

# A HISTORY of SERVICE The Origins of the U.S. Coast Guard

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



The remaining Great Lakes and coastal maritime sites in the United States have a colorful and exciting past. Their history of organized aids to navigation and assistance to mariners is a many-chaptered story. The Revenue Cutter Service, the U.S. Life Saving Service, and the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment - once separate civilian organizations - eventually combined to become a single organization known today as the U.S. Coast Guard.

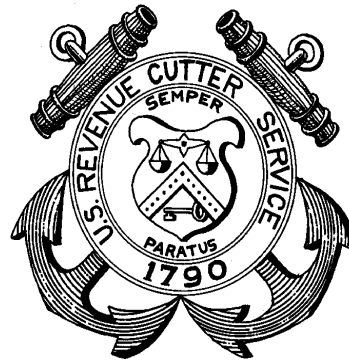
## Revenue Cutter Service

The precursor of today's U.S. Coast Guard was known by several titles from 1790-1915. A 1789 Act created a "force to regulate the collection of duties imposed by law on the tonnage of ships or vessels, and on goods, wares, and merchandises imported into the United States." Though Congress recognized the need for a floating police force in the 1780's, it wasn't until 1863 when it created the "U.S. Revenue Cutter Service". It is unclear when the cutter service came to the Great Lakes, but the period 1809-1820 seems likely to historians. In 1818 the first lighthouses were established on the Great Lakes and the first documented Revenue Cutter (the Erie) was stationed at Presque Isle on Lake Erie. It is interesting to note that prior to the Civil War the term "coast guard" was used in 1846 by the Cutter Service's Commandant Fraser. In 1864 the Army and Navy Journal printed what reads like an early version of today's Coast Guard motto, "Keeping always under steam and ever ready, in the event of extraordinary need, to render valuable service, the cutters can be made to form a coast guard whose value it is impossible at the present time to estimate."

Cutters like the **Tuscarora**, **Salmon P. Chase**, and **William P. Fessenden** enforced customs laws on the Great Lakes, provided support to U.S. Life Saving Service stations, and after, 1871, assisted distressed mariners. The Revenue Cutter Service merged with the Life Saving Service in 1915 to form the core of today's U.S. Coast Guard.

## U.S. Life Saving Service

In 1785 the Massachusetts Humane Society formed creating the initial volunteer civilian life saving service. That group built the first American Lifeboat Station at Cohasset in 1807.



In 1837, Congress directed the Revenue Cutter Service to begin watching for and assisting mariners in distress. It wasn't until 1847 that Congress appropriated funds for shore-based assistance to mariners.

A government organized life saving service did not take shape on the Great Lakes until 1876 though the first appropriation for the Great Lakes region was in 1854. Francis metal lifeboats were the only equipment provided, and then only to selected lighthouse keepers or bonded private citizens. A total of 51 of the lifeboats were sent to the lakes in 1853-54. At this point it was still very much a volunteer organization fraught with ineptness and lack of training.

The shipping season of 1870-1871 was particularly severe on the Great Lakes with 214 lives lost in shipwrecks. This loss stimulated Congressional action leading to the creation of the U.S. Life Saving Service (USLSS) and funds supporting paid crews, station keepers, and construction of several new stations. Many Great Lakes stations fell into a second class of station erected at a cost of \$4,790 and consisting of a lifeboat and a few other essential pieces of equipment. The stations in the original authorization for the lakes included sixteen



Grand Marais Life Saving Station - 1927

"second class" or lifeboat stations and fourteen "first class" or lifesaving stations. In 1874 (the year Au Sable Light Station became operational) Congress approved funds to construct four complete stations on Lake Superior. The Vermilion Point, Crisps Point, Two Heart River, and Sucker River (Deer Park) stations opened in May, 1877. Later stations within the area of the Lakeshore include Marquette (1891), Duluth (1895), Houghton (1885), Grand Marais (1900), and Eagle Harbor, (1912).

By 1893 there were 47 stations on the Great Lakes and the crews reputations for heroics led to their being called "storm warriors" and "heroes of the surf." Their unofficial motto was "regulations say we have to go out, but they don't say anything about coming back."

In 1878, Congress recognized the importance of the USLSS and its contributions by making it a separate entity within the Department of the Treasury. Sumner Kimball was appoint-

ed its first Superintendent. Since there was no restriction on how long a person could serve, Kimball remained until 1915 when the Life Saving Service merged with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

### U.S. Lighthouse Establishment and Service

As early as 1716 a lighthouse (Little Brewster Island) was constructed at the entrance to Boston Harbor. By 1779, there were 12 lighthouses along the eastern seaboard. The ninth law Congress passed created the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment under the Department of the Treasury. In part it reads “the necessary support, maintenance and repairs of all lighthouses, beacons, buoys, and public piers erected, placed, or sunk before the passing of this act, at the entrance of. Or within any bay, inlet, harbor, or port of the United States, for rendering the navigation thereof easy and safe...”

There is some controversy regarding the first lighthouse on the Great Lakes. Presq’isle (later renamed Presque Isle), the Niagara Fort light and Buffalo lights are leading contenders for that title in the early 1800’s. By 1838 the organization had expanded enough to warrant division into eight districts, two of which were on the Great Lakes. That same year the Great Lakes’ first lightship was stationed at the Straits of Mackinac, though it saw difficult service due to extreme weather.

The U.S. Lighthouse Establishment Board was created in 1852 to report annually the needs and progress of the Service to Congress. The board was made up of Presidential appointees but also included Army engineers and topographic engineers. One of their first duties was to reorganize the Service into 12 districts, assigning an inspector to each district. In this action the Great Lakes fell under the Tenth and Eleventh Districts.

Prior to the Civil War, ships were put into service to provide support for early lighthouses. In 1856 the **Challenger** and **Skylark** were commissioned as lighthouse tenders. The **Dahlia** was built in 1874 to serve on the Great Lakes and was the first ship named after a flower or plant. Later, the **Amaranth** and **Marigold** both served the Au Sable Light Station.

By 1865 there were 72 lighthouses on the Great Lakes, including 15 on Lake Superior. During this time, nearly all of the lighthouses were refitted with Fresnel lens, replacing the old Argand lamps with parabolic reflectors. Fresnel lens ranged from first order, which stood nearly 12 feet high and weighed 12,800 pounds, down to sixth order, which was 17 inches high and weighed 220 pounds. (The Au Sable third order lens is 62.5 inches high and weighs 1,985 pounds.)



Lighthouse Tender Marigold

Though the first mechanically operated fog signal (bells) was placed in the Great Lakes in 1851, the first steam fog signal was installed on Lake Michigan at South Manitou Island. Another landmark, uniforms for lighthouse personnel, went into effect in 1884 to “aid in maintaining its discipline, increase its efficiency, raise its tone and add to its esprit de corps.” President Grover Cleveland included the U.S. Lighthouse Service under the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883, in the hope of creating a more professional cadre of employees and reducing the number of political cronies at the helm of lighthouses nationwide.

As a result of public criticism of the lighthouse board type of governing body, Congress dissolved the board in 1910, reorganized the service and created the Bureau of Lighthouses. George R. Putnam was named the first Bureau Commissioner. Putnam served in that post for 25 years, overseeing significant expansion of the service while reducing the number of employees.

In 1939, President Roosevelt merged the U. S. Lighthouse Service into the U.S. Coast Guard, the third organization to have contributed to the current coastal authority.

Today the Coast Guard remains a vital part of the Great Lakes maritime world. Missions include the historic ones of search and rescue and aids to navigation as well as the new ones of ice breaking, pollution response, and homeland security.

Sources: “Guardians of the Eighth Sea - A History of the U.S. Coast Guard on the Great Lakes” by Michael T. O’Brien, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976, “This is the Coast Guard” by H.R. Kaplan and James F. Hunt, Cornell Maritime Press, 1972, Internet site: <http://www.uslife-savingservice.org/links.html>



Munising USCG Lifeboat Station Crew - 1933