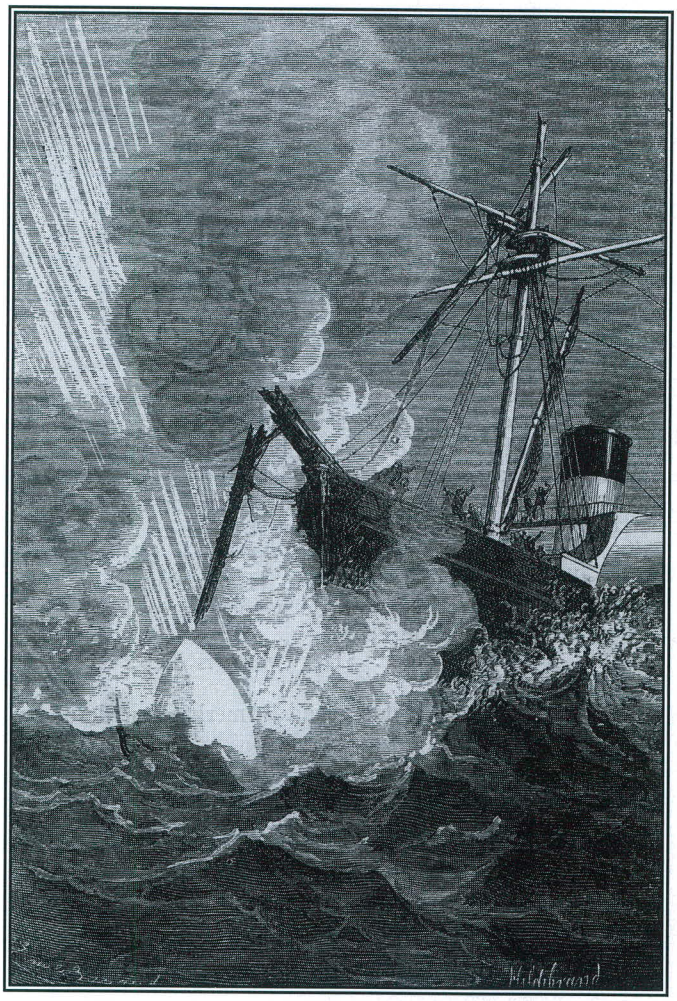
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2002 <www.USLHS.org>

Wreck of the Steamer *Protection*

and the Brave Efforts of the U.S. Life Saving Station Crew from St. Joseph, MI.



Excerpted from the *Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service* for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1884.

The wreck of the steam tug *Protection* took place on November 13, 1883 during a memorable storm on Lake Michigan.

On the 10th of November at 7 o'clock in the evening, the *Protection* departed St. Joseph, Michigan, with the steamer *Arab* in tow. The intent of the voyage was to tow the *Arab* across Lake Michigan to the vicinity of Racine, Wisconsin. The Arab had run aground near St. Joseph several days earlier and had just been pulled off the beach by the *Protection*. She was loaded with green lumber. She was badly leaking from the grounding and two steam pumps had been placed on board to keep the vessel afloat.

On board the *Protection* was the captain, pilot, engineer, two firemen, a deckhand, cook and wrecking master – eight men in all. The crew of the *Arab* consisted of the captain, mate, steward, three seamen along with two engineers and two firemen in charge of two steam pumps – ten in all.

At the time the vessels cast off, there was a bright moon with a light breeze and an easy swell from the west. The night continued calm as the two vessels proceeded across the lake without incident. At about 4 a.m. the crew of the tug heard cries from the schooner, which was about 500 yards off the stern. In the bright moonlight they saw a commotion on deck, and then the sailors rushing aft as the schooner rolled over and plunged down by the bow, sinking in a half-perpendicular position with only about ten feet of her stern above water. The crew was clinging to this part of the vessel, crying out for help.

No time was lost as the tug's skipper rang up [to the engine room] "stop," and then, "back – full." However, in backing up the propeller caught the towline and it was wound up like a reel until it stopped and disabled the engine. The tug had all at once become perfectly helpless and could no longer maneuver to rescue the schooner's crew. A small boat was quickly launched and rowed to the schooner. Once alongside the wreck they learned one of the crew, William Kelly, an engineer [working with] ... the pumps had drowned. He had been standing forward when the schooner capsized and was probably crushed by the overturning

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2002 <www.USLHS.org>

pumps, which had not been lashed down. Four of the men clinging to the submerged port quarter were immediately taken to the tug. The boat returned and transferred the remaining five men to the *Protection*.

Once all were aboard, the tug crew learned that only one of the two steam pumps had been placed in operation, as at first it was apparent that one pump was keeping up with the leaking hull. Eventually the pump in operation sputtered and quit. Before the crew could get the second pump to work, water entering the hull gained to the point that the weight of the water forward, along with the weight of the heavy pumps, caused the vessel to capsize.

Up to the time that the schooner capsized and the tug fouled her screw, the weather could not have been finer. The night was clear with a bright moon; there was only a gentle swell from the west and the wind but a soft breeze. But, it seems that there are times when the elements lay in wait to take advantage of a sailor's misfortune. Shortly after the crew of the *Arab* was rescued, the wind began to blow stiffly and the swells increased. The men on board, sensing the sinister change, worked at once to free the propeller. For four hours they worked to unsnarl the tow line.

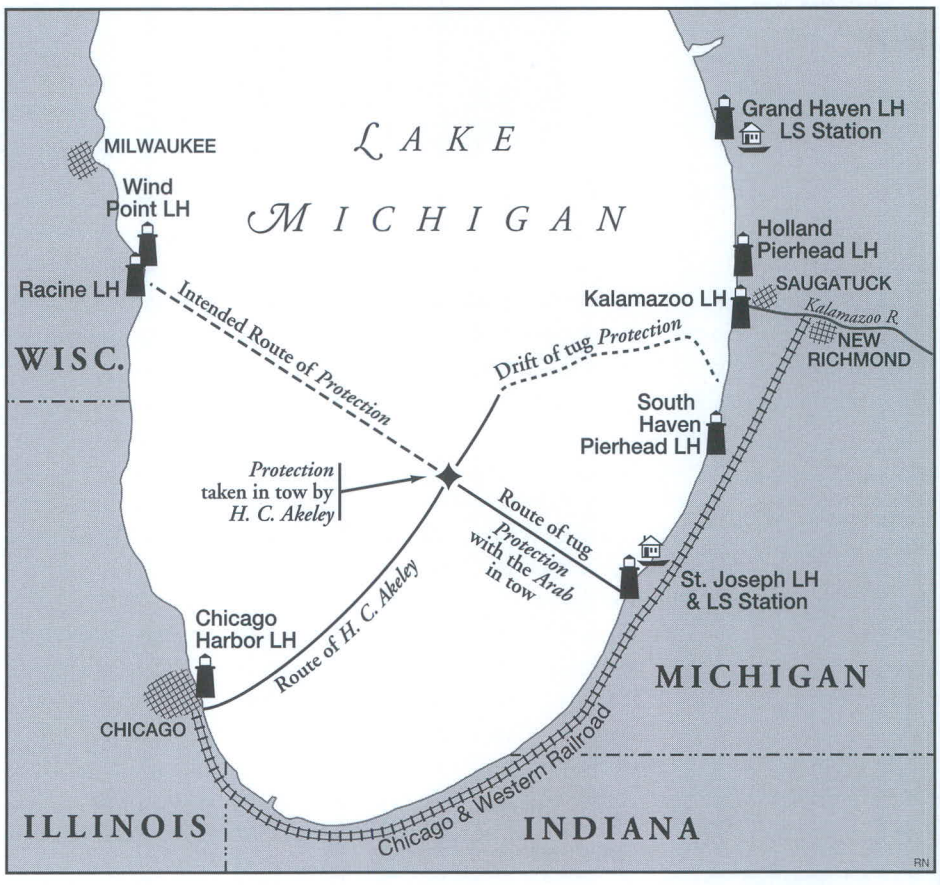
Finally, the seas had increased to the extent that they were forced to halt their efforts. By 10 a.m. the lake had become a swollen ocean and the wind had shifted to the northwest and it was blowing very hard as the helpless tug was pushed from trough to trough.

About 11 a.m., the steamship H.C. *Akeley*, of Grand Haven, MI, with a crew of 18 hove into sight and in response to the frantic sounding of the tug's steam whistle came plowing over to the *Protection* and took her in tow. The vessels then headed north. The wind constantly increased. By the afternoon the vessels were in a whole gale. The signal office in Grand Haven recorded a wind of 52 miles per hour. The seas were tremendous and the *Akeley* began to roll heavily. [The ship was] slow to recover from her rolls and with each roll the seas washed over her decks. It was evident that her cargo of corn had shifted. At 7 p.m. her steering gear became disabled, her engines stopped and she fell off helplessly and broadside to the seas. The captain made up sails, but the wind blew away her main sail and mizzen and she could only drift, like the tug she was towing. At 4 a.m. the next day (November 12) one of her boats was swept overboard and about 10 a.m. her smoke stack toppled over and was lost. All this time the tug hung on to the towline, but by swinging off to leeward, she kept her head into the wind and rode the seas better than the *Akeley*.

The gale moderated somewhat in the afternoon and the vessels continued to drift. At about 6 p.m. the *Protection* found that the fouled towline had apparently unwound and that her engines would work. Thinking they were about 30 miles from South Haven, the tug cast off the towline from the cargo ship and started for Grand Haven. The intention was to coal up and then return to take the *Akeley* in tow. She ran about ten minutes and then found out that the towline was still fouled in the propeller and the engine only worked to back down. The only recourse was to drift as before, which she did all night. The tug approached land around 9 a.m. the next day and she dropped anchor 1/2 mile off the town of Saugatuck, Michigan.

A great throng of people flocked to the beach, summoned by the screech of her whistle. She lay some distance north of the harbor entrance piers. There was a gloomy gray sky, driving clouds and heavy seas, which violently pitched and tossed the tug. Every so often her decks and crew were shown to the excited crowd as she rolled toward shore. A bit of awning secured to an oar and stuck upright at the bow streamed and flapped in the gale as a signal of distress. The screech of her whistle was never silent. But it appeared that nothing could be done to save the vessel under the present conditions. The state of the sea prevented any boat from getting out to her. The harbor entrance was barred by extremely monstrous breakers that washed over the piers as they rolled into the harbor. Finally, the citizens on the beach decided to send for the nearest life-saving crew that was located at Grand Haven. A telegram to the station was answered, stating that the crew was at another wreck, nine miles to the south. Another dispatch was sent to the station at St. Joseph, which was sixty miles away. When the Life Saving Service station keeper, William Stevens, received the wire, he called the district superintendent, but found out that he, too, was at the other wreck with the Grand Haven crew.

After a couple of hours of intense activity the St. Joseph station keeper made an arrangement with the Chicago and Western Railroad to transport his life saving equipment and crew to the site of the tug. Keeper



Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2002 <www.USLHS.org>

Stevens and his crew of seven had to first transport their mortar cart and other equipment across a river by small boat. This was no easy task as the waves from the lake were entering the river causing a rough and dangerous crossing. The crew rigged a line across the river and this helped in getting the rescue equipment safely to the other side where they hauled it up to the train depot. Once there, the crew had ten minutes to load the apparatus before the train departed. They had to remove the wheels in order to get the cart into the mail car, since no flat car available. At 12:55 p.m. the gear and crew were aboard and the train raced out of the depot. At 3 p.m. the Life Saving party reached New Richmond on the banks of the Kalamazoo River, having traveled 51 miles. The tug *Ganges* was waiting for them to transport the crew and gear to the wreck site. In a few minutes all were aboard and the tug steamed off, to travel some 13 miles down the river and along the lake shore. Finally, at 5 p.m. the lifesaving party had arrived at the South Haven Range Lights where they proceeded along the beach to a point opposite the tug.

During the afternoon local fishermen had twice attempted to take a large Mackinaw fishing boat out to the tug, but were rebuffed each time by the heavy seas. The tug was beyond the range of the shot of the Lyle line-throwing gun ... all the life savers could do was wait and make everything ready should the tug part her anchor line and drift closer to shore. They felt that so long as her anchor held she was safe.

At 6 p.m. the wind hauled around to the northwest, flurries of snow thickened the air and the weather showed signs of becoming even worse. The growing force of the storm caused the lifesaving crew to maintain a sharp vigilance. All at once, at 9 p.m. the tug's whistle started sounding a sharp screech of distress. The tug had begun to drag anchor and this unnerved the crew as they had felt safe so long as the anchor held. Now they felt that soon the vessel would run aground in the breakers and begin to pound to pieces. They were certain they were all lost and began to shake hands and bid each other goodbye.

On the beach the lifesavers sprang into action. They saw the tug begin to drift and realized that she would ground south of the south pier. It was therefore necessary to cross the river. They hauled their equipment to the bank where it was loaded on the government tug *Graham* and transported to the other side. There the life saving crew, greatly aided by local citizens, dragged the beach cart and equipment over the rough terrain to a spot where they felt the tug would ground. The path to the spot was strewn with logs, stumps, pieces of drift wood and large rocks and it took great effort to reach their intended destination. This was all accomplished in the dark with the wind howling and snow swirling around them. It took them over an hour to reach the area they thought would be opposite the tug when she grounded The final location was a strand of beach only about 100 feet wide, backed by steep cliffs surmounted by a thick stand of trees. The men started several fires on the beach and the white face of the cliff acted as a giant reflector casting light from the fires out over the breakers.

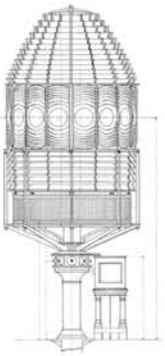
Meanwhile, the tug had passed the entrance piers and was drifting southward and slowly in toward the beach. The tug was drifting sternward with the crew huddled on the bow watching the action on shore as the lifesavers set up the Lyle line-throwing gun. This was their first realization that a life saving crew was present and that fact gave them hope of being saved from the cold, pounding surf. The wind increased in intensity and the snow swirled faster and heavier. Soon, about two hundred yards from the beach, the tug struck bottom with a great crash. The sea immediately made a great sweep over the deck. She continued to rise and fall, striking bottom with shivering shocks, while the seas swept across the vessel, smashing and rending. In a few moments the pilothouse was broken in, the doors of the engine room and cabin were torn off and the hull half full of water. One of the firemen, William Grace, who was standing aft near the fantail, was swept overboard and instantly perished. The tug continued to pound the bottom and in the midst of all this hurly-burly, the spectators on shore were astonished to see a young fellow get up quietly out of the surf, and walk calmly, streaming with water, to a neighboring fire. He was one of the sailors from the tug. He had put on a life preserver, plunged overboard and by one chance in a million, reached shore.

Before long the tug was pushed over the sand bar she had been pounding on, into deeper water where she swung around so that her stern was to the seas, which continued to wash over her. The wreck gun was soon trained on the vessel and fired. The line carried over her stern, but the line parted. A second shot was successful and fell amidships where it was caught by the crew and made fast. It was now 10 p.m.. By 10:30 the hawser had been drawn out to the vessel and was set up between it and shore. The breeches buoys was put in place and the lifesavers began removing the crew from the tug. The tug was rolling heavily and constantly shifting her position causing the lifesavers to continually tighten or slacken the rescue line. Even so, most of the men reaching shore via the breeches buoy were dragged through the surf as the line went slack. But the life savers worked fast and as one remarked, " ... they were brought ashore so fast, through the surf, that they left a streak of foam in their wake."

During the entire rescue operation the snow was so heavy that the tug, fairly close to shore, was barely visible. The weather was so cold that those life savers nearest the surf had their clothes frozen on them. By 11:20 p.m. the last of the crew was ashore. Each man reaching shore was taken to a fire and provided with stimulants. As soon as twelve of the men were ashore [sixteen were be rescued], the tug *Graham* took the men to a hotel in Saugatuck, where they were sheltered, given food and dry clothing. The cook arrived in such bad condition and so exhausted that he had to be carried to the nearby lighthouse where he was stripped, rubbed to warmth and provided dry clothing. The life saving crew finally reached the shelter of the Saugatuck hotel at 2 a.m.. The next day they made their way back to their station.

The Annual Report of the Life Saving Service – 1884 noted, "It is a cause for double regret that the single life lost from the tug was a needless sacrifice, due to the victims own rashness. He had been repeatedly warned by his comrades of the danger of standing at the stern, a position that ... exposed him to the onset of the seas breaking over the hull. He was a young man of twenty-five, a favorite with all who knew him, and foremost in the efforts made for the safety of the tug during her perilous voyage. The only relic of him was a mutilated body, supposed to be his, which was found fourteen days after the wreck on the beach ten miles north of Saugatuck."

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

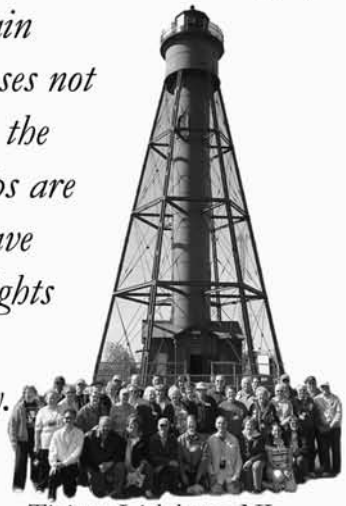
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log *magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.*

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ

To learn more visit

www.uslhs.org

or

call Headquarters at

415-362-7255