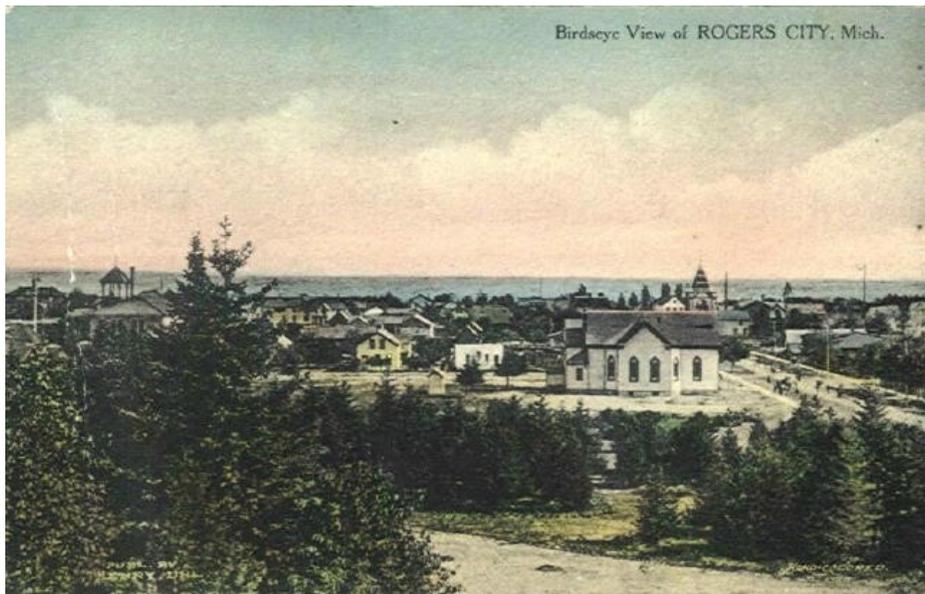


*Tragedy Off Rogers City:
The Loss of Superintendent Joseph Sawyer and Keeper George Feaben
October 20, 1880*

by Debbie Allyn Jett



“To the death-record of the year, there still remains to be made a sorrowful addition—the loss by drowning of the Superintendent of the Tenth Life-Saving District, Capt. Joseph Sawyer, and of Capt. George Feaben, the keeper of Life-Saving Station No. 8, in that district, while engaged in the prosecution of duty. The melancholy circumstance was mentioned in a note in the last annual report, added while in press, and the following are the details:”

Thus states the U.S. Life-Saving Service *Annual Report* for the year 1881. The tragedy had happened on October 20 of 1880, but the Report had already gone to press, so only a brief note had appeared in the 1880 volume. The rest of the sad tale was



included in the next year's report, telling of the loss of a beloved Superintendent and a dedicated Keeper.

Forty-four year old Superintendent Joseph Sawyer was making his quarterly rounds of the stations in his District, which included Lake Huron and Lake Superior. The purpose of the rounds was to inspect the stations and the crews, deliver supplies and mail, and to pay the men their quarterly pay. Although the pay for members of the U.S. Life-Saving Service was meager, compared to the pay of other less dangerous occupations, Sawyer enjoyed his work and was extremely proud of the Service, often stating to colleagues and friends that it would be the "banner Service of this country yet." He was more than a boss and a superior officer; the men who served with him and under him considered him to be a brother and a friend. He understood the difficulties and the dangers of their chosen livelihood, but still expected the best from those who served, and most of his fellow life-savers strove to do their best under his watchful eye.

Because of his position with the Life-Saving Service, he spent a fair amount of his time on the water, traveling to and from his home in Detroit, up the coast of Lake Huron, through the Soo, and across the Shipwreck Coast of Lake Superior. In 1880, he was in charge of Life-Saving Stations located at Point Aux Barques, Tawas, Sturgeon Point, Thunder Bay Island, Forty Mile Point, (later called Hammond Bay) all located on Lake Huron, and on Lake Superior, Deer Park, Vermilion, Crisp Point and Two Heart River. He traveled on steamers, in surfboats and station supply boats, and sometimes would rent a horse and wagon to deliver supplies, and if the roads were impassable with a wagon, he walked. Most of his trips, he delivered the men their mail and their pay at their stations, but, on occasion, if coming ashore was not feasible, he would have the steamer's Captain stop the vessel near the station, blow the whistle, and have the crew row out to meet him, without coming ashore, thus saving himself a lot of time.

The crews were paid quarterly, in cash, and since the stations on the Great Lakes were only open from April 1 through mid-December, the men were only paid three times a year. In the early years, Keepers received \$400 a year, and surfmen were paid \$40 per



month. The pay did not stretch very far, and most of the men sought other employment in the off months in order to feed and clothe their families. There was no compensation if a man was injured or killed. It was just tough luck.

1880 was a very difficult year for Supt. Sawyer. His wife, Catherine, had died in early March, shortly after giving birth on the 1st, to their fifth child, a son named Edmund Joseph. He had summoned his sister, Mary, who was single, from Ogdensburg, New York, where the family was from, to move to Detroit to care for the children. On April 23 of that same year, all six surfmen at the Point Aux Barques Station were lost in a tragic accident on Lake Huron. His cousin, Keeper Jerome Kiah, barely survived the tragedy, and was severely frostbitten on his legs and feet, forcing him to resign a scant two months after the tragedy. Sawyer had been summoned to the station after the disaster, and took charge of the situation due to Kiah's injuries and his anguished state of mind. Sawyer divided \$1000 from his own pocket among the families of the lost surfmen, and paid for the four funerals that took place in the area, shipping the other two deceased surfmen to Detroit, where they were then sent on to Canada for burial. Having just lost his wife, Sawyer was extremely sympathetic to the families and was especially concerned for the health of Capt. Kiah. He replaced the entire crew at Point Aux Barques, and then continued with his duties.

On October 19th, he was upbound on Lake Huron and had stopped at the station at Forty Mile Point, located on Hammond Bay, 16 miles northwest of the village of Rogers City.

Keeper Joseph Valentin, Forty Mile Point/Hammond Bay U.S. Life-Saving Station on Lake Huron. Photo courtesy of Dennis Noble, Jesse Besser Museum, Alpena, Michigan.

He arrived at 7:30 in the evening, and after paying the men, he spent the night at the station. At 7:30 on the morning of the 20th, he boarded the station's supply boat, the "Arrow," with 30-year-old



Keeper George Feaben and, 23-year-old No. 1 Surfman Joseph Valentin. Sawyer had planned to catch a steamer at the dock at Rogers City and continue his journey northward to pay the men at the stations on Lake Superior and give them their mail.

The “Arrow” was a Huron boat, which was a type of Mackinaw boat. She was a fish boat, clinker-built, with a center board. She had a thirty two foot keel and a nine foot

beam and two masts, the forward mast being taller and larger.



Model of a Huron boat. The “Arrow” was clinker built and this model is carvel, but they were the same type of boat. Model and photo courtesy of David McDonald.

Normally in the autumn, one of the masts and sails would have been removed, making the vessel easier to control in rougher weather, but she was

still rigged with both when the men set out for Rogers City. The weather had been stormy in the morning, but was clearing, the sun occasionally peeking out through the grey clouds. The wind was puffy, and coming in fresh squalls from the south-south west, forcing the crew to have to tack when within a mile and a half of the dock. As they approached and when within a half mile, Valentin secured the fore-sheet, and began trimming the ballast. Keeper Feaben and Supt. Sawyer were in the stern, with Feaben at the helm, when a sudden gust of wind tipped the vessel so far over on her port side that water began to pour into the boat. The three leapt for the starboard side to try to right her, but the boat sank right out from under them. All three got an unexpected icy bath as the boat plunged under. A few seconds later, the foremast popped up out of the water three or four feet, along with the gaff. The water was not very deep and the boat had somehow settled on the bottom, upright. Swimming quickly to the spar, Sawyer climbed up and sat on the block at the top of the mast, wrapping his arm around the spar. Feaben and Valentin clung to the spar and gaff underneath him. In front of them, less than a half mile, was a sandy beach, and to their left was the dock, with a saw-mill at one end.



The men were not overly alarmed at their situation at first. After all, they could clearly see men working at the mill and on the dock, so surely they could get their attention and be rescued. Sawyer waved his hat in the air and shouted loudly, but the men on the dock paid no heed and continued with their tasks. More shouting and waving proved to be fruitless as well. Seeing that no help was forthcoming, Sawyer stated that they must swim for shore or perish.

Surfman Valentin later wrote in the station's log: "Capt. Sawyer then said that we must swim for the shore or we would perish. I then took off my over coat, under coat and boots, which occupied some little time. Started to swim for shore but when out about 40 or so yards, my hands got so benumbed that I could not open them, so I started back for the spar, meeting C.G. Feaben 10 yards from the spar. When I arrived there, my hands were so benumbed that I could not take hold of anything whatever. Putting my arm around the gaff which was just on top of the water and looking around, I saw C.G. Feaben returning to the spar again. I then, by rubbing, got the blood in circulation, when Capt. Sawyer advised me to make for shore once more. I started again, but I think I did not get 20 yards from the spar when I was obliged to return. Then Capt. Sawyer ordered C.G. Feaben to take all his clothing off, which he did, except for his shirt and cap, handing his trousers to C.J.Sawyer, saying his money was in them. C.G. Feaben then tried it but failed and came back to the spar not speaking a word. C.J.Sawyer during this time took out Feaben's purse, but I did not see what he did with it, but he then said to Feaben to cut off the gaff, and he would try and swim to shore, Feaben saying that he could no longer hold on if he cut off the gaff."

"Then Sawyer said he had a good mind to try and swim to shore, when he took off his coats, boots, and trousers, ripping off his shirt and drawers in strips, leaving himself naked, except for his hat, and got into the water and started out for shore." (A later newspaper report stated that Sawyer had been ill, which may have accounted for his waiting till last to try for the shore.)



“He did not go far when he turned toward the spar, but when within 40 or so feet from it, he sank, and was seen no more.”

“Feaben and myself were then on the spar and seeing Sawyer drowned, I asked Feaben to reach for a white shirt which was on the peak of the gaff, as he was the closest to it but he did not get it. I wanted it to wave for assistance. I then got up on the spar and took a waist-sash, which I had on, and lashed my left wrist to the peak halyards. Feaben was in the water behind me with his left arm around the spar, and was paddling with his right, saying that the boat was drifting towards shore. I asked him if that was so. I was then drawing toward me what clothing I could. I got a blanket over me, when the spar seemed to rise a little higher, when I turned my head towards where C.G. Feaben was, but could not see him.’

“I looked for assistance but none came. I heard the mill whistling (sic) blow three times. I thought it was whistling for alarm, but I found out afterwards it was for noon....lost all hope for any aid from Rogers City. I kept looking up the beach for quite a while. When I turned around my head towards Rogers City, and there saw a small boat with two sails bearing towards me. I shouted as loud as I could but heard no answer but the boat kept still bearing towards me. Finally, came up and cut the lashing and took me ashore, likewise the clothing that was there. It was now 1 pm. The men rubbed my limbs, which were all benumbed, so much so that I could not walk or even stand. A fire was built and when I was warm, I sent two of the men who rescued me to the station for the crew, and the other two (there being four of them who rescued me) I sent out again to find the bodies – they returned saying they could find nothing except a red undershirt, and two pairs of boots which were lying near the foresail. I told one of them to see what was in the pockets of the coat which was taken from the spar. We found the following: Papers and old envelopes, one silk and one white handkerchief, one silver watch No. 201612, G.M. Wheeler, Elgin, Ill., one black rubber chain, one...locket with photograph. The foregoing was all that was found.”



“The foregoing is a true and complete statement of all matters concerning the disaster within my knowledge. Joseph Valentin, Acting Keeper Rogers City, October 20, 1880.”

Harness Maker Charles Perkins, Mill Laborer John Raymond, 17-year-old Levi LaLonde, whose brother Alex was a surfman at the Forty Mile Point Station, and 13-year-old Frank Platz had come to the rescue of Valentin. Seeing that he was in a very bad way, they sailed directly for the beach, where they carried Valentin from the boat and kindled a fire to warm him. Rubbing his limbs, to get his circulation going, they gradually brought him around. Valentin was more concerned about finding the bodies of his friends, and asked two of them to go fetch the life-savers, while the others sailed back out to the sunken “Arrow” in search of Sawyer and Feaben.

The crew from the station boarded the surfboat at 4pm and headed to Rogers City, to begin the grim search for the bodies of Supt. Sawyer and Keeper Feaben. They arrived at 8 pm, and with a torch to light the work, they grappled until 2:00am with no luck. Surfmen Max Kuhlmann, age 23, and John McSpadden, age 21, continued to patrol the beach until 6am. Valentin gave LaLonde and Platz a sum of \$4 for their assistance in summoning the crew and took over as Acting Keeper until further notice. He notified General Superintendent Sumner Kimball of the tragedy that had occurred, and then began the long and painful search for the bodies, as well as the difficult task of raising the supply boat up from the bottom of the frigid and deadly lake.

The next day, Valentin sent another message to Kimball, telling him they had found Sawyer’s coat, overcoat, vest, watch and chain, locket, and some papers, “bodies not yet recovered, heavy seas. “ The crew continued dragging the bottom and patrolling the beach, and on Oct. 26th, raised the “Arrow” but still did not find the bodies. Valentin, still acting as Keeper, kept his crew at Rogers City night and day, continuing the search. Surfmen Max Kuhlmann, John McKinzie, age 20, Alex LaLonde, also 20, and John McSpadden joined their new leader in their relentless quest, along with returning surfmen Ben Fisher, 43, who had returned to replace Valentin. Surfman Charles



Hausman, 47, had remained at the station to keep an eye on things there, while John Hightman was hired to fill out the crew.

For the next three weeks, the men dragged the bottom and patrolled the beach in both directions, in ever-lengthening patrols, in hopes of finding their comrades. The weather worsened as winter neared, with heavy winds, high seas and blowing snow. Valentin even hired a horse and rode along the shore for several miles, and came across a bucket from the "Arrow," and two coats belonging to Feaben and himself, 3 ½ miles from where the disaster had occurred. Other items belonging to the three continued to drift ashore, including Feaben's oilskin pants, Sawyer's socks, and more clothing.

In the meantime, in Sand Beach, Capt. Kiah was nearly restored to health from his ordeal earlier that year, when he was notified of the death of his cousin by the Life-Saving Service. He was asked to take the job of Superintendent left vacant by Sawyer's tragic death, and after careful consideration, he accepted. He and his wife Annie then prepared to move to Detroit to take over the task, while Mary Sawyer prepared to move herself and the children back to Ogdensburg.

Back in Rogers City, on November 11th, Supt. Sawyer's satchel came ashore. Inside were items that Sawyer would never use again; one pair of trousers, one pair of drawers, one white collar, one white handkerchief, two pairs of socks, two lead pencils, one hair comb, one hair brush, one blouse shirt, and in the pocket of the trousers, his pocket knife. Feaben's jacket also was found on the beach, along with some blank envelopes and one of Valentin's woolen gloves.

The next day, on November 12, the body of Keeper George Feaben was found 7 miles from the wreck. He was thirty years old at the time of his death, and had served as Keeper at the Forty Mile Point Station for 4 years, since the time it had opened. His pocketbook, which Sawyer had taken for safekeeping, was also found, containing \$48 and 5 cents, and five three-cent stamps. For unknown reasons, no mention was made



in the log of Capt. Feaben's funeral or burial. Perhaps Acting Keeper Valentin was unable to put into words the disposition of his Captain and his friend.

The search still went on for the body and effects of Supt. Sawyer. Money began to wash ashore, one or two five-dollar bills at a time, as well as some of Sawyer's other papers, including bits of the payroll. The weather grew colder and the snow began to accumulate. The crew still stayed in Rogers City and kept up the vigil until December 10th, when they were dismissed for the winter.

The following April, Capt. Joseph Valentin, now Keeper at Forty Mile Point, reopened the station on the 11th. His crew now consisted of No. 1 Surfman Benjamin Fisher, No. 2 John McSpadden, No. 3 Joseph Sharkey, No. 4 Leopold Kuhlmann, brother of Max Kuhlmann, No. 5 William J. McCutcheon, and No. 6 James F. Smith. No. 7 Surfman had not yet been hired, and No. 8 Surfman Henry Price was on his way to his second season as a surfman, having hired on at Point Aux Barques in the spring of 1880, as a replacement for Capt. Kiah's lost crew.

Capt. Kiah had sent the station a large load of supplies, along with a memo stating, "Every Person connected with the Service in this District will be held to a strict accountability for the faithful performance of his duties. Jerome G. Kiah, Supt." It appeared that Kiah was flexing his new Superintendent muscles, making it clear that he would accept no less than everyone's best.

Keeper Valentin kept his crew busy around the station, but still sent one man to Rogers City every day to search for more items, and the body of Supt. Sawyer. On June 5th, pieces of the money Sawyer was carrying were still washing up on shore. The search continued.

On July 3, 1881, Capt. Valentin wrote in the log, "Arrival of Capt. Jerome G. Kiah, Supt. U.S.L.S.S. of Dist. No. 10. Arrived at the station at 12am, left at 11pm." Kiah evidently gave the weary new Keeper permission to call off the search, as no more men were



sent to Rogers City to patrol after that. A total of 5 long months had been spent in a relentless, but fruitless search for Supt. Joseph Sawyer's body. It was never found.

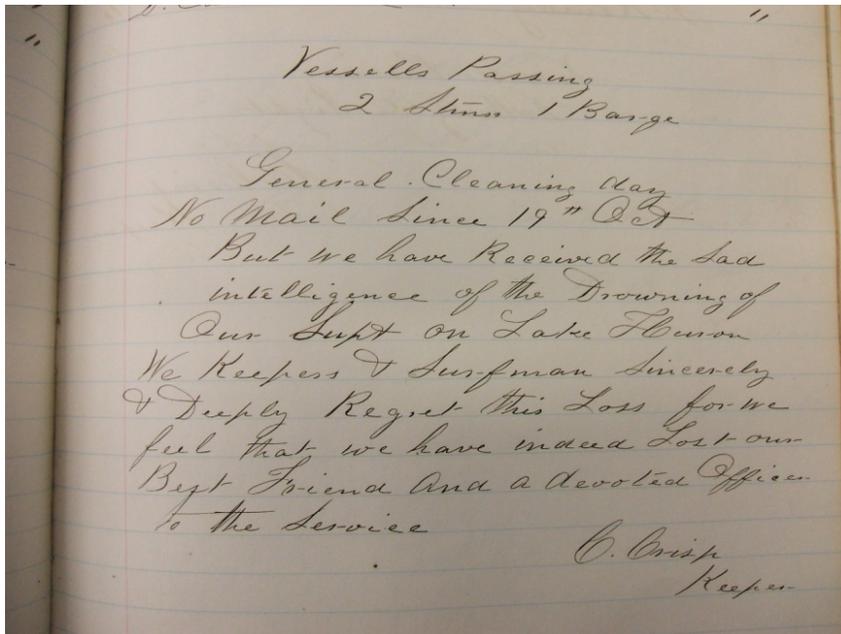
The *Annual Report* of the U.S. Life-Saving Service eulogized Sawyer and Feaben in the 1881 volume. They wrote, "To the Life-Saving Service the loss of these brave and faithful officers was one of the saddest calamities. Of the little group of district superintendents who guard the interests of the Service, and each of whom, in relation to the corps of keepers and their crews, is as the head of a brigade, Captain Sawyer was the second who laid down his life in the discharge of his duty. Henceforth, among these, his co-workers, will be missed the man of noble presence, with his fine oval head, clear features, and jet-black eyes, whose heart was in his work beyond all measure, and who found in that work, because of its humanity, a motive which roused to their fullest his chivalrous intelligence and energy. Sadder than the deepest regret which even the loss of such a man can cause, is the knowledge that his death bereft of a father five little children, the eldest only ten years old, the youngest an infant of eight months, who the March before had lost their mother."

"It is enough to say in his favor that the officers in charge of the Service at large were satisfied with him, and more than satisfied. With the keepers of his district and their men he was no less valued. They found themselves less his subordinates in office than his associates in a noble work, and sustained and encouraged in their duties by a friendliness almost brotherly. His sympathy with them was intimate and ardent."

"In the spring previous to the autumn which proved fatal to him, he suffered, as already stated, the loss of his wife, to whom he was tenderly attached, and it was with a heart still sore from this bereavement that he met his fate. It can only be hoped that the tragic close of his life, already so saddened, was not embittered by the thought of the five little motherless children he was leaving, but that the final moment had for him some supreme consolation, such as perhaps death alone can bring."

“Of Keeper George Feaben, nothing is known but good. He was poor, depending upon his pay for support, and left a wife, but no children. His personal character was without blame, and he was one of the best keepers in the district. During the time he had charge of the station, he and his crew distinguished themselves by the great amount of labor they performed in clearing away timber and making roads around their post in the interest of prompt and efficient life-saving operations. He himself was a hard worker, always taking the lead in these magnanimous exertions. He rests now from his labors, and his work is in other hands.”

Perhaps the most touching tribute to Supt. Sawyer was written by Keeper Christopher



Crisp, at the Crisp Point Station on Lake Superior. He and the other keepers of the nearby Superior stations had learned of the tragedy in early November. In the station log for November 6, 1880, Crisp wrote “No mail since October 19, but we have received the sad intelligence of the

drowning of our Supt. on Lake Huron. We Keepers and Surfmen sincerely and deeply regret this loss for we feel that we have indeed lost our Best Friend and a devoted Officer to the Service.”

Capt. Kiah, once he got settled into the job of Superintendent, moved the headquarters from Detroit back to the Kiah home in Sand Beach.



Keeper Capt. Joseph Valentin, Hammond Bay, USLSS. Photo courtesy of Frederick Stonehouse.

Capt. Joseph Valentin stayed on as Keeper at the Forty Mile Point Life-Saving Station. The name was changed to Hammond Bay in 1883. He was still serving after 1915, when the Life-Saving Service became the U.S. Coast Guard. He died in 1923 and is buried in the Valentin Family Plot in Memorial Park Cemetery in Rogers City, Michigan, next to his wife Catherine.



Captain Joseph Valentin's headstone, Memorial Park Cemetery, Rogers City, Michigan. Photo courtesy of Richard Tyll.

OFFICE OF
Superintendent of Life-Saving Stations,
TENTH DISTRICT,
Detroit, Mich., March 29th, 1881.

Every Person connected with the
Service in this district will be
held to a strict accountability for
the faithful performance of his
duties.

Jerome G. Kiah
Supt.

29 March 1881 memo from new 10th District Superintendent Jerome G. Kiah, notifying each lifesaver employed in his District that they would be held accountable "for the faithful performance" of their duties. Original in the National Archives, Chicago, Illinois.