

Friends of Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge



Helping to preserve one of Chatham's treasures



Did you know that Monomoy was home to three of Chatham's four Life Saving Stations? This holiday issue of the FOM Newsletter features a Christmas story from one of those stations.

We have two upcoming walks planned. Registration is required, please visit <https://www.friendsofmonomoy.org/events> to sign up and we hope to see you there!

- Sunday, December 21st: Winter solstice bird walk with Fi Lowry from 9:30-11:30am
- Thursday, January 1st: New Years Day Sunrise walk from 7:00-9:00am

* Walks begin at Fred's Shed in the parking lot at the end of Wilkis Way on Morris Island

A Christmas Eve on Monomoy Island



It was Christmas Eve 1908 and like most people in Chatham, the crew of the Monomoy Point Lifesaving Station was decorating their Christmas tree. Even on this festive night, the watch still had to be maintained, so a crewman was in the tower above the living room scanning the ocean for ships in trouble. Suddenly, he spotted the Harry Messer, a 3-masted schooner fully loaded with coal bound for Boston from Baltimore, foundering on a bar that had been the cause of so many other ships' demise, the dreaded Handkerchief shoal.

He bolted down the stairs to alert his fellow surfman. Captain Joseph Kelley, a veteran of the lifesaving service, was the station keeper and he phoned the crew at the boathouse and ordered them to launch the rescue boat.



Painting of the Harry Messer by William Stubbs c: 1880

On the beach, the surfman pushed the rescue boat through pounding surf and set out into the frigid night. Gale force winds were whipping up the seas causing the small boat to disappear from sight as it descended into the trough of each wave.

Ice clung to the sides of the vessel and across the cork life vests that each surfman wore. When the rescue boat peaked on a wave, its passengers could see the devastating surf breaking over the deck of the suffering ship about a half mile away. One of the masts came down as the thrashing waves pounded the schooner against the shoal. Through a tangle of rigging the surfman could see a tremendous wave hit the schooner's deckhouse, it splintered and was washed overboard. The men in the rescue boat knew the schooner itself would soon break up. They approached the ship from the leeward side and after just two attempts, the skillful lifesaving crew maneuvered their rescue boat close enough to the doomed ship for the men aboard to one by one jump into the rescue boat. Once all the sailors were aboard, they turned the rescue boat back against the numbing wind and toward the shore. Ice caked the men's faces, with more adding as the thundering surf raked the small boat, but Captain Kelley's men were seasoned rescuers, their hours of practice drills and experience with countless other wrecks, prepared them for this. Their will and courage prevailed this night and all returned safely to the lifesaving station. The surfman shared their Christmas



*Surfman at the Monomoy Point Station
(courtesy of Chatham Historical society)*



Surfman heading to a stranded ship from "Life Savers of Cape Cod" by JW Dalton

dinner with the sailors from the doomed ship. After dinner the crew and the wreck survivors finished decorating the Christmas tree and sang Christmas carols. Meanwhile, on the shoal, the Harry Messer was crumbling at the hands of monstrous waves. During the night, the ship broke apart and debris was scattered across Nantucket Sound. The crew of the Harry Messer spent Christmas day with the lifesaving crew and the next morning headed for Chatham and a train home.

**factual information from "Life Savers of Cape Cod" by JW Dalton, story by FOM volunteer Liz Stryjewski*