



Region – East Coast

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US Life-Saving Service Heritage Association*

Brave Men of Hull

By Robert W. Haley (Wreck & Rescue - Volume 1, Number 4)

Hull, Massachusetts, is a long, narrow peninsula seven miles in length and shaped like the number seven. Born of the last ice age, composed mainly of drumlins and a barrier beach, it completes the outer southeastern edge of Boston Harbor. Until about 1905, shipping came and left Boston Harbor by way of Hull via Nantasket Roads, a relatively narrow and dangerous channel. The channel entrance lies between Boston Light, on Little Brewster Island, and Point Allerton, on the northern edge of the Hull peninsula. Shore-based lifesaving began early and was needed frequently off Hull.

After it was established in 1786, the Massachusetts Humane Society placed one of its first huts of refuge on Nantasket Beach in Hull. Organized and effective lifesaving was first recorded here in 1841, when Humane Society volunteers saved five crewmembers from the ship *Emeline*, and twelve from the wreck of the *Mohawk*. By 1845 using the surfboat stationed there, Massachusetts Humane Society crews had saved thirty-six lives. Volunteer lifesaving increased markedly in Hull during the next forty years with five lifeboat/surfboat stations and a mortar station active along this small stretch of coast. In the great storm of November 1888, Massachusetts Humane Society volunteers under Captain Joshua James saved twenty-nine persons from six wrecks during a two-day period. The US Life-Saving Service awarded these volunteers eleven gold and four silver lifesaving medals for their heroic efforts.

Joshua James first became a Massachusetts Humane Society volunteer in 1844, and was keeper of the six Hull stations from around 1876 to 1889. In 1889, the federal government constructed a new U.S. Life-Saving Service Station at Hull. There was no finer surfman in the region and at age 62, and with a special waiver granted by the US Life-Saving Service, Joshua James became the first Keeper of the new Point Allerton Life-Saving Station.¹

It was while serving as keeper of Point Allerton Life-Saving Station that Joshua James faced one of his greatest challenges. During the night of December 15, 1896, a severe northeast storm, with gale force winds and heavy snow, began to hit the Massachusetts coast. Off Cape Cod, the three-masted schooner *Ulrica*, of British registry, bound from Parrsboro, Nova Scotia to Hoboken, New Jersey with a cargo of plaster, was caught in the intensifying storm. The seven-man crew headed the ship for Boston Harbor. During the next few hours, wind gusts destroyed her sails, and she was forced to drop both her anchors. Shortly the ship began to drag her anchors, grounding in the breakers off Nantasket Beach about 8 a.m. on December 16. Her ghostly white hull was spotted by the south patrolman of the Point Allerton Station, and he hurried back to the station to report the wreck. The lifesaving crew had already been notified by telephone of the schooner's

plight, and Captain James accepted the offer of the railroad, which ran nearby, to carry the crew to the wreck site, about two and a half miles south-east of the station. One surfman was left to obtain horses and bring the beach cart to the disaster scene.

On arrival, the lifesavers promptly brought the Massachusetts Humane Society's large lifeboat, *Nantasket*, housed nearby, to the beach opposite the ship. Captain James found very heavy seas breaking over the *Ulrica*, sweeping across her at all points forward of the mizzenmast. The ship's crew was huddled on the ship's after-house, and in the mizzen rigging. He felt that they were in great peril, "and dared not wait for our beach apparatus to arrive." Taking his own crew of seven, and six Humane Society volunteers, he quickly had the big green lifeboat launched. Twice the waves hurled her back to the beach. The third time they succeeded in getting off, but could make only slow progress toward the *Ulrica* because of the strong current running along the shore. When halfway there, a "towering" sea struck *Nantasket*, driving her astern, and tipping her to a near vertical position. Keeper Joshua James was thrown upward and backward out of the boat by the force of the wave on his steering oar, or by its blade striking the bottom. As the boat passed him, he caught hold of a surfman's oar, and was dragged back to the beach with the lifeboat. One newspaper account states, "the doughty veteran was not lost" but "danced out of the cauldron laughing gaily, although soaked to the skin." A more reasonable account says that the captain splashed his way shoreward, soaked and shivering." The latter seems better descriptive of a seventy-year-old man, thrown into icy water, and emerging into the dubious comfort of a northeast snowstorm.

Meanwhile, the beach apparatus had arrived. "The sea was making a breach across her from her mizzenmast forward." Captain James then fired two shots across the *Ulrica* with the Lyle gun, but the frozen crew made no attempt to get either line. The third shot fell across the rigging toplift, and slid down to where the crew could retrieve it. The whip line and the hawser were hauled off slowly, for only part of the ship's crew was now capable of helping. Then, because of their exhausted state, they were unable to make fast either line very high in the mizzen rigging. Captain James thought it was too dangerous, under these conditions, to attempt to use the breeches buoy for their rescue, fearing that the whip line would foul the hawser. (There is an account describing his attempt to have the lines stretched over the roof of a nearby house, hoping to elevate them out of the water. If true, the attempt was obviously unsuccessful.) Joshua James then decided to make another attempt to use the lifeboat.

This time, the lifesavers took five Massachusetts Humane Society volunteers with them. They attached the lifeboat to the hawser, presumably to the traveler block (pulley), and fastened another line to her stern. Captain James did not provide an exact description of the maneuvers used. He wrote that "by hauling on the hawser and by the use of the oars," aided by the men controlling the stern line from shore, they managed to work the lifeboat out to the side of the *Ulrica*.

Keeper James also stated that they were "obliged to encounter some very heavy broad side seas" as they went. Dennis R. Means, a direct descendant of the captain, who has written an excellent history of the *Nantasket* in *The American Neptune*, furnishes other information as to the procedure. He writes that "the hawser served to guide a James' Trolley," and that "its car was *Nantasket*." The men on shore, holding the stern line, acted as a "human rudder." From Captain James' account, it appears that some men aboard *Nantasket* hauled the big lifeboat hand over hand along the hawser, while others rowed.

The keeper left no description of the obvious difficulty, discomfort, and danger in doing this.²

Then, Captain James wrote simply, that they “were very fortunate in getting all the crew, and landing safely.” A contemporary account, however, suggests that the lifesavers had to board the vessel themselves. The survivors were taken to a nearby hotel, the Seafoam House, where they were stabilized for several hours before being returned to the station. “Old Ocean, in her maddest mood, raged over this failure of human sacrifice, and to console herself, gulped down the carcass of a poor wrecked ship. The prey sought for so fiercely had been snatched into safety. Again, science, skill, bravery and hardihood had made man master of the waters.”³

Old Ocean, however, had one last surprise for the lifesavers. On January 8, 1897, a crew of ten salvage workers were aboard *Ulrica*. Disregarding increasing northeast winds and roughening seas, they remained aboard until conditions prevented them from returning safely to shore in their own boat. Anticipating this problem, Captain James and his surfmen had gone to the wreck site, and promptly launched a small, older Humane Society surfboat. Being struck by “two bad seas” on the way out, the boat began to leak rapidly. Half full of water, and with two men bailing constantly, the surfboat returned to shore. Then rolling out faithful, big *Nantasket*, the lifesavers, accompanied by two Humane Society volunteers, returned to *Ulrica*, and successfully removed the salvage crew.

So ended the story of *Ulrica*, an unfortunate ship, with a most fortunate crew. The *Boston Globe* headline of December 17, 1896, described the actions of the lifesavers simply and well: “Brave Men of Hull.”

Brave Men of Hull notes

¹ The strong ties of family and friendship in this small community continued as close cooperation between the Life-Saving Service and the Humane Society. After Joshua James transferred to the Life-Saving Service his son, Osceola, succeeded him as the Humane Society’s Keeper in Hull, serving in this capacity until 1928.

² “The Surfboat-Lifeboat Nantaasket. Hull, Massachusetts. The boat that would not succeed.” By Dennis R. Means. Reprinted from *The American Neptune*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, 1977. Copyright 1977 by the Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

³ *The Boston Post*, December 17, 1896.