

The United States Coast Guard On The Great Lakes

A History

Copyright © 2007 Thomas P. Ostrom

To the men and women of the United States Coast Guard who have served with honor and courage from 1790 to the present. And to Lt. Ross Fleischmann (USCGR, Ret.) who served on the Great Lakes and in the USCGR Unit in Duluth, Minnesota, and who provided the author with invaluable information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to extend his appreciation to the sources listed at the end of this book; to the U.S. Coast Guard personnel who contributed their knowledge and professionalism; Dr. Robert Browning, the U.S. Coast Guard Historian, and his assistant, Coast Guard historian Scott Price, provided invaluable historical information, sources and photographs.

Dr. James Brady Foust, geography department chair at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and his talented cartography students, Philip Holleran and Drew Flater, facilitated and designed the exemplary Great Lakes maps used in the book.

Captain Fred Herzberg (USCG, Ret.), director of the Foundation for Coast Guard History, provided positive and constructive criticism on my previous book, *The United States Coast Guard, 1790 to the Present*. Captain Herzberg coached me on Coast Guard terminology and concepts to prepare me better for this book. The FCGH sponsored book, *The Coast Guard* (2004) was a significant source. Aviator-historian Lt. Cmdr. Thomas Beard (USCG, Ret.), the editor-in-chief of *The Coast Guard*, encouraged me in my historical writing.

Author, editor and publisher David St. John guided me through the publishing of my first book, and encouraged me in this one. The magnificent cover art was by Karen Salee, and the scrupulous copy editing was by Brian Firth.

Laura Jacobs, the curator of the Lake Superior Maritime Collections Archives at the Jim Dan Hill Library, University of Wisconsin-Superior, guided me through a plethora of articles, documents, and photographs. UW-S public affairs specialist and maritime author Al Miller led me to the UW-S Lake Superior Maritime Collection, inspired me with his own writing, and provided source material.

Reference librarian David Ouse and his colleagues at the Duluth Public Library directed me through a valuable Coast Guard and Lake Superior collection.

John J. Galluzzo, maritime historian and executive director of the United States Life-Saving Service Heritage Association, provided encouragement, source material, and the opportunity to write for the USLSSHA journal, "Wreck and Rescue."

Port Promotion Manager Lisa Marciniak of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority offered ideas, source materials, and her invaluable knowledge of port authority activities.

Steve Plunkett and his parents, Elizabeth and Judge Roger Plunkett, owners and operators of The Extraordinary Bookseller in Rochester, secured essential sources and offered encouragement and a hospitable environment for my literary endeavors.

Former Division 2 Captain Doug Cederholm, and Tom Romaine, Flotilla Captain in the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, Eighth Coast Guard Division, Western Rivers Region, and their intrepid colleagues encouraged my writing, invited me to attend and speak at meetings, clarified terminology, and provided information about the responsibilities, activities and training of USCGAUX personnel, even as USCGAUX members in the Washburn-Bayfield-Ashland area of Wisconsin provided important information and perspectives.

The Coast Guard complement at the Marine Safety Office and Office of the Captain of the Port in Duluth, and on the USCGC Alder, extended their hospitality and expertise during my 2004 and 2005 visits, as did Coast Guard personnel at Station Bayfield in Wisconsin.

Russ Gunvalson, a World War II veteran and POW, inspired me with his military service, and proudly shared information from the career of his son, Cmdr. Todd Gunvalson, USCG (Ret.).

I am especially grateful to my wife, Mary Lamal Ostrom, a former elementary school teacher who shares my Wisconsin origins. Without her encouragement and flexibility this book would not have been possible.

Thomas P. Ostrom

Rochester, MN

CONTENTS

1. A Brief Coast Guard History (1790 to 2006)
2. Predecessors on the Great Lakes (1790-1915)
3. The Coast Guard Emerges (1915-1939)
4. World War II to the Present (1945 to 2006)
5. Station Duluth (1866 to 2006) 6. The USCG Reserve and Auxiliary
7. Aids to Navigation
8. Great Lakes Light Stations
9. Great Lakes Ice Breakers
10. Buoy Tenders on the Lakes
11. Life Saving
12. Environmental Protection
13. Law Enforcement
14. Port Security, National Defense, and Commerce
15. An Overview of the Ninth Coast Guard District
16. Coast Guard Command Leadership

INTRODUCTION

IN 1961 I ACCOMPANIED two Wisconsin friends from Superior to the office of the Coast Guard recruiter in Duluth, Minnesota. From there we commenced an eight-year involvement with the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve.

That experience stimulated my desire to study and then chronicle the domestic and global missions of the multi-mission service in my first book, *A History of the United States Coast Guard, 1790 to the Present*. This book, *A History of the Coast Guard on the Great Lakes*, is a regional history of the Coast Guard on the Inland Seas.

The seasonal extremes of the humid continental climate on the Lakes are associated with pleasant summers, severe storms, high seas and winter ice. Dedicated Coast Guard Regular, Reserve, Auxiliary and civilian support personnel are stationed on Lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior.

The USCG is responsible for port security, ship and boat safety inspections, law enforcement, aids to navigation, search and rescue, the enforcement of fisheries and pollution laws, ice breaking, immigration and narcotics interdiction, and national defense.

The Revenue Service and the U.S. Life Saving Service were combined into the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915. The USCG was transferred from the Treasury Department to the Department of Transportation in 1967. After the 9.11.01 terrorist attacks upon the United States, the Coast Guard increased its national defense role and historical articulation with the U.S. Navy. In 2003 the Coast Guard was merged into the Department of Homeland Security.

The personnel of the Ninth (Great Lakes) Coast Guard District continue to add glory to the Coast Guard motto, “Semper Paratus, Always Ready.”

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE U.S. COAST GUARD

(1790 to the Present)

THE HISTORY OF THE United States Coast Guard is the story of a multi-mission military service with peacetime functions and civilian authority.

The maritime service has carried out its duties in times of peace and war at home and overseas. Coast Guard missions and responsibilities are domestic and global. The Coast Guard performs search and rescue (SAR), national security, port security, ship and boat inspection, aids to navigation (ATN), environmental protection, law enforcement, drug and immigration interdiction, fisheries enforcement, and oceanographic research missions.

The Coast Guard and its predecessors, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and U.S. Life-Saving Service, have saved tens of thousands of human lives at a cost of hundreds of its own personnel in honoring the Coast Guard motto, Semper Paratus (Always Ready).

The Coast Guard maritime domain has included international, coastal, and inland waters and rivers, including the Great Lakes (the Inland Seas): Huron, Ontario, Erie, Michigan and Superior. Before we begin our survey of the Coast Guard on the Great Lakes, a brief history of the service will provide context.

In 1789 the federal government established the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Aids to navigation, such as lighthouses and channel and harbor marking buoys, facilitated the safe passage of boats and ships in coastal and inland waters.

Navigation aids were used in British colonial America and the United States. Lightships (floating lighthouses) were introduced in the early nineteenth century.

The first lighthouse was built by British colonists in Boston Harbor (1716). The light beacons were illuminated by various kinds of wicks, oils, and complex glass lenses and prisms that magnified and concentrated light beams to be visible on clear nights to ships at sea.

Men and women who contributed to vessel and crew safety with their diligence, courage, and skills manned the lighthouses. They saved the lives of seafarers and passengers by venturing out in small boats to rescue victims in storms and shipwrecks, risking and sometimes losing their own lives in the process.

Women have served in the Coast Guard since the earliest lighthouse days. In recent decades women have commanded boats, cutters, aircraft, stations, districts and regional command areas.

The origin of the Coast Guard dates to 4 August, 1790. With the support of President George Washington and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, Congress authorized the creation of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. Ten revenue cutters were constructed to enforce tariff laws. Customs duties on imports were the only source of revenue for the new federal government.

The U.S. Lighthouse Service (USLHS), which became part of the Coast Guard in 1939, worked closely with the Coast Guard’s predecessor, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS), sometimes referred to as the Revenue Marine.

The USRCS was the first federal navy. The U.S. Navy came into being in 1798, in time to join the USRCS in the undeclared naval war with France and the War of 1812-1814 against Britain.

The USRCS was ordered to enforce tariff laws in the port of Charleston, South Carolina (1833) when merchants, in actions that were precursors to the Civil War (1861-1865), refused to collect and pay import duties which they perceived to threaten states’ rights and commercial prosperity.

The Steamboat Inspection Service was placed under the Justice Department in 1838, and later the Treasury Department and the Coast Guard.

The USRCS aided the Navy, Marines and Army in the protracted Seminole Wars of the 1830s and '40s; the Mexican War of 1846-1848; and the Spanish-American War (1898).

The initially voluntary U.S. Life-Saving Service (1848) was created to rescue coastal seafarers in distress. Over the years USLSS and lifeboat stations were placed along the Ocean and Gulf coasts and Great Lakes shorelines.

The U.S. Revenue Cutter Harriet Lane fired the first naval gunfire of the Civil War on 12 April, 1861. In 1876 USRCS cadets began training at the School of Instruction, the forerunner of the Coast Guard Academy.

The U.S. Life Saving Service (USLSS) was placed in the Treasury Department in 1878 and under the newly created Coast Guard in 1915.

With the purchase of Alaska from Russia (1867), the RCS began patrolling North Pacific, Alaskan, Bering Sea, and Arctic waters. The USRC Bear and other cutters served with distinction in the dangerous, icy cold, waters.

The USRCS and Public Health Service served the Inuit (Eskimo), Indian, and Euro-American inhabitants of Alaska. Captain Michael A. Healy and Lt. Ellsworth Bertholf, later Captain-Commandant of the USRCS (1911-1915) and the USCG (1915-1919), served with distinction on Alaskan waters and the Bering Sea Patrol.

Orville and Wilbur Wright initiated powered aircraft flight in 1903. Personnel from the Kill Devil Hills (North Carolina) U.S. Lifeboat Station stabilized the aircraft before takeoff and took photographs of the famous flight.

After the sinking of the British passenger ship Titanic (1912), the revenue cutters Seneca and Miami tracked icebergs in the International Ice Patrol. Coast Guard aircraft now patrol the iceberg areas.

The USRCS merged with the USLSS to form the United States Coast Guard on 28 July 1915. Commandant Ellsworth Bertholf guided the Coast Guard through the service's homeland and overseas missions in World War I. During that war and subsequent international conflicts, the USCG was transferred to the U.S. Navy. After World Wars I and II, Coast Guard commandants testified in Congress in opposition to attempts by Congress to place the USCG under permanent USN jurisdiction.

World War I (1914-18), initially called The Great War, disrupted the neutrality of the United States, which entered the conflict belatedly in 1917. The USCG assisted the USN in guarding Allied convoys, tracking and sinking German submarines, and saving thousands of lives on search and rescue missions, while losing almost 200 coast-guardsmen.

Coast Guard aviation missions commenced in 1916 when USCG personnel were admitted to the U.S. Navy flight training school at Pensacola, Florida. Lt. Elmer Stone (USCG) made the first airplane crossing of the Atlantic Ocean (1919) in a U.S. Navy NC-4 floatplane, pre-dating the 1919 Alcock/Brown and 1927 Lindbergh non-stop flights. The first operational USCG Air Station was established in 1920 at Morehead, North Carolina.

Seaplanes (flying boats) were used by the USCG in peace and war. In 1944 the first Coast Guard helicopter landing on a cutter occurred on the USCGC Cobb. A leader in helicopter flight since World War II, the USCG used boat-hulled helicopters for SAR from the 1960s until 1994, when the last HH3F amphibious rotor aircraft was retired. Lt. Frank Erickson (USCG) was a leading proponent of helicopter use in defense and search and rescue missions.

As an agency of the Treasury Department, the Coast Guard was called upon to enforce Prohibition laws (1920-33) on the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts and the Great Lakes. Using patrol boats, ocean-going cutters, and destroyers on loan from the U.S. Navy, the Coast Guard carried out the dangerous and unpopular mission, and suffered casualties and federal court adjudication in the process.

World War Two (1939-45) drew the USCG into domestic port security and overseas missions. The war was fought on land and sea in Europe, North Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The United States entered the war after the Japanese attack on U.S. military bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (7 December 1941). The USCGC Taney fired upon Japanese aircraft and subsequently served in combat in the Pacific and later in the Vietnam War.

During World War II the USCG conducted prewar and wartime convoy and anti-submarine patrols in the North Atlantic. The USCGC Northland captured several German military personnel in Greenland and a German trawler three months before America officially entered the war.

Coast Guard personnel assisted the FBI in the discovery and apprehension of German agents who reached Long Island (New York) from a German submarine.

The U.S. Coast Guard Reserve was initially formed as a civilian organization in 1939. The USCGR was designated to carry out domestic Coast Guard duties so regular service personnel could assume wartime duties at home and overseas.

The USCGR became a military arm of the Coast Guard in 1941. The civilian Coast Guard Auxiliary was created to carry out support activities. Auxiliary units assisted the USCG in aids to navigation (ATN), port security, life saving, boater safety, and search and rescue missions.

After the terrorist attacks upon the United States on 11 September 2001, the Auxiliary performed its functions on inland and coastal waterways.

Ethnic minorities and women have served in the USCG in civilian and military capacities. During World War II members of the Women's Coast Guard Reserve, known as SPARS from the service motto Semper Paratus, served under the command of Capt. Dorothy Stratton. Since World War II women have served in most Coast Guard ranks and rates in regular and reserve capacities.

The USCG has contributed technological innovations to maritime history. Commander L.M. Harding, in cooperation with academic and civilian scientists and the other military services, developed the LORAN (long-range electronics aid to navigation) system. LORAN has guided ships and aircraft in peace and war from World War II to the present. LORAN has since been supplemented by more advanced navigation technology systems.

After World War II the Coast Guard returned from U.S. Navy jurisdiction to the Treasury Department, and resumed peacetime functions. During the Korean War (1950-53) the USCG performed military support duties in the Pacific, ran destroyer escorts, manned LORAN stations, and served port security functions at home and overseas.

In 1957 three Coast Guard cutters navigated across Arctic waters. The U.S. Navy transferred its icebreakers to the Coast Guard in 1965.

In that same year, Coast Guard cutters were ordered into the Vietnam War, where more than 8,000 Coast Guard personnel served on port security, ocean and river patrol, helicopter SAR, and LORAN station missions. Coast Guard personnel served with distinction and suffered casualties in military support operations in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973.

The year 1967 is significant in Coast Guard history. The distinctive USCG "racing stripe/slash" was added to aircraft, boats and cutters, vehicles, signage, and stationery. In 1967 the Coast Guard ended its 177-year affiliation with the Treasury Department and transferred to the new Department of Transportation (DOT).

After the 11 September, 2001 terrorist incidents, federal reorganization plans were developed. In 2003 the Coast Guard became part of the new Department of Homeland Security.

The Coast Guard created Strike Teams in 1973 to police and clean up maritime petroleum and chemical pollution spills. In 1989 the Coast Guard responded to the Exxon Valdez tanker oil spill in Alaskan waters.

In 1975 the 729-foot cargo carrier Edmund Fitzgerald sank in a November storm on Lake Superior. Capt. Jimmy Hobough (USCG) took the 180-foot USCGC Woodrush (WLB 407) out of the port of Duluth (Minnesota) into heavy seas, high winds and a snowstorm to search unsuccessfully for the missing vessel and crew. The World War II vintage buoy tender and icebreaker Woodrush was built by the Zenith Dredge Company in Duluth in 1944.

The 22-hour search, aided by the crews of merchant vessels, for the Fitzgerald yielded no survivors. A subsequent Coast Guard investigation attributed the sinking to multiple factors.

In the 1980s the Coast Guard and Navy conducted joint patrols in the newly established Maritime Defense Zone and teamed up on national security, narcotics and immigration interdiction missions.

Not all goes well on every Coast Guard mission. Search and rescue missions often occur in storms and hazardous waters. ATN duties take place in relatively inaccessible places that require the placement of warning markers and other guideposts. In such circumstances, cutter and boat crews can be endangered, and Coast Guard vessels damaged and even sunk.

At 2:10 a.m. on a cold December morning in 1989, Lake Superior claimed the USCGC Mesquite, a 180-foot buoy tender that had grounded off Keweenaw Point, Michigan. The Mesquite had been servicing a navigational aid in a heavy current in dark water.

Investigators blamed an overworked, understaffed crew, some of whom later received awards. Other crew members got reprimands and reassignments. A Coast Guard report cited errors in judgment and the misuse of the cutter's updated and sophisticated navigation technology.

Coast Guard active duty (regular) and reserve personnel were deployed with other U.S. and Allied military forces against Iraq in Operation Desert Storm (1990-91) and Operation Iraqi Freedom which commenced in 2003.

After "9/11" 2001 and in the Persian Gulf wars, Coast Guard men and women earned citations and medals. In April 2004 DC3 Nathan Bruckenthal (USCG) was killed on a patrol boat mission in the Persian Gulf. Patrol boat commander Lt. Holly Harrison (USCG) received a Bronze Star in a separate Persian Gulf mission.

On 11 September 2001 the Coast Guard responded to terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists upon New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Port security and harbor patrols were coupled with armed helicopter missions over strategic ports, waterways, bridges, and power and petrochemical facilities.

Coast Guard Sea Marshals monitored and boarded commercial vessels coming into U.S. sea-lanes to protect and secure harbor areas, and deter and detect potential terrorist attacks.

The Coast Guard partners with port authorities, local, state and federal law enforcement, and the U.S. Customs Service to inspect ships, cargo containers, and port infrastructure. The task is overwhelming, considering the 25,000 miles of navigable coastal waters and 360 major ports that constitute the domestic maritime domain.

Regular and Reserve Coast Guard personnel confronted the war on terror with new techniques and cooperative training with U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Marine, Army, Navy and Air Force personnel.

In the late 1990s and into the 21st century, Coast Guard Commandants Adm. James M. Loy and Adm. Thomas H. Collins acquired increased federal funding, and more advanced technology and military platforms to meet new challenges and carry out operations in deep (blue) and littoral (coastal) water patrols.

This concludes our brief review of Coast Guard history from 1790 to the present. With that history in context, we can now explore the role of the U.S. Coast Guard on the Great Lakes in general, and Lake Superior in particular.

Note: Sources used for Chapter 1 (A Brief History of the Coast Guard) are cited in the Appendix A, Chronology and in the Bibliography. Chapter 1 is based largely upon the Chronology and a precis of the author's book, *The United States Coast Guard, 1790 to the Present*, Elderberry Press, 2004.

CHAPTER 2

COAST GUARD PREDECESSORS ON THE GREAT LAKES

(1790-1915)

THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT of Americans in the 19th century brought Euro-Americans to the North Central Plains and the Great Lakes two hundred years after Native Americans and French explorers had visited and settled the Inland Seas.

With the extraction of natural resources (forestry, mining, farming, fishing) and commerce and shipping on the shores of the Great Lakes, the Federal Government stationed the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, Lighthouse Service, and U.S. Life Saving Service on the fresh-water lakes. These agencies, which evolved into the U.S. Coast Guard, established aids to navigation (buoys and lighthouses), steamship inspections, and life-saving stations.

The U.S. Coast Guard was formed from the amalgamation of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Lifesaving Service in 1915. The U.S. Lighthouse Service joined the Coast Guard in 1939.

The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS) was formed in 1790 under Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, as directed by Congress. The USRCS served as a maritime police, life-saving, and defense force empowered to collect federal revenue duties on imported goods.

The smuggling tradition that frustrated the British still flourished in North America after the Revolutionary War. The RCS eventually suppressed smuggling, the slave trade, and piracy.

The USRCS existed before the U.S. Navy was established in 1798. The first ten armed sailing cutters and their crews served under the Treasury Department, as did the future Coast Guard. In 1967 the U.S. Coast Guard was transferred to the new Transportation Department. In 2003 the USCG was assigned to the new Department of Homeland Security.

Maritime historians believe the presence of the Lighthouse Service and Revenue Cutter Service on the Great Lakes dates to the early 19th century, between 1809 and 1820.

The first Great Lakes lighthouse was built in 1818. The War of 1812-1814, between Great Britain and the United States, resulted in a post-war agreement in which the British territory of Canada and the United States limited the number and armament of military vessels in their respective navies, with preference for revenue vessels. Those provisions of the Rush-Bagot Agreement (1817) suggest Revenue cutters may have been on the Inland Seas before the War of 1812.

Primary-source historical works, official documents, and travel journals reveal that a Captain Gilbert Knapp commanded the U.S. Revenue Cutter Alexander Dallas out of Detroit (Michigan) in 1819. The Revenue Cutter Fairplay operated out of Chicago (Illinois) before 1819. Captain Daniel Dobbins (1829) commanded a revenue cutter along Pennsylvania's Lake Erie shoreline from Presque Isle. Dobbins commanded the USRC Erie after 1832.

In the spoils-system politics of the Jacksonian era, Presque Isle District Collector of Customs Thomas Forster defended the professionalism of the crew of the USRC Erie and his son, a lighthouse keeper, in a letter to the Treasury Department (1833). In 1837-38, the Revenue Cutter Erie assisted the U.S. Army in suppressing a Canadian insurrection involving several hundred sympathetic armed Americans in the New York-Niagara-Canadian frontier zone.

Treasury Department records of vessel movements (1790 to 1933) refer to six revenue cutters on the Great Lakes between 1848 and the Civil War (1861-1865). Several cutters were transferred to the Atlantic Coast for wartime duty. The cutters were named after prominent historical, civilian, military and government figures. Government procurement agents leased sea-worthy vessels for Great Lakes cutter duty. The ships of the Civil War era were side-wheel steamers supplemented with masts and sails.

From the end of the Civil War until 1930, the missions of Revenue and Coast Guard cutters assigned to the Great Lakes included boat regatta patrols, life-saving, shipwreck rescues, the enforcement of U.S. Customs laws, and logistical support for U.S. Life Saving and U.S. Lighthouse stations and crews (O'Brien, 1976, pp. 3-9).

Sailing ships were vulnerable to the winds that powered them. With shifting winds ships sailing close to shore could be swept into rocks and broken apart on sand bars. When ships acquired machine power, steel hulls, and sophisticated direction finding technology, shore-based rescue services and lighthouses diminished in significance (Noble, 1994, p. 16).

Kit and Carolyn Bonner concisely described the dangers of sea faring: “Waves, wind, shifting currents, rain, sleet, fog and ice sink and damage countless vessels and will continue to do so as long as men and women sail.” But disasters stimulate maritime innovation and reform. The Bonners remind us that “the International Ice Patrol was established and administered by the USRCS and USCG after the RMS Titanic disaster (1912) to warn ships of icebergs and Atlantic ice floes” (Bonner, 2003, p. 13).

The first American lighthouse was built in British colonial America at the Boston Harbor entrance in 1716. Coastal lights guided merchant ships to navigable waters.

The first United States Congress created the Lighthouse Establishment (1789) under the Treasury Department to inspect and maintain lighthouses and other aids to navigation (ATN), such as piers and buoys in port, bay, inlet and harbor areas, for the purpose of “rendering navigation easy and safe” (O’Brien, 1976, p. 13).

Before the advent of electricity, natural, whale, and vegetable oils and lard and kerosene fueled lighthouse illumination systems, magnified and directed by huge, elaborate glass prisms and lenses. The most famous lens was the Fresnel Lens.

The U.S. Lighthouse Service functioned from 1789 to 1939, when the USLHS was placed under Coast Guard jurisdiction. U.S. Navy, Army Corps of Engineers, Treasury, Customs and Commerce department officials carried out lighthouse inspections. Civilian craftsmen and building contractors constructed and maintained the massive light structures that had to withstand the snow, cold, ice, waves and storms of the Great Lakes.

Federal documents indicate the first Great Lakes lighthouse was completed on Lake Erie (Presque Isle) in 1819, followed by the Buffalo (New York) lighthouse in 1820. The territory of Michigan received Congressional authorization (1819) for the construction of a lighthouse at the mouth of the Detroit River, and authorization (1823) for the placement of another lighthouse near the St. Claire River.

Given the perilous locations where light warning systems were usually placed, and the periodic storms and winter ice conditions of the Great Lakes, lighthouses required several years to construct. Building crews and lighthouse keepers experienced harrowing experiences and life-threatening incidents. Lighthouse and Lifeboat station keepers proudly wore their professional uniforms and medals. Keepers, their spouses and other family members performed life-saving missions in small row--boats at personal risk, and suffered occasional loss of life. Motor-powered boats were not widely available until the first decades of the 20th century.

Life-saving medals and commendations were awarded to keepers and their families by government agencies and private and commercial organizations. Medals were awarded to Revenue Cutter sailors and, after 1848, members of the U.S. Life Saving Service.

Frederick Stonehouse chronicled the history of the U.S. Lighthouse Service in his book, *Lighthouse Keepers & Coast Guard Cutters* (2000), and included the lives of several male and female keepers on the Great Lakes. Their heritage is preserved in the names of modern Keeper Class Coast Guard cutters like the USCGC Drew (WLM-557). Captain Frank Drew, a Green Bay (Wisconsin) and Lake Michigan keeper, won medals and commendations for heroic actions at shipwreck scenes, and for saving the lives of dozens of people between 1899-1929 (Stonehouse, 2000, pp. 219-231).

Within the years of Drew’s tenure, the Chequamegon Bay arm of Lake Superior was the scene of numerous ship groundings and sinking due to fog, fierce storms, and shipboard fires. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, cargo vessels evolved from wooden sail and side-wheel steamers to wooden and steel-hulled steam ships. In the post-Civil War era, and most significantly after 1870, increased commerce on Chequamegon Bay stimulated the growth of the Wisconsin port towns of Bayfield, Ashland, and Washburn. Ships from Duluth and Superior, and other Minnesota North Shore ports, contributed to the increase in maritime traffic through the Apostle Islands and Chequamegon Bay.

The crews of fishing vessels, tug boats, and large cargo vessels which carried passengers, fish, cattle, grain, coal, iron ore, timber and manufactured goods, faced the storms and cold turbulent waters of Lake Superior. Lighthouse keepers and life-saving crews met the challenge as best they could with the limited communications systems and technology of the day.

On 12 September 1885, the Canadian cargo vessel Prussia, headed for Duluth to pick up a load of grain, caught fire on Lake Superior. The crew of 10 men and 1 woman abandoned the 138-foot, 458-ton steamer 10 miles from the Apostle Islands.

Gale force winds and high waves drove one of their two lifeboats further out to sea. Sand Island Lighthouse Keeper Charles Lederlee witnessed the events and headed out into the storm in his small lifeboat. The survivors in the first boat sent Lederlee on to help their fellow mariners in the second boat. Miraculously, Keeper Lederlee rescued the crews from both lifeboats and rowed them to Sand Island. The keeper and his wife fed and sheltered the survivors, and took them to Bayfield (Wisconsin) the next day.

The captain and crew of the Prussia subsequently sent a letter of gratitude to Keeper Lederlee and his wife “for going to the rescue of the yawl boats and crew” who otherwise “would most likely have been lost” (Keller, 2004, pp. 35-37).

Steam ships and sailing schooners carried passengers and cargo along the south shore of Lake Superior in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The R.G. Stewart was carrying a few passengers and cattle along the southern Lake Superior shoreline from Hancock (Michigan) to Duluth (Minnesota) in heavy fog and darkness on 3 June, 1899. At 11:00 PM the ship crashed into Michigan Island in the Apostle Islands.

The captain of the 100-foot long, 23-foot wide, Stewart ordered reverse engines to back out of the shallow, rocky waters. The overheated engines caused a fire below deck that quickly spread. The order was issued to abandon ship. Cattle were pushed overboard, and the passengers and crew crowded into a lifeboat, while neglecting to cast off the line that was tied to the burning vessel. Flames quickly severed the line, but not before a deck hand was lost overboard as the boat capsized. Some survivors swam to shore, while others clung to the lifeboat in the frigid waters of Chequamegon Bay.

The keeper of the Michigan Island lighthouse gave the 11 survivors food and shelter and took them to Bayfield. A steamer took the crew and passengers to Duluth. Meanwhile, the cattle swam safely to shore (Keller, pp. 59-62).

On the evening of 1 September, 1905 the 373-foot iron-ore carrier Sevona left the Allouez dock in the east end of Superior (Wisconsin) for Erie (Pennsylvania) with 6,000 tons of cargo. By 6:00 AM on 2 September, heavy seas and gale winds forced the steel-hulled steamer, equipped with a new electric searchlight, into the Sand Island shoals of the Apostle Islands. Pounding seas split the vessel along the line of the 1904 weld that had added 73 feet to her length.

Two lifeboats were blown and washed ashore in high waves and surf. A lumberjack on shore gave the surviving passengers and crew members food and shelter, and then took them by horse and wagon to Bayfield, Wisconsin. Seven crew members, including the captain of the Sevona, had stayed aboard the grounded vessel and fashioned a life raft from wood broken loose from the disintegrating cargo boat. Sand Island Lighthouse Keeper Emanuel Lueck watched helplessly in the storm as the rafters were tossed about in the swirling waves and thrown to their deaths into breakers, rocks and driftwood.

Four ships were lost on Lake Superior in that terrible September storm, prompting a public outcry for better life-saving equipment on vessels; more life-saving stations, crews, and rescue boats near lighthouses; more shoal-marking buoys to guide vessels near shore; and strategically placed telephone and telegraph stations to facilitate better communication between lighthouses and lifesaving stations (Keller, pp. 95-105).

The storm that sank the Sevona also sent the wooden, 338-foot, 2,790-ton, 3-masted sailing vessel Pretoria to the bottom. The Pretoria left the Allouez docks in Superior (Wisconsin) on 1 September, 1905 loaded with iron ore. In the face of the escalating storm the schooner Pretoria teamed up with the 263-foot steamer Venezuela to maneuver past the potential shelter of the Apostle Islands. On the morning of 2 September, at the height of the storm, the steering gear of the Pretoria became inoperable and the towline that joined the two vessels snapped.

As the vessels separated in the raging waters, the Venezuela was forced to seek shelter in Chequamegon Bay. Captain Charles Smart of the Pretoria watched helplessly as giant waves loosened the ship's hatch covers and filled the cargo hold. Northeast winds sheared Pretoria's sails and blew the vessel toward Outer Island. The

crew waged a losing battle trying to pump water out of the boat. The schooner's anchors finally took hold as gigantic waves battered the hull and hatches and washed the wheelhouse overboard. Captain Smart and his nine-person crew abandoned ship into a lifeboat which immediately capsized with the loss of five men.

The surviving crew was reached and pulled ashore by the Herculean efforts of Outer Island Lighthouse Keeper John Irvine. The 61-year-old keeper swam into the surf and hauled the exhausted crew and capsized lifeboat to shore. Keeper Irvine and his wife provided food and shelter to the grateful survivors. The Pretoria crew were later picked up by the *Venezuela* and brought to Bayfield and Ashland, from where they departed to their homes in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Sweden. The bodies of the lost crew members eventually washed up on the Outer Island shores (Keller, pp. 107-112).

Author James M. Keller recorded an interesting bit of research on a Chequamegon Bay accident from the files of the Ashland Daily Press. Unfortunately, the account does not clearly identify the names, affiliations and fate of all the vessels referred to:

“1929: MARIGOLD: A freak accident took place on October 2 killing three men. The government boat MARIGOLD was moored at a light buoy off of Red Cliff point. A lighthouse tender was replacing the contents of an acetylene tank which furnished the light when it blew up with tremendous force. The tender was “blown to bits” while a second man was hurled against the vessel's mast and a third flew off the boat. All three were killed instantly (Keller, p. 141).

Floating lightships were added to the Great Lakes navigation aids arsenal. In 1820 the first lightship was stationed off the Eastern Seaboard. In 1838 the first Great Lakes lightship was stationed in the Michilimackinac Straits between Lakes Michigan and Huron.

More sophisticated federal lightships for the Great Lakes were built after 1890 by the Craig Shipbuilding Company of Toledo (Ohio). The wooden, 102-foot, steam-powered screw-propeller vessels were numbered 55, 56, and 57 and equipped with fog-bells. Twenty lightships served 18 different stations on the Great Lakes between 1891-1970. Lake storms periodically blew the anchored lightships off station. Maintaining a variety of illuminated red and white mast lights in stormy seas presented challenges, as did the danger of ship collisions in fog-bound waters (Bonner, 2003, pp. 34-35).

In 1875 South Manitou Light became the first Lake Michigan installation to receive a steam fog signal. In 1882 Congress mandated the placement of lights on bridges that extended over navigable waters. Two significant and still famous lighthouses were built on the north shore of Lake Superior: the Rock of Ages Light west of Isle Royale (1908), and Split Rock Light (1910). Split Rock Light is situated 180 feet above the level of the lake, although the tower itself is 60 feet high.

Lighthouse boats called tenders serviced aids to navigation and brought personnel, food, supplies, equipment, and mail to the lighthouse keepers. Lighthouse tenders carried builders, craftsmen, scientists, and officials from the USRCS, USLHS, the Treasury and Commerce Departments, Customs Service, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to the isolated stations.

Other Revenue cutters served tender functions. In the last half of the 19th century, lighthouse tenders ranged from the 88-foot sailing schooner *Belle* to the 124-foot, steam-powered, 292-horsepower *Haze* that saw service on all of the Great Lakes. The 152-foot, 400-horsepower steam vessel *Warrington* sailed until 1911.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

