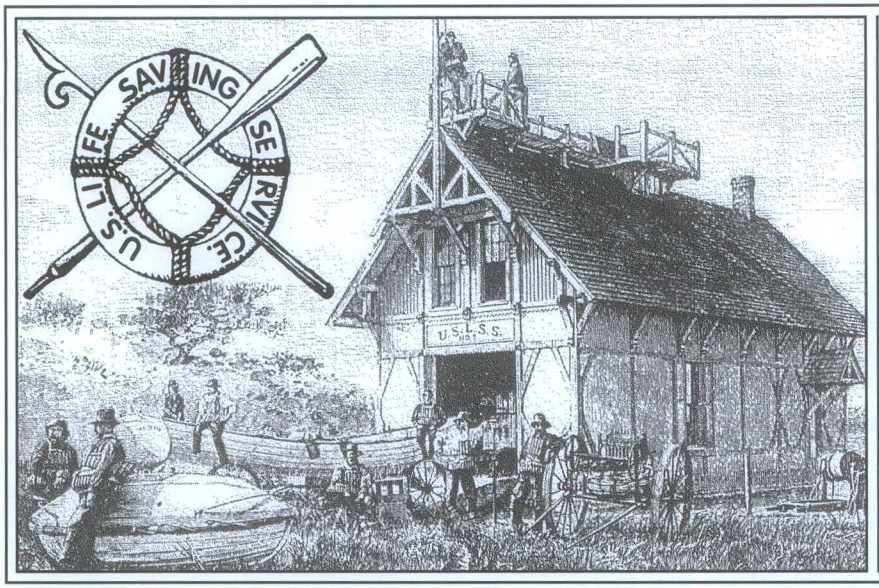
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

Just Give Me A Chance

Charles Jennings and the Wreck of the *USS Alacrity*

By John J. Galluzzo

In 1902, writer J. W. Dalton set out to visit each of the thirteen U. S Life-Saving Service stations on Cape Cod, from Wood End in the north to Monomoy Point in the south. His book, *The Life Savers of Cape Cod,* published late that year, remains the most minutely detailed account of station life at the high point of the Service's existence. Dalton's book covers not only the history of the Service and descriptions of each station, but also provides a paragraph on each and every keeper and surfman then serving along the Cape's seashore. He even includes entries on the names and habits of the stations' pets. And at the end of the book, Dalton leaves space for Keeper Seth Ellis of the Monomoy station to tell his version of the life-saving disaster of the previous March 17, of which Ellis was the only survivor.

For students of Boston Harbor history, the book holds two important stories. The more obvious reference of the two appears on page 90, under the heading "Wood End Station": "Capt. William Sparrow, now keeper of the Point Allerton Station, who was No. 1 man under Captain (Isaac G.) Fisher, acted as temporary keeper until Captain (George H.) Bickers was placed in charge." Captain Sparrow replaced Hull's legendary Joshua James just a few short months after James' dramatic death on Stony Beach on March 19, 1902. He served as keeper of the Point Allerton station into the Coast Guard years, retiring in 1920. He died on the Cape in 1932. [editor's note: The Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service combined to become the Coast Guard in 1915.]

The second and more obscure reference comes earlier, on page 72, under the heading "Cahoon's Hollow Station Crew": "The No. 7 surfman is Charles H. Jennings. He was born in Provincetown in 1878, and is serving his first year as a regular surfman. Surfman Jennings was a fisherman and boatman before he entered the service, and had also substituted as a surfman at the High Head Station, under Captain (Charles P.) Kelley. He will receive careful training under Captain (Daniel) Cole, and will, no doubt, make a skilled and fearless life saver. He married Edith J. Rogers." Dalton's words proved prophetic, for Jennings would one day be commended for his bravery and skill in the saving of lives from disaster at sea. The incident would take place sixteen years later, far removed from the shores of Cape Cod, while Jennings was serving as the keeper of Boston Light.

Jennings wore the uniform of a surfman at Cahoon's Hollow station in Wellfleet from December 14, 1902 until February 20, 1907, when he resigned to take the position as fourth assistant keeper at the twin lights of Thachers Island, off Cape Ann in Massachusetts Bay. His four years with the Life-Saving Service proved to be nearly completely uneventful, as the *Annual Reports of the United States Life-Saving Service* for the years 1902-1907 list only two instances in which the crew of the Cahoon's Hollow station responded to wrecks. Both occurred in February of 1903, and in both cases the stranded vessels had been abandoned by the time the life-savers reached them. Ironically, Jennings never had a chance to save lives as a member of the Life-Saving Service.

Yet Jennings fondly remembered his time as a surfman. Self-professedly unable to "boil water without burning it," he spent his leave time learning how to cook, one of the duties he had to perform at the station. He eventually came to enjoy cooking, and volunteered to become the station's permanent cook in lieu of beach patrol. Since no one else in the station liked cooking duty, he got his wish.

Years later he would regale his family with tales of his time as a life-saver at the turn of the century. According to his son Harold, his stories always started the same way: "'Did I ever tell you about the time I was in the life-saving station at Wellfleet on Cape Cod? … Cahoon's Hollow?' From there he would tell a story like the night he walked the beach in fear of an attack from an escaped bull. 'During the

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As a youg surfman at Cahoon's Hollow Life-Saving Station, Charles Jennings hoped to prove his life-saving prowess. Photo courtesy of Doug Bingham.

day someone had gone into town for the mail. News was that a local farmer's bull had gotten loose and it was asked that the life-saving crew walking the beach watch out for this bull... Walking that night on my watch — it was dark and only the stars were out — there was a little breeze and, listening to the surf on the beach, I was walking in a thoughtful trance. When, all of a sudden, out of the darkness, over the sand dunes, came this galloping object right straight for me. I couldn't outrun this bull, so I ran towards the surf, running as fast as I could, lantern in hand. Just as I got to the edge of the surf the bull got me — right in the back of the legs. Down I went just like a football player tackled me. My face was within inches of the surf's waves. I got my lantern upright — it hadn't gone out. I didn't know what to do. Finally I turned around and heard this thing swishing like a top that was running down. It stopped. There beside me lay a large fish barrel. The wind had caught it just right and it had started rolling down the beach and I thought it was the bull. Of course, you couldn't go back to the station and tell anyone or you would never outlive it and maybe get a name like 'barrel-head' or 'the bull.' They finally found the bull near Mayo's beach in Wellfleet on the other side of the cape.'" (Harold B. Jennings, *A Lighthouse Family,* p. 43.)

In any event, Jennings left the service in 1907 to accept the position at Thachers Island with the U. S. Light House Service, although it meant taking a $200 per year cut in pay. Two years later, he accepted a post as assistant keeper at Monomoy Point Light, twelve miles southeast of Chatham. In May of 1916, he applied for and received an appointment as head keeper at Boston Light. The job at first paid $804 per year, although that eventually was raised to $960 annually.

Jennings arrived at Boston Light just in time for its 200th anniversary celebration in September of 1916. He also had the distinction of being the first keeper to raise the American flag at Boston Light, on June 27, 1917. During the previous year's celebration, ex-president of the Boston Chamber of Commerce Charles F. Weed had noticed the absence of a flagpole at the light station, and inquired as to why that was the case. When he learned that the Department of Commerce had never set aside funding for the purchase of flags and flagpoles for lighthouses, he began collecting donations for just that purpose. His efforts resulted in a 55-foot pole and an American flag.

On February 3, 1918, fate finally offered Jennings a chance to become a life-saving hero. At 3:45am, the commanding officer of the Coast Guard patrol boat *USS Alacrity,* Chief Boatswain T. A. Evans, U. S. Navy, began sending distress calls by wireless that his vessel had become stranded on the rocks off of Boston Light. (The reason Navy personnel were manning a Coast Guard patrol boat had to do with the current World War. Per the act of January 28, 1915, signed by President Woodrow Wilson, the Coast Guard shall "operate as a part of the Navy, subject to the orders of the Secretary of the Navy, in time of war, or when the President shall so direct." On April 6, 1917, the United States had officially declared war on Germany and her allies and entered World War I.) He also ordered six shots fired from the forward gun, more than enough to wake Keeper Jennings, who ran to awaken his two assistants, Lelan Hart and John Lyman.

Immediately upon reaching the site of the *Alacrity's* predicament, they realized that since the ebbing tide had caused the vessel to lay over on its side, the crewmen aboard would have no chance to launch their own lifeboat. To launch a boat from the island would be precarious at best, due to the unpredictable movements of the large ice cakes floating in the harbor. Remembering the endless hours of drilling and training he had undergone at Cahoon's Hollow with Keeper Daniel Cole,

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Jennings' first instinct was to fire the shot of the Massachusetts Humane Society's line-throwing gun, kept in a hut on Little Brewster Island, over the bow of the listing craft.

Jennings eventually received a letter of commendation from Secretary of Commerce William C. Redfield for his meritorious service in saving the lives of the crew of the *Alacrity*.



Charles Jennings (center) with assistant keepers Maurice Babcock and Lelan Hart, finally reached his life-saving goals at Boston Light. Photo courtesy of Doug Bingham.

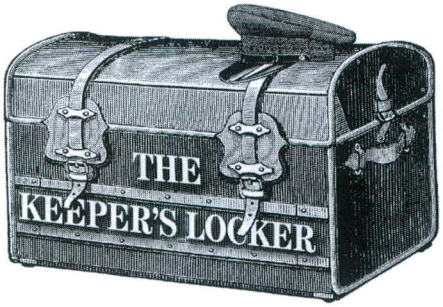
Evans later described Jennings' attempts in a letter to the Boston area lighthouse inspector, dated February 13, 1918. "Mr. Jennings fired ship gun a number of times but the line parted after the shot left the muzzle of the gun the aim perfect. The shot passed directly over the ship at each discharge of the gun." After four attempts, Jennings gave up and retreated to the island to fetch the station's dory. With the help of his two assistants he "carried her across the island over the icy and slippery rocks and lowered her with safety down the sides of high and jagged rocks, launched and ran a line to the *Alacrity* amongst dangerous ice floes in danger of being crushed or capsized in the dory in true sailor fashion, taking the crew to the rocks amongst the ice floes." Risking death amongst the ice and surf four times over, Jennings and his assistants succeeded in bringing all twenty-four crewmen to safety.

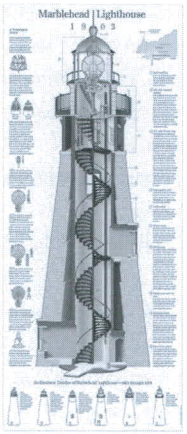
His tradition was carried on by his only son, Harold, born in 1921. Harold grew up on Lovell's Island (west of Little Brewster) as the son of a "wickie," attended school in nearby Hull, and served with the U. S. Navy in World War II. He moved to Eastham in 1951, where he worked as a plumber until the late 1980s. A remarkably active man late into his life, he volunteered at the Provincetown Coast Guard station, aided in the restoration of the famed Coast Guard rescue boat CG36500 at Rock Harbor, published his memoirs in *A Lighthouse Family* in 1989, and led the drive to save Nauset Light from encroaching erosion after the Coast Guard announced the light would be decommissioned in 1993. And, according to his close friend Doug Bingham, co-founder of the American Lighthouse Foundation, he spent countless hours in Maine researching his family's genealogy. A descendant of Richard Stubbs, Jennings never knew that his father had unwittingly moved his family to within a mile and a half of where Stubbs, progenitor of the American Stubbs, had first settled in 1642: Hull. Harold Jennings passed away in September of 1996.

In 1919, Charles Jennings accepted a transfer to the Lovell's Island Range Lights, just west of Boston Light. He served there for the next two decades, until the lights were decommissioned at the end of the 1930s. He died on March 1, 1940, a life-saving hero.

Boston Light and Little Brewster Island have been the scenes of many important moments in history, from the Revolution in 1775 to the rescue of the crew of the *Alacrity* by keeper Charles Jennings in 1918. Old post card courtesy of the Hull Historical Society.







Marblehead Lighthouse, 1903, an art print by Rick Henkel.

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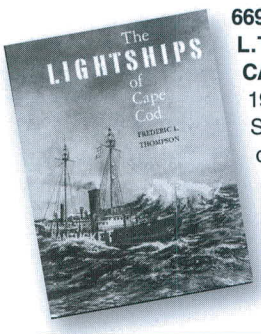
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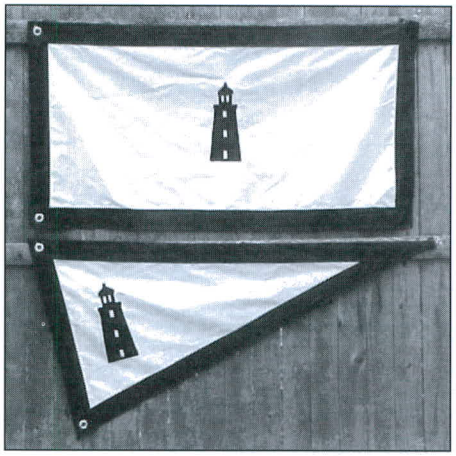


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6697. Thompson, Frederic L.THE LIGHTSHIPS OF CAPE COD. Northborough. 1983. 2nd printing. 112 pp. Soft wraps. Illustrated with over 93 beautifully detailed photographs. The photographs enhance the description of the history and life aboard these vessels. **$21.95.**



21426. [Reproduction] U. S. Lighthouse Service District Superintendent's Flag. This flag is 48" long by 24" and is typical of the flags on Lighthouse Service Tenders when the District Superintendent was on board.

21425. [Reproduction] U. S. Lighthouse Service District Inspector's Flag. This triangular flag is 48" long by 25" and is typical of the flags on Lighthouse Service Tenders when the District Inspector was on board. Both flags have a navy blue border on a field of white, with a large blue lighthouse silhouette. **$79.95 each.**



6762cc. United States Lighthouse Service Lighthouse Lamp Oil Filling Can. Bottom of can marked: "U.S. LIGHT HOUSE SERVICE" Scarce, original, early United States Lighthouse Service brass oil can is in very good condition. Brass oil filler is nearly original, with its original side handle and chain and top cap. Missing are the cap and chain for the spout. Spout has been resoldered and wire brace replaced. With few dents, otherwise complete and without any expected large dents. This is a fine example of this sought after style of lamp filling can, Nicely polished, can base measures 7" diameter. Overall height 6.5" Overall diameter approx. 11.5" (VG+). **$1695.**

6762dd. United States Lighthouse Establishment Brass Light-House Keeper's Oil Measure Can. Brass 3 quart oil can was used by Keepers of the Light-House Establishment to measure and transfer oil for the lamps. Can is entirely of brass, and in clean and original condition with no solder repairs, only small marks or denting from heavy use. Can measures 11" high and approx. 8" in diameter and is marked off in increments of pints and quarts up to 3 quarts. The body and bottom of the can is bears the original, distinctive stamping "U. S. LIGHT-HOUSE ESTABLISHMENT" A bit of corrosion near spout, and some soiling but will polish up beautifully. **$1995.**

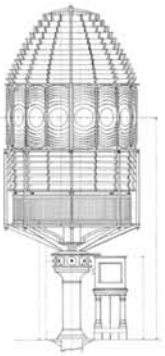




25122. U. S. Lighthouse Service Silver Plate Teapot. Extremely rare piece, once part of wardroom silver service used on the lighthouse tender and some light vessels for the officer's and Lighthouse Inspector's mess. This lovely piece measures 6" high by 9" wide. Only one very slight dent on back side, handle slightly loose. Otherwise in superb condition, inside is clean. Engraved on the side of the piece is the insignia of the Lighthouse Service: a beautiful rendered drawing of Minot's Ledge Light within a 1 1/8" circle, surrounded by the words "United States Light House Service." The piece is marked on the bottom "Rogers Bros 1847 Silver Soldered 01857 Patent Handle." This is a museum-quality piece (F-). **$5600 net.**

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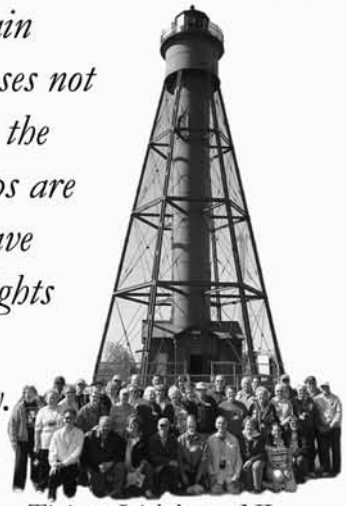
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