

Cape Charles Light Station

By Wayne Wheeler



The second Cape Charles Light Station tower in 1885. Note the keepers on the gallery deck and the kids at lower right. The keepers' dwellings are at right, the building at left is a store house. Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.



he town of Cape Charles was a busy seaport in the 19th century. With the advent of the railroad it became an important juncture

for cargo bound for Norfolk and passengers to be ferried between trains from the Delmarva Peninsula to Norfolk.

On May 18, 1826, Congress appropriated \$40,000 to construct a lighthouse on Smith Island, just off Cape Charles, VA. This island marks the northern side of the entrance into Chesapeake Bay. The light station, constructed for \$7,398.82, was named Cape Charles.

The original rubble stone tower constructed in 1828, possibly by Winslow Lewis, was only 55 feet high. The optic (lighting apparatus) consisted of ten oil lamps backed with 21-inch reflectors. It probably wasn't a very effective aid to navigation as Blunt's 1837 American Coast Pilot barely even mentions the lighthouse. It also fails to appear on a chart of the Chesapeake Capes included in that important guide for mariners. Cape Henry, which was constructed in 1790, is depicted, but not Cape Charles. The Pilot states, "When coming from sea . . . you may make [for] an island called Hogg Island, which has a shoal on the N.E. side . . . Hogg Island and Smith's Island are about 6 or 7 leagues [18 to 21 miles] from each other, and the latter has a light-house on it . . ." That's it! No description or advice on how to use it to navigate is provided.

In 1851-52, an ad hoc committee known as the Lighthouse Board inspected several

lighthouses along the east coast; among them was the Cape Charles Light Station. Their report states, "Smith's Island light-house, Cape Charles - This light is placed on the NE of Cape Charles, and at the north entrance to Chesapeake Bay. This very important light has at present only ten lamps [with] twenty-one inch reflectors. The dangers at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay render it extremely important that this light should be increased to a first order one. The tower has an elevation of only fifty-five feet, placed on a very low coast, giving the light, if in other respects good, a range of not more than twelve nautical miles, which it can seldom reach in consequence of the very inferior illuminating apparatus. This is one of the lights requiring the earliest attention of the light-house department."

The 'attention' the ad hoc committee gave the light station in 1858 & 59, once they became the official Light House Board, was to install a 1st order lens in the old 61-foot tower and obviously they also installed a larger and more modern lantern room to accommodate the large lens. \$35,000 was appropriated to rebuild the tower and in 1860, an additional \$10,200 was appropriated to rebuild the keeper's dwelling. But only \$1,890 was spent as 'rebels' destroyed the station shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War. The board reported, "August last [1862] the light-house at Cape Charles was visited by a party of guerrillas, who completely destroyed the light, carrying away such portable articles as they deemed valuable. The tower which had been authorized had reached a height of 83 feet, with the materials to construct it to a height of 150 feet

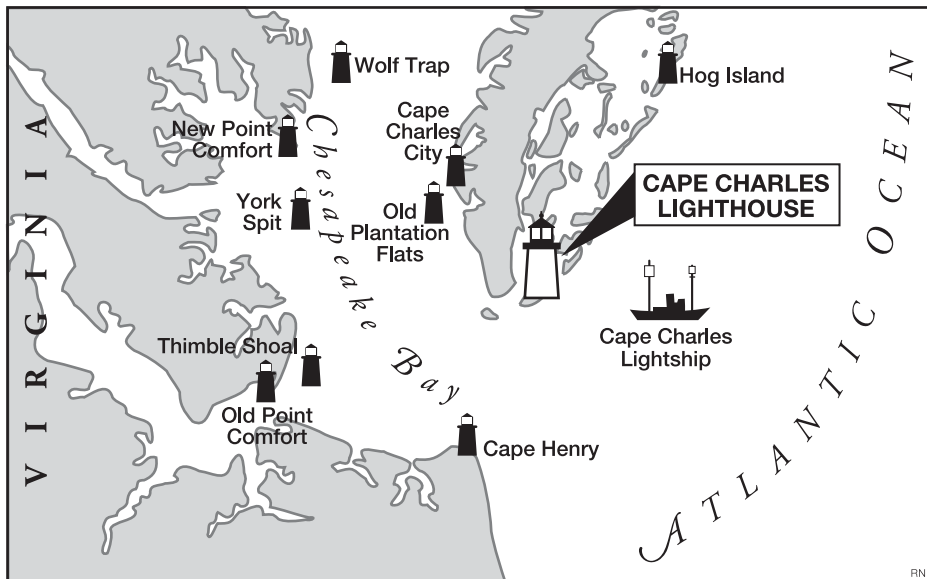
being stored on the grounds of the station. During the raid much of the material was . . . subjected to indiscriminate pilfering and spoliation, so that a new provision will have to be made."

In 1864, just prior to the close of the Civil War, the Board reported, ". . . Immediately upon the close of the rebellion [in the Cape Charles area] an experienced engineer was sent to those waters to take charge of the work to reestablish such lights, etc., as the interests of commerce might be found to demand. A large amount of illuminating apparatus, and other light-house material, which had been abstracted by the enemy, was recovered, and such portions as could be at once made use of were so applied, and the rest sent north for repairs and [sic] refitment." Congress appropriated \$20,000 for rebuilding the lighthouse and the tower was immediately completed and lighted on May 7, 1864. The Board wrote, "Owing to the liability of this important light to an attack of the enemy a competent military guard for its protection has been asked for." The new masonry tower stood 150 feet high and was described in the 1879 Light List as "A brick tower, white; lantern dark brown. On north side of entrance to Chesapeake Bay, distant 12 3/4 miles N.N.E from Cape Henry light-house. Old tower still standing nearby; out buildings white. Duration of flash 3 seconds [from a 1st order lens]."

The war ended without members of the 'rebellion' revisiting it and damaging it again. We don't know if a "guard for its protection" was provided.

Like many east coast stations, the Cape Charles station was threatened with erosion. Cape Canaveral, FL and Hunting Island, SC were both moved due to erosion in the 19th century. In recent years we have seen the relocation of the Southeast Lighthouse - Block Island, RI, the Cape Cod and Nauset Beach lighthouses in Massachusetts and the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in North Carolina.

In 1883, the Board reported, "Cape Charles, on Smith's Island, Virginia - The encroachments of the sea upon the shore at this station has been observed for many years. Since 1857, about 300 feet have been washed away. The water-line is now within 300 feet of the tower, and still nearer the keeper's dwelling. By stakes, driven five years ago, it is shown that the average annual encroachment is about 30 feet. If this erosion is not arrested the station will have to be abandoned in a few years: mean-



while any severe, prolonged storm may destroy it. Protection by means of one or more large jetties, at a cost of \$15,000, is recommended. The station is at present in good condition.”

The next year the Board reported, “The erosion of the shore by the sea continues. The construction of the jetties, provided for by the appropriation of \$10,000 at the last session of Congress, will probably arrest further encroachment. These works of protection will be commenced as soon as practicable.”

In the 1885 report the Board noted, “. . . The only practicable method of making the protection is by means of piers or jetties of stone resting upon heavy timber mattresses to prevent too rapid sinking [of the stone] into the sand. The light-house site occupies but a small part of Smith’s Island, and it was originally surrounded by private lands. The sea has gradually worn the shore away until high-water mark is now but 125 feet from the keeper’s dwelling, and but 225 feet from the tower. The light-house grounds now reach the water, but with a small front upon which a jetty may be built, and the location is not well adapted for that purpose . . .” They urged further Congressional action to purchase land to allow three jetties to be constructed. The Board noted that the site was difficult to reach; the project would be expensive, that the amount of funds on hand was not sufficient and urgently recommended an additional \$30,000.

In 1886, additional funds were apparently received, but were not sufficient to meet the bids obtained, “. . . bids received were excessive and the project was abandoned. Competition was afterwards had for building a concrete wall and a pile foundation, but no bid was received within the limit of the amount appropriated. It was then decided to invite offers for constructing a jetty and protection wall of brush and stone, to be built of such dimensions as the amount available would warrant.” On April 19, 1886, the bids were opened and the low bidder selected. The project called for a jetty 130 feet long and 30 feet wide constructed in a southeasterly direction from the tower. It would run parallel to the shore line and then northerly 250 feet. The Annual Report mentioned, “The buildings at the station were thoroughly repaired. A new store house, 20-feet by 16-feet in plan, was built in the rear of the assistant keeper’s dwelling.”

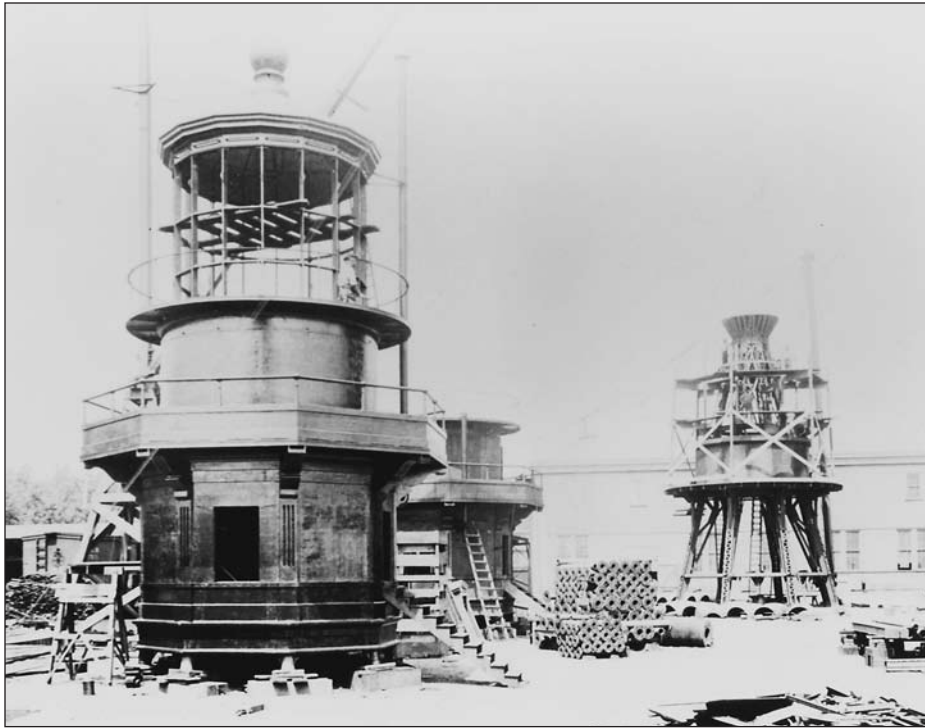
In 1888, the Board reported that part of the protection jetty or breakwater had been

breeched, but that the shoreline had stopped eroding. A request for funds to purchase additional land to allow the breakwater to be extended 500 feet was made. Also, a system of magneto-electric call bells between the dwelling and tower was installed. But over the next few years erosion resumed to the extent that the Board decided in 1892 that the station would have to be relocated. The report stated, “In June a red band, 25 feet wide, was painted around the tower about 60 feet above the base, that mariners may more readily distinguish the tower in the daytime . . . The station requires general repairs, which, however, will not be made at present, in view of

the projected removal of the station to a new site. The plan of the new tower which is to be erected about 3/4 of a mile from the present light-house, which is endangered by the steady advance of the sea line, has been determined upon and requisite drawings and specifications are now being made. The designs for the new dwellings will be taken in hand soon. One of the owners of the land required for the new site died during the past year leaving one of his heirs a minor. It was found, therefore, in order to save the long delay incidental to a suit in chancery [settlement by a court with jurisdiction in equity] for the sale of the interest of this minor, to acquire title by condemnation.



The second Chape Charles tower looking toward Chesapeake Bay. This photo shows the addition of the red band which was painted around the middle of the tower in 1892. This photo was taken some time after August 15, 1895, when the new tower went into operation and before the old tower was destroyed. Note the lens has been removed from the lantern room. A three-masted vessel can be seen in the background at the new pier. Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.,



Assembling the Cape Charles lantern room at the factory (foreground). The lantern being constructed at right is most likely for the sister Hog Island Lighthouse. Circa 1894/95 photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.

Five commissioners were appointed by the United States district court in Norfolk, VA to meet at the site on July 12, 1892, to condemn the needed land.”

In 1893, the Board reported that the needed ten acres had, indeed, been condemned and made available for the new station. Plans and specifications were published for bids for the Cape Charles and the Hog Island tower, both exoskeleton towers. The bid of \$78,200 was accepted for the construction of both towers. And they reported, “Designs were completed for the new dwellings and outhouses and for the temporary wharf and tramway for transporting materials.”

The Annual Report for 1894 provided details of the construction. “The construction of the iron tower for the new station was commenced under contract in June, 1893, and on June 30, 1894, it was completed at the contractors’ shops, except the top or lantern section. Six of the sections, comprising about 133 feet in height, of the tower were delivered to the site by the contractors, and four of the sections, or 96 feet in height, were erected by them on the foundation prepared for the new structure by the engineer’s working party. The framing of the dwellings and outhouses at the lighthouse depot at Baltimore, MD, was begun in July. On October 19, the material for the stable and

woodsheds were erected to serve as quarters for the working party until completion of the station, a road was graded from the landing to the new light-house site, and the construction of the wharf was commenced. The latter, 1,345 feet in length [the light station is surrounded by a low marshy area and it was necessary to construct this 1/4 mile long pier to reach water deep enough to allow a tender to tie up to the pier], with a receiving pier 43 by 60 feet, was finished in November and a tramway was built from the pier head to the light-house site excavations were made and brick foundations were laid for the two dwellings to be occupied by the assistant keepers. Meanwhile the framing of these buildings and of the principal keeper’s dwelling had been progressing at the light-house depot, and on January 14 and March 20 the materials for these dwellings were shipped to the site and duly landed. The following is the status of the work on June 30, 1894: The two assistant keepers’ dwellings are under roof and the upper floors have been laid. The workshop and oil house are under roof, ready for the inside work which is nearly ready at the depot. The stable is finished except for a second coat of paint. Four wood sheds are built, but are yet to be moved to permanent foundations, to be prepared for them. Nothing has been done toward the erection of the principal keeper’s dwelling and the

cisterns. The working party was disbanded and left the station on June 30 [end of the fiscal year], as the insects, particularly mosquitoes, were so numerous and annoying that it was impracticable for the men to continue work.” Of course the keepers had to remain at this station all year, mosquitoes or not.

In November 1894, the working party returned to Cape Charles to finish the station. In addition to completing all the buildings, the grounds were graded and the marsh north of the station filled in, presumably to reduce the presence of mosquitoes. The Annual Report of the Board stated, “. . . A neat fence was built around the grounds in May, and this practically completed the work, except the setting of the lens. The extreme severity of the weather during the winter interfered materially with the progress of operations.”

In June, 1895, “. . . the lens was taken to the station and successfully installed. The characteristic of the light is as follows: four quick flashes, dark interval three seconds; five quick flashes, dark interval 16 seconds. Note—In order to give mariners due notice of this important change of characteristics from the former light the exhibition of the new light was deferred until August 15, 1895.” [This is a very unusual characteristic and the only one of this type in the country.] This may be regarded as a model station.”

The grounds have been improved as far as is now practicable, Bermuda grass roots have been set out to form a lawn and hold the sand in place. A telephone apparatus has been installed, with connections to Cape Charles City, VA, by way of Signal-Service wire, which will prove of great advantage in many respects.”

The locality of this station is especially disagreeable, because of the scourge of the mosquitoes, sand flies, fleas, etc. which render existence almost unbearable for nearly half the year. Effort has therefore been made in the design of the station to mitigate the undesirable conditions as far as possible.”

Capt. Eric Bergland, Corps of Engineers, USA reported, “The light at Cape Charles, on Smith Island, seacoast of Virginia, was originally established in 1827. The rebuilding of the station which the new one now replaces was commenced in 1858 and completed in 1864.”

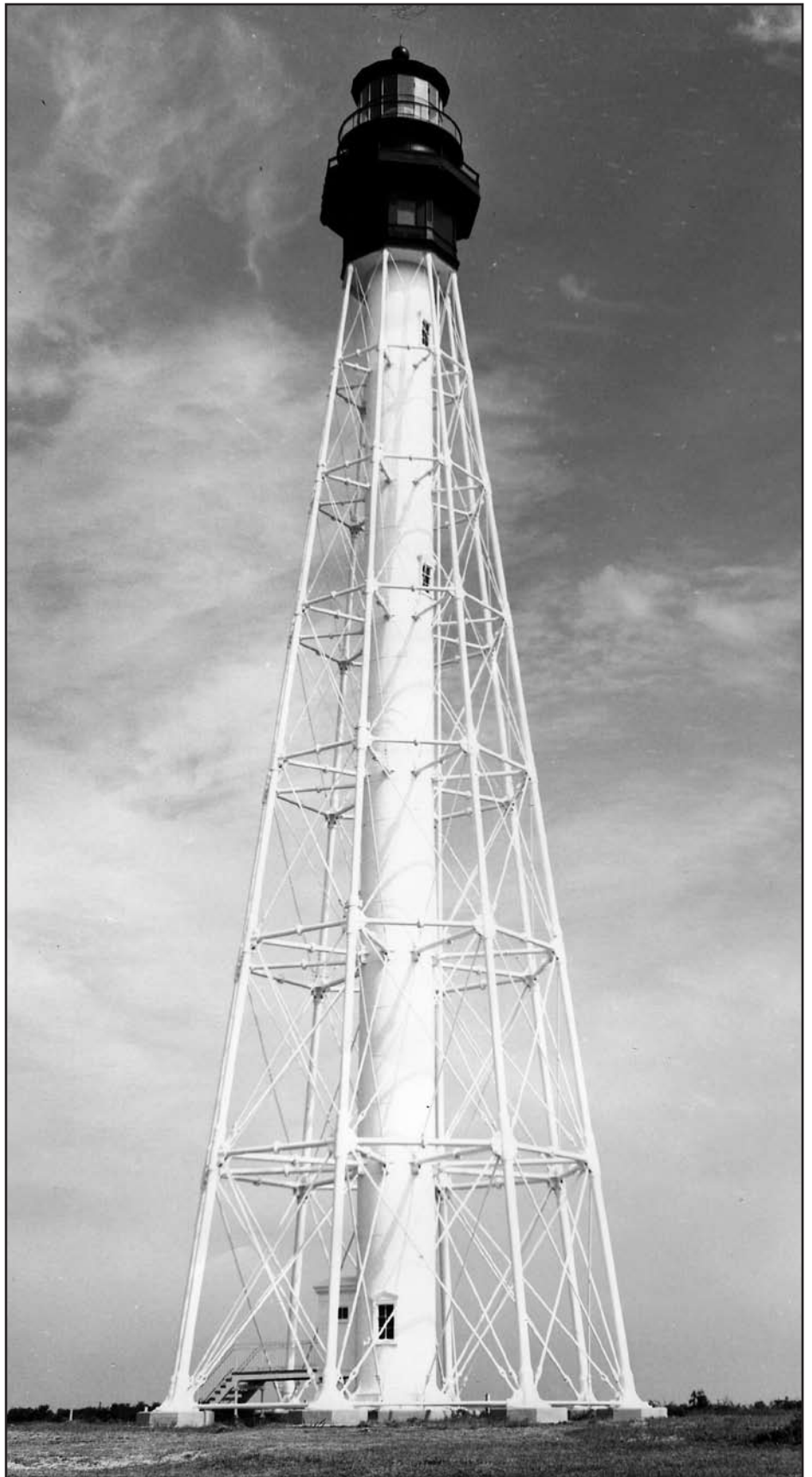
The present station was necessitated by the steady advance of the ocean’s high water line, which at length threatened the safety of the tower, and invaded the quarters of the light

keepers during easterly storms of considerable intensity or duration . . . Between 1883 and 1889, the advance of the water line had been 240 feet – an average of 40 feet per year.”

It soon became evident that such protective measures simply postponed the inevitable result. As periods of high tides washed over the protective wall, and the retreat of the shoreline being general and not local, any project of defense must be extensive, and hence would involve greater expenditure than the establishment of a station on a new site sufficiently remote from the old one to be beyond any danger from erosion, while at the same time affording practically as an effective a position for serving the needs of navigation.”

Accordingly, in the Board’s annual reports for 1889 and 1890 recommendation was made that an appropriation of \$150,000 be granted by Congress for the purpose of building a new station where it would not be exposed to danger . . . the engineer of the district proposed that the new tower be built of iron and of the same design as that at Cape Henry, Virginia, erected in 1881. This is a conical structure built of iron plates, and seems to adapt itself to the requirement of rapid erection at the site, which is a necessity because of the short working season there. The light-House Board, however...selected for the purpose a tower similar to that at Waack-aack, New Jersey, or Southwest Pass, Louisiana. Which, besides being much less expensive, it considered would be so different in appearance from the Cape Henry tower as to prevent any chance of it being mistaken by mariners for that light-house. It would also admit of the quick setting up of the parts at the site . . .”

The engineer included in his report numerous details as to the sinking of caissons to support the center tube and side piers of the tower, step by step discussion on the erection of each part, installation of the wood floors, stairs, windows and even painting the various areas. He then mentioned the lens, “. . . On June 17, 1895, the lens which had been sent to Baltimore from the general depot at Tompkinsville, NY, was taken to the station by the tender Jassamine. A hoisting engine was set up, a mast erected on the watch-room gallery, with the necessary pulleys and rigging, and the parts of the lens apparatus were hoisted outside the tower into the lantern, where they were properly arranged by the lampist. Everything was in place and the machinery satisfactorily working by the 28th. On that night curtains were hung



The completed third tower at the Cape Charles Light Station. This 1967 photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard. The tower is still in very good condition as opposed to today (see rear cover).



The Cape Charles First Order Fresnel lens at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, VA. Photo by Rete Williams.

on one side of the lantern to obscure it from seaward, the lamp was lighted, and the clock-work put in motion. The light was observed from the deck of the tender anchored in Magothy Bay, and it seemed to be satisfactory in every respect. This apparatus is of the first order . . . It represents the first adoption of the Mahan system in a 1st order light [lens]. The lens makes a revolution in 30 seconds, flashing nine times during this period as follows: Four quick successive flashes as intervals of about 1 1/2 seconds, then a dark interval of 2 1/2 seconds; then five quick successive flashes of intervals of 1 1/2 seconds, then a dark interval of about 16 seconds. Thus the number '45' is indicated by flashes of light, as in some places the number of a fire-alarm box is by stroke of a bell. By this method the light is identified absolutely . . ."

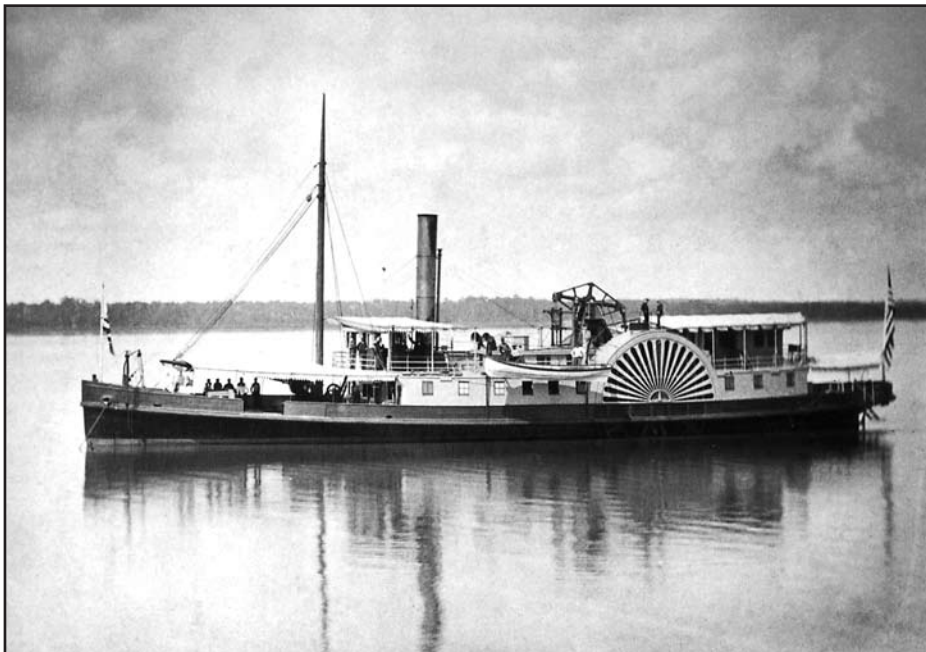
The National Park Service's National Register nomination form provides contemporary details about the principal keeper's dwelling, ". . . the structure is a very good example of the American Shingle Style of architecture. It is located about 90 feet west of the tower. The house has a brick foundation. The first story exterior is brick and the second story is wood frame covered with wood shingles. The cross gabled roof structure is covered with slate . . . a wrap-around screened porch is a prominent feature of the north façade . . . The interior is still in good condition with much of the original architectural furnishings and wood work intact."

The Coal House/Storage Shed, constructed in 1895 is described, "A wood frame structure located just south of the principal keeper's quarters. Coal lying around the structure indicates its use as a coal storage shed [one would think!]. The building has a brick foundation and a wood frame structure . . . all very good construction . . ."

The third extant structure is the 1895 Privy, "A two-hole privy is located just south of the coal house/storage shed. The building is of simple wood frame construction on a concrete slab. It has two exterior windows, both missing; one louvered door, nailed shut; a wood framing system with a wood shingle roof. It was later used as a paint locker."

Several structures were on the site, which are no longer extant. The National Register nomination form also lists them:

"First Assistant keeper's quarters (1895) – This structure stood east of the oil house and about 90 feet southwest of the 1894 tower. The first level was built of brick; shingles covered the framed second level. There were nine rooms.



The side-wheel Lighthouse Service tender *Jasmine*. The 156-foot long, iron-hulled vessel was constructed in 1881, one of several Lighthouse Service side-wheel tenders used in bays and western rivers. The regular complement consisted of four officers and 16 crew. 1926 photo courtesy of the Mariners' Museum.

A privy was located behind the house on the south side and what was probably a summer kitchen beyond that.”

Second assistant keeper’s house (1895) – This structure stood south of the oil house and 90 feet east of the 1894 tower. [The rest of the description mirrors that of the 1st assistant’s house.]”

Other structures – a 1 ½ story stable located 400 feet northwest of the tower was later used as a store house . . . There were nine privies indicated in 1938. At one point, a tram was built from the wharf toward the tower, where it divided to two tracks leading to either side, presumably leading to an oil house. The tram was used until sometime before 1901 when it was sold as scrap iron. Near the former wharf

landing was a USCG Station Dwelling, Garage & Storehouse, Oil House, and Privy. These are from 1929 or shortly thereafter. By 1956 only the pier was extant.”

1828 tower – the 60 foot brick tower constructed in 1828 was destroyed during the Civil War, its foundation has been eroded into the sea.”

The 1894 tower that stands today is 191 feet high, the second tallest lighthouse in American, just five feet shorter than the 196-foot-high Cape Hatteras tower.

The original lens, which floated on a mercury bath, was removed in 1963. It was replaced by a DCB 2-24 aero-beacon, a standard optic used by the Coast Guard in major seacoast lighthouses. The lens was given to the Mari-

ners’ Museum in Newport News, VA where it is presently on display, revolving and sending out its unusual group flashing characteristic of 4 – 5.

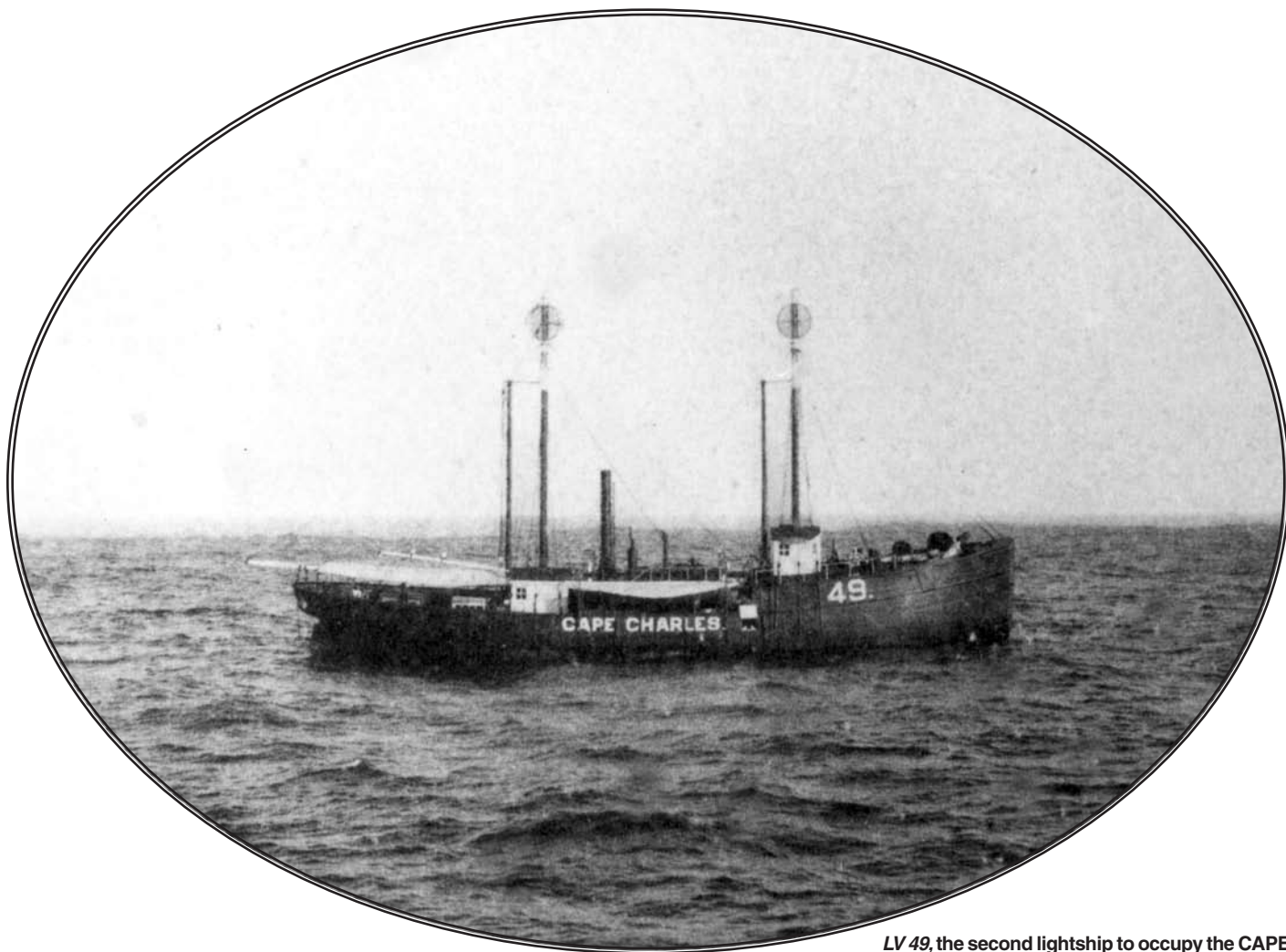
If in the Chesapeake Bay area, visit the Mariners’ Museum. Contact them at 100 Museum Drive, Newport News, VA 23606, phone: (757) 596-2222. To learn more about Chesapeake Bay Lighthouses on-line, visit the Mariners’ Museum’s website: www.mariner.org.



The Cape Charles Light Station in 1985. Duplex dwelling and store house at left, oil house and privy at right. Official U. S. Coast Guard photo by Kathi Bostman.

Cape Charles Lightship

By Wayne Wheeler



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

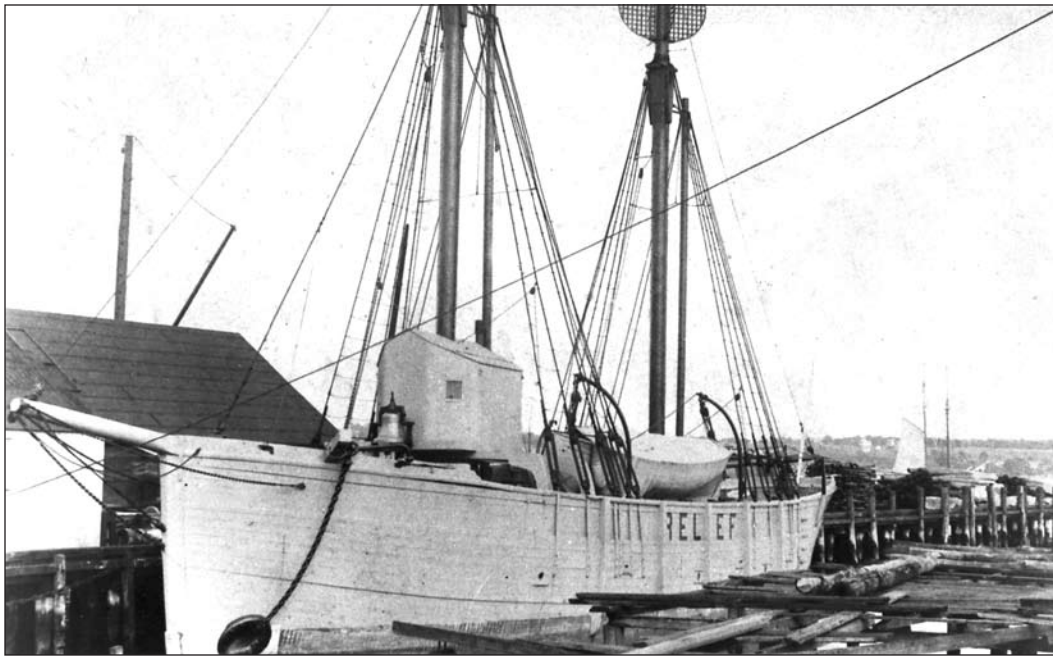
Ln 1888, to assist mariners find the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, the Lighthouse Service established a lightship station east of Smith's Island (and the Cape Charles Lighthouse). The *1888 Report to Congress* reads, "Cape Charles Light-ship, No. 46, off the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, Virginia – This 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

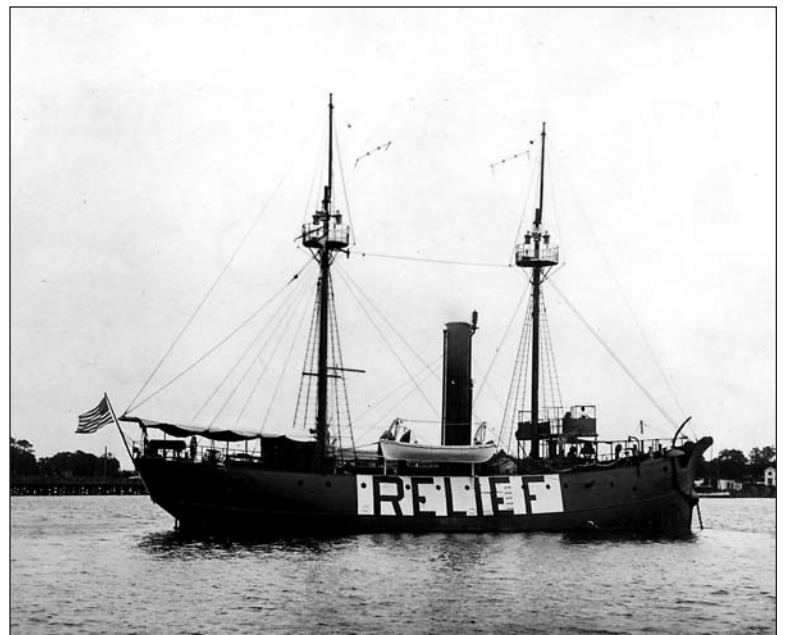
when she was replaced by LV 116 (Coast Guard designation WAL 538). WAL 538 maintained that station until it was discontinued in 1965. The station name was changed from CAPE CHARLES to CHESAPEAKE in 1928.

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 effort



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).

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 3rd District lightship temporarily assumed the station as the 5th 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 4th 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.**

