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FIRE ISLAND LIGHTSHIP

by Robert Bachand



***LV 68* on station from and old post card.**

During the mid-1890s, transatlantic vessels bound for New York carried an estimated 450,000 passengers yearly, and 13 million dollars in cargo each week. Approaching the harbor in fog or heavy weather, it was difficult for navigators to determine their exact position. Sounding the bottom gave an indication of the proximity of land, but a miscalculation could mean grounding the vessel (or worse) on the shores of Long Island or New Jersey. A whistle buoy had been established six miles off Fire Island to aid mariners during reduced visibility, but mariners complained that the signal was difficult to hear, especially from the bridge of large steamships. Thus in 1895, marine interests petitioned the Lighthouse Board to replace the buoy with a lightship.

The 121-foot steam screw vessel *LV 58*, took up its position at the newly established FIRE ISLAND Lightship Station on July 5, 1896. The ship was equipped with a 1st class steam (chime) fog signal, and an emergency, hand operated bell fog signal. A fixed white light was displayed from each of its two masts.

The ship remained on station for only 14 months, when it was replaced by *LV 68*. *LV 58* was assigned relief duty.

The composite hull *LV 68* (steel ribs and a wood hull) was constructed in 1897 at the Bath Iron Works, Bath, Maine. Capable of 8.5 knots under steam power, the vessel was also rigged for sail (just in case). It also displayed a fixed white light from its two masts, generated by electricity.

Up to this era lightship lamps were fueled by kerosene. In 1920 the lamps were replaced by acetylene, but later changed back to electric 375mm lenses.

Most of the *LV 68's* crewmen were still in their bunks on the morning of May 8, 1916, when the steamer *Philadelphian* crashed head-long into its side. The force of the collision left a two-foot gash in the lightship, four feet below the waterline. The men reacted quickly. With the aid of the steamer's crew, tanks were emptied, coal was shifted, and the ship's small boats were swung out over the uninjured side and filled with water. Together, the measures made the vessel list sufficiently to raise most of the damaged side out of the water and the pumps were able to keep up with the flooding. *LV 68* was taken in tow by the *Philadelphian* to a point near the AMBROSE Lightship Station, where a Lighthouse Service tender assumed towing responsibility. She was towed to the general depot at Staten Island. A tender manned the FIRE ISLAND Lightship Station until a relief vessel arrived the following day. *LV 68* was repaired and

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returned to the FIRE ISLAND Lightship Station, but eight years later she was involved in yet another mishap.

A dense fog had settled over the *LV 68* on the evening of March 29, 1924. By noon the following day it showed no sign of lifting. A radiobeacon, a newly developed aid to navigation installed two years earlier, had been in operation all night long, as well as the fog signal and submarine bell signal.

The FIRE ISLAND lightship and the AMBROSE lightship (along with the Sea Girt Light Station) were the first two lightships to have radiobeacons installed. While radiobeacons were a boon to mariners as they allowed navigators to fix their position in reduced visibility, they did pose a hazard to lightships as vessels tended to also home in on them, and unless they veered off (changed course in time) , a collision with the lightship occurred.

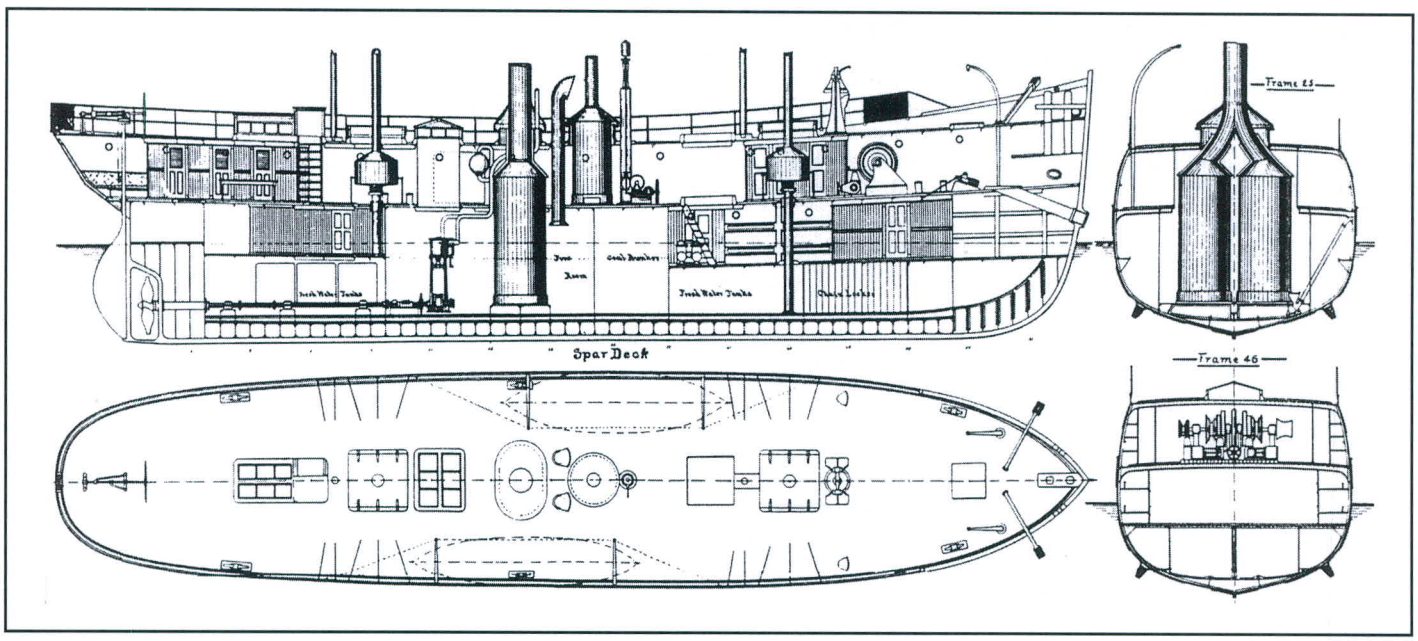
The lightship's assistant engineer later reported, "...I heard three ships, two off the port quarter and one off the stern. I went on deck looking for them and they continued blowing [their ship's whistles]. I then heard a sudden rush of water corning straight toward us."

The assistant engineer barely had time to ring the alarm bell before the British steamer *Castilian* struck a glancing blow to the lightship's port quarter. A hole was punched in the left (port) side from the deck to the waterline. Recovering from the shock of the collision, the crew threw slings over the side of the lightship, and, using tarpaulins and planks, they were able to patch the damage sufficiently to allow the vessel to safely reach port.

A new lightship, *LV 109,* which was being prepared at Staten Island for the FIVE FATHOM BANK station, took the FIRE ISLAND station the next day and remained until the necessary repairs were made to *LV 68.*

In 1930 *LV 68* was replaced by *LV 114,* which had been constructed in Portland, Oregon and sailed from the shipyard on July 15, 1930, reaching the Staten Island Depot on September 20. On December 1, 1930, she assumed the FIRE ISLAND station. The 133-foot-long vessel had a complement of five officers and ten crewmen. Like its predecessors, the ship displayed a fixed white light from each mast but the fog signal was now a compressed air-powered diaphone.

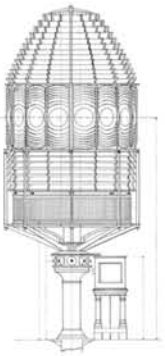
After the outbreak of WWI, German U-boats began to prowl the waters off Long Island. On January 11, 1942, the *LV 114* was removed from station and converted into an examination vessel. The FIRE ISLAND Lightship Station was never reactivated. After the war, major vessels began to be equipped with radar, obviating the need for lightships in some locations. In the years that followed, more and better onboard electronic navigation devices eventually eliminated the need for any lightships. The last manned station, NANTUCKET, was discontinued in 1984.



LV 58 **(above) was a one-of-a-kind lightship and the first hull to occupy the FIRE ISLAND station, but only for one year (1896-97). She was meant for the NANTUCKET station, and had occupied that station from 1894-1896, but due to the delay in the construction of *LV 68,* she was temporarily assigned to FIRE ISLAND. She was replaced by *LV 68,* which served from 1897-1930. The last ship was *LV 114* (Coast Guard designation *WAL 536*) which served on the FIRE ISLAND station from 1930 until the station was discontinued in 1942.**

After leaving the FIRE ISLAND station the *LV 58* became a RELIEF lightship for the 2nd Lighthouse District. On December 10, 1905, while relieving the NANTUCKET station vessel, she sprung a serious leak in the fire room compartment. The tender AZALEA responded to her distress call and took the *LV 58* in tow in very heavy seas. Before the ships could reach port the *LV 58* sank, 18 miles from station, only eleven years old.

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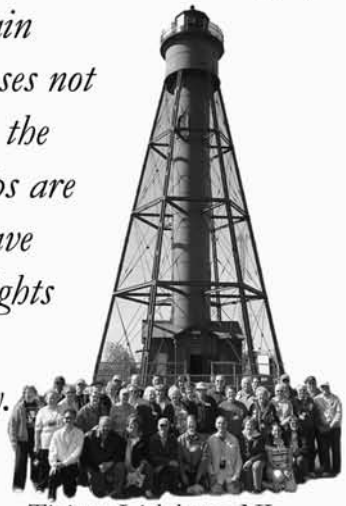
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