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## But most of them now rubble

# Life-saving station names live on

By Jim Gilbert

Stretched out along the coast of Cape Cod, at intervals of about five miles, lay the remains of the 13 U.S. Life-Saving Service stations that once protected seafarers from death in the surf.

In the years before the completion of the Cape Cod Canal early in this century, the ocean off the Cape was a major sealane. Steamboats and ships of sail of all sizes and trades plied the waters just off the coast. Then, as today, the coastline off the Cape was known as one of the "graveyards of the Atlantic." In the 1870's, an average of 75 ships would pass each day by the station at Pamet River (Ballston Beach).

A few of the old stations still stand on the Outer Cape. Most suffered the fate of any structure built on the bluffs overlooking the ocean, swept into the sea as the sand collapsed under storm surf and high tides.

But the names and the sites of the stations live on. Cahoon Hollow, Highlands, Race Point, and Coast Guard Beaches in Truro and Eastham are still used by beach lovers, winter and summer. But the sites had a different meaning to people in days before wireless communication and modern weather forecasting.

The names of the men that manned the stations are still familiar to Cape ears. The Pamet River crew at the turn of the century consisted of men named Dyer, Atwood, Paine Hatch and Nickerson.

Life at a station was tough and the pay very low. The men spent 10 months a year living on the beach. During the summer, only the keeper lived at the station. A surfman worked seven days a week for \$65 a month. He was allowed to visit his family one day a week from sunrise to sunset.

The beaches were patrolled each night between the stations. Guards trudging from neighboring stations exchanged greetings at halfway shacks during each watch. During the day, except during foggy or stormy weather, a watch was kept from the station.

Each week a different member of the station cooked for the rest. Men were ranked by the keeper according to their length of time in the service and their abilities. Usually seven to nine surfmen were under the station keeper.

The apparatus used by the lifesavers may seem archaic by modern standards, but it was often used successfully to save men from ships which had come ashore.

The basic piece of equipment was the surfboat, a wooden boat weighing up to a half ton, rowed by the surfmen through the surf to the distressed ship. It was brought down to the water's edge by a horse, often wearing a bag over its head to keep it from shying at the surf's edge.

The next piece apparatus was the breeches buoy used in connection with a small cannon called the Lyle Gun. The gun fired an 18-ounce shot with an attached line into the rigging of a stranded vessel. Attached to this line was another line, stronger than the first. With the help of a block, a pulley, and an additional line, a system of transporting victims off a wreck and above the high cold waves was set up. The conveyance was a cork ring around a pair of canvas breeches in which a victim sat while being pulled ashore. In the case of a ship being well offshore, generally more than 200 yards, a life-car, resembling a



Advocate photo by Jim Gilbert

Foundation of the old Pamet River life-saving station is strewn over Ballston Beach.

small, canvas-topped boat, was hung in place of the breeches buoy. Thus a victim could be pulled through the surf with a minimum chance of dying from exposure before reaching the shore.

On their patrols, surfmen carried a coston signal, a bright red flare that could warn a ship offshore or inform a stranded vessel—as well as his fellow lifesavers—that assistance was forthcoming.

The duty was vigorous, demanding and dangerous. Many died in the rescue attempts. It required hours of practice each week to maintain a high level of proficiency.

The stations and halfway houses were connected by telephone. When a vessel was close to danger, the word was sent out. All along the beach equipment was readied for use. According to the chronicler of Cape lifesavers, J.W. Dalton, in his book, *The Lifesavers of Cape Cod*, these were the most harrowing nights of all.

When a ship was sighted too close to shore in a gale, the chances were great that she would come ashore. But where the accident would happen could not be foreseen. The only thing that lifesavers could do was quickly prepare for the worst.

In the winter, even keeping the watch was hazardous. Frostbite was common. Often men would become lost in a blizzard after high seas had forced them off the beach and

onto the bluffs. Often they had to run for their lives from huge waves that would sweep up the beach and wash up the sand cliffs. The five-mile round trip from the station to the halfway house was a long and lonely vigil, especially when a storm was raging.

In spite of the overwhelming obstacles facing the lifesavers they were often successful. In 1872, the year the service was formally regulated under the supervision of the Secretary of the Treasury, no lives were lost in the wrecks that occurred on guarded coasts.

Before establishment of the U.S. Live-Saving Service, emergency huts and stations were maintained by the Massachusetts Humane Society and by other relief societies. But it was not until the federal government intervened that regular paid crews with up-to-date equipment and training arrived.

For the men in the lifesaving service, pride and status in their communities partially supplanted the low pay. The men were respected in their profession and occupied a high position in local society, according to the leading Cape historian, Henry Kitteredge. The economies of Cape towns were dependent on the sea and the men who worked on it. Memories of wrecks and storms, such as the horrible gale of 1841 in which 52 Truro men were lost, could never be far from the minds of men and women ashore.