

## **Lightships** <sup>[1]</sup>

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"Famous "Diamond" Lightship Stationed off Coast, Morehead City, N.C." ca. 1948 Image courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, UNC Libraries.

<sup>[2]</sup>by Dawson V. Carr, 2006

See also: [Lighthouses](#); <sup>[3]</sup>[Lighthouses Map](#) <sup>[4]</sup>; [Lighthouses](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

Lightships, beginning in the early nineteenth century, were anchored off the North Carolina coast to alert seagoing vessels to the proximity of hazards. Designed to supplement [lighthouses](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and mark sandbars and channels, these ungraceful but sturdy ships were placed in locations that could not be marked with fixed structures. Ships and crews remained on station in all weather conditions, warning sailors of treacherous waters. Operation of lightships was overseen by the [U.S. Treasury Department](#) <sup>[5]</sup> until 1852, when the [Lighthouse Board](#) <sup>[6]</sup> assumed control. The [U.S. Lighthouse Service](#) <sup>[7]</sup> replaced the Lighthouse Board in 1910 and was superseded by the [U.S. Coast Guard](#) <sup>[8]</sup> in 1939.

Lightships had official designations such as "LV," "WAL," or "WVL" and were numbered sequentially according to the order of their construction, though when on duty each ship temporarily received the name of the hazardous region it protected. Vessels could be identified by color codes, lights, foghorn and radio signals, and large letters painted on their sides. These ships were built to sustain the severe pounding of the fierce storms and agitated waters of North Carolina's most feared shoals. Although some were sunk by weather and others by collision or [Civil War](#) <sup>[9]</sup> engagements, most of the craft and their crews survived.

Many channels and shoals marked by the lightships gradually moved, and the need for these vessels subsequently diminished. [Diamond Shoal](#) <sup>[10]</sup> and [Frying Pan Shoal](#) <sup>[11]</sup> lightships were replaced by Texas-type light towers, and other areas were marked by buoys or fixed lights. These and other forms of technology eliminated the usefulness of lightships, and by the end of the twentieth century none were operating in North Carolina waters.

### **North Carolina Lightship Locations (with years of operation)**

Brant Island (1831–63)

Cape Lookout Shoal (1905–33)

Diamond Shoal (1824–27 and 1897–1966)

Frying Pan Shoal (1854–1964)

Harbor Island (1836–61 and 1863–67)

Horseshoe Shoal (1851–70)

Long Shoal (1825–61 and 1864–67)

[Neuse River](#) <sup>[12]</sup> (1828–62)

Nine Foot Shoal (1827–59)

Ocracoke Channel (1852–59)

Roanoke Island (1835–61)

Roanoke River <sup>[13]</sup> (1835–61 and 1863–66)

Royal Shoal (1826–67)

Wades Point Shoal (1826–55)

## References:

Willard Flint, *Lightships of the United States Government*(1989).

Mina Lewiton, *Lighthouses of America* (1964).

David Stick, *Graveyard of the Atlantic: Shipwrecks of the North Carolina Coast*(1952).

Stick, *North Carolina Lighthouses* (1980).

## Additional Resources:

Lighthouses: An Administrative History, National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/maritime/light/admin.htm> <sup>[7]</sup>

Lightships in the US, National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/maritime/ltshipnhtltheme.htm> <sup>[14]</sup>

Lighthouse Service Uniforms: [http://www.uscg.mil/history/uscghist/USLHS\\_Uniform\\_Index.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/history/uscghist/USLHS_Uniform_Index.asp) <sup>[15]</sup>

Flint, Willard. *Lightships of the United States government : reference notes*. Washington : Coast Guard Historian's Office, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters. 1989. <https://archive.org/details/lightshipsunit00flin> <sup>[16]</sup> (accessed October 16, 2014).

## Image Credit:

"Famous "Diamond" Lightship Stationed off Coast, Morehead City, N.C." ca. 1948 Image courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, UNC Libraries. Available from [http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/nc\\_post&CISOPTN=1323&CISOBX=1&REC=1](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/nc_post&CISOPTN=1323&CISOBX=1&REC=1) <sup>[2]</sup> (accessed July 12, 2012).

## Subjects:

Antebellum (1820-1861) <sup>[17]</sup>

Civil War (1861-1865) <sup>[18]</sup>

Gilded Age (1876-1900) <sup>[19]</sup>

Lighthouses <sup>[20]</sup>

N.C. Industrial Revolution (1900-1929) <sup>[21]</sup>

Reconstruction (1865-1876) <sup>[22]</sup>

Ships <sup>[23]</sup>

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## From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[25]</sup>

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## Links

<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/lightships> <sup>[2]</sup> [http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/nc\\_post&CISOPTN=1323&CISOBX=1&REC=1](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/nc_post&CISOPTN=1323&CISOBX=1&REC=1) <sup>[3]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/lighthouses> <sup>[4]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/lighthouses-map> <sup>[5]</sup> <http://www.treasury.gov/Pages/default.aspx> <sup>[6]</sup> <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/lighthou.htm> <sup>[7]</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/maritime/light/admin.htm> <sup>[8]</sup> [http://www.uscg.mil/history/h\\_lhindex.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/history/h_lhindex.asp) <sup>[9]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/civil-war> <sup>[10]</sup> <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?ct=ddl&sp=search&k=Markers&sv=B-41%20-%20DIAMOND%20SHOALS> <sup>[11]</sup> <http://www.fptower.com/> <sup>[12]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/neuse> <sup>[13]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/roanoke> <sup>[14]</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/maritime/ltshipnhtltheme.htm> <sup>[15]</sup> [http://www.uscg.mil/history/uscghist/USLHS\\_Uniform\\_Index.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/history/uscghist/USLHS_Uniform_Index.asp) <sup>[16]</sup> <https://archive.org/details/lightshipsunit00flin> <sup>[17]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/antebellum-1820-1> <sup>[18]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/civil-war> <sup>[19]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/gilded-age-1876-1> <sup>[20]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/lighthouse> <sup>[21]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/nc-industrial-rev> <sup>[22]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/reconstruction> <sup>[23]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/ships> <sup>[24]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/carr-dawson-v> <sup>[25]</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->