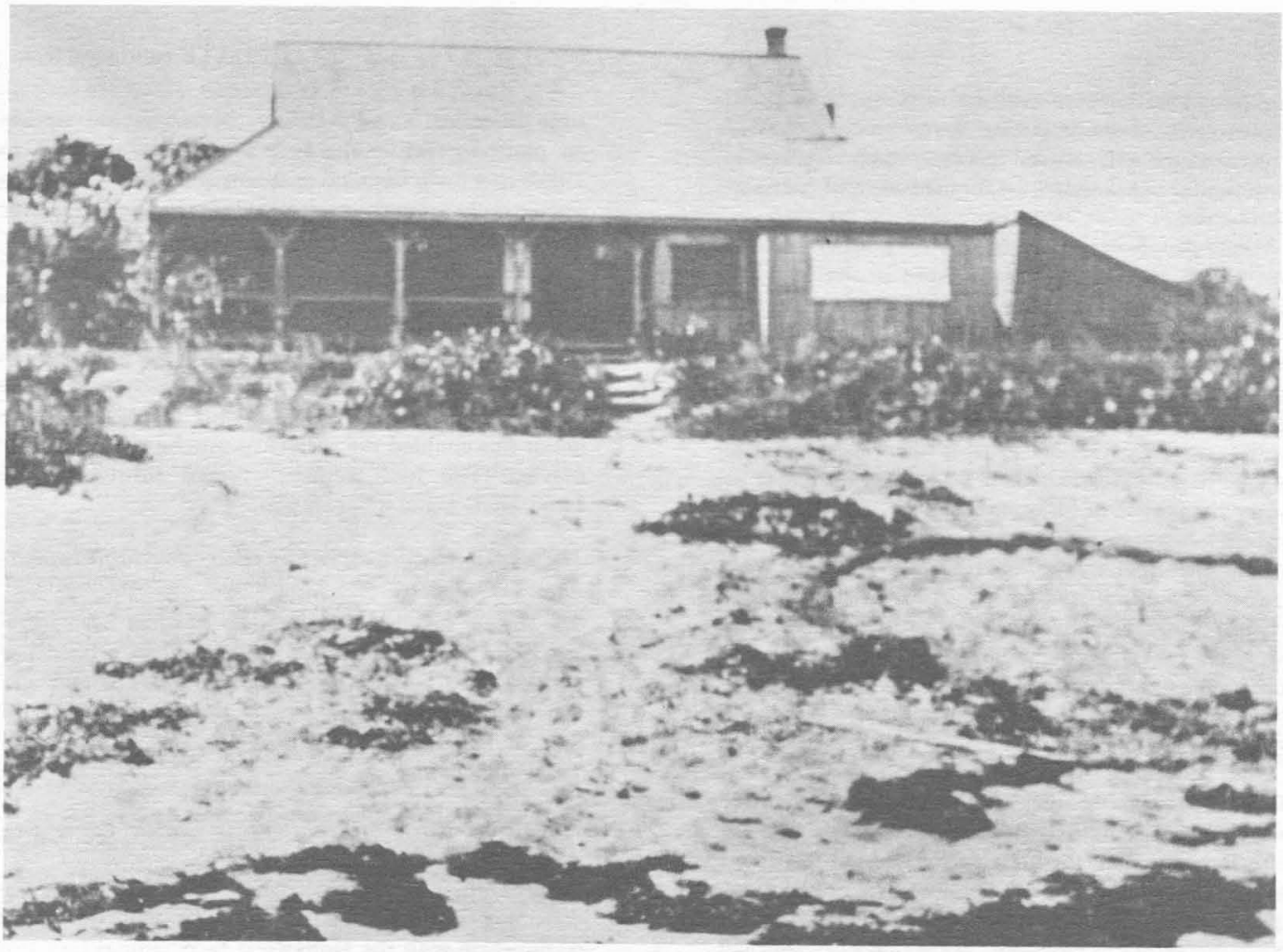

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"The Ft. Lauderdale House of Refuge, known as House #4, as seen from the beach. While the design for all five houses was originally identical, it underwent alteration later when the stations were taken over by the United States Coast Guard.

LIFE SAVING STATION #4

HOUSES OF REFUGE

A Unique System of Lifesaving For Southeast Florida

(Part 1)

Eugene E. Wiley

1876 was a very good year for news. The Nation's Centennial was being celebrated; the Battle of Little Big Horn was fought — and lost — along with the lives of General George Armstrong Custer and 264 of his men; Professor Alexander Graham Bell transmitted the sound of a human voice over a batteryless telephone, and, locally, John J. "Pig" Brown left his hog raising on New River in Ft. Lauderdale to sit in the Florida Legislature.

But, for the captains, crews and passengers of ships which used the Gulf Stream off the South Florida coast as a highway of commerce, the best news of all in 1876 was the completion, stocking and manning of the Houses of Refuge. Prior to September 11th of that year, sailors viewed the naked desolation of the beaches in this area with as much trepidation as they did reefs and sudden squalls.

Here it was not enough to escape the clutches of a stormy sea and reach the land, for one must still find food, fresh water and aid for one's injuries. But this was a wild, uninhabited coast. Looking north and south, one saw nothing but tall coconut palms lazily swaying over dwarf-like seagrape trees and, amidst the undulating beach grass, an occasional red-flowering hibiscus bush. Access to the mainland was denied by swamps through which miles of stunted mangroves spread. Many seamen were "saved" from the waves in those days only to leave their bones forever on the hot sands of the deserted coast.

Attempts at saving the lives of survivors from shipwrecks were, of course, not new. Small shelters were built on the Massachusetts coast by the "Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts" as

early as 1786. Inside these huts were placed blankets, food and fuel. But despite the accomplishments of this courageous group of volunteers, the idea was decades ahead of emulation and it was not until 1837 that the Federal authorities decided to help by dispatching a few cutters to cruise near the coast.

For sixty-one years there was but one organized life-saving system in the United States, the 18-station Massachusetts Humane Society's Houses of Refuge. Finally, in 1847, Congress appropriated $5,000 (attached to a lighthouse bill) to provide Atlantic coast lighthouses with means for assisting shipwreck victims. Even this might never have been accomplished except that for ten years the entire country had been in a state of shock about the tragic sinking of the bark MEXICO with 115 passengers and crew.

The wreck of the MEXICO had been especially dramatic since it happened on the morning of January 2, 1837, a very cold day, on the Hempstead, Long Island shore in plain sight of a band of selfless but ill-equipped amateur life-savers. They managed to save seven men and a boy from the freezing water but the spray from the storm turned to ice as it fell on the rest of the terrified passengers and crew who were forced on deck by the flooding of water into the ship's hold. After exhausting all the life-saving means at their disposal, the men on shore could do no more than stand by their fires and watch, frustrated and anguished, as the MEXICO and her luckless compliment went down. No previous wreck caused more publicity and all across the country engravings of the wreck appeared for sale.

In spite of the $10,000 Congress appropriated in 1848 for surf boats and other appliances for the coast between Sandy Hook and Little Egg Harbor and the larger appropriation in the following session for the construction of twenty-two life-saving stations for the Long Island and Jersey coasts, no one really addressed themselves to the total problem. No one was put in charge of the houses and they still had to get along with only volunteer crews.

Official apathy continued though progress was being made in communications and the burgeoning press took advantage of every wreck of consequence to arouse the indignation of their readers. One such wreck involved the loss of three hundred people when the POWHATAN went down near Squan Beach, N.J., in 1854. With a slight flare of interest. Congress voted to buy $40,000 worth of new life boats and equipment for the Long Island and Jersey coasts. At the same time, a superintendent was put in charge of each coast and keepers manned each house, but sixteen more years were to pass before permanent crews were to be assigned. The keepers did eliminate the wholesale thefts of life boats and other equipment but these appointees were another evil in themselves. The posts were handed out as political favors or rewards and many able volunteers, who had risked their lives through the years, were passed over for the few paying jobs and many others refused to continue under their new superiors.

In 1871, two men appeared on the marine scene who were to bring sunlight into a stormy situation. The United States Treasury named Captain John Faunce to inspect the various life-saving stations and his report of filthy houses, dilapidated equipment and rusty apparatus was very discouraging. Some stations had been stripped bare of any equipment not securely fastened. He found that the keepers generally lacked ability and that the morale of the crews was at a very low point. But apparently 4,163 lives had been saved together with $716,000 worth of property and that was enough to draw another $200,000 from Congress and push into the limelight a man who would eventually make the United States Life Saving Service the most respected in the world — Sumner Increase Kimball.

Sumner Kimball became Chief of the Revenue Marine Bureau of the United States Treasury Department in 1871 which put him in charge of the life-saving stations simultaneously. Kimball began to clean house — literally. Repairs to decaying buildings began; political appointees were removed in favor of more competent men; new stations were constructed and strict orders were issued regarding the conduct and responsibilities of the keepers and their crews. Mr. Kimball worked night and day, gradually bringing some order out of the muddled service. In 1873, he added ten stations to the existing seventy-one, extending the line along the Rhode Island and Cape Cod coasts. He also contracted to build twenty-three more — five in Maine, five in Massachusetts, one in New Hampshire, two in Virginia and ten in North Carolina. Attesting to his success was the fact that of the thirty-two wrecks that year, only one resulted in a fatality.

Captain John Faunce joined with Captain J.H. Merryman and Mr. Kimball to form a commission to report to the Secretary of the Treasury on expanding the service. They concluded, after examining every recorded wreck of the previous ten years, that three types of stations should be provided. Life boats were deemed sufficient for most places on the Pacific and Lakes coasts where disasters were infrequent and, thus, twenty-two of these were recommended. They were to be manned by volunteers who would be paid for their services at each wreck and additionally rewarded by medals of honor. The approximate cost of these life boat stations would be $4,790.

Twenty three complete life saving stations were recommended for the flat beaches with outlying bars far from settlements. These would have regular paid crews during the winter months and would contain all equipment needed to save lives from stranded ships. The complete stations would be built on specific, recommended sites on the Great Lakes and the Atlantic as far south as Hatteras and were to cost $5,302.

Then, according to the report:

> Upon the coast of Florida the shores are so bold that stranded vessels are usually thrown high enough upon the beach to permit easy

Washington (Wash) Jenkins, first Keeper of Ft. Lauderdale's House of Refuge, with his first wife and family. Probably taken in 1883 before his divorce and resignation as Keeper.

> escape from them; therefore the usual apparatus belonging to the complete stations are not considered necessary. The section of that coast from the Indian River Inlet to Cape Florida is almost destitute of inhabitants, and persons cast up upon its inhospitable shores are liable to perish from starvation and thirst, from inability to reach the remote settlements.

It was therefore recommended that five Houses of Refuge be constructed for the area mentioned, capable of sheltering 25 persons with provisions for ten days, plus a surf boat with oars and sails. The houses were to be manned by a Keeper and his family but, for the reasons mentioned in the report, by no crew members. $2,995 was all they should cost.

Sumner I. Kimball's dedication to hard work and to the perfection of the life saving system earned much praise and recognition for him. So much so that Congress in 1878 separated the life saving service from the Revenue Marine Bureau, made it autonomous and unanimously confirmed President Hayes' nomination of Kimball as General Superintendent of the United States Life Saving Service.

The position of station keeper was an important one. Their duties were to reside constantly at the station and hold themselves accountable for its care and custody. They were captains of their crews, always taking the steering oar in the boats and directing the life saving operation. Wrecked property remained in their control until the owner relieved them or they had instructions from their superior officers to relinquish control. As can be seen, these duties called for a person of good character with sufficient education to handle the business of the station, physically sound and with adequate proficiency as a seaman.

In spite of the strict prerequisites, the position of keeper seldom went begging. At this advanced stage of the Service, each and every crew member was a possible candidate, having been drilled and inspected as often as the keeper deemed necessary and a record of his merits having been noted at headquarters. Mainly, these were men who had been fishermen or wreckers from boyhood and were expert boatmen before going into the Service. Rarely was it necessary to go outside the area for keeper material. District officers had to have good, specific reasons for nominating persons from outside the immediate vicinity. In practice, there was seldom trouble in obtaining a keeper for an existing station. Infrequently the difficulty came in filling the position at newly created stations.

The Houses of Refuge had no crews until the Life Saving Service was reorganized into the Coast Guard much later and many of the duties and skills mentioned above were not required of the keepers. Theirs was a rather passive employment and perhaps the more boring. But they and their families did perform one of the life saving crew's basic chores which was to patrol the shore in both directions after storms looking for shipwreck survivors.

Commensurate with the degree of danger in their work or lack of it, the keepers of the different types of stations received different pay. The Secretary of the Treasury was authorized to pay a keeper $800 per year but few ever received that much. Some few, whose post was so isolated that they desired a paid assistant or who had performed their duties with exceeding merit, were paid the total amount authorized; but most Life Saving Service keepers received $700. Keepers of Houses of Refuge received $400 annually. Apparently, in those days Webster's dictionary had but one definition for "inflation," probably "To blow up, as a balloon," for we know that Charles Coman, keeper of the Ft. Lauderdale House of Refuge, was still drawing $400 before he resigned on October 6, 1888, twelve years after the service was started.

So it was in 1876, the United States' 100th birthday, that the good news came to Southeast Florida. That summer, carpenter crews began sinking 8" square beams into the sand every twenty-five miles or so and hammered together five Houses of Refuge which were to be manned by a paid Keeper on a permanent basis. Designed by Albert Blaisdell of Boston, Massachusetts, who was appointed Architect on October 18, 1875, all

five were reported completed by Lt. E. Biondi, U.S. Life Saving Service, September 11, 1876. No longer would sailors, cast up on the beach, face a lonely death by thirst, starvation or dementia for want of a human presence.

Acknowledgements and Bibliography

Information on the wreck of the MEXICO and much data on the early beginnings of the Life Saving Service were included in this article with the help of "The United States Life Saving Service and The Florida Houses of Refuge," the MA thesis of Dr. Stephen Kerber (Florida Atlantic University, 1971). A copy of this very thorough and well written paper is now a part of the Broward County (Florida) Historical Commission archives and the author is very appreciative of Dr. Kerber's generosity in making his work available.

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EUGENE E. WILEY

Mr. Wiley started writing early in life for companionship. He moved so much that he was never able to establish any lasting friendships. Through the years, he has written poems, short stories, articles, humourous ads and fillers. He sold a children's religious story book, "A Present for Jesus" with the help of a friend to Hearthstone Magazine. Presently Mr. Wiley is working on a novel which he intends to finish when he retires.

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Ft. Lauderdale's beach from the air about 1925. Plans were being formulated to convert Lake Mabel (in center) into the new Port Everglades. To the upper right of the picture can be seen the New River Inlet which would soon be discontinued.