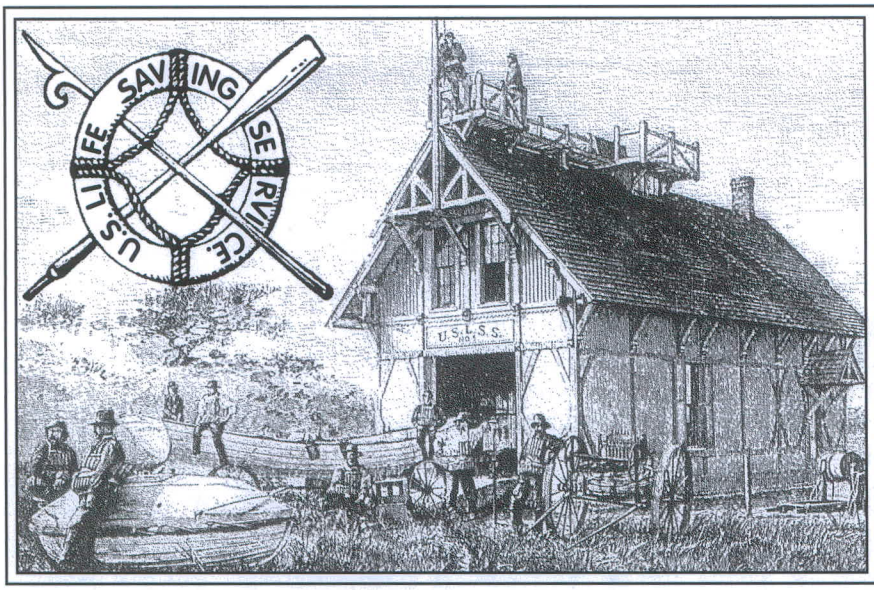
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

POWERLESS: The Wreck of the *Robert E. Lee*

By John J. Galluzzo

Composer George Gershwin sailed for Europe on March 9, 1928, to perform his "Rhapsody in Blue" for that continent's classical music devotees for the first time. That same day, boxer George "The Saginaw Kid" Lavigne, the world's second lightweight champion under the Marques of Queensbury rules, heard the ring bell toll for the last time, dying at the age of fifty-nine. And in a landmark decision, a U.S. Circuit Court judge ruled that Native Americans should not be held accountable to U.S. naturalization laws and should be allowed to cross the American and Canadian borders at will, as recognized by the Jay Treaty of 1796.

These news stories would be lost on the people of Plymouth, Massachusetts, pushed to the back pages of the newspapers by an unexpected and unnecessary local tragedy.

Plymouth, tucked away on the western shore of Cape Cod Bay, lays claim to the title "America's Hometown," the site where Elder William Brewster, Captain Myles Standish, Governor William Bradford and the rest of the Pilgrims set up the first permanent non-indigenous settlement in the New World. And although hidden as it was by the outer arm of Cape Cod, the harbor at Plymouth, protected to the northeast by a natural breakwater known as the Gurnet, became an important and active port over the next century and a half.

The fleet of whalers, coasters, smacks and packets that called Plymouth Harbor home was nearly decimated by the British during the American Revolution. By 1807 the fleet had regained its strength, but President Thomas Jefferson's Embargo Act of December of that year, forbidding American ships from trading with foreign nations, forced many of those ships to rest at anchor for fourteen months. Only around 1820 did Plymouth's mariners once again begin to profit from their life's work.

The true growth of the harbor, though, began in 1824 with the opening of the Plymouth Cordage Company. In 1810 America boasted 173 ropewalks. Rope made the maritime world of the early nineteenth century move just as much as wood or sailcloth. "Nothing symbolic of the sea would be complete without a piece of rope," writes Frederick William Wallace in *The Romance of Rope* in 1932. "It has bound the world together. It is enshrined in the sailor's heart because the cast-off mooring line is the last link with the land – last to leave and the first to go ashore." The constant flow of raw materials to the Plymouth Cordage Company when coupled with the goods needed for other local iron and textile factories made Plymouth Harbor one of the busiest spots in New England by the late nineteenth century. By 1899, Plymouth was supplying one-seventh of all the cordage in the world.

General Superintendent Sumner Kimball and the United States Life-Saving Service recognized the importance of the mercantile interests of Plymouth Harbor to the nation soon after the service's 1871 rebirth, beginning construction of two stations to protect the harbor just two years later. The Gurnet station, four and a half miles to the northeast of the town, stood at the southern end of the narrow peninsula that reached from the town of Duxbury to the north to the mouth of Plymouth Harbor. The station shared the end of the peninsula with the twin Gurnet Lighthouses, home to the first female lightkeeper in America, Hannah Thomas. Six and a half miles to the southeast the service constructed another 1874-type station on Manomet Point.

Both early structures served the local mariners well, but time, the elements, and the expansion of the service's workforce and duties called for the older simple lifeboat stations to be replaced with modern facilities. A Bibb #2-type station replaced the boat-

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house at the Gurnet in 1892, while a Duluth-type station supplanted the Manomet Point building in 1901. In both instances the older stations remained in use as auxiliary structures to the main buildings.

Because of its positioning on a high cliff and its proximity to that cliff's edge, the new Manomet Point station had a peculiarity all its own. The boat room doors that would normally be prominent on the front of the building instead were placed on the inland side of the station, to protect the surfmen from tumbling over the cliff with their equipment in the adrenaline-pumping frenzy of the first few moments of a rescue effort.

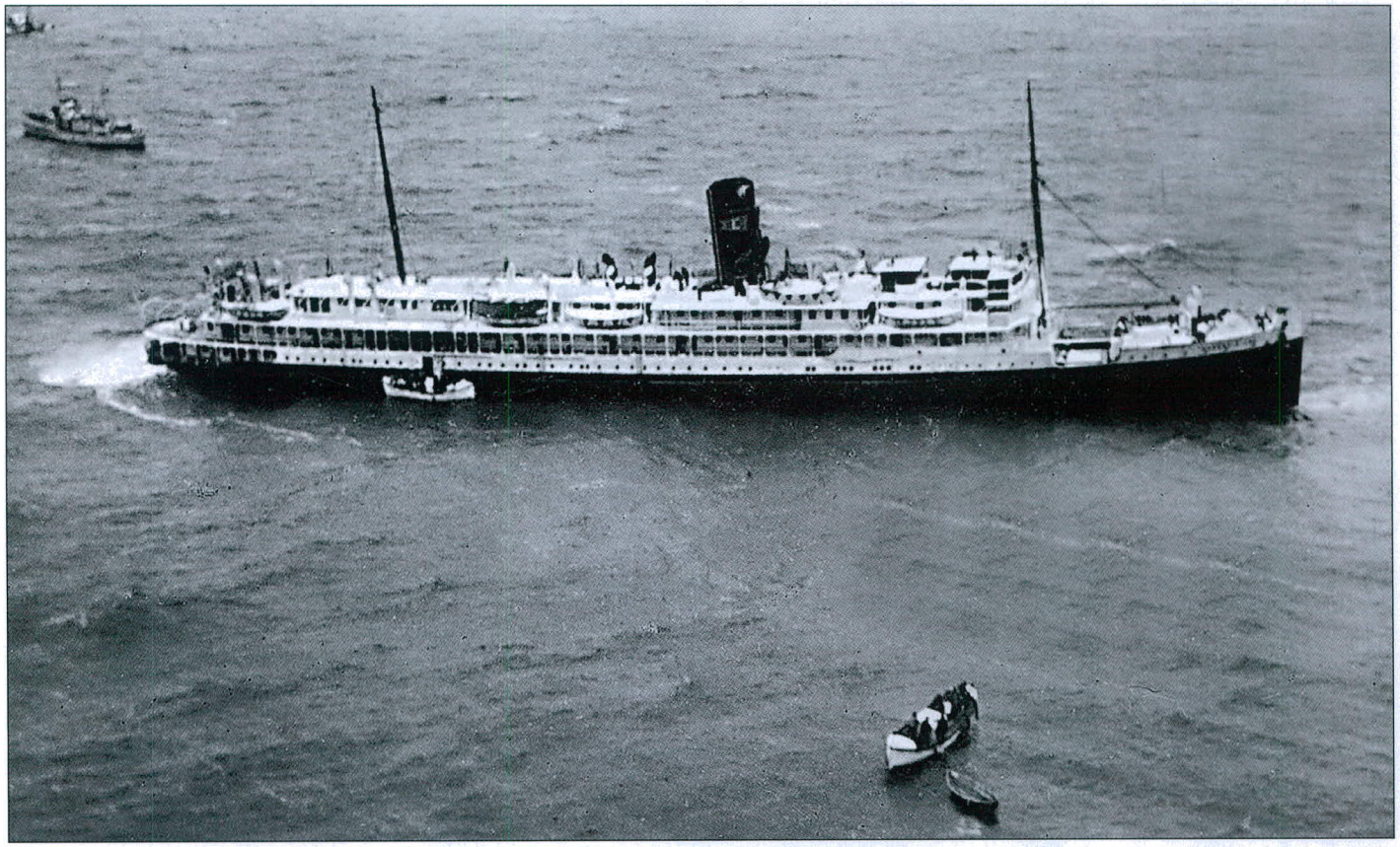
A decade later a significant public works project changed maritime traffic patterns off that town forever. The opening of the Cape Cod Canal on July 29, 1914, meant that ships that had for nearly three centuries rounded Cape Cod to reach Plymouth and Boston could now sail under the protection of the Cape itself and bypass the waters off the Great Beach. For Plymouth, though, the change had come too late. Many of the industries that had made the town strong had failed, although the foresight of the proprietors of the Plymouth Cordage Company who skillfully sought new markets for the products in the wheat and oil fields as American shipping changed from sail to steam kept that particular business alive. Nevertheless, easier access to Plymouth Harbor from the south did not spur an economic upturn for the town. The surfmen and keepers at Manomet Point and the Gurnet, and, eventually, the crew of the auxiliary station built at the eastern end of the Cape Cod Canal in 1919, now stood watch over a parade of ships passing by offshore, most of which would never fall prey to the dangers of the harbor's channels. Somewhat symbolically, the first ship to pass through the Cape Cod Canal, the Hull to Boston steamer *Rose Standish*, was captained by Osceola James, the son of famous lifesaver Joshua James.

The 400-foot, 5284-ton New York to Boston steamer *Robert E. Lee* was headed north after passing through the Cape Cod Canal in near blizzard conditions on the evening of March 9, 1928. Snow, sleet and hail, some of which entered the wheelhouse driven by forty-five mile per hour winds, hindered Captain Harland W. Robinson's ability to navigate his ship. The thick atmosphere shrouded the twin fourth order Fresnel lenses seven miles north at the Gurnet, aids intended to help mariners steer clear of the dangerous Mary Ann Rocks. Without their help, Robinson was in trouble.

The *Robert E. Lee* missed the first set of rocks, but struck and ran hard aground on the second. The vessel began to ship water on its starboard side, and Robinson ordered the seacocks opened, settling the Lee, and then sent out an immediate SOS distress call. At midnight, with high tide just two hours away, he feared for the safety of his passengers and crew. But the stranding had been so relatively gentle that some of the 273 passengers slept through the entire incident.

Ashore, Boatswain's Mate William Cashman and the Coast Guard crew at Manomet Point attempted to contact the stranded steamer by flashing light for over an hour. But the fog that had settled in rose and fell in such a pattern that it made communication impossible.

Feeling unsure of the situation, Cashman called his men to the station's pulling surfboat. After several attempts at launching their vessel in the pounding surf in the darkness, they opted to wait for sunrise. After the turn of the tide, the *Lee* stabilized, and some



Steamer *Robert E. Lee* aground off Plymouth, MA. Note the lifesaving crews in the foreground and alongside the vessel. Photo courtesy of the Old Colony Club, Plymouth, MA.

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Surf boat crew preparing to launch. Note the steep bluff behind the boat. Photo courtesy of the Old Colony Club, Plymouth, MA.

of the passengers took to singing songs to pass the time. When the sun rose, one man awoke and headed for the onboard barber's shop for a shave, unaware of what had transpired during the night.

At first light, Cashman and his crew – Frank Griswold, Edward Stark, Alden Proctor, Irving Wood, Joseph Ducharme, and a local mechanic named Ernest Douglas who volunteered to go out in place of Arthur Young, who was sick at home in Orleans – launched the surfboat onto the still-churning seas and headed for the *Lee*.

The 125-foot patrol boat *Bonham* had arrived on scene during the night, as had the Coast Guard destroyer *Paulding* and the 178-foot cutter *Tuscarora*. The 125-foot patrol boat *Active* and the 75-foot patrol boat CG176 stood by as well. Cashman climbed aboard *Lee* and talked with the ship's captain about the alternatives for removing the passengers and crew to safety. Both agreed that rowing them to shore in the surfboat would be a long, tedious process, and that shuttling the passengers to the larger vessels would be their best course of action. The Coast Guard had also dispatched two 36-foot motor lifeboats during the night, one from the Wood End station in Provincetown at the end of the Cape Cod peninsula and one from the auxiliary station at the Cape Cod Canal to the scene. Once the first transfer had been made, just after 11 a.m., Cashman and his crew headed for shore, confident that the situation had been correctly tended to. By the end of the day, every person on the ship would be safe on dry land.

As the Manomet Point crew approached the shoreline, though, tragedy struck. A wave, described by one of the Coast Guardsmen as twenty-five feet in height, lifted the stern of the craft, jamming the bow into the seafloor, pitchpoling it onto the top of the crew. The seven stunned men floated helplessly in the water, shocked and injured from the vessel's unexpected overturning. Two hundred spectators watched on shore as Surfman Griswold momentarily surfaced, and then sank out of sight. Boatswain's Mate Cashman clung to an oar as Surfman Stark complained to his friends Proctor, Ducharme and Wood that he had severe pain around his heart. Wood, who believed that the gunwale had struck Proctor when the boat flipped, helped push him onto the overturned vessel.

Local residents Russell Anderson, Earl Harper and Massachusetts state trooper John Horgan scrambled to the shoreline where they found a leaky dory. Cutting it loose, they rowed toward the drowning men. From around the point lobstermen Harry F. Eddy and friend Daniel Sullivan rowed another dory to the scene, Anderson and crew pulled Cashman, Proctor, and Wood into their boat while Eddy and Sullivan grabbed Stark and Ducharme to safety. Civilian Douglas told them "I can hang on. Take someone else first." Griswold could not be located.

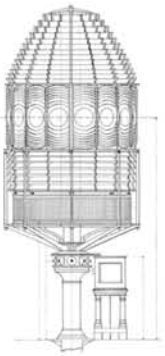
The Wood End 36-foot motor lifeboat arrived on the scene and transferred Proctor, Douglas, Wood and Stark to the *Paulding*, which headed for the Chelsea Naval Hospital in Boston. Ducharme and Sampson were taken to Plymouth's Jordan Hospital. Twenty-seven year old Edward Stark died in transit.

On the beach, doctor Edgar Hill and Fire Chief Albert E. Hiller worked on the unconscious form of Boatswain's Mate William Cashman for a little more than two hours before pronouncing him dead. A priest on the scene performed the last rites. Surfman Frank Griswold's body washed ashore a day later.

In the days that followed the tragedy, as 10,000 sightseers packed the roads leading to Manomet Point, the people of Plymouth looked for answers to seemingly simple questions. Why had the federal government allowed the men charged with protecting the coast to work in a building with no toilets, heated by coal stoves and lit only by kerosene lamps? Why should there not be a lighthouse erected on Manomet Point to steer ships away from the Mary Ann Rocks? And why, nearly three decades after the introduction of the service's first motor lifeboats, were these men manually rowing to the scene of a rescue? In the end, the locals surmised, the Coast Guardsmen of Manomet Point had been left powerless to save their own lives.

Two months after the disaster, the people of Plymouth gathered outside the Manomet Point station to dedicate a simple memorial to the fallen Coast Guardsmen. Dedicated on May 30, 1928, to the memories of Boatswain's Mate William E. Cashman, Surfman Frank W. Griswold, and Surfman Edward P. Stark, the plaque on the stone reads in part, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," the same Biblical passage carved onto the grave marker of Joshua James, and an all-too familiar reminder of the deadly risks taken by America's lifesavers when mariners are in distress at sea.

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Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

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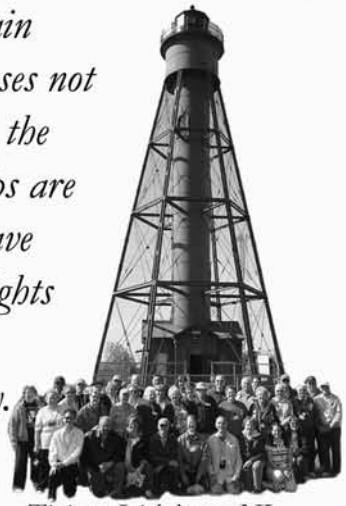
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