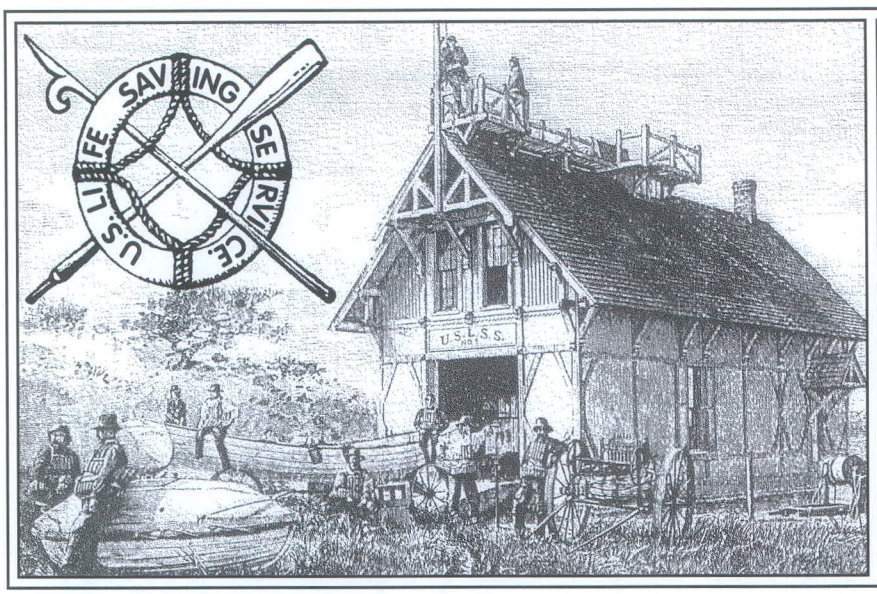
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Fall 2000 <www.USLHS.org>



OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

Whitehead Island Life-Saving Station

St. George, Maine

By David A. Gamage

Whitehead Island resident, Horace Norton, recorded the following in his journal on October 14, 1873, "The old Revenue Cutter came in harbor today and brought an officer to select a site for the life-saving station to be built on Whitehead. He selected a place at Salt Works Cove."

Earlier, in December 1872, at the request of Sumner Kimball, Capt. John Faunce and Lt. Lewis Stodder, of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service, sailed along the coast of Maine and New Hampshire aboard the Revenue Cutter *McCulloch* to locate suitable sites for new life-saving stations. One of their selections was Whitehead Island.

Earlier, in 1871, Secretary of the Treasury, George Boutwell, appointed Sumner Kimball to head the Revenue Marine Bureau. This proved to be an important event in the history of our Life-Saving Service, and eventually the Coast Guard. It was through the work of Kimball that the U.S. Life-Saving Service came into being. He rapidly restructured a poorly organized, volunteer effort into a professional organization. While directing the Service he was instrumental in creating the Revenue Marine Cutter School of Instruction. This academy trained Revenue Marine Cutter Service officers and eventually became the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

In 1878 the U.S. Life-Saving Service became a separate agency of the Treasury Department. It was a significant and unique government agency dedicated to the protection of life and property. Kimball was appointed General Superintendent, a position he held until the Service was joined with the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 and renamed the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Whitehead Life-Saving Station was constructed late in 1873 and became operational on December 1, 1874. It was operated continuously during the Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard years until 1954 when the duties of that station were relocated to Rockland.

It has been suggested that Horace Norton was appointed keeper of the station in exchange for leasing the property upon which it was constructed – to the government. However, Norton records in his April 1874 diary that he made application for this appointment. Furthermore, to support his application he "got a petition drawn up" and signed by local residents who recommended him for the position. That September, he was notified of his selection as Keeper of the station at an annual salary of $200 a year.

Norton, as keeper designate, went to work before the station was completely staffed or equipped. On October 10, he assisted in rescuing the crew from the shipwrecked steamer *Cambridge*, which grounded on the Hay Island Ledge. The Revenue Cutter *Woodbury* had delivered a new surfboat to the station in April, but without any oars. In fact, the station crew had not been formally engaged for the coming season.

In October and November, Norton worked on making the station operational. In Rockland he purchased cots, mattresses, bedding, chairs and eleven oars for the surfboat. He attempted to winterize the station. He cut two logs to act as a boatway for the surfboat and installed the station's only stove on the first floor next to the boat room.

Norton was not even furnished regulations for the operation of the station or engaging a crew. To provide some direction he borrowed a copy of the Lighthouse Service Regulations from the keeper of the Whitehead Light Station. In November he finally received the Articles of Engagement that he needed to enlist a crew of six surfmen by the December 1st opening of the station. Yet, on December 1st the station was still lacking certain essentials. On the 4th the crew rowed over to Spruce Head to pick up a boat cart, which was used to launch and retrieve the surfboat.

On January 14, 1875 Keeper Norton and his green crew attended their first shipwreck. The steamer *Georgia*, sailing between Halifax, Nova Scotia and Portland, Maine, struck the Northern Triangles Ledges, about six miles from the station, in a snow storm The passen-

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Fall 2000 <www.USLHS.org>

gers and most of the crew took to lifeboats, leaving five crew members and the pilot on board. When the first lifeboat landed at Whitehead, the crew immediately launched the surfboat and went to rescue those remaining on board.

Keeper Norton continued to drill his raw recruits in handling equipment and instructing them in rescue techniques. On January 19, he wrote in the station journal, "Fired the mortar [Lyle gun, which sent a line out to a ship] for the first time. The shot line parted and the shot went over the house and lodged in a stone wall." This was the first experience the crew had in firing this beach apparatus, but in time, with practice, they became proficient with the life saving equipment. Norton doesn't mention receiving any formal instruction in the operation of the station or the equipment. Perhaps the Superintendent of the District, John Richardson, provided instruction.

That winter, Norton wrote in his log, "We had a very cold winter and much ice, at one time the ice field extended to Monhegan [Island] which is something that I never saw before or afterwards." Conditions in the station house must have been grim that winter with only one stove. Additionally, the thin walls had no sheathing or insulation inside, nor shingles outside. The crew endured another cold winter before improvements were made. Late in 1876 the walls were lathed and plastered on the inside and shingles applied to the exterior. An additional stove was furnished for the second floor.

Politics and the Life-Saving Service

It was Sumner Kimball's objective to create a professional Revenue Marine Service, of which the Life-Saving Service was initially a part. He strove to eliminate political and personal influences on the Service in the selection of personnel or establishment of stations. Kimball directed, "District Superintendents are instructed in making nominations for keepers, and keepers in employing surfmen, to pay strictest regard to professional qualifications to the exclusion of every other consideration." On one hand, he needed Congressional support to provide funding to maintain and expand the Service. On the other hand, he was trying to eliminate political patronage – the spoils system highly regarded by members of Congress and a significant number of their constituents. Kimball had to wage a subtle warfare with the political establishment and he managed to successfully play this game until 1896 when legislation included Life-Saving Service employees in the classified Civil Service System. Afterwards, Kimball wrote, "[there were] partisan efforts from outside the Service to induce Service officers to circumvent the law."



The Whitehead Life Saving Station crew poses with one of their rescue boats. Note the bird house on an auxiliary boat house at left. Photo courtesy of the author.

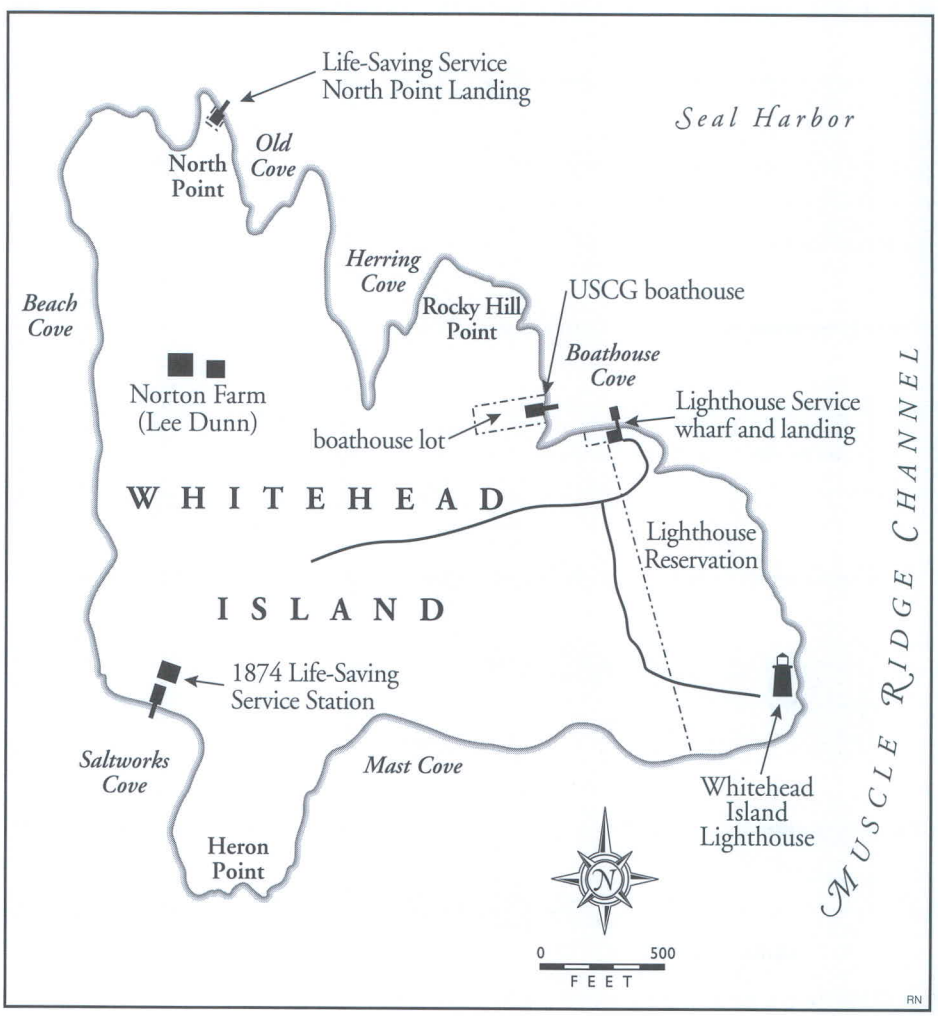
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Fall 2000 <www.USLHS.org>

1876 was an election year. In spite of Kimball's policies and instructions, the District Superintendent apparently instructed Keeper Norton to "engage a crew of Republicans" for the winter of 1876-77. Norton did accordingly by advising his crew to become Republicans. In October, he told Richardson, "...last years crew were Republicans," which was not completely true. Then Norton created some controversy when he was asked by a local businessman (who he didn't know was a Democrat) if he had discharged the old crew and hired a new crew, which were Republicans. Norton replied, "I told him yes. He was very indignant and reported our interview to the Rockland Opinion. The Opinion published an editorial in which he commented on these facts in a manner not complimentary to my new crew."

The election of 1876 was hotly contested and not resolved until March 2, 1877 when Rutherford B. Hayes was finally declared a winner over Samuel J. Tilden. Norton and his crew believed that if Tilden, a Democrat, had been elected they would have lost their jobs. Norton wrote, "The whole winter was passed in uncertainty as to who was elected President of the U. S. ... near March 4 we learned that Hayes was declared elected President and we were greatly relieved."

Mention of the Republican crew controversy of 1876 appeared in the Rockland Opinion for years afterwards, to the detriment of Norton, his crew and the Service. This and other matters caused difficulty for Sumner Kimball. He wrote poignantly in his 1898 Annual Report of the Life-Saving Service, "It was not so easy to deal with the partisan rapacity and activity of persons outside of the Service. Superintendents and keepers, as well as chief officers of the Service, were vigorously beset with all sorts of influences and in every conceivable manner, in the effort to reduce the places at their disposal to the level of partisan spoils. Praise, flattery, promises, abuse, falsehood, ridicule, cunning, deception, diplomacy, and the whole catalogue of shrewd devices for controlling the action of men were resorted to, and it is not singular that they were sometimes successful."

Keeper Horace Norton continued to serve as the Keeper of the Whitehead Life-Saving Station until he resigned in 1882, but then signed on as a surfman for two more seasons. After the Coast Guard was created in 1915, the Whitehead Life-Saving Station became the Whitehead Lifeboat Station. In 1954 the station was closed and the duties were transferred to a new station at Rockland.



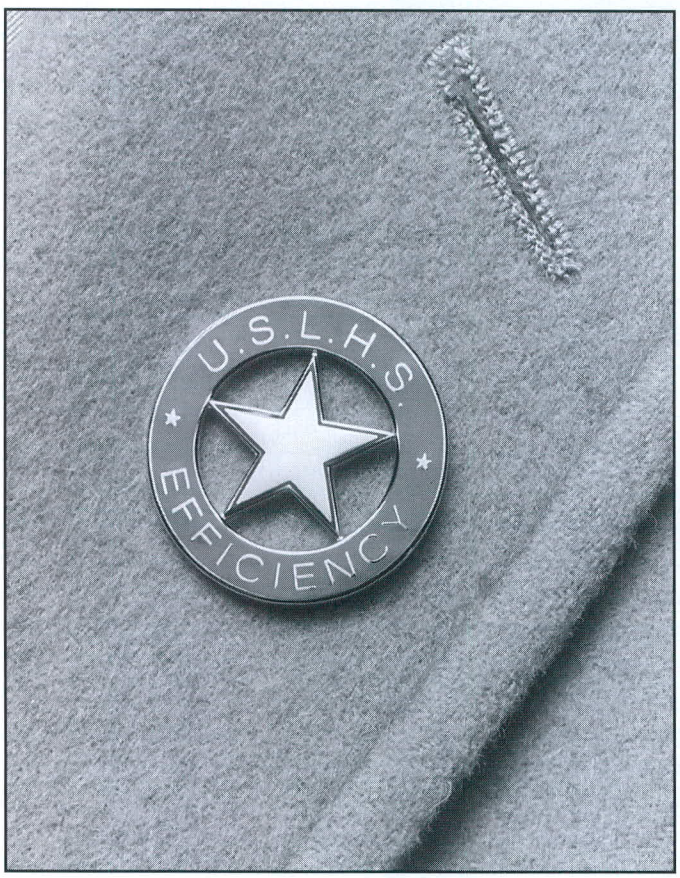
A Lighthouse Society Exclusive

We have developed a beautiful framed presentation of the five lighthouse postage stamps which were issued in 1990. These (real) stamps are displayed with a first-day cover cancellation envelope. Each framed display has a different cancellation.

Crowning the arrangement is the Society logo in gold leaf. We think this fine, limited edition collection would make a handsome addition to your lighthouse collectibles and artwork, gracing the wall of your den or living room.

The price is $47.50 plus $5 for shipping and handling. It is available only through the San Francisco office.





U.S. Lighthouse Service Efficiency Star

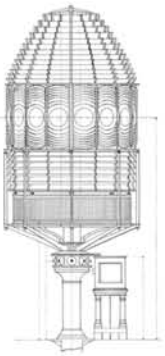
The 1912 report of the Bureau of Lighthouses to Congress stated, in part, "To promote efficiency and friendly rivalry among lighthouse keepers, a system of efficiency stars and pennants has been established. Keepers who have been commended for efficiency at each quarterly inspection during the year are entitled to wear the inspector's star for the next year, and those who receive the inspector's star for three successive years will be entitled to wear the Commissioner's star..."

As a Society exclusive (and one of the annual gifts to our District Inspector members) we have had an exact reproduction of the inspector's star created. It consists of red enamel on brass and measures $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches in diameter. If you feel efficient, you may wear one of these on your hat or lapel by sending $4.95 to the Keeper's Locker (price includes shipping and handling).

We now carry the Commissioner's star, same design but blue enamel on silver, at the same price as the District Inspector's star.

Although our mail order business has moved to Oregon, we will still sell the Efficiency stars, Passport kits and special framed lighthouse postage stamps with a first day cover through our San Francisco office.

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.

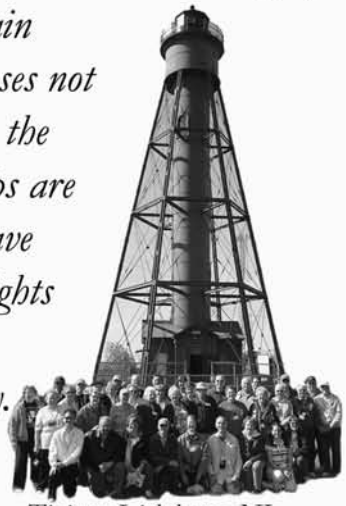
Help Support Our Important Mission!

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