THE SLEEPING BEAR POINT LIFE-SAVING STATION

By the turn of the century, there were about sixty life-saving stations along the Great Lakes. This included one at Point Betsie, about 19 miles southwest of Sleeping Bear Point, and one on North Manitou Island about 15 miles north of Sleeping Bear Point. The Manitou Passage, the channel between the Manitou Islands and the mainland, was a heavily-used shipping lane. Ships traveling between Chicago and the Straits of Mackinac favored the Manitou Passage over the open waters of Lake Michigan because of the shorter distance and access to the harbor-of-refuge on South Manitou Island. However, the waters of the Manitou Passage could be treacherous and shipwrecks occurred frequently. In 1901, two identical life-saving stations were constructed to guard the Manitou Passage, one on South Manitou Island and one at Sleeping Bear Point.

Surfman P.J. McCauley on day watch at Sleeping Bear Point — 1910.

The station was typical of the many life-saving stations along the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Coast. The keeper and crew followed daily routines that were standardized throughout the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Each day of the week was set aside for a specific activity such as boat practice, beach rescue drill or "resuscitation of the apparently drowned." In addition, there was constant watchfulness for ships in danger. On clear days, one surfman always manned the lookout tower. At night and on foggy days, the men walked beach patrol. They would light a signal flare to warn off ships that strayed too close to shore. This constant vigilance prevented accidents and provided prompt assistance when one occurred. When a ship ran aground, the life-saving team would perform a rescue either from shore, using the beach apparatus, or in an open boat, often risking their own lives on stormy seas.

The Sleeping Bear Point station was not built at its present site, but about a half-mile to the northwest at Sleeping Bear Point. The complex included the station house, a boathouse, outbuilding, lookout tower and signal tower. Several cottages sprang up nearby for the families of the surfmen. A second boathouse was built on a wharf in Sleeping Bear Bay, about a mile east of the station. It was built to house a 34-foot rowing lifeboat which required deeper water for launching.

Sleeping Bear Point Life-Saving Station, 1920 — Note drifting sand engulfing buildings.

Although the location at Sleeping Bear Point provided an excellent vantage point of the Manitou Passage, certain problems gradually became evident. Drifting sand threatened to bury the buildings and heavy surf frequently made launching the boats difficult. Therefore, in 1931 the station was moved to its present location. The move took about five weeks and was accomplished by means of horses and a system of rollers, track and cable. The two boathouses, the outbuilding and the signal tower were also moved to their present locations. The second boathouse (which was built for the 34-foot lifeboat and now contains restrooms for the museum) was turned so that the doors faced inland and was converted into a garage. Even after the move, the lookout tower remained at Sleeping Bear Point where a high dune provided the best visibility. Today the tower no longer exists.

Over the years, technological developments such as radios, radar and helicopters reduced the need for many life-saving stations. The Sleeping Bear Point Coast Guard Station closed during World War II and stood idle until 1971 when it served briefly as the visitor center for the newly-established Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. For several summers rangers led tours in the empty station, interpreting the U.S. Life-Saving Service and Great Lakes maritime history. Then in 1982 and 1983 the site underwent historic restoration. The grounds and the buildings were restored to their 1931 appearance, except for the interior of the boathouse and the crew's bedroom which were restored to the way they looked in the early 1900s during the first few years of the station's existence. In the spring of 1984 installation of exhibits and furnishings was completed and the former Coast Guard station re-opened as a maritime museum. The official dedication took place with a gala ceremony on Coast Guard Day, August 4, 1984.

The United States Life-Saving Service 1871-1915

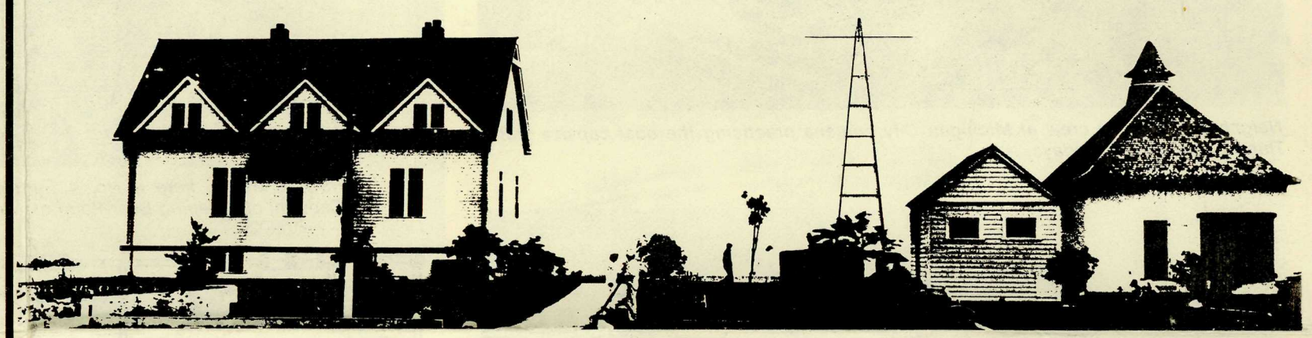
Navigating the nation's coastal waters, whether the oceans or the Great Lakes, has always been a risky business. Courageous volunteers performed most of the early rescues, but often, their efforts were hampered by inadequate training and poor equipment. As the nation grew in the post-Civil War era, shipping also increased. On the Great Lakes, both sailing vessels and steamers were numerous, carrying cargoes of lumber, grain, iron ore and other products. During the severe winter of 1870-71, 214 people lost their lives in shipwrecks on the Great Lakes. Shipwrecks were also common along the Atlantic Coast. The need for professional rescue crews was evident, and in 1871 Congress appropriated money for this purpose. The U.S. Life-Saving Service was the government agency charged with carrying out rescues from shore stations.

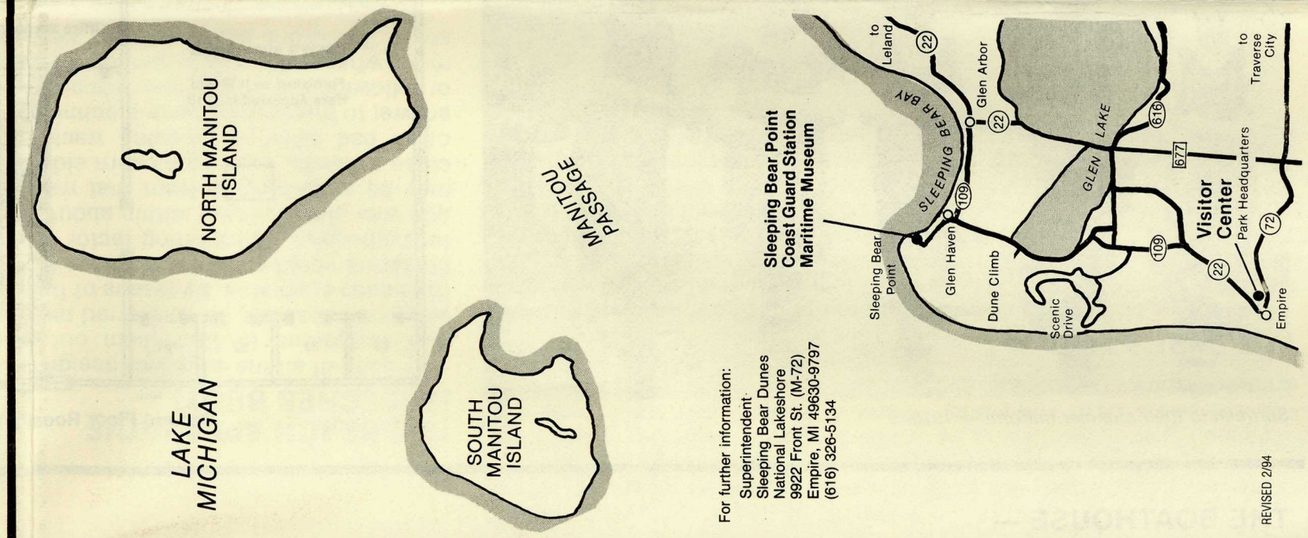
The United States Coast Guard 1915-Present

Each station had a keeper, often called "Captain," who had overall responsibility for the station. He was chosen for his skill as a boatman coupled with the ability to read and write. The keeper supervised a crew of six to eight surfmen hired from the local community. The main qualification for a surfman was the ability to row an open boat in a storm. The surfmen were ranked by skill, the best man being #1, while the least experienced would be #6, #7 or #8, depending on the size of the crew. The men worked their way up through the ranks. On the Great Lakes, the surfmen worked during the shipping season from April to mid-December, while the keeper worked year-round.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

SLEEPING BEAR POINT COAST GUARD STATION MARITIME MUSEUM





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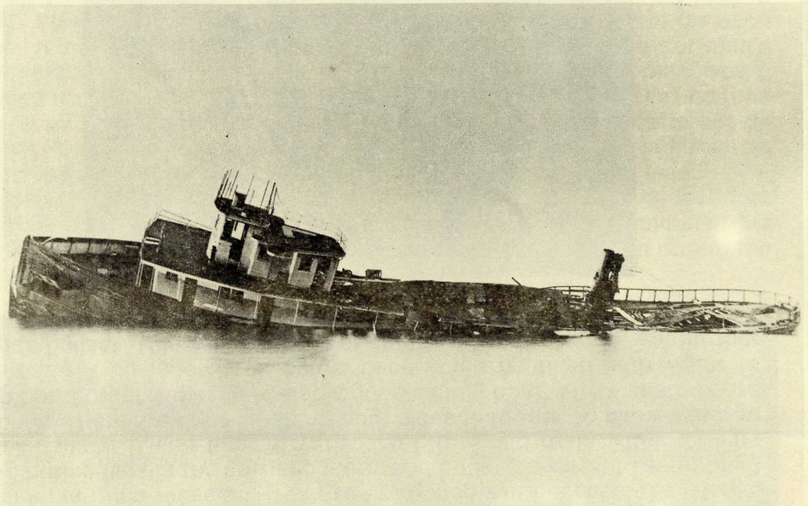
Inside the Museum

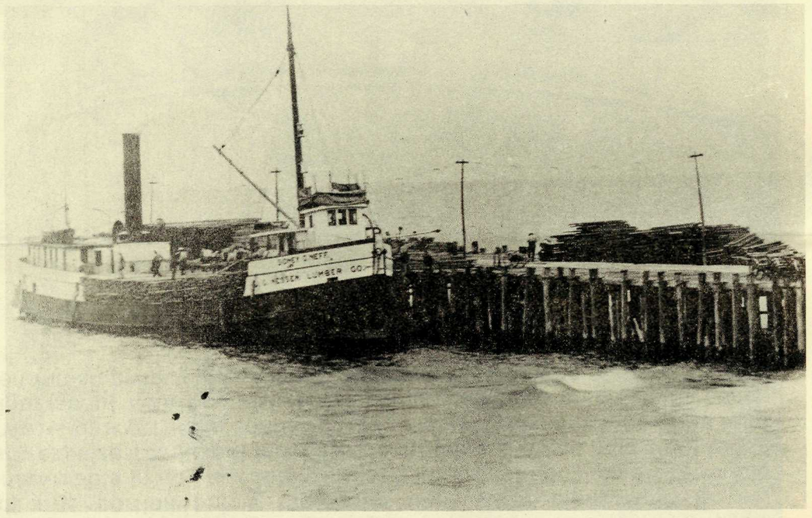
As you browse through the museum, you will learn the historic use of each of the rooms. A hallway divides the house down the middle: the keeper and his family lived on one side, the crew on the other. The two kitchens are still readily identifiable by the kitchen sinks. The kitchens and the adjoining living rooms now contain exhibits on Great Lakes maritime history.

THE FIRST FLOOR —



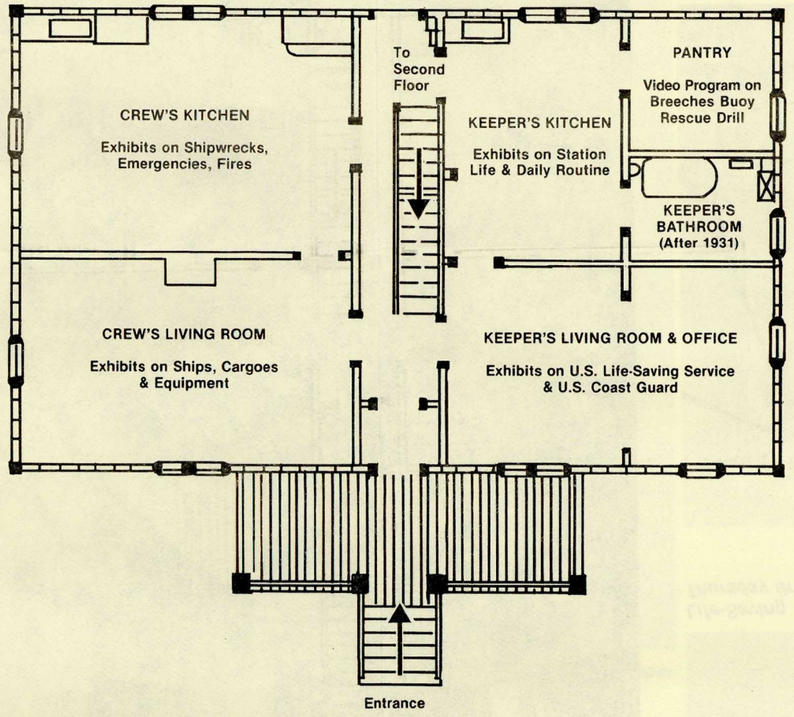
Steamer "Rising Sun" wrecked off Pyramid Point, October 29, 1917. Vessel was a total loss. All crew was saved.

Exhibits in the crew's kitchen recount the various hazards of Great Lakes shipping. Sailors often say, "The closest land is straight down." Storm, fog and fire are ever-present threats. You will see examples of safety gear such as a portable foghorn, signal flares, life vests and a bailing pan. And you will learn of some of the shipwrecks on Lake Michigan, including the story of the ill-fated freighter Francisco Morazan, which ran aground off South Manitou Island in 1960.

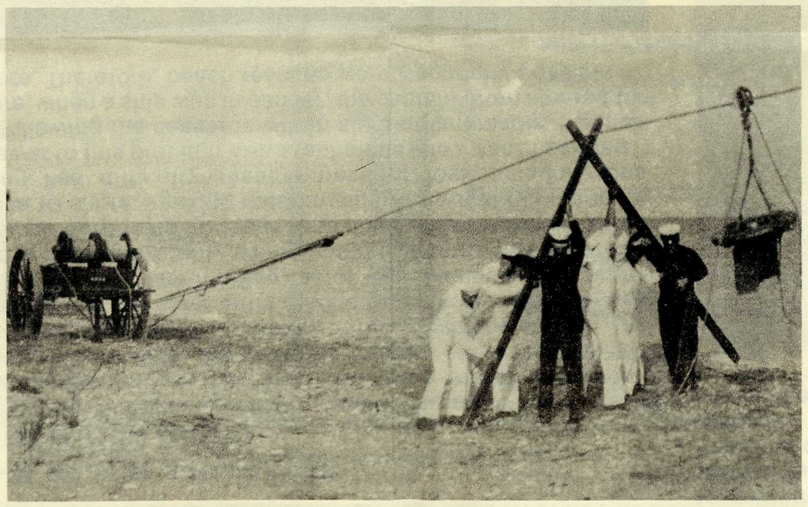


Lumber hooker "Sidney O. Neff" at Empire, Michigan dock — 1912.

In the crew's living room, you will find displays about ships of the Great Lakes. You will see pictures of some typical ships of the past, like the whaleback and the lumber hooker. Examples of cargoes give a feeling for the function of the ships and the economic life of the region. Pieces of nautical equipment—ships' whistles, side lights, hardware associated with the rigging—help to impart the atmosphere aboard a Great Lakes ship.



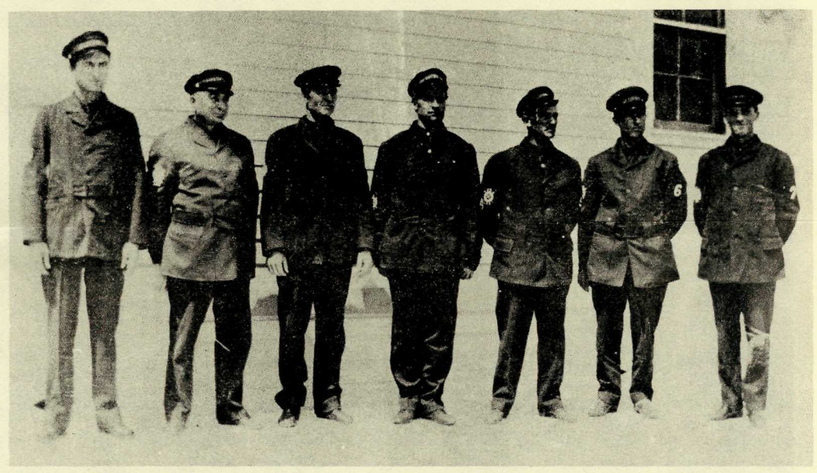
First Floor Room and Exhibit Plan



Thursday was the day for practicing with the beach-apparatus at Sleeping Bear Point — 1927.

The crew demonstrates artificial resuscitation under the watchful eyes of the Keeper and the District Inspector — 1912.

The keeper's kitchen describes the daily life at the station. The routine for each day of the week is recounted through historic photos, drawings and quotations. You will see photos of the station in its original setting at Sleeping Bear Point. In the pantry, you can watch a five-minute videotape of a "living history" beach apparatus drill. The bathroom adjoining the kitchen is restored to its 1931 appearance, complete with a variety of toilet articles.

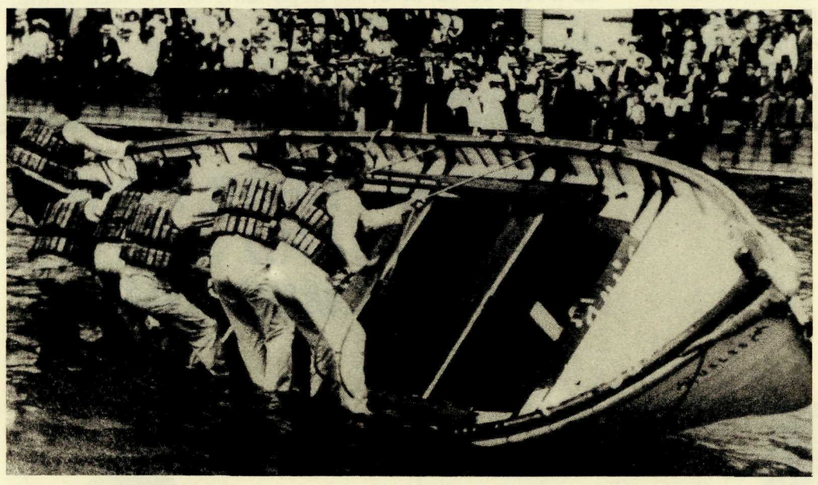


Captain Charles Robinson and crew at the Sleeping Bear Point Life-Saving Station — 1910.

The keeper's living room tells the story of the U.S. Life-Saving Service and its successor, the U.S. Coast Guard. You will see historic uniforms and pictures of rescues using both the beach apparatus and a surfboat. A large map shows the locations of life-saving stations and lighthouses around the Great Lakes in 1870. Two artifacts of special interest are on display—a Manby mortar (forerunner of the Lyle gun used in beach rescues), and a Fresnel lens (a lighthouse beacon). Photographs of modern Coast Guard equipment update the story of the U.S. Coast Guard.

THE SECOND FLOOR —

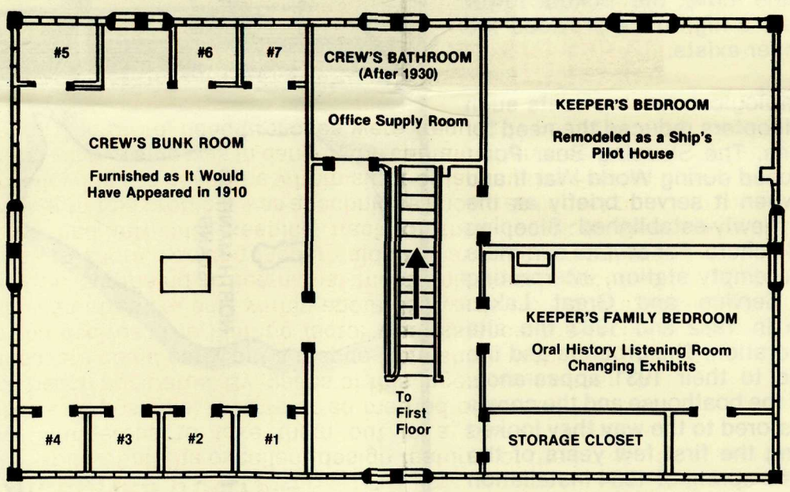
The crew's dormitory has been furnished to portray the period 1902 to 1915. Furnishings were spartan. There was a cot and a closet for each man. A number over the closet door corresponded to the surfman's numbered position on the crew. The simple, functional room gives a feeling for the spartan lifestyle at the station. Remember that at no time would all the cots be occupied, for there was always someone out on patrol. At any time the sleepers could be awakened abruptly with the cry, "Ship ashore!" Then all would dress hurriedly and rush to the rescue. The families of married crew members sometimes lived in small houses that built up around the station. While the married crewman could visit his family on his day off, he was required to sleep at the station during the rest of the week.



Neighbors watching crew at Michigan City, Indiana practicing the boat capsize drill. This was done on Tuesdays.

Surfmen in their summer uniform — 1910.

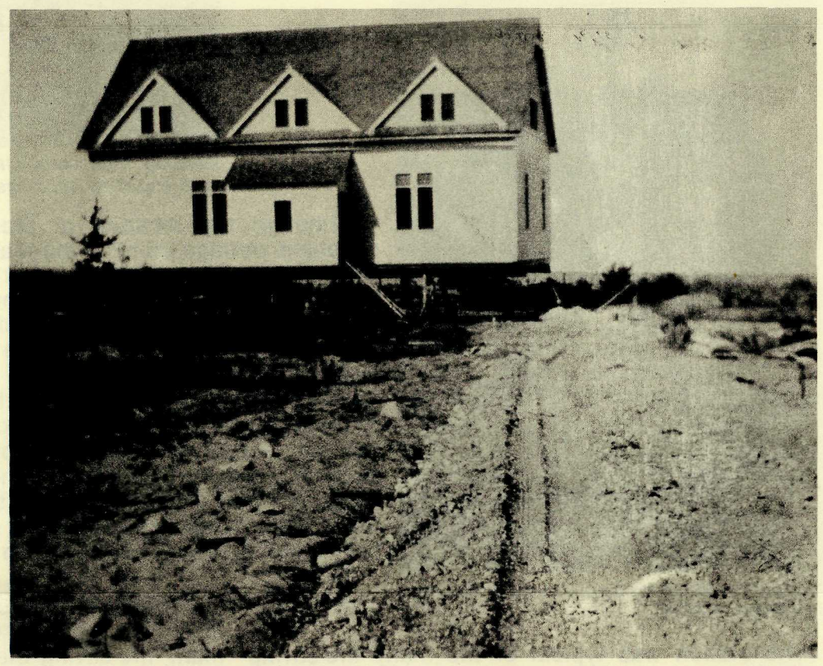
Fred J. Marsh, here a No. 4 Surfman, rose to become Keeper (Captain) of Sleeping Bear Point station from 1926 to 1936.



Second Floor Room and Exhibit Plan

Across the hall, in the Keeper's bedroom, is a simulation of a pilot house of a Great Lakes ship. You will see a panoramic view of the Manitou Passage as you stand among the instruments and furnishings of the pilot house. Give your imagination free rein: picture yourself guiding the ship safely past shoals, with the roar of the engine in your ears and the rolling deck under foot.

Next door, in the Keeper's family room, is a model illustrating the technique used to move the station in 1931. A local resident, Mr. William Popp, who actually participated in moving the station, constructed the model and donated it to the park. While you look at the model, you will have an opportunity to listen to a taped interview with Admiral Willard Smith, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, 1966-1970. The son of a surfman, Admiral Smith recounts his experiences growing up in an active life-saving station. His family lived at the North and South Manitou Island stations as well as at the Sleeping Bear Point station.



Moving the Sleeping Bear Point Station to its present location — 1931.

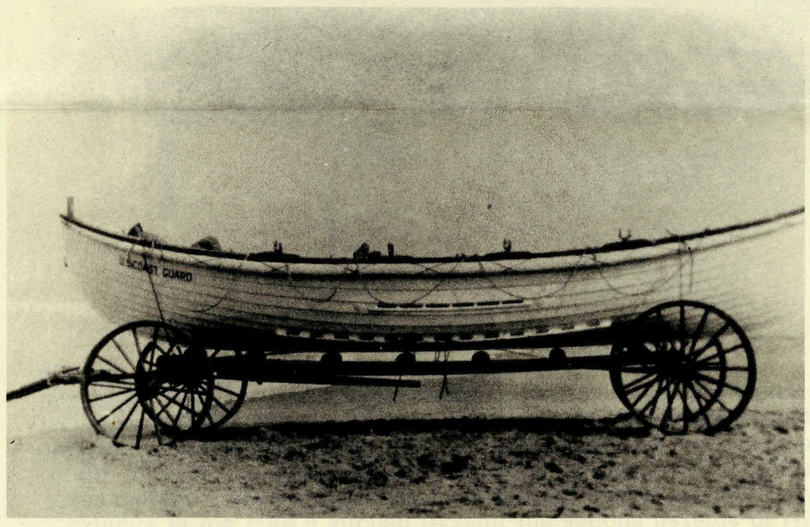
The life-saving stations played an important role in local communities, assisting in many ways beyond their official functions. The surfmen became folk heroes, greatly respected for their courage and skill. Neighbors often came by to watch their drills, especially the boating practice. This involved not only rowing in the surf, but also intentionally capsizing the boat and then righting it. The constant practice payed off in a crisis. From the time of its establishment in 1871 until it became part of the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service rescued over 178,000 people. Its success rate was an astounding 99%.

THE BOATHOUSE —

The boathouse is restored to the way it looked during the first decade of the 1900s. It contains two surfboats, a fully-equipped beach cart, and a variety of other items used to carry out rescues. The tracks leading from the boathouse toward the water aided in launching the surfboats. The two surfboats have somewhat different designs and were used for different types of rescues.

THE SURFBOATS —

One of the boats is an original, built in the mid-1880s for a life-saving station in Wisconsin. It is 26 feet long, 7 feet wide, and has a very shallow draft (the portion below the water line). Its design made it very maneuverable in a heavy surf. This was important because a boat could easily capsize if it did not meet a wave properly. It could hold eight to ten survivors of a wreck, in addition to the rescue crew. Because of its light weight (about 1,000 pounds), it could be hauled on a cart down the beach when the shipwreck was some distance away from the station.



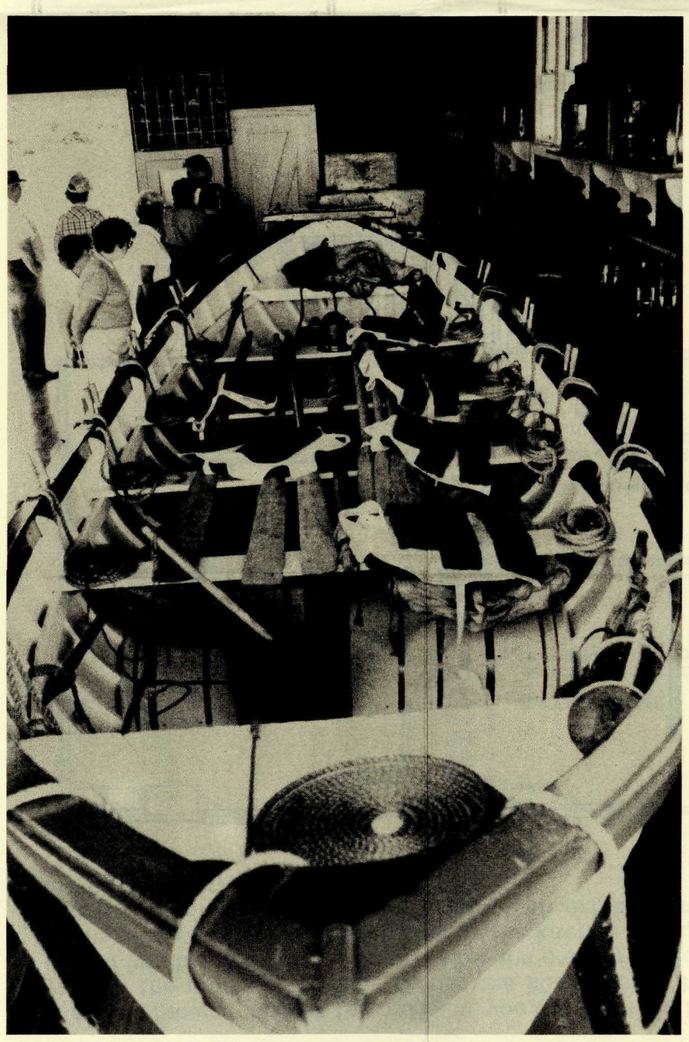
Self-bailing surfboat on boat wagon — note scuppers and hand rails.

The second boat is a replica Beebe-McLellan surfboat built specially for this maritime museum. It is extremely buoyant because of air tanks along both sides, in the bow and stern, and under the deck. In addition, it is self-bailing. If you filled it with water, it would drain within twenty seconds. There are flaps all along both sides that open to allow water to drain out through tubes. It is also a good sailing boat, with a centerboard and mast. A 30-gallon tank below deck could be filled with water to provide ballast. This was the boat of choice when the wreck was further offshore, beyond the breaking surf.

The station surfboat and crew — 1910.

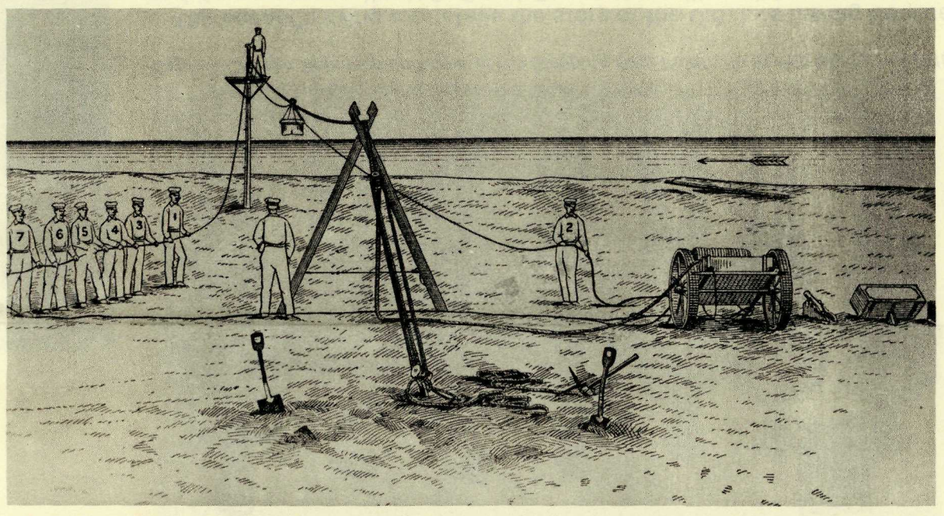
THE BEACH APPARATUS (BREECHES BUOY) —

In spite of all the excellent design features of the boats, it was dangerous to take them out in a storm. Therefore, whenever possible, the preferred method of rescue involved the beach apparatus. By means of this ingenious system, the lifesavers could carry out a rescue from shore with little risk to themselves. The limiting factor was distance: the technique was effective only within about 350 yards from shore. It may be surprising to learn that most shipwrecks occurred close to shore. Lacking modern aids to navigation, mariners often had difficulty keeping track of their location. One answer to this problem was a technique known as "coasting," or following the coastline within sight of landmarks. Furthermore, when a ship was in danger, the captain often steered for shore. Therefore, beach rescues were frequently possible.

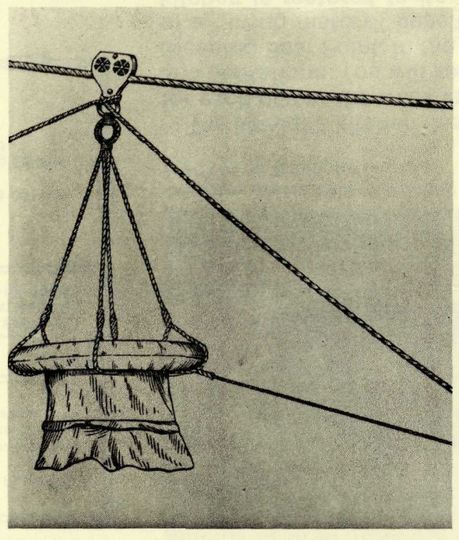


Replica of the Beebe-McLellan surfboat on exhibit at the museum. This replica was built in 1984 in Camden, Maine for the museum.

The beach cart with all necessary equipment was kept ready for use at a moment's notice. It could be pulled down the beach by either men or a horse to a suitable site for performing the rescue. The keeper fired a small cannon known as a "Lyle gun" to send a light rope out to the wreck. By pulling out a series of successively heavier lines, the crew on the wreck was able to rig a breeches buoy (a pair of canvas pants or breeches sewed to a life ring) that the lifesavers could pull back and forth to the beach. One by one, all those on board would ride ashore in the breeches buoy.



Life-Saving Service drill manual illustration of the beach-apparatus setup and crew positions for the Thursday drill.



The breeches buoy — a pair of canvas pants sewed to a life ring. One person at a time was pulled to the beach from a wrecked ship.

A keepers daughter riding in the breeches buoy during practice drill.

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