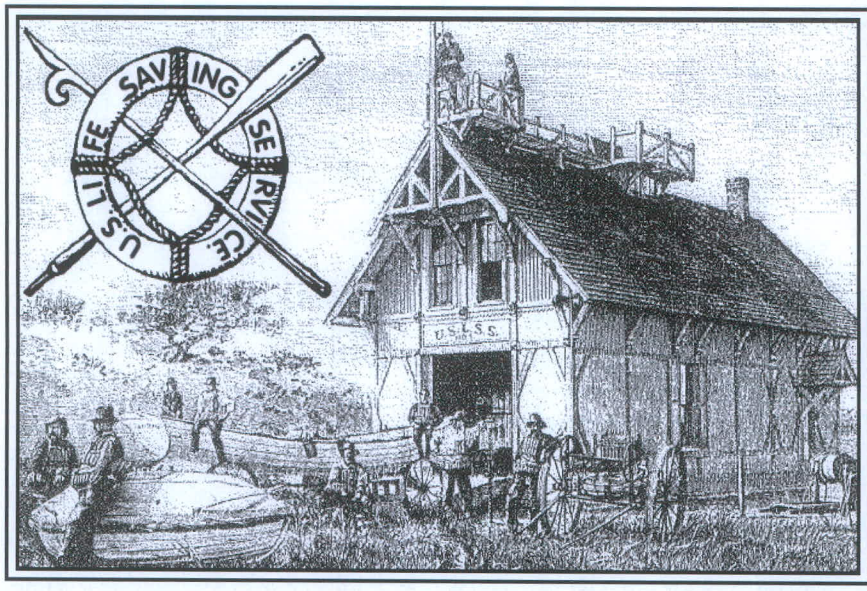
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

Cuttyhunk Lepers

By John J. Galluzzo

Darius Weekes had seen a Cuttyhunk winter before. He joined the Life-Saving Service at Monomoy, at that time the station standing at the extreme southern end of Cape Cod, off Chatham, on December 1, 1883. A decade later, on February 3, 1894, he made the leap from surfman to keeper, taking over the station at Cuttyhunk, at yet another extreme end. The Elizabeth Islands, curling southwestward off Woods Hole on the Upper Cape, ended at Cuttyhunk, a small, rock of an island known for its Anglers Club more than anything else. Future United States presidents would meet there to cast for stripers in the coming years.

Weekes spent the next decade at Cuttyhunk protecting the ships entering New Bedford Harbor and the smaller ports of Buzzards Bay. In 1904 he moved again to take the head position at Pamet River Life-Saving Station in Truro, near the northern end of the Cape Cod peninsula, but three years later, the Life-Saving Service found cause to relocate him once again, back to Cuttyhunk. That's where he was on January 13, 1912.

An important change had taken place in the local vicinity by the time Weekes returned. Leprosy had struck eastern Massachusetts, typically preying on immigrants entering the port of Boston.

At that time, only one leprosarium existed in the United States, on an island off Louisiana. Options were limited for sufferers of what is now called Hansen's disease. The city of Boston temporarily held diagnosed patients at Gallops Island in Boston Harbor but would not hold them permanently. Ship owners were punished for bringing them to the city in the first place. When possible, the ships that carried immigrant sufferers across the oceans were forced to take them back. This arrangement, though, added miserably to the lives of the patients. Unsure, but suspicious of the contagiousness of the disease, ship captains instructed their crews to ensure the patients stood downwind of all other passengers. Should they see them upwind, they were instructed to point and shout "Leper!" at the tops of their lungs, theoretically for the safety of the other, non-leprous passengers aboard ship.

The search for a leper hospital site began in 1904. Preferably, to the people of Massachusetts, the site would be isolated. But what defined isolation? The state Board of Charity purchased a 66-acre farm in Brewster, near the elbow of Cape Cod, on December 31, 1904. Eight days later the largest public hearing ever convened in Massachusetts was held in Boston. A special train had to be added from Cape Cod as protestors flooded the city decrying the potential loss of real estate values, citing the stigma imposed upon a community when the word "leper" became attached to it. Six months later the state sold the farm in Brewster and began the search anew.

The Board of Charity did not have to look far. The Elizabeth Islands were still mostly undeveloped, and the state envisioned a two-for-one deal. Nashawena Island was big enough, the state surmised, to place the leprosarium at one end and a prison at the other. That deal never came to fruition, but an even better option loomed nearby.

Penikese Island, just to the north of Cuttyhunk, had been farmed from the 1640s into the middle of the 19th century. In 1867 New York tobacconist John Anderson—the inventor of the New York City-style newsstand—purchased the island to build a summer home. Five years later he invited naturalist Louis Aggassiz to use the island as an outdoor classroom to teach teachers about the natural sciences. The school, eventually built with dorms and classrooms, operated until 1875, when it ran out of money. Anderson died in 1880, and in 1883 turkey farmers reverted the land back to its historic uses. Those farmers sold the island to the state of Massachusetts in 1905 for use as a leper colony.

Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, as it's known today, was new to most residents of Massachusetts in 1905. With immigration at his-

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The Cuttyhunk Life-Saving Station. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

toric highs, the disease entered the United States as never before. In fact, though, only approximately 5 percent of the population is not immune to the disease, and even then someone susceptible would have to have extensive contact with someone stricken with it, due to the disease's long incubation period. In extreme cases, bone absorption causes the shrinking of the coldest body parts (that is, those farthest from the heart, like the fingers, nose, and toes). Although no parts actually fall away, the lack of any sensation in those parts causes the sufferer to miss noticing injuries when they occur. Deformities arise. Today, thousands of patients with Hansen's disease walk the streets of the United States unnoticed.

Dr. Lewis Edmonds of Harwich, on Cape Cod, opened the leprosarium on November 18, 1905. Five patients accompanied him that day: Frank Pina and Isabelle Barros, originally from the Cape Verde Islands; Goon Lee Dip and Yee Toy, both from China; and John Roderick, a Portuguese sailor. Barros gave birth to a child, whom she knew she would have to give to the state of Massachusetts. The locals, sadly, reacted poorly, covering their mouths with handkerchiefs when they passed the island and refusing to land needed supplies on the island unless paid higher prices than regularly called for. The lepers suffered even more indignity, being separated on the island from the superintendent, his family and staff, and out of view of passersby traveling the length of the islands.

It was a misdiagnosis of Barros' condition that led to Edmonds' resignation and the ascension of Dr. Frank Parker, who arrived on January 1, 1907, and stayed for 15 years. Parker became a friend to the lifesavers on Cuttyhunk. When Surfman Louis Ramos, for instance, needed a doctor's note to return to duty from injury, Dr. Parker signed that note. Parker was in charge of the island and the lives of the 13 patients of the hospital on January 13, 1912.

That morning Keeper Weekes noted in his daily log that he and his crew were having trouble with their new motor lifeboat.

The Telephone line is not working east of Cuttyhunk.
The crew employed in cleaning house this a.m.
The new power lifeboat which is moored to a stake in Cuttyhunk pond or inner harbor is frozen in solid. As long as the ice can bear a man the boat can be reached and the engine turned over. The engine is being turned when the boat can be reached, but the battery is played out. Am expecting a new set of cells by first boat.

At about noon, the station's crew moved down to the dock in the harbor. "We never know what assistance may be needed in ice times," wrote Weekes. Of particular interest to the crew was the boat coming in from New Bedford with supplies, being pulled by the tug, *John T. Sherman*. The life-savers began helping to offload the supplies from the steamer.

Atop the main hill on the island number one surfman Edwin W. Rich played the role of "hill man." Standing on the island's highest point, he gazed upon the sea like the many hard-working Cuttyhunk pilots had in years past. When he looked toward Penikese, his eyes widened and he began a mad scramble toward the harbor. As Weekes and the crew worked at the dock, Rich "came running down and reported that the administration building at the Penikese Leper Colony was in flames and that their ensign was hoisted union down," a standard sign of distress for ships at sea. Understanding immediately that with their powerboat locked in the ice and absolutely no possibility of floating another boat from the station, the crew needed help. They retrieved their dory, which was hauled up near the dock, and "the keeper got Capt. Murray to turn his boat around and take the station men to Penikese, taking the dory in tow."

Word had already reached the mainland, as had the sight of the smoke. Ashore at South Dartmouth, folks with field glasses had



The crew of the Cuttyhunk station. Photo from author's collection.

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A post is all that's left of the gate that separated the leper colony from the rest of the island. Photos on this page by the author.

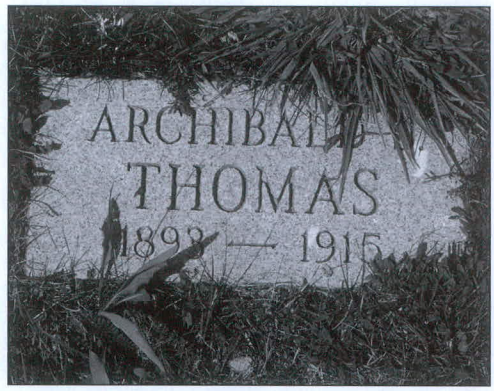
taken in the sight. Meanwhile, Archie Thomas, the youngest patient on the island, who had been given a wireless set by the New Bedford Women's Society, sent a message to a passing tug, which relayed the message ashore. The United States Revenue Cutter *Acushnet*, in port at New Bedford, received orders from the naval base at Newport, Rhode Island, to proceed to the scene.

Both the men of the United States Life-Saving Service—Weekes, Rich, Ramos, John A. Perry, Benjamin C. Davis, Henry E. Knowles, Charles W. Vanderhoop, and Roland S. Snow—and the crew of the United States Revenue Cutter Service charged into unknown waters. In an age when popular belief held that even breathing the same air as a leper could cause the disease, they found themselves hurtling toward direct contact with one of only two concentrated gatherings of lepers in the United States.

By the time the life-savers reached the island, "after an hour's struggle with dangerous ice floes in the intense cold," according to the *Boston Medical Journal* (Volume 166), but in considerably less time according to the keeper, the damage had been done. The administration building, formerly the home of John Anderson and Louis Aggassiz, then the home of Dr. Frank Parker and his family, was destroyed. "We were not long in going across to the island," said Weekes, "but by the time we arrived nothing could be done to save the building, but the station crew helped to pick up the things that were saved and put them in another building."

The greatest tragedy, in the end, was the loss of Parker's research. The house had served dual purposes: as the home of the superintendent and the administrative offices of the island hospital. Parker's elderly mother-in-law was the only person requesting assistance. She rode with the crew in the dory back to the tug. "Dr. Parker assured the keeper that there was nothing more that made it necessary for the station crew to remain longer," said Weekes, "so we returned to Cuttyhunk with the tug. We left the wharf at Cuttyhunk about 12.20 p.m. and returned about 2 p.m." The *Acushnet* arrived later and "landed a crew on the island with great difficulty and danger, and rendered all needed assistance."

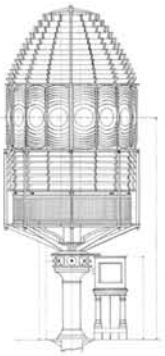
So ended a brief, but nerve-wracking chapter in the history of the men of the Cuttyhunk Life-saving Station.



Above: The grave marker of one of the lepers.
Below: Modern day view from the top of Cuttyhunk Island.



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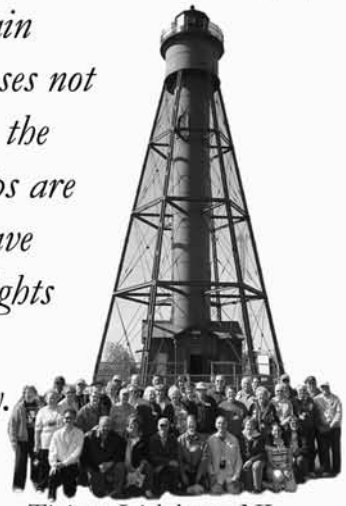
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