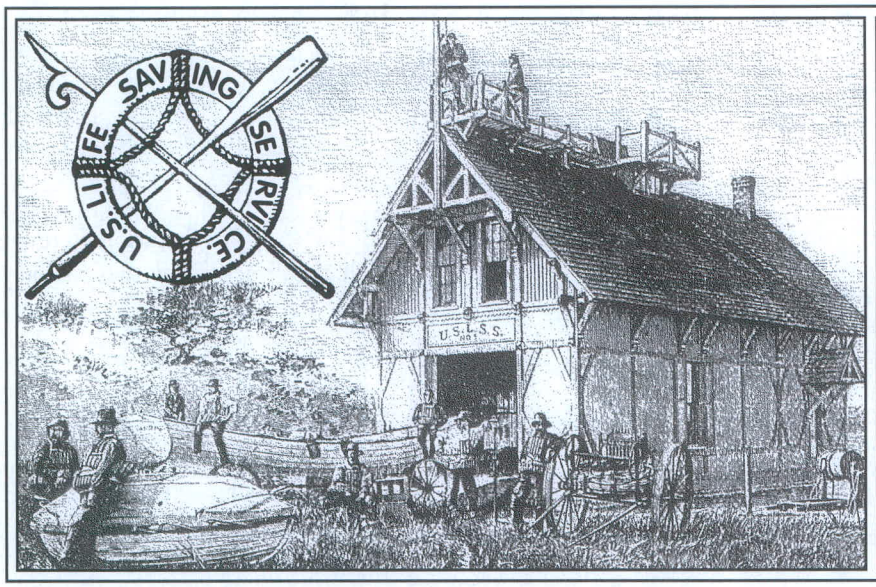
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

SURFSIDE LIFE-SAVING STATION
A History of Survival

By Janice Stillman

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the Surfside Life-Saving Station, an historic Nantucket landmark that represents one of the island's most colorful and storied periods. With this article, we celebrate the station - the first U.S. Life-Saving Service Station on the island and deemed to be the only one in the country still standing on its original foundation - and honor the surfmen who unselfishly provided the service.

The first organized life-saving efforts are credited to the Chinese, who, by the middle of the 18th century, had established several stations equipped with several lifeboats each at various points along major rivers and the coastline of China. Their organization, known as the Chinkiang Society for the Saving of Life, is believed to have been founded in 1708. The stations, as well as the strictly defined practices and procedures undertaken by their crews, were observed by Dutch and English sailors and merchants who regularly visited the country to trade in spices, silks, and other goods. They brought the idea home to their countrymen. As a result, a similar humane society was founded in Holland in 1767, and some seven years later, the British Humane Society was formed.

The idea traveled from London to Boston in the mind and heart of one Dr. Moyes, who came to the city in May 1784. About a year and a half later, when in conversation at his home with friends Rev. James Freeman, Royall Tyler, and A. Dexter, Moyes suggested the formation of a humane society in Massachusetts modeled after the British organization.

The concept found favor and, on January 5, 1786, the first official meeting of the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was held at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern on State Street in Boston.

At the time, the fates of locally shipwrecked mariners were essentially in their own hands. Victims who had managed to save themselves and make it to shore could have and did die of exposure, exhaustion, or starvation before they could receive help. To aid these distressed souls, the Society built shelters, or huts, along the coastline. These were primitive structures, "all of one size and shape. Each hut [stood] on piles, it [was] eight feet long, eight feet wide, and eight feet high; a sliding door [was] on the south [side], a sliding shutter on the west, and a pole, rising fifteen feet above the top of the building on the east." The huts were stocked with provisions including canned foods, first aid kits, a fireplace with fuel and flares, as well as information about their location and directions to the nearest community.

Records indicate that in some locations the Society also built "humane houses ... the size of a small barn, twenty feet long and eight and a half feet wide, painted barn-red with shingled roof and battened sides."

The first humane house on Nantucket was built in 1794. By 1830, Nantucket County alone had up to fourteen such houses, with at least half equipped as rescue stations.

Still, shipwreck survivors were not guaranteed relief. First, they had to find the shelters (with this the survivors had some assistance: in some places, fences for survivors to follow were run from the shelters to the beach, or specially marked flags were flown from the shelters' poles to designate their locations), but then they had to hope that vandals had not eaten all the food or used up all the wood.

By the turn of the century, the British Humane Society recognized the value of lifeboats in saving lives, and the concept was introduced to the Massachusetts Society at a meeting of its trustees on November 2, 1801.

In 1807, the Massachusetts Humane Society contracted with builder William Raymond of Nantucket to produce, under the inspection of Capt. Gideon Gardner, a

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lifeboat modeled after the common whaleboat. Completed in October of that year, the boat was thirty feet long and ten feet deep, and fitted with cork to add buoyancy. It carried twenty people, including ten oarsmen, double banked. One man would have a steering oar at the bow and stern. The lifeboat, the first of its kind in the Americas, was put into service in the Cohasset, Massachusetts station. Soon after, boats were installed in a number of Nantucket Humane houses.

In 1848, Congressman William Newell of New Jersey delivered an impassioned speech to Congress, urging the creation of a national life-saving service. Congress allocated "a small appropriation" and, as a result, some of the larger houses, or stations, were equipped with boats and life-saving apparatus, to be used by volunteers - mostly fishermen - to conduct rescues when disasters struck.

The need for dedicated facilities staffed by trained life-savers become woefully apparent over the winter of 1870-'71. In 1871, Congress voted to appropriate $200,000 to reorganize the service, dismiss inefficient personnel, hire new men, and buy better equipment to protect lives and property." Sumner I. Kimball was appointed the first superintendent of the new system, to be called the Life-Saving Service. In the service's first decade, Kimball directed the construction of nearly 100 life-saving stations.

In October 1873, Superintendent Sumner I. Kimball and Capt. Clark S. Merriman, an officer of the U.S. Revenue-Marine Service, traveled to Nantucket to announce and arrange the construction of the island's first U.S. Life-Saving Station. It was to be built at Surfside on the site of what had for forty years been one of the original Humane Society houses.

Charles H. Robinson built the station in one hundred days at a cost of $2,500. It was commissioned on December 1, 1874. The building's exterior reflected the Stick Style, distinguished by "tall proportions with high, steep roofs ... [and] eaves ... of considerable projection and supported by large brackets." The two-story interior conformed to a "pre-established design." " ... the lower floor [was] divided into five rooms-a kitchen, a keeper's room, a boat and beach apparatus room. Wide double-leafed doors with a sloping platform permit[ted] the quick and easy running out of the surf-boat and other apparatus from the station. The second story contain[ed] two rooms; one, the sleeping room for the crew; the other [had] spare cots for rescued persons and [was] also used as a storeroom.

"On every station there [was] a lookout, from which the life savers, during the day when the weather [was] fair, [kept] a careful watch of all shipping along the coast. In order that life-saving stations [could] be distinguished from a long distance at sea, they [were] usually painted dark red, and as a further aid to shipping, they [were] marked by a flagstaff about sixty feet high erected close to them. This flagstaff [was] also used to signal passing vessels by the International Code." The privy was located off the southwest corner of the building.

Each station was equipped with specially designed gear. That inventory generally included two surfboats, boat carriages and beachcarts, a Lyle gun, a breeches buoy, a life car, and cork jacket-style life preservers, as well as hatchets, compasses, flares, rope, and other tools. Some stations also kept horses to pull the boat carriages to the water's edge.

Under the direction of Capt. Joseph Winslow, a veteran whaling master, Surfside Station's first six-man crew - Capt. William Jernegan, No.1 man; George A. Veeder, a whaleman; Charles Glidden; Oliver Chadwick; Horace Cash; and Henry A. Nickerson - began service on December 1, 1874. The senior surfman was No.1, the next was No.2, and so on to the man with the least experience.

In addition to sharing floor plans of their quarters, the crews of stations on the Atlantic Coast shared service periods - all were manned from September 1 until the following May 1, with the principal keeper staying year-round - and regular routines. "The station crews patrol[led] the beach from two to four miles each side of their stations four times between sunset and sunrise, and if the weather [was] foggy, the patrol [was] continued through the day." Each man carried a Coston flare to signal distressed vessels and also to alert his fellow surfmen of a disaster. Each man also carried small brass tokens, which he exchanged with the patrolman coming from the opposite direction. At the same time, they shared news of shipping off their coastal areas. On Nantucket, the only such exchange of tokens was done between Surfside and Great Neck (Madaket), when it was built in 1891. Otherwise, the patrolmen went to a "key post" and "checked in" as a watchman might do.

A regimen of daily duties kept the surfmen busy: On Mondays, the crew conducted boat launch and landing drills; they practiced breeches buoy rescues on Tuesdays and Fridays; they cleaned the station and the equipment on Wednesdays and Saturdays; and on Sundays they welcomed visitors. In the



The Surfside Life Saving Station on Nantucket Island in the early years (after construction in 1874). Note the ladies enjoying the view on the lookout platform and their carriage at the right side of the building. The platform would later be enclosed and wings added to the sides of the structure. Photo courtesy of the author.

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years following the opening of Surfside Station, islanders and visitors alike traveled to the beachfront for "picnic parties" to watch the surfmen practice their life-saving techniques. (In 1881, some onlookers made the three-mile trip from Nantucket town by the island's first narrow-gauge train.) The site was also used to test several new appliances.

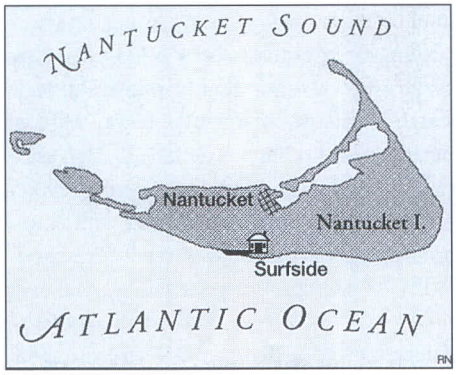
Surfmen exhibited dedication and courage, and on numerous occasions, risked their lives in the performance of their duties. They lived by the phrase, "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back," yet they were paid nominal wages: about $40 per month in the early years, increasing to approximately $65 per month by 1902, at which point the keeper earned about $900 annually. Recognizing the meagerness of their pay, the government did not prohibit the surfmen from accepting rewards, but they were strictly forbidden to solicit them. Following particularly dangerous rescues, medals of silver and gold as well as cash were awarded to some surfmen in recognition of their bravery and commitment.

In 1914, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to improve rescue resources. Pursuant to that, on January 28, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill that merged the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Life-Saving Service, renaming it as the U.S. Coast Guard.

In 1919, the U.S. Navy took occupancy, using the facility as a radio compass station (the cement piers that bore the radio towers can still be seen in the ground on the property). Two years later, the first of the Nantucket life-saving stations to open was also the first to close: Surfside Station was decommissioned.

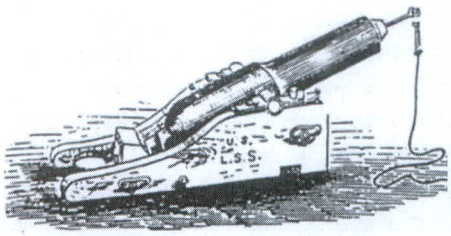
Following World War II, the building was abandoned and offered to the town by the General Services Administration in 1957, but the town declined the offer. Lilye D. and Ronald W. Mason of Somers, Connecticut purchased the building. For a short period, there were tentative plans to make the building a museum, but those never materialized. In 1963, its present owners, Hostelling International-American Youth Hostels, acquired the property. (A hostel has been present on Nantucket since 1952.) As a building, the Star of the Sea Youth Hostel continues to welcome strangers and enhance life experiences, fulfilling the organization's mission, "To help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling."

Over the years, the Surfside Life-Saving Station underwent several structural changes. In 1884, the rooftop observation deck was enclosed (requiring the mast which had been there to be removed) and wings were added to the east and west sides of the building, thereby extending the roofline. At that time, a chimney was added on the west-sloping roof. A picture dated December 6, 1893, reveals the Stick-style peak embellishments to be missing. Other significant changes-including the addition of two large dormers and the row of windows on the east facade of the first floor - are believed to have been made during the Navy's occupation.



In 1955, the Nantucket Historic District was created by the Town of Nantucket and approved by the Massachusetts legislature. The following year, the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of Interior designated the island a National Historic Landmark and subsequently listed it in the National Register of Historic Places. On November 13, 1966, the Surfside Life-Saving Station, owned by Hostelling International-American Youth Hostels and operating as the Star of the Sea Youth Hostel, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Janice Stillman is the President of the Board of Directors of the Eastern New England Council of Hostelling International-American Youth Hostels (HI-AYH). She is also the managing editor of Natural Health magazine.



LYLE GUN, SHOWING SHOT PROTRUDING FROM THE MUZZLE.

The Apparatus in Action

Each station manned a variety of life-saving apparatus, in addition to the basic surfboats or lifeboats. For near-shore rescues of crew and passengers, a beachcart would be used to transport the equipment along the beach to the scene of the shipwreck. The beachcart would be pulled by surfmen using draglines or ropes, in some cases, by a horse. Many stations, including the Surfside LSS, stabled a horse, starting in the 1880s. The Surfside crew also used their own horses to assist in this arduous task of reaching the scene of the wreck along the soft sand beaches of Nantucket. A number of the major shipwrecks proved to be more than five miles from the station.

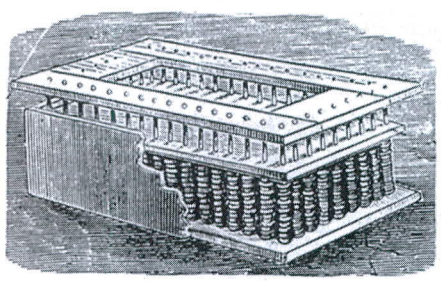
Many times the Keeper would have to decide which was the feasible alternative, surfboat or beach apparatus. The severity of the weather and the distance to the wreck from shore would be the determinants. Could the surfboat be launched? Was the wreck within range of the line-throwing gun or mortar? On one occasion, Keeper Veeder of Surfside LSS determined that it was not feasible to launch his surfboat, because the combination of tide, wind and seas opposite his station were extreme. Yet he knew that surf conditions five miles east of the station would permit launching a Mass Humane Society surfboat with a better chance of success. Keeper and crew made their way over rough roads and trails across the sheep pastures to the Forked Pond Humane Station, traveling a circuitous seven miles to the east of their station, successfully launching and effecting the rescue of the British steamer *Canonbury*.

Whether it would be a surfboat/ lifeboat rescue, or the beach apparatus, the Keeper was in absolute charge. Women and children were rescued first, followed by crew and finally the captain of the vessel last. Any lug-

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gage or personal belongings were usually left. However, the Keeper had absolute discretion as to what would be saved. The crew of Surfside LSS, like all stations, practiced boat and beach apparatus drills weekly and procedures were honed to near perfection.

If a breeches buoy rescue was determined to be the only feasible way of removing the passengers and crew, the beachcart would be positioned opposite the wreck and the gear unloaded. Each man would have his duties and immediately commence carrying them out. The Keeper and number one man would remove the gun and place it in four or five places to windward of the cart. The number two and three men would unload the shotline box containing the shotline, and prepare it by removing it from the wooden dowels that had been used to lay the shotline in a "faked" pattern. The line would usually be quickly dumped into the top of the shotline box and top tilted in the direction the Keeper would fire the shot out to the wreck. Others would simultaneously position the crotch boards and breeches buoy, while still others, usually the numbers five, six and (possibly seven) man would commence burying the sand anchor. It is important to note that when done near the station as a drill, no deviations in the drill format would be permitted. In a live rescue the Keeper would make any prudent adjustments in the drill procedure necessary to achieve success.



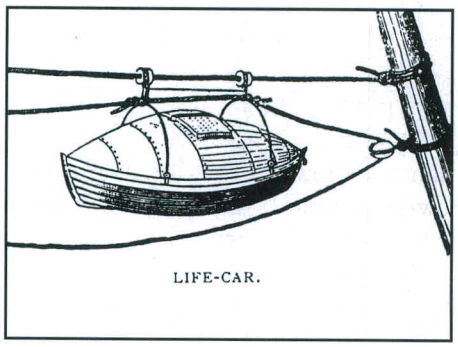
FAKING BOX.

With all ready, the Keeper would fire the #18 shot either through the rigging or over the vessel in such a way that the shipwreck victims would not be hit by the shot, but would be able to get to the shotline that would fall across their vessel. Once they seized it, the surfmen on the beach would attach their end to the tailblock, which had a continuous spool of 3/8-to-1/2-inch manila on two reels. The victims were then signaled to "haul off" and pull this tailblock out through the surf. When it arrived, it had a tallyboard containing directions in English, French, and sometimes Spanish or Portuguese, telling them to make the block fast well up the lower portion of their mast. Once attached, the Keeper and surfmen would be able to haul the heavy line, or hawser, out to the wreck with tallyboard #2 attached. This would instruct the crew to secure the hawser two feet above the tailblock.

With all now in place, the Keeper and surfmen would tension up the hawser by means of a block and tackle. Number three man would adjust the strap around the hawser and number four would place the outer block of the tackle into the strap. With all surfmen pulling on the block and tackle, the hawser would be hauled "moderately tight" and tied off. The final adjustment to the beach apparatus would be the use of a set of crotch boards (two ten-foot planks with a swiveling bolt near one end). They would be placed under the hawser at the beach edge, forcing it up in elevation to ensure the rescued crew and passengers would clear the wave tops. The surfman would then quickly haul the breeches buoy, by means of the whip, out to the wreck to receive the first victim. Should there be many passengers or crew, or the conditions warranted it, a Francis lifecar could be used instead of the buoy. With the lifecar, the rescuers could bring in a number of people at a time in this cocoon-like protective device. Lifecars were also used on a number of occasions to off-load valuable cargo, such as gold bullion, before the wreck was destroyed by the wave action.

While the surfmen gave of themselves selflessly when conducting rescues, for captains, crew, and passengers of shipwrecked vessels, the wait for help could seem eternal. The booklet, *Instructions to Mariners in Case of Shipwreck*, carried by many ships (and available at all American customs houses) advised, "From one to four hours may intervene between the burning of the [Coston] light and the surfmen's arrival, as the patrolman may have to return to his station, perhaps three or four miles distant, and the life-saving crew draw their apparatus or surfboat through the sand over bad roads to where your vessel is stranded."

The final task once all were saved was vital to the next rescue. The whipline and hawser had to be retrieved. Hundreds of yards of lines could not be sacrificed to each rescue.



LIFE-CAR.

To accomplish this, the surfmen would remove the breeches buoy or lifecar from the hawser and in its place secure a cutting block or "hawser cutter," as it was also known. This would be hauled off by the same whipline and positioned as close as possible to the knot of the hawser where it was attached to the mast of the wreck. Knife blades in the cutting block would be activated by means of a lanyard to cut the hawser. Once cut, the whipline that had been used to accomplish the rescue, as well as pull the "cutting block" into position, would be reversed and all the line would be retrieved except the actual tailblock and a few feet of the valuable hawser. Once back at the station, and after caring for their new charges, the surfmen would de-rig their equipment and shortly be prepared for the challenges of another rescue.

The Hostel at Surfside

The Star of the Sea is located at 31 Western Ave. in Surfside on Nantucket. It holds a unique place in the history of both life saving and the island of Nantucket: It is deemed to be the oldest life-saving station in the United States still standing on its original foundation-this year (1999) marks its 125th anniversary-and it is the last existing station on the island still accessible to the public.

As an HI-AYH hostel, the facility fosters and fulfills the mission of that organization - "To help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling" - by providing educational programs focusing on the local culture, history, community service, and the environment.

For more information, telephone the community information line at (508) 228-3900.

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Surfside Wrecks and Rescues

The crews of the Surfside Life Saving Station responded courageously and unhesitatingly to numerous dangerous situations, risking their lives to secure the safety of men, women, and children. Here is a glimpse into some of the events in which they participated and the circumstances under which they labored.

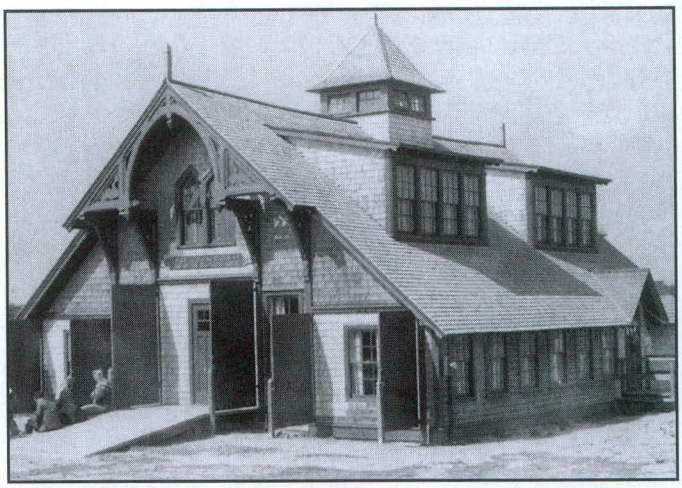
March 9, 1877: In thick fog, the bark *W.F. Marshall* drove up on the beach near Mioxes Pond. A surfman on patrol hailed the crew of the stuck ship, alerting them that help was on the way. A line with a sling attached was secured from the vessel to the shore, and the crew of fourteen, plus the wife and child of the steward, were delivered to dry land.

March 21, 1877: Approximately one-half mile east of the *Marshall*, the bark *Papa Luigi* C. was brought broadside by heavy seas and came ashore. During attempts to abandon ship, one or two crewmen fell overboard but were rescued by their mates. Their plight came to the attention of a surfman on patrol, who lent assistance as they landed in their own boat. On March 30, surfman Henry H. Nickerson, doing salvage work on the *Papa Luigi* C., fell from the vessel's main topsail yard to the deck and died almost instantly.

December 22, 1884: At about 11 p.m., the three-masted schooner *Warren Sawyer* came ashore at Surfside. Despite the darkness, a line was fired over the vessel and within an hour, the seven-man crew, who had taken refuge in the mizzen rigging, were all safely landed by means of a breeches buoy.

December 9, 1885: The schooner *Austen Locke* went ashore near Miacomet Pond. The Surfside crew landed all hands in a breeches buoy.

January 10, 1886: In the predawn hours during a driving snow storm, the three-masted schooner *T.B. Witherspoon* came ashore near Little Mioxes Pond. In 16°F weather, the Surfside station life-saving crew shot lines over the vessel, but the ship's crew was powerless to haul off the hawser attached. From the shore, hundreds of citizens who had rushed to the scene watched helplessly - although within speaking distance - as members of the seven-man crew slowly perished before their eyes in the rigging or fell into the sea and were drowned. Ever vigilant, nine surfmen launched a life-raft into the raging sea and attempted to haul off by a small line that had been shot over the vessel. Within minutes, a huge wave broke over the raft, knocking two overboard (they clung to the craft and were rescued) and drenching the rest. The impact snapped the line and the raft was hauled back to land by a rope that had been put out from shore.



The Surfside station as it appears today as a hostel. Note that the lookout platform is now enclosed, additions have been added to both sides, the roof line extended and dormer windows installed. Image courtesy of the author.

In the afternoon, a sixth attempt by a Lyle gun to plant a line across the vessel's bow proved successful; the line was secured to the fore-rigging. By this time, only two crewmen could be seen to be active aboard the ship. Eventually the line was secured and after dark, the two men (including the mate, who witnessed the deaths of his wife and child when the sea broke into the cabin), were landed by breeches buoy.

March 28, 1888: The iron steamship *Canonbury* struck the Old Man Shoal in a dense fog. When the fog lifted several hours later, the crew started for shore in their boats. Meantime, the vessel had been sighted from Surfside station and the surfmen put out in the surf boat to assist. On meeting the ship's crew, the surfmen directed the sailors to follow them to the shore. The high surf prohibited a landing, however, and the surfmen instructed the steamer's crew to anchor. Taking a few of the sailors into their boat, the surfmen effected a safe landing. In the meantime, the *Canonbury's* large lifeboat had been brought to the shore and two trips were made in it to rescue the remainder of the crew.

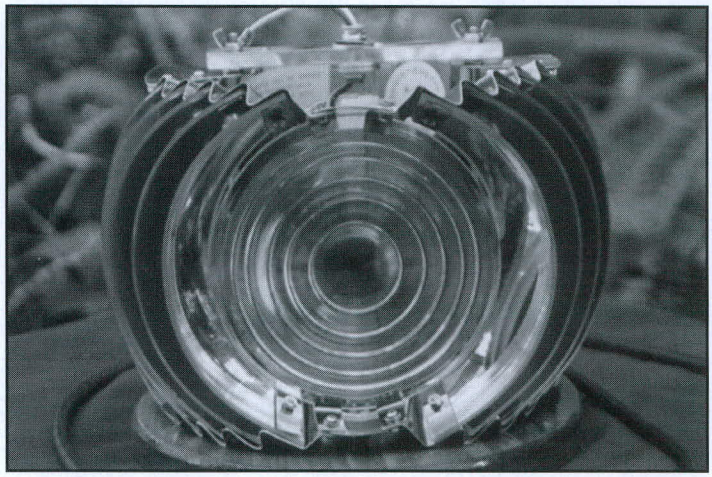
October 15, 1888: A dismasted schooner with a signal of distress flying anchored off Sankaty Head. She dragged through the day and by evening was off Surfside sending up rockets, which were answered until she disappeared from sight.

March 18, 1902: The schooner *Fly Away* was hove down and dismasted off Cape Cod, at which time the steward was washed overboard and lost. When her deck load and spars went overboard, the vessel righted and for some thirty-six hours drifted to and fro by the east end of Nantucket. She was sighted by the keeper of Sankaty Head Lighthouse, who reported her to the Surfside station, whereupon the crew pulled out to her near the Old Man shoal and took off the survivors, five in all.

October 14, 1913: The two-masted schooner *Georgie Pearl* anchored off Low Beach and hoisted signals of distress. She had been buffeted about among the shoals for hours by the gale, had lost her sails, and was leaking. She was boarded by the Surfside life-saving crew in the afternoon. With night advancing and the storm increasing, the captain decided to abandon her. The crew of five men was taken aboard the lifeboat and sheltered at the station.

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Saving the History of Life-Saving

The Nantucket Life-Saving Museum, itself an architectural reproduction of the Surfside Life-Saving Station, contains an impressive collection of authentic life-saving apparatus and relics of maritime history, as well as rare photographs and clippings from period newspapers and magazines. Among the numerous artifacts on display are a Mass. Humane Society surfboat (one of only four known to exist) and its horse-drawn carriage, the only Mass. Humane Society beachcart known to exist, breeches buoys, faking boxes, Lyle and Coston guns, a Hunt gun, and a Francis lifecar. Also there are two "key posts" used by Nantucket beach patrolmen. In addition, visitors may view a video of a life-saving drill - or, if they are lucky, see an actual demonstration. Twice each year, the U.S. Coast Guard at Brant Point station conducts an actual breeches buoy drill with the Museum's operative beachcart. Inquire at the Museum about times and locations.

The museum, located at 158 Polpis Road on Folger's Marsh (2.7 miles from the rotary), is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., from June 15 through Columbus Day weekend and at other times by special arrangement. Admission is $3 for adults; $2 for children over five years of age; children five years old and younger are admitted free. Groups of 10 or more persons and HI-AYH guests with a membership card or overnight receipts each receive $1 off. For more information, telephone (508) 228-1885 or go to www.nantucket.net/museums/lifesaving.

Through 1999, the Fair Street Museum has on display "Shoals and Shipwrecks: Nantucket's Treacherous Shores," an exhibit that includes resources and artifacts from the Nantucket Life-Saving Museum, including a diorama, a Lyle gun, a breeches buoy, and a faking box, among other items.

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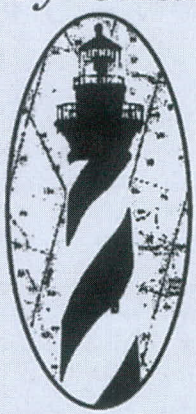


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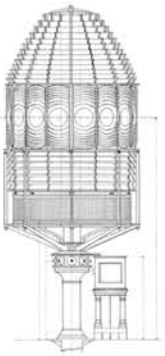
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Restoration & Preservation



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.

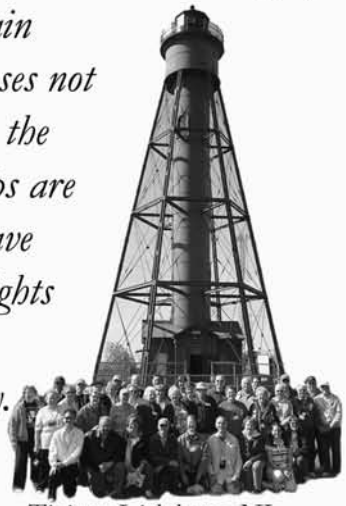
Help Support Our Important Mission!

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