manzanita* towed her to the Columbia station where she was moored with a 5,000 lb. mushroom anchor.

The Columbia River Bar station is often shrouded in fog and at times experiences severe weather. Waves driven by northwest winds meeting the vast amounts of water pouring out of the Columbia River can cause extremely rough and dangerous conditions for any vessel. Nevertheless, the COLUMBIA rode out storms and the rough seas of the area for many years without incident until 1899.

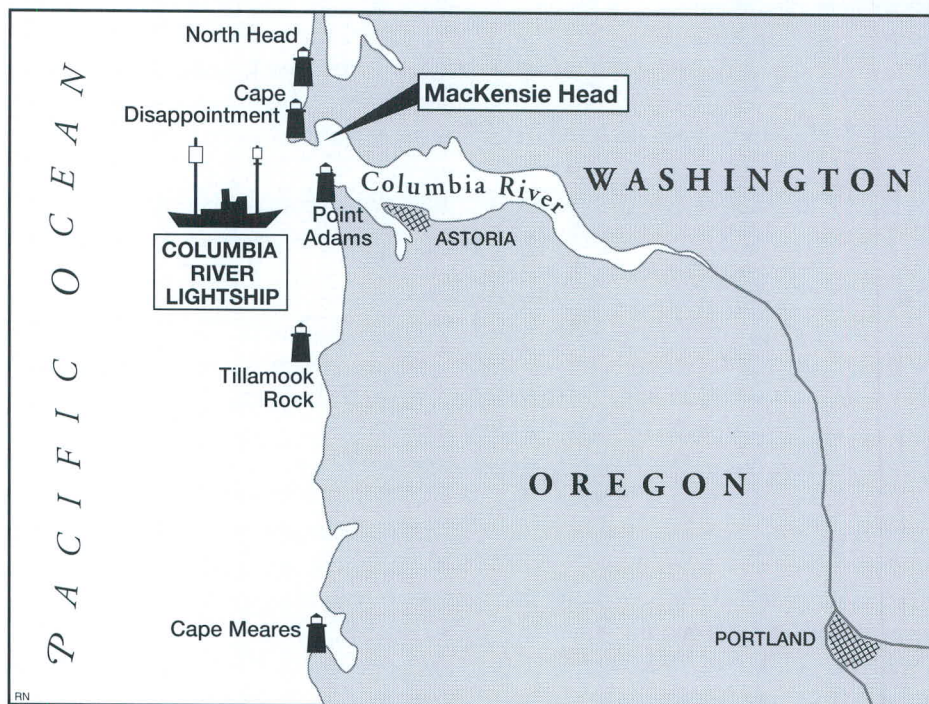
On November 2, 1899, a gale with winds around 74 miles an hour struck the area off the Columbia River. The District reported that the gale raised "a tremendous sea, with frightful breakers on the bar." Late that afternoon the 2 inch chain (chain made from stock 2 inches in diameter) snapped about 270 feet from the hawse pipe leaving the vessel to "the mercy of wind and sea." The crew managed to haul in the remaining chain and set sail, holding the vessel off shore until the next morning, when the storm somewhat abated.

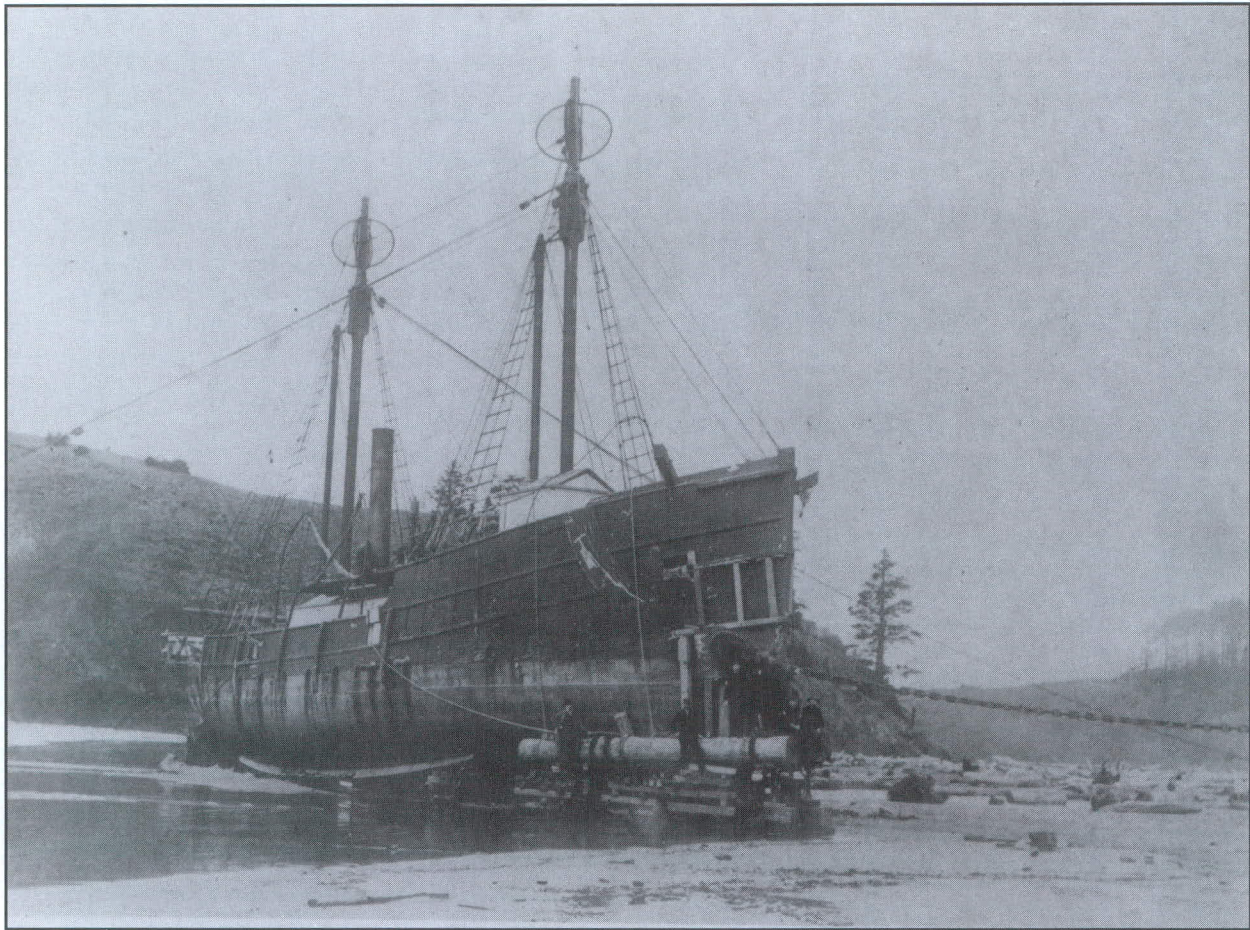
LV 50 then headed for the mouth of the Columbia River, although the breakers were running dangerously high on the bar. The District sent out the tug *Wallula* and tender *Manzanita* to assist. The *Wallula* managed to get a line aboard the lightship, but it parted. Then

the *Manzanita* got a line aboard and it, too, parted, but also fouled in the screw (propeller) of the tender. Now the *Manzanita* and the lightship were both at peril. While the *Manzanita* was involved in freeing the line from her shaft, the tug *Escort* succeeded in getting a line to the *Columbia* and began towing her over the bar. Halfway across the line parted and the lightship was adrift in the breakers off McKenzie Head, "in extreme peril with night coming on."

The District report stated, "In order to save the crew and, if possible, the vessel, extreme measures were necessary, and it was decided to beach the vessel. To the north of McKenzie Head was a rock bound coast lashed high by the angry seas. A short distance below was Fort Canby and the forbidding rocks of the southern end of Cape Disappointment. Between these two promontories lies a sand beach. To put the ship on this sand beach meant the probable saving of men and ship, while to strike the rocks on either side meant death to the crew and destruction to the vessel."

The ship struck the "friendly" beach at 6:30 p.m. on November 29. The Captain correctly used his sails to swing the vessel into the surf, pointing the high bow into the waves and thwarting any attempt by the seas to roll her over. Once secure, the men were brought





LV 50 upright on the beach at MacKenzie Head in 1901. Note the lines (ropes) steadying the vessel. USLHS photo.

ashore by breeches buoy by the crew of the Cape Disappointment Life Saving Service Station. Men from the local Army fort and citizens also assisted in the successful rescue effort. The crew were treated at the Army hospital and released.

When the weather abated, all movable material was removed from the vessel, and the District solicited bids to refloat her. In July, 1900 a shipbuilding firm offered to refloat the ship for \$14,000. The first contractor failed, as did several subsequent bidders. The initial attempts to move her seaward all failed. Finally, the method was changed and a contract was made to haul the ship over the beach and launch her in the sheltered waters of Baker Bay. But even this plan was delayed by heavy seas, high tides and other obstructions. Finally, on April 9, 1901 the District Inspector wired Washington, "Light-vessel in cra-

dle and started across land for Bakers Bay." The contractor had removed sand from the hull, turned the vessel to point toward the beach, jacked her onto a temporary railway constructed for the journey, and hauled her across the sand, through the woods, some 700 yards to Baker Bay. LV 50 had been on the beach for 16 months.

The contract was offered at \$17,500 and included delivering the vessel to the Astoria Lighthouse Depot wharf. The same company was awarded an additional contract to repair the vessel for about \$11,000, prior to refloating her. A change order boosted the repairs by \$1,110 and in June the vessel was towed to Portland where an additional \$570 was spent on the hull and \$980 on the boiler and machinery. The repairs to Columbia, as a result of the grounding, cost over half the original construction cost.

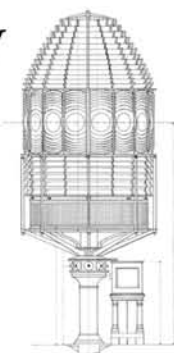
On August 18, 1901 LV 50, *Columbia*, was placed back on station and served another eight years. In 1909 she was removed from station and moored at the Astoria base, awaiting further disposition. She was eventually sold to the highest bidder and there is some indication she worked as a cargo vessel in the Pacific NW until as late as 1935. But for many years the large red hulled *Columbia* was a familiar sight to mariners plying the waters in the vicinity of the Columbia River bar, and it seems like only yesterday.



April 1901, LV 50 is on the temporary rail line and being hauled across the MacKenzie Head spit. Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Maritime Museum.



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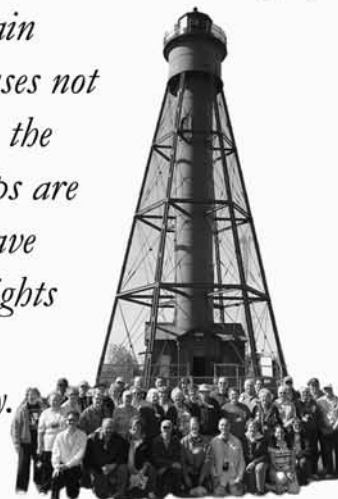
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