

In a recent book, an author described the fact most Americans know about lighthouses, but very few, if any, even realize there existed a U. S. Life-Saving Service. The writer goes on to state “[i]t took neither courage or bravery to run a lighthouse. That the light keepers may have had qualities of courage and bravery that went untested is a moot point. “To further the contrast, the author then relates, “I keep thinking of the example of the storm raging in full fury on the lake while the wickie sat comfortably in his warm house, enjoying perhaps a good cigar and dram of rum and wondering aloud that ‘it must be hell afloat tonight.’ But the life saving keeper was afloat!” The primary duty requirements of the light keeper, so the writer maintains, remained reliability. On the other hand, “it took courageous, brave and reliable men to lead a life saving station.”

There is no question that, in general, lighthouses are well-known and the U. S. Life-Saving Service is relatively unknown to most Americans. As one who has spent over twenty years researching and writing on the U. S. Life-Saving Service, and who has an abiding respect for the men of the U. S. Life-Saving Service, I agree that requirements for a lighthouse keeper and the keeper of a U. S. Life-Saving Service station were different. The passage “light keepers may have had qualities of courage and bravery that went untested,” however, is wrong.

The official record of the U. S. Life-Saving Service itself proves keepers of the U. S. Lighthouse Service more than proved their courage and many times went above and beyond the call of duty. From 1876 to 1908, the U. S. Life-Saving Service records six lighthouse keepers won the Gold Life Saving Medal, the highest award given by the Treasury Department for the saving of life at sea, and seven keepers won the Silver Medal, the second highest award, plus one lighthouse tender master won the Silver Medal



By Dennis L. Noble

and an entire boat crew from the *Shubrick* also won the Silver. Even this excellent record does not give an accurate picture. The award of the Gold or Silver Life Saving medals were for deeds above and beyond the normal. One has only to scan the *Bulletin of the U. S. Lighthouse Service* to see dozens of incidents of keepers helping a boat in distress near their stations, or the rescue of someone in danger of drowning. Most of these keepers never received a medal. A good example is Ida Lewis, arguably the most famous woman lighthouse keeper. Ida won the Gold Life Saving Medal for the rescue of two soldiers who broke through the ice near her light station at Lime Rock. Yet she is officially credited with saving at least eighteen people, with unofficial estimates as high as twenty-five, during her career.

One point to bear in mind: lifesavers had at their disposal boats designed for rescue work, either surfboats or the heavy lifeboat. In addition, their rescue equipment included beach apparatus for throwing a line to a wrecked ship. None of this was part and parcel of a light station. Usually, a light station had a small boat, but not necessarily designed for rescue work, although Ida Lewis, and others, certainly made good use of these boats in pulling people from the water. If lighthouse keepers did not have the equipment for the saving lives as did a lifesaving station, how then did they manage? The U. S. Life-Saving Service published a listing of all who won the Gold and Silver Life

Saving Medals from 1876-1909. A quick glance at the brief synopsis to some of the medals in the listing gives a suggestion of how keepers managed to cope.

Keeper Marcus A. Hanna, of the Cape Elizabeth light station, did not need to prove his bravery. During the Civil War, he won this country's highest military medal for valor, the Congressional Medal of Honor. On January 28, 1885, even while recovering from sickness, Keeper Hanna braved the elements and, putting himself in grave danger of being swept into the freezing waters, managed to pass a jury-rigged heaving line to the schooner *Australia* and pulled two sailors safely ashore. For his actions, Hanna won the Gold Life Saving Medal, thus becoming the only person to win both the top military medal for valor and the top lifesaving medal. Keeper Frederick T. Hatch, of the Cleveland light station, also did not need to prove his courage. While a member of the crew of the U. S. Life-Saving Service station at Cleveland in 1883, he received a Gold Life Saving Medal. On the night of October 26, 1890, lighthouse keeper Hatch won a second Gold Life Saving Medal for rescuing a drowning woman. Keeper Hatch is one of only three people to have won this award during the period 1876-1908. Keeper Martin Knudsen, of the Porte des Morts light station, rescued the crew of eight from the schooner *A. P. Nichols* on the night of October 28, 1892, when he “waded to a sunken wreck

where he was exposed in the storm and darkness to the waves as well as the falling spars of the stranded vessel, and from there guided and assisted the ship's company" safely to shore. For his actions Keeper Knudsen won the Silver Life Saving Medal. The list continues on, but perhaps the struggles of Keeper Niels Nilsen, of the Sand Island light station, Alabama, will graphically show the mettle of some lighthouse keepers.

On the late afternoon of December 1, 1905, Keeper Nilsen set off from Sand Island in the station's small sailboat across Mobile Bay to obtain supplies at Alabama Port for construction workers at his station. His first stop, however, would be at Fort Morgan to drop off a worker, Harian Hansen, for medical treatment.

By the time the two men were within a mile of Fort Morgan, "the bay was rough and choppy, and the wind blowing a gale." Hansen tried to assist in handling the sails. Apparently the worker was not a sailor for, while trying to clear the jib sheet, he fell overboard. Keeper Nilsen now tried the tricky maneuvering required to pick up a man in the water with a sail boat. Nilsen saw that Hansen could not swim and was going under. Then, in the words of the U. S. Life-Saving Service's official investigation into the accident, Nilsen, in "an exhibition of amazing courage," dove into the choppy waters of Mobile Bay "knowing that the water conditions would prevent him from getting back" into the boat. The nearest place of safety was the dock at Fort Morgan, at least three quarters of a mile away. Adding to the danger was the fact that Hansen was much larger than Nilsen and absolutely helpless in the water. Nevertheless, Keeper Nilsen managed to grab the worker and struck out for Fort Morgan.

A witness to the event, a contract surgeon for the army, said he watched the sail boat depart Sand Island at about 3:45 pm and saw the boat "suddenly lurch" when about three-quarters of a mile from the dock of the fort. At four thirty, the doctor heard "a faint call from the direction of the dock" and, along with others, ran to the location. There he found Nilsen "struggling in the water, and trying to support [Hansen] who seemed to be uncon-

scious." The keeper and Hansen were pulled from the water. Nilsen's heroic struggles were in vain, however. The doctor pronounced Hansen dead. Keeper Niels Nilsen's utter disregard for his own safety in the heroic effort to save Harian Hansen rightfully earned him the Gold Life Saving Medal.

There is no question that keepers and surfmen of the U. S. Life-Saving Service earned more life-saving medals than keepers of light stations. After all, it was their duty to go out into the raging surf and they were apt to win recognition for their efforts. What is important to recognize is the saving of life



Frederick Hatch, keeper of the Cleveland Light Station, won his first Gold Life Saving Medal as a member of the U. S. Life-Saving Service. His second, as a member of the U. S. Lighthouse Service, was for saving a woman from drowning at the entrance to Cleveland's Harbor in 1890. Keeper Hatch is only one of three men to win this medal between 1876 and 1908. Photograph from Dennis Noble courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

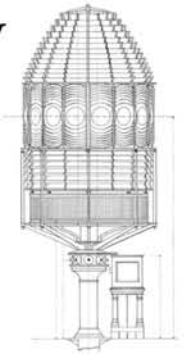
was a secondary duty for lighthouse keepers, but one they did not shirk. As anyone with experience in rescue work at sea knows, it is more common for people to stand around helpless in the face of danger than react. The Master of the lighthouse tender *Rose*, Charles H. Smith, for example, on September 17, 1877, while anchored in the Christiana River, Wilmington, Delaware, heard loud shout-

ing from a dock area. He saw a young boy struggling in the water, with no one helping. Smith immediately dove into the river and swam "some distance," grabbed the boy, brought him to safety and then swam back to the tender. For his actions, Charles H. Smith received the Silver Life Saving Medal. Keeper Jefferson M. Brown of the Point Arena, California, light station noticed the wreck of the steamer *San Benito* on November 22, 1896, and found a large crowd on the beach. He harangued and harangued the crowd to get volunteers to accompany him in an unseaworthy lifeboat, the only craft available. Twice Brown managed to get volunteers and twice the seas threw the intrepid keeper and his crew back. Keeper Brown wanted to make yet another effort, but could not get enough volunteers. For his efforts, Keeper Jefferson M. Brown won the Gold Life Saving Medal. The point being, none of these U. S. Lighthouse Service employees sat back "with a good cigar" in a "warm house" when there were people in danger. Indeed, it would have been easy for them to say "that is not my responsibility," rather than risk their lives. Furthermore, just because more U. S. Life-Saving Service crews won more medals does not mean the men and women of the U. S. Lighthouse Service did not help those in peril upon the seas.

Anyone who is even vaguely aware of the U. S. Life-Saving Service must marvel at the feats of those brave men who made up that service. Ramming small boats, none longer than 36-feet in length, into mountainous seas "so that others might live" should earn the respect of everyone. That these brave men should be largely forgotten seems almost a crime. This does not mean that because the crews of the U. S. Life-Saving Service are forgotten one should imply that the men and women of the U. S. Lighthouse Service sat back in a "warm house" and did nothing. The record is very clear that when tested wickies did a commendable job of helping those in peril upon the seas.



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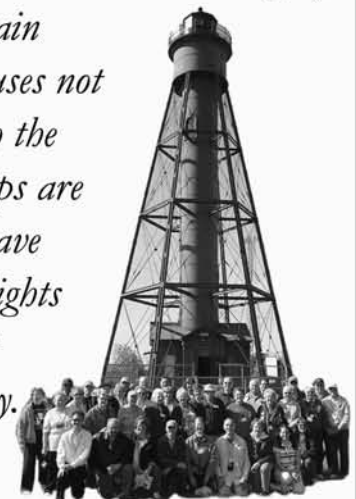
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