

By Irving S. Rogers

The U. S. Lifesaving Service:

"March 30, 1884—On this date, during a blinding northwesterly snow storm, the schooner **William H. Mailler**, of Calais, Maine, bound from Saint John, New Brunswick to Boston, Massachusetts, with a full cargo of lumber, was wrecked on the coast of Cape Cod about a mile and a quarter to the westward of the Peaked Hill Bar Station (Second District), coast of Massachusetts. Owing to the tremendous sea, the vessel had sprung her bowsprit, and in this crippled condition was unable to work off the dangerous lee shore. She struck the bar at half-past ten in the morning, 150 yards from shore, the weather being so thick that even at that distance the beach was scarcely discernible. The crew numbered five men, and the captain's wife was also on board. The tide was then at half-flood.

"The schooner was discovered by the west patrol, five minutes after she struck, as the Coast Guard was returning over his beat towards the station. He at once made signal to let the people on board know that they were seen, and then dashed on at the top of his speed to give the alarm. His comrades saw him coming, and guessing from his pace there must be a vessel ashore, at once threw open the boat-room doors and were in readiness to start with the beach apparatus by the time he arrived and breathlessly reported the facts. The route to the wreck lay dead to windward, in the teeth of the gale. Owing to the extremely high surf the men were compelled to keep close to the beach hills, where the sand and drifting snow was extremely soft and yielding. They labored heroically, and in spite of all obstacles arrived in sight of the wreck in less than half an hour from the time they left the station.

"By that time the masts were gone, and with the rapidly rising tide the schooner had beat in over the bar to within 25 or 35 yards of the beach. Keeper Fisher had run on ahead of the slow moving station crew and the life-saving equipment, and when he saw the vessel was rapidly breaking up, and that there would be no time to rig the breeches-buoy, he made signs to the men to drop the cart and bring up the heaving-line as quickly as possible. The vessel had broken in two and her people could be seen clinging to the after portion of the hull. They were in momentary peril of being washed off into the surf and drowned. The situation was perilous.

"As soon, therefore, as the station men arrived, the Keeper grasped the heaving-line, and rushing as far out as possible into the strong undertow, threw the end of it over the group on the wreck. It was caught by the ship's Mate, who quickly lashed it around the captain's wife, and then, telling her to jump, he sprang overboard with her, with the end of the line in his grasp to aid her in reaching the shore. Just at that moment a huge, overtopping sea came thundering in, and for a few seconds the two were completely submerged. The station crew, however, dashed in up to their waists and soon hauled them out. The Mate received several bruises, even in that short time, from hitting floating wreckage. He had also swallowed a great deal of water and was in a sorry plight. The next to be landed in the same way was the captain. He was so much exhausted that his men had to attach the line to him, being unable to do it himself. The remaining three soon followed, one by one, the life-savers wading out as far as possible as they drew them in from the wreck.

"They were rescued just in time. A few minutes later the wreck broke into fragments and was soon scattered by the surf. A delay of five minutes would probably have been fatal to every soul on board. The castaways were at once taken to the station and dressed with dry, warm garments from the supply placed there by the Women's National Relief Association. It was fortunate they were thus able to supply the wants of the captain's wife, as it would otherwise have been necessary to send all the way to Provincetown for clothing. Restoratives from the medicine chest also helped, and all soon came around all right, so that two hours later, when **Dr. John M. Crocker** of Provincetown drove over to give aid it was not needed.

"It should be stated that the crew of the **Race Point Station** also sped to the scene as soon as the disaster was learned, but were too late to be of any service. They arrived just a few minutes after the last man reached the shore. The people remained at the station three days, when transportation was furnished them to their homes."

The Superintendent of the Life Saving Service, Second District, received a letter from the five survivors commending the heroic actions of the entire crew of Peaked Hill Bar Station. A few days later on April 3, 1884, the same station crew acted bravely and heroically at another wreck. For their work during the **William H. Mailler** job and

the later wrecking of the **Robert B. Smith** the station crew was cited by a joint resolution passed by the Massachusetts Legislature on May 1, 1884.

In appreciation of the heroic work of the life saving crew the schooner's captain and crew, along with the captain's wife who was a passenger on the vessel, sent the following letter to "The General Superintendent, United States Life Saving Service."

"Dear Sir: The undersigned hereby wish to make known that the keeper and crew of Peaked Hill Bar Life Saving Station (Cape Cod) have rendered such assistance and exposed themselves to such risk of their own lives during the wreck of the schooner **W. H. Mailler**, of Calais, Maine, that we cannot go on our way without a word in their praise.

"We struck on the inner bar about 10:30 A. M. on the morning of March 30, in a blinding snow storm and dense fog. Land was scarcely visible at the time, but the patrolman, having good eyes, discovered us and signaled to us, and we answered him. We then saw him start on a run along the beach. In a short time our masts went over the side and then we began to drift over the bar. We could then see the crew with their apparatus coming along the beach. We drifted over the bar rapidly and struck again about fifty yards from the beach. The sea made quick work, and in a short time broke us all up, except a small part of the stern to which, with the captain's wife, we were all hanging. The crew were then three hundred yards distant. The keeper, seeing there was no time to lose, ran ahead with lines and with great daring and terrible risk, succeeded in getting on part of the wreck and passing a line to us. The men had got to us by this time. We then made the line fast around the woman, and the keeper, with great pluck, took her off and both were hauled ashore by the brave men on the beach through a tremendous sea, the men being at times almost washed off their feet. They then passed the line to us again, and after a lot of dangerous work got us all ashore alive, not a minute too soon, as she all broke up just as the last man got ashore. We arrived at the life saving station at five minutes to 12 (one and one-half miles distant from where we struck), where we received the greatest care.

"We saw the apparatus on the beach, sunk deep in the sand up to the axles, and wondered how men could haul it at all. If they had

a team of horses they would have been there a great deal quicker

Yours respectfully,
Capt'n P. Cummings and wife
Thomas Browne
S. John Kimo
Geo. N. Shaw
Peter Johnson."

Exactly four days later, the same life saving crew showing their bravery during the wreck of the **Robert B. Smith**.

April 3, 1884—The mid-watch (night) patrol eastward from the Peaked Hill Bar Station, Cape Cod, (Second District), coast of Massachusetts, when near the limit of his beat, sighted a vessel standing to the westward and dangerously near the bar. The wind was fresh from the northeast, with frequent flurries of snow. He flashed a Coston light to warn her off, but as she paid no attention to the signal and continued on the same course, he concluded to follow her up. She gradually edged in towards the shore and at 2 o'clock, when nearly abreast of the station, fetched up. It took but a few moments to give the alarm at the station, and the crew were soon out. The craft was a schooner of about 100 tons, and her people could be distinctly seen in the rigging. As she was not more than 25 yards from the shore, the keeper decided upon an attempt to land them without using the boat or rigging the breeches-buoy. He established communication by throwing the end of the heaving-line on board, and by means thereof sent off the hawser, which the sailors quickly made fast, the shore end being held by two or three surfmen. He and another man then, with lines around their bodies, waded out as far as possible, steadying themselves by the hawser, and called to the sailors to come in on the hawser one at a time. This was done, and as they met each man he was at once assisted to the beach. Four persons, the entire crew, were thus rescued. The affair was so well managed that in half an hour they were all safe at the station. It was then learned that the stranded vessel was the **Robert B. Smith**, of and from Rockland, Maine, for New York, with a cargo of lime. The crew of the next station east (High Head) came up soon afterwards, but too late to be of any service. The schooner became a total loss. The four men were sheltered at the station for two days.

"As a token of its appreciation of the excellent work of the Peaked Hill Bar crew on this occasion, and also at the wreck of the schooner

William H. Mailler a few days previous (March 30), the legislature of the State of Massachusetts adopted the following vote of thanks:

"Resolution tendering the thanks of the general court to Keeper Isaac G. Fisher and crew, of the Peaked Hill Bar Station, Provincetown.

"Whereas during the last week the schooners **William H. Mailler** and **Robert B. Smith** were wrecked upon Peaked Hill Bar, Provincetown; and whereas in the rescue of the passengers and crew marked bravery and heroism were displayed by the keeper and crew of the Peaked Hill Bar Life Saving Station; Therefore,

"Be it resolved, that the thanks of the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled be, and hereby are, tendered to **Keeper Isaac G. Fisher** and **Surfmen William W. Cook, James T. Fish, Samuel O. Fisher, Edwin A. Wheldon, Edwin F. Smith, Benjamin R. Kelley** and **Levi A. Kelley**, who by their heroic exertions and at the imminent peril of their own lives rescued from a watery grave ten citizens of the United States."

In the old days before steamboats became a common sight on the waterways and previous to the digging of the Cape Cod Canal, the back shore of the Cape was known as the graveyard of the Atlantic. Wrecks and drowning were common occurrences and the Surfmen had to be on their toes constantly.