

THE LIFESAVING LEGACY OF ORLEANS, MASSACHUSETTS

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Introduction

Shipwrecks and lifesaving in Orleans date back to the winter of 1626-1627, approximately 170 years before the town separated from Eastham and was formally incorporated. During that winter, the Sparrowhawk, carrying passengers bound for Jamestown from England was wrecked in a violent storm in the dangerous waters off of what became Orleans. Aid was first provided by local Native Americans, who also notified the colonists at Plymouth of the wreck. William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Colony, personally led a rescue mission which crossed Cape Cod Bay by water, landed at Namskaket Creek, and traversed what is now Orleans via Arey's Pond, to the site of the wreck. Bradford's "lifesavers" brought much needed supplies, as the survivors had run out of food and water prior to the wreck, and many, including the captain, were sick. After an aborted attempt to repair the ship and a second wreck, the survivors were ultimately taken to Plymouth, and remarkably, no deaths are evident in the record of this first Orleans lifesaving mission.

For nearly two centuries after the Sparrowhawk rescue, there were no organized efforts to aid those who were involved in shipwrecks in the dangerous waters off Cape Cod's shores. Those who found themselves cast up on the shores or sandbars of Cape Cod were at the mercy of whoever found them, if anyone did. Victims who made it to shore would have found a desolate shoreline with no one around.

The Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

As civil society developed in Massachusetts, the first organization that tried to provide some relief to shipwreck victims was the Massachusetts Humane Society, which was founded in 1786 and incorporated in 1791. The purpose of the Society, as stated in the act of incorporation, was stated as follows:

The end and design of the institution is for the recovery of persons who meet with such accidents as to produce in them the appearance of death, and for promoting the cause of humanity, by pursuing such means, from time to time, as shall have for their object the preservation of human life and the alleviation of its miseries.

According to Society member and noted historian Francis Parkman, "one of the objects soon engaging their attention was the erection of huts on exposed portions of the coast for shipwrecked seamen". The idea was proposed as early as 1788, but sufficient funds were not available. In 1789, the society constructed several rough huts along the shore. While these huts were unmanned, a shipwreck survivor could at least find some welcome shelter and survival supplies in these huts.

Eight years later, the Society built the first lifeboat station in Cohasset. There were soon at least four stations on Cape Cod; in Provincetown, Eastham, Chatham, and in our own Orleans. On October 4, 1802, Society member Rev. James Freeman presented a report to the Board of Trustees detailing the location of each lifesaving station. At the time of this report, there were six Cape Cod stations. The Orleans station is described in that report as follows:

A mile south of the entrance of Nauset harbour, it joins the main land of Orleans, except in very high tides, when the sea flows from the north eastern arm of Pleasant bay into the harbour of Nauset, completely insulating the beach. By those, who are acquainted with the shallow, it may be safely forded at any time; but strangers must not venture to pass it, when covered with water, as below, the channel is seven feet deep. On this beach, about half way between the entrances of Nauset and Chatham harbours, the Trustees have erected a fourth hut. The spot selected is a narrow part of the beach. On the west, the water adjoining it is called Bass Hole. Salt marsh is north and south of it next to the beach, but is here interrupted. Orleans meeting house lies from it north west. The meeting house is without a steeple and is not seen; but it is very near a windmill placed on an elevated ground, a conspicuous object to seamen coming on the coast. Timothy Bascom, Esq. of Orleans has undertaken to inspect this hut.

At the October 4, 1802 meeting, the Trustees voted to have two thousand copies of Freeman's report printed and distributed to Customs Houses and Insurance Offices in the Commonwealth so that seamen would be aware of the locations of the Society's huts.

The Wreck of the Orissa

One of the notable rescues that occurred in Orleans during the Humane Society years was the wreck of the Orissa on January 18, 1857. The Orissa was bound for Boston from India with a cargo of ginger, jute, and linseed. Captain Dean Gray Linnell, who served as the Keeper for the Humane Society hut in Orleans was one of the first volunteer rescuers on the scene of the wreck. The ship was a total loss, and several of the crew were lost. The Captain of the Orissa, Cyrus Sears, was taken to Linnell's home where a baby had just been born and was as yet unnamed. Sears proposed that the baby girl be named Orissa, and the name was accepted. Over the years, Sears sent Orissa gifts in gratitude for her parents' hospitality.

The Evolution of the US Lifesaving Service

The year that the Massachusetts Humane Society established its first huts, 1789, is the same year that the US Congress first appropriated money for aids to navigation. It would be another fifty eight years, in 1847, before the federal government took the first step toward lifesaving services by providing \$5000 for lifeboats to be stationed at lighthouses. Beginning in 1848, Congress appropriated \$10,000 for the establishment of lifesaving stations in New Jersey and Long Island under the direction of the Revenue Cutter Service of the Treasury Department. This

project was a failure as stations were not manned and equipment was stolen or used for unintended purposes. All this had no effect in Orleans, as lifesaving capability continued to be provided by the Massachusetts Humane Society.

The ineffectiveness of the federal government in supporting lifesaving operations changed abruptly in 1871 when Sumner I Kimball was appointed as the Chief of the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Division. Kimball studied the problems plaguing the lifesaving stations, went to Congress, and obtained a \$200,000 appropriation to make improvements. In what seems like lightning speed by today's standards, Kimball's efforts resulted in nine federally funded lifesaving stations on Cape Cod in 1872. The US Lifesaving Service was separated from the Revenue Marine Service a few years later and continued as an independent agency under the Treasury Department until the US Coast Guard was established in 1915, with Kimball serving as its head the entire time. While Kimball was based in Washington, there is an Orleans connection as he served as a schoolteacher here in his earlier years. In a paper that Kimball presented to the International Maritime Conference in 1889, he described the USLSS operation on Cape Cod as follows:

Cape Cod, a narrow strip of sand, stretches directly out into the ocean some 40 miles, then abruptly turns to the north for an equal distance, and, like a threatening arm, fiercely menaces the commerce of the principle port of New England. Its eastern borders of shifting sand bars fringe an unbroken line of sandy beaches, which have become the burial ground of unnumbered craft. Here 10 stations are located nearly equidistant, and designed to cooperate with each other.

In his efforts to professionalize the Service, Kimball established salaries and qualifications for Lifesaving Station Keepers and Surfmen. In 1912, he reported that Keepers of full stations received \$1000 per annum, and Surfmen received \$65 per month. One Surfman in each station was designated "No.1" and received \$70 per month. The No.1 Surfman was considered second-in-command and was in charge in the Keeper's absence. Surfmen were selected from eligible registers provided by the Civil Service Commission. The examination given was based on experience, physical condition, and age. Education was not a factor. Keepers were appointed on the joint recommendation of the local Superintendent and the Assistant Inspector of the Service. They were required to certify that the person nominated was the best qualified of the available Surfmen in the district. Only Surfmen were eligible for appointment to the position of Keeper.

Benjamin C. Sparrow

Kimball organized the US Lifesaving Service into districts, and Cape Cod became District 2. Benjamin Sparrow was appointed as Superintendent of District 2 in 1872, and he served in this capacity until 1904. He was born in Orleans on October 9, 1839 and was a direct descendent of Richard Sparrow, who arrived at Plymouth Colony on the ship *Ann*. As a boy, Sparrow often accompanied his father, a volunteer lifesaver, to the scene of numerous shipwrecks off Cape Cod shores. After finishing his education in the public schools of Orleans, he taught school in

Eastham. He then entered Phillips Academy to prepare for a career in law, but while there, the Civil War broke out and he enlisted in the regular Union Army and was assigned to an engineering battalion in the Army of the Potomac. He was captured in 1862 and was held prisoner by the Confederates at Belle Isle until he was released in a prisoner exchange. He served in the Union Army until 1864, and then returned to his home in East Orleans where he resided for the rest of his life. He married Eunice S. Felton on December 25, 1866.

Sparrow's appointment as Superintendent of District 2 was part of Sumner Kimball's efforts to professionalize the Service and address the corruption and inefficiency that had previously existed in other parts of the country. A contemporary account reported that in Sparrow's more than thirty years of service that he "has been actively engaged in the arduous duties of his calling, and to his efforts is due the success in securing the discipline and efficiency in this hazardous service in the district under his charge." Sparrow was known for what we now call "hands-on" management, and was reported to have personally attended nearly every wreck that occurred in his district over a thirty year period. In a report to Congress in 1908, USLSS General Superintendent Kimball described Sparrow as follows:

He was a thorough beachman, and no man on Cape Cod was more familiar with the shores of that dangerous projection than he, a fact to which he probably owes his life. He resided in East Orleans, near the shore, and I believe that no wreck occurred during the thirty years of his incumbency within a distance which would admit his reaching it that he did not attend. At such times his skill and advice have been of the greatest value. On some of these occasions he endured the severest hardships, and in one instance nearly lost his eyesight and barely escaped with his life.

The Wreck of the Orcutt

The incident that Kimball was referring to in the last sentence above was the wreck of the Calvin B. Orcutt on December 23, 1896. At about 7:00 pm during a raging snowstorm, Amelia Snow, the telegraph operator at the Orleans railroad depot, received a message from the Chatham Lifesaving Station that a four masted schooner was aground at Roaring Bull between Chatham and Orleans. Chatham lifesavers had been trying to reach the wreck since 3:30pm, but could not row across Pleasant Bay due to the storm. Chatham could not telephone the Orleans Lifesaving Station as the phone lines were down. The telegraph message requested that the message be delivered to Benjamin Sparrow so that he could call the Station from his home. After several attempts by Snow to find someone to take the message to Sparrow, Henry Knowles Cummings, who operated the general store in the town center, heard of the situation, closed his store early, and volunteered to carry the message to Sparrow. Knowles walked the one half mile to his home (the Knowles Homestead), then another two miles to Sparrow's home in what had by now become near blizzard conditions. It was nearly 11:00pm when Cummings reached Sparrow's home. Sparrow, whose telephone line was still working, immediately called Captain James Charles, the keeper of the Orleans Station, who set out with seven surfmen heading south along the beach looking for the wreck. Sparrow then set out on foot to the

station, but when he arrived, the crew had already set out. He then walked along the beach and marsh for about seven miles in the midst of the powerful snowstorm. In his statement after the incident, he described the ordeal, in part, as follows.

Here the storm broke out again with renewed violence, and I stopped a few minutes for observation, in order to determine the extent of my vision. I was completely enshrouded by an impenetrable mist of driven snow, so thick as to interfere with respiration, through which I do not think I could have distinguished a person 20 feet distant. The situation was thoroughly bewildering, and but for a perfect knowledge of every foot of ground about me I would have easily lost my way. The snow filled the meadow grass to a depth half to one's knees. The lower portion had absorbed the salt of the marsh and become wet and clinging. I proceeded thus until the tide overflowed the entire depth of the snow and rendered travel so difficult that I turned toward the outside of the beach, and found that a slight ebb of the tide rendered it possible to walk below the beach cliff by closely watching the waves and scrambling up the face of the sand banks on "all fours" when the heavier surfs ran up.

Sparrow arrived at the scene of the wreck sometime after 3:00am and took charge of the operation, where they found that no one was on board the vessel. There are various theories as to what happened, but the ship's underwriting agent concluded that the Orcutt "had anchored right on top of the extreme end of the north bar, and at low water, about 8 o'clock she pounded bottom and filled with water. Then the hatches washed away, and the crew were washed overboard and drowned." No bodies were ever recovered. Sparrow started for home and arrived at about 9:30am after walking a distance of over 14 miles during the night and morning. According to Sparrow, this did not take into account "the various zigs and zags, to and fro."

According to Kimball's report to Congress, Sparrow never recovered from the effects of his nights work. "He came near to losing his eyesight, and his vision is still very seriously impaired, while his general health was irrecoverably undermined by the exposure. He also gradually lost his mind until, in June of 1904, it became necessary to remove him from the duties of district superintendent."

Orleans resident Benjamin Sparrow exemplified the sacrifice that the lifesavers of Cape Cod were willing to make in the fulfillment of their duties.

The Orleans Lifesaving Station

One of these original nine stations was built in Orleans, on what is now called Nauset Beach, just about opposite of the south end of Ponchet (now Pochet) Island. The building was of the same type as all of the other eight original stations, known as the "Red Houses". These were two story buildings with long sloping roofs that gave them a triangular appearance. About two

thirds of the first floor was taken up by boat and equipment storage. Large doors provided access for the beach carts and boats. The Keeper's quarters were also on the first floor, as were the mess room and kitchen. The second floor contained sleeping quarters for the surfmen and a "guest room" with cots for use by individuals that had been rescued and brought to the station. Each station was staffed by a Keeper, or Captain, and six or seven surfmen. The Keeper was responsible for organizing the crew, numbering them in order of competence and trustworthiness, starting with No. 1, No. 2, and so on. The No. 1 Surfman was second in command, and exercised the duties of the Keeper in his absence. The numbers would change from time to time due to vacancies, promotions, or changes in proficiency as shown by drills or performance. By 1902, the Orleans Station was equipped with three surf boats, two beach carts with guns and breeches buoys, a powerful torch light, and a horse.

Surfmen reported to their stations each year on August 1 for the opening of the "active season". They stayed in residence for ten months, with one day per week off to visit their homes. This "day off" lasted from sunrise to sunset. Keepers resided at their stations for twelve months, being on the scene and available to summon the crew and volunteers in the event of a wreck.

There were three Keepers of the Orleans Lifesaving station according to the official US Coast Guard History Program. These were Solomon Linnell, who was appointed at the age of 52 on December 12, 1872. He served until September 1, 1881 when he resigned. He was followed by Marcus M Pierce, who served from August 26, 1881 until he resigned on November 8, 1894. Finally, James H Charles took command on November 13, 1894 until he retired on July 10, 1917. By that time, the lifesaving stations had been absorbed into the newly established US Coast Guard in 1915. In a footnote to the lifesaving heritage of Orleans, it was Solomon Linnell, our first Keeper, who discovered the remains of the Sparrowhawk off of Nauset beach. The skeleton of the ship had recently surfaced from the ever-shifting sands, and Linnell's discovery occurred on May 6, 1863.

A Snapshot of Orleans Lifesavers- The 1902 Crew

A contemporary account, written in 1902 by J.W. Dalton, provided portraits of the crew then assigned to the Orleans Lifesaving station.

The Keeper, **Captain James H. Charles**, was born in Dennis in 1857, and had at the time of the account, served in this position for nine years. He had previously served for six years as a surfman. As a young man, Charles engaged in boating and fishing on Cape Cod's shores, and at one point became skipper of a fishing vessel. After several seasons with the fishing fleet, he entered the Life Saving Service and was assigned to the Orleans Station. Under Captain Marcus Pierce, he displayed exceptional abilities as a life saver and boatman, and was promoted to succeed Captain Pierce as Keeper. Captain Charles married Lizzie Hurd and had three daughters and one son as of 1902.

Abbott H. Walker was the No.1 Surfman in 1902. He was born in Orleans on September 25, 1864, and in 1902 had served as a Surfman for eight years. Prior to his service he was a well-known boatman and fisherman. He was married to Lillie Wiley and had two daughters and two sons.

Richard S Gage was the No.2 Surfman. He was born in Dennis in 1858 and had been a Surfman for eleven years as of 1902. When he was appointed as a regular Surfman, he had been a substitute at the Monomoy and Orleans stations and was first assigned to the Pamet River Station where he served for three years. He married Hannah M. Ellis and was the father of two daughters and two sons.

The No.3 Surfman was **Nehemiah P. Hopkins**. He was born in Eastham in 1875, and in 1902 had been a Surfman for six years. He spent his boyhood on the water and had broad experience in boating when he was appointed to the Service. He married Geneva Eldredge and was the father of two sons.

William B. Sherman was the No.4 Surfman. He was born in Orleans in 1857 and had been a Surfman for seven years at the time of this account. He served for a time at Coskatta Station on Nantucket and then transferred to Orleans. He came from a seafaring family and learned the art of handling a boat in the surf before joining the service. He was married to Minnie Cormaney and had one daughter and three sons.

The No.5 Surfman was **Timothy F. Murray**. He was born in Boston in 1859, and had been in the Lifesaving Service for three years. He was engaged in fishing and steamboating before joining. He married Phoebe F. Chase and had two daughters and one son.

John Kilburne was the No.6 Surfman. He was born in Provincetown in 1856 and had three years of service as of 1902. He served at the Gay Head Station on Martha's Vineyard and the Cahoon's Hollow Station before transferring to Orleans. He was a mariner before his service and was married to Eliza Sparrow. They had two sons.

The No.7 Surfman was **George F. Jorden**. He was born in Williamsport, PA in 1875 and entered the Lifesaving Service at the City Point, South Boston Station. He also served at the Wood End Station and the Salisbury Beach Station before transferring to Orleans. Jorden had substituted at the Orleans Station before he had joined the Service. He was married to Sarah Smith and was the father of a daughter and a son.

Beach Patrols

Time was obviously of the essence in responding to a ship tossed up on a sandbar. The quicker the response, the more likely survivors could be rescued. For this purpose, each station had a lookout tower. During clear daylight hours, observation was maintained from this tower and, if necessary, from other observation points where the limits of the district could be seen. At night and during days where visibility was limited by weather, the watch was kept by patrols on foot by Surfmen of every foot of the station's coast. These men would walk halfway toward the

adjoining station and meet the patrolman from that station. Eventually halfway huts were built where these meetings would take place. There were several methods to document that the patrols had taken place. Patrolling Surfmen would exchange tokens when they met their counterpart at the halfway point, or, if there was no accessible adjoining station, they would carry a watch clock that would be wound by a key affixed to a post at the end of the patrol. As the stations were about five miles apart, each patrol "beat" was about two and one half miles. At the Orleans Station, the patrol north extended about two and one half miles to Nauset Harbor. The surfmen used time clocks on this patrol as the patrolling surfman from Eastham would not be accessible due to the harbor. The patrol south covered about two and one half miles, with the patrolling surfman exchanging tokens with the surfman from Old Harbor Station. Before this station was constructed in 1898, the Orleans south patrol had to cover the entire beach to Chatham Harbor, a distance of about five miles. Each patrolling surfman carried a brilliant red Coston signal which he would fire upon spotting a wreck as a signal to the crew that they had been spotted and assistance had been summoned. It would also be used to warn a ship approaching the danger line along the coast to haul offshore.

The End of the United States Lifesaving Service and the Birth of the US Coast Guard

On January 28, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed the law creating the United States Coast Guard by combining the Lifesaving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service. The law put the Coast Guard under the Treasury Department in peacetime and under the Navy in time of war, or as directed by the President. For the USLSS personnel, it was a significant change. They were now in the military service, with new ranks, rates and pay scales. They were now subject to transfer, but most of the personnel who made the transition remained in their original locations. District superintendents became commissioned officers, keepers became warrant officers, and surfmen became enlisted Coast Guardsmen. The surfmen became known as "sand pounders" by their sea-going counterparts. The Orleans Station was listed on and off as a Coast Guard lifeboat station until April of 1947. The property was turned over to the General Services Administration in 1954, and ultimately to the National Park Service in 1970.

Initially, the new service left the organizations of the two components basically the same. The lifesaving stations were still organized in the same districts, with Orleans being renamed Station 40. As to the surfmen assigned to the stations, they were now in the military service, with new ranks, rates, and pay scales. While they were now subject to transfer, most remained at their old stations. District Superintendents became commissioned officers, Station Keepers became warrant officers, and surfmen became enlisted Coast Guardsmen, though they would be known as "sand pounders" by their seagoing counterparts. All were now eligible for military retirement, and some of the veteran lifesavers took advantage of this.

In addition to this organizational change, a number of other changes were in the wind that would change the face of lifesaving, but not the bravery, fortitude, and determination of those

who engaged in it. These changes were brought about through technology and improvements in navigation.

One of these changes was the introduction of the motor lifeboat. The Chatham Old Harbor Station was one of the first on the Cape to receive one, a 26 foot Monomoy Surfboat, the nautical ancestor of Cape Cod's own CG36500. Since it was more practical to moor these boats than to launch them over the beach, it marked a big change in the way the Coast Guard went about the lifesaving business. The development of the two-way radio and aviation also brought about additional marked changes.

The opening of the Cape Cod Canal in 1914 marked another significant influence on lifesaving operations in Orleans. The concept behind the canal was to provide a safe and secure passage for east coast shipping, avoiding the treacherous waters to the east of the lower Cape. The initial canal in 1914 was a private enterprise, charging a substantial toll for passage. However, the US Government took over the Canal during World War 1, and after widening it and removing the toll, the Canal diverted much of the shipping traffic away from our dangerous waters.

The most dramatic lifesaving event during the Coast Guard years occurred on July 21, 1918 when a German U-Boat surfaced and began shelling the tug Perth Amboy and its four barges in tow. (As the U-Boat also shelled the Orleans coast, our town became the only spot in the US to be attacked during World War I.) On the morning of July 21, Keeper Robert Pierce was on duty as usual. He had been in the USLSS since 1890, and was 52 years old. Now a Coast Guardsman, he had just taken command of Station 40 in February. Pierce saw the attack developing, recognized that mariners were in danger, and like many before him, ordered the lifeboat launched and led the rescue himself. The only difference this time was that it was launched amid intense enemy fire. The day gave new meaning to the lifesavers' unofficial motto *you have to go out- you don't have to come back*. As the lifeboat approached the tug and barges, the concussions from the U-156's deck guns blew the hats off the heads of several surfmen. Pierce's boat met the lifeboat of the Perth Amboy's crew, and Surfman #1 Bill Moore transferred to it to render first aid to two wounded crewmen. Doctor's later credited Moore's actions with saving the arm of one of the men.

The Orleans Lifesaving Station no longer exists. One of the original nine stations erected by the USLSS in 1872, it was located on what was originally called Ponchet (now Pochet) Island, back of Nauset Beach about two and a half miles south of Nauset Harbor and about five miles from Orleans Village. Operations at Station 40 were discontinued in 1922 undoubtedly due in large part to the technological changes described above. It was again listed as active in 1928, and Public Works Administration funds were used to rebuild it in 1933. It disappears from the list of active stations in 1947. The property was turned over to the General Services Administration in 1954, and to the National Park Service in 1970.

No active lifesaving operations remain in Orleans today. However, the character, dedication, courage, and fortitude of those who risked their lives for the survival and safety of those at sea remain a strong pillar in the heritage of our town.

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