

LIGHTSHIP *COLUMBIA*
(WAL-604)
(WLV-604)
Columbia River Maritime Museum
Astoria
Clatsop County
Oregon

HAER OR-159
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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Lightship *Columbia*
(WAL-604)
(WLV-604)

HAER No. OR-159

Location: Columbia River Maritime Museum, Astoria, Clatsop County, Oregon

Type of Craft: Lightship

Official Numbers: WAL-604, WLV-604

Principal

Dimensions: Length (oa): 128'-0"
Beam: 30'-0"
Draft: 11'-0"
Displacement (light): 617
Maximum speed: 10.7 knots
(The listed dimensions are as-built, but it should be noted that draft, displacement, and tonnages were subject to alteration over time as well as variations in measurement.)

Propulsion: Atlas Imperial eight-cylinder, direct reversing diesel engine; 7'-diameter screw; 550 horsepower

Dates of

Construction: Laid down: 1949
Launched: April 18, 1950
Commissioned: December 19, 1950
Delivered: March 1951

Builder: Rice Brothers, East Boothbay, Maine

Original Owner: U.S. Coast Guard

Present Owner: Columbia River Maritime Museum

Disposition: Museum exhibit

Significance: Lightship *Columbia* is significant as an example of the last class of lightships commissioned by the U.S. Coast Guard. Dating from 1946 to 1952, *Columbia* and its sister ships featured all-welded steel hulls, high-speed direct propulsion, alternating current electrical systems, and roomier crew accommodations. In addition, the ship is significant as one of only

six surviving U.S. Coast Guard-built lightships. It was the last lightship to serve on the West Coast, guarding the treacherous Columbia River Bar before being replaced in 1979 by a buoy.

Project**Information:**

This project is part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a long-range program to document historically significant engineering and industrial works in the United States. The Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, administers the HAER program. Todd Croteau, HAER Maritime Program Coordinator produced the large-format photographs, and Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, compiled the report in 2012.

Description:

Lightship *Columbia* was designed with a welded steel hull and transverse bulkheads. Significant features include the foremast on which a Duplex 500mm lens lantern was mounted. In 1964, a “black box” (a high intensity, four-sided revolving lamp) was installed. The ship was also equipped with twin F2T diaphone fog signals and a hand-operated bell. The ship’s propulsion consisted of an Atlas-Imperial eight-cylinder direct reversing diesel engine driving a single 7'-diameter screw. The alternating-current power system was powered by generators. The ship required a 7,000-lb mushroom anchor to keep it on station. Accommodations were provided for sixteen enlisted men and three officers.¹

History:

Rice Brothers in East Boothbay, Maine, built Lightship *Columbia* at a cost of \$500,000 in 1949, and it was delivered to Seattle, Washington, in March 1951. The ship replaced earlier lightships tasked with serving as aids to navigation 10 miles from the treacherous mouth of the Columbia River beginning in 1892. *Columbia* was at this location from 1951 until December 12, 1979.

Despite its dangerous location and frequent near misses, the ship had an uneventful service life. Events of note include the rescue of the crew of a sinking U.S. Coast Guard 36' lifeboat in 1962. *Columbia* was hit by an unknown vessel in 1964, and in 1972, a freighter rammed the ship, but there was little damage and no injuries to the crew. Life onboard could be monotonous. Crew members rotated time onboard, spending three weeks on duty and then departing for two weeks via a Coast Guard lifeboat that made weekly visits. A buoy tender also brought supplies monthly.

¹Description based on James Delgado, “Lightship WAL-604, Columbia,” The Maritime Heritage of the United States NHL Study-Large Preserved Vessels, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1989, Section 7; “WLV 604,” U.S. Coast Guard Lightships & Those of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, available at <http://www.uscg.mil/history/weblightships/WLV604.asp>, accessed June 2012.

Columbia on the West Coast and *Nantucket* and *Relief* stationed off Nantucket Shoals (the Graveyard of the Atlantic) on the East Coast were the only two lightships still in operation by the late 1970s as the U.S. Coast Guard replaced its ships with large navigation buoys (LNB). In 1979, the U.S. Coast Guard decommissioned *Columbia* and instead installed a 42'-tall buoy equipped with a light, radio, radar, and foghorn. The Columbia River Maritime Museum purchased the ship in 1980 for use as an exhibit to replace Lightship No. 88. Due to the ship's high level of integrity and significance as the last Pacific Coast lightship and the last generation of U.S. Coast Guard lightships, it was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989.²

Sources:

"Buoy to Do Man's Job as Lightship Is Retired." *New York Times*, December 16, 1979, p. 29.

Delgado, James. "Lightship WAL-604." *The Maritime Heritage of the United States NHL Study-Large Preserved Vessels*, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1989.

Hillinger, Charles. "Lonely Duty at Sea and Going Nowhere." *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1978, p. B33.

"Lightship *Columbia*." Columbia River Maritime Museum website, available at http://crrmm.org/maritimemuseum_collection_lightshipcolumbia.html, accessed June 2012.

"WLV 604." U.S. Coast Guard Lightships & Those of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, available at <http://www.uscg.mil/history/weblightships/WLV604.asp>, accessed June 2012.

² See Charles Hillinger, "Lonely Duty at Sea and Going Nowhere," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1978, p. B33; "Buoy to do Man's Job as Lightship is Retired," *New York Times*, December 16, 1979, p. 29; "WLV 604," U.S. Coast Guard Lightships & Those of the U.S. Lighthouse Service"; Delgado, "Lightship WAL-604," Section 8.