

## Physical History

### Introduction

The original Fort Point Lifeboat Station originated in 1890 as a lifeboat station of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, prior to the creation of the U.S. Coast Guard. It was one of several similar stations built along the approach to San Francisco Bay during the late nineteenth century for the purpose of assisting mariners in these treacherous waters. The Life-Saving Service built nearly 300 stations throughout the country. Lifeboat stations were distinguished from the much more common life-saving stations by the fact that they specialized in the heavy lifeboat. Most were situated in relatively protected waters near the entrance to major harbors. Life-saving stations tended to be situated on remote coastlines and usually employed a lighter surfboat. This distinction became blurred after the widespread introduction of motor lifeboats during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Fort Point was always a lifeboat station and possessed the classic characteristics of that sort of facility. In 1915 the newly-created U.S. Coast Guard absorbed the Life-Saving Service. Most of the old lifeboat and life-saving stations continued operations under the administration of the new agency with little change for the first generation of the Coast Guard. Throughout much of the twentieth century these stations continued to provide assistance to mariners in distress. With time, however, new technologies and changing mission priorities greatly altered the nature of these stations and the type of equipment they used, until modern conditions eventually made most of them obsolete. The Coast Guard continues to provide life-saving services in and around San Francisco Bay, but it now uses helicopters and powerful motor lifeboats to fulfill its duties. It closed the Fort Point station in 1990 and transferred all motor lifeboat operations to a new facility on the north side of the bay at East Fort Baker. Ownership of the Fort Point facility passed to the National Park Service in 1995 when the Army deactivated its Presidio reservation on which the Coast Guard station was located. The Park Service currently leases most of the old Coast Guard buildings out for office and classroom space.

### Historical Background

#### *Origins of the Life-Saving Service (1807-1877)*

Life-saving stations were a response to maritime conditions unique to nineteenth century America. An increase in shipping during the first half of that century brought rising numbers of shipwrecks, especially in Massachusetts and along the coasts of New Jersey and Long Island, where two of the nation's most important maritime centers, Boston and New York, were located. The relative lack of navigational aids—like accurate charts, signal buoys and lighthouses—compelled early mariners to sail close to the shore so that they could use physical landmarks to orient themselves. Along much of the Atlantic seaboard, the land slopes at a very gradual angle into the water, so that sandy shoals are often present a long ways from the shore itself. Ships sailing along the coast frequently grounded on these shoals and their crews had to be rescued. Ironically, the tendency to sail close to the shore was often greater during bad weather, because navigators could not use the stars to establish their position and had to rely almost exclusively on terrestrial landmarks. Prior to the advent of steam power at the end of the nineteenth century, ships were also more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of wind and current and could more easily be swept off course and into land. If a wooden ship grounded on an exposed shoal or beach during a storm, it could be battered to pieces in a matter of hours, and the crew would have little chance of getting ashore alive without help.

#### *Volunteer Life Savers*

The response to this problem was incremental, growing only slowly in proportion to the gradual increase in the number and severity of wrecks. A few individual tragedies brought attention to the need for some system of assistance. Not surprisingly, the earliest measures were taken on the Massachusetts coast near

Boston, since Boston was one of the nation's earliest major ports. The Massachusetts Humane Society, established in 1785, began building simple huts on the more remote stretches of coastline in the 1790s. These unmanned shelters were supplied with caches of food, warm clothes, and firewood for use by survivors of shipwrecks. But so few people ever managed to get to shore once their ship had wrecked in these northern waters that the need for a more active form of assistance eventually became obvious. The first true life-saving station was established in 1807 by the Massachusetts Humane Society near the town of Cohasset on the Atlantic coast south of Boston. The Cohasset facility was supplied with a surfboat and equipment for rescuing mariners in distress. The station was not manned by a resident staff but by volunteers from the nearby town. By 1845 the Society had established eighteen more of these volunteer stations along the Massachusetts coast. As welcome as these stations were, they fell far short of providing the level of assistance most critics felt was needed. Many people, including several legislators, believed that only the federal government had the necessary resources to provide adequate measures and should therefore intervene. By the 1830s Washington grudgingly began to respond to this pressure.

The federal government had actually been involved in maritime assistance since as early as 1789, when the U.S. Lighthouse Service was created. In addition to providing a vital aid to navigation, lighthouse keepers frequently helped mariners who were shipwrecked in the vicinity of their stations. The federal government eventually made supplies and equipment available to lighthouse keepers to support this work, but it was never acknowledged to be one of the official responsibilities of the lighthouse service. In 1837 the government became more actively involved in life-saving when Congress authorized federal revenue cutters to patrol the coastlines during the winter storm season. [1] The Revenue Marine Bureau had been established in 1790 within the Treasury Department. [2] In 1848, in response to the appeals of New Jersey congressman William A. Newell, Congress appropriated a sum of money—about \$10,000—to provide surf boats and associated apparatus for equipping coastal life-saving stations. These stations were built and supplied by the Revenue Marine but subsequently turned over to a local community to be manned and maintained by untrained volunteers. [3] The system was no different from that which the Massachusetts Humane Society had established. Nobody was officially responsible for ensuring the upkeep of the stations or for training their volunteer staff, and the quality and effectiveness of each life-saving station varied dramatically. Most were less than satisfactory.

The inadequacy of these measures became apparent in 1854, when a severe storm swept the East Coast. In response to the loss of life and property which resulted, Congress appropriated money for more stations and equipment. More importantly, it allocated funds to employ full-time keepers at each station and two superintendents to oversee the entire system (which was still limited to the coastlines of New Jersey and Long Island). This was a decided improvement over the *status quo ante*, but the crews who manned the boats were still volunteers, and the station keepers had to raise these men from nearby communities whenever a disaster occurred. Usually it was too late by the time a crew was assembled.

#### *The U.S. Life-Saving Service (1878-1915)*

For awhile it seemed like the prospects for a better life-saving system were improving with federal involvement, but the Civil War distracted the government, and the life-saving program fell into neglect from the late fifties through the end of the sixties. But in 1870 a devastating winter storm season drew attention to the problem once more. In 1871 Congress officially established a life-saving branch within the Revenue Cutter Service and voted that "...the Secretary of the Treasury may establish [life-saving stations] on the coasts of Long Island and New Jersey for affording aid to shipwrecked vessels thereon, and furnish such apparatus and supplies as may in his judgment be best adapted to the preservation of life and property from such shipwrecked vessels." [4] This legislation merely formalized activities which had been going on in an *ad hoc* manner for nearly thirty years, and little might have changed except for the efforts of the newly-appointed chief of the Revenue Cutter Service, Sumner I. Kimball. Kimball made

the life-saving activities of the Revenue Cutter Service his principal task and personal obsession. He immediately organized a survey of existing facilities and prepared a highly-critical report on the less-than-satisfactory findings. At Kimball's instigation, steps were taken to replace the volunteer crews of the coastal life-saving stations with professional, full-time staffs. He established rigorous standards of professional conduct for these men to follow, introduced a manual of training and drill, and set up a centralized administration to provide oversight and accountability for the new organization. By 1878 Kimball had persuaded Congress to reorganize the entire life-saving branch of the Revenue Cutter Service as a separate entity within the Treasury Department. It was known from then on as the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Kimball became its first—and only—general superintendent, holding that position for the duration of the Service's active existence. A Board on Life-Saving Appliances was also established in 1882 to assist with the development and procurement of appropriate technology for the new Service.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service expanded rapidly during its relatively short existence. By its peak in 1915, a total of 280 stations existed on coastlines throughout the continental United States. These stations were divided into three categories: life-saving stations, lifeboat stations, and houses of refuge. The first of these categories, the life-saving station, was the original model established on the northeastern coast. These facilities were usually located on remote stretches of beach and staffed by a resident keeper and crew of between six and eight men. The crew manned small, lightweight boats that were launched directly into the surf. Life-saving stations were originally manned only during the storm season for about four months every year. The duration of this "active season" might vary from place to place. Over time, it was gradually increased, and some life-saving stations eventually began keeping their staff on hand all year long. On the West Coast, where heavy fogs made summer nearly as dangerous as winter, the Life-Saving Service was allocated enough funds to maintain a year-round staff in 1883. Keepers had always resided full-time at the life-saving stations, and most facilities provided a house specifically for the keeper and his family.

The second category, the lifeboat station, was an adaptation to conditions more common on the West Coast and the Great Lakes. In these places the shoreline tended to be more rugged with fewer beaches than the eastern seaboard, making the lightweight surfboat unnecessary or inappropriate. Instead, the much heavier lifeboat was used. These vessels were more stable in heavy seas and could operate further from shore, but they had to be launched by mechanical means directly into deep, sheltered water. Many lifeboat stations were actually built directly over the water on pilings. They were equipped with davits or a marine railway for launching the boat. Unlike the generally remote life-saving stations, lifeboat stations tended to be placed near major ports, often within the harbor itself or in a protected cove adjacent to the harbor entrance. Most lifeboat stations also possessed at least one surfboat.

The final category, the house of refuge, was only built in Florida and on the Gulf Coast, where milder conditions made the need for active rescues less common. In concept the house of refuge was much like the original shelters established by the Massachusetts Humane Society, but these were occupied year round by a keeper and his family and were generally more substantial. They provided food and shelter for survivors of shipwrecks.

#### *Life-saving Technique and Equipment*

The mission of the Life-Saving Service was not only to rescue mariners but to help prevent shipwrecks in the first place. Stations maintained a twenty-four hour watch over their designated service area. One man always stood watch at the station itself, positioned in a tower or in a cupola on top of the boathouse. During stormy or foggy weather, a patrolman would also walk along the coastline for a distance of one and a half to five miles in either direction. These men carried a type of flare, called a Coston signal, which they would use to warn ships in danger of approaching too near the coast. In effect, the patrolman

was like a moving lighthouse. The Coston signal was also used to alert the station lookout in case of emergency. A signalman of the U.S. Army Storm Signal Service was assigned to the life-saving stations to provide weather information to passing ships. Signals were transmitted by means of flags.

In the event of a shipwreck, surfmen had basically two means of providing assistance. They could either bring the victims ashore using equipment collectively known as the beach apparatus. Or they could try to reach the victims by boat and carry them back to shore. The first of these methods was employed only when the wreck was near the shore. It was done by firing a weighted shotline over to the wreck from a small cannon called a Lyle gun (named after its inventor, Lt. David A. Lyle of the U.S. Army). The shotline was carefully aimed so that it would fall across the mast or superstructure of the stricken vessel, where the vessel's crew could retrieve it. This shotline was used to haul out a much heavier rope, or hawser, which was tied securely to the mast of the ship. The life-saving crew secured the other end to a beach anchor, which was buried in the sand. The hawser was elevated as high as possible on a wooden crotch to get it off the sea, and a device for carrying people was sent out on a pulley. The most common carrying device was the breeches buoy, a simple harness that held one individual at a time, but occasionally a lifecar was used. The lifecar resembled a small boat with a domed, sheet-metal roof. It was entered through a water-tight hatch in the top and could hold as many as eleven people.

As the name implies, the beach apparatus could only be used when a ship was grounded relatively near the shore on a beach or sandy shoal where a rescue by breeches buoy or lifecar could be executed. The apparatus could not be used if the ship were wrecked more than six hundred feet out—the maximum range of the Lyle gun—or if it was wrecked off a shoreline that was too rugged or steep for the lifesavers to access with their heavy apparatus. In these instances, the life-saving crews had to rely on boats to execute a rescue. The Life-Saving Service used two categories of small boats. The first, the surfboat, was a relatively lightweight craft that could be hauled down the beach by its crew and launched directly into the surf. The design of this vessel had evolved from a variety of similar types used commercially on the northeastern seaboard, including the beach skiffs of fishermen on the New Jersey coast and the whale boats developed at Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. The typical surfboat used by the LSS was open and shallow-drafted, ranged from twenty-three to twenty-seven feet in length and weighed just under half a ton. Surfboats were often equipped with airtight compartments, making them insubmersible, but were usually not designed to be self-righting or self-bailing. The surfboat was kept in a boat house which stood directly on the beach above the highwater line. Garage-like doors swung out toward the ocean, and the crew would haul the boat down to the surf on a wheeled carriage. In a few places horses were used to pull the carriage.

The other type of boat commonly used by the Life-Saving Service was the lifeboat. This craft was as much as eight times heavier than the surfboat, but was considerably more seaworthy and could operate much further from the shore. The lifeboats used by the Life-Saving Service were taken from an English design, first invented in 1785 by a London carriage-maker and developed to its mature form by about 1852. [5] The English lifeboat was a relatively large, double-ended, deep-drafted craft. It was pulled by oars but could also be sailed. Most importantly, it was insubmersible and possessed the capacity to self-right and to self-bail. Self-righting was achieved through the addition of a heavily-weighted false keel and air-tight compartments. The compartments kept the vessel buoyant at all times, while the false keel concentrated the bulk of the vessel's weight beneath the hull, so that it would always return to an upright position. Self-bailing was achieved through a system of one-way valves placed within scuppers in the bottom of the hull. Another characteristic of these boats was their extraordinary strength, which was needed in order to survive the strain of heavy seas. In 1873 the United State Life-Saving Service—still part of the Revenue Cutter Service at this date—acquired its first lifeboat from an English manufacturer. By 1876 a slightly modified version of the English boat was being built for U.S. service in New York.

This basic design remained standard for the duration of the Life-Saving Service with only a few modifications. In 1891 the overall length was increased to thirty-four feet, and in 1907 a motorized version was introduced using a gasoline-powered engine. The motorized lifeboat was increased to 36 feet to accommodate the new equipment. Slightly later versions added a small compartment amidships for the helm.

Unlike the surfboat, a lifeboat could not be hauled to the water by hand. Those in use by the 1890s weighed about four tons. Instead, they had to be launched by mechanical means. In some instances, lifeboat houses were built directly over the water on piers, and the boats were lowered through a trap door. Much more common, however, was the marine railway, which was in widespread use by the end of the 1880s. [6] This system appears to have evolved naturally from the method of launching surfboats down a beach. The first modification was the addition of an inclined wooden launchway from the boathouse to the water. This facilitated the passage of the much heavier lifeboat carriage as it traversed the sand. Eventually steel rails were added to help accommodate the increased weight even better. Boats were moved up and down these launchways with a cable attached to their carriage and driven by a hand-powered cargo winch. Sometime around 1904 the hand-powered winch began to be replaced with a gasoline-driven version.

The inherent difficulty of conducting a maritime rescue as well as the complexity of the equipment involved, meant that the life-saving crews had to practice regularly in order to be able to perform their duties quickly and automatically under the most trying circumstances. The two most important drills, which were conducted regularly at every life-saving station, were the beach apparatus drill and the boat drill. Every Monday and Thursday the life-saving crews turned out their beach apparatus and practiced going through the entire procedure, from firing a shotline with the Lyle gun to bringing a crewmember back in on a breeches buoy. The drill was usually conducted along the beach in front of the station, where a "wreck pole" was permanently emplaced. The wreck pole was a simulated mast which was used as the target for the practice rescue. Crews were timed and had to be able to finish the entire drill in five minutes or less. On Tuesdays the life-saving crews practiced handling their boats. This included launching the surfboats and lifeboats and pulling at the oars for at least half an hour. Crews also practiced capsizing and righting their boats. These drills were held in all weather and could be as dangerous as an actual emergency. In 1890, for example, the Point Reyes Life-Saving-Station lost two surfmen during a Tuesday drill when their boat was capsized in heavy seas. On Wednesdays the life-saving crews practiced signals. They had to be proficient in wig-wag and in flag-hoists. Wig-wag was a type of code done with two hand-held flags, similar to morse code. Flag-hoists were a way of communicating using differently-marked pennants raised on a flagstaff or a spar. Each flag represented a different number or letter of the alphabet, and specific combinations of pennants had universally-accepted meanings. On Fridays the crew practiced first-aid; on Saturdays they cleaned and conducted routine maintenance around the station; and Sundays they had off. This routine was repeated every week without fail during the active season, unless it was interrupted by an actual incident.

### *Architecture*

The earliest life-saving stations—for example, those built by the Massachusetts Humane Society—were utilitarian, wood-frame structures with no architectural styling or adornment. With the creation of the U.S. Life-Saving Service in 1871, the buildings became more substantial and elaborate. This was partially in response to the need to accommodate a larger, more permanent staff, but professional pride also played a role in determining the character of these structures. [7] Nearly all of the facilities built after the 1870s borrowed their architectural motifs from contemporary domestic models. Many of the early stations were built according to the Stick or Eastlake style, which was popular during the first two decades of the Life-Saving Service. Colonial Revival, including the Dutch Colonial or Gambrel, became

popular slightly later. The basic residential model was modified according to the specific needs of a life-saving or lifeboat station. Boathouses, for example, all needed a large bay on the ground floor to store and service the station's small craft. These bays had to be accessed through barn-like doors, which pierced most of the ground-floor wall on one or more sides. Usually there was an attached ramp used to transport the boats to the water. Most boathouses had a living room or lounge adjacent to the boatroom on the ground floor and sleeping quarters on the upper floor. Another peculiarity of boathouses was the need for an observation deck or a watchtower. Many had either an open widow's walk or a cupola built into the roof peak. The Keeper's Quarters were closer to the typical residential house in design, but they too often had some distinctive features which conveyed their unique use. Many, for example, had cupolas like the boathouses.

*The U.S. Coast Guard (1915 to present)*

In 1911 President William Taft's economic adviser, Frederick Cleveland, convened a commission designed to investigate and recommend ways to increase cost efficiency in government. One of the key conclusions of the Cleveland Commission was that agencies with a single, well-defined responsibility or function were far more efficient than those with multiple, diverse responsibilities. The Commission therefore recommended consolidating related responsibilities and functions within single agencies as much as possible. Among the opportunities it saw for such consolidation were the so-called "protection" responsibilities distributed among the Life-Saving Service, the Lighthouse Service, and the Revenue Cutter Service within the Treasury Department. The first two services were exclusively responsible for life-saving. The latter had a variety of duties, of which life-saving and protection were only one. The Commission proposed that the exclusively life-saving and protection responsibilities of the Revenue Cutter Service be combined with the Life-Saving Service and the Lighthouse Service in a single, uni-functional agency, while the remainder of the Revenue Cutter Service's responsibilities be assumed by other, existing agencies, for example, by the Navy Department.

These recommendations aroused jealousies in the Treasury Department, which did not want to lose its Revenue Cutter fleet, as well as resistance in the Navy, which did not want to assume responsibility for the Revenue Service's civilian personnel. A compromise was reached in which the Revenue Cutter Service and the Life-Saving Service were combined in a new military service which would operate under the authority of the Treasury Department except during times of war, when it would revert to the authority of the War Department (now the Department of Defense) and work with the Navy. The new agency was created by an act of Congress on January 20, 1915 and was called the U.S. Coast Guard. Captain Ellsworth Price Bertholf of the old Revenue Cutter Service was its first Commandant. The Lighthouse Service was later added in 1939.

The creation of the Coast Guard had one very immediate effect on the life-saving stations. Their crews now formally became military personnel. As far as the men of these stations were concerned, the most important consequence of this change was their eligibility for military benefits, including retirement. This was something the old Life-Saving Service had fought for in vain since its creation. Other consequences included the introduction of a formal military hierarchy and the relative duties and authority associated with each grade. Surfmen now received enlisted ranking. The number one (senior) surfman became a petty officer. Keepers became warrant officers. District superintendents and above became commissioned officers. A few minor changes in nomenclature also occurred. Most notably, the keeper became known as the Officer-in-Charge (and the Keeper's Quarters became the Officer-in-Charge Quarters, or simply the Officer-in-Charge Quarters).

The implications of these changes did not become apparent for the life-saving stations for another few years. Personnel remained essentially the same. Duties remained primarily coastal life-saving. But in

1917 the United States entered World War I, and the Coast Guard, consistent with the terms of its enabling legislation, was transferred to the Navy. As the service's revenue cutters crossed the Atlantic to assume escort duties in the Mediterranean and around the British Isles, the life-saving stations assumed the new duty of coastal-watchers, patrolling for potential enemy infiltrators and saboteurs. World War I began a process of militarization that continued even after the Coast Guard returned to civilian status in 1919. The role of coastal-watcher had to be maintained by the life-saving stations throughout the following decade when the Volstead Act introduced Prohibition and made it necessary to patrol for rum-runners and clandestine drop points up and down the coast. By the time Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the seemingly imminent approach of new political hostilities ensured that patrol work would remain a permanent part of the life-saving stations' duties.

By this time, the original purpose of the old Life-Saving Service was becoming increasingly anachronistic in other ways. Commercial disasters close to shore were now less frequent as a result of improved navigational aids. More importantly, the substitution of steam for sails at the end of the nineteenth century had made ships less susceptible to the vagaries of ocean currents and the wind. Shipwrecks still occurred, but they were less likely to happen in the near-shore zone that the original Life-Saving Service had been designed to protect. By the middle of the twentieth century, the majority of incidents to which Coast Guard life savers responded involved small pleasure craft rather than commercial ships. This, combined with coastal defense, occupied most of the life-saving stations' time by the end of the 1930s. Since these activities tended to be concentrated in or around major ports, rather than off remote stretches of beach, the Coast Guard began to consolidate its resources over the next few decades in those stations that already existed within or near harbors. The introduction of faster motor lifeboats and especially aircraft, which allowed life savers to respond effectively over greater and greater distances, was an additional impetus toward such consolidation.

World War II only reinforced tendencies which had been taking place since 1917. In 1942 the Coast Guard was again transferred to the authority of the Navy and resumed much the same duties it had undertaken during the First World War. The Coast Guard's cutters performed convoy escort while its life-saving stations performed coastal defense and harbor patrol. This need to balance multiple duties associated with the Coast Guard's combined military, law enforcement, and civilian life-saving responsibilities has remained characteristic of the service up to the present day. Only those stations which were able to combine and integrate all these aspects of the modern Coast Guard's diverse mission have survived into the twenty-first century. The majority have been consolidated in new, multi-functional facilities.

### **Origins of the Fort Point Lifeboat Station (1886-1915)**

In June of 1886, the First Session of the 49th Congress authorized the Fort Point Life-Saving Station, and a permit for its construction on military lands of the Presidio of San Francisco was issued in January of 1888. A station was sorely needed as close as possible to the treacherous mouth of San Francisco Bay. The only other life-saving station in the area at that time was the Golden Gate Park Station, built in 1877 and located on Ocean Beach at the foot of Golden Gate Park. But this station was too far away to be of much help for any ship that came to grief on the shoals or rocky shoreline that bordered the narrow channel entering San Francisco Bay. Fort Point Station was the first to be built in useful proximity to this busy shipping lane. Later a second lifeboat station would be built on the north side of the Golden Gate just inside Point Bonita. [8] The contract for the construction of Fort Point Station was awarded to a local San Francisco builder in February of 1889 and stipulated that the work be completed by September of that year. The builder, however, encountered various problems ranging from bad weather, delays in

the supply of specified materials, and broken contracts with subcontractors, so that the facility was not actually completed until February 14, 1890. The contract for a wooden fence to surround the property was bid out separately and completed in March of that year. It was extended into the surf with barbed wire seventy feet on either side. The fence had proven necessary in order to keep wandering livestock out of the facility. [9] A few months after the completion of the station, the Life-Saving Service requested permission from the Army to erect a lookout tower on Fort Point. This was necessary in order to provide comprehensive visual coverage of the mouth of San Francisco Bay, the outer part of which was obscured from the station by Fort Point itself. The Golden Gate Park Life-Saving Station on Ocean Beach already maintained a lookout on the bluffs above Point Lobos, as did the Mercantile Exchange. These facilities provided good visual coverage of the Gulf of the Farallones, but were not able to observe vessels inside the Golden Gate itself. The Army granted permission to the Life-Saving Service, even agreeing to provide a telephone line between the lookout and the Fort Point Lifeboat Station.



*History figure 1. This photograph was taken shortly after the station was completed in 1890. The photographer is looking northwest toward the Golden Gate. [10]*

The original Station, as it appeared in 1890, contained only two buildings, a boathouse and the keeper's quarters. Its boundary was an irregularly shaped polygon 501-feet wide by 156-feet deep on the west end and 241-feet deep on the east. It was protected from the surf by a sheet piling bulkhead with a short wing at each end. This bulkhead elevated the station grounds from three- to five-and-a-half- feet above the



beach. Both of the original buildings are still extant, though they have been modified. Their architectural style is Dutch Colonial, which was then popular especially on the East Coast. The keeper's quarters originally had four rooms downstairs and three upstairs. But several additions were made over subsequent years, so that, by 1914, it had "... 7 rooms besides 2 pantries, porches and a bathroom on the first floor. The size of the original building, exclusive of porches was 41 ft. by 28'8". [11] The building had a gambrel roof with three gabled dormers on either side. A pair of corniced brick chimneys flanked a false widow's walk with a balustrade on the peak of the roof. In the front, an open porch with simple round columns faced the bay to the north. This porch had a balustrade across the top and could be used as a balcony. It was accessed through a door in the center dormer. An enclosed porch, also with a balustrade, was built to the rear, and beside it a large kitchen extended perpendicular from the main building about twice the depth of the porch. This extension was flat-roofed, with a balustrade across the top, and may have been accessible from a door in the southwest dormer so that it, too, could be used as a second-floor balcony. The original keeper's quarters functioned as the main dormitory and headquarters for the entire lifeboat station. During the active season it had to house a complement of at least seven surfmen in addition to the keeper himself. This explains the need for a separate addition to accommodate the kitchen, which would have had to be large enough to provide for the culinary requirements of the entire crew. The rest of the building was needed for living space. The extended kitchen would no longer be required when the building ceased being used as a dormitory after 1915, following the completion of a new boathouse and dormitory. The extension was eventually removed and the building transformed into a single-family residence for the keeper alone.



*History figure 2. Photograph of the Keeper's Quarters (bldg. PE 1902) from about 1900. Note the established vegetation and garden ornaments. A hose bib is also visible, indicating the existence of an underground water main. [12]*

The original boathouse stood west of the keeper's quarters approximately 200-feet. It measured 24 by 40 feet. Like the keeper's quarters, it was clad in rough shingle and painted a neutral red. Its steep, hipped roof with decorative cupola remains largely unchanged, but the original building had large, barn-like

doors opening both south and north. The south door was designed to provide access for the beach apparatus wagon. It extended only half the width of the building and was approached by a short, wooden ramp. A small winch room, measuring 9 feet 6 inches by 10 feet was later built beside it. A wooden sign with the painted inscription "U.S. Life Boat Station" hung over the top of this door. The north doors of the boathouse opened onto an inclined launchway which led down into the bay. The launchway was 200-foot long and built of wood planking suspended between pilings of "creosoted yellow fir." [13] The contractor originally made the launchway 30-feet too short due to an error in reading his plans. He later returned and added the missing length. This launchway was eventually fitted with a single three-rail track with switch and turn-out. The turn-out was a two-rail track designed to accommodate the surfboat. Both tracks were constructed of light-weight (60 lb.) flat galvanized iron rail. A hand-driven cargo winch was used to move the boats up and down the rails. [14] A technical drawing of a boat carriage dated 1895 proves that the railway system was being used at Fort Point by this date, if not earlier. [15] By 1914 the launchway had become unusable due to siltation which had buried the majority of its length under as much as five feet of sand. The 36-foot motor lifeboat, which was introduced in 1907, was being kept anchored in front of the station at that time. In its present state, the old boathouse has a pair of large, side-hinged doors opening south while the seaward side is walled off. This configuration dates from about 1915, when the building was moved to its present location and began to be used as a garage for the officer-in-charge. It is possible that the present southward-facing doors are the original boat doors and that the entire building was turned around in 1915 to face away from the bay. The original beach apparatus door would have been removed and the space filled in. Nothing remains of the original launchway, which was demolished in late 1914 or early 1915.



*History figure 3. Photograph of the boathouse (bldg. PE 1902) from about 1900, looking north. Note the beach apparatus wagon just inside the open door. The winch room is just to the left of it. [16]*

Two wreck poles were also installed at the original facility, though they do not appear until after 1890. The larger of the two stood on the beach just seaward of the keeper's quarters. It was at least 30-feet high and replicated a fully-rigged ship's mast, including three yards, a gaff boom, crosstree and stays. The complexity of this pole exceeded LSS regulations. It was probably used as a flagpole and signal staff as well (no other flagpole appears during this period). The other wreck pole was much simpler. It stood no more than 20 feet in height and included a single yard with stays and a small platform. It was located just south of the boathouse at one end of the grassy field separating the two buildings. The Fort Point facility also included a storeroom, 16 by 24 feet in dimension, and a lamp room, 16 by 16 feet in dimension. Both of these outbuildings stood east of the main building (keeper's quarters). On the west side of the boathouse was a wooden water tank which was elevated on a short tower.

By the end of the 1890s, the Fort Point Lifeboat Station was extensively landscaped with lawn and a border of cypress which was kept vigorously pruned in order to function as a border. This vegetation set the facility off in dramatic contrast to the surrounding dunes with their sparse native vegetation. The irrigation demands of these plants may explain why the lifeboat station needed to augment its water supply in 1895. In that year it requested permission from the Army to lay a water main across Presidio grounds from near the end of Tonquin Street. A photograph from about 1900 shows that the station

landscaping was already lush (see *history figure 2*). It also reveals at least one fountain and several hose bibs, which demonstrate that permanent, subterranean plumbing had been installed by this date.

### *Shipwrecks and Assistance I*

The Fort Point Lifeboat Station had scarcely been in service for a year when its crew was called out on an especially trying incident. On February 21, 1891 the three-masted sailing ship *Elizabeth* was inbound from New York with a cargo of general merchandise, when she tried to enter San Francisco Bay in high seas with a strong southeasterly wind. Captain Colcord declined the assistance of a steam tug in order to save himself the cost. But his miserliness ended up costing him his ship and the lives of more than half his crew. For the *Elizabeth* encountered a powerful ebb tide as it entered the Golden Gate which, combined with the southeasterly wind, drove the ship northward past Point Bonita and onto the nearby shoals at Four Fathom Bank. Two steam tugs were nearly swamped trying to reach the *Elizabeth* in that exposed location. When the crews of both Fort Point and Golden Gate life-saving stations also tried to reach the *Elizabeth* in their heavy lifeboats, they too were overwhelmed. The Fort Point boat was nearly swamped and its keeper, Charles Stuart, was washed overboard and drowned. The two boats barely made it back to shore. Despite their exhaustion, however, and the loss of Keeper Stuart, both life-saving crews remained intent on somehow reaching the survivors of the *Elizabeth*, if there were any. By this time the *Elizabeth* had drifted north up the Marin coast, so the life-saving crews arranged to have themselves and their beach apparatus ferried across the bay to Sausalito by steam tug in order to reach the *Elizabeth* from the shore. After an arduous journey lasting nearly all night as the life savers pulled their apparatus over the steep hills of the Marin Headlands, they finally arrived on the coast only to discover that the *Elizabeth* was dashed completely to pieces. Eighteen of her twenty-six man crew, including the miserly captain, were dead. Although the entire incident seemed like a tragic failure for the Fort Point life crew, their heroism and determination made a deep impression on the public and did much to establish the reputation of the Life-Saving Service in the local area. On February 23, 1891, the San Francisco *Examiner* wrote:

"It is gratifying to note that the Life-Saving Station on this side of the channel showed no lack of promptness or courage on this occasion. The life-saving crew at Bakers Beach [Fort Point] put off for the scene of the wreck, but it was too distant to be reached by a lifeboat in the heavy sea that was running. The death of the captain of the station is much to be regretted, but it has done much to raise the Service in the esteem of the people." [17]

Not every incident was as frustrating and tragic for the life-saving crews as this. Two years after the *Elizabeth* came to grief, the iron-hulled propeller steamship *City of New York* struck the rocks just below Point Bonita lighthouse. The *City of New York* had been built in 1875 in Chester, Pennsylvania for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. At the time, she was one of the most advanced ships in America's passenger fleet and among the first to replace the wooden-hulled sidewheel steamers that were still in use after the Civil War. On October 26, 1893, when she met her end at San Francisco, she was just embarking on a trans-Pacific cruise to Australia, China and Panama with a mixed cargo of general freight and 300 passengers. The tides that day were the highest of the month and the fog was worse than anyone could remember. The foghorn at Point Bonita was rendered practically useless, since its sound was deflected seaward and gave a false impression as to its source. The light was completely obscured by the heavy fog. The crew of the *City of New York* had no idea they were off course until the ship wedged itself firmly on the rocks at the north side of the bay. A contemporary account described the situation:

"City of New York met with disaster by a hair. So close was she from the cliff on which the light house stands it was possible to look down on the steamer's decks ... lights of the vessel were reflected in [the] stretch of water between the vessel and point of land. It did not look to be more than 500 feet out to the place where she was lying

and it could hardly be more than that distance from the rocks, as those which fringe the North Heads do not reach out more than 300 yards and beyond that is deep water. Indeed the light-house keeper said that if the steamer had passed 50 feet farther out from shore she would have cleared the rocks entirely."

The *City of New York* was mortally damaged by the impact, but the seas were relatively calm and the ship was in no immediate danger of sinking or breaking up. The Fort Point Station was able to evacuate all of her passengers and crew on their lifeboat without mishap. But the ship itself could not be pulled from the rocks and had to be abandoned. It was gradually picked to pieces by opportunistic salvors.

Two years later, during the worst storm of the season, one such group was still working on the *City of New York*. Captain Hamson had anchored his barge *Samson* alongside the sunken hulk and had been recovering bits of salvageable iron from it all year. The *Samson* had been built in 1890 specifically for the wrecking trade and possessed no motive power. It had to be towed into position by tugs and anchored in place. When the storm came up, the *Samson* dragged her anchors and began drifting toward the same rocks that had claimed the *City of New York*. The crew hoisted distress flags and blew the whistle on their deck engine but could attract no attention until the following morning. By the time the *Samson* was finally spotted by the Fort Point Station many hours later, her situation was dire. The station's crew arranged to have their lifeboat towed by the steam tug *Reliance* out to the site of the incident. By the time they arrived, all but four of the *Samson's* crew had abandoned the barge in small boats. One of these boats, containing two men, was lost. The other, containing eight men, was picked up by the Fort Point crew and transferred to safety. Three of the remaining four men managed to make it to shore and were rescued by the crew of the Point Bonita lighthouse. The fourth man drowned in the surf. The *Samson* was blown ashore in Bonita Cove and consumed almost entirely by a fire that probably resulted from her steam-powered deck engine being upended. One fact which the *Samson's* tragedy makes clear about early life-saving efforts was the limitation of hand-pulled boats. Although the Life-Saving Service's lifeboats were famously seaworthy, they depended on steam-powered tugs to get them where they were needed, especially in heavy seas. This situation would change dramatically with the introduction of gasoline power after the turn-of-the-century. [18]

### *Changing Technology*

Sometime around 1907 the crew of the Fort Point Lifeboat Station received its first motor lifeboat. This was one of the first motor lifeboats in the service. The introduction of gasoline power had a profound effect on the Life-Saving Service. Not only was its range of operation increased, but its ability to respond in all types of weather was also markedly improved. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of persons saved. The Annual Report for 1911 noted that one year prior to widespread introduction of motor lifeboats, the average number of persons rescued was 2,158. [19] Over the subsequent four years, that number averaged 2,852. The first motor lifeboats were standard 34-foot self-bailing, self-righting lifeboats which had been refitted with a gasoline engine and single screw. This is probably the sort of vessel which the Fort Point crew received in 1907. Within a few years the original "E" series 36-foot motor lifeboat was introduced. This vessel was designed specifically for power. Though it went through various modifications, it remained standard for the next fifty years. The 1911 Annual Report goes on to note that only sixteen of the 36-foot motor lifeboats had been introduced as of that year, ten of these in 1911 alone. Forty-three of the refitted 34-foot lifeboats were also in service. The remaining motorized craft in service that year, numbering sixty-three, were all surfboats which had been refitted with small, eight-horsepower gasoline engines.

### *Shipwrecks and Assistance II*

A few years later, in 1912, a minor incident of the sort which would become increasingly common for the Life-Saving Service illustrates some of the changes brought about by the introduction of gasoline power. On June 16 of that year,

While the crew of the Fort Point (Cal.) station were lying off Black Point, San Francisco Bay, in their power lifeboat on the afternoon of this date, keeping watch over numerous small craft that were taking part in a carnival, their attention was attracted to signals being made aboard a launch half a mile offshore and in mid-channel of the harbor entrance. The lifeboat crew immediately responded, passed a line to the launch, and towed it into Black Point Cove. [20]

With gasoline power, the lifeboats were able to act like tugs and actually tow stricken vessels into safety. This applied not only to small craft like the launch mentioned in this report, but also to much larger vessels. Another consequence of the introduction of gasoline power is suggested by the presence of the launch itself. Motorized pleasure craft like this one were becoming increasingly popular and common. Within a few decades they would account for the majority of incidents to which the life savers responded.

In 1914 the Fort Point crew participated in a response to what would prove to be the worst maritime disaster in the San Francisco Bay Area since the wreck of the *City of Rio de Janeiro* in 1901. [21] On November 22 the steamer *Hanalei*, bound from Eureka to San Francisco with a cargo of railroad ties and passengers, struck Duxbury Reef off Bolinas Point in a heavy fog. Since the *Titanic* disaster of 1912, all ships were required to carry ship-to-shore radios, and the *Hanalei* was no exception. The stricken vessel immediately radioed for help with its apparatus, and the life-saving stations at Fort Point and Point Bonita both responded. [22] The Revenue Cutter *McCulloch* also responded. The fact that Duxbury Reef was over thirty miles north of the Golden Gate, where both lifeboat stations were situated, testifies to the advantage provided by the new gasoline-powered motor lifeboats. Prior to their introduction it would have been impossible for any lifeboat station to respond to a call so far from its base of operations. As it happens, the motor lifeboats from Fort Point and Point Bonita were not able to render assistance to the imperiled survivors on board the *Hanalei* before the ship disintegrated the following night, because of the severity of the surf breaking over the reef. Fort Point's boat was capsized and its engines disabled, while Point Bonita's boat was forced to retire at nightfall after numerous failed attempts to reach the *Hanalei*. But another form of gasoline power did provide valuable assistance to the victims of the wreck at this point. The Golden Gate life-saving station, which did not possess a motor lifeboat, was able to respond to the incident when a motor truck was volunteered for its disposal and used to transport crew and beach apparatus to Bolinas mesa, from where 29 persons were brought safely to shore on lines shot from the station's Lyle cannon. Another 13 persons were rescued from the oily waters the following morning by the crew of Point Bonita's lifeboat. One person made it to shore alive, and was recovered by the crew of the Marconi wireless station, making a total of 43 survivors from a complement of 66. Twenty-three lives were lost in the disaster, and nothing remained of the *Hanalei* itself.

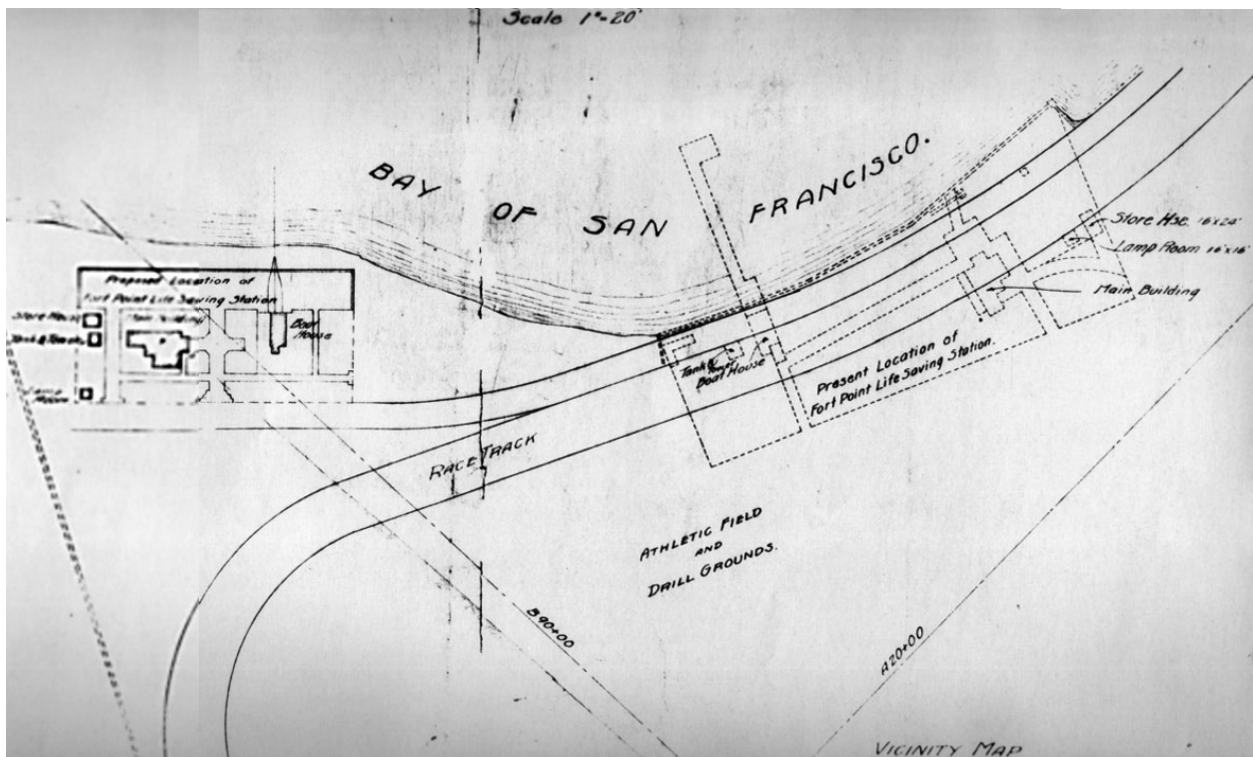
## **Rebuilding on a New Location (1915-1919)**

### *The Panama-Pacific International Exposition*

The year 1915 brought profound changes to the Fort Point Lifeboat Station. As already mentioned, the U.S. Life-Saving Service was absorbed by the Coast Guard in January of that year. During the same month this happened, the Fort Point Station was moved from its original location and shifted about 700-foot further west in order to make room for an auto racetrack. The racetrack was one of the features of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE), which would open in February. The exposition was conceived as a celebration of the Panama Canal, which was scheduled to open in 1915, and was intended to be an enthusiastic tribute to technological progress and the promise of the dawning twentieth century.

It would showcase new technologies, especially in transportation, as well as emerging trends in the arts and culture from around the world. It proved to be an ironic gesture, given the war that would concurrently devastate most of Europe, though this was hardly appreciated in the euphoria of the moment.

For San Franciscans, the privilege of hosting the Panama-Pacific Exposition had an immediate, local value, for it signified their city's recovery from the earthquake and fire of 1906. They consequently plunged into the task with enthusiasm expressed on a large scale. Six-hundred thirty-five acres of beach and wetlands along the city's northern shore were chosen as the site of the event. More than a third of this land lay within the eastern boundaries of the Army's Presidio reservation, including the windy beachfront on which the Fort Point Lifeboat Station sat. The Army agreed to make a temporary lease of this land, as well as eighteen acres at Fort Mason, in return for the right to retain any improvements which the Exposition Company might make. Since much of the land lay under water at the time and had to be reclaimed to be of any use, the Army rightly assumed that it would benefit from this arrangement, which would inevitably result in an increase in the usable acreage of its property. Beginning in 1912, contractors for the Exposition began the task of pumping more than 360,000 cubic yards of sand from the bay floor into the coastal wetlands and lagoons. By the time they had finished, some 184 acres had been filled and leveled. The Fort Point Lifeboat Station, which once sat on a narrow strip of beach called Strawberry Island, separated from the mainland by a lagoon and adjacent wetlands, was now on the edge of a broad plateau where a fantastic city of fanciful temples, art galleries and exhibition halls was quickly rising.



History figure 4. Map from 1914 showing proposed relocation of Fort Point Lifeboat Station 700 feet west of original site to make room for Exposition racetrack. [23]

The relocated station became officially known as U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station No. 323. (The number would change to 310 sometime after 1920). The new location was the site of the current facility, and the present configuration of structures and landscaping was more or less established at that time. The chain of events which culminated in the station's move began in 1912, when contractors for the PPIE first began draining the lagoon behind Strawberry Island in order to make room for the exposition ground. In connection with this operation, it became necessary to install a sewer to drain the water displaced from the infilling back into the bay, and the most practical location for this drain passed through the lifeboat station. A series of correspondence documents the exposition committee's application to the Life-Saving Service for permission to construct this sewer. In addition, permission was sought to install a pump and associated piping to draw saltwater back up from the bay to sprinkle on the exposition grounds to keep down the dust. This apparatus would also be situated within the boundaries of the lifeboat station. The Life-Saving Service seemed amenable to these requests, which were relatively trivial, but by the end of that year, it appears that the exposition committee's desires had evolved into a much more serious demand. A letter from the assistant superintendent of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, dated January 8, 1913, summarized a request made to him by the Director of Buildings and Grounds of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a Mr. H.D. Connick, in which the latter expressed his desire to have the lifeboat station moved "...to a site several hundred feet westward of its present location." The Assistant Superintendent explained Mr. Connick's concerns that,

...the present grounds interfere seriously with the race track, drill grounds and esplanade, as they butt directly against the eastern fence. [Mr. Connick] objects also to the appearance of the present station as being unsightly and not at all in harmony with the plans of the Exposition. By placing the station around the bend [of the race track] several hundred feet to the westward, it will clear the race track and esplanade, the latter running then directly in rear of the new station grounds. [24]

Despite the implied insult over the "unsightly" condition of its facility, the Life-Saving Service seemed willing to cooperate with the Exposition committee. The service realized that it might benefit from the move. This was due to the fact that the Fort Point Lifeboat Station really was in poor condition by that date and was sorely in need of upgrading. As noted already, the launchway had silted up and become unusable some years prior. Digging it out would provide only a temporary solution. A much longer structure was needed. The service also suspected that the present location of its facility contributed to the problem and that a more westerly location would be less inclined to silt up. But changing practices and the introduction of new technologies contributed more than anything else to the original lifeboat station's obsolescence. The larger motor lifeboats which had been introduced several years earlier required a more robust launchway in order to support their increased weight. They also took up considerably more space and required a larger boathouse for storage and maintenance. The Life-Saving Service had also increased the complement of its lifeboat stations and now required year-round staffing. The original Keeper's Quarters had been designed to accommodate only seven part-time staff in addition to the keeper and his family. It was no longer large enough. The Exposition committee's request to move the Fort Point station provided a convenient excuse to initiate the necessary upgrading. More importantly, it offered the opportunity to have at least part of the upgrading paid for.

By July of 1914, Sumner Kimball, General Superintendent of the Life-Saving Service, had expressed his assent to the proposed move, provided the government would incur none of the expense and that the new facility met LSS standards. In order to ensure the latter, the district superintendent of construction, Andre Fourchy, was asked to draw up plans and specifications for the proposed new facility. These were prepared in stages during the latter half of 1914. Preliminary specifications were ready by the middle of May, while complete engineering plans and elevations were not finished until November (Supplemental Information: Fourchy Plan). These documents, and associated correspondence, provide a detailed



baseline description of the Fort Point Lifeboat Station as it was initially constructed at the beginning of the period of significance. [25]

Fourchy's completed drawings show how he intended the new facility to appear. His plans included a new, two-story boathouse, measuring 55 by 55 feet. This would include dormitory-style accommodations for 12 crew members plus a private room for the No. 1 Surfman (or Chief Petty Officer, as he became known under the Coast Guard system). The Keeper (or Officer-in-Charge, as he became known) would have the entire Officer-in-Charge Quarters for himself and his family. This change in use was reflected in Fourchy's plans by the elimination of the large kitchen extension, which would not be needed in a single-family residence. This extension and the enclosed rear porch were both replaced by a simple shed addition which would extend about three-quarters the length of the building and end with a door and steps on its south side. The older wooden launchway was replaced by a more robust structure with marine railway supported on steel piers, or bents. It was nearly twice the length of the original launchway. A survey made in 1975 (just prior to its demolition) described it as follows: "Marine railway and westerly catwalk: rails on fifty-one 13" wide cast iron pile bents spaced 7-1/2' O.C. [on center] = 382' long, 3' wide wood catwalk on wood piling spaced 12' o.c..." [26]

Fourchy also proposed building two maintenance sheds just east of the top of the marine railway. One of these would accommodate a spur line for moving boats in need of repair off the main launchway track. The remaining auxiliary buildings were clustered on the west side of the facility, just beyond the O-in-C Quarters. They included a fuel house, garage, the water tower, and a hen house. These smaller structures were arranged to either side of a broad lane leading in from Marina Drive, and formed a small plaza between them in front of the hen house. A drill ground would be created on the seaward side of the O-in-C Quarters by building a wooden bulkhead, or seawall, about 150 feet beyond the mean high water line, then backfilling the protected space with sand topped with a 6-inch layer of macadam. This wooden bulkhead was understood to be a temporary measure, and the Life-Saving Service intended to replace it later with a more permanent concrete structure. (This was not done until sometime around 1935). The drill ground would extend lengthwise from the marine railway on the east to just beyond the cluster of auxiliary buildings on the west, a distance of about 250 feet. The wreck pole would be installed on the western end. The old boathouse does not appear at all in this plan, and presumably Fourchy was going to have it demolished.

Fourchy's plans were followed closely—but not exactly, and parts of his design had to be realized in stages. The most significant deviation from plan was caused by the Exposition's refusal to commit itself to building any new structures except the marine railway. Thus, Fourchy's most important proposed structure, the new boathouse/crew's dormitory, was not completed until the end of 1915, after construction was undertaken by the Coast Guard itself. The Exposition agreed to assume responsibility for the following actions only:

1. Erection of a wooden bulkhead around the seaward side of the new facility.
2. Laying of 2-inch water mains from city water supply.
3. Backfilling and grading of surface behind bulkhead.
4. Transportation of original buildings to new site.
5. Construction of new steel launchway with marine railway.
6. Grading of walks.
7. Landscaping.

This list also suggests the order in which each action was taken. Instead of building a new boathouse, the Exposition engineers laid out the footprint of the proposed structure but placed the original boathouse in its place, with the new launchway attached. The rest of the old buildings were also preserved and laid out more or less in keeping with Fourchy's 1914 plan. The O-in-C Quarters stood about 90 feet west of the