



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

Fall/Winter 2018 Newsletter

Holidays for Lighthouse Families

Coast Guard Lighthouses and the history of “The Flying Santa”

Throughout the history of the U.S. Coast Guard’s aviation branch, Service aircraft have come to the aid of the American public in emergencies and in time of need. However, the Holiday Season has provided a unique opportunity for private citizens to return the favor.



Trimotor flies over Graves Light, 1937

Beginning in the Great Depression, aviator William “Bill” Wincapaw began the tradition of “The Flying Santa.” Born in Friendship, Maine, Captain Wincapaw oversaw flight operations for the Curtiss Flying Service in Rockland, Maine. He came to admire Maine’s lighthouse keepers and their families for standing the watch in isolated and often inhospitable locations.

Travel Air A-6000-A airplane, featuring a single radial engine and wicker seats. That first year, he airdropped Christmas gifts to a dozen lighthouses located along the Maine Coast.

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Bill Wincapaw

Our Oral History Program

With the purchase of a new digital recorder, our efforts to collect oral histories from Coast Guard veterans has begun in earnest. We plan to include portions of some of these in the museum’s audio tours and add them to our growing archive and research library. If you have a Coast Guard story to tell, please consider allowing us to record it. Some of our recent recordings include:

Chief Robert Jones is a 97-year-old WWII veteran now living in Philadelphia. After the war, he completed a career as a fireman in that city. In the early ‘40s, he served as a trainer of both Coast Guardsmen and dogs preparing to conduct beach patrols along the U.S. East Coast. Later in the war, he supervised the Coast Guard security detachment assigned to Naval Air Station Martha’s Vineyard. His stories are fascinating.



Captain Bob Dinsmore is a graduate of the CG Academy - Class of ‘47. Bob served much of his career on ships, on the International Ice Patrol, and as one of the service’s early oceanographers. Admiral “Iceberg” Smith was his mentor and his recollections of this CG icon are invaluable in our understanding of the CG’s early role advancing the country’s marine science programs.

Petty Officer Vin Zavroskis, now living in Falmouth, MA, served on a CG Loran Station in the Pacific in the late 1950s. He told the story of his experience surviving a typhoon that passed over his station, leveling virtually all the structures there.

by Greg Ketchen, Captain, USCG (retired)

President's Report

Our 2018 season is now over, at least for the six months that we were open to the public. This has been an extraordinary year. We hosted several new events that we hope will become annual traditions including lectures, a members' only party, and an end-of-season Halloween celebration and we took part in our village's Fourth of July parade. We also prototyped a new mini-theater, a "selfie" photo station, and technology to collect high-quality oral histories. With the help of some very generous donations, we were able to expand our archival initiatives, upgrade our administrative software, add some new exhibits, and complete significant improvements to our facilities. With the start of the offseason, our hands-on work begins again as we tackle major renovations of our 2nd deck Grand Exhibit Hall and basement areas used for our library, office and artifact storage. We also plan to produce a short film for our theater. Come visit us when we reopen on 1 May. We're sure that you will be very pleasantly surprised.



Aine Glennon – a Halloween selfie at the Museum

During this past year, we experienced several emotional highs and lows. We're very excited about several new board members and volunteer staff that bring us new talents, experience and energy. Sadly though, as we mentioned in our summer newsletters, three of our family here at the museum "crossed the bar" earlier this year and then we lost Jim Travers in October.

In November, we lost two exceptional Americans who were part of our larger Coast Guard Family with ties to our service's rich history in Massachusetts. See the article in this newsletter by Nancy Shoemaker about Andy Fitzgerald who was part of the rescue that many consider to be the Coast Guard's "Finest Hours".

Olivia Hooker also died in November at 103. Dr. Hooker was the first African-American woman to serve on active duty in the Coast Guard after her friend author Alex Haley, a Coast Guard petty officer, recommended that she consider serving in the military during World War II.



Olivia Hooker on a CG cutter, 1945

She was enthusiastically accepted into the Coast Guard as a SPAR and served in Boston as a YN2. Coast Guard Commandant Schultz offered that Dr. Hooker was "a pioneer in the history of women and minorities in the Coast Guard and the nation". Her Coast Guard recruiter said "Miss Hooker is one of the (most) outstanding young women ever accepted for the SPARs". We plan to include her compelling story in a future exhibit area in our museum dedicated to diversity in the Coast Guard.



Olivia Hooker before Congress in 2005
AP photo

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

Crossing the Bar



The Museum was saddened to learn of the passing of one of our longtime docents, **James E. Travers**, 83, of Lynnfield and Sagamore Beach. Jim was born in Boston and raised in West Roxbury, MA, graduating from Massachusetts Maritime Academy and Suffolk University Law School. He served his country in the United States Navy and went on to have a civilian career at General Electric, retiring in 1997.

Deeply patriotic, Jim volunteered at the Coast Guard Heritage Museum and placed flags at the Massachusetts

National Cemetery in Bourne, on Memorial and Veterans Days. His museum tours were always well received and we will miss his good humor and the historical accuracy he infused into his discussions.

Jim is survived by his beloved wife of 56 years, Helen (Sullivan), as well as their five children and twelve grandchildren. A funeral Mass was held at St. Maria Goretti Church in Lynnfield with interment in Forest Hill Cemetery, Lynnfield. Donations may be made in Jim's memory to Massachusetts Maritime Academy, 101 Academy Drive, Buzzards Bay, MA 02532.



Remembering a Coast Guard Hero

Andrew J. Fitzgerald, Jr. passed away on November 15th. He was 87. Born in Brockton, Mass. - Andy was proud of being from the hometown of Rocky Marciano, the famous boxer.

The country knew of him as a crew member of the famous Coast Guard rescue of the *Pendleton* on February 18, 1952 as depicted in the Disney movie, "The Finest Hours," from the book by authors Casey Sherman and Michael Tougas.

His Coast Guard family knew him as Andy, the easy-going, always approachable former engineer of the USCG 36500. He had enlisted in the Coast Guard for a very simple reason: to save lives. We all hope we have had an impact on public safety and, in our own ways and with our own specialities, we most likely did. But Andy, at 20 years old, became an integral part of Coast Guard history as a crew member of the 36500.

After boot camp, Fitzgerald was sent to a lightship on Nantucket Sound. He didn't take to lightship duty. He found it boring and was often seasick from the constant swells passing under the anchored ship. A crew member senior to Andy loved the duty but was slated for a transfer. Andy volunteered to take his place; 30 days was enough. He was transferred to Chatham Station. And then . . .

There was a call for crew members on the mess deck. BM1 Bernie Webber's go-to engineman, Gus Gouthro*, was sick and had been out all day securing vessels in preparation for the storm. Bernie was going to rouse Gus, but Fitzgerald said, "You can't wake him up. I'll go with you."

We all know the story of the heroic rescue of 32 seamen from the stern section of the T-2 tanker the *Pendleton*.

1952: Fitzgerald handling lines at the forward hatch, photo by Dick Kelsey



*see spring 2018 issue

Fifty-seven years later Andy spoke of a few interesting details of that night:

- When he wasn't checking the engines, he was holding the search light from the forward hatch.
- The engines died twice. What a catastrophe that would have been if the lifeboat had permanently lost power.
- A few days later the boat had trouble getting into reverse. He was still shaking his head over that one.
- The rescue is often described as making pass after pass to the Jacob's Ladder, picking up one survivor at a time. Not true. He said the *Pendleton* crew were jumping off the ladder onto or near the boat (into the water) sometimes two or three at a time.
- With 20 survivors on the vessel, there appeared to be no more room. The boat was getting unstable - more and more difficult to maneuver as it was sitting low in the water. Remember the seas that night have been reported to be as high as 60 feet. But even if the seas were closer to 30 or 40 feet, it was a violent ride. There was talk of returning to the station with the rescued members of the *Pendleton* crew and coming back to retrieve the rest. Andy said he was the loudest critic of that idea: "I don't want to come out again!" Their decision to stay on station and get all *Pendleton* crew on board probably saved lives. Andy said, "Coming back in was easy. We surfed in with following seas."

The crew of the 36500, Bernie Webber, Irving Maske, Richard Livesey, and Andy, were reluctant heroes. They were not in a celebratory mood when they returned to the Station. They were tired and thinking of the ship's cook who had perished. Fitzgerald didn't tell his wife Gloria about the rescue until two years into their marriage.

After three years of active duty, Andy Fitzgerald moved to Colorado and started a successful career as an equipment salesman. Andrew J. Fitzgerald, Jr. lived a long and full life - and saved a few lives along the way.

by Nancy Viall Shoemaker

2009: Fitzgerald in the forward hatch of the 36500 with (l-r) Livesey, *Pendleton* survivor Charles Bridges, Maske, Webber



Moments in Coast Guard History

7 December 1793: The first Revenue Cutter Service court martial occurred on this date aboard the cutter *Massachusetts*. The offender, Third Mate Sylvanus Coleman of Nantucket, was summarily dismissed from the service for "speaking disrespectfully of his superior officers in public company...insulting Captain John Foster Williams [the commanding officer] on board, and before company... for keeping bad women on board the cutter in Boston and setting a bad example to the men by ordering them to bring the women on board at night and carrying them ashore in the morning . . ." and for writing an order in the name of the commanding officer.



Courtesy the Coast Guard Historian's Office
www.history.uscg.mil/Portals/1/events/pdf/december.pdf

Lightships of Cape Cod *(cont'd)*

In our Summer Newsletter Lightship article, the reader was left wondering what had happened to LV-6 (Light Vessel) frozen into the ice in Nantucket Sound during the winter of 1918. Captain of the vessel, Richard E.B. Phillips of Dennisport had taken regular leave from the ship, leaving First Mate Henry F. Joy in command. It was later reported that Mr. Joy had walked across seven miles of sea ice to Nantucket Harbor in order to ask permission of the Commanding Officer at Station Brant Point to abandon ship. He was ordered by the local USLHS District Officer to return to his ship and maintain station.

With the mid-winter thaw on February 1st, 1918, the ice sheet began to move and Lightship #6, Cross Rip was dragged off station. It was last seen moving out of the eastern entrance of Nantucket Sound with its ensign upside down in a sign of distress. The Head Lighthouse Keeper William Grieder of Great Point Lighthouse alerted the tender ship Azalea which searched for the ship, but it was pulled out to sea with the ice floes. The ship and her crew were lost at sea. All crew members were locals: Frank Johnson, Machinest, South Yarmouth, MA; William Rose, Cook, North Harwich, MA; Almon Wixon, Seaman, Dennisport, MA; Arthur C. Joy, Seaman, Dennisport, MA; E.H. Phillips, Seaman, West Dennis, MA.

In 1987, a lightship bell presumed to be from the LV-6 was recovered off Nauset Beach.

In an 1843 report to Congress, it was stated that “the Shoals of Nantucket are known and dreaded by every navigator on the Atlantic seaboard...” “The Shoals themselves stretch like angry fingers, covering hundreds of square miles with shifting sand bars and dangerous cross currents. Heavy fog saturates this area, covering it in a grey shroud more than 40 percent of the year.”



The first lightship selected to anchor at this exposed location, dangerously far from land, was the 104 foot long #11, built in 1853 and bearing the name Nantucket South Shoals. Located 40 miles southeast of Nantucket, Lightship Nantucket was put on station in 1854 to mark the limits of the dangerous Nantucket Shoals. It was blown off station and dashed on the rocks off Long Island, but not before the crew was rescued.

By 1855, #11 was removed and replaced by the sturdier LV-#1. Named Nantucket New South Shoals No. 1, it was double hulled by design. In the space between the hulls, salt was poured to ‘sweeten’ the wood. In effect, it was virtually petrified to strengthen its outer structure. In 1878, it was

blown off station by a gale resulting in a resting location off the coast of Bermuda, 800 miles off-station. In all, it was reported that #1 broke loose from her mooring 23 times between 1855 and 1892, and left as many as 25 mushroom anchors at the bottom of the sea around the point of anchorage. In a colorful first person account, journalist Gustav Kobbe, in the *Century Magazine* (described as the *National Geographic* of its time) wrote an article entitled “Life on the South Shoal Lightship” in August 1891 in which he described the lightship as having left “...a regular mushroom plantation at the bottom of the sea.”

Next, to better service the treacherous location, the #54 (1892) was placed 17 miles further southeast of the original station. Steel hulled, she was on station only a few months, and almost foundered



Life aboard a lightship

in a heavy gale, and was therefore moved to the less-exposed Boston station. Replacement vessel #58 (1892-1896) foundered off Nantucket Island, but the crew was rescued, and she later became a Relief vessel.

Nantucket Lightship #66 (1896-1907) had the designation of being the most exposed lightship to date, anchored 50 miles from the nearest point of land. She was also a pioneer in the radio industry in 1901, when Lightship #66 received the first land-to-sea radio transmission off the North American coast from the wireless transmitting station established by Guglielmo Marconi in Chatham.

In 1905, while the #66 was being spelled (relieved) by Relief Vessel #58, the Relief vessel developed a leak during a heavy gale and became the first American vessel to use the newly installed wireless radio for a distress call at sea. Neither “SOS” nor “CQD” had been established as the emergency call, so the radioman used “HELP”, broadcasting in both the new International Morse Code and the long-established American Morse Code. She sank due to the gale forces but all hands were rescued.

Lightship #71 had a brief stint on station during the winter of 1906, but was moved to off the coast of North Carolina, where in 1918, it became the only lightship sunk by enemy action. The #85 (1907) gained distinction during World War I as a refuge for 115 shipwrecked sailors in October 1917, when a German U-boat sank five merchant vessels south of the lightship.

When Nantucket Lightship #117 was placed in 1931, there had not been a loss of life on station since its inception in 1854. By 1934, Nantucket Lightship had been recognized as the only lightship guiding vessels to and from Europe in the North Atlantic sea lanes. Her position was 200 miles east of New York City and she was sometimes called the 'Statue of Liberty of the Sea' since she was the first tangible indication of the United States to many immigrants as they approached the East Coast. On May 15, 1934, the British luxury liner S.S. *Olympic*, the sister ship to the ill-fated *Titanic*, struck the Nantucket Lightship #117 at 16 knots in pea-soup fog. In a matter of minutes, the lightship was sent to the bottom killing four crewmen instantly. Three others died later from their injuries.



Two years later, the British government gave the Lighthouse Service a replacement ship designated LV-#112 as reparation for the sinking of the #117. It was equipped with the most sophisticated safety devices available at the time, including radio-beacon wireless, two-tone diaphone fog-signal horn and a submarine oscillator. The ship was placed on station in 1936 and except for three years during World War II when she was replaced by a lighted bell-buoy, and for two years (1958-1960), the #112 was on station from 1936 to 1973. She outlasted two notable hurricanes (1954 and 1959), surviving 110 mile per hour winds and 70 foot seas.

Lightship WLV-612, built in 1950 in Curtis Bay, Maryland was originally stationed in San Francisco. It was transferred to its final station, Nantucket Shoals, in 1975, thus becoming the only lightship to transit the Panama Canal in both directions. During its last four years on the Shoals, it alternated service stints of roughly 21 days on with WLV-613 (Nantucket Lightships I and II), the only two surviving lightships guarding the shores and waterways of the United States. In 1983, the Nantucket Shoals Lightship was replaced by a large navigational buoy (LNB)



Lightship and replacement buoy

also called a Texas Tower. Briefly pressed into communications duty in Maine, and as a fueling station for Coast Guard enforcement vessels, cost modifications needed to make her truly useful were prohibitive. On March 29, 1985, WLV-612 was officially decommissioned. Thus, Lightships and their colorful history passed into the navigational annals, along with coasting schooners and whaling ships.

END OF AN ERA

Most lightships are long gone, decommissioned or sold for scrap. In the lifetime of lightship service, from 1820 to 1985, ten vessels were lost to storms, at least 14 sunk by the Confederate Navy during the Civil War, over 150 collisions were documented and five lightships were verified as lost. By 1956, only 25 remained on station, and on March 29, 1985 the last lightship in service, the USCG WLV-612 Nantucket, was decommissioned, thus ending 164 years of continuous lightship service by the Federal Government.

Many of these sturdy sentinels met with questionable demise because records are incomplete, inconsistent or lost altogether. LV-17 and LV-18 were used for target practice after being transferred to the U.S. Navy. LV-20 was sold privately and used by rumrunners during Prohibition. A few have become floating museums or restaurants across the country, in cities as diverse as New York City, Portland (OR), Philadelphia, Seattle, Port Huron, MI, Baltimore, Astoria (OR), and Oakland (CA). When George H. W. Bush served as Vice President, WLV-612 was briefly used as a radar and security-communications platform when the Bushes were present at their vacation home in Kennebunkport, Maine. LV-3 and LV-42 were both burned as part of a firework display on the 4th of July. Still another light vessel, after being declared as surplus, was bought on E-Bay by an entrepreneur and converted into luxurious vacation rentals with spacious cabins, granite countertops and spectacular shoreline views, amenities certainly never thought possible by the long-forgotten crews.

by Patricia Garrity

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Flying Santa, 1946

Coast Guard Lighthouses and the history of "The Flying Santa" (cont'd)

Wincapaw continued the tradition the next year and, over time, came to be known as "The Flying Santa" and the "Santa of the Lighthouses." He began to dress the part and enlisted his son, Bill, Jr., to pilot additional Christmas Day flights. His gift parcels included basic items, such as newspapers, magazines, coffee, tea, candy, tobacco, soup, yarn, pens and pencils. By 1933, the program proved so popular that Wincapaw expanded it to include 91 lighthouses from Maine to Rhode Island and Connecticut. He even found commercial sponsors to underwrite the cost of the parcels and the flights.

In the late 1930s, the program expanded requiring the services of a third Santa. The Wincapaws enlisted New England maritime historian Edward Rowe Snow to fill the position. During World War II, deliveries became more sporadic; however, by war's end the Flying Santa visited an impressive 115 lighthouses and Coast Guard stations. In 1946, the program even tested the latest aviation technology using a helicopter to assist in airborne deliveries. The Flying Santa reverted to fixed-wing aircraft the next year and helicopters would not be used again for over 30 years.

In 1947, Captain Wincapaw suffered a heart attack during a flight out of Rockland and died in the ensuing crash. Numerous lighthouse keepers, their families, and representatives from the Coast Guard, Army and Navy attended Wincapaw's memorial service. At the appointed time of the service, foghorns and lighthouse warning bells called out along the Maine Coast to honor the man who established the beloved Flying Santa tradition.

After Wincapaw's passing, Edward Snow took over the program, and Snow and his family became the heart and soul of the operation. With the support of dedicated pilots, Snow honored Wincapaw by expanding the flights to include nearly 180 lighthouses and boat stations. In certain years, the program even served installations along the shores of the West Coast and Great Lakes; and remote locations, such as Bermuda and Sable Island, 100 miles off the Nova Scotia coast.

Snow continued the Christmas tradition for 45 years. He retired in 1981, when failing health prevented him from taking part in further Flying Santa missions. That year, oversight of the Flying Santa program passed to the Hull Lifesaving Museum and helicopters replaced fixed-wing aircraft to transport the Flying Santa. In 1987, lighthouses underwent automation; however, the Flying Santa continued to visit Coast Guard bases and installations. In the 1990s, a number of retired Coast Guardsmen began volunteering to serve as the Flying Santa. Moreover, in 1997, the all-volunteer Friends of Flying Santa was organized as a private non-profit to run the Flying Santa program.



First Flying Santa helicopter, 1946

The Flying Santa has been in operation nearly ninety years since Captain Wincapaw founded it. During that time, the Flying Santa has missed only the year 1942 due to the security concerns of World War II. Today, the program delivers Christmas gifts to over 800 Coast Guard children at 75 units located from Maine to New York.

by William H. Thiesen, Historian, Atlantic Area, USCG