

Race Point Has Seen Fierce Storms And Wrecks In Its Sixty-Five Years

From 1885 to 1902 Almost A Hundred Vessels Came to Grief at Point of Cape—Station Rescued More Than 600 Persons

This is another in a series of articles appearing in *The Barnstable Patriot* describing the Coast Guard Stations of Cape Cod.

Race Point station is one of the Cape's original nine stations, built in the winter of 1872, manned in 1873. It is situated one and one-half miles east of Race Point, and about three miles from Provincetown, Race Point is the only one accessible in an ordinary automobile. It has a good place to park one's car, while taking a stroll on the beach.

Race Point, at the extreme northern tip of Cape Cod, and Monomoy at the southern end, are the two "wreck centers" along the backside. Which locality has witnessed the greatest number of marine disasters is of small moment. J. W. Dalton in his "Life Savers of Cape Cod," 1902, declares that from 1885 to 1902 a total of 92 vessels came to grief at Race Point, and that men of the station rescued over 600 persons, 37 of them by use of the breeches buoy.

Tides and currents run past Race Point with great velocity. West of the station is Race Run, once a tidal inlet, now nearly filled in. Surfmen of Race Point station patrol westerly to the Race, which prevents their meeting with Wood End surfmen; easterly and southerly they meet Peaked Hill Bars station, half buried in the sand, lies the hull of a small Nova Scotian schooner, wrecked during the days of the 18th amendment. Because Old Neptune tossed her off her course, her cargo of liquor was returned to her owners. But the bleached bones of the schooner remain.

Outer Bar Dangerous

An outer bar which extends from Race Point to Highland Light, and a parallel inner bar, make waters off the point extremely dangerous. A northeast or north wind, and a sailing vessel too close to the outer bar, has always spelled trouble at Race Point. At the turn of the tide, the Race, or Race Rip as the coast guard call it, can take a sailing vessel like a chip. Sometimes a vessel rides over the outer bar, and strikes on the inner bar, there to break up. "A skipper may be almost on the outer bar," explained a Coast Guard, "though his sounding may show 25 feet of water. Five

minutes later he will be stuck in the sand."

Race Point's lookout tower is a separate building from the station house. From this tower, on a clear night, beams of half a dozen light-houses can be seen—Cape Cod light at North Truro, nearby Race Point, Wood End, Long Point, and Gurnet at Plymouth, among others on unusually clear nights the light on the Customhouse tower in Boston, more than 50 miles across Cape Cod Bay, can be made out. Race Point is the most northerly Coast Guard station on the Cape. It is radio equipped, for communication with Boston headquarters. Its aviation number is 34.

Of the peril mariners encounter in rounding Race Point, historians frequently speak. The fact that a lighthouse was established here in 1816 shows it was early known as a shore to be given a wide berth. When Henry Hudson rounded the Cape in 1609 he anchored, and it is believed the locality was Race Point. His men landed, picked wild grapes and roses. Hudson called this tip end, New Holland, and what is Race Point, White Point, for its sands. He also logged, sailing past Cape Cod, this extraordinary incident:

A Strange Sight

"June 15. This morning one of our company, looking overboard, saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one more came up, and by that time she was close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men. A little after, a sea came and overturned her. From the navel upward, her back and breasts were like a woman, (as they say who saw her), her body was big as one of us; her skin very white; and long hair hanging down behind, of color black. In her going down, they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a erel. Their names that saw her were Thomas Hilles and Robert Rayner."

Without impugning the veracity of the great Englishman who discovered and named the Hudson river, it must be recorded that no skipper who rounded Race Point since 1609 has logged quite such an unusual sight.

At Race Point, as at other stations along the Cape's backside, the sand comes swirling up in the wind, making the surfman's patrol a hard, dangerous grind. So strong is the blast of the sand, at times, that it literally cuts glass. A station's log,

on the backside, often contains entries like this: "New glass was set in the watch tower's windows Tuesday to replace that cut by the sand."

Sand Etches Figures

Coast Guards sometimes while away time by arranging a piece of glass with wood or metal covering, in the shape of a figure. This they set up outside the station house, letting it stand in the blast of whirling sand in rough weather. Sand literally etches away the uncovered portion of the glass, leaving little

figures, or initials or names. Girls on Cape Cod beaches sometimes use the same technique by stripping adhesive tape on portions of their anatomy, and letting Old Sol beam down on them. When they remove the tape, white initials or hearts or whatever they chose remain on sun-browned epidermis.

Henry David Thoreau visited Race Point on his journey down the great outer beach. His chapters on

the dunes make one ready to set out forthwith to roam them. "From the first high sand-hill, covered with beach-grass and bushes to its top, on the edge of the desert, we overlooked the shrubby hill and swamp country which surrounds Provincetown on the north and protects it, in some measure, from the invading sand. Notwithstanding the universal barrenness, and the contiguity of the desert, I never saw

an autumnal landscape so beautifully painted as this was. It was like the richest rug imaginable spread over an uneven surface; no damask nor velvet, nor Tyrian dye or stuffs, nor the work of any loom, could ever match it . . . Coming from the country, as I did, and many autumnal woods as I had seen, this was perhaps the most novel and remarkable sight that I saw on the Cape."



GUARDING CAPE SHORES is the Coast Guard, ever alert to help those in distress. This Winter rescue scene is typical of many others. (Photo by A. N. Thomson)