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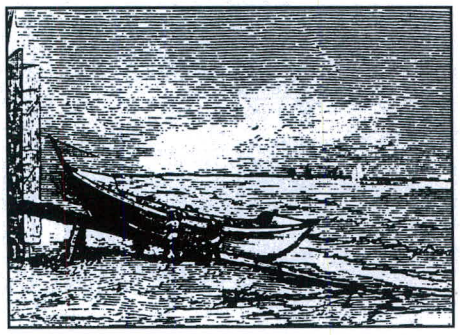
Through Howling Gale and Raging Surf The United States Life-Saving Service:

Part I: The Beginnings

By Dennis L. Noble

To most Americans, the United States Coast Guard is the service that saves lives. All of the various federal agencies brought together to form the modern day U.S. Coast Guard dealt in some manner with lifesaving upon the waters, or helping in the prevention of loss of life at sea. The primary mission of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, for example, was to maintain lighthouses and sea markers to warn ships from danger. Lighthouse keepers also helped those in distress near their stations. Each year the annual reports detailed rescues by keepers. Ida Lewis, the keeper of the Lime Rock lighthouse, for instance, won the Silver Life Saving Medal. The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service's primary duty was as a marine police force, but it also helped those in distress. Next, the Steamboat Inspection Service duties tried to prevent disasters before they happened. There was only one federal organization whose **primary** purpose was that of saving lives: the U.S. Life-Saving Service. In 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service and U.S. Revenue Cutter Service would merge to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

The large number of shipwrecks along the eastern seaboard of the United States made many seek a way to help those in distress. New York's harbor is a good example of the need for shorebased help. A skipper of a nineteenth century windship faced the chance of a winter nor'easter as he approached New York. The gale could force the ship ashore or onto one of the many New Jersey sandbars lying between 300 and 800 yards offshore. If a seagoing vessel tried to help, it also stood a good chance of grounding. Further, few people could withstand a 300-yard swim in the frigid Atlantic waters or the power of the pounding surf. Even if they managed to survive a wreck, they would probably die of exposure on the deserted beaches before help arrived. On January 2, 1837, for example, the bark *Mexico* went ashore on the coast of New Jersey and all 112 emigrant passengers on board were lost. These factors pointed to the need for rescue from shore-based stations.



The beginnings of the U.S. Life-Saving Service is usually set in Massachusetts. In 1807, the Massachusetts Humane Society established the first lifeboat station at Cohassett, Massachusetts. The Humane Society stocked small buildings with the equipment volunteers would need to help in a shipwreck. In 1848, New Jersey Congressman William A. Newell wrote an amendment to a lighthouse bill. Newell's plan released $10,000 in federal funds to establish a series of small lifesaving stations along the New Jersey coastline. Built and equipped by the federal government, the stations had volunteer crews, much like the Massachusetts Humane Society. No one, however, thought to incorporate a system of inspecting the stations. The units came under the loose control of the U.S. Revenue Marine (later called the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service) within the Treasury Department.

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The federal lifesaving effort during the two decades between 1848 and 1871 was erratic. On the plus side, the network of stations grew, eventually covering parts of the eastern seaboard and some locations on the Great Lakes. The minus side, however, placed the idea of helping people shipwrecked close to shore in jeopardy. The basic problem centered on a lack of supervision of the stations. One town, for example, used the lifeboat assigned to it "as a trough for mixing mortar and a tub for scalding hogs." In 1854, Congress voted funds to hire a man to remain at a station. The keeper still had to find volunteers to help in case of a wreck. Throughout the period stretching from 1848 to 1871 there was a series of shipwrecks, with large losses of life. Investigations reported poor performance by those at the federal lifesaving stations. Newspapers began to demand a revamping of the lifesaving network.

In 1871, a lawyer and former politician from Maine, Sumner Increase Kimball, received the appointment to head the Revenue Marine Bureau within the Treasury Department. The lifesaving stations were a part of Kimball's responsibilities. The appointment marks the end of the volunteer era in federal lifesaving in this country.

Kimball appointed Captain John Faunce of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service to inspect the lifesaving network. His report painted a bleak picture. Equipment was "rusty for want of care" and many keepers held their positions due to political influence. Discouraging as it was, the report served Kimball well. He took the report before Congress and received an appropriation of $200,000. Kimball, using his organizational genius and political ability, then attacked the problems in Captain Faunce's report. Kimball's accomplishments over the next seven years are amazing. His efforts led to stations at new locations and the renovation of older units. Kimball wrote a set of regulations and set station routines. He also established physical standards for crews, hired paid crews, established a system of inspections and, in short, set the organization on the road to a professional service.

Kimball devised the personnel system for the stations. Officially known as keeper, local newspapers gave him the title "Captain," as did his crew. Keepers tended to have long experience at fishing or other maritime occupations, or, he worked his way through the ranks of the organization. He was expert at handling a small boat and had absolute control over the crew. The keeper resided at a station year round.

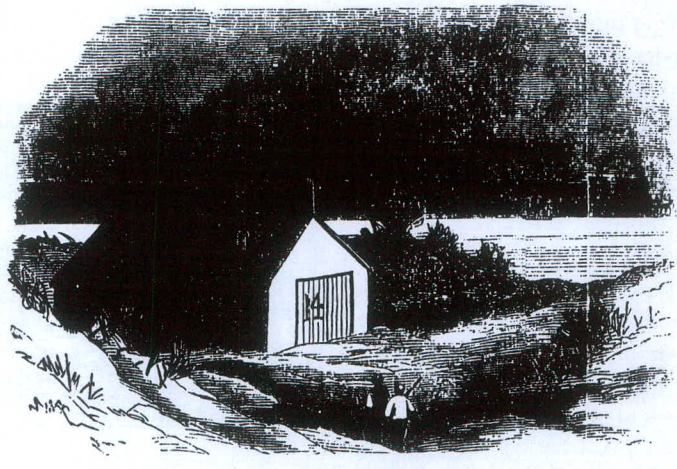


Sumner Increase Kimball. U.S. Coast Guard Photo.

Crewmen received the title of surfman. The derivation of the name comes from the East Coast fishermen who rammed their boats into the surf from the beach. Surfmen signed articles of agreement to work for about nine months. Known as the "active season," this was the time of the year when wrecks were likely to occur. Surfmen could be no older than forty-five and were adept at handling oars. Crew size depended on the number of oars needed to pull the largest boat on the unit. At most East Coast stations, this meant a crew of six. Experience decided the rank of surfmen. At East Coast stations, number six surfman would be the least experienced and number one the most experienced and second in command. When the service became uniformed in 1889, surfmen wore their rank number on the left sleeve of their uniform jacket. The U.S. Life-Saving Service had neither a retirement nor a disability system. A keeper or a surfman could spend twenty years in the organization and, when unable to pass a physical, be forced to resign or cashiered with no pension.

The network of lifesaving stations became a separate agency within the Treasury Department in 1878 and known as the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Stations dotted parts of the East, West and Gulf Coasts and the Great Lakes, with one unit at Nome, Alaska. Kimball became the General Superintendent of the service. Rescuing those shipwrecked close to shore was the **only** mission of this service.

It will be recalled that the stations of the Massachusetts Humane Society were huts stocked with blankets and equipment for volunteers in case of shipwreck. Once the federal government entered the picture, after 1848, stations were fitted out in basically the same manner. Then, in 1854, a man, called a keeper, remained at the station at all times and gathered volunteers in case of wrecks near the unit.



An early state life saving station at Sandy Hook, NJ.

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Kimball's new service had three classes of stations. At isolated locations along the East Coast and portions of the Great Lakes, there were lifesaving stations, usually two story affairs and had full crews only during the "active season." There was enough room in the structures to temporarily house shipwrecked persons. The boathouse doors opened toward the sea and a ramp led to the beach. The surfboat was the primary craft used at these stations for rescue. Usually boats and other equipment were on the ground floor and the crew slept on the second floor. Lifesaving stations usually had a keeper and six surfmen.

The next class, lifeboat stations, were usually located on the Great Lakes and the West Coast. At these locations, most shipwrecks occurred near the harbor's entrance and the stations usually sat near the entrance to the harbor. The main rescue craft at these story-and-a-half buildings was the heavy lifeboat, launched down an inclined ramp directly into the water. Originally, only the keeper resided year round at the station. He rounded up volunteers in case of a wreck. As time went on, however, even the lifeboat stations on the Great Lakes kept paid crews on site for the entire "active season." Eventually, the stations on the West Coast became the only units in the service to be fully operational year round. A lifeboat station usually had a keeper and eight surfmen. It is important to keep in mind that, in general, service for the surfmen, except on the West Coast, was part-time.

By regulations, only the keeper and his family could live on the station. A married surfman at an isolated unit wishing to have his wife nearby had to build a dwelling away from the property line of the station.

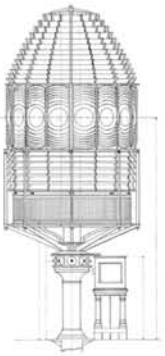
The U.S. Life-Saving Service had an entirely different type of unit in Georgia, South Carolina and portions of Florida. In this region, the service felt if a shipwreck occurred sailors did not face death from their ships slamming and breaking into pieces on cold beaches. The ships would usually "come up almost high and dry, rendering comparatively easy the escape of their crews..." Their greatest danger was "to perish from hunger and thirst." These one story units, known as houses of refuge, could house up to twenty-five survivors, with provisions for ten days. Instead of glass, the windows were "fitted with wire-gauze mosquito netting." Houses of refuge had a keeper and his family, who would patrol the beaches after a storm.

Sumner Increase Kimball is **the** reason that the United States gained a reputation for a professional lifesaving service. The bill to establish the U.S. Coast Guard provided for the retirement of Kimball. A small dose of statistics suggests what Kimball accomplished. From 1871 through 1914, "28,121 vessels and 178,741 persons became involved with its services." Only "1,455 individuals lost their lives while exposed within the scope of Life-Saving operations." This nation owes a great debt to Sumner Increase Kimball, the little-known man who organized and ran a service that did so much for those in peril upon the sea.



An 1880's design of a Life Saving Service Station at North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan. Early station designs had an open platform for the watch stander. In this design, the watch room is enclosed. Note the watchman on the balcony and the small children in front of the marine railway. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

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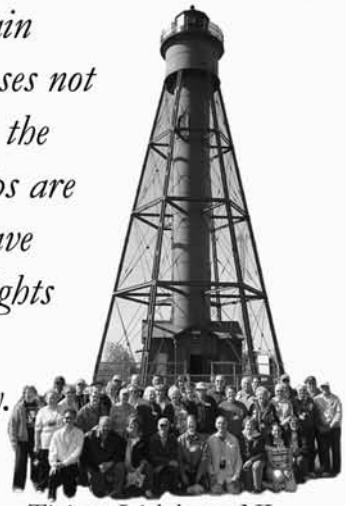
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