



# Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

## Spring 2025 Newsletter

### Birth of the Coast Guard

by Greg Ketchen

In the 18th century, commerce along North America's East Coast was rapidly expanding. Few services outside the ports were in place to assist or protect mariners who sailed the ships – all so vital to the success of colonial industries. This included the movement of raw materials and finished goods across the Atlantic and along the coast, transportation of people, and a flourishing commercial fishing fleet. Before the Revolutionary War, a few light-houses were built to guide marine traffic past hazards and into ports but little else was being done to help commercial shipping.

During the first years of our new nation, efforts were finally initiated to better protect the wellbeing of seamen and to promote and regulate marine commerce. These early services ultimately became the core missions of today's modern U.S. Coast Guard. All have roots that reach back to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the 18th century.



The first lighthouse in what would become the United States was Boston Light on Little Brewster Island located in outer Boston Harbor and first lit in 1716. In 1789, the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment (later to become the Lighthouse Service) was created, consolidating the management and support for Boston Light and the other existing lights,

and providing funds needed to construct and maintain a network of aids to navigation. This was the start of what became the Coast Guard's Aids to Navigation mission which today is responsible for over 45,000 fixed and floating navigational aids.

In 1785, several distinguished Boston citizens, appalled by the number of sailors needlessly losing their lives with no rescue organization to respond to marine disasters, formed the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.



"This organization was dedicated "to the rescue of the survivors of shipwrecks and ships in distress." Their efforts led to many advances, including the construction of our nation's first lifeboat (built on Nantucket) which was employed at the first lifeboat station (in Cohasset). Throughout the 19th century, the Humane Society's operations grew into a network of rescue stations and "survival huts" along the coast of Massachusetts. In the 1840s, after several high-profile marine disasters, the federal government began providing funds to support rescue organizations in several states, including the Mass. Humane Society. In the 1870s, the U.S. Lifesaving Service was formed.

In 1790, Alexander Hamilton, in his role as Secretary of the Treasury, saw the need for cutters stationed along the coast to serve as an armed customs enforcement service and to protect American shipping. He introduced legislation to form the Revenue Marine (later the Revenue Cutter Service) which was signed into law by President Washington. The duties of the Service included both law enforcement and national defense. In 1791, the Revenue Cutter *Massachusetts*, built in Newburyport, MA, became our nation's first commissioned armed military ship and the first of ten cutters built to create the Revenue Marine's original fleet.



Newburyport is recognized as the birthplace of the Coast Guard. The *Massachusetts* was homeported in Boston and commanded by Captain John Foster Williams, Revolutionary War hero and a Boston native.

In 1915, the Revenue Cutter and Life-Saving Services merged to become the U.S. Coast Guard. The Lighthouse Service was added in 1939. These services, first introduced in Massachusetts, became Coast Guard Search & Rescue, Aids to Navigation, Law Enforcement, and National Defense missions.

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In 2000, the Massachusetts Senate and House passed legislation that allowed for a memorial in the State House to recognize the Coast Guard for the significant contributions its men and women have made to the Commonwealth's rich maritime history. The plan was to commission a large piece of art to be permanently installed in a prominent location within this historic building.

Work began immediately to raise funds, complete a preliminary design, and select an artist. Unfortunately, several of those pushing the project forward had to move on before the art could be commissioned.

In early 2023, an Ad Hoc Committee was formed to restart this project. The 17-member committee included Coast Guard personnel, historians, maritime art specialists, legislators, State House officials, and representatives of organizations such as the Humane Society and the Coast Guard Heritage Museum. Over 70% of the \$200,000 needed to complete all phases of this initiative has already been raised.

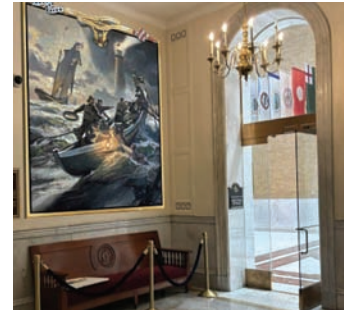
Donations can be made to the CG Heritage Museum designated for the CG Memorial Fund. The Museum, a 501.c.3 non-profit, is serving as the fiscal agent for the committee.

After a very comprehensive and competitive selection process, an exceptionally talented maritime artist was selected to complete the artwork. Russ Kramer of Mystic, Connecticut, was the committee's choice and, in December 2024, he was awarded the commission for this project. Done in a traditional style, the painting will commemorate the Coast Guard's origins in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.



Proposed USCG painting for Massachusetts State House by Marine artist Russell Kramer of Mystic, CT. Painting size: 96" wide X 102" deep.

This extraordinary work is on track to be completed and unveiled in the State House by the end of 2025. It is expected to be viewed by more than 100,000 people annually.



## Note of Interest

When our artist needed a model for his depiction of the coxswain of the rescue boat, it was suggested that he recruit a cadet from the nearby Coast Guard Academy. Committee felt using a Coast Guardsman as the model would be very appropriate and recommended Cadet 1/c Nate Pokress for several reasons. He is from Massachusetts, a co-captain of the CGA Men's Crew Team, and a direct descendant of William Chadwick.

In 1880, Chadwick, while serving as keeper of a U.S. Life Saving Station in New Jersey, successfully rescued five of the crew from the Schooner *George Taulane*. He was awarded the Congressional Gold Lifesaving Medal.

In 2022, Nate participated in the commissioning of Sentinel-class fast response cutter (FRC) *William Chadwick*. The cutter was the first of several FRCs to be homeported in Boston.



Cadet 1/c Nate Pokress holding different poses for the artist

Two of Nate's classmates and fellow CGA crew team members, Ben Coutu, and James Chase, also assisted with this modeling assignment. All three are now newly commissioned Coast Guard Ensigns, having graduated on May 21, 2025.



## President's Report

For our 2025 season, we are adding some new exhibits and programs, attracting more bus tours, and welcoming several new additions to our staff. We continue to grow and mature!

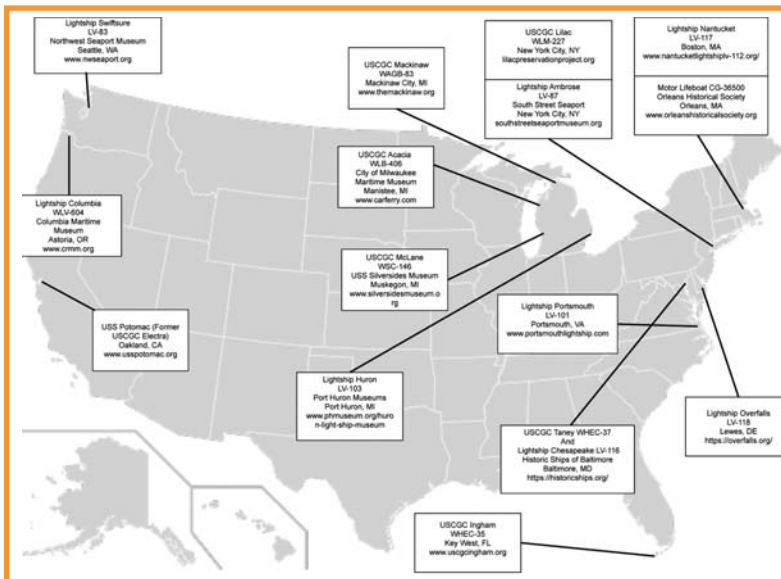
We have begun working with cadets from the newly formed Coast Guard Jr ROTC program at Barnstable High School. This is an exciting initiative and we're hoping a few of the cadets will contribute some of their spare time helping out at the museum.

We also continue to actively support the program to create a Coast Guard Memorial for the State House in Boston. We have recently received or are expecting several grants for the memorial and for the museum, but can always use additional financial support.

**Greg Ketchen, Captain, USCG (retired)**



ROTC cadets with their supervisor, Captain Rich Schultz (USCG retired) visiting the museum



### A Road Trip . . .

For anyone wishing to visit some (or all) of the major preserved Coast Guard vessels that are open as of the 2025 season.

Included are tenders, lightships and cutters, as well as the 36500.

Submitted by Connor Lamoureux

## Coast Guard Heritage Museum's First Crew

It is ironic that the Coast Guard Heritage Museum was the brainstorm of two former Navy men – our founder and first president, Cape Cod historian and lawman Lou Cataldo and CDR Maurice Gibbs (USN Ret) of Nantucket.

CDR Gibbs was a founding member of the U.S. Life-Saving Heritage Association (USL-SHA) and President Emeritus of the Nantucket Life-Saving Museum. It was he who suggested that we re-name the Donald Trayser Memorial Museum, noting that local history buffs might not know about historian Trayser, but: "Everybody knows the Coast Guard!"

Three former Coasties included Jim Walker (USCG Retired) of the American Lighthouse Foundation, Albert L. 'John' Manning (USCG), and CPO Dan Davidson (USCG Retired). These men came on board during the planning stages. So did Barnstable businessman Joseph Dugas who loaned us money to restore the interior of the old Custom House building.

Captain Robert L. O'Brien (USCG Ret), the former Comptroller of the U.S. Coast Guard and former Chief of Staff to the Commander of the old First Coast Guard District, was also a charter member of CGHM. Others instrumental in our founding include the late Cape Cod philanthropist L. Paul Lorusso, a former WWII Army Air Corps Veteran; Francis Broadhurst, ex-Navy Petty Officer (SO1) and retired journalist; RADM John Aylmer (CDR USN-Ret), former president of Massachusetts Maritime Academy; Ralph L. Jones (USCG Ret) a decorated U.S.C.G. veteran; Jim Ellis, Barnstable Village Blacksmith who worked his forge in the old Carriage House located on the museum grounds; and Hyannis businessman Stuart Bornstein.

There are others who were instrumental in the start up of the Coast Guard Heritage Museum; their contributions will always be greatly appreciated.

# The Shipwreck that changed the Coast Guard forever...

by PAC Corinne Zilnicki

When the clock tolled 12 A.M., February 12, 1983, the 605-foot cargo ship *Marine Electric* trekked northward 30 miles off Virginia's Eastern Shore, plowing slowly through gale-force winds and waves stirred up by a winter storm.



An able-bodied seaman relieved the watch and peered forward, noticing for the first time that the ship's bow seemed to be riding unusually low in the water. Dense curls of green ocean rushed over the bow, some of them arching 10 feet over the deck before crashing back down. The crew had been battling 25-foot waves for hours, but until now the bow bucked and dipped as normal.

Over the next two hours, the waves intruded with increasing vigor. The entire foredeck was swallowed in six feet of water. The main deck was completely awash. At 2:30 A.M., the Ship's Master, Phillip Corl, summoned his Chief Mate, Robert Cusick, to the bridge and shared his fears: the bow was settling, they were taking on too much water, and the crew was in real trouble.

At 2:51 A.M., the captain made the first radio distress call to the Coast Guard. "I seem to be taking on water forward," Corl said. We need someone to come out and give us some assistance, if possible."

By the time the assistance arrived, the *Marine Electric* had listed, rolled violently to starboard, and capsized hurling most of the 34 crew into the 37° water. Chaos ensued.

Cusick surfaced with a gasp, managed to get his bearings and spotted a partially submerged lifeboat. After swimming through towering waves for 30 minutes, he pulled himself into the swamped boat and started thrashing his legs to stay warm.

"All the time I kept looking out and yelling 'lifeboat here'. I just kept continually yelling out to keep myself going," the chief mate said. "Then I waited and prayed for daylight to come."

The Coast Guard had long since dispatched an HH-3F Pelican helicopter crew from Air Station Elizabeth City, N.C., and directed the crews of several cutters to the *Marine Electric's* position, but the tumultuous weather conditions slowed the rescuers' progress.

Naval Air Station Oceana had to recall available personnel before launching a helicopter crew, including Navy rescue swimmer Petty Officer 2nd Class James McCann.

At 5:20 A.M., the Coast Guard helicopter crew was the first to arrive on scene. They had expected to find the *Marine Electric's* sailors tucked into lifeboats and rafts, but instead, they found a blinking sea of strobe lights, empty lifeboats, and bodies strewn below.

The Navy aircrew arrived and deployed McCann, who tore through the oil-slicked waves, searching for survivors. He managed to recover five unresponsive sailors before hypothermia incapacitated him.

The Coast Guard scoured the southern end of the search area and discovered one man, Paul Dewey, alone in a life raft. They dropped the rescue basket so he could clamber inside, then hoisted him into the helicopter. About 30 yards away, they spotted Eugene Kelly, the ship's third mate, clinging to a life ring, and lowered the basket to retrieve him.

Cusick remained huddled in his lifeboat until the sailors aboard the *Berganger*, a Norwegian merchant vessel whose crew helped search the area, sighted him and notified the Coast Guard. The helicopter crew retrieved him in the rescue basket and took him to Salisbury, Maryland. The three survivors were then brought to Peninsula Regional Medical Center.

Meanwhile, more Coast Guard and Navy rescue crews converged on the scene to continue to search for survivors. Coast Guard Captain Mont Smith, the Operations Officer at Air Station Elizabeth City, piloted a second Pelican helicopter through turbulent headwinds for over an hour in order to reach the site.



Capt. Smith and his crew scanned the debris field below for signs of life. The people they saw were motionless, and it was difficult to determine whether they were simply too hypothermic to move or deceased. Smith spotted one man and hovered over him, squinting through the whipping snow, trying to decide what to do. "We all felt helpless," Smith said. There was no way to know if the man was dead or alive. We had to try something."

Petty Officer 2nd Class Greg Pesch, the avionics electrical technician aboard the helicopter, volunteered to go down on the hoist cable. After some deliberation, Smith agreed.

Pesch's descent in the rescue basket was a harrowing one. "The whole world seemed to be churning," Smith said. "I struggled to maintain a smooth hoist, but I know it was erratic."

Once in the water, Pesch grappled with the basket, trying to hold it steady as he guided the unresponsive man inside. It took several attempts, and then he scrambled into the basket himself and ascended back to the helicopter alongside the victim.

The aircrew spotted another potential survivor, and although Pesch attempted to descend again, the hoist cable spooled back on itself on the drum. The crew was forced to abort their mission and departed early for the nearby Salisbury Airport. There, paramedics pronounced the man they had just pulled from the water was dead upon arrival.

Dewey, Kelly and Cusick were the only men pulled from the ocean alive that morning. Their 31 shipmates had either succumbed to hypothermia or drowned. All told, Coast Guard, Navy, and merchant vessel crews recovered 24 bodies from the scene of the capsizing. Seven were never found. It is likely the ship's engineers were trapped below decks when the vessel capsized.

"Throughout Coast Guard history, the missions of the service have been written in blood," said Dr. William Thiesen, Historian Coast Guard Atlantic Area. "Such was the case with the loss of the *Marine Electric*. This tragic event led to stricter marine safety regulations and the establishment of the Coast Guard's premiere rescue swimmer program."



While the incident itself served as the catalyst for the major changes to the Coast Guard and maritime community at large, the rigorous efforts of Captain Domenic Calicchio brought the necessity for such changes into sharper focus.

Captain Domenic Calicchio

Calicchio was one of three marine safety officers charged with investigating the capsizing and sinking of the *Marine Electric*. The board of inquiry launched their investigation on July 25, 1984, and examined every aspect of the WWII-era cargo ship, its upkeep, the events leading up to its demise, and the Coast Guard's rescue efforts of that morning.

The investigation revealed that although the *Marine Electric* had been recently inspected several times by both the American Bureau of Shipping and the Coast Guard, marine inspectors had failed to note several discrepancies or recommend needed repairs. Investigators concluded that the casualty had most likely been caused by inadequate cargo hatches and deck plating, which allowed the crashing waves to flood the vessel's forward spaces.

Calicchio felt the Coast Guard needed to revamp its marine safety procedures and demand more of maritime companies, but more importantly, that the Coast Guard needed to demand more of itself.

His push for reform resulted in several additions to the Coast Guard marine safety protocol, including guidance on hatch cover inspections, and new requirements for enclosed lifeboats and their launching systems, for ships' owners to provide crews with cold water survival suits, and for flooding alarms to be installed in unmanned spaces on vessels.

The Coast Guard also tightened its inspections of ships that were 20 years old or older, which led to the near-immediate scrapping of 70 similar WWII-era vessels.

"Calicchio embodied the service's core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty," said Dr. Thiesen. "He championed marine safety and pursued the truth, even at the risk of his career as a Coast Guard officer."

While the Coast Guard changed many policies to make as after marine environment after the sinking of the *Marine Electric*, the service continues to make improvements on its marine safety program today. By 2025, it is estimated that the demand for waterborne commerce worldwide will more than double. The Coast Guard has published its Marine Commerce Strategic Outlook in preparation for the increasing demand.

The *Marine Electric* shipwreck also served as the genesis of another crucial development: the U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Program was established in 1984. The program's physical fitness standards, training and organizational structure were developed over a five-year implementation period, and in March of 1985, Air Station Elizabeth City became the first unit to receive rescue swimmers.

The first life was saved two months later.



Robert Cusick



# 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

## COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM SCHEDULE HOURS

- Memorial Day to Columbus Day: Tues-Sat 10-3 • Columbus Day to Veterans' Day: Thurs, Fri, Sat 10-3

## COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM'S 2025 MEMBERS-ONLY NIGHT

Saturday, 2 Aug., 6:30 – 8 pm

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

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We are a 501(c)(3) organization. Our mission is to preserve and share the story of the U.S. Coast Guard in the former U.S. Custom House, Barnstable, MA.