

# The Community Outlook

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## Saints in Sou'Westers and Old Station #89

*(A History of the Community Church  
Building)*

by Bob Daxsee

*O hear us when we cry to thee  
For those in peril on the sea*

Official Coast Guard documents state it is not known when Station #89 (the original Coast Guard Station/Community Church building) was actually built, but the first keeper was Oliver S. Denton who was appointed in 1853. This station was known as Long Beach east end station, its position two miles west of Jones Inlet, until 1883 when Treasury Dept. Circular 41 changed its name to Point Lookout. The station was extensively repaired in 1888. Then in 1908, a severe storm made it necessary to erect new buildings and further repair others. Station #89 and the twenty six other stations along the south shore of Long Island were operated by the U.S. Life Saving Service. Established as a rescue organization for those in peril on the sea, the USLSS established a record of many daring and heroic rescues.

Crews of the U.S. Life Saving Service were known by an admiring public as Storm Warriors, Soldiers of the Sea, and Saints in Sou'Westers. (A sou'wester is a heavy rainhat.) They were the sports heroes of the 19th century. On the approaches to major seaports, stations were three to five miles apart. Legend has it that a young surfman and his station keeper stood looking at the horrendous breakers just before launching their boat. The young surfman asked the keeper if he thought they would come back alive. Said the station keeper, "The regulations only say we have to go out. They don't say anything about coming back." The motto of the service was born. "We have to go out, but we don't have to come back." Surf men were represented by all ethnicities including



*Old Station #89 / Community Church (with thanks to Van Field)*

American Indians. Both the Shinnecocks of Long Island and the Wamponoaks of Martha's Vineyard were people of the sea who served in the USLSS. The entire crew of the Pea Island Station in North Carolina was of African American heritage.

Surfboats were from twenty-three to twenty-seven feet. The boat crew consisted of six to eight oarsmen and a steersman. Standing in the stern, the crew chief steered by means of an eighteen foot steering oar. The routine consisted of 24/7 beach patrol, drills and more drills. I can remember looking through the boat house window of the Point Lookout station when I was a boy and seeing the surfboat there on its four-wheeled carriage. Alone. Neglected. Abandoned. An icon of the past. Its days of high action and adventure ended, days of being man and horse drawn over ice clad sand to the wreck site. Picture the scene. It would probably be winter. The sky, bleak. Clouds banking up and scudding before the wind. The air filled with sea wrack and spindrift. The wreck, maybe a coastal schooner, heavy, laden with coal, the crew clinging to the rigging, the deck swept by sea after sea... The life boat was launched

into a welter of foam. Rowed by six to eight oarsmen and a crew chief on the steering oar, the steersman would keep a shrewd eye for the scent of the wind and sea and would calculate the chances of reaching the wreck without being swept down wind. They risked their lives that others might live. Heavy loss of life occurred during the mid nineteenth century. People immigrating from the Irish potato famine sought cheap winter passage on sailing vessels that could be driven ashore by winter gales.

Another method of rescue was to set up a rope, or hawser, between ship and shore and bring the victims ashore in a traveling basket known as a breeches buoy. The buoy was a life ring with canvas breeches attached that the survivor actually sat in, like a pair of breeches. A tall A frame was erected on the beach with a V notch on top for the hawser to pass over. The beach end of the hawser was then secured into the ground by way of a sand anchor. The other end of the hawser was made fast to the ships rigging or mast. The buoy was suspended from a traveling block or pulley. By hauling on a set of messenger lines from shore, the lifesavers could pull the buoy

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### **Saints in Sou'Westers**

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from ship to shore and back repeatedly, rescuing one or two people at a time.

A line was established between ship and shore with a device known as a Lyle gun which had a range of up to seven hundred yards. A seventeen pound, fourteen inch bullet shaped projectile with a line attached was fired at the wreck using this small cannon. Once the crew retrieved the shot line they could haul the hawser aboard and set up the breeches buoy. The Lyle Gun was the only cannon ever developed for the express purpose of saving lives.

In the November 1969 issue of Long Island Forum, Long Island historian Julian Denton Smith writes about the Point Lookout Beach House. In 1908 he made a trip to Point Lookout with his father in the family naphtha launch. Incredible as it seems, naphtha, which was a crude form of gasoline, was boiled over an open flame to produce a gaseous vapor. Just imagine using gasoline vapors instead of steam to power an engine. The main purpose of this contraption was to get around a law requiring a licensed engineer to operate a steam engine. This was before gas engines were readily available. Anyway, after docking he noticed a horse standing near the boardwalk that did not seem to belong to anyone. No one paid any attention to him, except for children who would climb on his back to take a ride. Said Mr. Smith, "The horse belonged to the Life Saving Station. He had to work when there was a shipwreck, a drill, or fishing in the surf. He had been trained to come a-running when the horn went off."

In 1915 the Life Saving Service and the Revenue Service merged to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

In 1947 a group of public spirited citizens petitioned the War Assets Commission to turn the property over to the Point Lookout Community Church. Their efforts were rewarded with success.

Old #89 served as a Life Saving Station for several decades. Then it served the country as a Coast Guard Station during two world wars. For the last half century plus it has served the community as a church of God, saving souls in a different fashion. A rich legacy.

1853-2005

**STILL FLYING AND  
NAILED TO THE MAST.**