



The Lifesavers of Sandy Hook



NPS Photo

The Early Years 1848-1870



1849 Lifeboat Station currently on display at Twin Lights State Historic Site, Highlands, New Jersey
(NPS Photo)

New Jersey saw many shipwrecks on or near its shores in the 19th century. This destined the state to play a key role in the founding of what became the U.S. Life-Saving Service. In 1848, Monmouth County Congressman William A. Newell reported to Congress that 158 sailing vessels had been lost off the New Jersey coast between 1839 and 1848. Newell asked Congress to appropriate \$10,000 to build eight “lifeboat stations” equipped with “surfboats, lifeboats, and other means for the preservation of life and property shipwrecked on the coast of New Jersey between Sandy Hook and Little Egg Harbor.”

Congress agreed, and the stations were completed in 1849, spaced ten miles apart from Spermaceti

Cove on Sandy Hook south to Long Beach Island. Each station housed rescue equipment that included a surfboat mounted on a wagon, a small line-throwing mortar, and a small enclosed metal lifeboat called a “lifecar.” The lifecar held up to six passengers and was used to haul them back to the beach using rope lines stretched from shore to shipwreck. Congress continued to make additional appropriations that created more stations. The federal lifesaving establishment was growing, but without anyone at the stations to care for them, they fell into disrepair. Local volunteers performed the rescues, but they often had to travel long distances just to get to a station, and then to a shipwreck. Sometimes they arrived too late to help shipwreck victims.

A Life-Saving Service Develops

In 1871, the lifesaving system was reorganized and 28 old stations on the Jersey Shore were replaced with larger ones. Because they were painted red for visibility from the sea they became known as “Red House stations.” Paid six-man crews were introduced, who were rated numerically by their experience and capability, with a keeper in charge of each crew. The surfmen lived and worked at the stations, and drilled weekly with rescue equipment that included wooden boats and beach apparatus. Surfmen conducted daily tower watches and nightly beach patrols to be on the constant lookout for shipwrecks.

During the 1870’s, lifesaving stations expanded along the East Coast and the Great Lakes. Each state coastline became a numbered district, as did the stations in them. New Jersey became District No. 4, with the stations numbered from north to south along the coast. The Sandy Hook Life-Saving Station, near the tip, was Station No. 1, Spermaceti Cove was Station No. 2, and Cape May Station was Station No. 40. In 1878, the lifesaving system was officially named the United States Life-Saving Service, an agency within the U.S. Treasury

Department. Men who knew the sea like Jonathan “Captain Jack” Edwards, keeper at Spermaceti Cove Life-Saving Station from 1879 to 1899, were now in charge of the stations. Edmund Price also served at Spermaceti Cove Station from 1880 until 1910 as Surfman No. 1, a rank that reflected his lifesaving experience and skills. However, as dedicated as they were, time and the rigors of the job caught up with these men. An injury incurred during a surfboat drill forced Keeper Edwards to resign his post, while ill-health eventually forced Surfman Price to retire. Eventually, the “Red House” Stations were replaced by larger and sturdier structures. A new station was built near the north end of Sandy Hook in 1891. Keeper Trevo-nian H. Patterson, the son of Sandy Hook Light-house Keeper Charles Patterson, was in charge, a person who had “..lived at Sandy Hook since he was one year old, knows every inch of the beach, and is as familiar with the treacherous shoals as he is with the plank walk leading from the station to the Ordnance dock.” A new station was also built near Spermaceti Cove in 1894, where, in 1899, Joel R. Woolley became keeper. This station still stands today.

Preparing for a rescue.
(NPS Photo)





Rescue Equipment

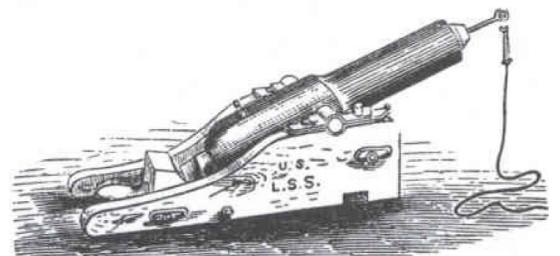
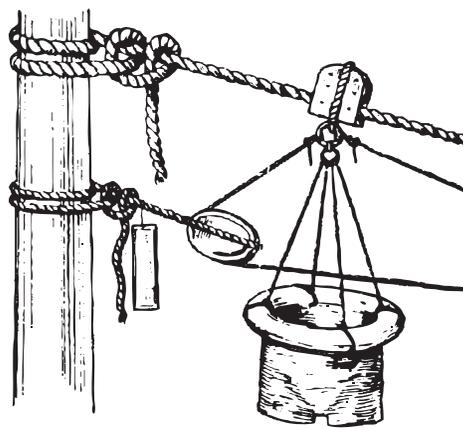
When a shipwreck occurred, lifesavers preferred using wooden rescue boats called surfboats. These could be launched and rowed quickly from the beach and held up to 12 passengers. However, some storms were so powerful a boat could not be used, so the beach apparatus had to be relied upon to perform the rescue.

Lieutenant David A. Lyle, an officer in the U.S. Army Ordnance Department, developed a long range line-throwing gun for the Life-Saving Service. He field-tested his small bronze cannon at the Army's Sandy Hook Proving Ground in 1877, and the Lyle Gun was officially put into service the following year. This gun was a great lifesaving innovation. It could shoot a shot-line over 500 yards to make contact with a shipwreck. A shipwrecked crew hauled in the shot-line to bring heavier lines out to the ship. With lines stretching from ship to shore, the lifesavers pulled a breeches buoy out to the wreck so people could be saved by hauling them back to the shore. The Lyle gun was so reliable and practical that no other gun ever replaced it for shipwreck rescues during the Life-

Saving Service era.

The boat wagon and beach apparatus cart were pulled from a station by a horse and lifesaving crew to a shipwreck in the worst kind of weather imaginable. During severe storms two lifesaving crews would sometimes work together. A good example of this occurred at Sandy Hook on December 17, 1907. The sailing ship EDMUND J. PHINNEY wrecked during a fierce gale 300 yards off the Hook's North Beach area. Keeper Woolley's crew pulled their beach apparatus cart two and one-half miles against raging winds and over flooded beaches to meet Keeper Patterson's crew to save the seven sailors on the PHINNEY. Through freezing wind-swept waves, five seamen were laboriously hauled ashore by breeches buoy. With the ship on the verge of breaking up and no time to spare, the PHINNEY's captain and 1st mate crammed themselves into the breeches buoy. They were just reaching the churning shore when the PHINNEY broke apart. The seven crewmen were wet, cold, and dazed, but still alive.

At left, a breeches buoy, and a Lyle gun, right.
(NPS Photo)



The Life-Saving Service Fades Into History



The PHINNEY wreck was a dramatic rescue, but the large number of shipwrecks had been steadily declining. The age of sail was being replaced by iron hulled steamships. Steamships were stronger and faster than wooden sailing ships, and their ability to avoid navigational hazards cut down considerably the number of shipwrecks. In an effort to reorganize and modernize two government agencies, the U.S. Life-Saving Service merged with the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 to create the U.S. Coast Guard. The Life-Saving Service left behind a splendid record. From 1871 through 1914, the Service aided 28,121 vessels, and rescued or aided 178,741 persons, while only 1,455 people lost their lives. Since 1915, the U.S. Coast Guard has continued to save lives endangered by the sea, using fast, motorized rescue boats, aircraft including helicopters, and modern radio and radar technology to accomplish its search and rescue missions.

Today, New Jersey has the most surviving Life-Saving Stations in the United States. This includes the one built at Spermicetti Cove in 1849, the only known survivor of the first eight federally built lifeboat stations. It is preserved at the Twin Lights State Historic Site in Highlands, New Jersey. The 1894 Spermicetti Cove Station has been open to the public as a Visitor Center since 1974, when Sandy Hook became a National Park and part of Gateway National Recreation Area. The Monmouth Beach Station, located seven miles south of the Spermicetti Cove Station, is currently being used as a Community Center by the town of Monmouth Beach. The tradition of lifesaving is still carried on by the U.S. Coast Guard Station at Sandy Hook. The Coast Guard's official motto, "Always Prepared," echoes the spirit of the old Life-Saving Service's unofficial motto: "Remember, you have to go out, but nothing says you have to come back."