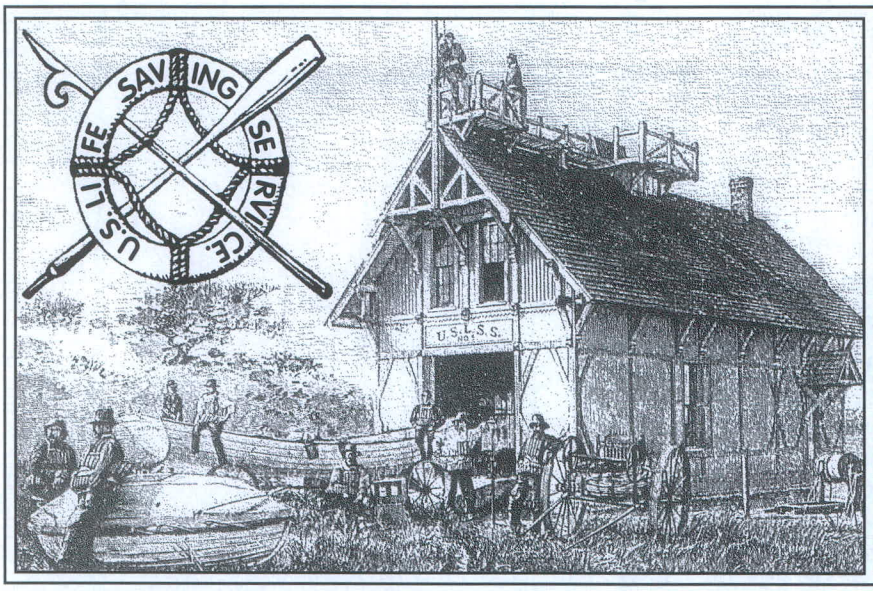
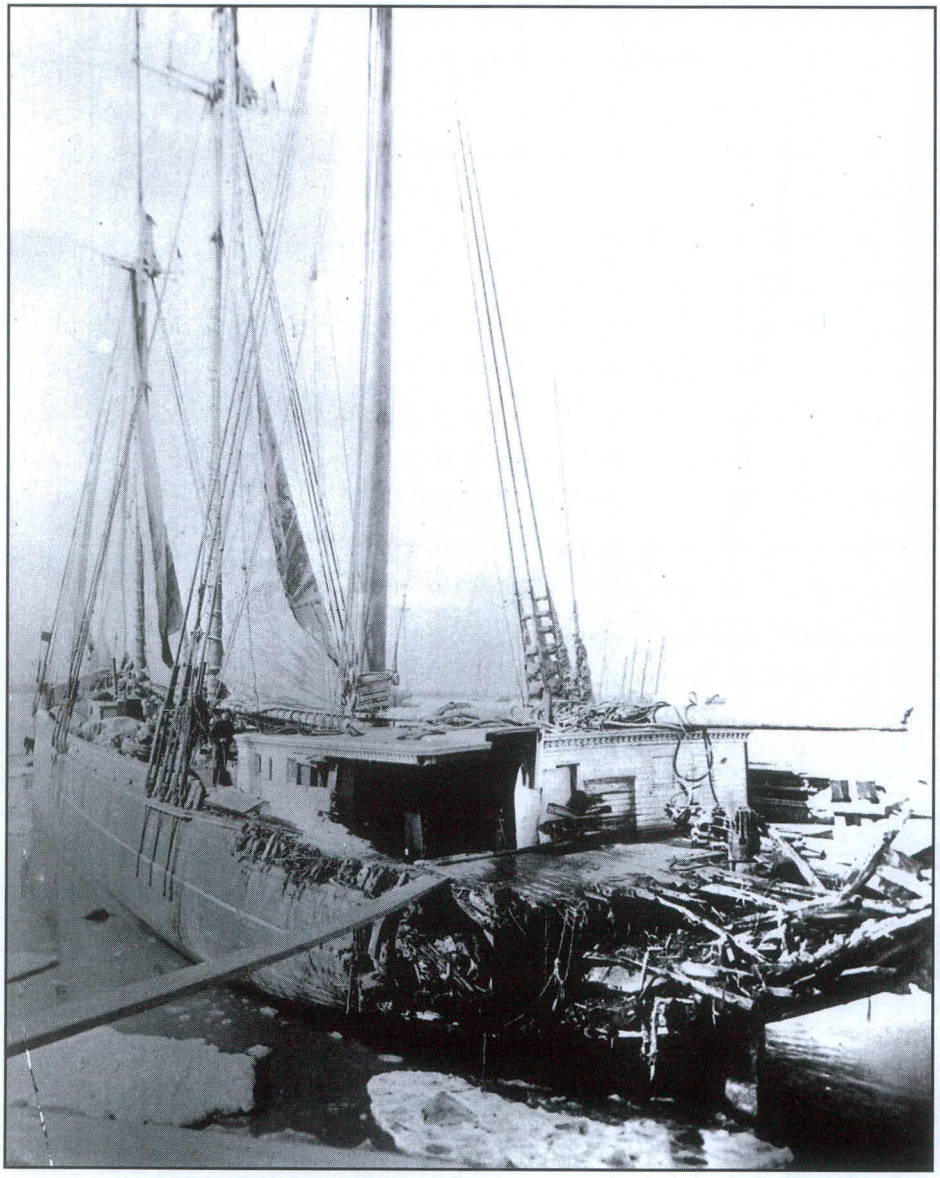
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2004 <www.USLHS.org>



OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

The Wreck of the Schooner *Allie H. Belden*



This article excerpted from the *1888 Annual Report of the Life Saving Service.*

The terrible tempest of wind and snow that swept over a large portion of the United States on March 12, 1888, will not soon be forgotten, and was in many respects the most remarkable in the country's history of elemental disturbances. Gathering force as far west as the Rocky Mountains, and coursing eastward, it soon became central in the region of the Great Lakes, whence, with accelerated fury, it took a southerly direction, and off the seaboard in the vicinity of Cape Hatteras, met another violent storm center moving northward. It was felt with greatest severity in the Middle Atlantic States, though throughout the entire stretch of country and coast, reaching beyond the Canadian border, the effects were of nearly equal magnitude. The sleet and snow blew in straight streaks through the air and mounted into tremendous drifts wherever obstructed. In fact, the quantity of snow that fell would have of itself made this storm without precedent, even had it occurred in the midst of winter. The boasted triumphs of civilization were for the time overcome. Travel was suspended, all means of communication were cut off, and the ordinary pursuit of life in the great cities, towns and hamlets were brought, with startling abruptness to a complete standstill. Desolation and suffering were marked

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2004 <www.USLHS.org>

on every hand. Many lives were lost, and doubtless hundreds more were shortened. Though all the dire effects of the storm can never be known, it is certain that they were the most disastrous ever experienced within the same limits.

While numerous marine accidents were reported, shipping generally escaped with far less casualty than might have been expected, a circumstance largely attributed to the fact that on most of the Atlantic seaboard the wind was off shore. At Delaware Breakwater, however, where the harbor was full of anchored vessels, the havoc was unparalleled, though, owing to the splendid work of the station crews, aided by the citizens of Lewes, the fatality to human life was comparatively slight. Only two instances fell within the scope of the Service operations.

The first of these was the loss of the *Allie H. Belden,* of Portland, Connecticut, which took place at half past 2 o'clock in the morning about 800 yards northeast of the Lewes Station (Fifth District).

It appears that shortly before midnight of the 11th the wind, which had been fresh from the southeast, all at once veered, without warning, to the northwest, and accompanied by rain, sleet and snow, blew with hurricane force. A large number of vessels were anchored behind the Delaware Breakwater, and the greater portion of them not being prepared for this unexpected and violent change, were either swamped at their moorings or driven ashore. The whole fleet was suddenly thrown into the wildest commotion; chains were sundered, masts shattered, and collision, wreck and indescribable chaos followed. The waters were stirred into turbulence and uproar, which, with the raging storm-wind driving and roaring through the pitchy blackness of the night, were enough to appall the stoutest heart. The terrified crews on board the vessels had barely time to escape from their berths and scramble on deck or into the rigging for safety. It seems little less than miraculous that more lives were not lost. When morning dawned the havoc was discernable in all directions, as far as the eye could reach through the driving snow. Nearly every craft that had been at anchored the night before was either sunk, stuck fast to some shoal, or stranded on the beach . . . fourteen schooners and two steamers were assisted in one way or another by the life-saving men; yet these were not all that had suffered damage, many others having been cared for by wreckers.



Above – The pilot boat *W.W. Kerr* on Lewes, Delaware beach in 1890. The ship was driven ashore during the blizzard of 1888. The Lewes Life Saving Service Station, which was involved in rescues during the blizzard, can be seen in the background. Note the debris on the beach two years after the storm. Photo courtesy of the Lewes Historical Society.

Opposite page – The *Allie H. Belden* was one of numerous vessels that came to grief during the 1888 blizzard on March 12. Photo courtesy of Delaware Public Archives – Purnell Collection

As soon as day began to break on the morning of the 12th the keeper of the Lewes station mustered his crew and made an attempt to reach the beach knowing full well that the services of his men would be needed. The force of the gale was so great, however, that sand and sleet whirling in their faces so cut and buffeted them that they were prostrated one by one on the ground, obliged to crawl on their hands and knees back to the station. Half an hour later the weather lulled somewhat, the snow temporarily ceasing so that surrounding objects could be seen, and the surfmen again set forth, their attention being directed to the schooner *Allie H. Belden,* fast aground a few hundred yards offshore, the sea making a clean breach over her, and her crew clinging to the rigging. As this craft seemed to be in the most imminent danger, steps were at once taken for the rescue of her imperiled people. The beach-apparatus was placed in position and, not withstanding the fury of the gale, the line at the first fire was landed over the vessel within reach of the captain, but the wind was so furious that he was unable to hold it and it was blown adrift. It was then hauled ashore, a dry one substituted, and this was thrown across the jib boom, but the sailors being aloft in the rigging and the sea breaking heavily over the hull, they could not get to it and it was finally washed off. Another line was then got ready, but at this stage a thick snow squall set in and the seas again flying over the breach, the line became wet and froze stiff. On being fired it parted, and two further attempts to communicate with the schooner failed. It now became evident that the vessel's crew could only be saved by means of a boat, though the prospect of launching one and forcing one through the tremendous surf was anything but encouraging, and could not possibly have been accomplished by the station men unaided when they first arrived on the scene. By this time many people had assembled on the beach willing and eager to lend their services. On the lines being taken to the station and laid near the stove to thaw, the crew, assisted by a strong force of men, procured the self-bailing surfboat and carried it to a point opposite the stranded pilot schooner *E. W Tunnel,* which lay near the beach. Those on board threw a line ashore which was made fast to the bow of the surfboat and the life-savers, several pilots and a wrecker who had volunteered, were hauled out through the breakers alongside. The

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Winter 2004 <www.USLHS.org>

boat was then cast loose, but as soon as it was drew away from the schooner and the wind took effect, it sagged off to leeward, and, despite the united efforts of the oarsmen to maintain headway, was beaten back upon the beach. After this, five of the stoutest and most daring of the young pilots made a vigorous attempt in one of their own boats to reach the distressed craft, but they were similarly driven ashore. Nothing daunted, however, a fresh crew of pilots took the place of their exhausted comrades, and by almost super human exertions succeeded in reaching another stranded schooner – *E.L. Dow* – but far to the leeward of the objective point. Here they bailed out their boat, which had shipped a great deal of water, and after resting, again pushed on, but within some fifty yards of the Belden their boat struck the bar, where the seas instantly boarded it and they were thrown, as in the two former instances, back to the starting point. The station crew, assisted by two volunteers, then took their boat, waded with it well to windward, and by a desperate struggle managed to get safely away from the beach, but the men were so exhausted by their previous efforts that the boat had to be brought to an anchor to allow them time to somewhat regain their strength. By alternately rowing and anchoring, and thus holding on to every inch that was made, the life-savers by the most desperate work managed to get alongside the wreck. This was at half past two in the afternoon, nine hours from the time the efforts of the rescue began. They took from the rigging, in nearly exhausted condition, the captain, mate, and two seamen, who had clung to the shrouds for nearly twelve hours. It was learned that two of the schooners crew – Moses H. Small, of Dennis Massachusetts, and the cook, whose name was not known, had sometime before succumbed to the exposure and cold and had fallen overboard. The rescued, all who were more or less frostbitten – the captain and one seaman badly so – were speedily conveyed to the station, where Dr. Hall, of Lewes, who had generously placed his services at the disposal of the keeper, did everything in his power to alleviate their condition. The captain and mate were sheltered and comfortably cared for by the surfmen four days, while the other remained only two, having been recovered sufficiently by that time to start for their homes.

The heroic efforts put forth on this occasion to rescue the imperiled sailors are worthy of the highest commendation. It is plain that they were in no way responsible for the loss of the two lives, as unquestionably everything was done within the limits of man's knowledge and skill to reach the vessel in time to save them. Three of the surfmen were badly frostbitten, yet they did not once shirk from the task before them, but resolutely and bravely continued at their posts until those who remained on the ill-fated schooner were brought off. The fact that the undertaking was at times confronted by apparently insurmountable obstacles did not in the least dishearten them. Neither can too much praise be bestowed upon the pilots and others, who, by their intrepid work, helped to make the rescue possible.

The schooner, which became a total wreck, was from Boothbay, Maine, bound to Easton, Maryland with a cargo of ice.

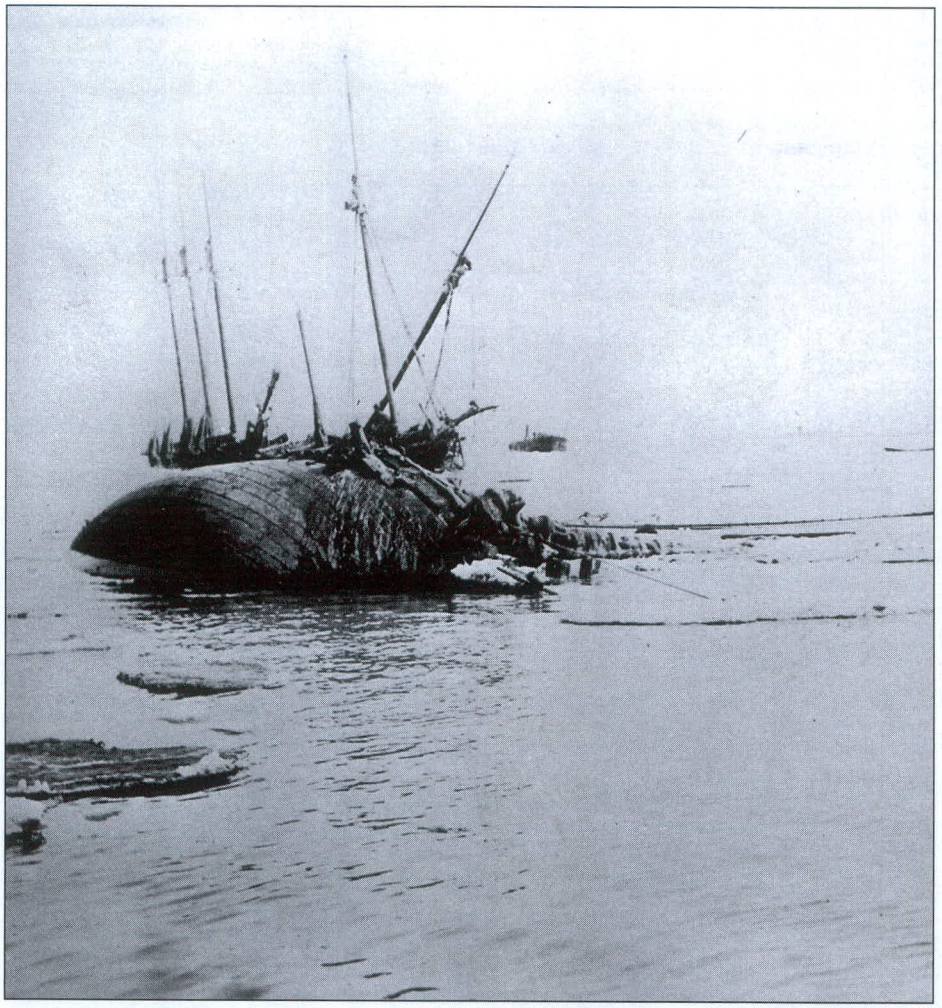
The following letter was received at the office of the General Superintendent.

Lewes, Delaware
March 20, 1888

Dear Sir:

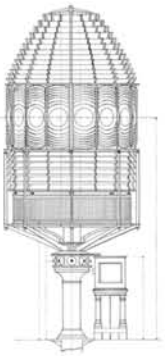
Having been wrecked in my vessel at the Delaware Breakwater in the late gale of March 12, I wish to commend the crew of the life-saving station at the above-mentioned place for their brave, cool, and courageous work in saving the lives of my three men and myself. I feel that I cannot with my pen describe my feelings of gratitude to the U. S. Life-Saving Service.

Very Respectfully yours,
John Crowell, 2d
Master of the wrecked schooner
Allie H. Belden



This capsized vessel and the two damaged vessels in the background were behind the Lewes breakwater when the blizzard struck. Photo courtesy of the Delaware Public Archives.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



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.

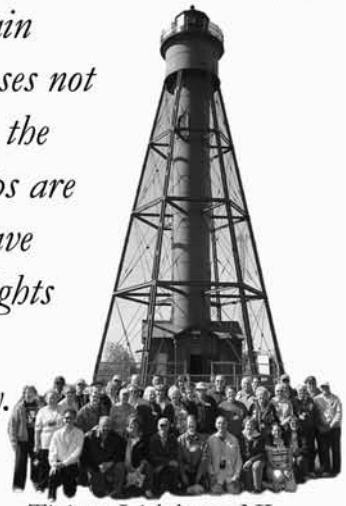
Help Support Our Important Mission!

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