

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

JAN 09 1989

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Lightship WLV 539
other names/site number S-7857 The Lightship "Overfalls"

2. Location

street & number Lewes-Rehoboth Canal between Shipcarpenter & Mulberry not for publication
city, town Lewes vicinity
state Delaware code DE county Sussex code 005 zip code 19958

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> objects
		<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: N/A

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

John R. Kern 12/22/1988
Signature of certifying official Date
Director, Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

Patrick Andrus 2/16/89

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Coast Guard facility

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Other: Lightship

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation NA

walls NA

roof NA

other Steel

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Lightship WLV 539, now known as Overfalls, is located in a slip on the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal in Lewes, Sussex County, Delaware. Constructed in 1938, the Lightship served at a number of stations along the east coast of the United States before being decommissioned in 1973. It is now a museum. The Lewes-Rehoboth Canal at Lewes is wide enough to serve as a harbor for a wide variety of pleasure craft and work boats.

The Overfalls is in a specially constructed slip next to a public boat launch. The original Lewes Lifesaving Station (c. 1884) is just to the north of the lightship having been moved to its present location in 1978. The Overfalls is a steel, doubled-hull vessel, 116 feet in length with a beam of 25 feet. It draws 12 feet. The hull has a high bow and free board and a rounded stern. This is typical of lightships in that it provides maximum stability while at anchor in adverse conditions. The main engine is an eight-cylinder diesel capable of producing 300 horsepower. The maximum speed of the lightship is nine knots. A single screw drives the lightship. For auxiliary power while at station, the Overfalls has 3 diesel generators and two diesel air compressors. These are not intended to drive the ship but rather to assist with heavy work on board the lightship and to provide power for the light, fog horn and radio beacon as well as power for daily needs.

Below deck, the interior of the lightship is divided into two levels. The galley and a machine shop occupy the center of the upper level. A mess hall is set up on the starboard side while the port side has a machine shop work area. In the galley, the original coal-fired stove was altered to use diesel fuel. (This may not have been a good idea since the odor of diesel fuel still permeates the galley and mess hall.) The stainless steel fixtures of the galley remain in place.

Forward of the galley are five two-man rooms for the crew and, in the bow, the anchor/windlass compartment. A shower and two-man toilet are located to the rear on the starboard side of this compartment.

In the stern are four single rooms for the ship's officers, officer's mess/ward room and a ship's office. In the stern is the emergency steering gear.

The lowest level of the lightship contains the ship's engines and storage area.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)
Maritime history

Period of Significance
1938

Significant Dates
1938

Cultural Affiliation
NA

Significant Person
NA

Architect/Builder
Rice Brothers Shipyard

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Lightship WLV 539 was built in 1938 at the Rice Brothers Shipyard in East Boothbay, Maine. It was one of the last lightships ordered by the U.S. Light Service which was merged with the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939. It is also one of the last five lightships ever built in the United States. It served as a lightship until 1973. As one of the few remaining lightships left in the United States the Lightship WLV 539 is eligible for listing as an example of the federal government's role in providing aid to navigation through the marking of ship channels and dangerous shoals and points of land.

The lightship's first and longest station was at Boston Harbor. As lightships are named for their station, the name BOSTON was painted in large letters on the sides of the hull. As a guide to the painters, the letters were picked out by welds.

The lightship also served at two locations near Long Island, New York, "Pollock Rip" and "Cornfields."

As an aid to navigation, a lightship is a floating lighthouse. Its function is to mark ship channels or dangerous points of land. The first American lightship was launched in 1821. The use of lightships was an English technique that had been developed in the late eighteenth century. In this country, lighthouses or beacons date to the early eighteenth century. The first were erected by local citizens or merchant's groups. One of the first light beacons was established at Cape Henlopen at Lewes, Delaware in 1725. Erected by Philadelphia merchants it was replaced by a brick lighthouse in 1761. The federal govern-

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property .07

UTM References

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Zone Easting Northing

B

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Zone Easting Northing

C

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D

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary is the physical limits of the lightship itself.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

As a lightship, no land was ever associated directly with its function. Accordingly, only the lightship itself is being nominated.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Stephen G. Del Sordo, Historian
organization Bureau of Archaeology and Historic Preservation date September 1988
street & number 15 The Green telephone (302) 736-5685
city or town Dover state DE zip code 19901

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On deck, the forward section has housing for the main 7,000 pound mushroom anchor and for the 4,000 pound auxiliary anchor. Amid ship is the wheelhouse. It contains the navigation instruments and beacon and light controls as well as the ship's wheel. An early surface radar system manufactured by RCA was installed after World War II. The system was a surplus item left from the war and has a range of fifteen miles. On top of the wheelhouse is the con. This area provides a mooring site for the radar beacon and radio mast but, more importantly, was the station for a senior crew member who would guide the lightship while it was underway. The high bow of the lightship makes it impossible for the helmsman to navigate. He is effectively blinded by the lightship's sides and the crew man above would guide the ship.

Aft of the wheelhouse is the radio room. The single stack is located behind the radio room. On the rear deck are two lifeboat stations and a diesel motor. The light mast is 57 feet above the water line. It houses a fresnal lens which is visible for twelve miles. The ship's foghorn is also secured onto this mast.

The lightship's hull is painted red above the waterline and black below. The superstructure is white with buff colored stack, masts and ventilator. The lightship's station, OVERFALLS, is painted in white letters on the lightship's sides. A former station, BOSTON, is recalled by that station's letters being outlined in welds on the steel plates to show painters how to form the individual letters.

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ment took over the lighthouse in the late eighteenth century as the U.S. Government began to assure responsibility for interstate trade and for aids to navigation.

Lightships were used at locations that were not suitable for a traditional lighthouse. They were either located in deep water or where the water bottom would not permit a lighthouse to be erected. Lightships were once common along both coasts and on some inland waterways. The entrance to the Delaware Bay, for instance, was marked by both a northern and a southern lightship. As engineering technology developed in the nineteenth century, permanent manned lighthouses could be constructed in deep water or on previously unsuitable bottoms. On the Delaware Bay, improved technology enabled the U.S. Light Service to replace the lightship with lighthouses.

In the twentieth century, reliable automatic systems and radio began to make manned light-stations obsolete. Automatic radio beacons and lights did not need the constant attention of a manned light station. Gradually all light stations were converted to unmanned automatic lights. All of these are checked on a regular schedule by the U.S. Coast Guard. That agency has responsibility for all aids to navigation in the United States.

Those ship channels and dangerous shoals that are in water too deep for automated light beacons are now guarded by large platforms known as Texas Towers or more properly "large navigational buoy" (LNBS). Most coastal lightship sites, including the Overfalls Shoals, have an LNB marking the shoal or ship channel.

When the Lightship WLV 539 was retired from active duty in 1973, it was given to the Lewes Historical Society for use as a museum. Upon arrival in Lewes, it was named the OVERFALLS. The Overfalls shoals is located just outside of the Lewes Harbor and Cape Henlopen. The shoal was marked by a lightship from 1892 until 1961. In 1961 an unmanned navigational beacon was erected at Overfalls. Two other lightships have carried the name Overfalls.

In addition to marking the shoal, the Overfalls lightship station marked the southern entrance to the Delaware Bay. The southern entrance was used by the deepest draft vessels and by ships

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coming up the Atlantic Coast from the south. A northern sea lane was marked by other lightships and now by an unmanned navigational buoy.

Life on board a lightship was basically monotonous duty. The light above the ship was lit from one hour before dusk till one hour after dawn. It was also lit during inclement or overcast conditions. The Lightship WLV 539 light is visible for a distance of 12 miles.

The lightship also used a foghorn when conditions warranted. The foghorn can be heard for five miles. While the blare of the foghorn made life difficult on board ship, it did serve to warn approaching ships away from the station. There are, however, known occasions when a ship would steer towards the sound of the horn and actually sail into the lightship. Such a mishap did not occur to this vessel or to previous Overfalls. The lightship also had a radio beacon with a range of 100 miles. The radar system installed on the lightship after World War II can track ships approaching within 15 miles.

The entire lightship's crew would not be on board at one time. Each man received one week off for each two weeks worked. The men usually worked one month or double shifts. Consequently about 1/3 of the crew would be ashore during each shift. The lightship itself stayed on station for 12 to 18 months. After that it was brought into overhaul. While in port a relief lightship was established on station. The relief ship had RELIEF painted in white on its hull.

Special consideration - Integrity of location technically, the Lightship WLV 539 is in a location not associated with its years of service as a lightship. However, the very nature of the service it performed, was transitory. This lightship and other such vessels were shifted on an as-needed basis. As the lightships ended their period of useful service, they were either replaced by other lightships or, in the modern period, by navigational buoys. Lightships such as the WLV 539 are an example of an obsolete technology that would be a hazard to navigation if they were kept on station. Accordingly, the remaining lightships are museum pieces used to interpret our nation's maritime heritage.

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COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The Lightship WLV 539, known as Overfalls, represents an important part of the aids to navigation system established by the federal government to make the use of the Delaware Bay and River more easily accessible to ships calling at ports on the Bay or River. In Delaware, this would be principally at Wilmington, although some coastal trade ships would stop at Lewes, Milton, Milford and Delaware City. The later location was usually for ships planning to traverse the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.

The lightship as an aid to navigation relates to the coastal zone of Delaware. Thematically it represents improvements to the transportation system, a government function as well as an engineering achievement that provided the skill to produce iron hulled ships with both radio and light beacons. Chronologically the lightship falls within the 1880-1940 period which in Delaware was a period of urbanization and suburbanization or consolidation of the population towards the port city of Wilmington.

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Kaplan, H.R. & Hunt, James F. This is the Coast Guard
(Cambridge, MD: Cornell Maritime Press, 1972)

Holland, Francis Ross, Jr. America's Light Houses,
(Brattleboro, VT: The Stephen Greene Press, 1972)

Lewes Historical Society, The Lightship Overfalls
Unpublished manuscript, 1988

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SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 89000006

Date Listed: 2/16/89

Lightship WLV 539
Property Name

Sussex
County

DE
State

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Patrick Andrus

Signature of the Keeper

2/16/89

Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

Criteria Consideration B (Moved Properties) is checked on the form. National Register Bulletin 15 guidance establishes that this Criteria Consideration does not apply to properties that were designed to be moved. In consultation with Steve Del Sordo of the DE SHPO the form is now officially amended to delete Criteria Consideration B.

DISTRIBUTION:

National Register property file
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)