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# WEEKEND BREAK



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# Remembering the Desdemona Sands Lighthouse

Lighthouse was one of six along the Columbia

By JULIA TRIEZENBERG  
*For The Astorian*

There have been six different lighthouses (or lightships) that lit the Columbia River and North Pacific Ocean in the North Coast's history. Some of them are still around, while for others you can only see the remnants of what they left behind.

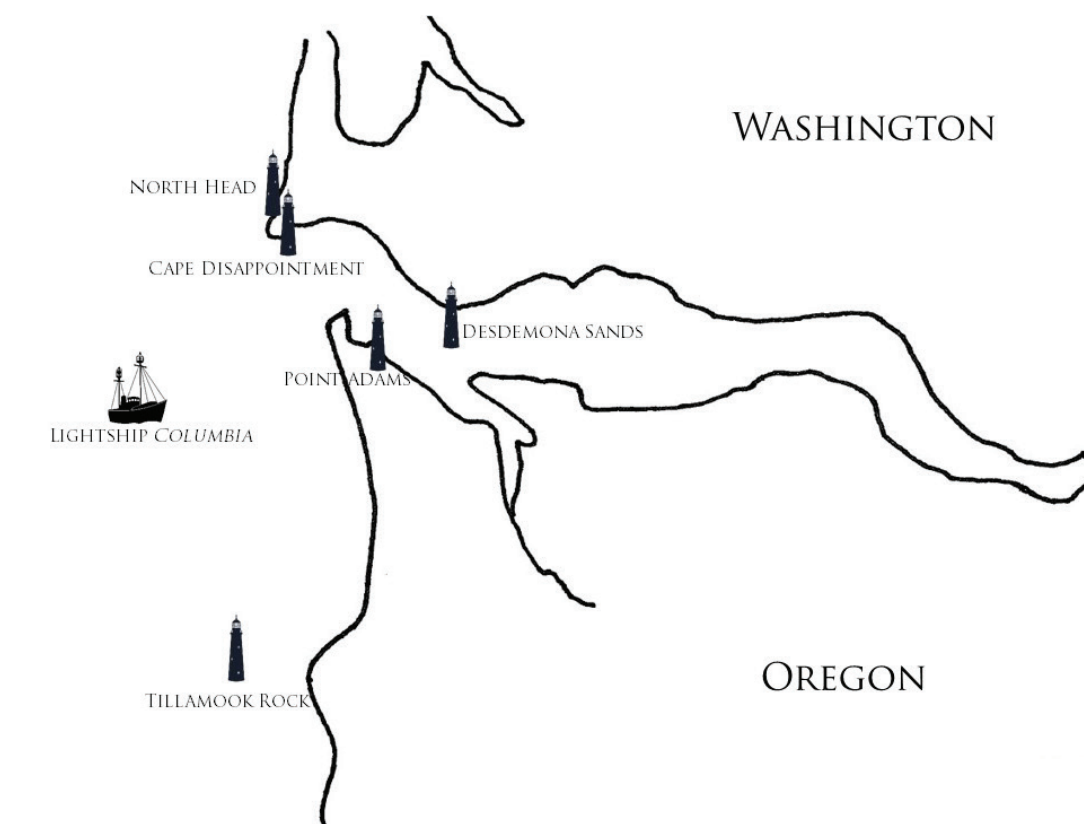
The pilings that used to hold up the Desdemona Sands Lighthouse can still be found on a shoal near the mouth of the Columbia. Originally built to replace the Point Adams Light that stood on the Oregon side of the river, Congress appropriated \$24,000 to construct Desdemona Sands on June 6, 1900, in addition to \$11,000 given for a station near Fort Stevens.

The lighthouse's structure was designed by famed architect Carl Leick, who was also responsible for the designs of the Flavel House and Clatsop County Courthouse in Astoria. Its octagonal frame sat on a wooden platform in an area of the river that used to be known as Chinook Sands.

Chinook Sands was eventually renamed "Desdemona Sands" after a bark called Desdemona ran aground there in 1857. This particular spot's shifting sands made it dangerous for mariners to navigate so the lighthouse marked the western side of the sandbar.

Construction was officially completed in 1902. Described by some as a "poor man's castle," Desdemona Sands' light was a fourth-order Fresnel lens that was visible for up to 12 miles. The lighthouse also had a fog signal on its west side that would blast for two seconds at 3- and 23-second intervals when needed.

The structure was unique because it was positioned in the middle of the river instead of on shore and it also didn't have a place for the lighthouse keepers' families to stay. Instead, families would live in Astoria while keepers stayed on the river for weeks at a time. They would lower a small boat down from the lighthouse and row their way back when the



Columbia River Maritime Museum

There have been six different lighthouses (or lightships) that have lit the North Coast's waters.

weather was good enough.

Because so little of the area around Desdemona Sands is navigable, virtually every large-scale vessel would travel past it on the Oregon side of the river. Ships would glide past the lighthouse at all hours of the day and night.

The keepers often became friends with the ships' crew members, and they would pass books or magazines to each other from the lighthouse platform in wooden barrels.

The biggest concern for the lighthouse's safety was fire. The oil that the light required was stored in the wooden structure itself rather than a secondary oil house that onshore lighthouses might have.

There was an incident in 1916 when a por-

tion of the building caught fire. Thankfully, the keepers were prepared enough that they were able to put it out themselves before help could arrive.

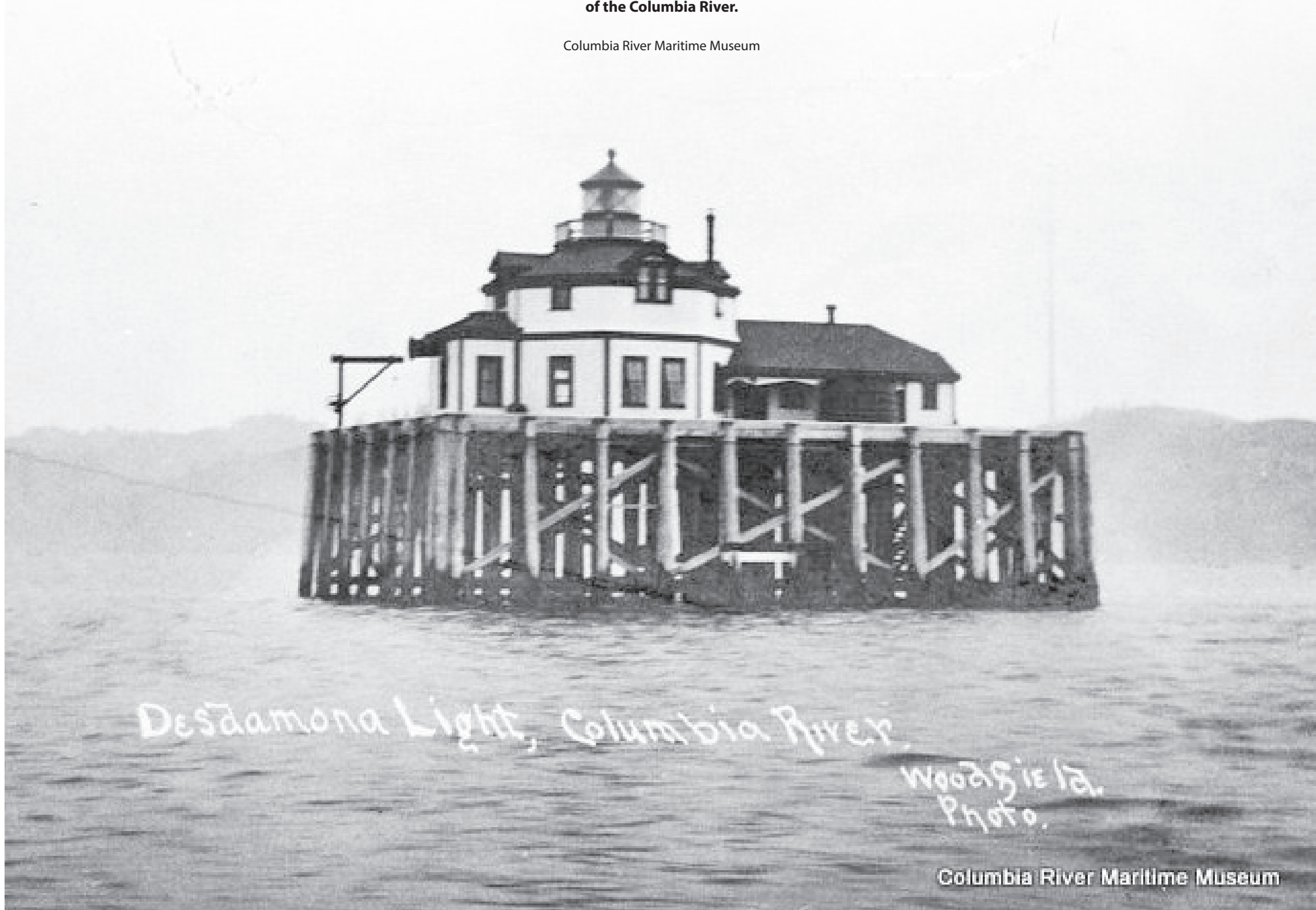
Unfortunately, Desdemona Sands Lighthouse was one of the first casualties of automated technology. In 1933, 8,000 feet of submarine cable electrified the lighthouse. After that, the light and fog signal could both be operated by remote control. The structure was deactivated as a staffed station.

The lighthouse was demolished in the early 1940s and replaced by a light beacon, which lit that area for another 20 years before it was also taken down in 1964.

Julia Triezenberg is an educator at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

Desdemona Sands Lighthouse  
sat on pilings near the mouth  
of the Columbia River.

Columbia River Maritime Museum



Desdemona Light, Columbia River.

Woodie La.  
Photo.

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