

THE STORY OF
HORSENECK POINT LIFESAIVING STATION
HUMANE SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS STATION NO. 69
WESTPORT, MASSACHUSETTS
1888-1913



*Lifesaving station
Horse Neck Pt. Mass*



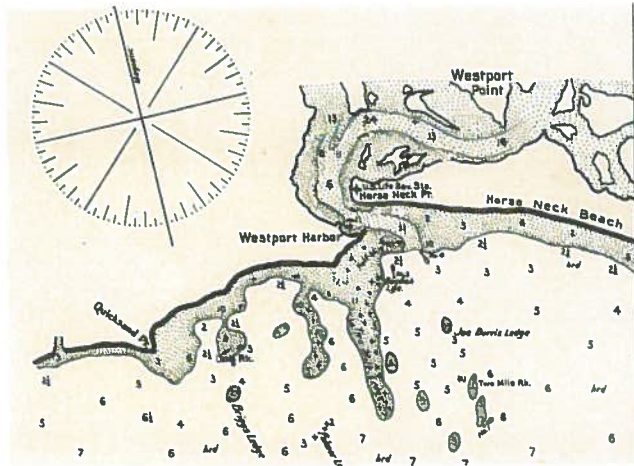
THE WESTPORT FISHERMENS' ASSOCIATION



THE HORSNECK POINT LIFESAVING STATION WESTPORT, MASSACHUSETTS

The Humane Society of Massachusetts erected its sixty-ninth lifesaving station in April of 1888 at the Westport harbor entrance, on the west end of Horseneck Beach. The station was 16'x32', a simple shingled post-and beam structure on posts with a floor, and pitched roof to house a 30' lifeboat named "Westport". This typical HSM station was unmanned and performed the simple function of housing the lifeboat and associated equipment in the boat room. A 1901

Eldridge Harbor map shows the station located just inside the stone jetty on the more protected river beach. The Horseneck Point station was later moved to a better location at the other end of Horseneck Beach before it was decommissioned in 1913 after twenty-five years of service. To date, there are no records of rescues performed by the station crew. The only evidence so far is a post card showing a winter beach scene with wagons and people observing people and objects being



brought ashore over the ice, with an apparently ice-bound ship in the distance. The title of the scene is "Horseneck Beach Disaster 1905". The station was soon converted to a restaurant, one of many uses in the following years. Today, the original structure is intact, buried by many renovations and additions. The Westport Fisherman's Association is currently undertaking the restoration of the station to its original appearance.

This station is a small, almost forgotten piece of Westport's maritime history. Its story has links to old Westport families, shipbuilding, whaling and the late-nineteenth century development of the town and East Beach area in particular, reflecting population growth, prosperity as well as cultural shifts in leisure time. The station, along with a very few houses at Horseneck Point, witnessed and survived the 1938 Hurricane, which changed the face of East Beach, Horseneck Beach and Westport forever.

At the same time, this little station was part of a network of a State and National effort to rescue and help shipwreck survivors, a significant problem in earlier times. Charts provided limited information and were often inaccurate. The aids to navigation system –

lighthouses, buoys and markers – were not dependable. This was also the age of sail, where ships were more at the mercy of the weather, particularly wind, waves and fog. In 1785, some citizens in Boston formed the Humane Society of Massachusetts, and over the next century, the Society erected a network of “houses of refuge” and lifesaving stations along the Massachusetts Coast. The Westport station was one of the very last to be established.



In the beginning, as was their custom, the Humane Society appointed an experienced local mariner as Keeper of the station at a small annual stipend. His responsibilities included maintaining the station, recruiting and training a boat crew for rescue work. The first keeper of the Westport lifesaving station was Captain George L. Manchester, from one of the early families to settle in Westport. He was formerly the Captain of the whaler Kate Cory, one of the last whalers built in Westport Point on the east river bank behind the present-day Paquachuck Inn. George was appointed Keeper in 1888 at the age of 64. A photograph from that time shows him, a stern and rugged bearded mariner



posing seated at a table. In July 1889, at the first Annual Inspection by the Humane Society, the inspector listed all of the contents of the station: House, boat, oars (10 plus steering oar), life vests, lines (cable and two heaving), boat hooks, ax, bucket, anchor, grappling hook, branding iron, broom shovel and pick. There was no Hunt Gun and breeches buoy apparatus originally, but simply a boat and associated equipment. We do not have the date of George’s retirement from the Keeper’s job, and there is little information to date on that early period. By 1898, the HSM Annual Report lists F.B. Head as the Keeper. George died in 1905 and is buried in the Westport Point Cemetery along with his father.

In January of 1894, the Westport Lifesaving Station was moved to its present location at the east end of Horseneck Beach near the causeway out to Gooseberry Neck. The main reason for this move may be found in the HSM Annual Inspection notes from 1908: “This station was moved to its present position in 1894, from Westport Point Harbor where it was originally placed (a very poor place for a boat).” One might guess it was a poor location because the narrowness of the harbor mouth produced a very strong tidal current, and the bar outside the harbor mouth intensified storm surf in that location. It must have been difficult to launch the boat in any conditions. One can imagine the crew loading the station on a wagon and pulling it with a team of horses at low tide, down the frozen sand or over the ice to the other end of the beach. The station was re-installed on posts at the west end of East Beach Road, where it remains today.



At this point of land, the new location offered two launching areas – one on the generally more protected East Beach and one on West Beach. The location was also near the entrance to Buzzards Bay, a major shipping route, with Hen and Chickens Reef and The Old Cock off Gooseberry Neck, making the passage hazardous. This passage remains notorious for rough seas to this day. The new location, therefore, may have seemed to the Society closer to potential groundings and an easier place to launch rescues.

Around the time of the relocation of the station, a new Keeper was appointed, a man by the name of Frederick Burdon “Burt” Head. He, too, was an experienced mariner, and he lived on East Beach near the relocated lifesaving station. Burt Head was born in 1850 in Dartmouth near the village of Russells Mills. He was the son of Frederick Head, a mate on two whale ships: the Thomas Winslow and John Winslow, both built at the Head of Westport at the top of the East Branch of the Westport River. Both ships were floated downstream on casks over the shallows at high tide to deep water. Burt was married twice and was the father of William “Will” Head, a fisherman who lived in the village of Westport well into the 20th century.



At the age of sixteen, Burt Head shipped in the Whaler “Antelope” out of New Bedford for a thirty one -month voyage in the North Atlantic. It was a hard life, but Burt, although a small man, was strong, determined and energetic. He took his turn at the helm, manned an oar in the whaleboats, and worked as an Able Seaman. The ship was eventually wrecked on Dog Island off Hudson’s Bay when the Antelope dragged anchor in a storm and was blown ashore. Two English boats in the area, the Lion and the Wolf, rescued the crew and some of the 500 barrels of oil aboard. The Antelope broke up on the shore. Burt, in the Lion, made his way to St. John’s, Newfoundland and eventually home to Dartmouth. There, he decided to give up whaling and went to work on a farm near his home.

About a year later, in 1876, he decided farming was not for him, and he moved to East Beach in Westport into an old bowling alley, the only structure on the beach. The building had bedrooms, and Burt began renting the rooms to duck hunters. He loved hunting and fishing. His success in guiding and lodging duck gunners soon led him to build a proper rooming house right on the beach, towards the west end, close to the future location of the Lifesaving Station.

In a 1937 interview for the New Bedford Standard Times, about a year before the 1938 Hurricane, Burt, at the age of 88, was interviewed about his life there, and he said “ For quite a while, it was the only house on the beach. As many as 150 gunners roomed at my house in earlier years during the season

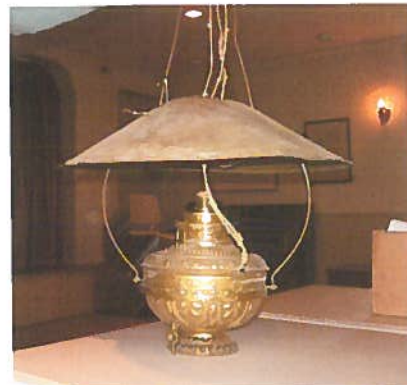


“YOUNG FELLOWS better watch how I do it.” So advised Frederick B. Head, 88-year-old Horseneck Beach resident.

when ducks and other fowl were plentiful. I went hunting a lot myself and was and still am a crack shot. I shot as many as 86 ducks in one day and shipped them to the markets in Boston and New York." In addition to ducks, loons, quail and other waterfowl, he hunted deer successfully in the Horseneck Beach area. He fished out of a rowboat, caught lobsters along the shore and picked beach plums. Much of what he shot and caught he sold. With his rooming house, guiding and living off the land, he was quite self-sufficient.

When the lifesaving station was moved in January of 1894 close to Head's rooming house on East Beach, he was a logical choice for the next Keeper. George Manchester was 70 years old and may have decided to retire with the move of the station. The station is called out on an 1895 map of Westport at the end of East Beach Road on the point. There is little information on the activities or crews of the Horseneck Point Lifesaving Station after the move. The few HSM inspection notes record repainting in September of 1899 and new posts in August 1908. On August 28, 1908, two new lanterns and a "penalty sign" were delivered. The penalty sign was undoubtedly the language from the Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 266: Section 133, still on the books today, which prohibits entry into an HSM boat station and lists penalties. Apparently, with the unmanned stations, vandalism had become a problem. That sign shows on the front of the building along with the station sign in the only known photograph of the station in its prime.

The only known artifact is a brass kerosene lantern that once hung in the station and was given to the Westport Historical Society. It was a common household hanging lantern developed in the 1850's, called a "Juno" Center Draught Fount with glass chimney, 20" reflector and adjustable wick. It was in general use in the latter part of the 19th century. For an extra 75 cents, they could have had it nickel-plated, but it is brass. One theory is that Burt Head brought the lantern over from his rooming house to help out at the station.

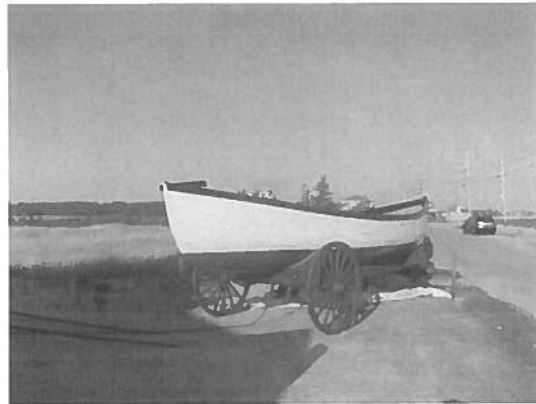


As for the boat itself, research continues. The 1908 inspection report records: "Boat built by Lawley in 1888. Good condition, but very poor model. Too sharp floor and too heavy." George Lawley and Son, ship builders from the Boston area, were proud of their lifeboats, and had completed one in 1887 for the Point Allerton Lifesaving Station in Hull, which exists complete in the excellent Lifesaving Museum there. The Hull boat, however, was a custom design, built to the specifications of the Keeper, the famous Joshua James. We do not know if the Westport boat, built the following year, resembled the Hull boat. Additional HSM Annual Report notes from the turn of the last century refer to several station boats needing replacement. In 1905, the Cuttyhunk HSM station, directly across Buzzards Bay from Horseneck Point, sold its surf boat for \$7.00 to a private owner who converted it to a fishing boat. That boat, at 25-feet, was smaller and lighter than the Westport Lawley boat. A cabin house was added to make it more seaworthy. It passed through several owners, including one from Westport, and was

eventually given to Mystic Seaport and restored. If, in fact, the HSM replaced some of the station boats with a standard smaller, lighter surfboat around the end of the 19th century, the Westport station may have had a second boat in its final years. The full history of the Westport boat is yet to be known. In June of 2007, Mystic Seaport loaned the Cuttyhunk surfboat to the Westport Fishermen's Association, with the permission of the Town of Gosnold, as an interim display for the station restoration project. In the winter of 2009, a replica of the Nantucket HSM boat wagon was built by Westport boatbuilders and a local blacksmith, with minor adjustment to fit the boat. In December of 2009, the boat was installed in the boat room at the grand opening of the fully restored station.



In 1911, Burt Head traveled to Marblehead for the annual Keepers Meeting of the Humane Society of Massachusetts. A group photograph survives with Burt Head in the second row, with the caption "...Head, Horseneck Beach...". The 1911-1912 HSM Annual Report lists the Horseneck Point Station as usual, along with a map locating all of the active stations, including Horseneck Point.



By the following Annual Report for 1913-1914, Station No. 69 at Horseneck Point is no longer listed or shown on the station map, a quiet end to 25 years of service.

With de-commissioning, the station structure began a new life of different uses, renovations and changes. Post cards in the 1920's show the station as a restaurant, with new wrap-around porch with tapered columns and a large dormer. Ali Aberdeen started "Ali's Restaurant". The restaurant use endured until 1966. Some local residents remember it well, and one reports that his father worked there as a waiter. East Beach had blossomed into a summer colony and resort since the 1870's when Burt Head arrived, and it was now a thriving community of vacation houses, a hotel, rooming houses, stores and a dance hall.



Shown are the Mass. Humane Society station captains, posing during their annual meeting in Marblehead in 1911. They are from left to right: (front row) Allen (Cuttyhunk), Vanderhoop (Gay Head, one of the only American Indians in the service), Blackman (Brant Rock), Morse (Gloucester), Gosber (Gloucester), Giles (Marblehead), Head (Horse Neck Beach), and O'Neil (Scituate); (back row) Welch (Scituate), Bloomer (Chatham), Barrus (Cape Pogue), Parsons (Rockport), Breen (Rockport), Blackman Jr. (Brant Rock), Norcross (Nantucket), Salvador (Cohasset), and Cleveland (Vineyard Haven).

The 1938 Hurricane in September of that year changed everything. All but a few houses near the point, including the old lifesaving station structure, were completely wiped away on both East and Horseneck Beaches. Poor Burt Head decided to ride out the storm at his rooming house and was found drowned the next day in a marsh far inland. There was no trace of his rooming house to be found. The lifesaving station restaurant undoubtedly suffered some significant damage. Those distinctive tapered columns from the 1920's post cards may have been recycled into a nearby post-hurricane cottage that exists today on Horseneck Beach.

In 1940, the triangular structure was added to the complex. Over the years, as other additions and renovations buried the original lifesaving station further, the building served as a bar, a clam shack, an ice cream parlor, a residence, and an environmental

visitors center called The Edge. In the early 1990's Mary Schmidt, the last private owner of the property, began efforts to document and restore the lifesaving station. The Westport Historical Society placed a plaque on the building documenting its origin as HSM Lifesaving Station No. 69. In the late 1990's, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took ownership of the complex, and it has been unoccupied for



several years. In 2007, the Westport Fishermen's Association, after some planning, negotiated a lease on the property with the Department of Communities and Recreation, with the intention of restoring the station to its original appearance, removing all of the additions except the triangular building which will stand as a separate structure and serve as a visitors center.

Research into the history of the station, its keepers, crews and boat continues. It is one of a very few Massachusetts Humane Society lifesaving stations still in existence. The first phase of demolition and stabilization in preparation for the final restoration was completed in the summer of 2008, funded by local Community Preservation Act funds voted by the Town of Westport, matching funds for the State Department of Communities and Recreation and supplemented by private donations. The second phase, to complete the station building restoration was completed in the summer of 2009. With the completion of the Visitors Center in December of 2009, a three-year effort to restore this piece of Westport's history and return it to the community was complete.

Christopher Gillespie
January 2010

