



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Station Belle Isle, Michigan

Location:	Belle Isle, MI, in the Detroit River
Date of Conveyance:	1881
Station Completed:	1943
Fate:	Still active

Remarks:

Belle Isle Station is primarily a search and rescue unit, operating within the geographic area. This unit has the responsibility of responding in some way to all distressed mariners within these boundaries, Secondary missions include aids to navigation, logistics support to other Law Enforcement Agencies, water pollution checks in assistance to Marine Inspection Office, and Safety Patrols in support of Marine Regatta's, Training of CG Reservists and CG Auxiliaries also fall into the secondary mission's category.

The facilities of Station Belle Isle, formerly known as St. Clair Lifeboat Station, were designed by the Ninth Coast Guard, Civil Engineering Section, Cleveland, Ohio. The contractors who built the station were: Sheet Piling & Launchway Company; The Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Company; Foundation Piledriving; The Candler Dock & Dredge Company; and Building Construction, the Faulkner Construction Company.

The property (1 1/4 acres) was purchased April 6, 1881 from the City of Detroit for the sum of \$1.00. Belle Isle Lighthouse was constructed and a light was first shown on May 15, 1882. The light keeper's dwellings were built the succeeding year along with a surrounding retaining wall and a boathouse. That lighthouse occupied the site continuously until construction of the present facilities.

During those first years, the land was very swampy and the only way to reach the lighthouse was by boat. By 1930, the natural topography coupled with the man-made improvements had extended the utilized position of the island, and in 1930 William Livingston Memorial Light was built east of the Belle Isle Light. This light marks the head of the Detroit River.

Throughout the years of Detroit's development the maritime interests had been served only by the Coast Guard cutters, patrol boats and USLHS tenders. Yachtsman and public-spirited citizens had campaigned for a lifeboat station for many years. Their success came in passage through Congress an enabling act in 1936. Representative Clarence J. McLeod was the author of the bill, and had campaigned vigorously to secure Coast Guard Services for Detroiters. In 1939 an appropriation bill of \$100,000.00 was passed by Congress, but due to litigation in connection with the original survey of the swamp land the money was not available for construction until late in 1940.

The station was completed in 1942, and at that time the station was the most modern on the Great Lakes. The mooring basin, launch ways, and boat handling facilities were the finest obtainable. The watch tower was unparalleled; surveillance of the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair being handled by a twenty-four hour watch in the seventy-five foot tower with the most scientific design and instrumentation available.

The station is named for the island on which the station is located. Situated in the upper Detroit River, it is the largest island in a U.S. city, covering an area of 985 acres.

Sources:

Station History File, CG Historian's Office

Dennis L. Noble & Michael S. Raynes. "Register of the Stations and Keepers of the U.S. Life-Saving Service." Unpublished manuscript, compiled circa 1977, CG Historian's Office collection.

Ralph Shanks, Wick York & Lisa Woo Shanks. *The U.S. Life-Saving Service: Heroes, Rescues and Architecture of the Early Coast Guard*. Petaluma, CA: Costaño Books, 1996.

U.S. Treasury Department: Coast Guard. *Register of the Commissioned and Warrant Officers and Cadets and Ships and Stations of the United States Coast Guard, July 1, 1941*. Washington, DC: USGPO, 1941.

