

Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 26 Number 5

May 2003

Calendar of Events

Wednesday, May 14
DHS Board Meets
7:00 P.M.
Josiah Dennis Manse

Saturday, May 17
1:00-4:00 P.M.

"Capt. Levi Howes, Master of the Seven Seas"

A special maritime exhibit
at the

**Josiah Dennis Manse
Museum**
77 Nobscussett Road
Dennis Village

Wednesday, May 21
7:30 P.M.

Lightships of Cape Cod
Doug Bingham, historian
for the US Coast Guard
Foundation, will tell of the
brave men who served in
the US Light Ship Service
and the US Lifesaving
Service.

Carleton Hall
1006 Old Bass River Rd.
Dennis. Refreshments.

Saturday morning, 9:30
June 7

Lady Slipper Walk
Naturalist Shannon Go-
heen leads a walk over
the Indian Lands Conser-
vation Area. Reserva-
tions at (508) 385-0376.
Limited to 40 people.

"YOU HAVE TO GO OUT..." *Phyllis R. Horton*

But you don't have to come back!" was the slogan for the early U.S. Life Saving Service established in 1872. The USLSS was the federal service that succeeded the Massachusetts Humane Society formed in 1786 to give relief to shipwrecked sailors. The Massachusetts Society was the first of its kind in the world.

(See August, 2002 article)

Ship traffic increased in the mid to late 1800s to meet the needs of increased population and economy. Unfortunately, more traffic meant more ships to find misfortune during the Atlantic gales, and outer Cape Cod became a gathering spot for the unlucky ones. The shoals, bars and beaches from Monomoy to Wood End have been the graveyard of hundreds of vessels and thousands of mariners. Even today an occasional storm will uncover ancient timbers or pieces of coal from an old wreck, and every down-Cape cemetery has the remains of unknown mariners that washed up on the shore. The life savers were truly saviors on those wild waves and windswept beaches.

Many Dennis men joined the USLSS after they retired from the sea in their 30s and 40s, not old enough to really retire and still young enough to have the strength required for the job. For a Cape Cod mariner it seemed the natural thing to do. Most of them had gone to sea as young boys and knew the ways of wind and water.

Obed Shiverick of Dennis Village, grandson of the shipbuilding Shivericks, went to sea as a young boy on fishing schooners. His first trip was to the Grand Banks—quite an inauguration for a young lad. After a number of years of fishing, he joined the U.S. Light Ship Service serving first on the Cross Rip and then four years on board the Nantucket Shoals Lightship. When the Monomoy Point Life Saving Station was established in 1902, Obed came ashore and signed on there as No. 3 Surfman. He became known as a brave and efficient life saver. Surfmen served ten months on station and July and August at home. The Captains were on station year round.

Benjamin Kelley of West Dennis was No. 2 Surfman at High Head Station in Truro where he signed on at age 32. Going to sea at an early age,



You have to go out....continued

he made numerous voyages to the Atlantic whaling grounds. He followed the sea in a number of different positions until he came ashore in 1886 and joined the USLSS. When a man has salt water in his veins it's hard to stay away from it. Benjamin was injured on duty and went on temporary retirement. His place at the station was filled by his young son. How many young men have a chance to step into father's shoes so early in life? Benjamin's commendation said he had "faithfully performed the arduous duty of the life of a surfman, and was an efficient and trustworthy life saver."

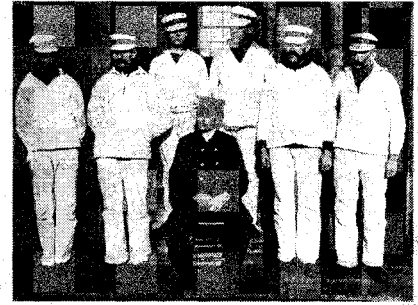
A couple of life savers from Dennis Port were Richard S. Gage and Timothy F. Murray. Richard was a fisherman for a number of years and also did coastal and deep water sailing. He became a life saver in 1891 at the age of 33 and served at the Monomoy, Pamet River and Orleans stations. He also served on the joint Nauset/Orleans combined crew that went into action on especially difficult rescues. He was a big man standing 6'4" and people who knew him said he had the strength and heart of an ox. He was involved in many rescues and received many commendations, one of which read, "Surfman Gage is a perfect type of life saver. Skilled in the art of boating, absolutely fearless, he has made a brave and hardy surfman." His family told of one instance when the crew on the foundering ship was so numbed by exposure they were unable to secure the breeches buoy and the waves made it impossible to launch a life boat. Richard tied a rope around his waist and after several attempts was able to get past the surf and reach the vessel where he secured the breeches buoy line. "Brave and hardy" seems like a tame description.

Timothy F. Murray joined the service in 1899 at age 40 after a life at sea starting at age 9. He began as a cook's helper, then became a fisherman and worked his way up to own a coastal schooner himself. He spent some years in the trading business up and down the East Coast and was a steamboater when he retired from the sea. He served at the Orleans station becoming No. 1 Surfman, #49373, until he retired about a year before his death in 1913. In November 1909 his salary was \$70 a month plus \$9 for food. He was also my great-grandfather and I wish I could have known him. There were many other worthy men but they must wait for another time.

When the life savers were not making rescues there were still many chores to keep them busy. On clear days the observation tower was manned during all daylight hours. The station had to be kept clean and painted when necessary. The equipment had to be kept in good condition at all times, and there was Patrol Duty. Every night and during any inclement weather, from pea soup fogs to raging blizzards and sandstorms, two men left the station at an appointed hour, one going north and the other south, looking for any trouble along the way. If trouble was found, the surfman would ignite a red Coston flare to alert the station and notify the stranded ship that they had been seen.

The stations were about five miles apart with a small halfway house in the middle. Each man carried his identifying brass surfman's check that he would exchange with his counterpart from the next station, then each would return to his own station for the next pair to start out. If the other man didn't show up the surfman continued on toward the next station until he met the man or reached the station, whereupon a search was started.

Each surfman took his turn cooking for the station. Grandpa Tim was a notoriously poor cook. When it was his turn Grandma Phebe would go to Orleans and cook in his place, doubtless saving many



A. Baker, J. Mullet, H. Kelley, D. Snow, C. Higgins, R. Ellis and Capt. Kelley, High Head Crew



Surfman Gage

upset stomachs. There may have been other women who did the same, but she is the only one I know of.

Countless mariners owed their lives to a small group of life savers who swore to save and protect them. Today's Coast Guard proudly carries on the work of those dedicated life savers.



[Pictures for this article are from *The Life Savers of Cape Cod* by J. W. Dalton of Sandwich, first printed in 1902. and reprinted by the Chatham Press in 1967.]

Many Dennis men served aboard the light ships around the Cape and Islands. Some survived their duties while others did not. **Doug Bingham, historian for the U.S. Coast Guard Foundation**, will tell of the brave men who served in the U. S. Light Ship Service and the U.S. Life Saving Service in his illustrated talk, **Lightships of Cape Cod**. Doug is a great speaker. This is a "not to be missed" event. Come and bring a friend to Carleton Hall, 1006 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village, on **Wednesday, May 21 at 7:30 P.M.** Refreshments will be served by DHS Board Members.

This is **the time of the year** when many of our members and friends come back to Dennis and Cape Cod for the season. **We are always happy** to send your Newsletter to a summer address, but many of you haven't notified us of the exact times we should change your address. Every time the Post Office has to notify us of this change they charge us 70 cents. Multiply this by many "snow birds" and we are out "many dollars" which could better be used in our school programs or for acquisitions. If you haven't updated this information lately, do send us a postcard and let us know when to make the change.

This brings to mind some problems you may have had in mail-ordering books and materials. Your requests go to our main PO Box and sometimes it takes a while to get into the hands of someone with a key to our stores of supplies during the winter. (Some of our volunteers are also snow birds!) If you haven't received an order, please let us know and we'll do our best to send it quickly. If you have questions at any time you can also call one of the Board Members.

There have been a few changes in the Board since our October Newsletter so this seems like the place to update you on our new members. **Mary Kuhrtz** is taking Sarah Kruger's place for the remainder of the term. Also **Joan Monteiro** is the board member representing Jericho Museum this year, and **Joshua Crowell** is coming aboard as representative of the Dennis Historical Commission.

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| Pres. Ray Urquhart—(508) 398-0376 | Vice-Pres. Virginia Devine—(508) 385-4441 |
| Treas. Joan Martin—(508) 394-9303 | Asst. Treas. Lura Crowell—(508)385-3268 |
| Rec. Sec. Bonnie Hempel—385-2366 | Cor. Sec. Ruth Derick—398-3183 |
| Elected Directors: | |
| Mary Kuhrtz—385-4978 | Terri Fox—760-0433 |
| Brendan Joyce—385-6492 | Susan Kelley—385-3300 |
| Nancy Howes—385-3528 | Burt Derick—398-3183 |
| Appointed Directors: | |
| Phyllis Horton—394-0017 | (Manse Museum) |
| Joshua Crowell—385-3769 | (Historical Commission) |
| Joan Monteiro—394-1357 | (Jericho Museum) |

Dennis Historical Society

P.O. Box 607

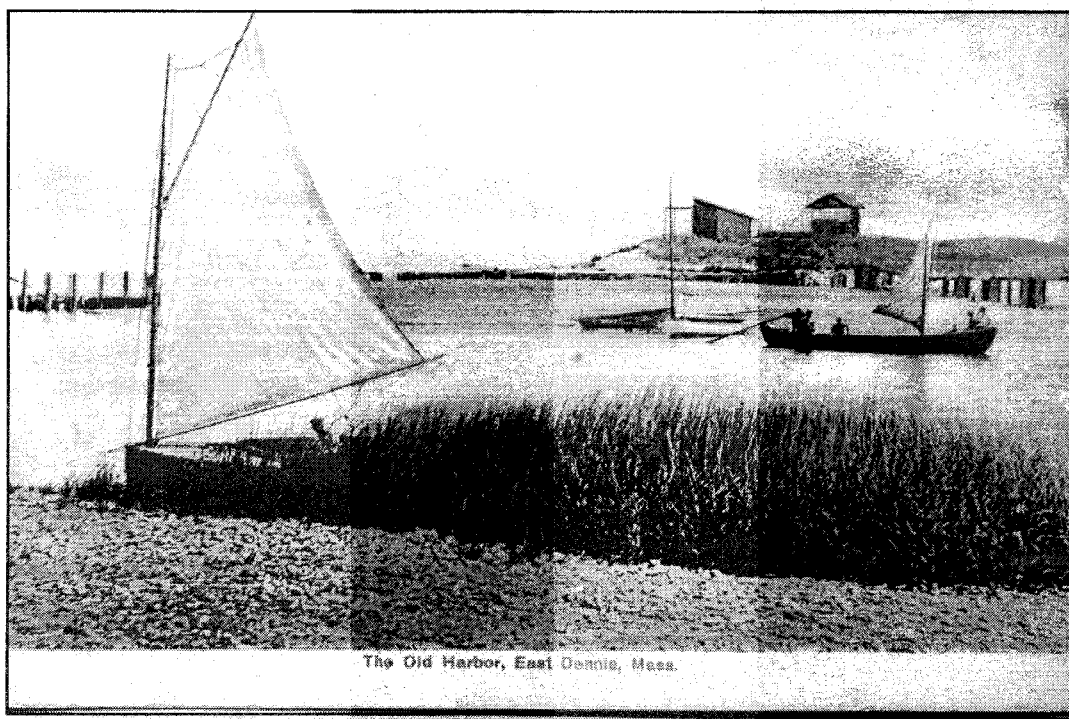
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THE WAY WE WERE

Sesuit Harbor a while ago!



The Old Harbor, East Dennis, Mass.