Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 2001 <www.USLHS.org>

TINKHAM TALES III

Based on the Journals of Lighthouse Engineer Ralph Tinkham

Edited by Wayne Wheeler

Our Society has the good fortune to have acquired a historically valuable donation of the papers of Ralph R. Tinkham, Lighthouse Engineer. Presented by his granddaughter, Marjorie Scooros, the memoirs chronicle a fascinating career that led him far and wide as he moved up the ladder of positions within the U. S. Lighthouse Service to become Chief Engineer and, eventually held the position of Captain, Chief Engineer of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Ralph Tinkham graduated from the College of Engineering, University of Michigan in 1905. He joined the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company in 1906 as a design engineer, from which he was "loaned" to the Lighthouse Service to oversee the design and initial construction of the proposed Rock of Ages Lighthouse. Working for the firm's structural steel division, but from the Lighthouse Service 11th District offices in Detroit's Customs House, he worked on the Rock of Ages project until he resigned the firm in 1908. He then began employment with the Lighthouse Service as the Superintendent of Construction for the 11th Lighthouse District (Lakes St. Clair, Huron and Superior).

For the next 38 years Tinkham was involved with numerous lighthouse projects across North America, from the Great Lakes to Alaska—even to Panama. After his retirement in 1946, he wrote a massive tome about his experiences, laced with anecdotes.

Over several issues of *The Keeper's Log,* we will publish some of his more interesting memories as part of a series called "The Tinkham Tales." We now present installment number three.



Ralph Tinkham in the late 1920s at his desk when he was Superintendent of the 19th Lighthouse District (Hawaii, Midway, Guam and American Samoa). Note the photo of President Hoover at left. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, Split Rock Lighthouse.

PRINCESS SOPHIA

Departure... from residence in Alaska was in the spring of 1918. As a reserve Captain of Engineers, U.S. Army, I had been ordered to active service in Washington, D.C. This departure was made by boarding the Canadian Pacific *SS Princess Sophia* at Ketchikan bound for Seattle .... It was a pleasant voyage, made so chiefly by the kindness and friendliness of the captain .... this captain .... was a veteran .... looking forward to a well earned retirement that same year. He was doomed to disappointment. When we said our goodbyes to him in Seattle, none could foresee that on his last voyage before the date of his retirement, he would lose his ship and his life.The real stormy season on the Alaskan coast usually starts about the first of August .... after the stormy season had begun in the fall of .... 1918, the *SS Princess Sophia* ... departed Skagway on its return trip to Vancouver and Seattle. Skagway [in Southeastern Alaska] is at the upper end of an arm of the Inside Passage called Lynn Canal, a long narrow fjord bordered by the steep slopes of high mountains. The town is the terminal port of a railroad [White Pass & Yukon Railroad] outlet for Yukon Territory. Storms from the north funnel into Lynn Canal and sweep its length with accelerated velocity due to its configuration. Storm winds of 110 miles per hour have been reported there – the velocity of a hurricane.

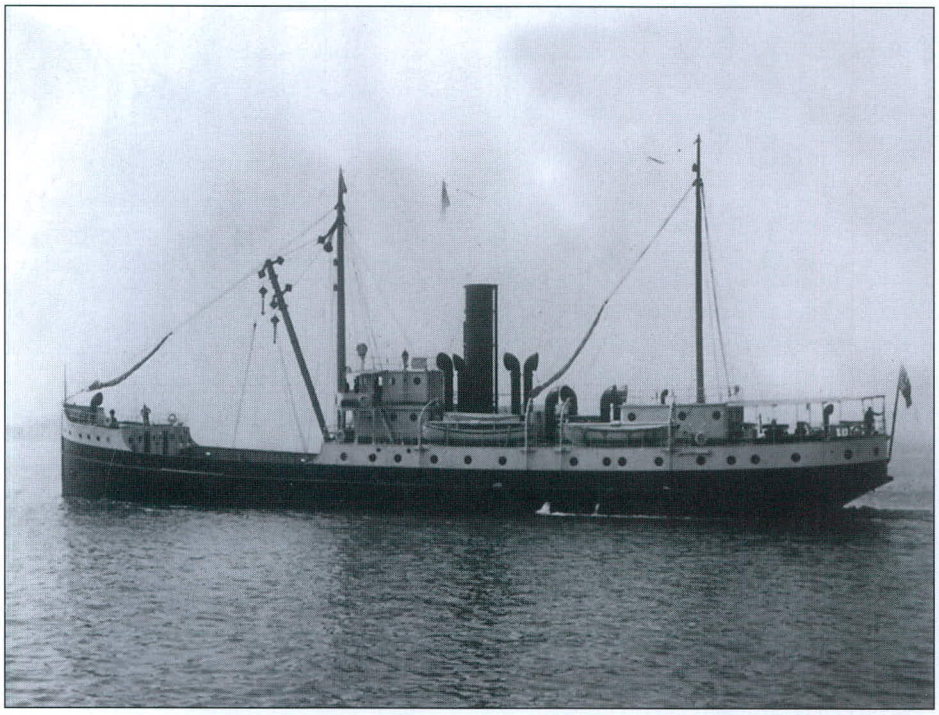
On the occasion of this [October 24] departure of the *Princess Sophia,* such a storm was brewing, and with it came snow. Well down near the lower end of Lynn Canal stands Sentinel Island, a small jagged outcrop situated right in the middle of the waterway. There is a lighthouse and fog signal on this island, and ship channels on both sides of it. Extending out into the main west channel is a rock reef [Vanderbilt Reef], submerged from half tide to full, bare below half tide, its extremity marked by a buoy. More than once a ship has stranded on this reef, notwithstanding those aids to navigation, but always in a position and at a stage of tide that permitted it to be floated again at high water, with only repairable damage. Now, as the *Princess Sophia* proceeded, a hurricane wind behind her, and driven snow becoming an impenetrable wall ahead, night set in. Navigating only by compass, with the wind and following sea accelerating it, their speed could only be guessed. Knowing they should be approaching Sentinel Island, pilot and captain would strain eyes and ears to detect its signals. Impenetrable snow, like a blanket of fog, completely obscured the light beam of the lighthouse, and the violent winds blowing in the same direction they were going, effectively blanketed the .... blasts of the fog signal. Even after they struck the reef they could neither see the light nor hear the foghorn, although both were in operation only a few hundred yards away. They came to a grinding stop. Immediately an SOS went out by radio, followed by a report to Canadian Pacific headquarters in Vancouver.

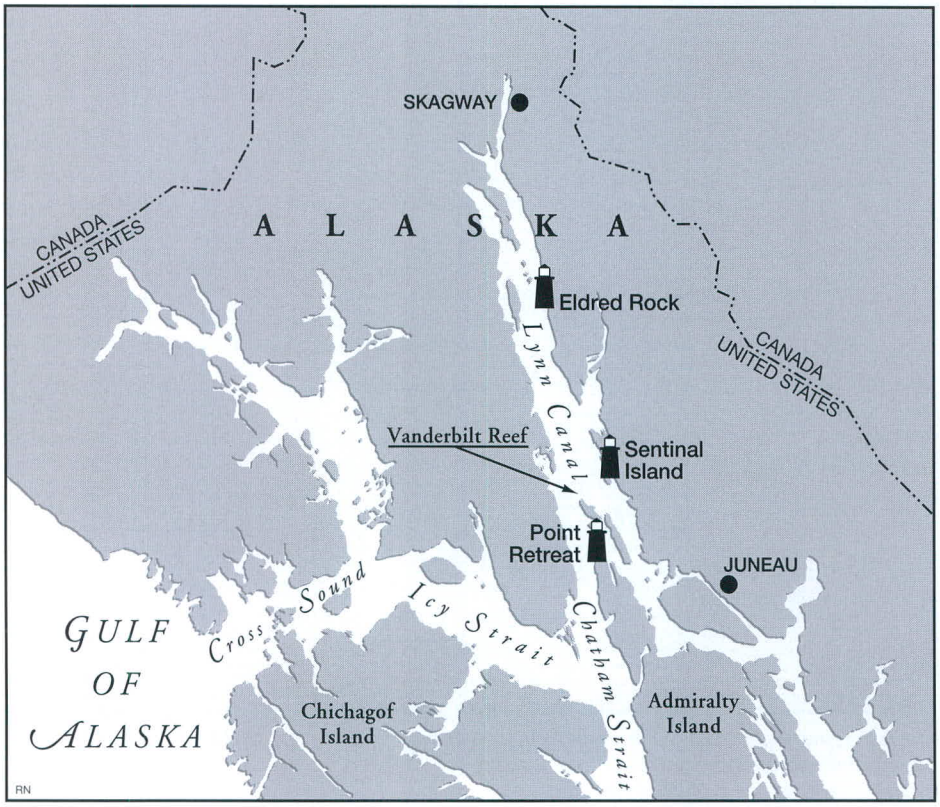
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 2001 <www.USLHS.org>

By what might have been a fortunate circumstance, the lighthouse tender *Cedar* lay at anchor in a protective cove not far from the lighthouse where the tender had been landing supplies that afternoon. This operation had been discontinued when darkness fell, and the *Cedar* sought shelter for the night from the rising wind and seas. It was still early in the evening when the operator on the *Cedar* picked up the SOS from the *Princess Sophia*. Immediately, the captain of the *Cedar* weighed anchor and proceeded to the assistance of the stranded ship, being near enough to the [light] station to con [pilot] his ship with safety notwithstanding the force of snow and wind. As the *Cedar* approached the *Sophia* just outside of the reef, having already notified the stricken ship that he was coming, the captain of the tender offered to take off the passengers. This being entirely feasible at that stage of the storm .... communication was all by radio; a megaphone voice would not have been heard the width of the ship in that turmoil.

In obedience to instructions just received by radio from his superiors in .... Vancouver, the captain of the *Sophia* declined to transfer the passengers. He had been instructed to await the arrival of the SS *Princess May*, then on route north through the Inside Passage,

The Lighthouse tender *Cedar*. The Lighthouse Service constructed the vessel in 1917 to replace the tender *Armeria*, which grounded and sank on May 20, 1912. She was designed especially for the outside waters of Alaska. At 1,970 tons and 201 feet long, she was the largest tender in the Service. The ship's complement consisted of 8 officers and a crew of 25. The *Cedar* was decommissioned in 1950. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.





due to reach the *Sophia* in two days. The *Princess May* had, herself, been aground on the same reef a few years previously, lying high and dry, entirely out of the water at low tide, but had been refloated at high tide with only minimum damage to her bottom plates... the conditions had been quite different, however. The *Princess May* grounded in fog in calm weather. Now a driving blizzard was raging, and a heavy sea becoming more menacing by the hour. Again the captain of the *Cedar* urged the captain of the other ship to consider the conditions, and transfer his passengers while it was still possible by use of lifeboats ... the constantly increasing intensity of the storm indicated that this might become impossible later. But having communicated again with his office .... reporting the assistance available, he received positive orders to hold his passengers for the arrival of the *Princess May*. So, regretfully he again declined assistance from the *Cedar*. The latter stood by for some time, but the storm became so violent that, for the safety of his own ship, the captain returned to his earlier anchor-

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 2001 <www.USLHS.org>

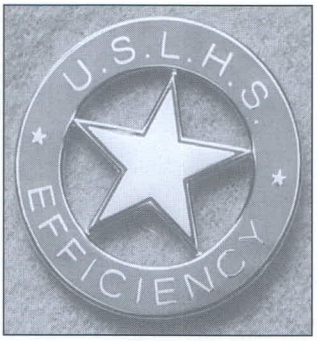
age in the protective cove .... he continued radio communications with the *Sophia* at half hour intervals, still holding himself in readiness to render assistance should an emergency develop. This interchange of messages continued through the night until, at one thirty in the morning, there came no reply from the *Sophia*. The latest report indicated that the stranded ship had shifted slightly on the reef by the heavy seas, which had been building for several hours.

Receiving no reply from the *Sophia* after repeated calls, the *Cedar* put out again in the teeth of that violent storm, but this time was unable to locate the *Sophia* and returned to its anchorage .... When daylight came the storm had abated considerably and the snow had ceased. Proceeding to the location of the *Princess Sophia*, those on the *Cedar* observed the tips of her two masts extending above the surface of the water, nothing more. The violent storm and heavy seas had boosted the *Sophia* across the reef into deep water, the jagged rocks tearing the bottom out of the ship. Three hundred [actually 343]* people, including the veteran captain, perished with the *Princess Sophia* that night; not one survived. A few bodies in life preservers were found on the rocky shore of Sentinel Island that morning, mute evidence of the tragedy.

Thus had transpired another tragic testimonial to the pernicious practice of directing the handling of a ship from a swivel chair in the snug home office by managers who know nothing of conditions surrounding the ship, but consider only the dollar profit or loss. It had happened before, it will happen again.

* Over three hundred people perished when the *Princess Sophia* sank beneath the waters in Lynn Canal. Various sources place the number as high as 386. Because of the large number of people leaving the Canadian gold fields enroute to the 'states,' and due to turn-of-the-century statistical errors, the exact number of casualties will never be known.

U.S. Lighthouse Service Efficiency Star



The 1912 report of the Bureau of Lighthouses to Congress stated, in part, "To promote efficiency and friendly rivalry among lighthouse keepers, a system of efficiency stars and pennants has been established. Keepers who have been commended for efficiency at each quarterly inspection during the year are entitled to wear the inspector's star for the next year, and those who receive the inspector's star for three successive years will be entitled to wear the Commissioner's star..."

As a Society exclusive (and one of the annual gifts to our District Inspector members) we have had an exact reproduction of the inspector's star created. It consists of red enamel on brass and measures 1-1/8 inches in diameter. If you feel efficient, you may wear one of these on your hat or lapel by sending $4.95 to the Keeper's Locker (price includes shipping and handling).

We now carry the Commissioner's star, same design but blue enamel on silver, at the same price as the District Inspector's star.

Although our mail order business has moved to Oregon, we will still sell the Efficiency stars, Passport kits and special framed lighthouse postage stamps with a first day cover through our San Francisco office.



The *MV Princess Sophia* on Vanderbilt Reef, October 24, 1918, shortly before a storm struck, forcing her across the jagged reef and tearing out her bottom. Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond collection.

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 2001 <www.USLHS.org>

The Last Voyage Of The *Princess Sophia*

by Steve Hites

The steamboat boys are comin',
old Skagway's on a spree tonight
The Yukon's froze up and there's snow on the ground
we're all headin' Outside on the next high tide.

Every berth is booked and there's no room to be had
There's piles of trunks on the wharf.
The dock boss is screamin' out orders to his hands
to a shrieking of protesting pulleys and booms.

Look alive, haul away!
The Princess Sophia is getting up steam —
we've got to cast off before light of day.

The jam of men in their thick overcoats,
the women in winter shawls.
Wide-eyed children like Eskimo dolls
watch the Christmas-sized flakes swirl down, down, down
fallin' heavy in the blizzard on Skagway town.

Up the gangway they jostle,
and there's scores more waiting in vain.
Three-hundred-eighty-six have her fall to the rails —
the Sophia's the last steamer south for a month.

Steam whistle wail, lost in the snow,
muffled by mountain walls down the Canal.
"Cast loose the lines!" Engines thudding alive,
the Sophia back off from the wharves of Time.
And I watched as the snow dropped a curtain of white
between the lights 'long her hull and the black of the night

On down the Canal, wrapped in the dark of the storm,
the Sophia strayed her course in the wee hours of dawn
and the shock of the crash knocked the passengers from sleep
as the Princess Sophia struck Vanderbilt Reef.

But she didn't take water, she was held fast —
the people were calmed by the Captain's request.
"Don't lower the boats! The hull is still tight!
We'll float with the high tide and get off all right"

With daylight a wire brought assistance from shore,
a score of small craft that had heard her distress.
But the seas were still high, and the storm still in force,
"Too rough to lower boats," was the Captain's firm choice.
"Besides, the Alice is steaming this way —
we could save cost of salvage if we wait one more day.
There's even the chance the tide'll float us free.
It's too early to tell —
We'll just wait and see."

So they sat and they waited all through the day;
the people relaxed and the ship's band played.

It was a festival mood, there was laughter and song
while the small boats bobbed close the whole day long.
'Til late afternoon when the North Wind rose
and they beat for refuge on the darkening shore.

No one knows what happened that night
as the blizzard screamed 'round her lonely lights,
and the passengers lay huddled in their cabins and beds
watching the waves swing the lamps that hung overhead.

But the force of the storm brought an unseasonal tide
that lifted Sophia's stern right up to the sky.
And as the Captain watched helplessly,
she was ground 'cross the teeth
of the jagged rock shoals of Vanderbilt Reef.

The sound of her plates being torn from beneath,
water rushing in to a hissing of steam;
terrified screams from steerage below
as the sea pushed her free from her perch on the shoal

Too rough to launch boats, no time for alarm,
no help nearby in the teeth of the storm.
The Sophia has turned from a ship to a stone —
"My God, we are sinking!" screams the wireless phone.

Icy cold water, black of the night,
fumbling for life-vests in the failing light.
Where are the children? Which way to the deck?
All lost in the vortex of the foaming wreck…

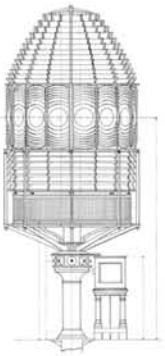
When the Alice arrived in the light of day
not one passenger remained to be taken away.
The tips of her masts breaking sea at low tide
marked the grave of the Princess Sophia.

Well they cut down the tops of her masts one day
so as not to frighten travelers who passed where she lay.
And it's been years now, and the memories are few,
of the people that remember and the people who knew.

And the summer tourists come by the thousands to see
if the Inside Passage is all that it claims to be.
And I wonder if any of them pause to hear
the crashing of the waves on the rocks so near.
And I wonder as I watch the lowering sky
if we're going to have a storm when you cast off tonight?

©1978 by Steve Hites. Skagway, Alaska, USA. All Rights Reserved

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

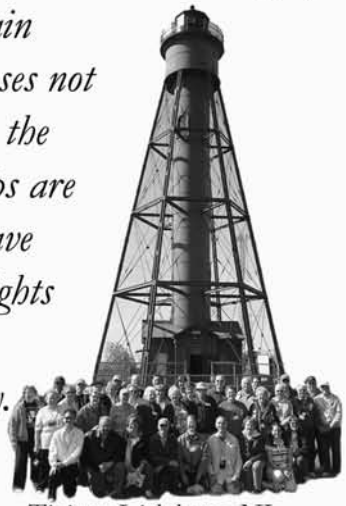
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log *magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.*

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ

To learn more visit

www.uslhs.org

or

call Headquarters at

415-362-7255