



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

at the U.S. Custom House in Barnstable Village, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Summer 2019 Newsletter

The Barnstable Custom House

“A History of the U.S. Custom House and Post Office Building – How It Came To Be and Why It Is Important to Our Heritage”

Editor’s Note: *When our nation began, Barnstable was one of the busiest ports in Massachusetts, ranking fourth in shipping tonnage behind Boston, Salem-Beverly-Newburyport, and New Bedford. With the advent of the railroad and construction of the Cape Cod Canal, its importance diminished. In 1913, the Custom House was turned over to the U.S. Post Office, and all custom duties were transferred to the Port of Boston, where they remain.*

On August 12, 2005, when Rear Admiral David Pekoske, Commander of the First Coast Guard District “commissioned” the Coast Guard Heritage Museum, it was noted that it was most fitting that our Coast Guard heritage be exhibited in a U.S. Custom House. To this day, all Coast Guard Officers and Petty Officers are sworn Customs Officers, empowered to intercept and board any ships within our territorial waters, search them, seize any contraband aboard the vessel, imprison the crew and confiscate the vessel.

This is the story of the Barnstable Custom House as written by Francis I, Broadhurst in an essay titled “A History of the U.S. Custom House and Post Office Building – How It Came To Be and Why It Is Important to Our Heritage”.

The U.S. Custom House and Post Office sits atop Cobbs Hill in Barnstable Village on the north side of Barnstable’s Shiretown. It’s a quaint little settlement nestled around a beautiful deep-water harbor, with all the “rural seaside charm” chambers of commerce have marketed so successfully during the middle part of the 20th century.

It is totally unique among Cape Cod buildings, having been designed in an “elegant Renaissance style”. It is one of only two such structures built in Massachusetts: Barnstable Village getting one and Gloucester home to the other. Two more were constructed in Maine, which until 1920 had been part of Massachusetts. The building was erected in 1856 when Barnstable was still a major port of call for domestic and foreign merchant ships, coastal schooners, a fishing fleet and a major shellfish industry.



From the collection of the Barnstable Historical Society

The Barnstable Customs District predated the American Revolution, and before we were a nation, the Massachusetts General Court appointed a “Naval Officer” to collect custom duties in the Port of Barnstable once the Continental Army, under General George Washington had driven the British from Boston. Joseph Otis, William Taylor and Samuel Hinckley, all Barnstable residents, held the post until 1789 when President Washington, at the behest of his Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, appointed the first Federal Customs Collectors. He named his comrade-in-arms, General Joseph Otis, Collector for Customs District VII. The district eventually included all Cape Cod towns.

Secretary Hamilton knew what he was doing and President Washington let him do it. The new nation had very little income. Thus, revenues collected in the new nation’s ports and federal taxes collected on whiskey paid off the debts assumed by the federal government. Within ten years, the national debt, including debt assumed from the individual states, was “Paid in Full”, thanks to the Customs Collectors and the Revenue Cutter Service, which enforced the laws. Not bad in a nation populated by inveterate smugglers and bootleggers who disliked taxes and loved being free of any rule, foreign or domestic.

continued on page 6

“Members Only Night” on the eve of Coast Guard Day | Saturday, August 3 at CGHM see page 2

President's Report

This past winter and early spring proved to be exceptionally productive for the museum. Many of our exhibits were overhauled and new exhibits were added. The second-deck Grand Exhibit Hall (GEH) was completely emptied, cleaned, painted and reassembled adding eight new display cabinets. In our basement, the archive and office spaces were significantly upgraded and our library was expanded. Other new amenities include a mural for our "selfie" station, additional video displays, an upgraded mini-theater, expanded gift shop, and, last and not least, an even nicer head. These improvements will not only improve our visitors' experiences but will also make for a much better working environment for our growing number of dedicated volunteers. This work was completed by a diverse workforce including town employees, inmates from the Barnstable County Correctional Facility, and our volunteers. Special thanks to both Vic Viola and Rick Poole for their extraordinary efforts.

In May, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first trans-Atlantic flight. The NC-4 departed from Chatham, MA on May 14, 1919 with Coast Guard LT Elmer "Archie" Stone as the pilot. After stops in Halifax, Newfoundland, and the Azores, they arrived in Lisbon on May 27th to complete a feat that changed the world.



Ketchen holding model of the NC-4 made by David Crocker



Recognition of this event included a formal ceremony that we coordinated at the site of the old Chatham Naval Air Station (closed in 1922) and several talks during the month to groups around the Cape about this forgotten accomplishment. RADM Denny Sirois and his wife Gail helped us with one of these presentations.



David Crocker and Buck Baley stand by the plaque at the end of Strong Island Road in Chatham

Some more good news. In March we learned that we had been selected to receive a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council to produce a short film about Coast Guard station operations here on Cape Cod in the 1920s. We hope to complete this by early fall and show it in our new theater before we close for the season on October 31st. Our work collecting oral histories continued over the winter and a trip to Nantucket has been planned in June to interview several Coast Guard veterans and historians there. We have also dropped off a second batch of documents and photos from our archives to be digitized at the Boston Public Library. This effort is being funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Come visit us this summer. We think you'll be pleasantly surprised!

*Greg Ketchen, Captain, USCG (retired)
President, CG Heritage Museum*

FOR OUR MEMBERS

**Please join us for a
"Members Only Night"
on the eve of Coast Guard Day.
Saturday, August 3rd
at the museum in Barnstable Village
1800 to 2000 (6 to 8 PM)**

This is a special time of day at the museum when our exhibits are magically illuminated and you get to enjoy evening colors as we formally lower the National and Coast Guard ensigns at sunset (7:56 PM). Light hors d'oeuvres, beverages, and some surprises to thank you for your support.

Moments in Coast Guard History



April 12, 2012

While on a fisheries patrol along the coast of New England, the crew of the 225 ft. Coast Guard Cutter *Juniper* lay 1.5 million rose petals over the resting site of the *RMS Titanic*, 400 miles south of Newfoundland. The *Titanic* was on its maiden voyage when it went down after striking an iceberg on April 12, 1912, killing 1,514 people.

Source: http://cgvi.uscg.mil/media/main.php?g2_itemId=1607258

Rob Simpson

A Sincere “Thank You”

The expression “...it takes a village” was never more apparent than upon entering the museum during the winter months and seeing how many people were involved in getting things prepared for the new season.

Hammers, saws and paint brushes were in evidence in all areas of the Museum, as George Howe, Vic Viola, Jim Sylvester and Rick Poole lent their time and talents to everything from painting to floor waxing. The basement space has been transformed into an area that can now truly be called an office. The pages of the Past Perfect instruction manual are dog-eared with use as Buck Baley, Joanie Dubis and Peter Eleftherakis have become expert at documenting donors, artifacts and photographs. Of course, banking is a year-round job and Steve DeCesare is busy making weekly deposits and updating the balance sheets. New cases were assembled and thoughtfully filled with artifacts to tell the story of the Coast Guard with the help of Curator Jeremy Slavitz, Dick Boonisar, Bill Collette and Don Severy.



One of our newest volunteers is artist Lynn Richards. Lynne and her husband Keith have lived on the Cape for the past 40 years, raising their children in Cummaquid. Lynn is a retired nurse who previously worked with the VNA of Cape Cod, as well as at Cape Cod Academy

where she was on the Board of Trustees for six years.

Over the winter, Lynn has been most generous with her time and talent, creating the backdrop for our new selfie studio. While her usual medium is oil and her favorite subjects are sailboats and dinghies, this application has involved acrylics and wall paint, and Lynn has successfully captured both a USCG cutter, underway, and helicopter performing a hoist.



The backdrop was a huge hit at the recent Festival of Museums in Hyannis where we had over 100 children (and a few adults) dress up in Coast Guard gear and pose in front of it as part of a ‘selfie studio’. The backdrop is now in the museum with plans to move it out to the theater once the season is underway.

We also were the recipients of several active duty volunteers from Base Cape Cod in early March. Anthony Oliver, Dain Gant, Donovan Wirtanen and Dawson Allen gave of their time to move display cases and help us dispose of old bookcases. All the additional manpower has made the winter revitalization of our exhibition area a much easier task, and the upgraded office space in the basement is a welcome improvement.

A sincere thank you to all.

Second Floor Gets a Major “Lift”

We look forward to watching this season's visitors explore our upstairs display area after major renovations were made to provide a new focus and interesting additions to our already fascinating collection of Coast Guard artifacts.

There is a new display case with historic Coast Guard Academy memorabilia including a handwritten letter of Cadet Appointment dated 1886, and a photograph of the 2nd graduating class (Class of 1880) hand signed by the five classmates. We are indebted to our in-house CGHM historian Dick Boonisar for sharing these one-of-a-kind objects.

Another case features enlisted and officer SPAR uniforms with background information regarding women in the Coast Guard. From the collection of Ms. Donna Lumpkin of the Chatham Marconi Museum, we have learned about a World

War II LORAN installation that featured an all-female crew working in secret in Chatham MA. As we develop the information, we hope to provide a look into this interesting facility and its place in CG history.



Downstairs, in the case featuring the history of the Revenue Cutter Service, we have both a cutlass and a fully-restored boarding pistol, one of 24 assigned to each Revenue Cutter as defense.

Ida Lewis – Lighthouse Keeper, Lifesaver and “The Bravest Woman in America”

by William H. Thiesen, Historian, Coast Guard Atlantic Area

... it is peculiarly appropriate that you should receive the national life-saving medal in commemoration of your brave acts as a life-saver, while it is an occasion for added satisfaction that such a memorial of unquestionable heroism should have been won by a woman.

William Windom, Secretary of the U.S. Lighthouse Board, September 28, 1881

The United States Coast Guard and its predecessor agencies have been blessed with the service of many determined and courageous women. One such woman was Lighthouse Keeper Ida Lewis, recipient of the Service’s Gold Lifesaving Medal.



Posed photograph of Ida Lewis early in her career. (Coast Guard Collection)

Idawalley Zoradia Lewis, known as Ida Lewis, is one of the best-known keepers, male or female, in the history of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. She gained national fame at a time when most women worked behind the scenes with little notice or compensation. Overcoming the biases of the time through skill and professional ability, Lewis served unofficially as keeper of Newport, Rhode Island’s Lime Rock Lighthouse beginning in 1857, when her father, the official keeper, was disabled by a stroke. From 1857 until 1872, she kept the light and cared for her disabled father and a seriously ill sister. Ida Lewis was finally appointed Lime Rock Light’s official keeper in 1879 and served there until she died in 1911.

An expert boathandler, Lewis made her first rescue when only sixteen years old. It was noted by others that she could “row a boat faster than any man in Newport.” In 1881, she received the Gold Lifesaving Medal for the rescue of two soldiers from nearby Fort Adams. The men attempted to walk across thin ice from Lime Rock to the fort and broke through the ice into the frigid water. With only minutes before the onset of hypothermia, loss of feeling in their limbs and imminent drowning, the men screamed for their lives. Lewis heard their cries and ran from the lighthouse with a rope. She threw them the line while standing on the ice. In spite of the

danger of falling through or being dragged into the water by the two men, Lewis managed to save both men—one by herself and the second with the help of her younger brother.



An 1876 woodcut rendering of Ida Lewis rowing to yet another rescue in treacherous seas. (from *Women of the Century* by Phebe Ann Hanaford)

Lighthouse keepers frequently went in harm’s way to rescue those shipwrecked or in danger of drowning near their light. Ida Lewis did so numerous times. Over her fifty-four years of keeping the light, Lewis was officially credited with saving eighteen lives; however, other sources indicate the number to be much higher. In 1881, Lighthouse Board secretary William Windom wrote Lewis that “*The papers before the Department in this case, cite the instances of no less than thirteen persons saved by you from drowning . . . and it is stated that there are many more who do not appear in the record.*” She performed her last rescue at the ripe age of sixty-four.

During her career, Lewis received countless awards and honors. Her likeness graced the cover of *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* and she was the only



woman to receive the prestigious Grand Cross Medal of the American Cross of Honor Society. The Society titled Lewis “The Bravest Woman in America.” In addition to her other honors, she received visits from U.S. presidents and Newport held a parade in her honor. The Life-Saving Benevolent Association awarded her a silver medal and a \$100 check and, late in life, the Carnegie Hero Fund provided her a lifetime pension of thirty dollars per month.

Ida Lewis died of a stroke at the age of sixty-nine. Her funeral was attended by nearly 1,500 mourners and she was laid to rest at the Common Burying Ground in Newport, Rhode Island. She served as Lime Rock Lighthouse’s keeper for over fifty years and saved the lives of dozens of men and women. In addition to her many awards and accolades, the Rhode Island Legislature renamed Lime Rock for her and the Lighthouse Service renamed Lime Rock Lighthouse in her honor. Later, she was honored as the namesake of the Coast Guard 175-foot Keeper-Class buoy tender homeported in Newport, Rhode Island.



Headstone of Ida Lewis at the Common Burial Ground in Newport, Rhode Island. Wikipedia



A commemorative painting from the Coast Guard Collection depicting Ida Lewis’s 1881 Gold Lifesaving Medal rescue. (Coast Guard Collection)

Lewis’s career serves as an example of the modern Coast Guard’s core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty. She stood the watch through fair weather and foul, saving numerous lives in the process. Unfortunately, the story of Lewis and dozens of other women who kept the light remains largely unknown to the American public. Lewis dedicated her life to the safety of others, serving as a role model for both men and women of the long blue line.



Photograph of Ida Lewis late in life. (Courtesy of National Archives)

BECOME A COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM MEMBER!

Individual - \$25 Single membership: attending annual meeting with no voting privilege, individual admission to the museum, and a 10% gift shop discount.

Family - \$40 Same as Individual, but with additional admissions to the museum for immediate family. One person may attend annual meeting with no voting privilege.

Supporting Member - \$100 Unlimited museum admission & 10% discount. This is for those who want to support museum but not actively participate.

Sustaining Member - \$250 For those who want to show a greater level of support for the museum. Unlimited admission and 10% discount apply.

Guardian: 3 donor levels – Guardians receive all benefits of membership. The Guardian category includes individual recognition at the museum. The 3 categories are: **Captain’s Circle** - \$500+; **Admiral’s Circle** - \$1,000+; **Commandant’s Circle** - \$2,500+

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Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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Would you like to publish an article in our newsletter?
Contact us at 508-362-8521.

Newsletter graphic design by West Barnstable Press

The Barnstable Custom House (cont'd from page 1)

Massachusetts Historical Society records indicate that by 1867 there were "687 vessels enrolled in the Barnstable District – 1 seamer, 1 barque, 2 brigs, 13 sloops and 670 schooners." They were employed in the mackerel, cod and whale fishery, as well as foreign and coastal trade. There was also a 'try yard' on Sandy Neck where beached whales or blackfish were dragged ashore and their carcasses rendered for lamp oil. Far from being quaint and picturesque – it was a stinking mess and the putrid smells of whale carcasses permeated the area around the Common Fields and the harbor when they were downwind of the try yards.

Sylvanus B. Phinney was the Collector of Customs for the Barnstable District twice. He served a two-year term from 1847 to 1849 and came back to serve 1853 to 1861. It was during his second term that the building was constructed. Phinney demanded that the U.S. Treasury build him a "brick, fireproof building" because he feared those that resented revenue collectors might burn down the rented quarters closer to the harbor.

Thus, Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department James Guthrie authorized Phinney to move the customs office from inside his home and to "hire a building for customs use at a price not to exceed \$125". Congress authorized funds for the construction of Federal Customs Houses in Barnstable, Massachusetts; Bristol, Rhode Island; Pensacola, Florida; Cleveland, Ohio; Plattsburg, New York; and Alexandria, Virginia. Specific building instructions were developed "for the accommodation of the custom-house and post office; a building of brick and the like (fire-proof, iron beams) floors, beams, roof, shutters (etc.) forty-five feet by sixty, and forty-eight feet high, to cost no more than twenty-five thousand dollars."

Supervising Architect of the newly created Office of Construction, Ammi B. Young, and Captain Alexander Bowman, Engineer in Charge of the Office of Construction, were responsible for "keeping the office current with rapidly changing tastes and assimilating improved construction techniques." Captain Bowman was largely responsible for "the fireproof cast iron construction". Records noted "iron was used extensively for stairs, thresholds, shutters, interior column supports, window casings and numerous other decorative features", all of which are still found in the Barnstable Custom House.



Ammi Burnham Young
June 19, 1799-
March 14, 1874
First Supervising
Architect of the U.S.

Three sites were submitted by Phinney for Guthrie's review. The smallest and most expensive lot was selected and the government paid Frederick W. Crocker \$1,500 for the land. The final cost of construction was \$34,442.71 and included a 30 X 21 foot carriage house. Despite its cost and small size, the site was a good one. Cobb's Hill is the highest elevation in Barnstable Village. Before the view was obscured by trees and the addition of a large hall to the Unitarian Church across the street, it offered a commanding view of the harbor.

Phinney's mansion still stands less than 100 yards to the east. He could easily walk to work, or if he chose to ride his carriage, he could park in the new brick carriage shed Uncle Sam had built for him.

Written by Francis I. Broadhurst, 2011