

LIGHTSHIP BASKETS

These sturdy, honey-toned symbols of nautical lore represent a folk art unique to the island of Nantucket, and owning one means owning part of the island's seafaring



heritage. Once made as a diversion by sailors at sea, lightship baskets have evolved from utilitarian containers to fashionable souvenirs and prized collectibles.

Lightships, essentially floating lighthouses, were moored in difficult-to-navigate waters. In the 1850s, crews sentenced to a four-month tour of duty aboard the South Shoal Lightship, 24 miles off Nantucket's Sankaty Head, turned to weaving rattan baskets as an antidote to cabin fever.

In an 1891 account of life aboard the lightship, Gustav Kobbe wrote that the baskets were made for



Linked to Nantucket lore, lightship baskets demand quite a price, but devotees to this art form don't mind the cost. The baskets have an honest simplicity that enhances décor during the holidays or any time of year.

“whiling away the weary winter hours.” He describes them as round or oval baskets made of white oak or hickory, filled in with rattan, and says they are baskets “of graceful lines and of great durability.” Sailors made them in nests, the sizes “ranging from a pint to a peck and a half,” Kobbe wrote.

Buyers back on Nantucket used these baskets for everyday tasks such as berry picking, marketing, or storing grain, but by the 1870s, vacationers were buying them as souvenirs. The label that read “Made by ... on board the South Shoal Lightship” added to their appeal.

This lightship hobby flourished until around 1900, when the U.S. government



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