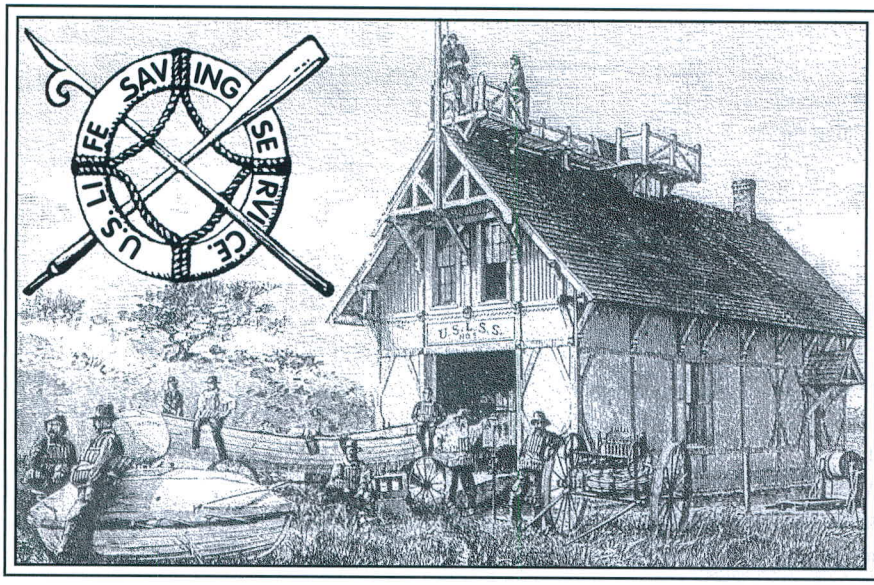
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

Surfman William Drazel of the Louisville Floating Life-Saving Station

By John J. Galluzzo

"Some things have happened around here," Surfman William Drazel told the *Louisville Courier Journal* in May of 1921, "that make me believe the day of miracles hasn't passed." If anybody would know about miracles on the Ohio River, it would be Drazel, who spent 40 years as a member of the crew of the floating Louisville, Kentucky, U.S. Life-Saving (and later U.S. Coast Guard) Station. What he neglected to mention was that many of the miraculous lifesaving rescues on the river could never have been enacted without his skilled oarsmanship, dedication to the preservation of human life and "semper paratus" vigilance.

William Drazel first joined the crew of the Louisville floating life-saving station as a young man of 20 on April 1, 1882, just four months after the establishment of the station in December, 1881. Although he never kept accurate records, he estimated that over the course of the next four decades he responded to approximately 2,000 distress calls, aided between 5,000 and 7,000 endangered persons, assisted in saving $6,000,000 - $7,000,000 worth of property, and pulled 400 dead bodies from the depths of the Ohio River.

The rapids of the Ohio afforded many life-saving opportunities to local boatmen. Vessels traveling upstream could pass safely through a system of locks, bypassing the dam at the Falls of the Ohio. Yet negotiating a vessel downstream caused headaches for steamboat captains and flatboat fishermen alike, as the only passage was through two fast-moving chutes. Three local rivermen – William Devan, John Gillooly, and John Tully – saved 45 people from drowning as volunteers between 1875 and 1881, and had each earned a gold medal from the USLSS. When the Louisville station opened in 1881, all three joined the crew.



Riverman William Drazel of the U. S. Life-Saving Service. Photo courtesy of the author.

Even more dangerous than the rapids, though, were the periodic horrendous floods, caused by torrential rains that swelled the river until it overflowed its banks and swallowed up everything for miles, submerging many houses, and driving other residents up onto their roofs where they could expect to sit for days without sustenance, until the waters receded.

For precisely these two reasons, the USLSS built their first, innovative floating station in 1881, positioned usually just above the dam, but capable of being towed to the spot of an emergency whenever necessary. A fixed station would have been of no use whatsoever during a typical Ohio River flood, since the river level greatly fluctuates and the banks overflow.

The first station consisted of a two-story riverboat-like structure set on a scow-shaped hull, and topped with the ever-present Life-

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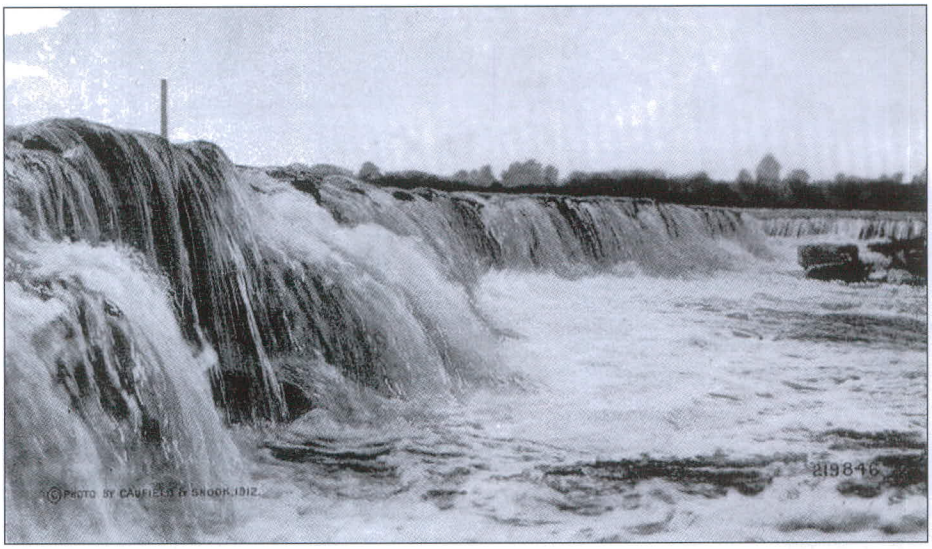


Above – The Louisville Life-Saving Station, the only inland life-saving station in the United States. It was one of only two floating life-saving station ever built. Photo courtesy of the author.
Below – The Falls on the Ohio at Louisville circa 1912. Old post card view.

Saving Service lookout tower. The surfmen, who retained the same title as their coastal life-saving brethren, yet who knew nothing about the actions of the surf, served year round from the time of the station's establishment, due to the dangerous nature of the Falls. They manned two low, fast skiffs, boats unlike any other in the service, known as *Reckless* and *Ready*. The first Louisville station remained in service until November of 1902, when it was replaced by a newer, more modern station. The Coast Guard replaced that station in 1929 with a third floating station.

Louisville's first keeper, Captain "Billy" Devan, served until his death in 1911. Surfman John Gillooly, with more than 28 years in service, took over at that point, continuing as keeper until retiring in 1916. After Gillooly retired, the Coast Guard transferred in two successive warrant officers from the Great Lakes, who, although given proper respect by their men, were never seen as true "rivermen." Surfman Drazel, although he outlasted all of the members of the original crew, never reached the level of keeper.

Throughout the course of his Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard career, Drazel fought through floods, ice floes, and raging rapids to help those in need. In 1891, after a severe tornado tore through the Louisville area, he and other members of the crew cruised the river searching for wreckage. Through blinding rain he caught sight of the endangered steamer *Hibernia*, headed for the falls. The boat raced through some rapids, with the lifesavers in chase, before safely coming to halt near the Louisville Bridge. They succeeded in saving all fourteen people aboard.



From the station's tower, Drazel's watchful eye caught first sight of a number of endangered steamships over the years. Steamships that, for one reason or another, found themselves on a collision course with the dam, including *Monterey, Lena May, Buckeye State* and *Queen City*.

On February 10, 1914, the steamer *Queen City* left Pittsburgh bound for the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans, planning to ride the Ohio River west to the Mississippi. At 1:30 a.m. on the 17th the captain of the stern-wheel steamer attempted to dock at a wharf in Louisville, but heavy rain had swelled the river, and the vessel got caught in a current and bypassed the docking facilities. In a nighttime scenario, the steamer, with more than 200 people aboard, headed for the falls.

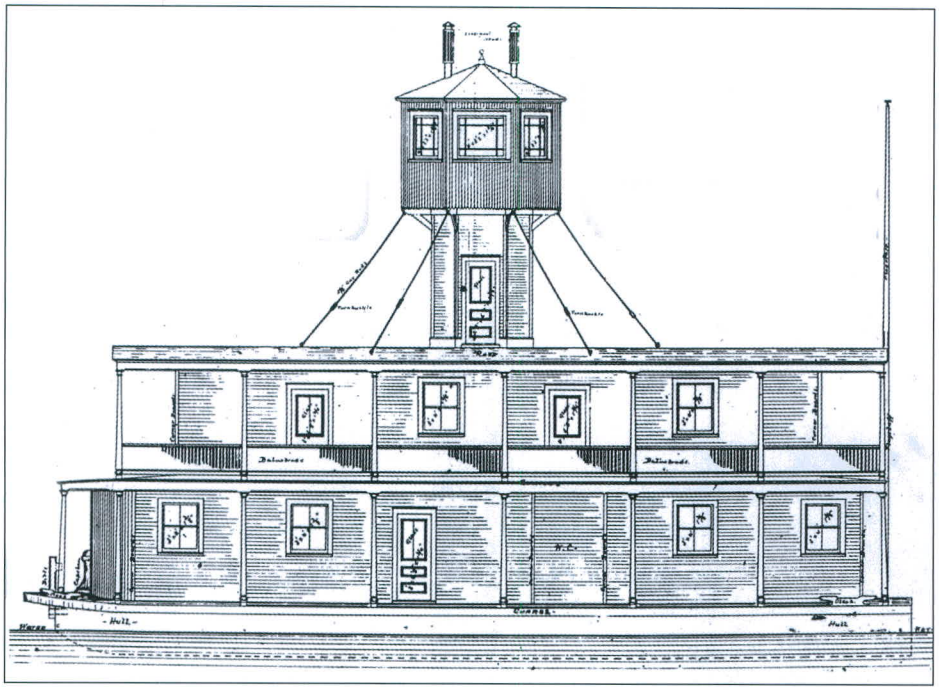
The first few feet of *Queen City* nosed out over the falls before miraculously, she struck a rock on the river's bottom and held fast. Unsure how long the vessel would hold her position, the captain blew the whistle for help.

Drazel, who had spotted the disaster, ran down from the lookout, a half dozen flights of steps, and joined Captain Gillooly and the other surfmen in launching *Reckless* and *Ready*. Although they had to pull through freezing temperatures and ice floes an inch thick, both skiffs reached *Queen City* within five minutes. Once aboard, Captain Gillooly calmed the excited and confused passengers, attempting to restore order. He realized that the boat could slide over the falls at any second, and ordered his men to worry about people first, and possessions later. Due to the late hour, some heavy sleepers had to be pulled from their beds in various states of undress, and then led in stunned bewilderment to safety. Gillooly also ordered his surfmen to lower and man the steamer's yawl for use in transporting passengers and crew to safety.

During the night, the intense cold and thick mist caused ice to form in the boats and oars. Besides adding weight to the oars themselves, ice on the oar locks made the oars nearly impossible to move, and ice on the handles yielded no firm grip whatsoever. The surfmen spent most of the night breaking the ice off of their equipment in between runs. By 5 a.m., they had rescued all 215 people aboard.

When a tug pulled the steamer free from its precarious perch above the falls, the rock she had struck pulled out of the riverbed with her, still engorged in the two-foot hole it had created.

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Left – Plan drawing of the Louisville Life-Saving Station. Drawing courtesy of the author.

During the deadly floods of March and April, 1913, Surfmen Drazel joined Keeper Gillooly and three other surfmen in responding to distress calls from a number of Ohio River communities. At 3 a.m. on March 27, Captain Gillooly received telegraphic orders from the Treasury Department to take a crew and a boat and head for Dayton, Ohio, where flood waters reached murderous levels. Before they receded, they would claim 454 dead (150 in Dayton alone), leave 100,000 people homeless, and cause $250,000,000 in property damage between Ohio, Indiana, West Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee.

Crossing the river to Cincinnati in the middle of the night, the life-savers boarded a train, boat and all, and headed to Dayton. They arrived sixteen hours later, and sought out the local relief work director. He informed them it would be pointless to set out to work that night. And the crew should get a good night's sleep and head out at first light. They slept that night in the National Cash Register plant.

At 5 a.m. on the 28th, the crew rowed with 500 rations, delivering food and water where needed, and carrying the sick and crippled to relief. They then toured the northern half of the city, rowing between rooftops, bringing aid to another 800 people in one way or another.

On the morning of the 29th, the floodwaters had receded to a point where the people of Dayton could safely leave their homes. By 2:30 p.m., the town's officials thanked the crew and sent them on their way, on a train back to Cincinnati. They reached their destination by 6 p.m., but had to wait until morning to cross to Louisville.

The next morning, while waiting to cross, Captain Gillooly and his men received a telegram ordering them to nearby Covington, Kentucky, where at least 50 families were in distress. After distributing food to the citizens of Covington, they received yet another distress call. Six miles up the river the town of Dayton, Kentucky, had become surrounded by water, and many houses built on sandy soil had already broken off their foundations and overturned. On the 31st, the Louisville surfmen rescued 75 people in Dayton, before heading back to Covington. By 6 a.m., they received orders to head back home, where conditions had gotten considerably worse. They reached Louisville the next morning, where the surfmen who were left behind to man the station had been working continuously for days. On the third of April at 8:45 a.m., the crew headed out en masse, in a 65 mile-per-hour gale and heavy rain, and attended to the folks of their hometown. At the end of the night, the crew could finally stand down. They had helped well more than 1000 people over the course of the longest week of their lives.

In his 1921 *Louisville Courier-Journal* profile, William Drazel told of several river events that never otherwise reached newspaper headlines. He once watched in horror as a large steamer backed its rear paddlewheel over a small skiff anchored just off of the river's bank. The two men aboard the skiff got sucked into the water, one of whom managed to free himself and resurface within a few seconds. The other, who could not swim, passed underneath the length of the boat. When Surfman Drazel found him, he pulled the terrified victim, who had been underwater for more than two minutes, to safety. During the entire ordeal, the man had held a briar pipe, which he had been smoking at the time of the accident, firmly clenched between his teeth. Miraculously, both men survived with nothing more than a rapid heartbeat after their unexpected swim.

On June 27, 1916, Drazel witnessed the saddest event of his 40-year lifesaving career. Responding to the cries of two young boys whose boat was headed for the falls, Surfmen Drazel and John Munz had their boat smashed to pieces on the dam. His knowledge of the river's waters and his ability to swim saved his life that day, although his clothes were torn to shreds by the sharp rocks of the rapids. Surfman Munz, though, did not survive.

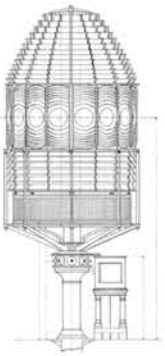
Perhaps due to the death of the young surfman, William Drazel prepared to retire later that year. But, due to the impending intervention of the United States in the war raging in Europe, the Coast Guard temporarily froze all retirements. Five years later, Drazel found that he still had the urge to perform his life-saving duties, and that he still possessed the skills to do so. "I have no hankering for retirement just now. I've been here so long that I wouldn't know what to do elsewhere, and besides I can still pull an oar with the young fellows."

When not saving lives, Drazel liked to fish and read. In 1913, he caught a 67-pound catfish, no surprise to his fellow surfmen, who knew he had a knack for knowing where the "big ones" would be. His friends also said he lived by the motto "a good book is a good friend."

Finally, on April 10, 1922, at 60 years old and with a 40-year career in life-saving behind him, Surfman Drazel decided to retire, receiving his discharge papers on that date. Although Drazel wore only one medal on his chest, Captain Richard Herline of the Louisville station said that he "received the greatest amount of official praise of any enlisted men in the service."

Much more important to Drazel, though, was the respect he earned from his Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard brethren. He gained legendary status amongst the crews of the 10th district, who marveled at his unblemished career. To his fellow lifesavers, he was known as the man who "served forty years without a break in duty."

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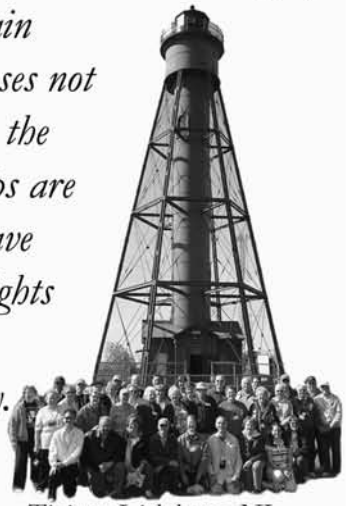
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