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Relocating Segregation : The Pea Island Life-Saving Station

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Relocating Segregation:
The Pea Island Life-Saving Station

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

By

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Marshall University

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ABSTRACT

Relocating Segregation: The Pea Island Life Saving Station

By Jessica Caldwell

This study examines racial segregation through the lens of the first and only all African-American crew in the history of the United States Life Saving Service (L.S.S.), predecessor to the United States Coast Guard. The all-black Pea Island station, under Richard Etheridge's leadership, remained the only L.S.S. station with any black surfmen from 1880 until WWII. This study will consider the geography of the station's location on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the life of its keeper, Richard Etheridge, and the nature of the Life-Saving Service to show this segregated station provided some benefits to the men who served there.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents, Dave and Cindy. Without their endless support and encouragement I would not be here today. My father has always provided the motivation and inspiration I needed to continue through the most challenging times. My mother has a perspective that reminds me to take every opportunity presented, while always enjoying life. They are two of the hardest-working, most outgoing, and dedicated people I know. I am proud to be a reflection of these ordinary people who have made an extraordinary difference in my life.

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Thank you to my friends and family, who whether they truly cared about the Pea Island Life-Savers or not, were always willing to listen. To Jarrell and Cassie, you guys have always been there for me and have become family. To Val, who has been my family for quite sometime, your friendship has meant so much. To Matt, whose never-ending support and encouragement has got me through the darkest of days. To my research assistants, my parents, the hours you both spent in archives with me going through stacks of old, smelly, barely legible documents are invaluable.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the American Civil War, a new battle ensued over how to restore a broken country. Though Reconstruction ultimately failed, one major portion of this battle revolved around the future of the newly freed slaves and a brief fight for racial equality. With this failure, the South increased systematic segregation of races by imposing Jim Crow laws and practices. During Reconstruction's immediate aftermath, 1880, a combination of events led to the establishment of the first and only all African-American crew in the history of the United States Life Saving Service (L.S.S.), predecessor to the United States Coast Guard. The all-black Pea Island station, under Richard Etheridge's leadership, remained the only L.S.S. station with any black surfmen. From that year until WWII, the Life Saving Service and the Coast Guard remained racially segregated.

The extent and nature of racial segregation was greatly affected by geographical location. North Carolina's Outer Banks are a thin stretch of barrier islands between the mainland and the beautiful but treacherous Atlantic Ocean. Pea Island is one of the most remote places on the Outer Banks and today is a national wildlife refuge. In hindsight, it is easy to see that segregation led to legalized discrimination and racial inequality; however, this study considers the special circumstances of the Outer Banks to show that some African-Americans benefited from segregation, using the men of Pea Island as an illustration.

The literature on the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow era is divided by the way in which scholars view segregation. Some historians view segregation as a devastating obstacle that African-Americans could not overcome. Other scholars point to ways in which segregation actually benefited or advanced some blacks. The Banks' unique

geography and history also require that this study look at works that address the different experiences of urban and rural communities concerning segregation. Although most secondary literature ignores this distinction, this paper will place the story of Pea Island and its all-black L.S.S. station within the larger contexts of segregation.

Contemporary society equates segregation with discrimination. Due to the Civil Rights movement the word ‘segregation’ brings to mind bus boycotts and restaurant sit-ins. Scholars like John Hope Franklin contend that segregation was an injustice from the beginning. In *From Slavery to Freedom*, he argues that “too frequently the Negro’s survival in America has depended on his capacity to adjust—indeed, to accommodate—himself to the dominant culture and the obstacles have at times been too great to permit him to make significant achievements.”¹ In Barton Bernstein’s assessment of the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, he agrees that by allowing “separate but equal” the court allowed Negroes to be second-class citizens and “seeds of race hatred were sown.”² Historian Rayford Logan also uses the phrase “second-class citizenship” when referring to segregation. He argues that this was “accepted by presidents, the Supreme Court, Congress...indeed by the vast majority of Americans, North and South.”³ All of these studies fail to see that some African-Americans were able to manipulate the system in their favor. The time period in which these studies were written—the 1950s and 1960s, during the height and heat of the modern civil rights movement—may have

¹ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), viii.

² Barton Bernstein, “Plessy v. Ferguson: Conservative Sociological Jurisprudence,” *The Journal of Negro History* 48, 3 (July 1963): 205.

³ Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877-1901*, (New York: The Dial Press Inc., 1954), x.

influenced the arguments and conclusions of these historians. More recent scholars have disputed this completely negative view of segregation.

Legal segregation was an injustice that led to legally approved discrimination, but historians must consider this act within its larger context. In an effort to be more objective, scholars of the 1980s and 1990s tried to look at segregation within the circumstances that faced African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. Howard Rabinowitz and other scholars first defined the difference between segregation and exclusion.⁴ Considering that African-Americans could have been completely excluded from many facets of society, segregation, he argues, may have looked like a favorable alternative. Darlene Clark Hine's study of black professionals from 1890 to 1950 argues that segregation "offered black Americans ... private space to buttress battered dignity, nurture positive self-images, sharpen skills, and demonstrate expertise."⁵ Likewise, Leon Litwack contends that "the irony of segregation is that it opened up new opportunities for enterprising blacks."⁶ None of these scholars argue that segregation was a positive development, but they try to see the positive accommodations made by at least part of the black community. The study of the Pea Island station will show that segregation within the Life Saving Service saved African-Americans from complete exclusion from that service. Following this line of argument, the Pea Island station provided an environment in which these lifesavers could excel, safe from confrontation with their white

⁴ Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, (New York: Oxford Press University, 1978).

⁵ Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950," *Journal of American History* 89, 4 (March 2003): <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/89.4/hine.html>> (20 Oct 2004).

⁶ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 374.

counterparts. As Hine put it, accommodating themselves to segregation was “the best hand they had in an all-around bad deal.”⁷

Finally, to place this study of the Pea Island lifesavers into a larger context, its geographical location must be considered. Nearly all scholars agree that there were major differences in the ways in which urban and rural areas applied Jim Crow laws. The Outer Banks was an isolated, rural area during the nineteenth century. C. Vann Woodward is considered by many to be one of the foremost historians of race relations after publishing *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, among other works. Thirty-four years after writing this book, the *Journal of American History* published his self-critique of this work. He admits that he put “the question *when* before the questions *where* and *how*, giving time priority over circumstance.”⁸ He concedes that he should have given more attention to the fact that “it [Jim Crow] was essentially an urban, not a rural, phenomenon,” because in the countryside “services were not there to be segregated.”⁹ Dale A. Somers’ study of race relations in New Orleans from 1865 to 1900, though it focuses on the city, contains telling comparisons to rural areas. He claims that “racial violence and various forms of agricultural peonage kept rural Negroes in a condition of economic and physical subordination.”¹⁰ The unique rural, non-agricultural setting of the Outer Banks provided neither the environment of a highly segregated city, nor the

⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950.”

⁸ C. Vann Woodward, “Strange Career Critics: Long May they Persevere,” *The Journal of American History* 75, 3 (Dec 1998): 857.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 858.

¹⁰ Dale A. Somers, “Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations, 1865-1900,” *The Journal of Southern History* 40, 1 (Feb 1974): 20.

agricultural subordination of the countryside, opening some “space” within which the Pea Island station could exist and excel.

David Wright and David Zoby are the foremost scholars on the Pea Island Lifesavers. Their book *Fire on the Beach* does an excellent job of gathering and analyzing primary sources to recover the background of Richard Etheridge and the history of the station.¹¹ Other sources on the Life Saving Service and the Outer Banks are used in this study for background information. No major work on segregation or race relations mentions the Life Saving Service, and existing studies of Pea Island do not fully address the larger context of segregation. This study will fill this gap by reconstructing the history of the first all-black Life Saving crew under the circumstances of the rural area in which it was located and by considering its seemingly unique experience in this time period.

Reconstruction was a war fought not on the battlefield but on the floor of Congress. So-called Radical Republicans worked for racial equality, at least on paper. The national government changed laws and more importantly, the United States Constitution, in order to accomplish its agenda of redefining citizenship and expanding federal power over the states. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known simply as the Freedman’s Bureau, was created in 1865 to assist the newly freed slaves. The organization was to help black Americans find jobs, assist in building homes and communities, and provide them with education, all opportunities previously denied. By military order the Freedman’s Bureau established colonies for the newly freed or escaped slaves on abandoned or confiscated lands. Under martial law, the white Southerners could not resist. One of these colonies was created on Roanoke Island,

¹¹ David Wright and David Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

North Carolina, to which slaves from inland North Carolina fled. The Bureau assisted freedmen in building schools, churches, and communities. The conditions initially provided by the Freedmen's Bureau and military rule allowed former slaves to make advances in their individual lives and as a race. However, these conditions ended with the removal of the military districts, failure of the Freedmen's Bureau, and the rise of sharecropping among the former slaves.

In 1869, Tennessee enfranchised most ex-Confederates, and more states soon followed. By 1870, the Freedmen's Bureau ended its work, including its goal of providing education. The Bureau began returning ownership of confiscated lands to ex-Confederates. Ex-Confederates and other Southerners, increasingly frustrated with the occupying military, formed 'white protective societies' with the objective of 'keeping the negro in his place,' or establishing white supremacy. Some of these national societies included The Knights of the White Camelia, The Constitutional Union Guard, The Pale Faces, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Though its stated goals had been in serious decline, the final end of Reconstruction is usually marked by the election of President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1875 and the Tilden-Hayes Compromise.¹² The federal government removed military rule and southern states, where economic dependence on slavery had created deeply-rooted racist attitudes, increasingly passed Jim Crow and segregation laws. In rural areas, where few amenities existed to be segregated, discrimination expressed itself in other ways. Many Northern liberals and Southern conservatives found segregation acceptable, because both races could share equal citizenship, but in separate spheres. The Outer Banks, far removed from the politics of

¹² This is associated with "the let alone policy" of President Hayes, by which he refused to take action against the growing white supremacy movement, including Jim Crow laws.

Washington D.C., nonetheless felt the effects of the decisions and actions of national political leaders on the area and its people.

Nearly all U.S. and foreign trade and communications depended on shipping in the Atlantic Ocean. In the early 1800s, shipwreck victims were at the mercy of the sea. If assistance was provided, it was from fishermen, inlet pilots, and other volunteers. In 1807, the first volunteer life saving station was built at Cohasset, Massachusetts by the Massachusetts Humane Society. As far back as 1790, the United States realized the need to protect its economic interests at sea. Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, oversaw the formation of “a system of cutters” also known as the Revenue Marine Service (R.M.S.) and unofficially referred to as the Revenue Cutter Service, to enforce tariffs and prevent smuggling of goods into the United States in 1790. The R.M.S. performed these responsibilities, as well as piloting ships safely into port. The Lighthouse Establishment, first formed in 1789, and the Revenue Marine Service were placed under the Department of Treasury.¹³

New York City was one of the fastest-growing ports and also one of the most challenging to navigate. On New Year’s Day 1837, the *Mexico*, bound for New York from Liverpool, England, approached Sandy Hook, New Jersey, a perpetually difficult area for ships to navigate. In 1764, the British constructed an 85-foot lighthouse at Sandy Hook.¹⁴ While waiting for an inlet pilot in a severe winter storm, the *Mexico* ran aground at Long Beach, New York. All passengers, including 112 Irish immigrants, were lost.¹⁵

¹³ In 1789, George Washington ordered all lighthouses of the former colonies transferred to the Lighthouse Establishment; in 1852 the name changed to Lighthouse Bureau; In 1910 it changed again to the Lighthouse Service which it remained until absorbed into the Coast Guard in 1939.

¹⁴ J. Candace Clifford, *Nineteenth-Century Lights: Historic Images of American Lighthouses*, (Alexandria, VA: Cypress Press, 2000), 6.

Locals watched as the frozen bodies of the victims washed ashore. The loss of the *Mexico* foreshadowed following disasters, all of which led Congress, in 1848, to pass a lighthouse appropriation bill that included ten thousand dollars for “surf boats, rockets, carronades, and other necessary apparatus for better protection of life and property from shipwrecks on the coast of New Jersey between Sandy Hook and Little Egg Harbor.”¹⁶ This did not include a salary for men to staff the stations. Stations were built, but no inspectors, training, or administrative structures accompanied them. Modeled after the volunteer service active in the United Kingdom, locals were to take care of the stations and supplies. In 1852, three of these stations were built in North Carolina, at Bodie Island, Ocracoke and Wilmington.¹⁷ In 1857 Congress authorized \$24,185 for salaries to be used only for keepers of the stations. They planned to appropriate \$26,440 the next year for equipment to furnish the stations in New England.¹⁸

By the start of the Civil War, revenue cutters of the R.M.S. were stationed at every major port along the east coast. When fighting began, many cutters were taken by Confederate forces. In New Orleans, the *Robert McLelland* was taken by the crew who joined the Confederacy. The first war-time mission of the R.M.S. included helping the Navy blockade southern ports. Many cutters were involved in battle, such as the *Harriet*

¹⁵ David Noble, *That Others Might Live*, Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1994, 17.

¹⁶ House of Representatives, *Speech of W.A. Newell... wrecks on the New Jersey coast*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 3 August 1848, H. Doc. 69, pp. 1089.

¹⁷ United States Congress, house, *Disbursement of Appropriations Made for Locating Lifeboats on the Coast of United States*, S. Ex. Doc. 63, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., 1852.

¹⁸ United States Congress, House, *Views on Providing More Efficient Means for Preservation of Lives of Seamen and Passengers Wrecked on the Coasts of New Jersey and Long Island*, S Ex. Doc. 33, 34th Cong., 3d sess., 1857.

Lane and the *Caleb Cushing*.¹⁹ The R.M.S. proved it could perform diverse missions, possibly including life-saving operations.

In 1871, the United States Department of Treasury established an organization solely committed to aiding stranded vessels and saving shipwreck victims, the United States Life-Saving Service. This marked the end of the volunteer era and the beginning of a professional organization. When first created, the L.S.S. operated under the Revenue Cutter Service. Secretary of the Treasury Boutwell appointed Sumner I. Kimball as Head of the Revenue Cutter Service. Kimball accepted, but only upon his conditions. He would dedicate himself to improving the service, but he warned, “Congressmen will come to you [Secretary Boutwell] in long processions and will attempt to convince you that the service is being ruined.” He told Boutwell “an uncommon display of backbone” would be required to stand up to the criticism, but in the end he would improve operations.²⁰ As his first act, Kimball ordered Captain John Faunce of the Revenue Cutter Service to carry out an intense inspection of every station. Faunce reported stations “were too remote from each other ... houses were dilapidated, many being ... worthless ... With but few exceptions ... they were in a filthy condition ... [and] gave every evidence of neglect and misuse.” Keepers were too old, lived too far from station, and/or were incompetent. The inspectors found the stations that dotted the Atlantic coast were spread too far apart, lacked proper equipment, and most alarming, manned by surfmen without adequate knowledge and qualifications.²¹ Kimball felt the latter problem would be solved by ending nepotism and politically-motivated appointments.

¹⁹ “RMS in Civil War,” *Military Images*, May/June 2001, < www.findarticle.com > 9/23/05.

²⁰ Noble, *That Others Might Live*, 27.

In the years following his appointment, Kimball lobbied for appropriations for the Life Saving Service. By 1873 the L.S.S., better organized and with comprehensive regulations issued, organized districts. A civilian superintendent, someone outside of the Revenue Cutter Service, directed each district. The Sixth District included the Atlantic coast from Cape Henry, VA to Cape Hatteras, NC.²² The new regulations also created a detailed system for inspection and maintenance of stations and required an annual physical examination for every keeper.²³ On 20 June 1874, Congress passed the Life-Saving Stations Act. This included the right to award the Gold and Silver Life Saving Medals to surfmen for heroic acts, the requirement of all vessels to report any shipwrecks and their locations, and funding to build new stations where they were most badly needed.²⁴ The stations were to be on average three to five miles apart for efficient beach patrols. Seven of these new stations were constructed on the Outer Banks to rescue mariners from the waters known as the “graveyard of the Atlantic.”²⁵

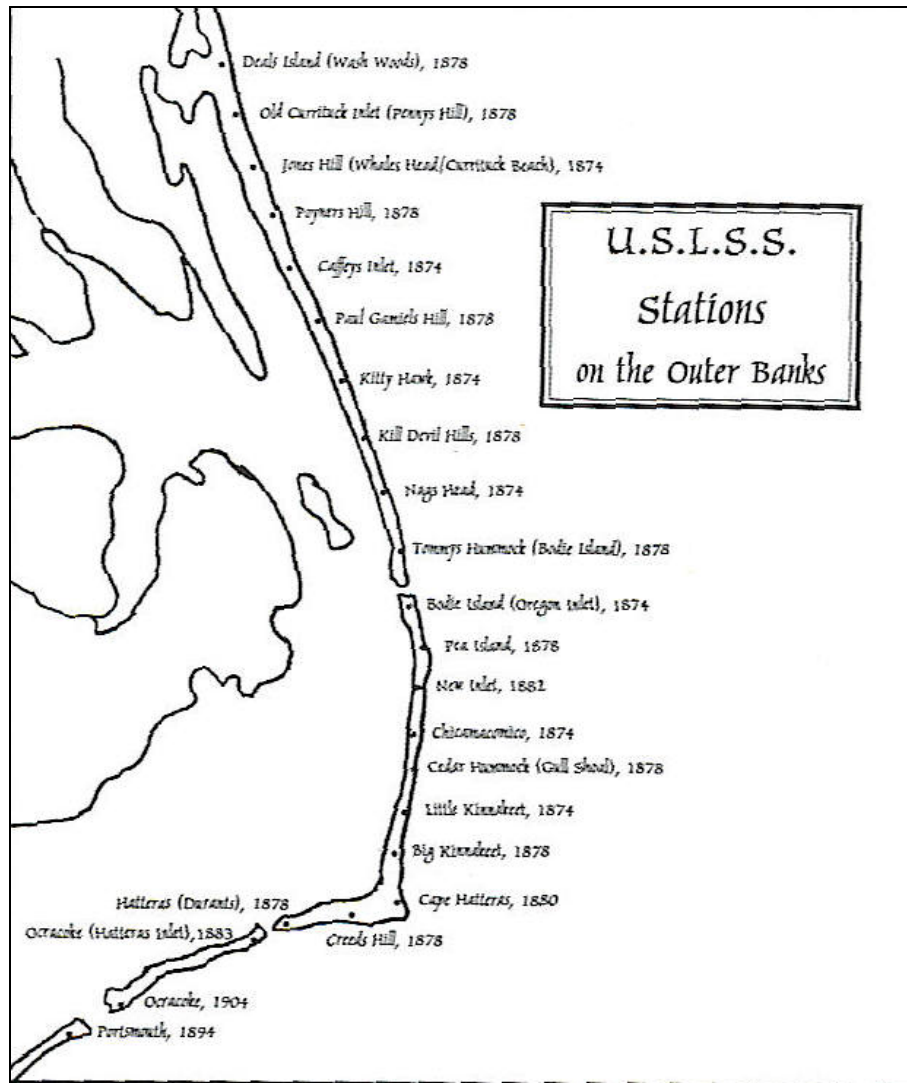
²¹ Senate Committee on Commerce, *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury Communicating...Present Condition of the Life-Saving Stations on the Coast of New Jersey and Long Island*, 42nd Cong., 2d sess., 1872, Ex Doc. 22, pp 6.

²² By 1891, the Sixth District extended to Oak Island, North Carolina. *Official Register of the United States Life-Saving Service*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891).

²³ Senate Committee on Commerce, *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury Communicating...Present Condition of the Life-Saving Stations on the Coast of New Jersey and Long Island*, 42nd Cong., 2d sess., 1872, Ex Doc. 22, pp 6.

²⁴ Congress, House, *Life-Saving Stations Act*, 43rd Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 2655, *Journal of the House*, (20 June 1874).

²⁵ This is a well-known and commonly used phrase when referring the waters off the Outer Banks. It is the name of a shipwreck museum and David Stick’s history of shipwrecks on the Outer Banks. *Graveyard of the Atlantic*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1952).



National Park Service

District Six's seven stations operated December 1 through April 1 and were ten to fifteen miles apart, much further than the desirable distance. The keeper, acting as captain of the crew, and his six crewmen lived in the station. Each crew member received a ranking one through six, indicating their experience and skill. If the keeper were absent or incapacitated on the site of a rescue, the number one surfman would take over command of the crew. When the Life Saving Service adopted a uniform policy in

1889 the rank was to be worn on the uniform.²⁶ Each day the crew practiced a different drill, and at night the men patrolled the beach, met a surfman from the next station, and exchanged a badge to prove they had completed their walk.

Unusual for the time period, some of the stations were racially integrated; these were known as “checkerboard” crews. Black surfmen, however, usually held the number six rank and were expected to perform extra duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of stables. In the 1870s, at least five African Americans served in the Fifth District (including six stations from Cape Henlopen, Delaware to Cape Charles, Virginia), and nineteen served in the Sixth District.²⁷ As Reconstruction faded so did the number of black surfmen hired by the white keepers. The keeper of the Bodie Island station, Edward Drinkwater, a Republican, was responsible for hiring five of the Sixth District’s nineteen African Americans.

In the years from Kimball’s appointment in 1871 to 1877, the L.S.S. had become professional and better organized; however, the disasters of the *U.S.S. Huron* and *Metropolis*, both in the Outer Banks region, brought a flood of criticism. In November, 1877, the *Huron*, a Navy warship, traveling too close to the coast, ran aground on the treacherous shoals. This ship was one of the last three American naval vessels built with iron rather than steel and having sails to supplement the steam engine. The 175-foot steamer was trapped as the waves pounded against the hull, breaking the vessel apart as men scattered. Some dove straight into the cold water and heavy surf, swimming to

²⁶ Department of Treasury, “CIRCULAR: Regulations Relative to Uniform for Employees of the Life-Saving Service,” 5 August 1889, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²⁷ *The History of Blacks in the Coast Guard from 1790*, Department of Transportation, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977). “At least” is used because race was not always clearly defined, therefore it is difficult to get a definite count.

shore 200 yards away. Others held on or tied themselves to the rigging of the crumbling ship; ninety-eight of the 132 crew members drowned.²⁸ Although the Nags Head station was less than two miles away, there was no help from the Life Saving Service because the operating season did not begin until December. Witnesses on shore saw the disaster unfolding but were reluctant to break into the life-saving station. When Ensign Young of the *Huron* reached shore, he broke into the station, but his efforts were too late.²⁹ The following day, District Superintendent Guthrie arrived by boat. He and a small crew launched a small boat toward the beach. The seas were still rough and tossed the boat into the waves. Guthrie and four others died.

On 5 February 1878, lifesavers from the Jones Hill station responded to the wreck of the *Metropolis*, but poor leadership and decision-making meant the ship's crew received no assistance. The life-saving crew arrived nearly six hours after the ship had been stranded, due to the weather and long distance between the station and the wreck. With only two rounds of black powder, the crew was unable to reach the wreck with the Lyle gun. Only fifty of the 248 crewmen were able to swim to shore.³⁰ Editorials in local and national newspapers tried to place blame for the calamity. The Life Saving Service received a hail of criticism for these disasters. The *New York Daily Tribune* "condemned" the men of the No. 4 station because they "performed their work

²⁸ *New York Herald*, 29 November 1877, Life Saving Service Scrapbook, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ The Signal Service dispatch of Kitty Hawk reported 50 of 248 swam ashore. David Stick in *Graveyard of the Atlantic*, recorded 85 lives lost. The *New York Daily Tribune* reported 91 lives lost. The *Cincinnati Commercial* reported "nearly 200 lives were lost." Both articles found in Life-Saving Service Scrapbook, District Six, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

inefficiently.”³¹ Some editorials suggested the L.S.S. be handed over to the U.S. Navy.³² Other news sources, like the *Norfolk Virginian*, pointed to the *Metropolis* as being “unseaworthy.”³³ The *Boston Journal* reported that Mr. Manson, the ship’s carpenter, in compliance with orders from its owner Mr. Lunt, used new timbers to cover up rotten ones so it could pass inspection. The article eventually placed blame with the United States Inspectors of Steam Vessels, “whose duty it was to have detected the unseaworthiness.”³⁴

Kimball argued that the shortcomings were not necessarily that of the L.S.S.; the stations of the Sixth District were too far apart and the season was too short. Some newspapers supported this argument. The *Cincinnati Commercial* printed an editorial praising the L.S.S. for the accomplishments it had made and pointed to the small budget it received. The editor wrote “during the year 1877, Congress appropriated about \$200,000 for the Life-Saving Service and at that time 1,461 lives and nearly \$2,000,000 of property were saved by this service.”³⁵ Responding to the criticisms, Sumner Kimball vowed to improve L.S.S. operations.

On 18 June 1878, President Rutherford Hayes signed a bill separating the United States Life Saving Service from the Revenue Marine Service; Kimball was appointed superintendent.³⁶ Kimball reported directly to the Secretary of the Treasury, as he did as

³¹ Life-Saving Service Scrapbook, District Six, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³² Ibid.

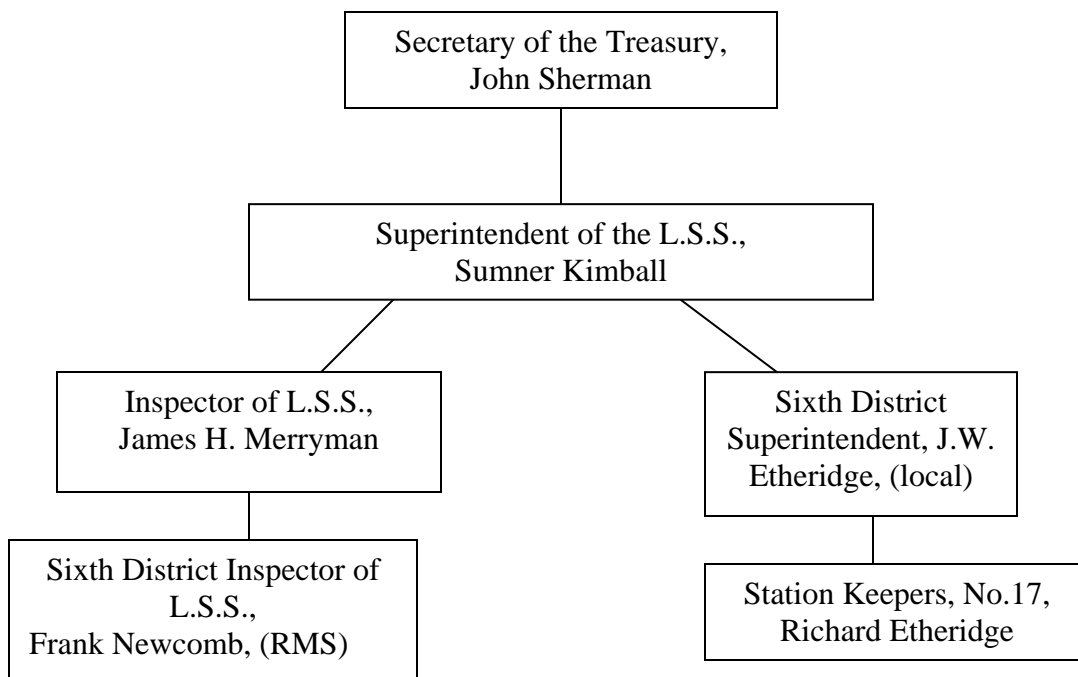
³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

head of the R.M.S. Reporting to him were two separate branches: The first, the civilian branch oversaw operations; the other service branch was given the task of inspection. The bill authorized R.M.S officers to serve as inspectors in each district. The Inspector of the L.S.S. was an R.M.S. captain and visited each station at least once a year to inspect the operations, crew, and equipment. Under him were district assistant inspectors, none of whom could be ‘locals’ of the area in which they served, to allow the inspectors to be objective without fearing retribution from the community. Their duty was to inspect operations at each station monthly. The R.M.S. inspectors also investigated shipwrecks and responsibility for disasters.

Figure 1: L.S.S. Hierarchy—1880.



³⁶ H.R. 3988, *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 2d sess., Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878.

The civilian branch was comprised of a local district superintendent, many times a local politician or community leader. He was appointed by the Secretary of the Treasury with the L.S.S. superintendent's recommendation. The 1873 regulations specified he had to be "not less than twenty-five nor more than fifty years of age," be literate, and "have some knowledge of the elementary principles of bookkeeping."³⁷ He also had to be familiar with the district and the use of life saving equipment. The district superintendent was required to visit each station in his district at least five times a year to check readiness, cleanliness, and record keeping. The district superintendent made recommendations for keepers to Superintendent Kimball. The keepers reported to their district superintendent, and, for the most part, chose their own crew members.

In 1878, Reconstruction and the debate over social reform left a divided Congress unable to agree on nearly any legislation. However, both Republicans and Democrats saw a need for improvement in the Life Saving Service. Kimball's constant lobbying led Congress to pass H.R. 3988.³⁸ This bill created thirty seven new stations, eleven along the Outer Banks, reducing the distance between them to only six miles. This bill also included extension of the season from September to April and doubled the keeper's salary.³⁹ Despite the implementation of these changes, problems persisted in the Sixth District.

³⁷ "Regulations for the Government of the Life-Saving Service of the United States," L.S.S., Revenue Marine Bureau of the Department of Treasury, 1873, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³⁸ H.R. 3988, *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 2d sess., Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878.

³⁹ Department of Treasury, *Annual Report of Operations for the United States Life-Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1878*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879). Salary was raised from \$200 to \$400 annually.

In January 1880, the *M&E Henderson* wrecked off of Pea Island. The L.S.S. response was inadequate; an investigation found fault with the negligent keeper and some crew members of the Pea Island (No. 17) station. The number one surfman, Leonidas Tillet, failed to spot the stranded vessel on his beach walk. The keeper, George C. Daniels, lied under oath about his actions during the tardy rescue attempt. L.S.S. Assistant Inspector Charles F. Shoemaker attributed the questionable performance of the Pea Island station to inexperienced, unskilled, and/or unfit surfmen hired not on merit but on political connections. He recommended dismissing Keeper Daniels and Surfman Tillet. He wrote Superintendent Kimball recommending that the black No.6 surfman of the Bodie Island crew, Richard Etheridge, be sent to Pea Island as the new keeper.⁴⁰

Richard Etheridge was a qualified candidate. A former slave of the keeper of the Bodie Island lighthouse, Etheridge had exceptional knowledge of the sea. He developed leadership skills while serving as a Union officer during the Civil War. Shoemaker and Newcomb agreed that Etheridge was “one of the best surfmen on this part of the coast of North Carolina.”⁴¹ He was sent to the Pea Island station and appointed keeper on 1 February 1880. Two other black surfmen from other stations in the district were transferred to the station, and Etheridge hired two fishermen from Roanoke Island to complete the all-black crew. With these moves, the L.S.S., heretofore integrated, became segregated. This study will explore the circumstances of the Outer Banks, race relations, and life of a surfman to better understand the Pea Island L.S.S. and the men that served.

⁴⁰ “Recommendation for keeper,” Letters Received, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴¹ Shoemaker to Kimball, 21 January 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

Chapter One, “Coastal North Carolina: The Space Between” will focus on the rural, though non-agricultural, Outer Banks region. This area supplied a unique setting, and this section will explore in detail its history, attitudes, and race relations. The small black population of the Outer Banks and the lack of economic dependence on slavery left white Bankers without deeply-rooted racist attitudes. During the Civil War, Roanoke Island, between the Banks and the mainland, served as a freedmen’s colony; the North Carolina coast was one of the first Union strongholds, and freed slaves fled toward it. Though the Roanoke colony was broken up in 1867, it left a base of churches and schools for the remaining black population.⁴² This community’s history conditioned its reaction to the all-black crew formed in 1880.

Richard Etheridge and his career before and at Pea Island will be the focus of Chapter Two, “Richard Etheridge: Slave to Keeper.” It will retrace Etheridge’s life as a slave and relationship with his former master, John B. Etheridge. This important relationship may have helped Etheridge obtain his appointment in the L.S.S. His military career will be discussed, since Army experience presented many opportunities not otherwise available to former slaves. From the end of the war until his appointment as Keeper, Etheridge was an active leader of his community. He bought his own land, gave loans to former slaves in need, and read for elderly or illiterate community members. His background as a former slave, Union soldier, and leader of the black community led to his appointment as Keeper of the Pea Island Station, a highly-coveted position among white and black surfmen.

⁴² Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen’s Colony, 1862-1867*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Chapter Three, “The Pea Island Station: Life in the Service” will look at the formation of this first black crew in 1880, which segregated a formerly integrated service. This segregated station provided benefits to those who served there, but it restricted black men to seven positions in the entire L.S.S. Though two black surfmen protested their transfer to No. 17, they were still transferred. The fate of these two men will show the intent to segregate, in spite of the feelings of these surfmen. This chapter will explore the mixed reactions of the Outer Banks community to the newly-formed crew. In the summer of 1880, the No. 17 station mysteriously burned down; though investigations pointed to racially-motivated arson, no one was ever charged with the crime.⁴³ U.S. Life Saving Service positions were coveted jobs. They were federal, steady-paying jobs, hard to find in this area.⁴⁴ The region’s race relations were vital to the formation and survival of the black crew and will be compared to that of other coastal North Carolina communities, like Wilmington.

Chapter Three will also explore the nature of the occupation of lifesaver to show its difficulties and to show how segregating the stations provided benefits to the Pea Island surfmen. Understanding the daily life of surfmen, including drills, quarters, and rescue techniques, makes clear the benefits for the Pea Islanders and shows the heroism of these men. This station, formed before segregation was declared constitutional, remained the only “colored” unit of the L.S.S. and the Coast Guard until WWII.⁴⁵

⁴³ In his report to Superintendent Sumner Kimball he says, “I am a little suspicious of some parties. This was the station with the colored keeper.”

⁴⁴ By 1898, Etheridge, as keeper, made \$900 annually. The surfmen collected \$60 per month, only in months they worked. Payroll Records of the No. 17, Sixth District, March 1898, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁴⁵ *The History of Blacks in the Coast Guard from 1790*, Department of Transportation, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977

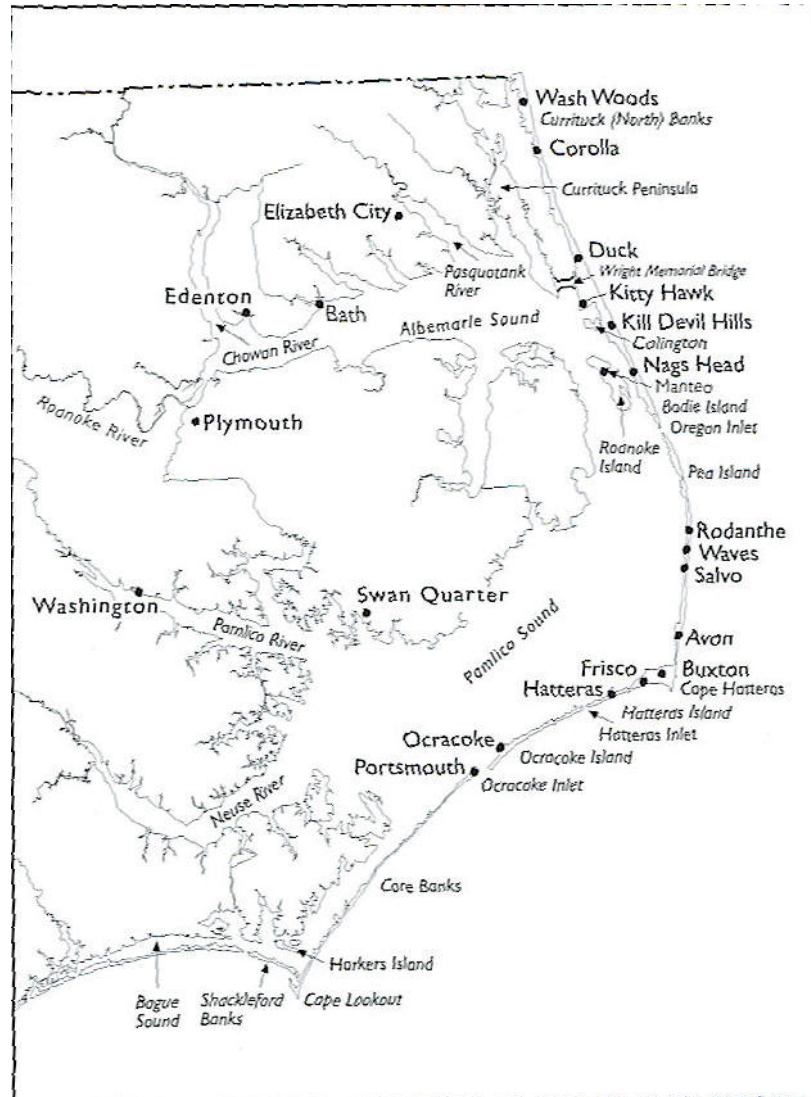
Although this segregation limited the number of positions for blacks in the Life Saving Service, it allowed generations of black “Bankers” the opportunity to serve. They were equal, at least within daily life at the station.

The concluding chapter recounts the discrimination the men suffered at the time and the way in which their accomplishments remained overlooked for 100 years; this neglect was partially rectified when these men posthumously received the Gold Life Saving Medal in 1996. In hindsight, it is easy to see segregation was an injustice and led to legalized discrimination. However, some African-Americans were able to take advantage of the Jim Crow system. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court endorsed “separate but equal” as constitutional in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, permitting segregation, and ultimately legalized discrimination.⁴⁶ In this same year the brave surfmen of the Pea Island Life Saving Station would carry out one of the most heroic life saving missions in the history of the L.S.S. This study will conclude neither segregation nor discrimination held these men back from excelling at their job and their lives.

⁴⁶ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (U.S. Supreme Court, 1896).

CHAPTER ONE

COASTAL NORTH CAROLINA: THE SPACE BETWEEN



In order to understand the circumstances that created the Pea Island Life-Saving Station as the first and only station with an all-black crew, the locality in which they transpired must be studied. The Outer Banks, a thin stretch of barrier islands, hug the coast of North Carolina almost from border to border. The area is a beach community, luring tourists since the 1830s, but this area was not exactly a resort community in the nineteenth century. Though beautiful, this harsh, unforgiving environment could be quite

difficult to survive. The hot, humid summers ended with a sometimes vicious hurricane season, leading into cold winters. The winds coming off the ocean sweep across the island and over the sound. The nor'easters of the spring could also be devastating. All the while, the people of this area persevered. These conditions changed the lives of the people who populated this area, particularly on the interaction between races. As David Cecelski explained, "racial boundaries had long been confused on the Outer Banks, where the islanders, including more than a few shipwreck survivors and deserters, heeded the less rigid racial mores of shipboard life more than those of tidewater plantations or inland ports."¹ This chapter will show the reduced tensions of race relations in the area fostered the development and progress of the Pea Island Life-Saving station.

The coast was generally less racist than the interior of North Carolina where large tobacco plantations and the majority of former slave owners could be found. The Outer Banks residents—referred to as Bankers—did not participate in mainstream America and were not usually included in North Carolina society. Blacks had long composed a large part of the maritime labor force in America and were considered, "along with the [native] Algonquian, Siouan, and Iroquoian peoples, to be the coast's foremost boatmen, pilots, and fishermen."² The Banks' unpredictable weather patterns and poor soil did not allow for large plantations or cash crops. As a result, the census of 1850 reported the population of the Outer Banks as 1,185, of which 610 lived on Roanoke Island. This included four "free Negroes" and 168 slaves.³ In 1860, 33 Island -families owned the

¹ David Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 50.

² Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 4.

³North Carolina Census of 1850, Bureau of Census, West Virginia Collection, Marshall University Special Collections.

179 slaves.⁴ The peculiar institution of slavery was not deeply rooted in the psyche of the Bankers nor were they economically dependent on it.

The Banks islands also tolerated more lenient inter-racial relations. Many illegitimate mulatto children were recognized by their white Banker fathers. As in the case of Calvino Windsor, some white fathers even deeded parcels of land on the Outer Banks to their mixed children. Windsor inherited sixty acres on the Shackleford Banks.⁵ Some slaves, like Moses Grandy of Camden, were able to purchase their freedom by saving his own earned wages.⁶ This atmosphere provided advantages not available to freedmen in the interior of North Carolina, and to whites, who were able to escape violent racist ideology.

Roanoke Island, twelve miles long and three miles at its widest point, is located between the Banks and the mainland. The soil is sandy and in most places less than two feet above sea level.⁷ It is surrounded by other small islands; most, uninhabited by people, provide habitat for a variety of birds. It served as a freedmen's colony during the Civil War. The lost colony of Roanoke is known as the first English settlement in America and was the birth place of Virginia Dare, the first English child born in America in 1587.

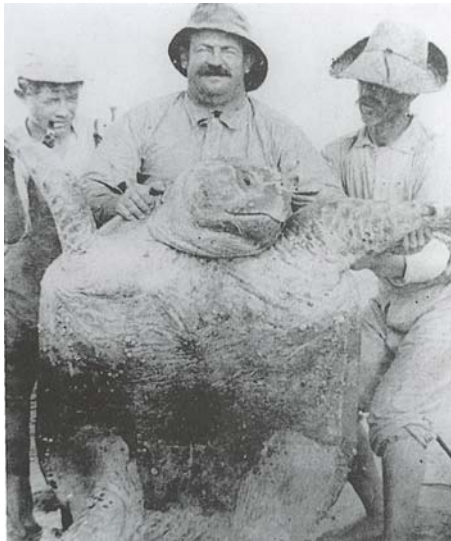
⁴ Eighth Census (1860), Slave Inhabitants, North Carolina, Vol. 2, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁵ Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, 50.

⁶ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, (London: C. Gilpin, 5 Bishopsgate-Street, 1842). Also available [book on-line] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Academic Affairs Library, 1996, accessed 30 September 2005); available from www.docsouth.unc.edu/grandy/grandy.html ; Internet.

⁷ Brian Crumley, *Roanoke Island, 1865 to 1940: Special History Study*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division National Park Service, 2005).

Most white Bankers made their livings as whalers, fisherman, or inlet pilots, many times working directly beside a slave or free black. Commercial fishing did not become a major source of income until after the Civil War. Residents usually bartered fish for other goods. Turtles were much more profitable than fish. Sea turtles, namely the loggerhead and green, went for twenty and fifteen cents each. The diamond-backed terrapin, found in the brackish water around the Outer Banks, became the most sought-after for soups and stews. In 1849, John B. Etheridge, owner of Richard Etheridge, sold 2,150 terrapins in Norfolk for \$400 and another 2,000 for \$350 in Baltimore.⁸ The terrapins were either caught by hand or in a “terrapin drag,” which was invented in 1845 by Banker William Midgett to capture the animal in the winter when they lay dormant in the mud.⁹



Loggerhead turtle caught at Cape Lookout, ca. 1908. (North Carolina Maritime Museum)¹⁰

⁸ This figure is given by Davis Stick in *The History of the Outer Banks*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 221-23. Also by Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958).

⁹ Brain Crumley, *Roanoke Island, 1865 to 1940*, 12.

¹⁰ Rodney Barfield, *Seasoned by Salt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 71.

Bankers survived by keeping small gardens, building their own houses, fishing, raking for oysters, and “wrecking” or salvaging items from shipwrecks. The shoaled and tricky waters off the Banks claimed many ships, earning the area the name “graveyard of the Atlantic.”¹¹ The earliest recorded wrecks were European explorers in the 1500s.¹² When pieces of these ships or their cargo washed ashore, the Bankers salvaged whatever they could. John Gaskill, the son of the keeper of the Bodie Island Lighthouse from 1908 to 1921, remembered a ship carrying bananas from South America wrecking during his childhood. His family gathered as many as they could from the wreck. In another instance of wrecking, his family’s home in the small fishing village of Wanchese on Roanoke Island was partly built with timbers from the *Laura Barnes*.¹³ David Stick, a leading historian of the Outer Banks, quotes a Confederate officer as observing, “queer folks in this region ... Most of them were born here, never saw any other locality and all are happy. There are women here who have never wore [sic] shoes. The people seldom see money, indeed they have no use for it.”¹⁴ Bankers were a product of their environment, and significantly differed from other Southerners.

¹¹ This is a well-known and commonly used phrase when referring to the Outer Banks. It is the name of a shipwreck museum and David Stick’s history of shipwrecks, *Graveyard of the Atlantic*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952).

¹² David Stick, *Graveyard of the Atlantic*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 244.

¹³ John Gaskill, interviewed by author, Bodie Island, North Carolina, June 2004 and August 2005. John is the son of Vernon Gaskill, the last keeper of the Bodie Island lighthouse from 1919 to 1940. The *Laura Barnes* wrecked in 1920.

¹⁴ David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 155.



Outer Bankers “wrecking” along the coast, 1899. (Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.)

This community provided special circumstances for slaves and free blacks. David Stick concluded:

Because there had been little slave ownership on the Banks before the war, the Bankers had comparatively little difficulty adjusting to the new order. Some of the former slaves remained in the area ... they soon were living side by side with the white people ... accepted as members of the Banks community, not quite on an equal plane, but so close to it that it took a keen observer to tell the difference.¹⁵

These conditions made an ideal environment for the creation of a freedmen’s colony.

In the years leading to the Civil War, most Bankers were uninterested in the heated debate of slavery and states rights. Nevertheless, outsiders involved them early on. The “Anaconda Plan” of General Winfield Scott targeted the coast to blockade the ports of the South. Small forts of sand and turf dotted the islands, three on Roanoke Island. The Bankers did not necessarily consider themselves supporters of the Confederacy, but most did not run to join Union troops either. After North Carolina seceded, residents of Hyde County held the Hatteras Convention and drafted a

¹⁵ Stick’s quote in Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 166-167.

“Statement of Grievances and a Declaration of Independence,” that declared their loyalty to the United States.¹⁶ On 28 August 1861, General Benjamin Butler led Union forces to take Fort Hatteras and Fort Clark in “the first major amphibious assault ever launched by the U.S. Army.”¹⁷

Hatteras was one of the busiest ports in North Carolina. Its capture meant the Bankers had to become involved in a national issue to which they had paid little attention. After the capture, the Confederates on Roanoke Island became nervous. There was reason to be. The loss of this major port and inlet exacerbated supply shortages already felt by the Confederacy. Troops from Georgia and Virginia arrived to reinforce General D.H. Hill and the North Carolina 17th regiment.¹⁸

The Union clearly controlled Hatteras Inlet, but moving north was not easy. In October 1861 the Union forces pushed to Chicamacomico, and then were chased back to Fort Hatteras. These skirmishes have become collectively known as the “Chicamacomico Races” because neither side could claim victory. That is, until General Ambrose Burnside collected a fleet of light-draft steamers, sailing vessels, and barges and troops from coastal states like Massachusetts and Rhode Island in the fall of 1861. In November, a black Banker named Ben fled Roanoke Island to alert General Burnside of the Confederate defenses.¹⁹ Due to storms, the fleet did not make it to Roanoke Island until February 1862. The outnumbered, poorly equipped Confederate forces were easily

¹⁶ Rodney Barfield, *Seasoned by Salt: A Historical Album of the Outer Banks*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 92. Dare County was formed from surrounding counties, including Hyde.

¹⁷ Crumley, *Roanoke Island*, 14.

¹⁸ Fred Mallison, *The Civil War on the Outer Banks*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1998), 51.

¹⁹ Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 157.

overrun, an easy victory for the Union. The Confederate General Henry A. Wise, in charge of holding Roanoke Island, had asked for more troops to defend the island with his 1,500 inexperienced and untrained troops already there. The request was denied.

Later General Wise said of the defeat,

It was the key to all the rear defenses of Norfolk. It unlocked two sounds (Currituck and Albemarle); eight rivers (North, West, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Little, Chowan, Roanoke, Alligator); four canals (Albemarle and Chesapeake, Dismal Swamp, Northwest and Suffolk); and two railroads (Petersburg & Norfolk and Seaboard & Roanoke ... It should have been defended at the expense of 20,000 men and of many millions of dollars.²⁰

This victory proved to be a key for the Union. In short order, other coastal towns fell; by late 1862 the Union controlled the North Carolina coast.

The coast of North Carolina was one of the Union's first strongholds in the South causing slaves to flee to this area for freedom. On 13 May 1862, Congress passed an Article of War prohibiting Union military personnel from returning escaped slaves, some of whom had already gathered on Roanoke Island.²¹ The army began to organize, feed, and house the refugees. The Freedmen's Bureau had not yet been created, but Vincent Coyler was appointed Superintendent of the Poor in March 1862 to lead these efforts. He resigned in the summer and Reverend James Means succeeded him, his title changed to Superintendent of Blacks in North Carolina. He began performing marriage ceremonies for the freed slaves. Means died in April 1863 from typhoid, he was replaced by his assistant Horace James.²²

²⁰ Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 20-21.

²¹ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 37.

²² Crumley, *Roanoke Island*, 18.

The freedmen's settlements on the North Carolina coast were really the idea of Horace James. Just after taking over as Superintendent of the Black or Negro Affairs, on June 27, 1863, James wrote, "[T]he remedy proposed to meet this unique state of things, [surplus of freed women and children] is to colonize these freed people, not by deportation out of the country, but by giving them facilities for living in it ... and by directing their labor into such channels as promise to be remunerative and self-supporting."²³ During the war, freedmen congregated at Union strongholds, namely New Bern, Beaufort, Washington, and Roanoke Island. The occupied cities on the coast, especially New Bern and Beaufort, became centers of black political culture. In 1864, 7,500 former slaves gathered at New Bern, 1,000 at Roanoke Island, and 1,500 at Washington and Beaufort.²⁴ James, an abolitionist and a Congregationalist minister, wanted to turn the refuge of Roanoke Island into a permanent settlement.²⁵ He divided the confiscated and abandoned lands of white islanders among the colonists. Families of soldiers and other government employees, as well as the elderly and infirm, received a one-acre plot.²⁶

The recruitment of black soldiers on the Outer Banks began on 19 June 1863 by General E. A. Wild.²⁷ James wrote "[T]he hardy young negroes of Roanoke Island were

²³ Letter from Horace James to the Public. 27 June 1863. Reprinted as Appendix C in Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 211.

²⁴ Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People of the United States Army in North Carolina, in the Spring of 1862, After the Battles of Newbern*, (New York: Vincent Colyer, 1864), 6. New Bern is also spelled Newbern.

²⁵ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 59.

²⁶ Horace James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*, (Boston: W.F. Brown & Co., 1864).

²⁷ James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*.

among the first to answer the country's call. They freely and enthusiastically volunteered, to the number of nearly one hundred."²⁸ The Union enlistment of black recruits was very high on Roanoke Island. The absence of able-bodied men left a settlement of women and children. Upon their departure, only 150 of the 900 residents were classified as "healthy men."²⁹ In the winter of 1863, General Edward A. Wild led his newly raised African Brigade across the mainland. The raids of the African Brigade sent more "contrabands" to the island. When the Freedman's Bureau was officially created in March 1865, 3,500 freedmen lived on Roanoke Island.³⁰

James envisioned the Roanoke Island colony to be a permanent settlement, where the freed people could be self-sufficient. However, when 100 of the 197 men of Roanoke Island left with the Union troops, he realized "the removal of the vigorous young men, who would have worked upon the soil, and fished in the Sounds for the support of the colony, necessarily changed the character of the enterprize [sic], converting it into an asylum for wives and children of soldiers."³¹ He reported 1,295 males in the colony, of which 587 were boys. Seventy percent of the adult males were either "in the immature period of youth, or in the decline of life."³² The colonists left on the island worked for the Quartermaster and Commissary of the Post or the government doing a variety of tasks. Most were never paid for their labor, meaning the community lived off rations and were cash-poor.

²⁸ James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*.

²⁹ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 8.

³⁰ Records of the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³¹ James, "Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina."

³² James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*."

James planned to teach the colonists skills that would help them survive and “raise them above mere field hands.”³³ He reported many of the women could already card, spin, and weave, and a few men could make spinning wheels. The Friends of Philadelphia, an abolitionist group, sent the colony shoemaker’s tools and copper’s tools, to make barrels. James knew them to be good carpenters, “the negro always builds his own house. Set him down where trees grow, give him an ax, a saw, a hammer, and twenty pounds of nails, and in a month his house is done.”³⁴

Exposure to the colony provided additional benefits to former slaves. The freedmen of coastal North Carolina had a three-year head start on those of the interior to organize political groups, churches, schools, and communities with the aid of the Freedman’s Bureau. Northern missionaries came to Roanoke Island to assist freedmen in their transition from slave to citizen. The American Missionary Association (AMA) was the most prominent organization on the island. In correspondence with their home offices, these missionaries requested clothing, tools, household goods, utensils, and food items for the refugees. The missionaries believed their most important work on the island was to educate. In February 1864, the AMA opened Lincoln School with sixty students. By June, six schools operated in the colony offering both day and evening classes for all ages.³⁵ Elizabeth James, a pioneer missionary, thought “the way to elevate any race hitherto degraded is to educate some of their own number and bring them up to be

³³ James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*.

³⁴ James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina*.

³⁵ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 78.

teachers and leaders.”³⁶ The teachers emphasized the relationship between education and freedom.

Outside of education, the colony provided freed people with food, shelter, and a place to unite with their families and form a community. Missionaries provided supplies to the freedmen to build their own homes, gave them seeds to grow gardens, and supplied nets for shad fishing in an effort to make the colony self-sufficient, but it was the freedmen who shaped the community. The opportunities and direction given within the colony encouraged former slaves to feel and act like citizens, although with limited freedom.

In the fall of 1864, Horace James hired Holland Streeter as his assistant. Streeter was to manage the Roanoke Island colony and rations, since James’ office was in New Bern. James also entrusted Holland Streeter with the charge of the fishing business. He and the colonists caught herring, mullet, shad, and bluefish. 1861 and 1862 had been much less productive than normal. The low income from this endeavor caused the colonists and eventually James to take a closer look at Streeter. The colonists were distrustful of both men. They had been working since they arrived on the island, but had not been paid, which is the reason for their dependence on rations. Many of the Union soldiers occupying the area treated them like beasts.³⁷

Word of this treatment reached the Bankers in the United States Colored Troop regiments out in the field. In June 1865, Frank James of Company C of the Thirty-sixth USCT, wrote Commander Draper that his family was not being taken care of as

³⁶ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 111.

³⁷ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 138.

promised.³⁸ Two other soldiers of Company F, Richard Etheridge and William Benson, wrote to General O.O. Howard, commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, protesting the treatment of their families as well.³⁹ This letter particularly pointed to the "copper head" Holland Streeter as being responsible for the lack of food and mistreatment of the colonists.⁴⁰ Eventually General Howard ordered someone sent to the island to report on conditions. From Beaufort, the Freedmen's Bureau sent Captain John McMurray of the Sixth United States Colored Troops (USCT) to investigate.

On 24 July 1865, a military commission convened at Roanoke Island and tried Holland Streeter on charges of "misapplication and embezzlement of public property entrusted to his care," fraud, and "cruel and abusive treatment of colored people under his care."⁴¹ Streeter pled "not guilty" to all the charges. On Charge I of embezzlement the court cited five "specifications" or incidents of this happening, selling corn meal, pork, sugar, flour, coffee, eggs, soap, and other rations. Once he sold "four barrels of salt-cod fish and one half barrel of mackerel to a white man" in Pasquotank County for \$125. Charge II of fraud accused Streeter of stealing government rationed barrels of fish and replacing them with "fish belonging to himself which were entirely valueless and worthless." Also, Streeter sold a sail boat belonging to four black residents of Roanoke Island for \$150, then told the men the boat had been lost. On Charge III, of cruel and

³⁸ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 140.

³⁹ Richard Etheridge and William Benson to General Howard, May or June 1865, Reprinted in Ira Berlin, Joesph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *The Black Military Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University press, 1982), 730.

⁴⁰ A "copperhead" referred to a Northerner who sympathized with the South during the Civil War.

⁴¹ Court Martial, MM-2836, Holland Streeter, Court martial case files, Office of Judge Advocate General, Box 1238, 24 July 1865, RG 153 National Archives, Washington D.C.

abusive treatment, Streeter had five specifications including using a club to strike Margaret Langest, a black woman attempting to obtain rations from Streeter.

Many people, both black and white, testified against Streeter. William Benson testified he saw Streeter take items from the ration house at night. He signed his name with Richard Etheridge to a letter sent to General Howard complaining about Streeter's treatment of the people. Another witness, Lewis Wescott, later served at the Pea Island Life-Saving Station. Streeter chose not to present a statement in his defense. After deliberation, the commission found Streeter "guilty" of charge I, embezzlement and "guilty" on charge II of fraud. On Charge III, they found Streeter "not guilty," but "Guilty of cruel treatment to two colored women under his care as Ast. Superintendent of Negro affairs." The commission sentenced Streeter "to be confined at hard labor, for the term of three months" at Fort Macon, NC "and that he pay a fine of five hundred dollars to the United States government."⁴²

The Freedmen's Bureau had been created to have "supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen."⁴³ This act looked promising for the future of the colony, but President Johnson's lenient Reconstruction policies on land restoration destroyed these hopes. At the end of the war, the Freedmen's Bureau controlled 1,800 acres of Roanoke Island, confiscated from twenty-seven different owners.⁴⁴ In October 1866, the first portion of the confiscated lands on which the colony existed was returned to the pre-war owner, Isaac C. Meekins.

⁴²Court Martial, MM-2836, Holland Streeter, Court martial case files, Office of Judge Advocate General, Box 1238, 24 July 1865, RG 153 National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴³ Records of the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴⁴ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 175.

More owners then applied for restoration of their lands and received them. The colonists could not afford to pay rent, and jobs were not available. The Freedmen's Bureau began cutting government rations and sending colonists to the mainland to find work. In May of 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau issued official orders to break up the Roanoke Island settlement.⁴⁵

Most freedmen left the island; however, the ones who stayed became the foundation of a permanent black community. Native islanders had never been familiar with farm labor and had no desire to find work on the mainland. Other colonists had grown attached to the coast and feared returning to the mainland. These freedmen held a meeting on 23 December 1865 to protest their removal from Roanoke Island. Sixty-seven men signed a petition requesting to stay on the island until the spring.⁴⁶ One of these signers was Richard Etheridge. Four other signers later became surfman at the Pea Island station including Fields Midgett, William B. Davis, George R. Midgett, and William B. Daniel.⁴⁷

On 20 August 1877, seven African Americans, including two future Pea Islanders purchased a parcel of land from Martin Daily.⁴⁸ In that deed the land is referred to as

⁴⁵ Records of the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴⁶ Petition from Freedmen Wishing to Stay on Roanoke Island, December 1866-67, Letters Received, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for North Carolina, Record Group 105. National Archives, Washington D.C. Reprinted as Appendix F in Click, *Time Full of Trial*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dare County Records of Deeds, 1877-1882, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

California. The black community of Roanoke Island was called California well into the twentieth century.⁴⁹



The town of Manteo around 1900. (Outer Banks History Center)

Certain towns on the Banks were growing. In 1870, Manteo, located on the north end of the island, was named the county seat of Dare County. By 1873, a post office and a courthouse were opened.⁵⁰ On 1 July 1876, the Nag’s Head Hotel opened for business. The owner, J.C. Perry charged \$2.00 per day or \$30.00 per month and could accommodate 250 guests.⁵¹ The hotel advertised Nag’s Head’s “sea breezes and healthfulness.” Manteo also claimed to be home to the first English child born in the Americas, Virginia Dare, and to the “first religious services of this country.”⁵²

⁴⁹ In author’s interview with John Gaskill, he referred to the “black part of the island” as California.

⁵⁰ Crumley, *Roanoke Island*, 23.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Economist, 1 July 1876, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

⁵² L. Branson, ed., *North Carolina Business Directory, 1877-78*, North Carolina State Library, Raleigh, NC, 13.

The sentinels of the shore, the Cape Hatteras and Bodie Island Lighthouses, were rebuilt and a new light constructed at Currituck. The Cape Hatteras light station, finished in 1870, was the largest with a black and white spiral stripe. Bodie Island, finished in 1872, had the same exact design as the Currituck light. Bodie Island was painted with black and white bands, while Currituck was left unpainted to show the red brick. Just after Currituck was finished, the United States government began constructing Life-Saving stations on the sandy dunes of the Outer Banks. These postwar construction projects certainly brought new job opportunities to the Bankers.

In the years of Reconstruction, African Americans had gained footing in political and economic fronts, but it would not last. North Carolina elected four African Americans to the House of Representatives, three of whom served even after Reconstruction.⁵³ In 1877, the Reconstruction period came to an end. As early as 1876, editorials in the *Elizabeth Economist* berated the Republican Party and began printing Democratic propaganda. On 13 September the paper led with “WHITE MEN OF PASQUANK READ THIS.” The article reported a marriage in 1867 between A.G. Thornton, a white “leading radical luminary of that town” and a black woman of Fayetteville. Thornton served on the state’s constitutional convention which passed an ordinance making his marriage legal. The editorial chastises the intentions of the Republicans, which includes “negro supremacy and racial equality...The tendency to negro equality has grown stronger every day of the existence of the Republican party in this state.”⁵⁴ The article covering the other side of the same front page leads,

⁵³ Jeffery Crow, Paul Escott, and Flora Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992).

⁵⁴ *Elizabeth Economist*, 13 September 1876, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

“Republican Defalcation and Embezzlement.”⁵⁵ Though not active in the Outer Banks area secret societies like the Knight of White Camelia, the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan began organizing in North Carolina. Nationally, African Americans were losing any progress they had made in Reconstruction years, but in the Outer Banks the changes had not been so radical.

The income of people in the Outer Banks was mostly uncertain, since it depended on the weather, fish, and the market. In 1877, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the average income of mechanics, brick masons, and carpenters in Dare County as \$275 annually. Yearly income of fishermen could not be calculated since it varied. A keeper in the Life-Saving Service earned \$400 a year, but the surfmen were paid \$60 monthly.⁵⁶ Most Bankers had multiple sources of income. For example, surfmen were only employed five months of the year in 1880. This is \$300 annually, but most fished, hunted, kept small farms, and/or participated in wrecking to supplement this income.

Race relations in the Outer Banks and Roanoke Island differed greatly from that of inland North Carolina and the majority of the South. It is important to note that the area was not free from racism, but “overall black and white relations were far more uncertain and egalitarian than they were ashore.”⁵⁷ The atmosphere of the Outer Banks set the stage for the Pea Island Life-Saving station to become the first and only all-black station in the history of the Life-Saving Service. The relatively low racial tension stemmed from the history of interracial working conditions, economic hardships of the islands, and the legacy of the Freedman’s Colony. These factors created the environment

⁵⁵ “Defalcation” means to misuse funds or embezzle.

⁵⁶ Payroll Records of the U.S.L.S.S., 1900, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁵⁷ Cecelski, *Waterman’s Song*, 51.

into which a young slave by the name of Richard Etheridge was born. His experiences on the islands as a youth and adult led to his becoming the first and only African American keeper in the Life-Saving Service. The following chapter explores his life as a slave, soldier, Banker, and keeper.

CHAPTER TWO

RICHARD ETHERIDGE: SLAVE TO KEEPER

Richard Etheridge was central to the formation of the Pea Island crew and the backbone of the station from 1880 to his death in 1900. His experiences were unique. From his birth as a slave to his appointment to a federal position, he did not have the typical life of an African American in this time period. This chapter will explore the life of Etheridge as a child, soldier, leader of the community, and keeper in the United States Life-Saving Service.

Richard Etheridge was born on 16 January 1842, a slave of John B. Etheridge. John B. Etheridge was a prominent member of the Outer Banks community, but his wealth was not comparable to the planter elite of inland North Carolina. In 1850, Roanoke Island and the surrounding area had a total of 179 slaves, owned by 33 slave owners.¹ Of those John B. Etheridge owned nine slaves, seven males including Richard. Nine slaves was above the average owned by slaveholders in the county but just below the state average of 9.6 slaves. Plantations owners of the interior of North Carolina owned many more. The Latta Plantation of Huntersville, twelve miles north of Charlotte, had an average of 23 slaves through its years of operation.² According to the 1860 Census, John B. Etheridge's combined value of real estate and personal estate totaled \$7,000. Only five other families in the Roanoke Island area claimed greater wealth.³

¹ "Slave Inhabitants in Roanoke Island 1850," Census of 1850, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

² "Historic Latta Plantation," Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation Council, www.lattaplantation.org, 11/21/05.

³ 1860 census, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

Except for one “carpenter,” the wealthiest men, including Etheridge, listed their occupation as “farmer.”

Like most Bankers, John supported his family in many ways. Despite his listed occupation as “farmer,” most of his income came from commercial fishing. Using his schooner, *Syntax*, he caught fish and other seafood and sold it to many buyers from Norfolk to the local hotels. An 1876 advertisement for the Nag’s Head Hotel promoted the “fresh catch” provided by Rogers & Etheridge.⁴ In 1880, Rogers & Etheridge “did a business of some seventy-five thousand dollars in one year.”⁵ Etheridge owned land on the beaches, sound, and marshlands of the Banks.⁶ In 1850, just two years after the Bodie Island Lighthouse, which marked the entrance of Oregon Inlet, was finished John B. was appointed keeper. Lighthouse keeper was a prominent and relatively high-paying position, one of the only federal jobs in the area before the Life-Saving Service. During the Civil War, Confederate troops fleeing from Union forces destroyed the structure. The U.S. government decided to rebuild the lighthouse about a mile north of Oregon Inlet. They purchased the fifteen acre site from John B. Etheridge for \$150 on 16 May 1871.⁷ All in all, then, Richard Etheridge was born into a prominent and relatively wealthy household, though as a slave.

⁴ *Elizabeth Economist*. 13 September 1876, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

⁵ L. Branson, ed., *North Carolina Business Directory*, 1880, North Carolina State Library, Raleigh, NC.

⁶ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.

⁷ Currituck County Record of Deeds, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.



Local fishermen with the daily catch. (North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill)⁸

Richard Etheridge's upbringing was deeply influenced by the unique nature of the Outer Banks and of his owner's household. His mother, Rachel Dough, belonged to another local slave owner.⁹ Typically, the child of a female slave belonged to her owner. However, there is no record of his being sold or deeded from the household of his mother, indicating that Richard was born as the property of John B. Etheridge. Some plantation slaves had little contact with their slave owners and their families. Richard and his owner had an unusually good relationship; local rumor held that John may have been his father. Sarah Ward, John's daughter, later testified that Richard was "born at her

⁸ Rodney Barfield, *Seasoned by Salt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 27.

⁹ Zoby and Wright claim Warren Dough was the slave owner of Rachel Dough, however he died one year after Richard was born. His will does not indicate to whom she was sold. In the 1850 Census only sex and age of the slaves are given. According to her birth date given on her grave stone, Rachel would have been 45 in 1850. There are only two slave owners, Solomon Ashbee and Peggy Etheridge (distant relation to John B. Etheridge), with a 45-year old female listed as property.

father's home" and "raised as a member and one of the family."¹⁰ Her brother, Jesse Etheridge, testified that Richard chose to live with John upon his return from the Civil War until he married a year later.¹¹ Also, someone in the family taught Richard to read and write, which was highly unusual. John was literate, but his wife Fanny signed her name with a mark of "X," indicating that she was not. North Carolina made literacy among slaves illegal in 1830, and more strictly enforced the law after 1831 when Nat Turner led a slave revolt resulting in the death of fifty-nine white people just north of the Outer Banks in Southampton, Virginia.¹²

Instead of a farm laborer, whose contact with whites was limited to an overseer, Richard and other slaves of the Outer Banks worked side by side with their masters building boats, piloting them, mending nets, fishing, raking for oysters, and keeping small gardens. This no doubt affected the relations between slaves and other whites and probably led to Richard being "raised as a member and one of the family."¹³ Even after emancipation, this system of both races working side by side continued to ease racial anxieties. Though large portions of blacks' and whites' lives, including school, meals, and communities remained separated until the 1950s, working together lessened the racial strife and violence that were common elsewhere in the former slave-owning areas in the South.

¹⁰ Pension Application of Richard Etheridge, Military Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² North Carolina State Law, 1830, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

¹³ Pension Application of Richard Etheridge, Military Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.



An integrated fishing hut near Cape Lookout, ca. 1885. (From George Brown Goode, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industry of the United States, 1884-1887*)¹⁴

Working as he did, Richard Etheridge grew up learning about the tides, weather systems, and shore life. As early as four years old, he witnessed the wrath of storms. In 1846, a hurricane forced the ocean through the barrier island, creating two new inlets. One cut through Bodie Island, near the Etheridge home, which created Oregon Inlet. The other was Hatteras Inlet, both still vital to the Outer Banks today. While working on his owner's boats, Richard learned the ocean and the surf.

Due to the isolation of the Bankers, many were indifferent about the coming war. In August 1861, many were forced to choose sides as Major General Benjamin Butler led Union forces who took and occupied Fort Hatteras and Fort Clark on the Banks. Before the Confederate soldiers fled to Roanoke Island, they used black powder to destroy the

¹⁴ Rodney Barfield, *Seasoned by Salt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 63.

Bodie Island lighthouse.¹⁵ In February of 1862, the Burnside Expedition captured Roanoke Island, pushing the Confederates inland and making the Outer Banks Union territory. Freed and escaped slaves fled across the Pamlico Sound to the safety of the islands. Though the local whites could not have been pleased with the blockades put on shipping or the hundreds of freed men, women, and children pouring into the area, they did not revolt. The Etheridge family was split on their loyalties. Many Bankers, including John B. Etheridge and his brother Adam, took the Union oath of allegiance.¹⁶ However, his other brother Tart had three sons join the Confederate ranks. Few white Bankers joined the Union army, most likely signed the Union oath just to resume their businesses and lives.

Military service was the most obvious way for former slaves to combat the peculiar institution of slavery. The black population of Roanoke Island was ready to fight. The Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina, Horace James, reported that “the hardy negroes of Roanoke Island were among the first to answer the country’s call.”¹⁷ Of the 197 African American men living on Roanoke Island, 100 signed up.¹⁸ The recruitment of black soldiers on the Outer Banks began on 19 June 1863 by General

¹⁵ *Bodie Island Lighthouse: Historic Structure Report*, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, National Park Service, 2004, 10.

¹⁶ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 53.

¹⁷ Horace James, “Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina,” (Boston: W.F. Brown & Co., 1864). Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 55 attributed this quote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

E. A. Wild.¹⁹ Etheridge and his longtime friend, Fields Midgett, joined the army together on 28 October 1863.

In the Union army, men who in civilian life occupied the lowest level of the social hierarchy were given responsibilities, awarded leadership positions, and awarded medals. By the end of the war, 186,000 blacks had enlisted in the Union army; some 38,000 died while in the service.²⁰ Many former slaves learned to read and write while in the service. Richard Etheridge was literate before the war; when first mustered in October of 1863, he earned the rank of sergeant in the 36th regiment, Company F.²¹ Fields Midgett received the rank of corporal in the same company.²²

Many of these new soldiers worried about the fate of their families left behind on Roanoke Island. General Edward A. Wild, in charge of raising the “African Brigade,” promised those left on Roanoke Island would be taken care of by the Freedmen’s Bureau. Superintendent of Negro Affairs Horace James agreed that the newly formed freedmen’s colony would serve as “an asylum for the wives and children of soldiers...where the children might be educated, and all, both young and old, be trained for freedom and its responsibilities.”²³ With these promises, General Wild sent the new enlistees of the 36th regiment to New Bern, North Carolina, another Union stronghold on the Carolina coast and the site of a freedmen’s colony. Here, Etheridge and the rest of the 36th received

¹⁹ James, “Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina.”

²⁰ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 198.

²¹ Richard Etheridge, Military Service Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²² Fields Midgett, Military Service Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²³ James, “Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina.”

their physical examinations.²⁴ To conduct the training of the new troops, Wild chose Lieutenant Colonel James C. Beecher, half brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe. On 15 June 1863 Beecher wrote his fiancé:

I am amazed at the promptitude of these men to learn military drill and in less than three weeks I shall have a battalion which any man might be proud of. There is an amount of muscle which no regiment in the service can boast of ... I think the government can't frown at a regiment-enlisted, organized-uniformed-armed-equipped and handsomely encamped in six weeks ... I wish doubtful people at home could see my three week's regiment. They would talk less nonsense about negro inferiority.²⁵

It seemed at least some of those who had a good deal of exposure to the black soldiers were confident in their abilities.

From New Bern, most of the 36th regiment, with the exception of Company H which followed Wild to Folly's Island, South Carolina, was sent to Portsmouth, Virginia, where they stayed until December 1863.²⁶ Under the command of Colonel Alonzo Draper, the remaining 36th dug trenches at Fort Monroe on the James River. Draper was an active abolitionist and believed in his troops' abilities in battle. Before the war, Draper studied law in Massachusetts and edited the *New England Mechanic*.²⁷ When his troops were not laboring, Draper drilled and prepared these men for battle. However, morale was low considering their pay was less than that of the white troops, and they

²⁴ Richard Etheridge, Military Service Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²⁵ Colonel Beecher to Frances Johnson, (accessed 26 September 2005); available from www.rootsweb.com/~ncusct/beecher.htm; Internet. Original Source: Frances Johnson, *New England Magazine*, XVII, January 1898, 533-543.

²⁶ Regimental Descriptive Book, Thirty-sixth USCT, Records of the USCT, Records of Adjutant General's Office, RG 94, National Archives, Washington D.C. All information about given orders and movement of the regiment or company are found in the Descriptive Book and Etheridge's military service records.

²⁷ Draper, Thomas Wain-Morgan, *Drapers in America*, (New York: John Polhemus Printing Co., 1892).

lacked proper equipment and supplies.²⁸ Two events in November helped improve the situation. First, General Wild returned from South Carolina. Second, Benjamin Butler was appointed commander of the Department of Virginia and North Carolina.²⁹

Benjamin Butler, a Democrat before the war, denounced slavery. When war broke out, he joined the Republican Party and was appointed brigadier general in the Massachusetts militia. In summer of 1861, Lincoln promoted Butler to Major General and sent him to command Fort Monroe, VA. Butler refused to return runaway slaves when they arrived at the fort. In a conversation with President Lincoln, Butler suggested taking troops by ship to the South, then “gathering up negroes, who could ... defend themselves and aid the rest of the army in case of rebel charges upon it.”³⁰ Butler served as military governor of New Orleans in 1862 and witnessed the successes of the black troops of the Louisiana Native Guard. Confederate President Jefferson Davis denounced Butler as “a felon, deserving capital punishment ... a common enemy of mankind.”³¹ Butler endorsed the use of black troops to fight the Confederacy. Now the black troops had leadership that believed in their fighting capabilities.

In February 1864, the 36th regiment of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), including Etheridge and Midgett, was sent to Point Lookout, Maryland. Lying between

²⁸ Evidence of this lack of pay can be found in many letters from soldiers. Charles Jones of the 35th regiment to Freedmen’s Bureau, *Concerning Back Pay*, 27 December 1870, www.rootsweb.com/~ncusct/letter5.htm. More letters found in Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *The Black Military Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University press, 1982), 730.

²⁹ Benjamin Butler, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, (Boston: A.M. Thayer, 1892). All information on Butler is from this source unless otherwise noted.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jefferson Davis, “By the President of the Confederate States: A Proclamation,” 23 Dec 1862, reprinted on <<http://www.civilwarhome.com/davisbutlerproclamation.htm>> 9/25/05. Also found in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compendium of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901).

Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River, Point Lookout is in St. Mary's County, the southernmost tip of Maryland. This former summer resort served as a hospital and a prisoner-of-war camp, holding more than 15,000 Confederates.³² Etheridge and his fellow soldiers guarded Confederate soldiers, some of whom were former slave owners, men who had treated them as chattel property. These black soldiers were not watching others decide their fate; they were active participants in the fight for their race. The 36th continued to guard the prisoners through June of 1864. However, before they moved out of the area, they would see action.

On May 11, Company F, among others, was sent out to the countryside along the Rappahannock River. There, the men disabled "Confederate torpedoes," or land mines. As they worked their way up the river, they met Confederate irregulars; on June 17, the black soldiers traded gunfire with the Confederates. The soldiers of the USCT held their ground. When the smoke cleared, Draper and his men headed back to Point Lookout with 600 freedpeople, 375 head of cattle, 160 horses and mules, and supplies confiscated from Confederates.³³ Of the mission, Draper wrote, "[T]he gallantry of the colored troops on this occasion could not be excelled. They were as steady under fire and as accurate in their movements as if they were on drill."³⁴ Though a small skirmish, the black soldiers proved their worth, at least to Draper, with their performance.

In July, the 36th regiment proceeded to Deep Bottom, Virginia to report to General Butler. For one month, the soldiers trained under General Charles Jackson Paine at

³² Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 79.

³³ Regimental Descriptive Book, Thirty-sixth USCT, Records of the USCT, Records of Adjutant General's Office, RG 94, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³⁴ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 88.

Bermuda Hundred. All companies of the 36th received marching orders and proceeded to the trenches of Petersburg, Virginia. There, soldiers remained under fire for an entire month. The front lines, while always a dangerous position, were especially hazardous for the men of the colored troops. Confederate soldiers specifically targeted the black soldiers. While in the trenches of Petersburg, thirteen men of the 36th lost their lives, eight from Company F, under Etheridge. One of the fallen, Lawrence Midgett of Roanoke Island, was a corporal in Company F and, though not related, a close friend of Fields Midgett. This was only the beginning of the losses of this regiment.

Near the end of September, the 36th received orders to march toward New Market Heights, Virginia, to take part in an assault. Richard Etheridge came out unscathed, though not all his unit members were so lucky. Though the mission was a success, the Second Brigade of the Third Division, Eighteenth Army Corps, of which the 36th regiment formed a part, lost twenty-two men and had five officers and 102 men wounded. One of the wounded, Sergeant Miles James, Company B of the 36th, lost his left arm. Despite this, he did not wish to return home. General Draper wrote the following letter on his behalf:

Sergeant Miles James, Co. B, 36th U.S.C.T. writes me from your hospital to urge that he be permitted to remain in the service ... If it be possible, I would most respectfully urge that his request be granted. He was made a Sergeant and awarded a silver medal by Major General Benjamin Butler, for gallant conduct. He is one of the bravest men I ever saw; and is in every respect a model soldier. He is worth more with a single arm, than half a dozen ordinary men. Being a Sergeant he will have very little occasion as a file closer to use a musket. He could be a Sergeant of my Provost Guard, and could do filly [sic] duties in many ways. If Consistent with your views of duty, I would be greatly obliged if you can make it convenient for him to return to his Regiment.³⁵

³⁵ Miles James, Military Service Record, National Archives, Washington D.C.

James was returned to the regiment and served for another year. Draper genuinely believed in the men of the colored regiments. Serving under him, these black men, including Etheridge, surely gained confidence in themselves and their race.

The 36th regiment garnered other supporters. Thomas Morris Chester, a lawyer, editor, and former brigade general of the Louisiana state militia, wrote for the *Philadelphia Press*. Chester's mother was an escaped slave. As a correspondent for the war, he often wrote of the USCT. He gave special attention to the 36th regiment, especially after the battle of Petersburg. He wrote, "The 36th is a model regiment and, wherever it has operated, it has been distinguished by the undaunted bravery of the men and the gallantry of its officers." He made a point to draw attention to the black officers like Etheridge. He wrote "in the 36th Regiment there were but three white officers present, the companies being commanded by the colored sergeants ... There is no lack of qualification in these sergeants to command their companies."³⁶

Despite the losses suffered at Petersburg and New Market Heights, the soldiers had no time to grieve. The next day, the Second Brigade moved on to charge Fort Harrison, Chaffin's Farm, Virginia. Ten miles south of Richmond, this was the closest Union troops came to breaking into the Confederate capital, but they were unsuccessful. From October of 1864 until the fall of Richmond in

³⁶ Philadelphia Press, reprinted in Zoby and Wright, 94. Also quoted on the African American Registry, <http://www.aaregisrty.com/african_american_history/660/Lawyer_and_politican_Thomas_Chester.htm>, 6/18/05

April 1865, Company F of the 36th stayed in the field in Virginia without major action.

During this time, William Benson, a black Banker of the 37th regiment, returned to camp from Roanoke Island to report deplorable conditions. Though Etheridge had no wife or children back home, he took it upon himself to report Benson's testimony to the Freedman's Bureau. In his letter, written in May 1865, Etheridge pleaded:

We the soldiers of the 36 U.S. Col Reg Humbly petition to you to alter the affairs at Roanoke Island. We have served faithfully and don [sic] our duty to our Country, for which we thank God (that we had the opportunity) but at the same time our family's [sic] are suffering at Roanoke Island N.C. When we enlisted in the service we were promised that our wives and family's [sic] should receive rations from the government. The rations have been (and are now cut down) to one half the regular ration. Consequently, three or four days out of every ten days, thee [sic] have nothing to eat, at the same time our ration's are stolen from the ration house by Mr. Streeter the Assistant Superintendent of the Island (and others) and sold while our family's are suffering for something to eat...the cause of much suffering is that Captn James has not paid the Colored people for their work ... There are men on the Island that have been wounded ... in the service of the U.S. army, and returned home to Roanoke that cannot get any rations and are not able to work...our familys [sic] have no protection.³⁷

This letter was not just a list of grievances; it was a call for action to ease the sufferings of his community. He asked the Bureau to remove Holland Streeter, a "Copper head" who "takes no care of the colored people and has no sympathy with the colored people." He finished the letter "signed in behalf of humanity."³⁸ As a result of this letter and other

³⁷ Richard Etheridge to General Howard, May or June 1865, Reprinted in *The Black Military Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University press, 1982), 730. All misspellings are in original.

³⁸ This letter is signed by Etheridge and Benson, however both signatures are in the same handwriting. Zoby and Wright contend that Benson was probably illiterate and Etheridge alone penned the letter.

complaints, the Freedmen's Bureau launched an investigation of Streeter. He was found guilty and sentenced to three months of hard labor and a fine of \$500.³⁹

After the Confederate surrender, the 36th regiment finished its three years of service in Brazos Santiago, Texas.⁴⁰ Many regiments of the USCT saw garrison duty in this area of southern Texas. The 36th arrived in June 1865. The U.S. built up troops along the Mexican border to monitor French operations in Mexico. While in Brazos Santiago, Lt. Colonel William Hart recommended Etheridge receive a promotion to Regimental Commissary Sergeant. In this position, Etheridge performed quartermaster duties for the entire regiment.⁴¹ They were mustered out on 28 October 1866, but did not return to the Banks for another month.

The military provided black soldiers, including Richard Etheridge, with many new opportunities. Throughout his time in Virginia, Sergeant Etheridge was sent by his commanding officer, Alonzo Draper, to the countryside to recruit prospective soldiers from among the slaves. Fields Midgett recalled during the war he and Etheridge were together "all the time, except the short intervals of time that the soldier Richard Etheridge was out on detail with recruiting officers."⁴² He watched over Confederate prisoners and saw the harshness of war. In war, he came in contact with white men who believed in his capabilities, not as a Negro, but as a human being. The responsibility given to Etheridge and other soldiers of the United States Colored Troops gave them confidence to act as

³⁹ Court Martial, MM-2836, Holland Streeter, Court martial case files, Office of Judge Advocate General, Box 1238, 24 July 1865, RG 153 National Archives, Washington D.C. More details of Streeter's trial found in Chapter One.

⁴⁰ Pension applications of Richard Etheridge and Fields Midgett, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴¹ Richard Etheridge, Military Service Records, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴² Ibid.

leaders of their race. In the army, Etheridge also learned to keep records and reports, give orders, and exercise restraint, all skills that contributed to his later appointment and performance as keeper in the Life-Saving Service.

With the Freedmen's Bureau disbanded, the colony on Roanoke Island slowly disappeared. The assassination of President Lincoln left Andrew Johnson to oversee restructuring the country. Presidential Reconstruction, as it has been labeled, required ex-Confederates to merely sign an oath of allegiance to the United States and show proof of ownership to claim abandoned lands. The land on the north end of Roanoke Island that was once the colony was returned to the pre-war owners. Rations stopped and freedmen were shipped to places like New Bern, where they could work on farms. By 1870, three hundred African Americans remained on the island, far from the peak of 3,500, but one hundred more than before the war.⁴³

Upon his return to Roanoke Island, Richard Etheridge embraced his role as a leader of the community. Along with other native blacks and some colonists, he signed a petition to the Freedmen's Bureau asking allowance for African Americans to remain on the island, even though he decided to live in the household of his former master, John B. Etheridge.⁴⁴ Richard remained in the home of his former owner until May 1870 when he married Frances Aydlett, whose husband had died one year earlier. They saw the birth of their first child, Onieda, the same year.⁴⁵ In 1873, the couple purchased land on the sound side of the island. The widow Sarah Mott sold the Etheridges two plots, together

⁴³ Click, *Time Full of Trial*, 197.

⁴⁴ December 1867 Petition, Letters Received, Headquarters, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for North Carolina, RG 105, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴⁵ Testimonies in Pension applications name Richard's daughters as Onieda, 32, and Maggie, 21, (in 1902), but the head stones in the Etheridge cemetery include only one daughter by the name of Lurena.

totaling 116 acres.⁴⁶ The Mott family was relatively new to the Roanoke Island area. The 1870 Census showed Sarah, her husband Willett, and two adult children were all born in New York and were quite wealthy. Most families, white or black, listed “value in real estate” and “value in personal estate” under the father/husband’s name only. Willett Mott, a “farmer,” was the only one with real estate totaling \$500, and his personal estate was \$3,000. However, Sarah, whose occupation was “keeping house,” had a \$3,000 personal estate of her own. Their 27-year-old son was a sailor and claimed a \$700 personal estate and their daughter, 29, listed as being “at home” claimed \$150. By 1873, Willett was deceased and Sarah was in debt to J.W. Etheridge.⁴⁷ She not only sold land to Richard, but also to another black islander, Dempsey Baum.⁴⁸ Land on the Croatan Sound was perfect for fishermen and for small scale farming. Owning land put Richard in a position to invest in the black community.

His military service and literacy gave him status in the community and Richard stood out as a leader among the black population of Roanoke Island. In 1868, a group of eleven black families purchased a tract of land on Roanoke Island from the heirs of Thomas Dough. Richard Etheridge served as “witness to the forging and proved the signatures of the parties.”⁴⁹ An illiterate former slave, Manuel Etheridge, wanted to collect a pension for his son, William Etheridge, who served in the 36th regiment with

⁴⁶ Dare County Book of Orders and Decrees, 1871-1909, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC. Pension Application of Richard Etheridge showed at the time of his death he owned 105 acres.

⁴⁷ Dare County Clerk of Superior Court Minute Docket, 1870-1895, p31, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC

⁴⁸ Record of Deeds, Dare County, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC. Dempsey Baum was one of the four trustees of the Missionary Baptist Colored Church along with Richard.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Richard and had been killed during the battle of New Market, Virginia in 1864. Richard filled out the appropriate papers for Manuel and on 27 April 1871 accompanied him to Norfolk, Virginia, to testify he knew Manuel as William's father and that he knew this because they "were raised in the same neighborhood." William's mother, Sarah was a slave of John B. Etheridge and died in 1869, therefore Manuel received the pension.⁵⁰ By May 1873, Manuel purchased land on Roanoke Island from S.A. Baum, perhaps with his son's pension. In April 1873, Richard sold land to freedpeople John and Eliza Meekins, setting up a way for them to pay over time.⁵¹

Beginning 8 May 1875, Richard Etheridge is listed in the attendance of meetings of the Board of County Commissioners along with J.W. Etheridge, future district superintendent of the L.S.S., and Erasmus Midgett and M.L. Midgett, keepers. In October 1875, a note scribbled on the side of the minutes said Richard Etheridge paid this day. This could be referring to dues to be a member. The Board's minutes show they discussed schools, taxes, and juries for the Superior Court. In 1875, thirty-six names were chosen for the jury, including Field Midgett, Richard's longtime friend and war buddy, John Meekins, to whom he sold land, and Noah Simmons, to whom he would sell land in August 1878.⁵² Also, Richard Etheridge became one of four trustees of the Missionary Baptist Colored Church. The church dated back to the Freedman's Colony, but when lands confiscated by the Union were returned to former owners, the church was

⁵⁰ Pension Application of William Etheridge, National Archives, Washington, D.C. It is possible that Manuel Etheridge was also a slave of John B. Etheridge. In 1860 he owned a 20 and two 18 year old males.

⁵¹Dare County Record of Deeds, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁵² Minutes of Board of County Commissioners, 1870-1915, Vol. A, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC. Since the list of jurors does not designate race, there is no way to know how many, if any, of the other thirty-six were black.

on the land of John B. Etheridge. On 10 June 1879 John B. Etheridge sold the land for a sum of five dollars to the four trustees of the church.⁵³

Richard made his living in many ways, as most Bankers did. Foremost, he was a fisherman. Depending on storms and the shad season, this life was always uncertain; therefore federal jobs, such as lighthouse keeper or postmaster, were highly coveted on the Banks. In 1874, new job opportunities came to the coast.

The L.S.S. built seven stations along the coast of the Outer Banks in 1874. The stations at Jones Hill, Caffey's Inlet, Kitty Hawk, Nags Head, Oregon Inlet, Chicamacomico, and Little Kinnakeet were located fifteen miles apart, and operated December through March. The keeper and his six crewmen alternated patrolling the beach in four hour shifts, meeting a surfman from the next station, and exchanging a badge to prove they had completed their walk. The first district superintendent, Charles Guirkin, held the positions of town commissioner and postmaster before his appointment in the L.S.S. One year after the service arrived in the Outer Banks, Superintendent Kimball appointed a commission to inspect the new stations to ensure they were performing to his standards. Along with four keepers and eleven surfmen, Guirkin was dismissed for inadequate knowledge and/or skill. John Guthrie, a Civil War veteran, took his place. Still conditions did not improve and many wrecks ended in tragedy.

The positions in the L.S.S. were very important in the newly formed Dare County. Unlike the neighboring counties, Dare was divided nearly evenly among Democrats and Republicans. During the tumultuous time of Reconstruction, the recently enfranchised black population could determine the outcome of elections. The L.S.S. positions were one way these politicians could popularize their name and gather support. Positions

⁵³ Dare County Record of Deeds, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

could be used to promote a political party and hire those loyal to it. In 1874, John B. Etheridge served as the sole representative from Dare County to the North Carolina House of Representatives. Edward Drinkwater, keeper of the Bodie Island station, served as the chairman of the Republican County Convention of 1876. Nominations from this convention included Marcus Midgett for sheriff and J.W. Etheridge for registrar of deeds. Later Midgett would be appointed keeper of the Oregon Inlet station and J.W. Etheridge was appointed district superintendent in 1878.⁵⁴

Edward Drinkwater served in the Union navy during the war and was a respected keeper. He hired five black men in his five years as keeper at Bodie Island. In 1875, he hired Richard Etheridge to serve as the number six surfman at his station. Though Etheridge was known as a skilled waterman and highly-respected in the black community, other factors may have helped him obtain this position. Drinkwater's wife was John B. Etheridge's niece. Despite his possible nepotism, Drinkwater hired respectable crews. Of the five African-Americans he hired, four served for more than a decade, three were civil war veterans, and two later served as keeper at Pea Island.

Superintendent Kimball realized early on one of the main problems was appointing competent keepers. Malachi Corbell, keeper of the Caffey's Inlet station, was a capable surfman and was, in fact, awarded a silver lifesaving medal in 1875. However, he hired incompetent surfmen due to political motivations and was caught "using government appropriations for political gain."⁵⁵ In 1879, Assistant Inspector Shoemaker found five of the eighteen keepers in the district were incapable and two were

⁵⁴ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 143.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 145.

“imbeciles.”⁵⁶ Many left the station for days at a time to fish during shad season or to hunt waterfowl. The four disasters of the *Nuova Ottavia*, *U.S.S. Huron*, *Metropolis*, and *M&E Henderson* from 1876 to 1879 further disappointed Kimball in District Six and demonstrated the need for its reform.

When 98 of the 132 crew members aboard the *Huron* drowned in November, 1877, the L.S.S. stations of the Outer Banks saw criticism.⁵⁷ Although the Nags Head station was less than two miles away, there was no help from the Lifesaving Service because the operating season did not begin for another two weeks.

To add to the heat on the service, two months later, lifesavers from the Jones Hill station responded to the wreck of the *Metropolis*, but poor leadership and decision-making led to no assistance for the crew. Only 50 of the 248 crewman were able to swim to shore.⁵⁸ When Congress threatened to fold the L.S.S. into the Navy, Superintendent Sumner Kimball vowed to improve the operations of the service.⁵⁹

To begin improvements, on June 18, 1878 Congress passed H.R. 3988, making the Life-Saving Service an autonomous agency, under the Department of Treasury. It created eleven new stations along the Outer Banks, making them only six miles apart. This bill also included extension of the season from September to April and doubled the keeper’s salary to \$400 annually.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 162.

⁵⁷ *New York Herald*, 29 November 1877, Scrapbook of L.S.S., RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁵⁸ David Stick, *Graveyard of the Atlantic: Shipwrecks of the North Carolina Coast*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 99.

⁵⁹ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 161.

When the lack of rescue to the schooner *M&E Henderson* proved to be the fault of yet another negligent keeper, Kimball was fed up. On 30 November 1879, the ship had wrecked off the coast of Pea Island. The L.S.S. response had been inadequate; an investigation found fault with the negligent keeper and some crew members of the Pea Island (No. 17) station. The number one surfman, Leonidas Tillet, had failed to spot the stranded vessel on his beach walk. The keeper, George C. Daniels, had lied under oath about his actions during the tardy rescue attempt. L.S.S. Assistant Inspector Charles F. Shoemaker had blamed the questionable performance of the Pea Island station on inexperienced, unskilled, and/or unfit surfmen hired not on merit but for political reasons. He recommended dismissing Keeper Daniels and Surfman Leonidas Tillett. He wrote Superintendent Kimball recommending that the black No.6 surfman of the Bodie Island crew, Richard Etheridge, be sent to Pea Island as the new keeper.⁶¹

Richard Etheridge was a worthy candidate for this position. From his childhood, he was literate and knew the coastline of the Outer Banks. He had ties to one of the most prominent families in the area. As a former officer during the Civil War he had learned discipline, respect, and restraint. After his service, he had returned to become a respected member of the community among both races. He was a leader. Except for his color, Richard Etheridge seemed to be the ideal choice for keeper in a service that desperately needed knowledgeable, dedicated leaders. He proved himself to be a worthy keeper at the Pea Island station.

⁶⁰ The Life-Saving Act of 1878, reprinted in “Revised Regulations for the government of the Life-Saving Service of the United States, and the laws upon which they are based,” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1884).

⁶¹ Nominations of Life-Saving Service Keepers, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PEA ISLAND STATION: LIFE IN THE SERVICE

Though Richard Etheridge's skills and knowledge made him a qualified candidate, they do not explain *why* he was appointed. There were many capable black surfman on the Outer Banks and seven United States Colored Troops (USCT) veterans had served at Pea Island, yet none had ever been appointed keeper, and few African Americans were hired at all. Were the L.S.S. Inspectors truly color-blind? Were they trying to make a point? Or did they desire racial segregation—a growing trend in the South—for their previously integrated service? Was this segregation an attempt to keep black lifesavers in the Service? These questions may never be answered absolutely, but this chapter will argue that segregation of the L.S.S. was not an accident, but rather served several purposes. The choice of Richard Etheridge for keeper may have caused some initial tension in the Outer Banks community and within the L.S.S. but, as this chapter will show, the choice proved to be respectable. Etheridge was a first-rate keeper; he began a legacy of the Pea Island station being an aspiration for black male Bankers and a worthy station with fine crews.

In November 1879, the wreck *M & S Henderson* cost the lives of four crew members. The schooner, carrying phosphate rock, left Bull River, South Carolina for Baltimore, Maryland. The Annual Report noted “the unintelligible English spoken by the three survivors made it impossible for the life-saving crew to obtain from them any explanation of the disaster,” and failed to mention the negligence of the life-saving crew. Regardless of the initial cause of the wreck, Assistant Inspector Charles Shoemaker found the slow response was the fault of the keeper and his number one surfman.

Assistant Inspector Charles Shoemaker recommended dismissing both men and appointing a new keeper, Richard Etheridge.¹

According to the L.S.S. 1876 Annual Report, a keeper had the responsibilities to “care and [keep] order of the stations and boats ... keep accounts, journalize all transactions, and maintain all necessary correspondence with their superior officers ... The certain degree of education, and the high integrity and accountability involved in these requirements, are but a part of the demand made upon them.”² The L.S.S. also required keepers “to be expert and valiant seamen [who] are selected on account of their known intrepidity in danger, and their skill in managing boats under the most trying circumstances. As captains of their respected crews, they must also be good commanders.”³

The ultimate decision to appoint Richard Etheridge had to come from Superintendent of the Life-Saving Service, Sumner Kimball, though it is clear the choice did not originate with him. Frank Newcomb held the position of Assistant Inspector, stationed in the Sixth District and is said to be “the originator of the idea [to appoint Etheridge].”⁴ Lieutenant Charles Shoemaker, listed as an assistant inspector “on special duty” Washington, D.C., served as the recorder of the Board for the Examination of

¹ Nominations of Life-Saving Service Keepers, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C. The last pages of this correspondence, from Assistant Inspector Charles Shoemaker to Superintendent Sumner Kimball, are Shoemaker’s recommendations. These were also sent enclosed in orders from Superintendent Kimball to Assistant Inspector Frank Newcomb, assigned to the Sixth District.

² Annual Report of Operation of the United States Life-Saving Service for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1876, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876).

³ Annual Report of Operation of the United States Life-Saving Service for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1876, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876).

⁴ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 166.

Plans, Devices, and Inventions.⁵ He was assigned to investigate the wreck of the *M & E Henderson*, though it is not clear why. Inspector Charles Shoemaker insisted on the appointment of Richard Etheridge.

Shoemaker recommended “Richard Etheridge, colored, now No. 6 surfman in the station No. 16 [to be keeper of station No. 17]. I examined this man and found him to be thirty eight years of age, strong robust physique, intelligent, and able to read and write ... He is represented as one of the best surfman on this part of the coast of North Carolina.” Shoemaker also recommended “that his crew be composed of colored men” already in the Service.⁶ He was “convinced that the efficiency of the service at this station will be greatly enhanced.”⁷ He claimed “the same views with my own are held by the Assistant Inspector of the 6th District,” which was Newcomb. However, this letter from Shoemaker to Kimball was forwarded to Newcomb and is written in a way that Newcomb may have had little to do with the recommendation.

Inspector Newcomb had a good reputation as fair-minded. In June 1879, just six months before Etheridge’s appointment, the editor of the *Wilmington Post* wrote “the selection [of Newcomb for Inspector] was very wise and judicious, and the Superintendent of the Life Saving Service of the United States has shown himself as excellent judge of character ... the Lieutenant is making a favorable impression.”⁸

⁵ Annual Report of Operation of the United States Life-Saving Service for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1879, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1879).

⁶ Shoemaker to Kimball, 21 January 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

⁷Ibid.

⁸ Life-Saving Service Scrapbook, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C

The recommendation of Etheridge for keeper may have originated with Newcomb, but on 21 January, Kimball wrote to Newcomb that “Shoemaker [is] sick ... can’t tell what I will do with Station seventeen [Pea Island] until I confer with him.”⁹ Obviously, Shoemaker’s opinion weighed heavily on Kimball’s decision. On 28 January 1880, Kimball wrote to Newcomb that Shoemaker recommended removal of George C. Daniel and replacing him with Richard Etheridge. Kimball, agreeing, wrote that Newcomb, “in conference with [District] Superintendent [J.W.] Etheridge, [is] directed to carry into effect, if it is practicable to do so.” He continued, “In carrying out these instructions, it is to be understood that the wishes of the Keepers of the respective stations in relation to the choice of men for their crews are to be consulted and no person will be forced upon them ... Should any of the men, it is proposed to transfer, decline to be exchanged on the grounds that they were engaged to serve at particular stations, you [Newcomb] will give them the option of the transfer or being discharged.”¹⁰

Etheridge’s appointment was unusual; inspectors typically did not choose or even recommend a new keeper. The Regulations of the Life-Saving Service outlines the normal procedures:

Whenever a vacancy shall occur among the keepers, the most competent member of that or of one of the adjacent station crews will be selected to fill the vacancy, unless the selection of some other person would be for the advantage and welfare of the Service, in which case the district superintendent will fully and specifically set forth such advantage in his letter transmitting the nomination to the General Superintendent.¹¹

⁹ Kimball to Newcomb, 21 January 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹⁰ Kimball to Newcomb, 28 January 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹¹ “Revised Regulations for the government of the Life-Saving Service of the United States and the laws upon which they are based,” Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1884.

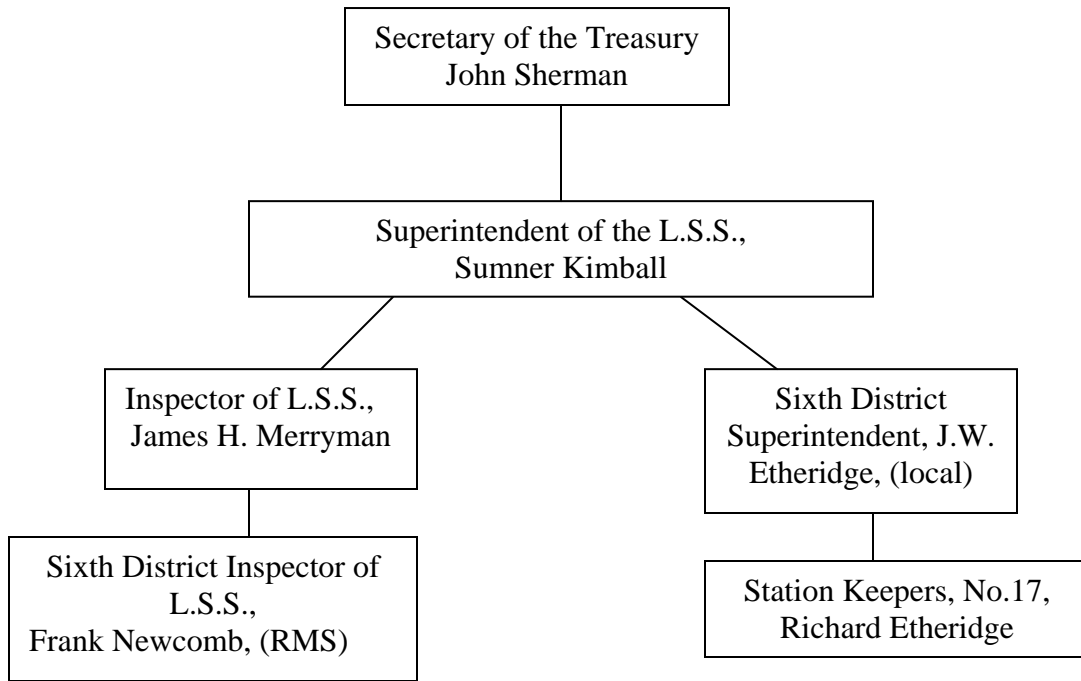


Figure 3.1 Hierarchy of L.S.S.—1880.

Inspectors are not mentioned as having a role in recommending a new keeper. According to these guidelines five white men of the Pea Island station, five of Bodie Island station, and seven of the Chicamacomico station held a higher rank than Etheridge and thus stood in line in front of him. Yet none of these men seemed to be taken into account. One of these men, the number one surfman at Bodie Island, Adam Etheridge, was the nephew of John B. Etheridge and had expressed his desire to become a keeper.¹² The next surfman in line of the Pea Island crew was his brother, Jesse B. Etheridge. Both of these men probably grew up knowing Richard as a family slave. So, Richard Etheridge may have fallen into the “other person” category. His appointment may have been “for the advantage and welfare of the Service.” If this was the case, the task of “set[ting] forth such advantages” would fall to the district superintendent, J.W. Etheridge.

¹² Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 169.

This would seem promising for Richard since J.W. Etheridge and John B. Etheridge were distantly related and had done business together many times.¹³ J.W. may have known Richard Etheridge, even from boyhood. J.W. Etheridge had served as an officer in the Union army, ran for public office in 1865 on the platform of “negro suffrage,” and had been scorned by Conservatives for his “negrophilia.”¹⁴ However, when Richard’s name was considered for the position, he rejected the suggestion. He felt that appointing a black man to a high-ranking position in one of the most coveted jobs in the area could have negative consequences. When reporting the burning of Station 17, he wrote, “My judgment has been against colored keepers and crews entirely.”¹⁵

Regardless of his disapproving, he traveled to Bodie Island on 1 February 1880 to take Richard Etheridge to the Pea Island station. The Bodie Island station log showed Richard patrolled the shoreline from 10:00 pm to 2:00 am on 31 January, but 1 February J.W. Etheridge took Richard to Pea Island. The Bodie Island log read “R. Etheridge absent to take the oath of office and take charge of station 17.”¹⁶ Richard was chosen by a federal official, over the wishes of the local superintendent. This was probably not a popular decision with locals, who nonetheless carried out the orders.

Upon Etheridge’s arrival the remaining white crew of Pea Island left for Manteo. Most secondary literature holds that these white surfmen refused to suffer the indignity of

¹³ The two names appear frequently in the Records and Deeds Books of Dare Co., Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

¹⁴ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 170-171.

¹⁵ J.W. Etheridge to Sumner Kimball, 2 June 1880, Letters Received, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

¹⁶ Bodie Island Station Log, 1 February 1880 RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

serving under a black keeper.¹⁷ However, in Inspector Shoemaker's report, in which he recommended Etheridge become keeper, he also recommended "that this crew [at Pea Island] be composed of colored men, four to be drawn from the number of colored surfmen now in stations: two from No. 10 [Caffey's Inlet], two already at No. 17 [Pea Island], and that he be directed to select two others to complete his crew."¹⁸ Though "checkerboard" crews had existed along the Outer Banks, by 1880 only six black surfmen remained, and all had been hired during the Reconstruction years by Republican keepers. Of those keepers who tolerated their checkerboard crews, like Marcus Midgett, who inherited two black surfmen including Richard Etheridge at the Bodie Island Station and Malachi Corbell of Caffey's Inlet, none had hired any black men in years. As Shoemaker recommended, four black surfmen of the Sixth district were transferred to the station, and Etheridge hired two fishermen from Roanoke Island to complete the all-black crew. The other black surfman, Joseph Case of Caffey's Inlet, refused to transfer and was dismissed.

The reaction of the community that J.W. Etheridge feared was not immediate and not extensive. Dare County had no newspaper and there is little evidence of dissatisfaction with this decision in other editorials or in print. In fact, one of the few editorials in the nearby *Elizabeth Economist* that mentioned the decision praised Inspector Newcomb. On 11 May 1880 the paper's editor wrote, "[W]e don't know whether he [Inspector Newcomb] be republican, radical or democrat, but this we do know, he is a courteous gentleman ... and from [what] we learn, makes his appointments without reference to political or racial complexion. If what our friends in Dare tell us to

¹⁷ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 174.

¹⁸ Nomination of Keepers, Sixth District, RG 26 National Archives, Washington D.C.

be correct.”¹⁹ The Life-Saving Service prided itself on being non-partisan and made many efforts to rid its crews of politically-motivated appointments and nepotism. After the disasters of the *Huron* and *Metropolis*, the Service was under pressure and threatened with its loss of independence. J.H. Merryman, RMS officer and chief inspector of the Board of Examining Crew of L.S.S., wrote, “The officers and men of the Service are chosen without reference to any other consideration than those of professional fitness and integrity.”²⁰ Merryman wrote this in 1880, the same year Etheridge was appointed. It is entirely possible the L.S.S. wanted to appoint Etheridge to prove its claims of nonpartisanship. The 1878 Annual Report mentioned “In our service we start with the great advantage of crews who are no conscripts to the surf, but skilled in the use of boats with which they are accustomed from boyhood to surmount it.” The Life-Saving Service was one of few government agencies to include African Americans after Reconstruction. This may be due to the fact this organization seemed to hire on merit-based standards, and these men were some of the best.

Not all black surfmen were in favor of serving at the segregated station. On 19 January 1880, before Etheridge’s appointment, Superintendent Sumner Kimball received a letter from Lewis Wescott and Joseph Case, black surfmen of the Caffey’s Inlet station. They “heard it rumored that we are to be transferred from this station [Caffey’s Inlet] to No. 17.” This would “greatly inconvenience us both ... as we will be 40 or 44 miles from our homes while we are now only 3 or 4 miles from our homes.”²¹ However, by 7

¹⁹ Life-Saving Service Scrapbook, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

²⁰ Merryman, J.H., *The United States Life-Saving Service—1880*, (Golden, CO: Outbookes, 1981).

²¹ Joseph Case and Lewis Wescott to Superintendent Sumner Kimball, 18 January 1880, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

February 1880, Lewis Wescott had reported to Pea Island. Case refused his transfer, and Keeper Austin of the Caffey's Inlet station, with the approval of Sumner Kimball, "discharge[d] Case from the service."²² Case did not take this lying down. Kimball received a letter from him charging Inspector Newcomb with playing politics. He was convinced he was discharged "because I was a colored man and a republican." He accused Newcomb of carrying on a "reign of terror" and "tak[ing] all the power from Supt. [J.W.] Etheridge."²³ Though Newcomb was troubled by the charges, he understood the letter was not penned by Case since he knew Case to be illiterate. Newcomb believed not only did Case not write the letter, but also that a group of Republicans had urged him not to accept the transfer. Case never worked for the L.S.S. again.²⁴

Richard's first job as keeper was to form a crew. The Service transferred Lewis Wescott from Caffey's Inlet and William C. Bowser from the Bodie Island station. William Davis and Williams Daniels already served at the No.17 station. Etheridge chose George Midgett and Henry Daniel, watermen from Roanoke Island, to complete the first crew at Pea Island.

As for the fate of the remaining white Pea Island crew, though Shoemaker recommended the discharge of three, only one was discharged. Keeper Daniels had already been dismissed. Kimball transferred Jesse Etheridge and Leonidas Tillett to

²² Caffey's Inlet Station Log, 2-7 February 1880, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

²³William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

²⁴ In 1885, Case was appointed committee member for the Jarvisburg Colored School, Currituck County. Jeanne Meekins Murray, *Histories of Currituck County North Carolina Families*, (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2005), 161.

Caffey's Inlet to replace Joseph Case and Lewis Wescott. Llewellyn Cudworth replaced William Bowser at Bodie Island.²⁵

If the Inspectors did intend to racially segregate the Service, they may have thought they were doing a noble deed for black surfmen, as well as white. Systematic segregation was a relatively new idea and championed by many. Even W.E.B. Du Bois endorsed segregation in some aspects of life.²⁶ When the New Inlet station was built in 1882, Newcomb recommended it too should become a station staffed by black surfmen.²⁷ This recommendation was rejected.

Newcomb returned to Pea Island on 17 February. He drilled the men and found them "on the whole, fully as intelligent and competent to perform their duties, as any crew in this District."²⁸ Before Newcomb departed Lewis Wescott asked for a discharge, stating he was too far from his home and family. However, Keeper Etheridge persuaded him to stay.²⁹

Every day Etheridge drilled the men and prepared them for their duties. The season ended the last day of April without any action, and the crewmembers were sent home until November. All expressed a desire to return the following season.³⁰

In the off-season, Keeper Etheridge frequently visited the station to check the equipment. On 29 May 1880, Etheridge learned his station had burned. The fire

²⁵ Bodie Island Station Log, 6 February 1880, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

²⁶ In 1934, Du Bois resigned from the NAACP because he was unwilling to advocate racial integration in all aspects of life. In business, industry, and other economic situations he argued integration meant exclusion.

²⁷ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 181.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 184.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 190.

³⁰ Pea Island Station Log, 30 April 1880, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

probably quickly consumed the small wooden structure on the windy seashore. By the time the keeper reached the site, little was left. Keeper Etheridge salvaged “the gun and 10-shot and the axles of the boat carriage and hand cart.”³¹ District Superintendent J.W. Etheridge arrived the same day and reported he was “suspicious of some parties [since] this is the station with the colored keeper.”³² He wrote to Kimball, “My judgment has been against colored keepers and colored crews entirely and if every man had gone throu [sic] with what I have and knew what I think I know, they would agree. The keeper of this station was competent but the idea was-He is a negro.”³³ J.W. Etheridge knew his worries had come true. The district superintendent and inspector investigated the incident. They quickly determined it was in fact arson and began interviewing those living in the area.

According to J.W. Etheridge, all the locals interviewed condemned the burning of the station. The only real evidence was footprints left at the sight. Investigation revealed three parties had visited the island that day from Kinnakeet, Chicamacomico, and Roanoke Island. The latter group consisted of George Daniels, the former Pea Island keeper dismissed after the *M & E Henderson* wreck, and two of his surfmen Llewellyn Cudworth and Leonidas Tillett. This was highly suspicious, but the group’s footprints did not match and witnesses testified that they were back on Roanoke Island by the time the fire was set, which investigators determined was between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m. Investigators went back to the three households on Pea Island.

³¹ Letter to Newcomb from Richard Etheridge, 2 June 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

³² Letters Received, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³³ Ibid.

The homes on Pea Island belonged to Jesse Etheridge Sr. (John B.'s brother), Adam Etheridge (John B.'s nephew), and Abraham Twine. Jesse Etheridge donated land to the federal government to build the Pea Island station.³⁴ Upon interviewing Adam, number one surfman at Bodie Island, and his brother Patrick, who had served as a substitute surfman for years without ever getting hired in the L.S.S., Newcomb realized their stories did not match. They both claimed to see the fire that night, but thought it was small, like a "light house would show on a dark night." Both brothers testified they did not know of the fire until the next day.³⁵

The investigators later spoke with Mrs. Christian Payne, who had stayed at Adam Etheridge's house that night to help his sick wife. She claimed to have seen a fire and was worried it may be Jesse Etheridge's home. She asked Patrick where was the fire? He answered that it was not Uncle Jesse's house and she should not worry. She told investigators the fire seemed to be quite large and heard the two brothers comment on its size.³⁶ Other testimony pointed to the guilt of the two brothers. The captain of the *Pecora*, which was docked in Oregon Inlet, testified that the brothers had boarded his ship between 9:00 and 10:00 am on 30 May, the next morning. Two hours before they claimed to know of the burnt station, they had informed the captain about the incident.³⁷

Though none of this evidence proved the men started the fire, the investigators at least held them accountable for failing to act to stop it. Newcomb wrote to Kimball, "Adam Etheridge is surfman No. 1 in Station No. 16, and is an applicant for the position

³⁴ Annual Report of Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service for the fiscal year ending on June 30, 1878, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878.

³⁵ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 194.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 194.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 195.

of keeper ... it would naturally be expected that he would consider it to be his duty to inform the Officers of the District of a case of this kind.”³⁸ It would have taken three hours to reach J.W. Etheridge on Roanoke Island, but no attempt was made. As if this evidence were not enough, Patrick’s shoes matched the footprints found at the site, as did William Clark’s, a guest of Adam Etheridge who stayed there that night. The investigators figured the men, both of whom sought a position in the L.S.S. but with no success, “probably thought that the burning of the station would occasion a change in the Keepership.”³⁹

Since the evidence was circumstantial, the investigators could do little. They offered a reward of \$300 for information leading to the arsonists, but none came to light.⁴⁰ In the final report, District Superintendent J.W. Etheridge and Inspector Newcomb concluded “the inference is, though merely supposition, that Patrick H. Etheridge set the station on fire ... or what is more probable, that William Clark was employed by Patrick to set the station on fire, the object being, to secure the removal of the present colored Keeper.”⁴¹ Upon reading the report, Superintendent Kimball decided not to press charges for lack of evidence and allowed Adam Etheridge to be rehired at Bodie Island the following season. The men did not even receive a slap on the wrist. In fact, two years later Patrick Etheridge was hired at the Big Kinnakeet station, south of Pea Island, and later was approved by both J.W. Etheridge and Kimball to become keeper

³⁸ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 195.

³⁹ Newcomb’s comment on the investigation reprinted in Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 196.

⁴⁰ To Newcomb from Kimball, 9 July 1880, William Francis Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

⁴¹ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 195.

of the Creed's Hill station. Wright and Zoby claim Kimball's actions in this matter were due to the fact he could not afford to lose skilled surfman, especially in the wake of the disasters in the preceding years. However, Joseph Case was an able surfman who was let go rather easily, not to mention the number of African-American men living on Roanoke Island. However, Kimball was not about to hire them in the place of prominent Bankers like Adam Etheridge.

Though this is the only act that showed any dissatisfaction with the new station, none of the community came forward to tell the truth, even when a reward was offered. They may have condemned burning the station, but they did not seek justice for the act. The case was closed, and the only thing left to do was to rebuild the Pea Island station.

The entire crew came back on the first of October 1880. They used the stables as a station. The remote location of Pea Island led to delay in the building of the station. Newcomb spent most of the winter watching over the reconstruction. On 22 January, Keeper Etheridge "received used boat from station No. 16."⁴² The new station was finished 26 January 1881.

On 6 October 1881 the Pea Island crew got its first chance to prove its skills. At 6:00 am, surfman William B. Daniels spotted the *Thomas Lancaster* stranded on the shoals two miles south of New Inlet. New Inlet would not have a L.S.S. station for another year. The *Lancaster* had left Boston bound for Savannah on September 22. The ship's first mate, who was at the helm, was unfamiliar with the Outer Banks and mistook

⁴² Pea Island Station Log, 22 January 1881, National Archives, Morrow GA. If Adam Etheridge did conspire to start the fire, the most he got out of it was a new boat for his crew, giving Pea Island their old one.

the Bodie Island light for the Hatteras light.⁴³ Although the wreck was closer to the Chicamacomico station, Etheridge mustered his men and started to the scene with light supplies including their medicine chest, life belts, and Merriman suits.⁴⁴ The Pea Islanders had to cross New Inlet, an inlet created by a hurricane that was opened one season, closed with piling sand the next. They arrived at 8:30 am to find Keeper L.B. Midgett and his crew attempting to fire a line to the ship. Two of the crew had already jumped ship, attempting to swim to shore. The line could not be secured since the crew that remained aboard the ship were exhausted and injured and failed to grab the line. The fourth shot made it to the ship but again, no one aboard was able to hold on. Etheridge and surfmen of both stations were sent to Chicamacomico to retrieve their lifeboat, but after five hours of trying, the harsh winds kept the exhausted men from reaching the wreckage with the boat. The men did not return to the site until the evening. As night came, bodies began washing ashore. The sea was so rough the surfman were not able to reach the ship until morning. The ship had been stranded for over twenty-four hours, the surfmen had been on the scene exposed to the elements for nearly as long. Six survivors, including the captain's wife and infant child were brought back to shore, but the infant died at the station. Including the infant, the ocean claimed seven lives.⁴⁵ Etheridge

⁴³ Wreck Reports, *Thomas Lancaster*, Chicamacomico Log Book, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁴⁴ A Merriman suit was made of heavy rubber, similar to a wet suit to keep surfmen dry in the cold waters.

⁴⁵ Wreck Reports, *Thomas Lancaster*, Chicamacomico Log Book, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

wrote, “[H]ad the crew [of the *Lancaster*] all remained by the wreck, no life need to have been lost.”⁴⁶

Life as a surfman was not an easy one. On 31 August 1880, Sumner Kimball wrote J.W. Etheridge instructing him to prohibit the carrying of lights by surfman in the Sixth District since vessels had mistaken the lights for lighthouses or beacons, unless the night was so stormy the light was necessary to enable the patrol.⁴⁷ In December 1882, Etheridge received word that the station would receive five dollars a month to keep a horse at the station.⁴⁸ This must have been a relief, since pulling the beach cart and surfboat, both of considerable weight, was done by the seven to eight crew members and sometimes a mule. However, the men were not allowed to ride the horse on their patrol. The Superintendent thought they may ride too fast and miss a distressed ship.⁴⁹

In locations like Pea Island diseases such as malaria threatened the well-being of the surfmen. On the other side of the barrier island, a few miles wide at most, the marshes and swampy waters were home to disease-carrying mosquitoes that threatened the station. Though the connection between mosquitoes and malaria was yet to be made, in April 1886 Etheridge received materials to “close all cracks that will admit of mosquitoes.”⁵⁰ Etheridge reported being sick with malaria, or ague, many times.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Pea Island Station Log, 6-8 October 1881, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA. Details of the wreck are found in Wreck Reports, *Thomas Lancaster*, Chicamacomico Log Book, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁴⁷ Pea Island Station Log, 31 August 1880, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA. It was common for ships to make this mistake on the Outer Banks. Local folklore holds “Nag’s Head” was named when wreckers would tie a lantern around a horse’s neck to fool ships into thinking it was a harbor.

⁴⁸ Correspondence, RG 26, National Archives, Atlanta, GA. These records are now located at College Park, MD.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Pea Island Station Log, 17 April 1886, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

The site of a rescue was challenging for all surfmen. The season lasted from November to April. In these months the Atlantic waters are very cold, often causing hypothermia for shipwreck victims and surfmen. After dragging heavy equipment through the sand for possibly many miles, the crew had to work efficiently and in an organized manner to set up equipment. Wasted time or disobedience could cost lives. Even if the surfman made it through the cold waters to the wreck, the sailors could not always help themselves. Wright and Zoby point out the “twisted” logic of many superstitious sailors of the day who believed it was bad luck to learn to swim, making the rescue considerably more difficult.⁵²

Lifesaving was not the only responsibility of the surfman. They were hired men of the government and the government asked them to perform any needed duties. Someone was sent to Manteo once or twice a week to retrieve the mail. On 19 March 1885 Etheridge reported “the crew engaged working on the telegraph line,” that had fallen due to a heavy snow storm the day before.⁵³ In December, they received instructions and supplies to build a stable for horses next to the station, with the direction that “should a wreck occur...don’t delay the vessel.”⁵⁴ In February they received two horses. In April 1887 the crew engaged in constructing a telephone line.⁵⁵ At least a few times a season, Etheridge reported “crew engaged in shoveling sand from around the

⁵¹ The night before the *Lancaster* rescue Etheridge reported being ill. Through his time at Pea Island he and other surfman reported being sick with ague. This may have caused his death in 1900. Pea Island Station Logs, 4-5 October 1881 and throughout, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁵² Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 29.

⁵³ Pea Island Station Log, 19 March 1885, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁵⁴ Pea Island Station Log, 20 December 1885, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA. Regardless of the task at hand, aid to ships was always their first priority.

⁵⁵ Pea Island Station Log, 21 April 1887, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

station.”⁵⁶ Winds on the barrier island caused sand to pile up quickly. However, their most fundamental, challenging, and certainly most crucial task was beach patrols.

One surfman left the station walking in one direction (North or South) for three to four miles. The “shifts” were midnight to 4 a.m., 4 a.m. to sunrise, sunset to 8 p.m., and 8 p.m. to midnight. The keeper recorded who walked each beat, who they met, and what station they were from. To the north, Pea Islanders met Oregon Inlet crewmembers, to the south they stopped at New Inlet, until a station was built there in 1883. The two surfmen exchanged a badge or surfmen’s check, stamped with the station number and the man’s rank. When there was an inlet preventing the meeting, the L.S.S. installed a time detector that could be stopped with the turn of a key carried by surfmen. The surfmen watched for debris washing on shore, silhouetted ships on the horizon, or any sign that a vessel may be in trouble. If something needing assistance were spotted, the surfmen set off a red Coston flare.⁵⁷

While on patrol, the crew reported all findings on their patrols. Supplies and debris of all sorts washed up on the shore line. Many times Etheridge reported finding yellow pine timber or other cargo.⁵⁸ The most disturbing finding was most likely the

⁵⁶ Pea Island Station Log, 26 September 1893 and throughout, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁵⁷ The L.S.S., like nearly all government organizations or military branches, was male-dominated, but not without the contributions of women. Martha Coston invented the Coston flare, used by the Navy and L.S.S. for communication with ships. The Women’s National Relief Association donated clothing, books, and other supplies to stations. Wives, daughters, and mothers of lifesavers were in many ways part of the stations and the activities that went on there. Women cooked for the men and for victims of shipwrecks. In the event of a wreck, women clothed the victims and acted as a nurse. Edith Morgan, daughter of the keeper at the Grand Point au Sable Station in Michigan received a Silver Life Saving Medal for her efforts in two rescues. Pea Island surfmen had to leave their families for five to seven months, only visiting on Sundays. Wives of surfmen sustained the family and household in the absence of their husbands. Though Etheridge’s wife and daughters stayed at Pea Island in the summers, they were away from him for most of the year.

⁵⁸ Pea Island Station Log, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

bodies that occasionally washed ashore. The crew buried many. Sometimes the bodies were mutilated and their identities never known. On 24 April 1889, the crew buried Robert Nolan, age seventeen, of the *Davy Crockett*.⁵⁹ In fact, local folklore holds the neighboring Bodie (pronounced “body”) Island was named for bodies that washed ashore.⁶⁰



Even with a horse, pulling the surfboat through the sand was difficult, ca. 1900. (Cape Hatteras National Seashore, National Park Service)

During the day, weather-permitting, the crews drilled constantly. Monday the crew practiced with the beach apparatus and inspected all related equipment. The apparatus had an anchor that was buried in the sand. A tall, wooden structure held one end of the line. A Lyle gun was used to shoot a line out to a ship, aiming across the mast. The line itself was “faked” in a faking box, meaning it was wrapped around pegs in an intricate manner. The surfmen sent over the breeches buoy, a floatation device with shorts sown to the inside. Then, they pulled victims to shore, with lines stretched to the ship, one at a time. Each surfman had a particular duty in the exercise, according to his

⁵⁹ Pea Island Station Log, 24 April 1889, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁶⁰ This is probably not accurate. The National Park Service conducted research finding the island was likely named for an English family named Body that owned land in the area, hence the original possessive spelling “Body’s Island.” “Bodie Island Lighthouse Structure Report,” National Park Service, 2004, 1.

rank. When inspectors visited the station, they timed the crew in this activity. Tuesday was reserved for practice with the surf boat and life boat. This consisted of launching and landing the boats and practicing with the oars. The crew practiced with signals on Wednesday. This included flares and flag signals, which were their main means of communication with ships. Thursday was more beach apparatus drills, since this was the primary method of life-saving. Friday was for practicing resuscitation of the apparently drowned, the forerunner to modern CPR. Saturday was used to clean and repair anything in or around the station. Etheridge diligently recorded each of these activities in the station log.⁶¹



The breeches buoy was used to reach victims without going in the water.
(www.schoonerman.com/.../breeches_buoy.htm)

Etheridge ran a tight ship. He dismissed surfmen for any neglect of duty or disobedience. Etheridge realized a deficient surfman could lead to poor performance at the site of a wreck and could cost lives. On 4 January 1884 he discharged R.F. Tolar for

⁶¹ The daily drills are mandated in “Revised Regulations for the Government of the Life-Saving Service,” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1884).

drunkenness and neglect of patrol duties.⁶² In March 1890, he discharged Henry L. Daniels for “using profane language and insubordination to the acting keeper.”⁶³ Etheridge usually hired replacements from Roanoke Island. However, he was not without compassion. When Surfman I.M. Ward returned home to find his child dead and wife very near death, Etheridge excused him without a substitute. The dedication of these men was remarkable. Ward was only absent one day and two nights.⁶⁴

Etheridge kept good records; his military training was evident in his writings in the station log. He wrote factual and straightforward reports about even the most trying rescues. He also kept details of amount of oil, flares, and other supplies used daily. In 1887, he reported finding \$8.66 on a body that washed ashore which he turned in.⁶⁵

The creation of the Pea Island station as the black station did prove advantageous to the black surfman working there. The men never again had to suffer the indignities of extra duties like cooking or cleaning stables as they had in the “checkerboard” stations. This is not to infer the duties were never performed. They took turns doing the undesirable tasks when necessary instead of being given the responsibilities due to the color of their skin. They were looked up to as leaders of the community. Instead of sharecropping or factory labor, they had a job to be proud of and that literally saved lives.

While serving at Pea Island, the surfmen may have had an opportunity to become literate. The 1877 Annual Report thanked a donor who wished to remain anonymous for donating books for the stations. The books were “well adapted to the distinct tastes of

⁶² Pea Island Station Log, 4 January 1884, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁶³ Pea Island Station Log, 7 March 1890, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁶⁴ Pea Island Station Log, March 1890, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁶⁵ Pea Island Station Log, 18 May 1887, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

brave men who constitute our crews,” including adventure, travel, and shipwreck stories, as well as religious works.⁶⁶ Literacy was not common among Bankers, especially in the black community. It is unclear exactly who taught Etheridge to read in his youth, but he read and wrote quite well. Other Pea Island crewmembers also learned to read during their career and possibly at the station. The 1880 Census listed a Benjamin J. Bowser as a “fisherman” and “crw,” meaning cannot read or write.⁶⁷ He was hired by Etheridge in December of 1881. In 1886, Etheridge appointed him number one surfman when Lewis Wescott failed his physical examine.⁶⁸ From this point on, when Etheridge was absent or ill, B.J. Bowser was the acting keeper and recorded daily activities in the station log and wrote quite well.⁶⁹

White and black crews worked side by side, not only on rescues but on many daily tasks. 13 October 1892, Etheridge had to call Keeper L.B. Midgett of the New Inlet station to “take [his] boat and go off on board of the *Sharpie* to get supplies as he [Etheridge] could not get his boat out of the creek the tide being very low.”⁷⁰ Four of New Inlet’s crew and the two keepers retrieved windows, doors, and other supplies to build kitchens at New Inlet, Pea Island, and Oregon Inlet.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Annual Report of Operations for the U.S. Life Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending 1877, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878).

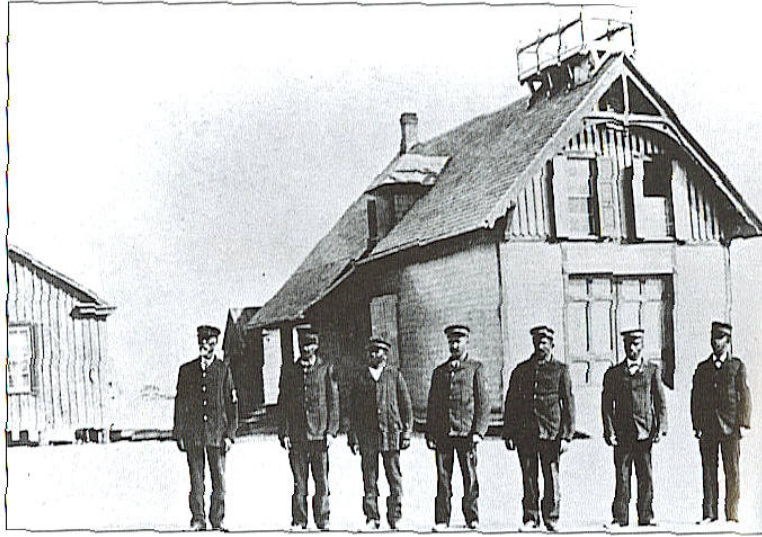
⁶⁷ 1880 Census, Microfilm, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁶⁸ Pea Island Station Log, 1 November 1886, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁶⁹ Etheridge died in 8 May 1900, but Bowser had kept the log since January. Pea Island Station Log, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁷⁰ New Inlet Station Log, 13 October 1892, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁷¹ The Pea Island kitchen or “cookhouse” was moved from private property to a public park in Manteo, on Roanoke Island, to serve as a monument/museum dedicated to the Pea Island crew. Charles Bunyea, “Wanted: New home for Pea Island Cookhouse,” *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 30 October 2005.



1896 Pea Island Crew from left to right: Richard Etheridge, Benjamin Bowser, Lewis Wescott, Dormon Pugh, Theodore Meekins, Stanley Wise, and William Irving.
(Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

The Pea Island station continued to be a source of pride for black Bankers throughout its existence. They performed their most heroic lifesaving mission on 11 October 1896. The weather was fierce. Etheridge wrote it was “raging fearfully and the sea tide was sweeping across the beach so fearfully that no patrolling could be done.” The *E.S. Newman*, a schooner carrying Captain Sylvester Gardiner, his wife, child, and six crewmen, was caught in what Etheridge recorded in the station log as a “hurricane.”⁷² Theodore Meekins, the surfman on watch, spotted the grounded vessel and alerted the keeper. Etheridge mustered the men, gathered the equipment, and left the station. He wrote that “it seemed impossible under such unfavorable conditions to render any assistance. The team was often brought to a standstill by the sweeping tide...but the

⁷² All details of this rescue are taken from Pea Island Station Log, 11 October 1896, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

wreck was finally reached ... the voice of gladden[ed] hearts greeted the arrival of the station crew.” Upon reaching the wreck, they attempted to set up their lifesaving apparatus but “it was found impossible to berry [sic] the sand anchor as the sea tide was so high.” The second choice for lifesavers would have been to launch a surf boat, but the crew was unable to pull the surfboat in this weather, and it would have been impossible to launch in the huge waves. The only option was to swim out to the vessel, a rarely used tactic. Theodore Meekins and another lifesaver tied themselves together with a large shot line and made their way through the frigid water to the ship. Swimming and wading through the crashing waves, the two men made it to the ship, crawled up the ladder, tied a line, and brought the captain’s child back to shore. In pairs, the lifesavers took turns going out to the ship. They saved all nine of those aboard with this method. They all arrived back at station no. 17 by 1:00 a.m. Etheridge provided the survivors with dry clothing furnished to the stations by the Women’s National Relief Association.



The schooner *E.S. Newman*. (Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*)

The following day, Etheridge recorded “the crew engaged in assisting the captain of the wrecked schooner *E.S. Newman* to save the baggage [and cargo] of said schooner.” Also, they had to repair the station which had received some damage in the hurricane. When the Captain found the name plate of the *E.S. Newman* washed up on the beach, he presented it to the Pea Island crew in

gratitude for their outstanding service. This was the only formal recognition the Pea Island Lifesavers would ever see in their lifetimes for this rescue or any other. The Annual Report of 1887 mentions the wreck and tactics of the rescuers along with eleven other wrecks due to the hurricane-like conditions. It reported all were rescued “under great difficulties and with imminent peril to the lifesavers.”⁷³



Sideboards of wrecked ships displayed at Chicamacomico Life Saving Museum. Now the *E.S. Newman* sideboard is located at the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum, Hatteras Village. (Michael Halminski)⁷⁴

No matter the danger of the job, the lifesavers received no pension if they were injured or died on the site of a rescue. In 1891, surfmen from all over formed the Surfmen’s Mutual Benefit Association. The organization would “render financial assistance to the widow or other dependent relatives of deceased members.” Basically, it provided lifesavers with a pension, something Sumner Kimball tried to convince Congress to do for years. These objectives are stated in Article II of the by-laws and

⁷³Annual Report of Operation of the U.S. Life Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1897. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898).

⁷⁴Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 192.

minutes of the organization twenty-second meeting in 1921. In Article VIII, the by-laws stated “Membership shall be limited to those white male persons...” in the L.S.S. or Coast Guard.⁷⁵ By 1891, the only lifesavers in the L.S.S. that were not white were the surfmen of Pea Island.

Etheridge served four more years after this rescue, but died at the station on 8 May 1900, at fifty-four years old, and after more than twenty-six years of service in the L.S.S. During the existence of the L.S.S. from 1874-1915, only 13% of keepers served as long as or longer than Etheridge. Pea Island had a low turn-over rate in general.⁷⁶ The acting keeper, B.J. Bowser, reported very plainly, “Watch for the day G.E. Jones, no. 1. Keeper Richard Etheridge dide [sic] at this station at 20 minutes to 7 oc [sic] a.m. today. The condition of the telephone at this station is good.”⁷⁷ On 27 June, Bowser took the oath to officially become keeper. However, he would only last until 4 October, when Lewis Wescott took the oath. Wescott had asked Newcomb for a discharge twenty years before his appointment. It was Etheridge who talked him into staying on at Pea Island, and now he had become keeper. Also, in 1886 the Marine Hospital rejected Wescott due to an injury, while performing his physical evaluation. Etheridge wrote to E.C. Chayton, then Inspector of the Sixth District, and asked that Wescott “be taken back into the

⁷⁵ “By-Laws and Minutes of The Surfmen’s Mutual Benefit Association,” Chicamacomico Life Saving Station Museum, Rodanthe, NC.

⁷⁶ Only 9% of keepers died while still employed by the L.S.S. Noble, *That Others Might Live*, 64-65.

⁷⁷ Pea Island Station Log, 8 May 1900, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA.

Service as soon as the opportunity presents itself ... he is a good man and a brave surfman," which he was.⁷⁸ He was obviously dedicated to the men of the station.



Richard Etheridge's grave site is located at the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island. The inscription reads, "We trust our loss will be his gain, And that with Christ he's gone to reign." (Jessica Caldwell)

Dedication was an attribute of many of the Pea Islanders, all of whom were locals to the Outer Banks. William B. Davis and George Riley Midgett served twelve and sixteen years until they could no longer pass physical examinations. Theodore Meekins served twenty years from 1890-1910. Benjamin Bowser served seventeen years at Pea

⁷⁸ Letter from Richard Etheridge to E.C. Chayton, 29 January 1887, Articles of Engagement, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

Island, becoming keeper only upon Etheridge's death. Lewis Wescott, who became keeper, served from 1874 to 1901 in L.S.S.⁷⁹ However, no matter the length of service, the dedication of the surfman, or his bravery and expertise, the only chance for keepership was the resignation or death of the Pea Island keeper.

Of the 131 Medals of Honor awarded in the first thirty years of the Lifesaving Service, 33 were given to stations on the North Carolina coast, but none to Pea Island.⁸⁰ Though other stations operated without receiving medals, none had a rescue like that of the *E.S. Newman*. Not until 5 March 1996, at the United States Navy Memorial in Washington D.C., did these men receive proper recognition. Nearly one hundred years after the rescue of the *E.S. Newman*, the Pea Island crew received the Gold Lifesaving Medal, the highest peacetime honor in the U.S. Coast Guard. Descendants of the lifesavers and those of the shipwreck victims were on hand to witness the event.



The Gold Life Saving medal is housed at the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island. (Jessica Caldwell)

⁷⁹ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 259.

⁸⁰ Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 298.

After Etheridge's death a chapter in the station's history closed. He had set a precedent and proved to the African Americans of Roanoke Island and beyond that they could be an important part of society. They could aspire to be life-savers, and thanks to Etheridge they had a station that would hire them.

CONCLUSION

The previous chapters highlighted a small coastal community, the life of one man, and a federal organization. This study may seem narrowed to a part of the country that was not typical of the rest, however many important national issues are reflected in this story. Segregation and Jim Crow were being established as a system that caused turmoil in the lives of Americans for the next sixty years. These factors were at work nationally, within the Life-Saving Service, and in the Outer Banks. Segregation offered an alternative which many contemporaries thought to be for the greater good of both races. By the Jim Crow era of the early twentieth century, segregation became a way to ‘keep the negro in his place,’ and reinforced racist rhetoric. Some African Americans, however, used this discriminatory system to their advantage. In the twentieth century, for example, the brave men of the Tuskegee Airmen were not only given an opportunity to prove their skills, but also because it was a segregated unit, were able to gain recognition for their accomplishments.¹ In this same way, segregation provided a situation where the Pea Island Lifesavers could prove themselves, and there were no white crew members to overshadow their accomplishments. Though not recognized with medals, the men of the Pea Island station were known as good surfmen, had a job they could be proud of, and were able to leave a legacy to their community.

A combination of factors, on both local and national levels, interacted to move from appointing one worthy African American as keeper of station to segregation of a government organization and later, in 1896, the country. Politics on a national level were marked by a struggle for power. After the Civil War, Republicans outnumbered Democrats; Democrats could not prevent the passage of laws during Reconstruction. By

¹ Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., accessed 3/20/06, <www.tuskegeeairmen.org>.

1877, when Hayes took the presidency, Democrats were frustrated and ready to reclaim their power in Congress and over the American people. Rhetoric of “negro rule” or “negro domination” was printed in newspapers all across the country, especially in the South. Democrats ran for office backed by white supremacy organizations, which together spread propaganda directed at poor southern white men. Protecting the purity of white women became a tool used to spread fear and gather support. In North Carolina, the Democratic State Platform stated, “[W]e denounce the administration of the Republican party in North Carolina by which negroes were placed in high and responsible official positions which ought to have been filled by white people.”² In many places in the South, lynching and other forms of violence not only ensured African Americans would not make it to the polls to vote, but that they would not step out of their subordinate role.

Republicans worked to keep whatever power they had, but as the Democrats became more popular and more powerful, they pulled away from their more “radical” policies. Losing interest in campaigns for black rights, Republicans looked towards Northern industrial interests. Democrats pointed out the corruption within the Republican Party. Embezzlement, bribery, and mishandling of funds hastened its loss of power. Both parties came to endorse segregation, and the Supreme Court agreed.

In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of segregation in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Louisiana authorities arrested Homer Plessy for refusing to move to the segregated rail car. Plessy, claiming to be only one-eighth black, took his case to the Supreme Court. Of the decision of seven to one, Judge John Marshall Harlan, a former

² *The North Carolina Year Book 1901*, (Raleigh, NC: The News and Observer, 1901).

slave owner, wrote in his dissent that “our Constitution is colorblind.”³ Unfortunately, many agreed with the decision and saw “separate but equal” as a good way to deal with America’s race problems. However, the ruling would not only apply to rail cars. Schools, restaurants, bathrooms, drinking fountains, movie theaters, swimming pools, neighborhoods, and other public areas were separated, but the facilities were not equal. This system legally stood in place until 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁴

The political environment of the government during Reconstruction no doubt affected federal organizations, including the Life-Saving Service. From 1874, when the L.S.S. was officially created, Sumner Kimball walked a tight rope to prove his nonpartisanship, which he saw as the key to success of his service. After the maritime disasters of 1878, including the *Metropolis* and *Huron*, some in Congress suggested the L.S.S. be absorbed by the U.S. Navy. Kimball worked to prevent this. Under these pressures, he tried to ensure the L.S.S. would be a merit-based organization to save lives and not allied with either party. As to segregating his Service, the pressure he may have felt is unknown. However, he made the ultimate decision to make Pea Island the black station in the Sixth District and did not make an effort to have black surfmen hired anywhere else. It is possible he saw this growing trend and agreed to let Pea Island be the compromise. By doing this, he was able to keep radicals content; there were blacks in his organization, while at the same time avoiding the wrath of the Democrats, since there was only one station in a remote area.

³ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (U.S. Supreme Court, 1896).

⁴ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (U.S. Supreme Court, 1954).

Though the national political climate was quite heated, the Outer Banks were in many ways removed from the daily struggles over racial issues. White Bankers clearly viewed Black Bankers as inferior, but without the violence and daily degradation. In 1898, in Lake City, South Carolina, a white mob lynched the black postmaster and shot his wife and three daughters. When Richard Etheridge was appointed keeper of a station, a job comparable to postmaster, there is no record of threats on his life, home, or family. His station was burned, but the station belonged to the United States government and the suspects were disgruntled L.S.S. job seekers. Though some on the Banks were not happy with the appointment, it was not the entire community and they did not attack Etheridge personally. In fact, the Pea Island Station log shows that Etheridge and three other crewmembers, Lewis Wescott, B.J. Bowser, and J.S. Wescott were “absent today to the election for the purpose of voting.”⁵ In 1885, the L.S.S. requested each station to list surfmen and their political affiliation. Of five surrounding stations, sixteen Democrats, thirteen Republicans, and five Independents responded, nearly all of whom were locals.⁶ The Pea Island crew, including Etheridge, Lewis Wescott, J.S. Wescott, Benjamin Bowser, and W.C. Bowser, able to read and write, along with W.B. Davis and Henry Daniel, all listed themselves as Republicans. To this document Etheridge added, “We have never been questioned relative to our politics by any one connected with the Service but have been free to vote as we please.”⁷

⁵ Pea Island Station Logs, 7 November 1882 and 4 November 1884, RG 26, National Archives, Morrow, GA. The four men who went to vote may have been able to do so because of their literacy.

⁶ Miscellaneous Documents, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C. The five stations were Kitty Hawk, Bodie Island, Oregon Inlet, Chicamacomico, and Little Kinnakeet.

⁷ Miscellaneous Documents, Sixth District, RG 26, National Archives, Washington D.C.

Richard Etheridge is key to this story. A respected local, Etheridge obviously played a large part in the black community of Roanoke Island. As soldier and surfman he was qualified for the job, but his connections to the white community might better explain his appointment. He was rumored to be the son of a white, wealthy, well-known Banker. In 1875, Etheridge served on the Board of County Commission with influential members of the white community, including L.S.S. District Superintendent J.W. Etheridge.⁸ The *Elizabeth Economist* referred to “Captain Dick Etheridge, (colored) our old friend ... the worthy Keeper of Pea Island Life Saving Station,” as “a representative of the old time colored man—polite, respectful, considerate, and self-respecting.”⁹ The decision to appoint Etheridge and not another black surfman may have been due to his connections to the white community. He may have been tolerated because he was so embedded in both the black and white communities of the area.

African Americans were not the only minority active in the L.S.S. The Service employed some Asian Americans on the Pacific Coast. In the 1870s the entire crew, except the keeper, of the Waaddah Island station in Washington belonged to the Makaw or Quileute Indian tribes. Two brothers of the station received the silver lifesaving medal for the rescue of the *Lily Grace* in 1887. The Shinnecock tribe of Long Island lost ten men who volunteered to rescue the *Circassian* in December of 1876. The men of the Wampanoag tribe also received a silver lifesaving medal for the rescue of the *City of Columbus* off of Martha Vineyard in 1884.¹⁰

⁸ Minutes of Board of County Commission, 1870-1915, Microfilm, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁹ David Wright and David Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 255-256.

The creation of the Pea Island station as the black station may have provided other advantages as well. The men may have had the chance to learn to read. With low literacy rates all over the Outer Banks, among black and white Bankers, this was quite remarkable. Also, the Pea Islanders did not suffer the indignities of extra duties like cooking or cleaning stables; their daily work environment had to have changed significantly since the days of “checkerboard” crews. They were looked up to as leaders of the community. Instead of degrading sharecropping or mindless factory labor, lifesaving was a job to be proud of, in some ways like a soldier. Lifesaving was a dangerous job, as the motto of lifesavers went, “you have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.” Death on a rescue may have been honorable, but unlike soldiers, their families received nothing. Like other African Americans across America who also worked such dangerous jobs as mining, factory work, and others, lifesavers received no pension.

The Surfmen’s Mutual Benefit Association formed in 1891. The member’s dues provided some pension to those surfmen injured or to their families upon death. However, the Pea Island crew was forbidden to join. The by-laws stated “Membership shall be limited to those white male persons ...” in the L.S.S. or Coast Guard.¹¹ Their station may have provided some advantages, but discrimination was apparent.

¹⁰ Joe Mobley, *Ship Ashore! The U.S. Lifesavers of Coastal North Carolina*, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1994).

¹¹ “By-Laws and Minutes of The Surfmen’s Mutual Benefit Association,” Chicamacomico Life Saving Station Museum, Rodanthe, NC.

The Outer Banks were changing. The Kill Devil Hills Life Saving crew reported helping two brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright, test their flying machine.¹² The technology that developed from the first flight, along with technological advances in engines, radios, and navigational aids contributed to the end of the Life Saving Service. In 1906 the state of North Carolina recorded a “remarkable decrease” in the shad, a main source of income for Bankers.¹³ Tourism began to grow in the early 1900s. Northerners traveled to the beaches in the summer and to hunt waterfowl in the fall and winter. In 1920, with the Currituck bridge nearing completion, the state planned a hard-surface road all the way to Roanoke Island. The quaint fishing villages of the Banks began their transformation to prime real estate for beach-goers. The Depression slowed progress of building roads and bridges. However, the “New Deal” of Roosevelt proved beneficial. The Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, and National Park Service all added to the economy and changed the nature of the Outer Banks.

The L.S.S. stations changed too. In 1915, the L.S.S. combined with the Revenue Marine Bureau to form the United States Coast Guard. The Lighthouse Service was folded into the Coast Guard in 1939. During WWI and WWII, the L.S.S. added watching for U-boat activities to their duties on beach patrol.¹⁴ Advances in technology ended the era of coastal lifesaving. Boats were made of better material and had better aids to navigation, resulting in fewer distressed ships. Also advances in communication and engines changed the maritime history. The Pea Island station closed in 1947. The

¹² Wright and Zoby, *Fire on the Beach*, 240.

¹³ Brian Crumley, *Roanoke Island, 1865 to 1940: Special History Study*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division National Park Service, 2005).

¹⁴ United States Coast Guard, www.uscg.mil/hq/gc-cp/history.html, accessed 3/15/06.

Oregon Inlet and Bodie Island stations were rebuilt under the Coast Guard, but others simply closed. Both Cape Hatteras and Chicamacomico closed in 1954.

The U.S. Coast Guard policies on segregation paralleled those of the Navy. All recruiting facilities were authorized to recruit Negroes under exactly the same conditions as other races were recruited, until 1922 “when enlistment of the Negro was discontinued.”¹⁵ It was not until April 1942 that President Roosevelt called for desegregation of the Coast Guard and Navy. The first group of 500 black men recruited by the Coast Guard received training at Manhattan Beach Training Station in New York, but sleeping quarters and mess facilities were still segregated. Nearly all new black recruits worked shore duty at an all-black Coast Guard station, organized at Tiana Beach, New York. The Coast Guard encountered problems when rotating the sea crew with shore duties. White Coast Guardsmen wanted shore duties, but replacing them on the ships with blacks meant integrating crews. Complete integration of Coast Guard ships was inevitable. By 1945, just before the Pea Island Station closed, 956 African Americans served as petty officers or warrant officers in the Coast Guard.¹⁶

Eventually, war forced all of the armed forces to desegregate. The Selective Service Act of 1940 forbade “discrimination of any person [in the armed forces] on account of race or color.”¹⁷ However, the Army answered with a racial quota system in which troops were still largely segregated. The Army found segregation complicated training, devastated moral of black troops, and “wasted the manpower, funds, and

¹⁵ *The History of Blacks in the Coast Guard from 1790*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Morris MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985). Available from <www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/integration/IAF-02.htm>

equipment.”¹⁸ By the fall of 1942, some officials proposed assigning black recruits to white units. The need for more troops by 1944 forced officials to further integrate and raise the quota of black troops. African Americans again made more strides in the Army in 1950 during the Korean War.

After Reconstruction, many African Americans made important advances. In 1881, Fredrick Douglass was appointed recorder of deeds for Washington D.C. That same year thirty students enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute, also founded the Negro Business League in Boston, Massachusetts. Many black Americans subscribed to the idea of racial uplift in this time. Personal successes were to be used to help make the black community better. Even if the lifesavers on the North Carolina coast were not aware of the idea, in many ways Pea Island Lifesavers uplifted their community, if not their race.

The Pea Island Station was decommissioned in 1947. The rich tradition of black Bankers aspiring to become lifesavers changed, but many carried on the tradition in the Coast Guard. Maxie Berry, Sr. kept the Pea Island station through the early 1940s. His grandfather, Joseph H. Berry, was hired by Richard Etheridge in 1897. Twenty-two of Joseph’s descendants, including Maxie and L.T. Herb Collins, served in the Life Saving Service or the Coast Guard.¹⁹ Collins was one of two surviving Pea Islanders that witnessed the Gold Life Saving Medal given in 1996. The other William Bowser, served at the Pea Island Station until its decommission in 1947. His cousin, Benjamin Bowser,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ United States Coast Guard, www.uscg.mil/hq/gc/history/M_Berry.html, accessed 3/15/06.

served as keeper following Etheridge's death and was awarded the medal as part of the 1896 crew that saved the *E.S. Newman*. At the ceremony Bowser said:

I was very afraid when I came here to the ceremony today in Washington, D.C., that I would hear the National Anthem being played. Do you know why? I was afraid to come because every time I heard the National Anthem being sung I would cry, but I would cry out of anger because of how badly I was treated as a black man back in those days. Now, after what you, the little girl, the two students and the Coast Guard have done for me and the gentlemen from Pea Island, I will still cry when I hear the National Anthem. But, I will cry out of joy because this day has erased 50 years of bitterness from my heart.²⁰

Much of the nation has not healed from the wounds of segregation and racism, as Bowser has, but recognizing the accomplishments of worthy people, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, will help us heal as a nation.

²⁰CDR Steve Rochon, *The Reservist*, October 1966, Available through <<http://www.uscg.mil/RESERVE/magazine/mag1996/oct1996/peaisle.htm>>

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