



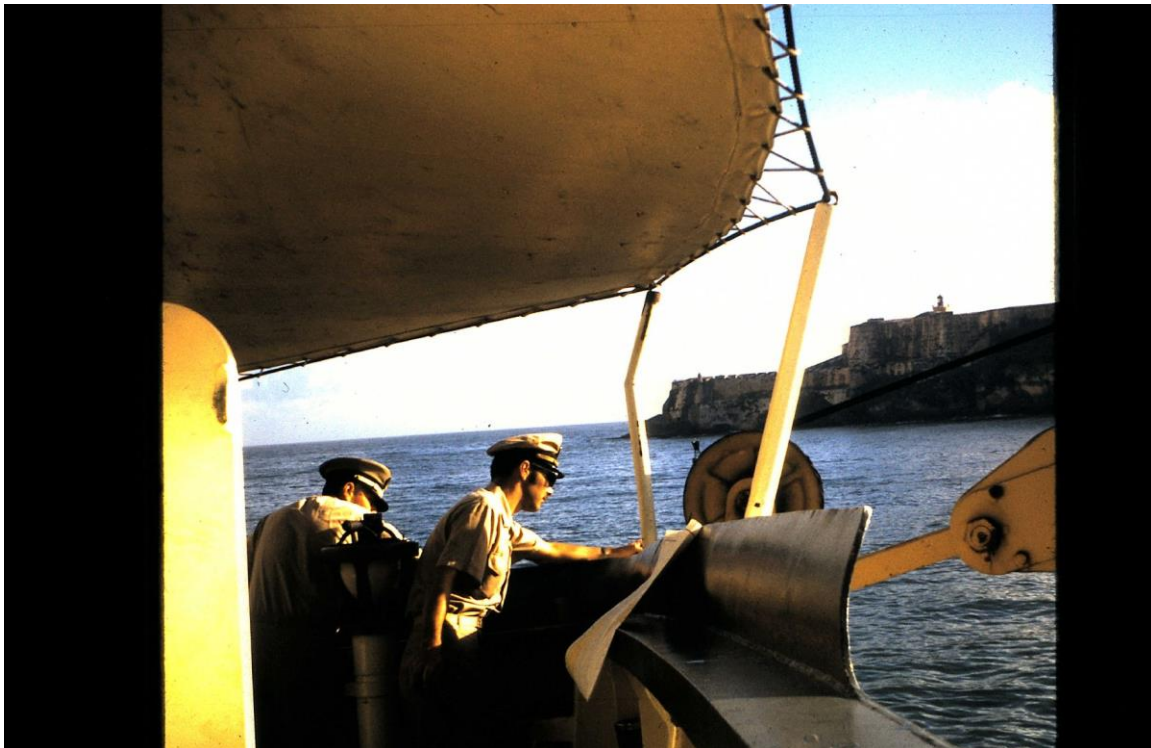
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A Narrative about the “Aids to Navigation in Puerto Rico”

The following is a compilation of the history of United States Light House Service (USLHS) and United States Coast Guard (USCG) ATON vessels that served in and around Puerto Rico (PR) waters during the 20th century. It was written by Retired CDR Guy P. Clark in 2012. A graduate of the USCG Academy, class of 1961, CDR Clark's career was spent entirely in the Aids to Navigation Programs. This included servicing and maintenance of lighted and un-lighted buoys and beacons as well as lighthouses and Lightships. CDR Clark served as Operations Officer aboard USCGC FIREBUSH (WAGL-393), Executive Officer of USCGC LILAC, (WAGL-227) and was Commanding Officer (Captain) of USCGC SAGEBRUSH (WLB-399) in PR from 1971-1973 (pic.1-2). He retired after having served as Program Manager of the Short-Range Aids to Navigation Program at USCG HQ in Washington, D.C.

J. Edwin Nieves MD, USCG AUX BC-Archives, District 5 Southern Region, Division 6 Commander.



Pic. 1. CO, LCDR Guy P. Clark on the right on the bridge of the USCGC SAGEBRUSH, December 1972, to the left, XO, LT Theodore “Ted” T. Musselman. San Juan PR Harbor. El Morro Castle in background. Photo by Luella C. Clark courtesy Kristina C. Clark. Dba “Illuminadora” Photography.



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Pic.2. USCGC SAGEBRUSH, heading out to sea. San Juan harbor. USCG photo.

J. Edwin Nieves MD, USCG AUX BC-Archives, District 5 Southern Region, Division 6 Commander.

Aids to Navigation in Puerto Rico

According to Peterson (p. xvi), the U.S. Lighthouse Service¹ authority was expanded to include Puerto Rico in 1900. This author's oldest Light List, Vol. 2 is from 1966. It included 15 Lights in and around Puerto Rico built between 1853 and 1900 (this information is no longer published in the Light Lists). Puerto Rico was first made part of the 3rd Lighthouse District since it was supported from their Depot at Staten Island, NY.

The first PR USLH Tender, **AGUACATE**, was a 38' sloop acquired as a war prize from the Spanish-American War. It was acquired on October 29, 1901 and decommissioned after being severely damaged in a storm on December 5, 1901, giving it the shortest life span in USLHE/USLHS history. During March and April, 1902, the 100-ton schooner **DISCHOSE** was hired for \$13.33 per day.

In 1910, a reorganization of the USLHS established Puerto Rico (and Cuba) as the 9th Lighthouse District (LHD).

¹ The term 'U.S. Lighthouse Service' seems to be used generically in his fine publication. This author's recollection is that the 'U.S. Lighthouse Service' was known as the "U.S. Lighthouse Establishment" until 1908. I am in possession of a fire ax engraved USLHE from a lighthouse built in 1900, and during the early 1970's **SAGEBRUSH** was still deploying riveted wrought iron 2/c standard can buoys embossed with 'USLHE.'



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The first **USLHT LILAC**², a 155', 643 ton twin-screw Sea-Going Tender, had been commissioned in 1892, and was then transferred to the 9th LHD (pic.3). She was decommissioned in 1924, sold in 1925, and then operated as the freighter **ELMA** until 1938.



Pic. 3. USLHT Lilac NavSource Photo ca. 1900 location unknown.

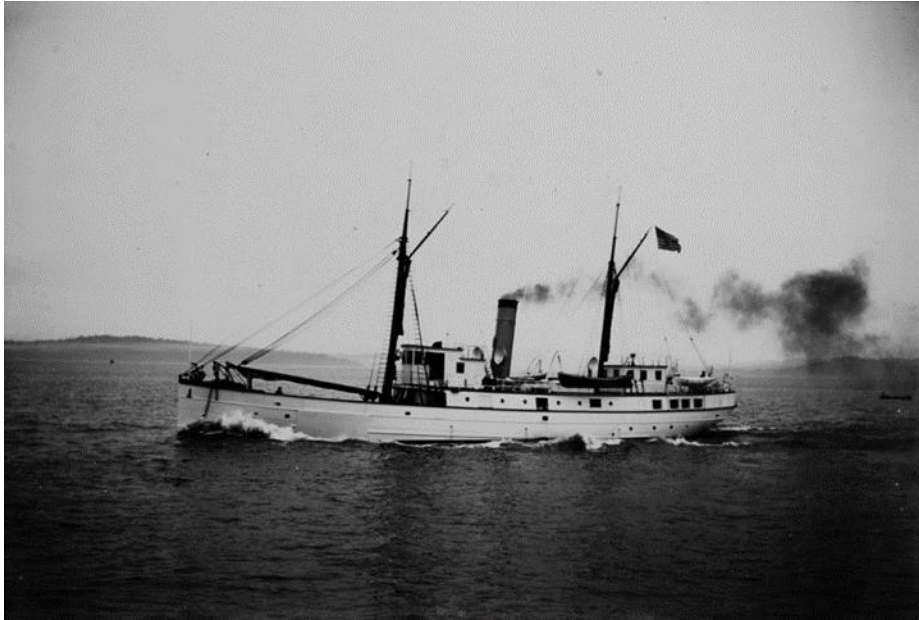
LILAC's sister ship, **USLHT COLUMBINE**, followed, from 1925 to 1927, when she was decommissioned and replaced by **USLHT ACACIA** (pic. 4-6).

² The author served as XO aboard the second **USLHT LILAC**, in '62-'64. The 'Flower of the Delaware' was 173' LOA, 1012 tons with twin screws but a single rudder, and served from '33-'72



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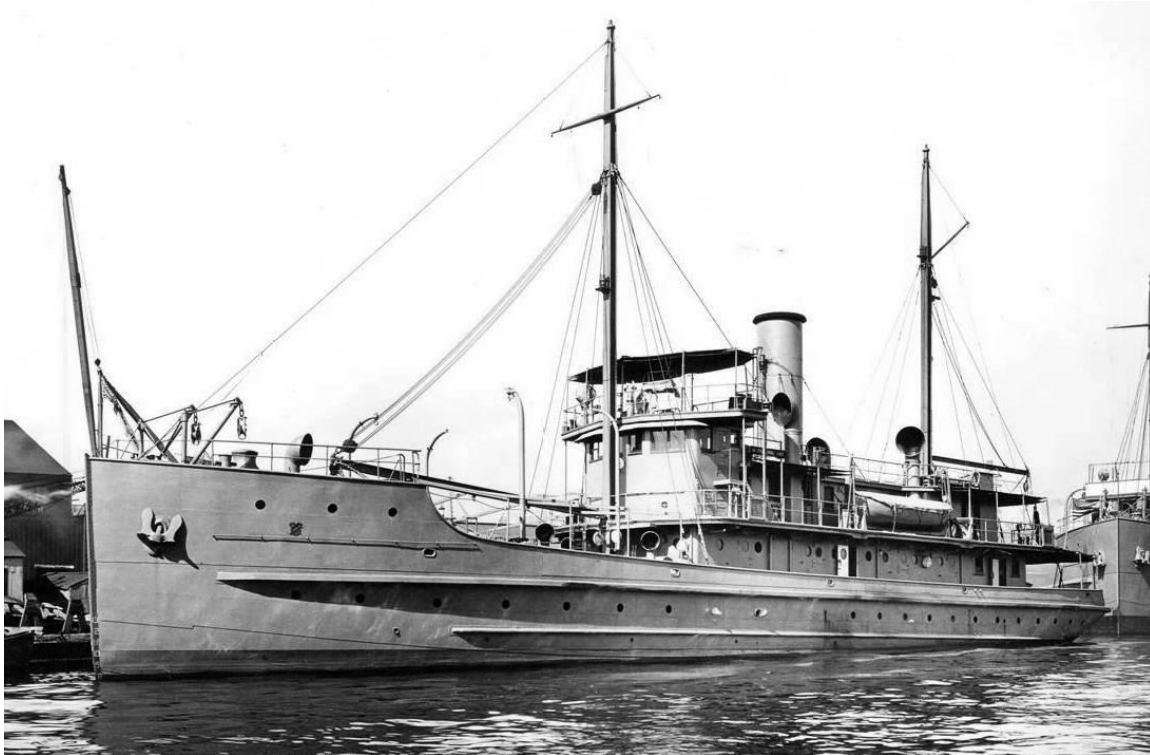
Pic 4. USLHT Columbine. Steaming, at 15 Knots, Columbia River, May 10, 1894. She served in the Navy as USS COLUMBINE in 1917-1919. Photo. Courtesy of Rear Admiral A. Farenholt. Naval Heritage and History Command.

US AMP (Army Mine Planter) **GEN. JOHN P. STORY** was built in 1919 for the Army Corps of Engineers, and was transferred to the USLHS in 1922 and renamed **USLHT ACACIA** (pic.5). With twin screws, a length-over-all of 172 ½ ft., she displaced 1130 tons. She was further renamed **USCGC ACACIA (WAGL 200)** after the USLHS was merged into the USCG on September 1, 1939. Also as part of the merger, the 9th LHD became part of the 7th CG District. The unarmed **ACACIA** was the only buoy tender sunk by a U-boat during WWII, on March 15, 1942. See White for (very interesting) details.



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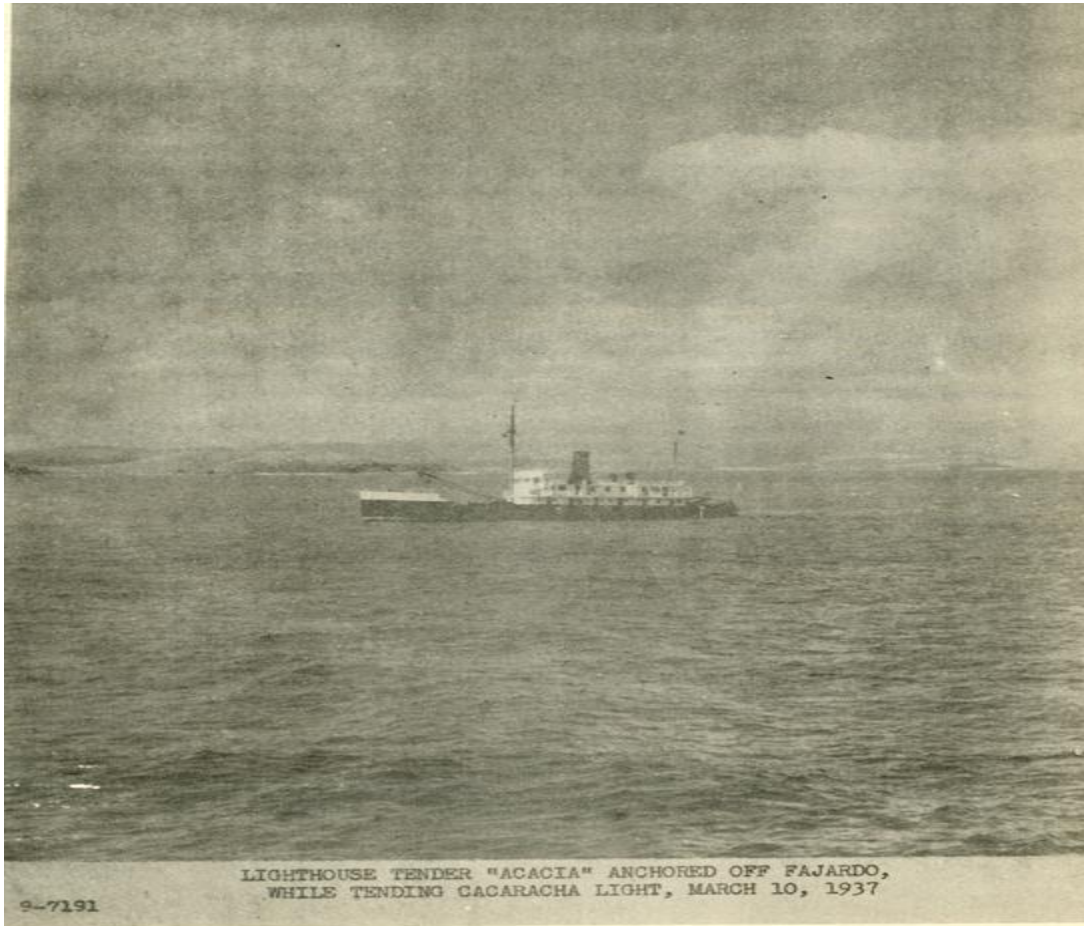


Pic 5. US AMP Gen. John P. Story, dock side while in Army service 1920-1921. Location Unknown. NavSource photo.



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Pic.6. USLHT Acacia off coast of Fajardo PR 1937. USCG photo.

During WWII a fleet of 39+/- 180', 1000-ton single screw multi-purpose auxiliary vessels were built, which included the capability of tending buoys. Among these were **USCGC SAGEBRUSH (WAGL 399)** and **USCGC BRAMBLE (WAGL 392)** (pic. 7). In July 1944, **SAGEBRUSH** replaced **ACACIA** at Base San Juan where she serviced the aids in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands for 4 ½ decades until the late '80's when she was decommissioned and sunk as a fishing reef.



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Pic 7. USCGC Bramble underway, date and location unknown. Wikipedia photo.

BRAMBLE was also home-ported at Base San Juan for a number of years, (1944-1960's) but her assignment was servicing the aids at Guantanamo Bay, Navassa Island Light, and the aids in the Panama Canal. Servicing of aids at Guantanamo Bay was turned over to the U.S. Navy and those at the Panama Canal were turned over to the Panama Canal Commission, probably during the '60's, freeing **BRAMBLE** for reassignment to the Great Lakes as the old USLHS tenders were being decommissioned due to their advancing ages.

With **SAGEBRUSH**'s decommissioning (April 26, 1988), an Aids to Navigation Team with a 55' **ANB** (Aids to Navigation Boat) was established, and 'quarterly' visits from stateside were made first by sister-ship **USCGC MADRONA (WLB 302)** and since by the new **USCGC OAK (WLB 211)** for when 'heavy lifting' is required, (pic. 8).



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Pic. 8. USCGC Oak underway, NAS Pensacola 2010. US Navy photo.

Legend has it that sometime in the '40's -'60's time frame, Base San Juan had an approximately 40' buoy boat which **SAGEBRUSH** would carry to Christiansted, St. Croix, and perhaps elsewhere, and then deploy it to service the channel buoys there. With no buoy boat in the '70's, this was, (St. Croix), undoubtedly our most challenging place to tend buoys from a 180. This narrow channel has a 90° turn to the right immediately followed by a 90° turn to the left, through coral reefs. On my first visit I could not negotiate the first turn due to the trade winds, and unable to turn around, I had to back out. I entered again the next morning before the sun and trade winds came up and had to make much use of our anchor for maneuvering. We started at the inshore end, and worked our way out. The Officer in Charge of the 82' WPC **POINT WARD** in St. Thomas told me he would not enter Christiansted on just one engine. After vacationing at St. Croix, the officer I had previously relieved on my first two buoy tenders asked me: "Who works the buoys at Christiansted?" I told him: "John, there is no one else." He retorted in disbelief: "You go in there? With a 180?" Clearly, today's 55' **ANB** is a much better option.

Aids to Navigation equipment in the 7th CG District followed a trickle-down process. When new equipment was ordered by the District, be it a buoy or lighting equipment, it was put into service stateside. If it was needed in San Juan, San Juan generally received older used equipment. Similarly, San Juan's even-older used equipment would be sent to the Panama Canal. In the early '60's, acetylene lights were giving way to new electric lights throughout the Coast Guard. The acetylene light equipment worked its way to the Panama Canal from and through San Juan while electrification took place first stateside, and then in San Juan. In the early '70's, San Juan still had a number of 1928-type 8X20 lighted buoys, while there were none stateside (where they had mostly 1962-types and 1952-types of 8X26's). Meanwhile, San Juan was able to pass off the old Converted-C types to the Panama Canal. (C-type buoys were originally filled with



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Pintsch³ gas used as the lighting fuel before the switch was made to acetylene. They were then modified to hold acetylene cylinders.

When **SAGEBRUSH** headed north in '73 for the shipyard, the District office asked us to bring back an 8' lighted buoy to fill a shortage stateside. We did. Much to the consternation of the GS-12 Aids to Navigation Specialist in the District office, we brought back an old 8X20! Such was life during the first 34 years after the end of the USLHS! After WWII the USCG had plenty of relatively new ships, and the costs of fuel and crew to operate them were low. Missions were easily found to use them. Years later when these aging ships were nearing the end of their useful lives, the cost of building replacements presented another story.

³Pintsch gas was a compressed fuel gas invented by Pintsch, which was derived from distilled naphtha and used for illumination purposes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its primary use in the latter half of the 19th century was for illumination of buoys, isolated beacons, lighthouses and railroad cars.

At USCGHQ in Washington, DC, we used to quip, at budget time; "Find me a buoy tender that is not in someone's Congressional District, and you have found a buoy tender that can be decommissioned." Apparently, someone during the mid-'80's finally figured out that **SAGEBRUSH** was not in anybody's Congressional District.

Base San Juan also served as the home port for the 210' **USCGC COURAGEOUS (WMEC 622)** from '69-'70, and for the 165' **USCGC AURORA (WPC-103)** from '59-'68, (pic. 9). They were engaged in missions other than Aids to Navigation.



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Pic 9. USCGC Courageous docked Curtis Bay. USCG photo.

The author makes no contention that the above is complete, or that his memory is totally correct. It is more than 51 years since he began his career as a pharologist while the last of the "wickies" still ran the program; the first 22 years being in the USCG and the next 20 years or so in the private sector.

Lights in and around Puerto Rico (as of 1900)

Punta Borinquen Lt	1889	Punta Figuras Lt	1889
Arecibo Lt	1898	Caja de Muertos Lt	1887
Puerto San Juan Lt	1853	Cayo Cardona Lt	1889
Cabo San Juan Lt	1880	Guanica Lt	1889
Punta Mulas Lt	1885	Cabo Rojo Lt	1882
Isla Culebrita Lt	1886	Isla Mona Lt	1900
Puerto Ferro Lt	1899	Punta Higuero Lt	1892
Punta Tuna Lt	1892		

USLHS Lore #1: A keeper of Mona Island Lt. had a lady friend in Mayaguez whom he missed very much. Early one summer he asked a west coast (of PR) fisherman who was visiting Mona how to get to Mayaguez in his rowboat. The fisherman told him to leave at dawn and steer at the sun. He did and had a wonderful visit. Six months later he again decided to visit his lady friend, left at dawn, and steered at the sun. He did



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not realize that the sun did not rise in the northeast in December as it did in July. He rowed, and he rowed, and he rowed. Very tired, he was still steering at the sun when it set. A day or two later he arrived on the east coast of the Dominican Republic, setting off a minor international skirmish.

USLHS Lore #2: Culebrita Lt. When this light was manned, a donkey which was used to pull a wagon, loaded with supplies, up the hill to the light from the landing pier when USLHS Tender **ACACIA** delivered supplies. In time, the donkey realized that when the black hull came, it was time to hide. The keeper then learned to keep the donkey tied up on those days so it would be available as a beast of burden when needed. In the course of time, Culebrita Lt. was automated and scheduled for unmanning. The keeper had moved everything to be removed moved to the pier, except the donkey. The black hull came, everything on the pier was loaded aboard, and a search began for the donkey so that it, too, could be retired. The donkey could not be found and was left behind to fend for itself. There were a few reported sighting reports from the locals for a while, but never when the black hull was within sight.

USCG Lore # 3: During the period October '71-March '73, between stateside shipyard visits, **SAGEBRUSH** averaged a SAR case every three weeks, aiding well over 400 persons in various degrees of distress. This statistic must be tempered by one case involving 342 persons on a 6-shaft high speed ferry from St. Thomas which grounded very hard on a reef outside Fajardo. When scheduling our monthly servicing runs, my first Ops officer, LTJG R. D. White, Jr., would ask me what day I wanted to schedule our expected SAR case.

USCG Lore #4: I have on several occasions heard of a notable rescue when (I presume it was) **ACACIA** ventured in the tradewind driven breakers to save the crew of a vessel which floundered on the rocks under the shadows of El Morro. I know nothing more, but I deduce this occurred between 1927 and WWII.

Guy P. Clark
CDR, USCG (Ret)
(penned 2012)

References:

Doug Peterson, USCG (Ret); "United States Lighthouse Service Tenders 1840-1939"; Eastwind Publishing, Annapolis and Trappe, MD, 2000: 410-476-4445

Richard D. White, Jr.; "Aids to Navigation in Puerto Rico 1927-1942; History of the Buoy Tender ACACIA"; Review Interamericana IV, Winter '74-'75. (Excerpts of which appeared in Retiree Newsletter #4-87.)