



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Station Chicago

formerly Station Old Chicago

Coast Guard Station #280

Original Location: South side entrance to Chicago River, at North end of main inner breakwater.

Date of Conveyance: 1874

Original Station Built: 1875

Fate: Discontinued in 1968

Keepers / OICs / Commanding Officers:

- **Frank Fountain** was appointed keeper on 31 August 1894 and transferred to Station Charlevoix on 12 June 1900.
 - **Henry Sinnigen** was appointed keeper on 11 June 1900 and transferred to Jackson Park on 14 May 1902.
 - **Charles Carland** was appointed keeper on 14 May 1902 and was still serving in 1915.
 - **Boatswain (L) J. O. Anderson, USCG**, was attached to the station on 5 November 1917.
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Remarks:

Station was moved in 1884(?)

Reports indicate a lifeboat detachment at least as early as 1878. There had previously been an annex to the new station at Jackson Park. Some reports mention the station still being a detachment in 1894, however. The Coast Guard eventually acquired the land by transfer from the War Department in 1900. It was located in Chicago Harbor.

By June 1932, renovation and improvement cost had run up to \$98,382.

There are, however, reports about the advanced state of building a new station in Chicago Harbor in 1902/3. It is unclear whether this refers to the completion of Old Chicago Station after the transfer of the land or whether a new station was been built.

In 1906, a Service boat was installed in the boathouse of the Farragut Yacht Club at the foot of 33rd Street, Chicago, in order to provide better and more complete coverage.

A day that went down in the annals of the Coast Guard on Lake Michigan was May 18, 1894 when a heavy snow and rain storm hit the area with gusts over 65 miles per hour. Particularly tragic was the eventual sinking of the schooner *Myrtle* after a struggle that went for hours. All six men of the crew were lost within sight of the shore because the breakers were too high to reach the ship. Allegations about the unfit state of station and Surfman Frank Fountain were brought up immediately in and by the leading Chicago newspapers. The reputation of the Life-Saving Service suffered severely.

New station was erected and placed in commission on 20 October 1903. By 30 June 1935 the station had answered 8,454 calls for assistance. The most spectacular marine disaster within the scope of operations of this station was the capsizing of the steamer *Eastland* on 24 July 1915, with 2,400 passengers on board. 280 were rescued by the Old Chicago crew and 400 bodies were recovered. It is estimated that this station has been instrumental in saving at least 6,000 lives through June, 1935.

Coming Home Again

By CWO Jim Harmon, USCG

The Coast Guard along with Illinois Conservation and Chicago Police now occupy the newly renovated Chicago Marine Safety Station (CMSS) in downtown Chicago. The CMSS renovation was completed in 2005. This building was known by many names throughout the years, ironically including (in order): "Coast Guard Station Old Chicago", "Coast Guard Lifeboat Station Old Chicago", "Coast Guard Station Old Chicago", "Coast Guard Station Chicago", "Chicago Police Marine Unit Headquarters" and now after the completed revitalization: "Chicago Marine Safety Station".

Despite name and address; Federal Government Maritime Lifesaving efforts supporting Chicago have been continuous since 1856 when a rowboat was given to the city to be manned by volunteers in case of disaster and housed under the Rush Street Bridge. It wasn't until 1876 that the first Life Saving Station Chicago was built; located near what we would now consider the southwest side of the Lake Shore Drive Bridge.

In 1893 a new Chicago Life Saving Station was completed on the south bank of 59th Street Harbor to respond to the needs of the crowds anticipated to attend the World's Columbian Exposition of that year. At the same time of the Exposition, the original downtown station's vantage point at the mouth of the

Chicago Harbor was lost. It served as a lookout platform for the lake, but was obscured as salt mounds rose about the facility blocking the view of the lake and access to the property. A new facility to the east was built and opened as Life Saving Station Old Chicago in the JMSS's current location. The facility was built on a wooden deck and accessible only by water. By 1902 the 59th Street Chicago Station had been renamed Jackson Park Life Saving Station (later closed and moved to Jackson Park Harbor) yet Old Chicago kept its name.

1915 marked the merger of the Life Saving and Light House Services into the present day Coast Guard, changing the name to Coast Guard Station Old Chicago, after WWII the name changed again adding Lifeboat to signify its role as a lifeboat station vice house of refuge.

In August of 1933, the interior of the Old Chicago Lifeboat Station was completely destroyed by fire to such an extent that demolition and renovation was necessary from the ground up leaving only the Boat House in place. The new and current Cape Cod style facility was completed in 1936 at a cost of roughly \$ 99,480.00.

Old Chicago Lifeboat Station finally dropped the Old and Lifeboat from its name and eventually became known as Coast Guard Station Chicago until 1969 when the Coast Guard abandoned the property, turning it over to the city and eventually becoming the home of the Chicago Police Marine Unit and later Illinois Conservation Police.

This year 2005 marks a new era as the Coast Guard, the Illinois Conservation Police and the Chicago Police Marine Unit move into the CMSS. What, remains steadfast is the noble purpose of the Station; to protect the lives of the maritime community in the Chicagoland area.

Your safety remains our number one concern.

Photographs:



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago Lifesaving Station, Chicago Harbor, Illinois, a typical U.S. Lifesaving station of the 1800s, is shown here while holding open house for the crowds attracted to the waterfront during the World's Columbian Exposition of 1892-1893." By 1902 this station had been renamed Jackson Park Lifesaving Station. It was then closed and moved to Jackson Park Harbor.



Original photo caption: "View of West or River side of Bldg. [;] Sta. 280 (Old Chicago)." Photo dated 3 October 1922.



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago - 280 [;] Coast Guard station and crew at drill." No date.



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago." No date.



Original photo caption: "U.S. Coast Guard Station No. 280 [;] Illinois-Central Pier No. 1 [;] Chicago, Illinois." No date indicated. Photo taken by "Special Service Co. Photographers of Austin, Ill." Note the crew practicing their capsizing drill with the station's lifeboat.



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago [;] West Elevation [;] Shop."; photo dated 28 August 1933; photo by "D.K.R."



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago Station [;] West & South Elevations - Taken from S.W."; photo was dated 13 November 1935.



Original photo caption: "Old Chicago Station [;] view from Southwest."; photo dated 16 April 1936; photo taken by "R.D.G."



Station Chicago, circa 2000. Original photo caption: none; no date.

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.

