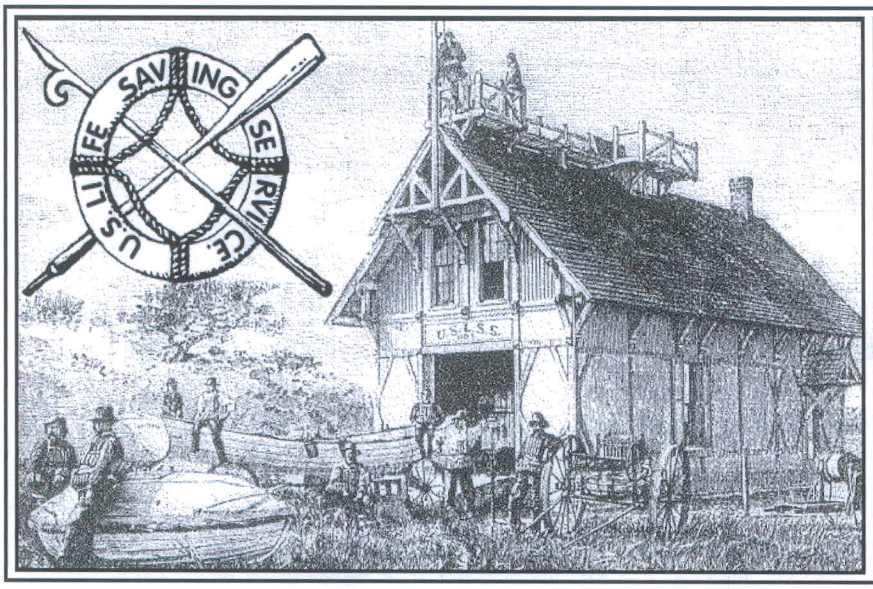
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

The Portland Gale

By John J. Galluzzo

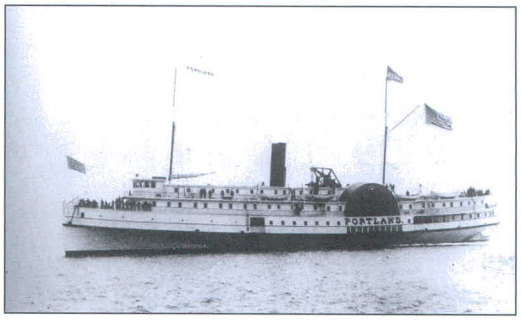
If Joshua James took time to reminisce when he arose the morning of Saturday, November 26, 1898, he would have realized that that day marked the tenth anniversary of his finest moment, the Great Storm of 1888, in which he and the volunteer Massachusetts Humane Society lifesavers of Hull, Massachusetts, rescued 29 men from six vessels within the span of about 36 hours. The crews that day committed the surfboat *Nantasket* to its first test, and she performed admirably enough to silence the experts who said she would never succeed as a lifesaving craft. The dramatic events of November 25-26, 1888, made Joshua James and the surfboat *Nantasket* the most famous lifesaving tandem in the world.

Now, 10 years later, Joshua James, who had just turned 72 years old four days earlier on November 22, proudly wore the mantle of keeper at the Point Allerton U.S. Life-Saving Service Station in Hull. The *Nantasket* rested quietly halfway down the beach in the Massachussets Humane Society Station #20. This station was the headquarters for Hull's volunteer crews, watched over by its keeper, 33-year-old Osceola James, Joshua's only surviving son.

The outbreak of the Spanish-American War led to extra duty for the keepers of the South Shore lifesaving stations and four of the surfmen at each post during the summer of 1898, as they received orders to remain on duty for the summer months and watch the horizon for enemy warships. Until late November, that extra assignment defined the year for each of the crews. Singular incidents up and down the shore kept the crews mildly busy, but as winter approached, it seemed that the season would be a relatively forgiving one.

The first frost arrived in early November. At the Gurnet, Surfman Joseph Wixon, injured when his lantern had blown up in his hands while he was on patrol earlier in the fall, returned to work on November 15. Three days later, on November 18, the keepers of the South Shore lifesaving stations noted an increase in the intensity of the surf. At the Gurnet, Keeper Augustus B. Rogers checked off "strong" for surf in the daily report at midnight and at sunrise, and upgraded it to rough for the rest of the day. Up and down the coast, the keepers kept a close eye on the sea for the next six days, sometimes sending extra men out to patrol during the daytime hours. Only the old veteran from North Scituate, George Brown, downplayed the week's meteorological disturbances; where others checked rough, he checked light; where they marked strong, he said he saw smooth seas.

On the morning of the 26th, Brown noted that the sea was smooth from midnight forward. In fact, the disruptive winds and scattered rains from the previous week had dissipated to leave the South Shore with a seasonably chilly, cloudy, breezy but not windy day. Keeper Benjamin Manter took advantage of the lull to run a resuscitation drill with his crew. Afterwards, Surfman Nathaniel Besse left to tend to a family illness, replaced by Arthur Manter for the day. By late afternoon, though, the winds returned, shifting around from the west to the east and northeast, howling a bit stronger than they had all week, as dark clouds began to gather overhead.



An early photograph of the *SS Portland*, the ship which gave its name to the storm of 1898.

As the storm approached Scituate and Marshfield that afternoon, Fourth Cliff Lifesaving Station Surfman Richard Wherity felt it was his duty to warn the hunters

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The destruction of the Portland Gale reached from Maine to Nova Scotia and centralized here in Hull, Massachusetts. Photo from author's collection.

that annually found their gunning huts on the saltmarshes of the North River each November, when migrating ducks made their return to the area, of the impending turn of the weather. But the temptation to linger in the marshes was strong for the hunters. Of particular interest to local sportsmen at that time of the year were the three species of scoter ducks—black, surf and white-winged—which they colloquially called "coots," not to be confused with the American coot, a different bird entirely.

Some gunners, as they were called, looking for coots rowed out along the beach before sunrise in small dories and anchored themselves in long lines perpendicular to the shore. The birds flew in predictable aerial pathways from the north, parallel to the coast, and could be drawn in with decoys. When flights passed overhead in loose formations consisting of all three types of scoters and possibly a few common eiders and oldsquaws (recently renamed as "long-tailed ducks"), numerous guns popped at once and gunners began arguing over who got what before the birds even hit the water. A good day's hunting could net 15 to 20 birds.

Some gunners, like the Clapp brothers of Scituate's Greenbush section, and the five young Norwell men in the Henderson party on November 26, preferred to do their reconnoitering from small wooden shanties they had located in the saltmarshes. One of the Clapps, Everett, even had his own trained flock of Canada geese to use as live decoys to bring the birds in close enough to shoot.

Once back to the center of town with their catches, gunners had the option of keeping their prizes for their families or selling them to local taverns or hotels, which vied for the distinction of having "the best coot stews in town." Ironically, according to many recipes of the day, even "the best coot stew" was among the most unpalatable meals in town. For example, a *Field & Stream* recipe from 1924 said: "Take the goodly coot and nail it firmly to a hardwood board. Put the board in the sun for about a week. At the end of that time, carefully remove the coot from the board, throw away the coot and cook the board." Other recipes say to boil a coot with potatoes and carrots for a few hours, throw in an old shoe, remove the coot and eat the shoe. Edward Howe Forbush stated in his *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* that "the younger birds have been found quite palatable, if skinned and dressed at once…" but "if allowed to hang long with the viscera unremoved, they become vile. I recall a case where a lady cooked such a bird, thereby driving everybody out of the house. She had to throw away both bird and kettle."

The reason that coots tasted so bad in a stew is that as they are bottom-feeding birds, they tended to be very oily. When they were cooked in a stew, they become saturated in those oils.

But the Clapp boys—Everett, William and Richard—and the Henderson party—Fred and Bert Henderson, Albert Tilden, George Ford and George Webster—were not worried at all about debating the pros and cons of the taste of a stewed coot on November 26, 1898. Thanksgiving had just come and gone, and the holiday weekend was still young. There was plenty of time for innocent revelry in the magnificence of the season on the river, and certainly plenty of hunting to be done.

George Woodman, a Trouant's Island resident, visited the Henderson shanty behind Fourth Cliff that afternoon, hoping to score a bird for Sunday dinner, but found that one of the boys had already left for home with the

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day's prizes, and that Webster was looking to leave as well. The other three boys stayed in the camp, a decision that would cost them dearly as the storm closed in on the South Shore, for as the storm grew, the waters of the North River rose.

At the Gurnet, as the sun set, Keeper Rogers began a struggle that would last through the night. "Boatroom doors would not stay locked," he wrote in his log, "had to make them fast with rope." By 7:37 p.m. snow began to fall, and by 11:30 the wind speed had reached 72 miles per hour. By 12 a.m., the storm that would forever be known as the Portland Gale raged with all its fury.

But the disasters that would define the storm began before the clock struck midnight. At 11 p.m., Consolidated Coal Company's *Barge #4*, anchored off Hull's Point Allerton Bar, parted from her mooring and began to blow toward Toddy Rocks to the southwest. Shortly after the tug *Cumberland* had left her to ride out the storm, barge captain Charles Abergh blew four short blasts on his whistle three times to call the tug back, but garnered no response. He would have continued to blow for help had the seas not endangered his ship's fires.

At midnight, watches set out from the South Shore stations. Surfman Fred Eaton of Brant Rock marched southward through the maelstrom to find his Gurnet counterpart, Surfman Nelson King, halfway between the stations. Twenty-three year old Thomas Harris, in just his second year as a lifesaver, took the north patrol out of Brant Rock. Surfman Fernando Bearse of Point Allerton set out to the west of his station, heading for Pemberton Point, walking directly into the northeast winds when setting out on his return journey to Stony Beach at 2 a.m.

An hour later, Bearse spotted a three-masted schooner a quarter of a mile out from the station. As the surf was pounding so heavily and the wind was blowing so hard, Keeper James decided against launching a boat at that time. About an hour later the vessel had been swept a third of a mile westward and within about 500 yards of the shore.

Around 5 a.m., just before dawn, and away from the view of the Hull lifesavers, then preparing to head out to save the crew of the schooner, *Barge #4* crashed on shore in a cacophony of howling wind, roaring surf, and screams of dying men. When she struck, engineer Charles Nelson and two crewmen



The *Henry R. Tilton* wrecked directly in front of the Point Allerton life-saving station. Photo from author's collection.

simply known as Alfred and Fred, disappeared beneath the ocean's frothy surface. Disoriented by the darkness, and battered about relentlessly by the surf, they would never be seen alive again.

Captain Abergh and his steward, John Vanderveer of Baltimore, survived the disaster. Hugging the base of the cliff below Battery Heights (in front of the Jacobs School), they hurriedly and blindly stumbled westward along the shore, soaked by the breaking surf, until they reached a small cottage. Pounding on the door and hollering above the din of the storm, they alerted the owner, Amber Cleverly, who hastened to let them in. They had barely begun to warm themselves in front of the fire before the entire house tilted on its foundation. Gathering his family and the stranded sailors, Cleverly led them all to the annex of the nearby Pemberton Inn. Moments after they arrived, the annex filled up with water, and they all had to climb the stairs to the second f loor.

At daybreak, around 6:30, the three-masted schooner, now recognized as the *Henry R. Tilton*, had come within range of the station's Lyle gun. Volunteer lifesavers from the Humane Society—volunteers Osceola and Francis James, Eben Pope, Louis and Joseph Galiano, William Mitchell, and John Knowles—joined the Point Allerton crew and other local, unaffiliated men on the way to the wreck. The local Methodist pastor even came out to help, supplying coffee to the would-be lifesavers on the beach, one of whom was his son.

Keeper James landed two shots across the schooner, but one fouled in the debris in the water, and another fell out of reach of the enfeebled sailors. A third landed within a reasonable distance, and they secured the whipline to the foremast 20 feet above the deck. After bringing the first man ashore, the keeper and his men realized that due to the fact that the vessel was still drifting shoreward, they would have to reset the lines after each rescue to make them taut again. Also, in order to keep the lines clear of debris, the men handling the lines had to stand dangerously close to the breaking waves, and from time to time the sea would engulf the surfmen and their equipment. It took longer than three hours, but the mixed crew of the government's hired men and the town's volunteers brought all seven mariners aboard—Captain H.S. Cobb, mate Frank Randlett, and crew Henry Henderson, Charles Colson, L.M. Keane, William Healsley, and John Hanson—to safety.

Elsewhere on the South Shore, the lifesavers were hard at work. The North Scituate crew kept patrolling throughout the day in a thick, wet snow and vicious wind. At Fourth Cliff, the surfmen patrolled as far as they could in each direction but had to stop before reaching their keyposts, as, wrote Keeper Fred Stanley, "there was a large quantity of wreckage washing ashore all day." The Clapp boys, who had been warned away from their gunning hut, fled for the safety of their small dory as the depth of the water steadily increased, but abandoned that when a runaway gundalow—a low, flat boat used in salt-haying—happened by. Luckily, it headed for shore in Marshfield, but not before passing within hearing distance of the screams of the Henderson boys, who were being swept away uncontrollably in their own dory.

Surfman Walter Kezer of the Gurnet, a new man hired on October 20, had similar problems. He had to abandon portions of his northward patrol on Duxbury Beach as the sea washed over it and into the bay. Finding a gunner's hut, he burst inside to find some late-staying hunters under assault from the rising waters, with three feet of it already inside their building. He helped

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The storm blasted away the building around it, but this piano stood its ground. Photo from author's collection.

them collect their belongings and head for higher ground. Northward, at Brant Rock, high drama was unfolding.

At 8 a.m., Surfman Benjamin Simmons set out on the north patrol but could only walk for about one mile, stopped cold by a deep cut in the beach. The same happened to Temporary Surfman Arthur Manter, who was not even supposed to be working on this day, on the south patrol. Simmons found two men, two women and a child in need of assistance and helped get them to a safer ground. Keeper Manter sent Surfman Fred Eaton out to aid his temporary surfman in collecting the station's dory from Green Harbor.

Meanwhile, Keeper Manter took Surfmen Albertus Cahoon and Thomas Harris with him to aid the people of the local village. Together they hurried the residents of Brant Rock into both the lifesaving station and the stone chapel across Ocean Street. "A line was run from the station to the chapel," according to Manter's log. "4 women, 6 children, and 8 men stayed in the station and were provided with dry clothing from the Woman's National Relief Association's supply and stimulants from the medicine chest. We helped about 30 people altogether."

Carrie Phillips, one of the local residents who sought relief at the station, wrote a letter to a friend just days after the storm. "At 8 a.m. Sunday the breakwater gave away and seas broke through on to the street. At 8:30 the street was full of water, and H. [Henry] said Mr. Bryant's family had gone to the church and I must get the children dressed to go. So the men took Mr. C's three little ones, Mr. Landry's two, and my two little ones to the Church; also Mr. Peterson's two youngest. It was all they could do to get there. Then Leslie Peterson and Henry took me."

The walk to the station proved nearly injurious. "We had to dodge piazza roofs and boards, for they were flying through the air," continued Phillips. "I wanted to get to the church where the children and nearly all the women were, but we had to stop at the life saving station and be thankful to get there. Just as we landed on the station steps Briggs' house sailed away. We went into the station and I thought I was wet and uncomfortable then but it was nothing compared to what I got later on."

At 10 a.m., the operation to secure the safety of the people gathering at the station was suddenly and terrifyingly interrupted. "We had only been in the station a few minutes when Mr. Cahoon's house and one of the stations hands' houses went down with "Clifton" the second house from the station next to Melrose. Mrs. Cahoon just escaped with her four children, the youngest five months old. They only had what clothing they had on." Minutes later, the rugged boat room doors, directly facing the sea to the east, broke loose and allowed the crashing waves to penetrate the building. Thinking quickly, Manter and his men broke down the doors on the opposite end of the room, allowing the water to pass directly through, an effort Phillips claimed saved them all. The windows in the dining room shattered under the attack, as rocks and stones flew into the station, tossed by the sea. The women and children jumped onto the table and chairs. "The base and legs of the Irvin heater were broken and the table and some dishes were destroyed," wrote Manter. "At this time all the lower part of the station was flooded. The east side of the station and outbuilding were stripped of shingles and some are gone from the north end." Manter estimated that 50 to 75 tons of stones had been thrown into the building.

"They did not dare for us to go up stairs," continued Phillips. "They ran a line over to the church and fastened it to the stone porch thinking we might get over on that, but Mr. Harris, who carried it over, nearly lost his life getting back. The rope slackened up and the rocks knocked his feet from under him and the rope got around his neck. Henry and Baker went to his rescue. So you see what danger there was to get into the street and off your feet. They ran the life boat out and strapped life preservers on to us, even to the little baby."

Back at the Point Allerton Station, Keeper James' wife, Louisa, and the wives of the other surfmen had laid out blankets and hot drinks to care for the survivors of the *Tilton*. Seated in front of a roaring fire in the mess room, the seven sailors finally felt safe for the first time in about 15 hours.

The same could not be said for several other ships' crews. Almost two hours earlier, at 9 a.m., the coal barges *Virginia* and *Lucy R. Nichols* tore from their anchorage off Nantasket Beach, having been left by their tug, *Underwriter*, to ride out the gale. The *Virginia* broke apart and succumbed to Neptune's call, all aboard perishing. As the *Nichols* blew towards Black Rock at Stoney (or Crescent) Beach, on the Hull-Cohasset border, Captain John Petersen and an anonymous crewman leapt overboard, taking their chances with the sea, which made sure they would never walk the earth again.

In probably the most amazing instance of pure luck throughout the entire span of the storm, a mast from the disintegrating *Nichols* fell directly across to the small island at Black Rock, creating an extremely temporary walkway to safety for the remaining crew members. The three men—John Soderstrom, B. Fray, and Oscar Colson—dashed across the mast towards the only available shelter, a gunning hut, as the sea swallowed their vessel behind them. They entered the hut, built a fire, and waited.

Somewhere off Hull's shores the *Minnie Stowe*, *Abel E. Babcock*, *James H. Hoyt*,

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Baltimore, and countless other vessels disappeared without witnesses.

By the time Joshua and his lifesavers had finished with their rescue efforts on the *Tilton*, word had already arrived that Consolidated Coal Company's *Barge #1* was dragging ashore on Toddy Rocks, three-quarters of a mile to the west. Knowing it would be impossible to drag their second beach apparatus to the scene of the wreck due to the tangled masses of telephone, telegraph, and electrical wiring in front of Point Allerton station, Keeper James conferred with his son Osceola, who agreed to send some of his men back for the Massachusetts Humane Society's Hunt gun at Station #18 on Stony Beach. Osceola hired a team of horses to bring back the equipment, as the rest of the lifesavers headed for the wreck.

The two crews reached *Barge #1* at about 11 a.m. and set up the Humane Society's beach apparatus. They fired shots with the Hunt gun before realizing that the barge was about to break to pieces. Both keepers, Joshua and Osceola, called for volunteers to wade out into the surf. Tying lines around their waists, a group of surfmen walked out among the wreckage as far as they could, getting as close to the distressed vessel as possible, trusting their friends on the beach to drag them to safety at the first sign of real danger. Within moments the pilothouse broke off the barge and began riding the waves toward the shore. With a tremendous crash it slammed to earth heavily, tossing its passengers into a pile on the beach. The lifesavers in the surf rushed to grab the men before the undertow dragged them back in again. The surfmen held onto the sailors and waited for the next wave to crash, which carried them all to a point on the beach where they could scramble to safety. As the wave hit, though, a flying piece of debris struck the leg of volunteer Louis F. Galiano, leaving a deep bone bruise. His heroic rescue work during the Portland Gale ended there and then.

Knowing it would be impossible to bring the survivors back to the station into the driving northeast winds, Joshua looked for the nearest available shelter. He spotted a cottage nearby and banged on the door, but the family had fled. He and his men then crashed down the door, dragging in the helpless forms from the wreck. The crew made a fire, stripped off all of the sailors' wet clothing, and wrapped them in any quilts and blankets they could find. One of the surfmen found the liquor cabinet and heated up some whiskey drinks to warm the survivors from the inside.

As he came to his senses, the master of the barge, Captain Joshua Thomas, started to violently curse the master of the tug, claiming that his crew and the crew of *Barge #4* had been left to die. This mention was the first the lifesavers had heard of the #4.

Finally back at the station in the afternoon, Joshua James spotted a schooner ashore of Great Brewster Island and knew that there was no way he could launch a boat into such powerful seas. He decided to wait until the surf quieted. As the storm continued to rage, the keeper feared that the night's high tide would be even worse than the morning's, an unbelievable thought, as Hull Village has become a white-capped lake. Down the street from the station, a man could be seen waving his arms frantically through his chamber window. Surfman #1, George F. Pope, Joshua's nephew, launched a dory onto the flooded street and rowed to the man's rescue, bringing him to higher ground. That afternoon, after receiving word from the Pemberton Hotel of the presence of the Cleverly family and the crew of *Barge #4*, the keeper sent a team of horses to retrieve them and bring them to the lifesaving station. By mid-afternoon the wives of the surfmen were caring for 14 wet, cold, tired mariners, as well as the Cleverly family.

While the Hull men fought to save the *Barge #1* crew, the Brant Rock crew responded to another call. "About 11.30 a.m. Lloyd Peterson, a resident of Brant Rock, reported to me that a schooner was ashore about ½ mile south of the station and the crew of eight men were in a cottage near the wreck," wrote Keeper Manter. "I at once sent the surfmen to the place to help the men to the station and furnished them with dry clothing from the Woman's National Relief Association's supply. As the station was uninhabitable they returned to the cottage until the next day when they came to the station and were cared for three days."

Surfmen Eaton, Manter and Simmons returned to the Brant Rock station around 1 p.m., shocked to see what had happened to the first floor of their building. At Fourth Cliff, Keeper Stanley reported that "During the gale this day the flagpole was blown, the out-building was moved off from its foundation and a lot of shingles torn off and the platforms were washed away with the slats of the Station and a key post with one Key." His son, Surfman Thomas P. Stanley of the Gurnet crew, patrolled Duxbury Beach between 12 and 4, but reported that no surfman from Brant Rock had met him along the way. To the west of the Gurnet Point Station, the keypost on Saquish Beach had also washed away, as had a portion of the old 1874 station.

"As soon as tide left so that we could go the west patrol," wrote Keeper Rogers, "sent a man that way, met the Capt. of the *Venus*, who said his sloop was ashore in Saquish cove." All hands from the *Venus* were safe, but the captain noted that of the 11 ships anchored between Saquish and Clark's Island on Saturday



Wreckers found plenty to do in the aftermath of the storm, as tons of coal washed ashore on Nantasket Beach. Photo from author's collection.

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night, only two were now visible: his and the *Charles J. Parker*, which had lost both masts. "I asked him if there was anything we could do for him," Rogers recounted, adding, "he said 'no living man could do anything on the water on a day like this.'"

More news, though, was forthcoming. "The Surfman from the west returned," wrote Rogers, and he "stated that he could not see any thing on account of the snow, but said that the gunners there told him the Sch. seemed to be riding all right the last time they saw her. In the mean time an unknown Sch. was sighted at anchor about ½ mile ENE from Gurnet head, and being in a very dangerous place, all hands kept watch of her until night set in, then placed two men on watch, but she did not use any light, so that was the last we saw of her."



In this 1909 postcard, lifesavers fire the Lyle gun. USLHS archive image.

The human drama of the storm continued to unfold at the Brant Rock station. "At 2 p.m. William Jones and Alger Brown reported at the station that a schooner was stranded about 2 miles north of the station and there were two dead men on the schooner's deck and one on the shore," noted Manter. "I at once sent Surfmen T.W. Baker and B.F. Simmons to the scene with orders to move the bodies above the reach of the tide. I notified the undertaker at Marshfield who took charge of them the next morning. The nine survivors were cared for at a farmhouse near the wreck." With night rapidly approaching and the fear of the evening's high tide being worse than that of the morning, Manter began preparations to care for the souls gathered unwittingly into his care at the station. "All of the station blankets and pillows and some station wood were taken to the chapel. There were 28 people, including the station crew, who stayed in the chapel through the night. The patrol was not maintained during the night because the crew were so exhausted from the unusual hard work of the day."

In North Scituate, Keeper Brown told his crews to remain at the station instead of patrolling at 4 and 8 p.m., fearing for their safety with the tremendous amount of wreckage floating in the surf and strewn across the beaches. At Fourth Cliff, patrolling to the north was no longer an option. "The beach a little north of this Cliff is cut through so that it is impossible to get across except with a boat and then only occasionally," wrote Keeper Stanley. The North River, in combination with the storm, had destroyed the barrier beach that had tenuously held Third and Fourth Cliffs together for centuries.

The storm had spent its fury by the next high tide, around 10:30 p.m. At Point Allerton, Keeper James sent his men on patrol that night, although both of the station's keyposts had washed away and the beaches were nearly impassable with wreckage. At Little Brewster Island, the crew of the schooner *Calvin F. Baker*, stranded on the island since 3 a.m. on Sunday the 27th, had clambered into the rigging as the aft deck crumbled beneath their feet. During the night, their pitiful cries for help kept Keeper Henry Pingree's wife awake in a state of horror, the stress of which would eventually kill her. Fifty-seven-year-old First Mate Burgess Howland lost his strength in the freezing cold and dropped into the ocean, dead. Soon thereafter, Second Mate R. McIsaacs met the same fate. Steward Willis H. Studley froze to death in place.

At 1 a.m. on Monday the 28th, Keeper Brown at North Scituate deemed it safe to set his men back on their patrols, safety being a relative term. By his definition, the fact that the seas were no longer washing over the entirety of the beach made it safe.

Three hours later the south patrolman returned to the station to report that a well-known pilot boat, the *Columbia*, "was ashore on top of the beach with both masts gone and no one there. I took three of the crew and went down to her. They told me there was no one left but they found one body in the hole," wrote Brown. "We picked one body up when we went down and saw one in the surf but could not get it." Brown sent two members of the crew to the site of the wreck at the northern end of Cedar Point, and relieved them with three men a few hours later. The five men of the *Columbia* had all perished, and the remaining bodies eventually appeared in the still rough waters. "They saw them in the surf but couldn't get them," said Brown.

At first light the next morning, Keeper James used his glass to look out to Boston Light on Little Brewster Island for a predetermined distress signal agreed upon by himself and light keeper Pingree. Seeing it, the U.S.L.S.S. crew and four volunteers launched Massachusetts Humane Society surfboat #17, *Boston Herald* (the only other Humane Society boat built along the same lines as the famous surfboat *Nantasket*) from Stony Beach and headed for the wreck. They spotted the tug *Ariel*, and the tug captain arranged to pull them as close as he could to Great Brewster Island, resting the weary arms of the mixed crew.



The *Columbia* "was ashore on top of the beach."

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When the crew of the tug dared go no further, the surfmen began to row. Passing through a series of breakers, the rescuers finally settled alongside the vessel, the *Calvin F. Baker*, and brought what was left of its crew to safety. Five men had survived to tell their tale. Two of Captain Magathlin's men were none the worse for their ordeal, yet two had badly swollen and frostbitten feet. Prying the dead steward from the rigging, the lifesavers brought the victims to the tug, where the captain had hot whiskey waiting.

After being pulled back to Stony Beach by the tug, the crew headed to the station. The five survivors entered the already-overcrowded building and sat down before the fire to thaw themselves, bringing the total of "lucky ones" to 19. As the crew brought the frozen steward to the morgue, they wondered just how many sailors had not been so lucky in the past two days.

As the Point Allerton crew completed its grisly task, Keeper Stanley and the Fourth Cliff crew "spent the day in clearing away the wreckage about the premises and looking for any bodies that might come ashore."

At Brant Rock, stated Keeper Manter, "Early in the morning we commenced to clear the dining room and kitchen of stone, etc. We were obliged to take our breakfast and dinners in the chapel, on account of the station being in such a bad condition."

To the south, at Gurnet Point, Keeper Rogers sent Surfmen Wixon, King and Edward Tobin to Saquish to board the schooner *Charles W. Parker*, which had survived the worst of the storm, even with the loss of its masts. A tugboat from Plymouth arrived and towed the vessel into the harbor. Surfman Stanley, meanwhile, headed for Duxbury with the station's mail. On his return he found a dead body floating in the surf but was unable to haul it ashore. The undertow proved to be his match in strength. He returned to the station with the news, and the entire crew headed out onto the beach to retrieve it. They lost track of it, and it was never found again. Rogers also noted that the day's high tide washed away two small boats the crew had pulled to safety for local residents, and that the gunners who had come to the station for safety had left for home.

At 4 p.m., reported Keeper Manter at Brant Rock, "Daniel Graffam, a resident of Green Harbor village, came to the station and informed me that he had found a body on Duxbury beach and had moved it beyond the reach of the tide and covered it up. I at once notified the undertaker at Marshfield who took charge of it." Brant Rock crews began patrolling again at sunset on Monday night.

In Hull, Keeper James and the weary men of the town had one more challenge to face. Stepping back into the lifesaving station around 10:30 a.m., the keeper received news from Alfred Galiano that a group of what looked to be five men had set up a distress signal at Black Rock, six miles to the south-southeast. James again hailed his son Osceola, and together the surfmen and the volunteers headed for the Bayside Humane Society boathouse to collect the trusty surfboat *Nantasket*.



Joshua James in his later years. USLHS archive photo.

Already responding to the signal, Cohasset's Humane Society volunteers—Captain William Brennock, Albert Brennock, John Fratus, Allie Morris, Frank Martin, Joseph J. and Joseph E. Grassie, Manuel Antone, and Frank Salvador—attempted to launch from Stony Beach, only to have their boat capsize a few feet from shore. Struggling back up the beach they headed for the summer home of George Swallow of the Governor's Council, where caretaker Arthur Mulvey tended to their needs.

Keeper James and his crew decided to launch *Nantasket* from protected Gun Rock Cove, about a mile north of Black Rock, after waiting almost an hour for the seas to abate. They pulled out to the island, rowing with the wind, but had to wait for longer than an hour to make a safe landing. On the island they could see a small gunning hut.

Inside the hut huddled three men, sailors from the coal schooner *Lucy A. Nichols*. One man complained of a broken shoulder and showed several contusions about the head and legs. Just before sundown the crew launched *Nantasket* once again, rowing for a mile headlong into a heavy NNW wind. Once on shore, Joshua James hired a team to go on ahead and call for a doctor to meet them at the station. At 7 p.m., the crew finally returned to the station for the night. There, 22 survivors from five different vessels found comfort thanks to the tireless efforts of the women of the town. On Monday night, Keeper James finally told his men to stand down. "The weather looking favorable this evening the men were exempt from Patrol to take rest after the heavy strain since 12 o'clock Saturday night."

Surfman Tobin from the Gurnet walked the 8 p.m. to midnight patrol to the north but never made contact with a Brant Rock surfman, so he continued on to the station. Being thoroughly exhausted, he spent the night there instead of walking home.

Tuesday morning, the Brant Rock crewmen returned to their task of removing the stones from their boatroom, and did their best to get their lifesaving gear back into working order. Surfman Tobin left at first light for the Gurnet. Four men from the Fourth Cliff crew joined the locals in searching for the bodies of the Henderson brothers and Albert Tilden, last seen careening helplessly down the North River on Sunday. The rest of the crew watched the beach for any other dead bodies that might come ashore.

At the Gurnet, Keeper Rogers took his men down to examine the old station, which was still being used as a boathouse. It was worse off up close than at first glance, and the crew could not entirely tell what was missing. They noted that the upper

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floor had settled about three feet and that everything on the lower floor except for the boats themselves had washed away. They figured now that on a normal high tide, water would enter the building.

Meanwhile, Surfman Tobin returned to the station with news of another dead body, lying just about where the station's keypost once stood. Seaweed and sand had conspired to keep the body in the ground, making it impossible for Tobin to pull it out alone. Rogers and Surfman King joined Tobin on the way back, harnessing up a horse and wagon. Together they dislodged the body from the wet sand, as the tide rushed in around it. "Found the head badly bruised, should say it had been dead surely 24 hours," wrote Rogers. "We then rolled the body in one of Station blankets, put it in the team, returned to station, took Monomoy surf-boat and all of crew except Tobin, went to Town and delivered body to coroner E.O. Hill, Plymouth."

For the official log—according to the *Revised Regulations of the United States Life-Saving Service*, the responsibility for identification of such victims of the sea belonged to the Keeper—Rogers described the body: "He had black hair, none on top of head. Blue eyes, 5 ft 8 1/2inches tall. One joint of the finger next to little finger gone, on right hand. Blue pants. Light woolen drawers, white. Nothing on body except Oil Jacket which was hauled over his head. Blue mixed woolen stockings, with white toes. Russet lace shoes. Black mustache."

Six members of the crew of the schooner *Venus*, still ashore on Saquish Beach, arrived at the Gurnet Point station requesting shelter, food and beds, which Rogers and his crew provided.

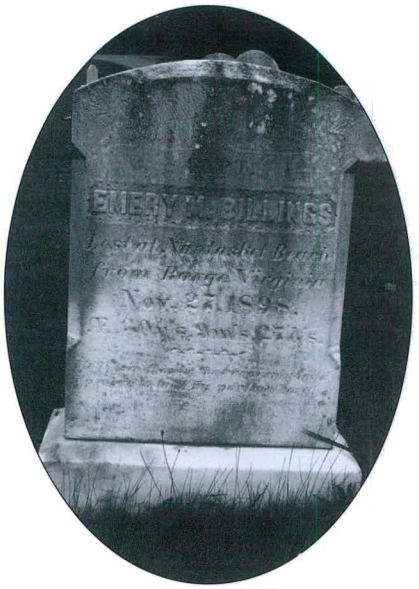
That same morning, the *Boston Herald* reported the loss of the side-wheel steamship *Portland*, of the Boston to Portland run. Captain Hollis H. Blanchard, most likely figuring he could outrun the oncoming storm, had pulled her away from Boston's India Wharf at precisely 7 p.m. on Saturday the 26th, a decision that proved to be fatal to the (at latest estimation) 192 passengers and crew members aboard. Twenty-four hours later, wreckage clearly identifiable as having belonged to the *Portland* washed ashore on Cape Cod.

From the cupola atop the Point Allerton station, Keeper James and his tired surfmen held a commanding panoramic view of the devastation in Boston Harbor. Dozens of vessels rested eerily silent on the shores of Thompson's, Spectacle, Rainsford, and Moon Islands in the inner harbor. The barge *Grant* had stranded on Gallop's, while the schooners *G. M. Hopkins*, *John S. Ames*, and *Lizzie Dyas* had found final resting places on or near George's.

Twelve corpses washed ashore in Hull in the first few days after the storm. Walking the lonely lane down to the town deadhouse, Keeper James did his best to match descriptive letters sent by mourning relatives to tattoos, scars, and missing teeth.

Some bodies yielded very few clues. "Thursday morning the body of one of the shipwrecked sailors was picked up on Nantasket Beach in a perfectly nude condition with the exception of a belt about his waist. On one finger he had a silver ring. He was evidently a Swede about 30 years old." Others easily gave up their identities, according to the report of the *Hull Beacon* weekly newspaper:

> One of the bodies was that of a man 5 feet 9 inches in hight [*sic*], weighing about 175 pounds. His hair and mustache were sandy. On the inside of the right forearm, in india ink, there was a woman resting on a table, hand shading eyes, in left hand basket of fruit. The work is well executed. The woman is fancifully attired, the design being decidedly Parisian. Around the right wrist there is also a bracelet in india ink, connecting with a wreath on the inside of it, in which there is a woman's head. In one of the pockets the searchers found a letter addressed to 'Mr. W. W. Phillips, 33 North 2nd St., Camden, N.J.'
>
> The front of the envelope bears the following postmark, 'Philadelphia, Penn., Nov. 4, 7.30 p.m., '98.'
>
> On the back of the envelope is the reception postmark: 'Camden, Nov. 5, 6 a.m., 1898, N.J.'
>
> The letter is simply dated Friday, 1.30, and is addressed to 'Dear Weston,' which would correspond with one of the first initials on the envelope. The contents of the epistle is of a character that precludes any doubt that it belonged to any person than the one on which it was found. It bears only the signature of 'Mattie.' Persons bearing the following names are referred to in it: 'Sophie,' 'Clara,' 'Will,' 'Mom,' and 'Mr. Kerns.'



The tombstone of one of the victims of the Portland Gale. Creative Commons photo, circa 2008.

Using such evidence, in some cases more and in some cases less, Keeper James identified four of the twelve bodies. The town buried the rest at Strangers Corner, a mass unmarked grave of nearly 100 unknown sailors at the Hull Village Cemetery. The horrible, undignified manner in which shipwreck victims spent their final hours above ground in Hull—no caskets, no embalming—inspired local newspaper editor Floretta Vining to push for the appointment of a town undertaker, and for the construction of a receiving tomb to store dead bodies until positively identified.

As if wrestling with such a horrible chore were not enough to wear down his resolve, Keeper James also had to face the hopeful families of the crew of the schooner *Abel E. Babcock.* The families had read in one of the Boston papers that the men of Hull had heroically pulled their loved ones to safety, and they had come to the Point Allerton station to collect them; he could only report that the bow of the vessel had been found, and nothing else. Heartbroken, the now-grieving families left for home. Two days after the storm, Keeper James also learned that one of his lifelong friends and the man who led his first lifeboat rescue, Moses Binney Tower, had died at his home in Auburndale at age 84. Overburdened with his duties, James never got the chance to say good-bye.

Over the next week, the Life-Saving Service crews rebuilt their stations and their

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lives. At the Gurnet, Keeper Rogers found that two navigational buoys, the whistling buoy off the Gurnet and the number 6 buoy off Duxbury Beach's High Pines area, had been blown well off station. He contacted the Lighthouse Service with the news. In the meantime, his crew worked at transferring everything from the old station into the "new" station, as, he said, "things were not safe there, the next storm will take it away, if a hard blow does not." The crew finally could account for missing items: nine oars, old shot lines, seven paint brushes, two skids, and a tally board had gone missing. The station dory proved to have a hole in it, and the gap in the rocks that the crew had historically used to launch boats had to be cleared out. On December 3, Rogers learned from the Plymouth police that the body delivered to them several days earlier had still not been identified.

Frustratingly, the number 6 check from the Gurnet Point station had vanished. Recounting the steps of the past week, Rogers traced it back to the Brant Rock station on Saturday, November 26, when Surfman Kezer had reached that station on patrol. Keeper Manter at Brant Rock promised to turn his station upside-down until he found it.

Assistant Inspector of Life-Saving Stations Worth G. Ross arrived at Brant Rock on November 30 to assess the damage to the building, joined a few days later by the Service's Assistant Superintendent of Construction, Andre Fourchy. The crewmen continued to work from sunup until sundown removing the stones from the boatroom. They tossed their last one out on December 3. They resumed their patrols as usual and stopped from meeting their Gurnet brethren due to a deep cut on the beach. "The patrolmen will not be able to meet on the high water for a time," wrote Manter.

On December 6, an eerie sight appeared a mile ESE of the Brant Rock station, a dismasted schooner gliding silently toward the coast. Keeper Manter and his men launched their surfboat and pulled toward the ghost ship, the *Grace*, finding her devoid of human life. The ship had been reported lost off Cape Cod on November 27 and, waterlogged and abandoned, "Her deck and house are gone and she is nothing but a shell," wrote Manter. "I have informed a brother in law of the Capt the condition of the Sch as it is supposed the Capt and two sons were lost."

At Point Allerton, the crew responded to a false report that a three-masted schooner was coming ashore four miles to the south on Nantasket Beach on November 30 during a thick snowstorm. They left the station at 9:30 a.m., returning at 3 p.m. On December 1, the survivors of the wrecks of the schooners *Henry R. Tilton* and *Calvin F. Baker* and the barge *Lucy Nichols* left the station. The next morning Keeper James reported, "The supply of men's clothing provided this station from the WNRA has been expended." On December 3, the crew found their keyposts amongst the wreckage on the beaches and put them back in place.

On December 5, Surfman Francis Mitchell found the body of the captain of the barge *Lucy Nichols*; on December 6, the crew picked up the body of the mate. For the next week, the crew worked at clearing the grounds of the station from all the "wreckage, rocks, gravel, &c," and on the 12th, Assistant Inspector Ross came to see how the building had held up during the storm. He left them with instructions to repair their launchway, erect their flagpole, and return their station to working order. On December 18, Keeper James took his crew out in their surfboat for a row among the Boston Harbor islands, three weeks after the storm, to make one final sweep for dead bodies. They found none.

One week after the storm, on Sunday, December 4, Keeper James and his Point Allerton crew were jolted from their station by a horrible cry just outside their doors. They dashed out into the blackness of night with lanterns in hand, foraying through both the duck pond behind the station and the beach across the way. After an extended search, they concluded that either they had better prepare to look for a body at daylight, or that they had been given a false alarm. Neither case proved to be true. The "unearthly and blood-curdling" scream that they had heard actually came from a passing admirer on horseback, young James Cashman, who offered his salute to his heroes on his way by. "Now don't laugh at the lifesavers," wrote the *Hull Beacon* of December 10. "This incident shows how prompt and faithful they are to respond to every cry. Since their fearful experience in the late storm the very atmosphere is haunted with distress cries."

From Point Allerton to the Gurnet, from Hull to Plymouth, the men of the U.S. Life-Saving Service fought the Portland Gale and its aftermath for three full weeks. They rescued many, retrieved the dead bodies of several others, and opened the doors of their stations to anybody in need during the one weather event that even the old-timers had to admit rivaled the Minot's Light Gale of 1851. With aching arms, shoulders and backs, burning leg muscles, and exhausted minds, they looked toward the turn of the year with an earnest expectation for better days. After all, they had lived through the storm of the century.

Or so they hoped.

When Storms Arose and Ships Wrecked, Lighthouse Keepers Sent the Message, and Life-Saving Service Surfmen Responded.

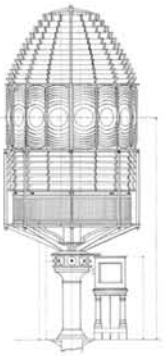


Founded at the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1995 by maritime historians, authors, museum directors, National Park Service professionals and other caring people, the U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association strives to preserve the history, artifacts and architecture of the Life-Saving Service and the early Coast Guard.

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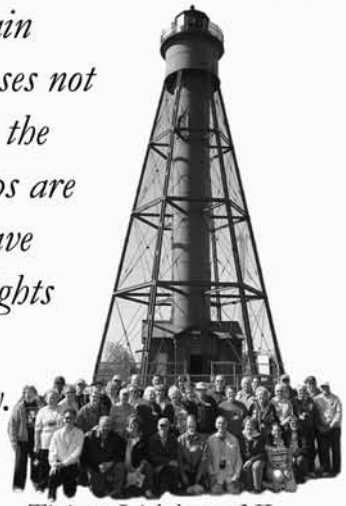
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