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The Automated Lightship

By Wayne Wheeler

At the end of World War II, the Coast Guard took an inventory of the aids to navigation system that service inherited just prior to the war. During the war, the Coast Guard was busy with port security, escort duty in the Atlantic, landing craft duty in the Pacific theater, submarine patrols, and other duties.

After the war, the service realized it was caretaker of a vast empire of aids to navigation, including more than 800 light stations, numerous lightships, and thousands of minor aids to navigation. The cost of maintaining these aids to navigation was huge, and the service started to seek means to reduce the expense. Most light stations employed four families and several buildings which required constant maintenance. The lightships were even more expensive than the stations as they generally had a crew of 22 and required a shipyard visit for maintenance about every two years.

An idea to create an automatic (unmanned) lightship was hatched, probably at Coast Guard headquarters.

Lightship LV *99* (Coast Guard designation WAL *522*) was selected for the experiment and moved to the Coast Guard yard at Curtis Bay, Maryland.

LV *99* was constructed by the Lighthouse Service in 1920 at Boothbay Harbor, Maine. The ship initially served in the Great Lakes: first on the Poe Reef, Michigan, station (1921-1929) and then on the Grays Reef, Michigan, station (1929-1936). In 1937 she was towed to Boston and apparently mothballed. In 1942 she was made an Examination Vessel (equipped with one 3-inch and two 20 mm guns) and sent to Port Everglades, Florida, to guard against German submarines. Then the vessel was sent back to Curtis Bay in 1943. There she was modified and converted into an unmanned radio controlled lightship (designated EXP-99). In 1950 she was to be placed on the Scotland station off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and controlled by the Sandy Hook Light Station. This was advertised in the Coast Guard *Notice to Mariners* and received publicity in the *N.Y. Times*, other papers, and in *Popular Science* magazine.



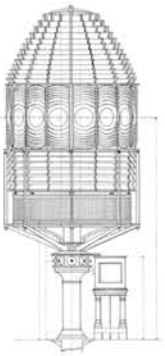
LV *99* at Coast Guard Yard Curtis Bay, Maryland. Photos courtesy of Willard Flint, date unknown.

Shortly thereafter the *Notice to Mariners* stated "indefinitely postponed." The reason for never placing the experimental ship on station is unknown. She was decommissioned in 1956 and sold.



LV *99* modified as an experimental automated lightship. Note most deck superstructure has been removed.

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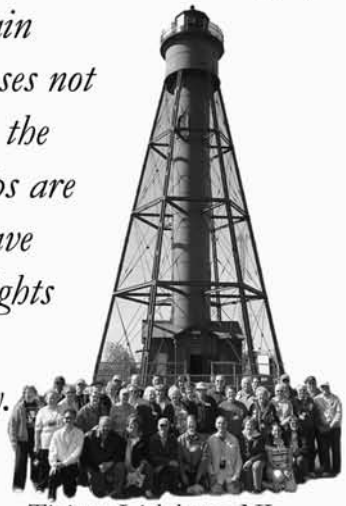
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