

The 1900 Galveston Hurricane

and the Activities of U.S. Lighthouse Service Personnel in America's Worst Natural Disaster

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The recent devastation wrought on Galveston, Texas, by Hurricane Ike serves as another reminder of the destruction the oceans can bring to coastal regions of the United States. And yet Ike also showed us how modern weather, communications and disaster response systems have greatly reduced the number of casualties resulting from super-hurricanes. The number of deaths caused by Ike is a mere fraction of those lost to the Galveston Hurricane of September 1900. Estimates for those killed in Galveston by the 1900 Hurricane range from 6,000 to 8,000 and, it is believed, that as many as 4,000 died in the rest of the Gulf Coast area. This number is more than the combined casualty figures for the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack, Hurricane Katrina, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in addition to Hurricane Ike in 2008.

This article recounts the efforts by the personnel of one of the Coast Guard's predecessor services to serve during the worst disaster in American history. Lighthouse keepers of the United States Lighthouse Service served bravely throughout the hurricane, which made land-fall in Galveston on September 8, 1900. The Lighthouse Service maintained a lightship and a number of lighthouses marking the navigable waters in the Galveston area. These included the Galveston lightship *LV-28*; screw-pile lighthouses at Redfish Bar, Halfmoon Shoal, and Fort Point; and an iron encased brick tower lighthouse located on Bolivar Point.

In 1900, the Galveston area boasted three screw-pile lighthouses, whose design combined the keeper's quarters and lantern room on top of iron legs augured into the shallow waters below them. Of the three, only the newly commissioned Redfish Bar Light managed to escape the wrath of the 1900 Hurricane, but just barely. At the height of the storm, a large steamer in

Two views of Redfish Bar Lighthouse which narrowly escaped disaster during the hurricane. Photos courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



Halfmoon Shoal Lighthouse (also called Halfmoon Reef) was destroyed during the hurricane by the steamer *Kendall Castle* which broke away from its mooring and struck the lighthouse a fatal blow. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard

Galveston Harbor broke its moorings and drifted directly toward the lighthouse. Just as it loomed closer to the beacon, the ship veered slightly and passed silently only a few feet away from the lighthouse structure. While it survived the 1900 Hurricane, this light would suffer severe damage from a hurricane that battered the Galveston area in 1915.

Located about ten miles south of Redfish Bar, the Halfmoon Shoal Lighthouse did not share the same fortune as the Redfish Bar Lighthouse. On the night of the hurricane,

the storm surge drove several steamers against the hull of the British freighter *Kendall Castle*. Dislodged from its mooring, the large British cargo vessel blew down on top of Halfmoon Shoal Lighthouse and continued drifting for another ten miles to Texas City. The ship's collision with the Halfmoon Shoal Light resulted in the obliteration of the lighthouse and the death of its keeper, Captain Charles K. Bowen, whose body was never found. As one witness indicated, "we passed within a few hundred yards, but could see no evidence of the lighthouse, it being completely washed away." If this were not bad enough, three generations of Bowen's family were wiped out at the same time as the storm killed his father, wife and daughter, who lived together in the city of Galveston.

The thirty-six year old Galveston lightship *LV-28* had been blown off station by hurricanes many times before, but not by one as strong as the 1900 Hurricane. The eighty-two foot wooden ship relied on sails for motive power and was completely at the mercy of the storm. *LV-28* sustained severe damage as the storm tore the vessel from its moorings and parted the anchor chain. The lightship's windlass and whaleboat were completely destroyed and the storm brought down one of the ship's two masts. The hurricane drove the vessel several miles up

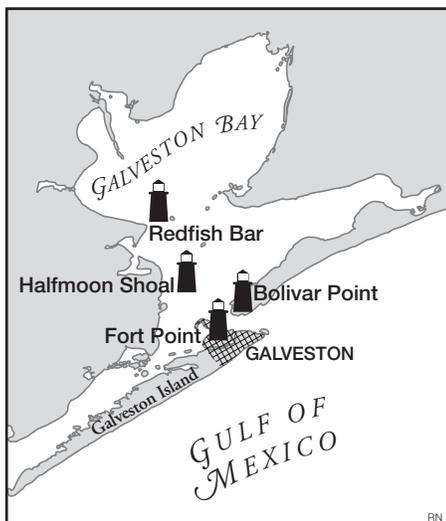
into Galveston Bay before the crew could drop the spare anchor, which held fast until the hurricane abated. Fortunately, no lives were lost on board the vessel and it did not wash ashore.

The story of the Fort Point Lighthouse was one of survival in an area devastated by the storm surge. The screw-pile lighthouse got its name from Fort Point, which had served as the strategic location for fortifications over many years. In fact, the U.S. Army had nearly completed work on a system of modern forts and ordnance just before the storm struck. The most important of these defenses was Fort San Jacinto, which stood closest to the Fort Point Light. In addition, only two hundred yards away from the lighthouse stood the U.S. Life-Saving Service station supervised by veteran keeper, Captain Edward Haines.

Colonel Charles D. Anderson manned the Fort Point Light along with his wife. Anderson was a veteran Confederate officer who attended West Point and attained the rank of lieutenant before the outbreak of the Civil War. He joined the Confederacy and received the command of the 21st Alabama Infantry. His last command was Fort Gaines, in Mobile Bay, when naval forces under the famous admiral, David G. Farragut, captured the fort in August of 1864. By 1900, Anderson was a man in his mid-seventies; however, he must have enjoyed a sense of security from storms with a fully manned life-saving station on one side and modern U.S. Army outpost on the other.

As it turned out, Colonel Anderson and his wife would be the only ones left on Fort Point after the storm had passed and the seas subsided. The ferocity of the hurricane combined with the low-lying topography of Fort Point devastated the other installations. As the seawater rose, Captain Haines and a crew tried to row a surfboat the mere two hundred yards to the screw-pile lighthouse to rescue the elderly couple; however, the wind and sea conditions proved too dangerous for the brave men and they had to turn back before they reached the lighthouse.

The worst of the storm arrived the evening of September 8. Floodwater carried off equipment on the lighthouse's lower deck, including the lifeboat and storage tanks for fresh water and the light's kerosene fuel. The rising water also destroyed or covered all other man-made structures in the area and it appeared for a time as if the Fort Point Lighthouse were adrift on a stormy sea. True to his mission,





Fort Point Lighthouse. U. S. Lighthouse Society Archives.

Anderson kept the light burning throughout much of the storm even though most ships on the open water were either out of control or washing ashore at points along the Texas coast. Late in the evening, the wind grew so intense that it peeled off the lighthouse's heavy slate roof tiles. Eventually some of the flying stone tiles shattered the lantern room windows and the high winds snuffed out the light for good. Anderson had tried his best to maintain the light, but facial wounds from the flying glass drove him below. With the lighthouse's lowest level flooded, the light extinguished, Anderson wounded and no way to make an escape, the light keeper and his faithful wife made their way to the parlor room, sat down and waited in silence for the end to come.

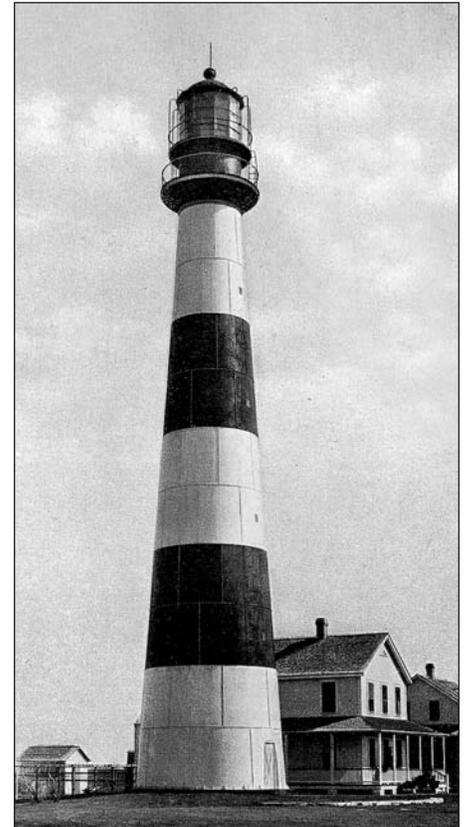
Miraculously, the couple survived the apocalyptic storm to see another day. What they witnessed the morning of September 9th beggars description. As they emerged arm-in-arm onto the lighthouse gallery, they saw the human toll of the storm as the ebbing tide carried away dozens of bodies to the Gulf of Mexico in a silent watery funeral procession. Where the Fort Point Life-Saving Station once stood, only four or five broken pilings remained. Captain Haines had lost his wife and a crewmember when the station collapsed into the sea, yet he and the rest of the crew floated several miles to the safety of the Texas mainland. During the storm, seawater had completely submerged the fortifications at Fort San Jacinto and, in a matter of hours, had rendered useless the fort's state-of-the-art



defenses. Many of the outpost's army personnel were also lost; however, one of the army regulars survived by perching on a wooden door and floating over fifty miles to a point located across Galveston Bay.

The tower lighthouse at Bolivar Point fared better than the screw-pile lighthouses. Lighthouse Keeper Harry C. Claiborne had stored up a month's supply of provisions before the storm struck. Floodwater from the hurricane covered Bolivar Point with a foot of water and 125 individuals found shelter in the iron encased brick tower while the wind and water swirled around it. At one point in the storm, a few passengers found their way from a train stalled in the floodwater not far from the sanctuary of the lighthouse. The rest of the riders chose to remain on board the train and perished in the storm.

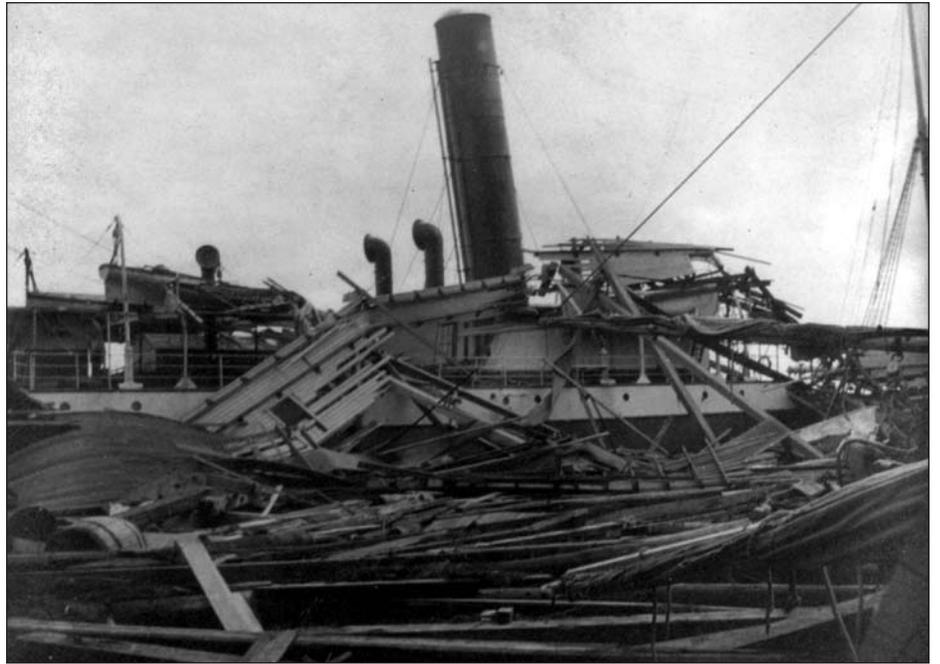
Claiborne did his best to care for his flock of storm survivors. While he had food to feed them, he had no way to provide fresh water. He tried to fill buckets with rain water from the gallery at the top of the 120-foot lighthouse tower, but the buckets only filled with wind-d



Above and left – Bolivar Point Lighthouse sheltered 125 people during the hurricane and received relatively little damage. U. S. Lighthouse archives photo.

driven salt water. When the storm subsided, the survivors emerged from the tower only to find the lighthouse surrounded by a dozen bodies of those who drowned trying to find their way to the safety of the tower. The storm survivors had consumed all of Claiborne's provisions and when he returned to his quarters to take stock of his belongings, he found that the storm had wiped out his household and worldly goods as well. Today, Claiborne's name adorns one of the Coast Guard's Keeper-Class 175-foot buoy tenders.

For years, the U.S. Life-Saving Service boasted the unofficial motto of "You have to go out, but you do not have to come back." This refers to the fact that many Life-Saving Service personnel served in the worst sea and weather conditions to save the lives of others and many Life-Saving Service personnel lost their lives as a result of their dangerous service. Members of the U.S. Lighthouse Service

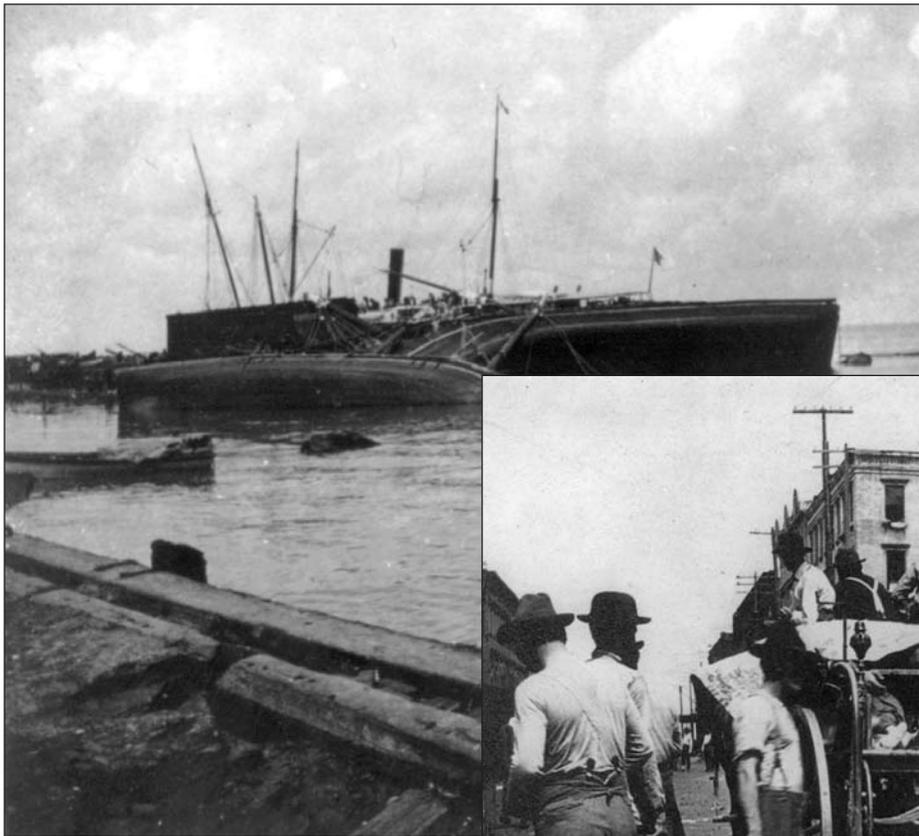


Above – The aftermath of the hurricane on the Galveston waterfront.

Left – The ships in the harbor which did not break loose and carry out into the bay suffered equal destruction at the dock.

Below– The tragic result of the storm which killed an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 is shown, as the "dead cart" collects bodies for burial.

Photos courtesy of the Library of Congress.



showed the same devotion to duty by manning the lights in all sorts of sea and weather conditions and in assisting survivors of storms or wrecks whenever possible. This proved true for the brave lighthouse keepers in the 1900 Galveston Hurricane as it has for personnel throughout the history of the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the modern Coast Guard.

