

Shipwrecks & Lifesaving

Shipwrecks & Rescues



The primary function of the Twin Lights was to assist mariners in navigation as they approached the treacherous coastline south of New York Harbor.

Although no actual rescues were performed from the Twin Lights, over the years the dual beacons prevented the loss of thousands of lives during violent storms. Needless to say, the Twin Lights keeper and his assistants stayed in constant contact with the local lifesaving crews.

The Twin Lights grounds are now the proud home of the Spermaceti Cove Boat Building. It was the northernmost of the eight original U.S. Life Saving Service stations built between Sandy Hook and Little Egg

Harbor in the middle of the 19th century. The structure at Twin Lights was the first boat building constructed, and one of only a handful of surviving structures in the country. Moved to the Twin Lights grounds in 1957, it became part of the historic site established to interpret New Jersey Maritime History.

According to Commander Timothy Dring, US Naval Reserve (Retired), the structure at the Twin Lights is the only known example of the first federally established coastal life-saving stations created under the Newell Act of 1848:

"It is the last surviving building from a total of 26 lifesaving equipment boathouses that were constructed over the years 1848 to 1856-primarily along the coastlines of New Jersey and Long Island. In fact, the Spermaceti Cove boathouse was the very first one to be built, and holds the distinct honor as the first federal lifesaving station ever built in this country. Moreover, the boathouse equipment artifacts that are in the collection held at the Twin Lights site are the originals that were issued in 1849, making them the oldest surviving pieces of such equipment. As such, this boathouse and its artifacts are not only of local and state historical interest, but also national historical interest."

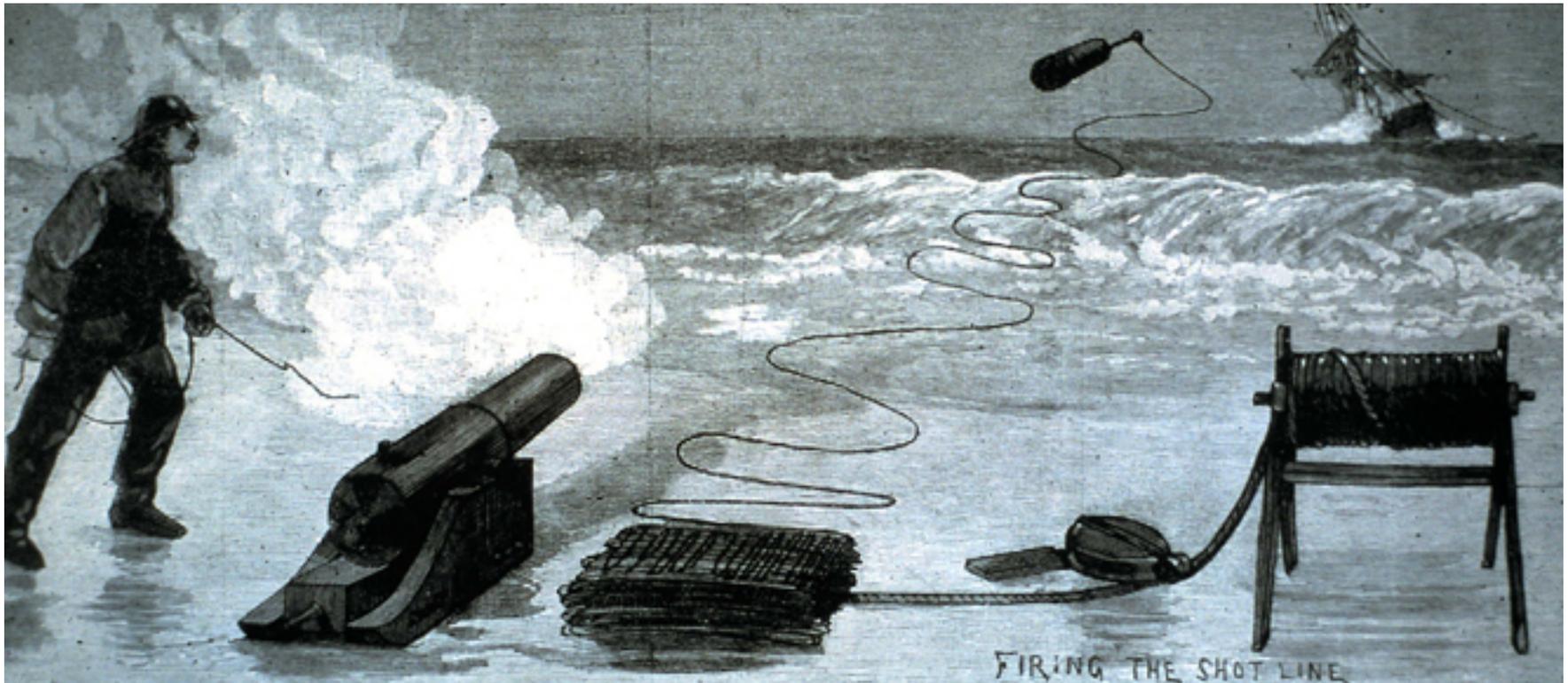
The exterior of the building has recently been restored. The interior and its contents date back to the early part of the 20th Century.



Francis Lifecar

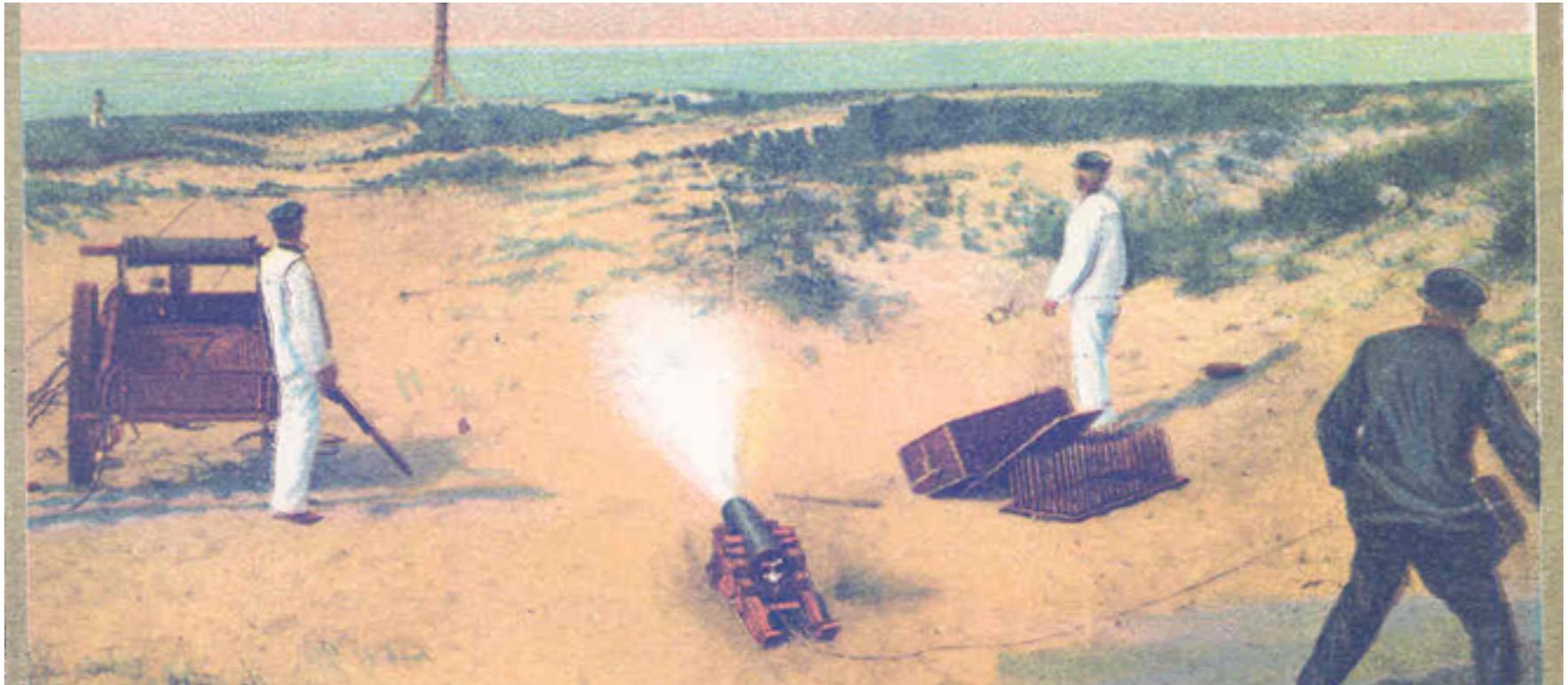
The building's most famous "inhabitant" is its Francis Life Car, the cramped "pod" that carried shipwreck victims to safety as their boats were being smashed to bits on the sandbar. One Francis Life Car was on display in the Twin Lights Museum for many years before going out on a loan to another maritime history center in New Jersey. A new exhibit for the second life car is being planned for the Twin Lights.

The Francis Life Car gets its name from its inventor, Joseph Francis. Its value was first demonstrated in 1850 off the coast of Manasquan, when the immigrant ship *Ayrshire* ran aground in a blinding snowstorm with more than 200 aboard. The weather prevented the launch of rescue boats, so the lifesaving crew had no choice but to use the experimental device. It functioned precisely as designed and only one life was lost during the rescue—a man who insisted on straddling the car while his family was crammed inside. A wave swept him off the metal container and he was never seen again. That life car survives to this day; it is now in the Smithsonian Institute.



Breeches Buoy

The line on which the Francis Life Car moved back and forth was a sturdy rope that stretched from the boat to the beach. Lifesaving crews used a small cannon to fire a Breeches Buoy—a heavy iron projectile attached to the rope—onto or over the deck of the stricken ship.



Lifesaving in New Jersey

The history of lifesaving in the United States dates back to the first shipwrecks hundreds of years ago. Maritime disasters were common enough that most shore communities organized their own rescue squads, complete with training and equipment. In the early 1800s, crews were funded by local charities or by wealthy individuals.

After the construction of the Erie Canal in the 1820s, ship traffic into New York Harbor exploded. The result was a spike in shipwrecks off the New Jersey coast. The original Twin Lights, constructed in 1828, improved the

situation. However, hundreds of lives and millions of dollars were still lost each year to maritime disasters-often within shouting distance of the beaches. It was time for the federal government to step in.

In 1848, shortly after election to Congress, New Jersey physician William A. Newell pushed through the Newell Act, a bill that created a lifesaving system administered by the U.S. Revenue-Marine, a branch of government created by Alexander Hamilton in 1790 to combat smuggling and enforce maritime law.

Newell's medical practice was located in Manahawkin, and he was a member of the Barnegat life saving squad. He saw firsthand the critical need for better training, equipment, communication and organization. The Newell Act immediately established eight lifesaving stations from Sandy Hook to Little Egg Harbor. Each was outfitted with the latest equipment, including sturdy surfboats and cannons that could shoot lines to ships in distress. The stations continued to be manned by local volunteers; some rescues were successful, some were not.

An 1854 hurricane, which resulted in tremendous loss of life, underscored the need for further improvements to this system. The government agreed to more funding, which paid the salaries of permanent employees-as many as three at each station. Still, there was no federal money to upgrade or even repair equipment, which tended to deteriorate quickly under the harsh conditions.

Sweeping changes finally came in 1871, when the government expanded its commitment to lifesaving by paying the salaries of permanent six-man crews. Along with the added funding came the construction of new stations, and regulations that outlined the basics of performance and training. By the end of the 1870s, there were lifesaving stations along much of the Atlantic coast, as well as stations on the Gulf of Mexico and Great Lakes. In 1878, the U.S. Treasury officially created an independent agency, the Life-Saving Service.

The lifesaving stations along the Jersey Coast were most active from November to April, when storms had the greatest impact on commercial shipping. As recreational boating became more and more popular at the end of the 19th Century, lifesaving crews were on alert all year 'round. As these photos show, the Lifesaving crews on Sandy Hook had plenty of interaction with the keepers at the Twin Lights.