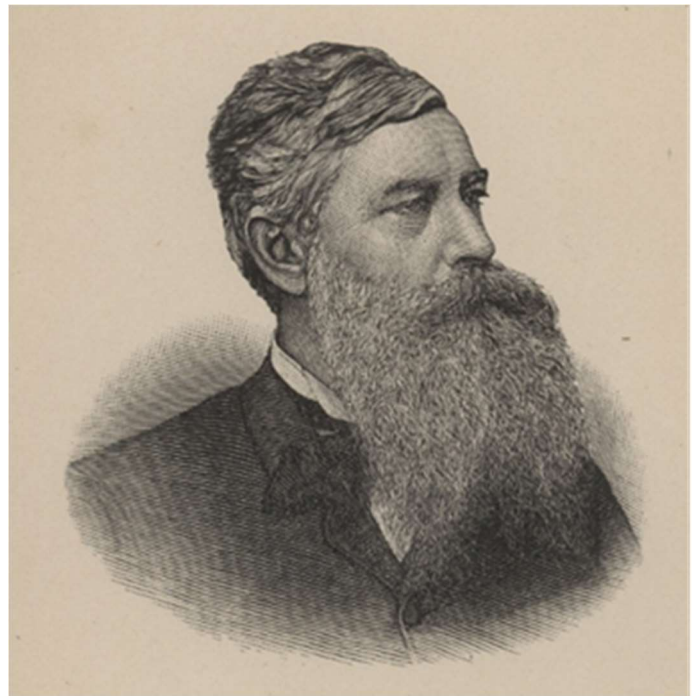


New Jersey's First Lifesaving Station Written by: Nicholas Wood

New Jersey's shore, today enjoyed by millions for its boardwalks and long sandy beaches had quite a different character over 170 years ago. The barrier islands, then sparsely settled were considered undesirable – fit only for grazing cattle and fishing. The waters just off shore were also considered so dangerous they were sometimes labeled the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” for the many shoals lurking beneath the waves could easily cause shipwrecks.

The salvage of shipwrecks was a lucrative, but unpredictable, business done under the employ of the Insurance Agents who wished to pay out as little as possible on the shipwreck. The saving of life from those wrecks was equally spotty due to the desolate nature of the beaches and over-all lack of training and equipment for this purpose.

It was not until Monmouth County physician, William A. Newell, advocated for a \$10,000 congressional appropriation in 1848 that the emphasis began to shift from salvaging cargo to saving passengers. Newell's passionate pleas to aid shipwrecked victims began after he witnessed the wreck of the *Terasto* on Long Beach Island nearly a decade earlier. All its passengers and crew drowned within sight of onlookers on the beach who had no means to save them.



William Newell, 1864 – 1866, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

The new stations were organized under the supervision of Captain Douglas Ottinger of the United States Revenue Marine. He selected the best rescue equipment then available, which was already in use by the Massachusetts Humane Society, Great Britain's Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and the Revenue Marine.



Earliest known photo of the 1849 station, circa 1900.
National Archives, Record Group 26

One of the most unusual pieces of equipment, commissioned for this project, was the new corrugated iron surfboat designed to be pulled from shore to ship and back suspended by a heavy rope known as a hawser.

Each completed boathouse was left in the care of a local volunteer “keeper,” who was expected to rally other volunteers to respond to a shipwreck using the equipment found in the boathouse.

It would not be long before the newly founded organization was to provide itself in grand style. In the early hours of the morning of January 12, 1850, the Brig *Ayrshire* ran aground on a sandbar 200 yards off Squan Beach, New Jersey. Keeper John Maxon decided that launching a boat in the blinding snowstorm was too dangerous to attempt and began the very first rescue using the Beach Apparatus to send a lifecar to the distressed ship. Working diligently, the all-volunteer crew was able to save 201 of the 202 souls aboard proving the effectiveness of the lifecar for the first time.



Illustration from *History of Lifesaving Appliances and Military and Naval Constructions* by James L. Pond

Additional stations were added in the mid-1850s to include boathouses and equipment placed at beachfront locations in New England, North Carolina, and on the Great Lakes. From 1849 to 1870, volunteers using this equipment saved over 4,100 persons from shipwrecks.

The new volunteer service was not universally successful and a pair of disastrous wrecks in 1854 cost the lives of nearly 400 passengers and crew within site of the volunteers on shore who were unable to assist them. These tragedies and a track record of poorly kept stations eventually lead to the adoption of professionally trained crews and the formation of the United States Lifesaving Service in 1878. This legacy of lifesaving work is continued today by the United States Coast Guard, which was formed in 1915 from the U.S.L.S.S. and the Revenue Marine.



Staff Photo, October 19, 2019.

Visitors to Twin Lights today can visit the first and only remaining boathouse from the initial series of stations constructed on the Jersey Shore in 1849.

An early Francis lifecar, surfboat, and other lifesaving equipment are displayed in the boathouse and the museum galleries.