



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Station Cape Lookout, North Carolina

USLSS Station #24, Sixth District
Coast Guard Station #190

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| Location: | At Cape Lookout, N.C., 1 3/8 miles southwest by west of Cape Lookout Light; 34-36' 30"N x 76-32' 20"W |
| Date of Conveyance: | 1886 |
| Station Built: | 1887 |
| Fate: | Station was conveyed to the State of North Carolina in 1957. Station of same name is still in operation. |

Remarks:

Coast Guard Station Cape Lookout on Harckers Island, North Carolina, was established by an Act of Congress on June 18, 1878. The station itself was built as a Life Saving Station in 1887 and it was complete on August 31. Land for a boathouse was acquired by deeds dated June 16 and July 1, 1891. The station was rebuilt on its original site in 1916 despite permission to move to the nearby Army Engineer Reservation. On March 1, 1945, the War Department transferred its lease of 411 acres of land, buildings, and the Army dock to the Navy Department for Coast Guard use. Th Coast Guard trimmed the area to 95 acres in a subsequent lease change on August 18, 1945 and let the lease expire entirely on June 30, 1949. In 1950, the Radiobeacon located at the Cape Lookout Light Station was moved to the Lifeboat Station.

It was just before dawn March 17, 1915, when the three-masted schooner *Silvia C. Hall* was wrecked on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and earned herself a permanent place in Coast Guard History.

Only 48 days had passed since the U.S. Life Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service had merged January 28 to form the U.S. Coast Guard. The ill-

fated *Silvia C. Hall* was about to become the service's first major rescue. The schooner was hit by a howling southeast gale near Cape Lookout, N.C. With the wind at her back, the 384-ton vessel made a southerly entrance into the strong, erratic currents which predominate in the area. Her five-man crew attempted to seek shelter in the protected anchorage of Cape Lookout, once famous as a rendezvous point for pirates like the blood thirsty Blackbeard.

With a sickening grinding sound and a snap of timbers, the *Silvia C. Hall* plowed into the shifting sands of Cape Shoals which separate North Carolina's Onslow and Raleigh Bays. Her cargo of Florida cypress would never reach New York. To the newly renamed Coast Guard Station Cape Lookout, a watchman came running with the news that the schooner had gone aground on the treacherous shoals. Waves were breaking over the stricken ship and it would be only a matter of time before she broke up and the crew was lost.

The Station keeper, 37-year-old Fred Gillikin, began rousing his sleeping crew and making preparations for the rescue. Without time for breakfast, the Coast Guardsmen ran the half-mile to the protected bend in the shore where their 36-foot motor surfboat was moored. The schooner was too far out to use a breeches buoy, so a boat would be their only choice. With grim determination, Gillikin headed the boat out of the protected water bight and into the full fury of the gale in an open sea.

Underway less than an hour after the sighting, the rescue team fought against icy March winds estimated at over 40 knots. The seas were running 20 feet. It took several hours to bring the surfboat up to the stricken schooner. The winds dropped the chill factor to well below zero and the raging storm tossed the small boat about like kindling. The rescuers held on for their lives. "Bring her around and come in slow from the windward side," shouted Gillikin to the coxswain.

The boat was nearly abeam of the schooner when a huge wave broke over the surfboat. Two crewmen were knocked down and only saved from being washed overboard by their safety lines. With a cry one man was smashed into the gunwales, receiving a painful hip injury. Before the water could drain from the self-bailing boat, a second wave washed over them, flooding the engine, and leaving the struggling boat at the mercy of the sea.

Gillikin took the helm and fought to keep the boat from broaching. The coxswain went to work on the engine. With a cough, the motor finally caught and Gillikin brought the boat around to meet the seas head on. The rescue team withdrew to deeper water to nurse the sputtering engine and tend to the injured crewman. The rest of the day was spent beyond the breakers waiting for a favorable chance to approach the wrecked ship and tinkering with the uncertain engine. Cold and numbing fatigue were taking their toll on the crew and fuel began to run low. Gillikin reluctantly turned the boat towards shore as darkness fell and the storm showed no sign of slackening.

Before dawn the crew mustered at the boat house and hitched the station's horse to a 26-foot pulling boat which they towed to their moorings. They launched the boat and towed it back toward the wreck with their motor lifeboat through the raging seas. The temperature was still below freezing and the seas had only slightly moderated.

Near the surf line, Gilliken called the order "Cast off!" and the crew of the 26-footer put their backs to the oars. They successfully crossed the surf, which had nearly killed them the day before and made a cautious approach to the schooner. Rigging and debris were everywhere. Only the pulling boat could have picked its way through the wreckage without being fouled.

Two haggard survivors appeared on the forecastle. With Gillikin shouting directions, they rigged a line from the jib boom and lowered themselves into the rescue boat. As they were transferred to the motor surfboat, the sailors told Gillikin of three more men still aboard the wreck. "Those men are done for if we don't get back," shouted Gillikin to his crew. Gillikin gritted his teeth and turned the boat about for another trip through the deadly breakers.

Finding an opening in the crashing surf, the Coast Guardsmen drove their tiny boat back through the waves. The other sailors on the wreck had seen their comrades rescued and made their way across the wave-washed decks to the forecastle for their turn to slide down the line to the waiting arms of the Coast Guardsmen and the dubious safety of the surfboat.

From the shore a crowd of fishermen and townsfolk had gathered to watch the drama unfold. As the noisy motor lifeboat came through the breakers with the pulling boat in tow and all the mariners and rescuers safe, a cheer went up that could be heard all the way out to the surf line. They were cheers for the U.S. Coast Guard, not for the Lifesaving Service. They were cheers which would be heard many times in the future in many places around the world.

Keepers:

William H. Gaskill (G) was appointed keeper on 15 DEC 1887 and resigned on 19 APR 1912. He and his crew were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal for a rescue that took place on 10 FEB 1905.

William T. Willis was appointed keeper on 10 APR 1912 and left in 1915.

Freddie G. Gillikin was appointed keeper in 1915.

Sources:

Station History File, CG Historian's Office

Dennis L. Noble & Michael S. Raynes. "Register of the Stations and Keepers of the U.S. Life-Saving Service." Unpublished manuscript, compiled circa 1977, CG Historian's Office collection.

Ralph Shanks, Wick York & Lisa Woo Shanks. *The U.S. Life-Saving Service: Heroes, Rescues and Architecture of the Early Coast Guard*. Petaluma, CA: Costañó Books, 1996.

U.S. Treasury Department: Coast Guard. *Register of the Commissioned and Warrant Officers and Cadets and Ships and Stations of the United States Coast Guard, July 1, 1941*. Washington, DC: USGPO, 1941.

