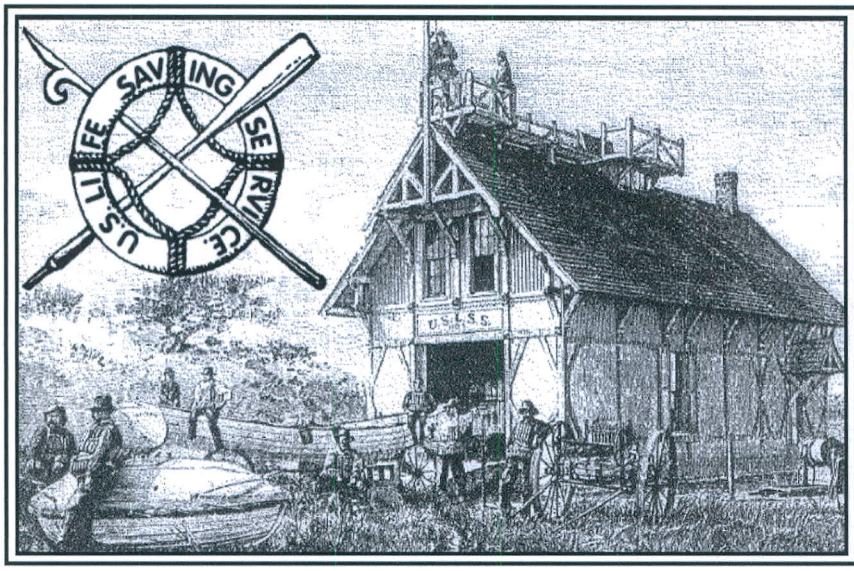
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life-Saving Service
1873 - 1915

GURNET POINT, 1874

By John J. Galluzzo

The Gurnet in Massachusetts gained its name from one of the Pilgrims, Edward Winslow, who described the headland as looking like the nose of the fish of the same name. The 27 acres of the Gurnet had been described as early as 1605 by Samuel de Champlain as being covered with a dense forest of pine trees. By 1638, although not physically attached to the community, the Gurnet became a part of Plymouth. Its position at the mouth of Plymouth Harbor would prove to be of major value for military protection in years to come.

The first permanent settlers to the Gurnet arrived in 1720, and by the time of the American Revolution, its military value proved its worth. The HMS *Niger*, a fifth-rate ship of the line, fired on the coastal defenses in 1776 while attempting to enter the harbor. Less than a century later, the Union restrengthened the works—Fort Andrew—in preparation for potential action during the Civil War.

The same advantages seen by military leaders of the 18th and mid-19th centuries—sweeping views of the approach to Plymouth Harbor from atop the headland at the mouth—which had also attracted a lighthouse to the site in 1768, brought the Life-Saving Service to the site in the early 1870s. Sumner Kimball's order in 1873 for the construction of 23 of what would be known as "1874-type" stations became the directive to place one on the Gurnet to watch for shipwrecks. On October 14, 1874, George H. Hall, a Marshfield man noted to have 20 years of experience in handling boats in the surf behind him, accepted the position of keeper of the first lifesaving station on the South Shore.

The station's objective was simply stated, if not simply executed. Watching the approach to the harbor partially required maintaining vigilance over the long stretch of Duxbury Beach to the north. To reach the Gurnet by land prior to 1892, travelers had to take a train to Marshfield and then endure nine miles by



The new Gurnet station, built in 1892, was a Bibb #2 type, a style named for the architect. The building was constructed in a mirror image of its plans. Left to right in this 1902 picture: Keeper Augustus B. Rogers, Ed Tobin, Albert Rhoden, Walter D. Kezer, Lewis Short, Tom Roberts, and Oscar Johnson. Courtesy of Dick Boonisar.

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The first lifesaving stations built on the South Shore of Boston, like this 1874-type constructed at the Gurnet, reflected the architectural styles of the period. Courtesy of Dick Boonisar.

carriage over the sand. The construction of the Powder Point Bridge that year shortened that trip by three miles.

But the glacially-formed beach did not end at the Gurnet. Instead, the sand curled back off it to the west-northwest, rambling toward another headland, Saquish, off which laid a substantial island, Clark's Island. The lifesavers tasked with manning the station, which then sat with the lighthouse among a few farmhouses, had two patrols, one to the north along Duxbury Beach, and one to the west along Saquish Beach. They walked these beats alone for 19 years. In 1893 they were met on their north patrols for the first time by counterparts from the new Brant Rock station, the only such meeting point between any of the stations on the South Shore. By that time, the men of the Gurnet had seen their first building become outdated and had seen the construction of their new lifesaving station in 1892.

Also during those years, the Gurnet crew watched as the landscape around their station changed. Vacationers, a section of the populace that never existed prior to the Civil War, discovered the natural allure of the headland, summer sunshine and sea breezes topping the list. Keeper Hall resigned in 1878, making way for the appointment of John F. Holmes on December 23. A little more than a year later Hall purchased an old farmhouse on the Gurnet and enlarged it, adding a dancing pavilion. Summer visitors hunted and fished, swam and danced. Those folks who could afford to do so purchased land and built cottages of their own. In 1884 Hall swapped farms with the Boardman family of Lexington, who opened the former Hall place as the Gurnet House.

During the quarter century leading up to 1900, the Life-Saving Service matured, and the crew at the Gurnet, more so than at any other South Shore station, lived through the growing pains. Boats were tested and put into use. The equipment of the beach apparatus, utilizing a basic philosophy dating back to the days of George Manby's mortar nearly a century earlier, fell into place with the perfection of the Lyle gun, tested at the Springfield Armory in the western part of the state. Protocols were set for patrols. Shoulder-harnessed punch clocks carried to "keyposts" held surfmen to strict precision on their patrols.

That is not to say that there were not moments of lackadaisical behavior on the part of the surfmen.

Life-Saving Service, Second District, Gurnet Station, March 25, 1894

Hon. S.I. Kimball, General Superintendent U.S. Life-Saving Service, Washington, D.C.

Sir,

I would most respectfully state that night before last at 9-10 p.m. I arrived on Patrolman Clarence Smith's beat and did not find him. I traveled his beat from that time until 11-30 p.m. and did not see him during that time. About 15 minutes later I arrived at the station and met him in station yard. I told him what I had been doing and asked him where he had been. He replied I will tell you the truth, I have been away with a woman, but I should not have done it had it not been a bright moonlight night. I told him there was no excuse for neglect of Patrol duty.

I discharged him according to instructions contained in paragraph 127 of Revised Regulations Life-Saving Service 1884, and yesterday procured another man in his stead. Until quite recently Smith has been a good man, excellent in a boat, always ready, willing and cheerful about station duties, and until recently I have had implicit confidence in him. In his previous patrol duties he has many times exceeded the requirements, as on his sunrise and sunset patrols, when the weather has been thick, but would frequently lift, he has almost invariably patrolled to the farthest post, saying to me on his return I mean to do as you have advised, if I err on my duties, err on the safe side.

But Mr. Boardman's hired man (an Irishman) with his bad rum and a woman imported from Boston, have led him astray. Mr. Boardman's place here at the Gurnet is left in charge of his hired man during the winter, he alone occupying the premises, and for weeks past Surfman Smith has visited him quite frequently, and sometimes on his returns I have been informed he has ardent spirits enough down to make the fact quite noticeable. On Thursday last, the hired man had a strumpet come down from Boston (called her his first cousin) with 4 quart bottles of whiskey, and the result was the fall of Smith. While he was absent from his patrol beat he was in Boardman's House in bed with the woman.

If a dishonorable discharge needs to be recorded against Smith, I would most respectfully ask if a notification of the same may be kept from me, until after Smith gets his pay, for if on the day I receive Smith's check I can inform him that I have rec'd no notice of a dishonorable discharge for, I think I can easily induce him to go with me and pay his bills at Plymouth, contracted during the present quarter, Grocer, Clothier and shoe-dealer, for which I feel bound, as I introduced him to them.

Very Respectfully,
Your obedient servant,
John F. Holmes, Keeper

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Even with strumpets and Irishmen around, the barrenness of the Gurnet and Duxbury Beach in winter could lead to some strange circumstances. Keeper Holmes, who resigned from his post less than a month later, recorded the following event on September 7, 1898:

> Late in the afternoon 2 men with a horse and wagon crossed the Gurnet bound (they said) to Clark's Island to get 2 cows they had bought there and they went in that direction out of sight from the Gurnet. About 8 p.m. the horse with the wagon attached returned to the Gurnet the bridle being off the horse's head and hanging to his side, but no men were in sight. As the men had to cross from Saquish to Clark's Island by boat, and as there had been a heavy squall of wind and rain about 7.30 p.m. I sent the 8 to 12 p.m. patrol to Saquish by the inside road (the way the horse had come) to discover the whereabouts of the men. The patrolmen discovered nothing. Then I sent the 12 to 4 patrol to Saquish on the inside track but he discovered nothing. At 6 a.m. I hitched up my team and drove to Saquish and found the men just swimming the cows across from the island to Saquish. I took one of the men in my team, the other following behind with the cows and I drove to the Gurnet where the men found their horse and wagon safe and sound. The men stated that they had the Squall after they arrived at the Island, and as they were not much used to boats, they thought they would be safer to stay at the island all night. The horse they had left unhitched at Saquish thinking he could take care of himself, which he did.

Throughout the history of the Life-Saving Service, stories of odd occurrences on nightly patrols kept the "sandpounders" on their toes. One man in Hull was beaten up and robbed. One surfman from the Cahoon's Hollow station on Cape Cod approached his task with great trepidation, being forewarned of a wild bull loose on the beach. Another man in North Carolina stepped on a razorback hog in the darkness; the pig squealed and ran one direction, while the surfman squealed and ran in another. A surfman from North Scituate found a dead body on patrol, and figuring no one was looking, went through its pockets, claiming its money. The next night, he claimed to feel a slap across his face while standing on the same spot, and threw the coins into the sea. Another surfman walking a Cape Cod patrol heard a gunshot ring out, and was soon engaged in a gun battle on the beach with another surfman over a woman.

At the Gurnet, Surfman Joseph L. Wixon had none of those problems. Instead, he had to face one of the scariest potential problems of all. At 11:50 p.m. On November 6, 1898, Surfman Nelson King reported to Keeper Augustus Rogers that Wixon had never returned from his 8 to midnight patrol, and that his Brant Rock counterpart had arrived at the Gurnet station. Surfmen intending to meet other surfmen on patrol were instructed that if that man never showed up, they should continue walking. "I immediately dressed myself and called all hands," said Rogers, "and with permission to use [former Keeper] Holmes' [horse and carriage] team (after getting a supply of blankets and some whiskey, which was taken from the station supplies) proceeded at once to look for him." Taking the Brant Rock surfman with him in the carriage, Rogers instructed the rest of the surfmen to take kerosene lanterns and walk the inside and outside sections of the barrier beach to look for their fellow lifesaver. Surfman Edward Tobin stayed behind to watch the station. Rogers instructed that if any surfman found Wixon, he was to burn a red Coston signal flare.

"We at once separated and proceeded up the beach myself with the team going ahead," said Rogers. "After we had been about 2 miles met Wixon coming back. I asked him what the trouble was, he stated that when he was walking along the beach within about ¾ of mile of the Post House, the Lantern exploded, and he supposed that he must have fainted, because the first thing remembered he was on the top of the beach looking for the Post House. He had a cut on his left hand in which he carried the lantern."

Rogers took Wixon aboard the carriage, and together they rode back to the station. Wixon showed Rogers where the explosion had torn his lower left pant leg to shreds. The surfman mentioned that the leg hurt as well, but didn't say much more on the ride home.

Rogers dropped Wixon at the station and then headed for Holmes' place to return borrowed horse and carriage. Before he could finish with the horse, Rogers saw Surfman King run into the yard. Wixon had a deep cut on his leg, and it had obviously bled freely for quite some time. Rogers returned to the station to find Wixon feeling faint from the loss of blood, and began to dress the wound. The lifesavers administered some whiskey, which helped put Wixon to sleep for the night. The next day, Wixon returned to his home.

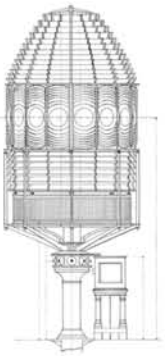
Eight days later, he returned to duty. His timing could not have been better, as in November of 1898, the lifesavers of the South Shore would need all the help they could get.





Left: Walter D. Kezer here models lifeboat crew wear of the 1890s, including his cork life vest. Right: Surfman Walter Kezer models his "summer whites." Both courtesy of Dick Boonisar.

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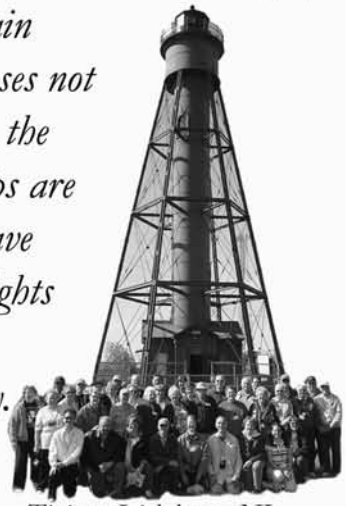
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