



## U.S. Coast Guard History Program

---

# Station Dam Neck Mills, Virginia

USLSS Station #3, Sixth District  
Coast Guard Station #163

<b>Location:</b>	10 miles south of Cape Henry Light; 36-47' 10"N x 76-57' 30"W
<b>Date of Conveyance:</b>	1881
<b>Station Built:</b>	Unknown
<b>Fate:</b>	See "Remarks" section below

---

### Remarks:

A station was erected on land owned by the Commonwealth of Virginia shortly after the passage of the Act of Congress establishing the station in 1873. In 1881 the Commonwealth of Virginia granted a patent of this site to the U.S. for use as a life-saving station. Station became inactive in 1938. In 1951 the Commonwealth of Virginia executed a deed in which the subject property was conveyed to the U.S. for use as a naval anti-aircraft training and test center under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Navy.

### Dam Neck Mills:

The 1850's and 1860's were a period of severe storms on the East Coast, causing many shipwrecks. In order to aid victims of these shipwrecks, a Life Saving Service was started in 1874, and in the following decade, life saving stations were constructed along the coast. Stations were built at Cape Henry and Dam Neck Mills. A "keeper's house" is believed to have existed at Dam Neck Mills as far back as 1850. In 1878, the Seatack Station was placed between these two at the present 24th Street at Virginia Beach. The property on which the Dam Neck Station stood was purchased in 1881 from the State of Virginia. The stations were numbered from north to south, starting with Cape Henry. The Dam Neck Mills Station was therefore number 3. The next station to the south was at

Little Island and is now a beach house at the far southern end of Sandbridge. The original station, built about 1874, was moved back from the ocean some time during the first 20 years

There are several dramatic accounts of rescues from ships wrecked at the Dam Neck Mills Station during its existence. Accounts of all which occurred until 1915 may be found at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia, in the Annual Reports of the Life Saving Service. These reports also include incidents of minor assistance rendered. Summaries of some of these reports made during Captain Barco's time follow:

On January 26, 1884, the three-masted schooner *Albert C. Paige* grounded 2-1/2 miles north of the station and was a total loss. All six personnel aboard were saved. On October 31, 1887, the 214-ton schooner *Mary D. Crammer* was wrecked 1-1/2 miles south of the station and all personnel were saved.

Probably the most tragic story in the history of Dam Neck Mills Station is the valiant attempt to rescue the crew of the German ship *Elisabeth*. James E. Belanga of Dam Neck Mills was patrolling the beach in a heavy snow storm during the mid-watch on January 8, 1887. He and the surfman patrolling from Little Island discovered a ship aground at Sand-bridge, 4 miles south of the Dam Neck Mills Station (Latitude 36o44.6'N). It quickly settled on its side in the sand. Both stations sent rescue teams to the scene. The 22-man crew of the ship were discovered to be in a life boat in the water, sheltered by the lee of the wreck. They could not attempt to reach the shore because of a north-east gale and the surf which it produced. The conventional rescue by breeches buoy could not be carried out and the only means of rescue was to reach them by boat. Abel Belanga, James' brother, was the Keeper of the Little Island Station and in charge of the rescue. He returned briefly to his station to pick up some equipment and to his home for a bite of breakfast and remarked to his wife how difficult it would be to reach the lifeboat. This was the last time she saw him alive. Back at the scene of the wreck, he launched the surfboat with a crew made up of his brother, James, his brother-in-law, Joseph Spratley of Dam Neck Mills, and four other Little Island surfmen. As the shipwrecked crew was being transferred to the rescue boat, a wave overturned both boats, throwing all 29 men into the sea. All except two were drowned or died soon after from exposure. George W. Stone and John H. Land were the two other Little Island surfmen lost. The survivors were Little Island surfmen John Ethridge and Frank Tedford, who was another brother-in-law of the Belangas. Also mentioned as being present was "Ogelsby the miller". In appreciation of the heroic actions of these men who gave their lives, the German government gave funds to their families. The German crew was given a Christian funeral and buried at Norfolk. Abel and James Belanga and Joseph Spratley are buried in a fenced section of the Tabernacle Church Cemetery on Sandbridge Road. Abel's tombstone gives a brief account of the tragedy. D. Gregory Claiborne Butts, the minister of the Tabernacle Church

on the road to Sandbridge describes this rescue in his book "From Saddle to City by Buggy, Boat and Railway".

Mrs. W. H. Belanga, remembers these wrecks in which her father, Captain Barco, participated. After one of these rescues, one of their neighbors took a wagon to the beach to take Captain Barco home. However, the surfmen insisted that he walk home because he was so nearly frozen that had he relaxed in the wagon, he would probably have gone to sleep and never awakened. She remembers that when he arrived home his scarf and hat were frozen to his face, and he could not talk for a long time until he thawed out.

On March 14, 1888, the 400-ton brig *Agnes Barton*, carrying phosphate rock and ten men, grounded 1/4 mile north of the station in a northeaster. Six of the men were lost because of difficulty in working the breeches buoy, which kept fouling with rope, wreckage and "junk". The ship was heeled so far on its side that the rescuers could not get the buoy rigged high enough to stay clear of the water. The Captain was washed out of the breeches buoy and lost. Finally, the ship rolled on its masts, to which the remaining crew members were clinging. This wreck is mentioned again in connection with the construction of the chapel.

On December 21, 1900, the schooner *Jennie Hall* was wrecked 2/7 mile northeast of the station in a 50-knot northeast gale. Five of the eight men aboard were saved. In order to rescue the last man, who was tied to the starboard cross-tree of the mast, Surfman John R. O'Neal rode to the ship by breeches buoy but returned for help. Then the surfboat was put to sea in surf which was carrying wreckage 30 to 50 yards above the high water mark. Captain Bailey Barco was at the helm and his crew was O'Neal, Horatio Drinkwater (an ex-surfman), W. H. Partridge, George W. Whitehurst and two surfmen from the Seatack Station. The man was lowered into the boat and saved.

Mrs. Belanga says that at the time of this wreck, Captain Barco, her father, was sick in bed with the flu. He insisted that he take part in the rescue. His exertions during this night were such a strain on his heart that he never regained his health, and he died the next year of heart failure.

In 1901, Lt. Col. Earl Woodhouse moved to Dam Neck from North Carolina. Col. Woodhouse is now retired from the U. S. Army and resides in Virginia Beach. When he moved to Dam Neck, he was only 6 months old. His father, Captain James Edmund Woodhouse, was the new Keeper of Dam Neck Mills Life Saving Station, a position he retained until 1920. Earl lived with his parents and seven brothers in a house one-half mile north of the station, in the present pistol range area. However, for two months of each summer, the surfmen assigned to the station would be laid off and the Woodhouse family would move into the station house.

The station was manned by the Keeper and six or seven surfmen. Those surfmen with families lived in their own homes along the road which ran by the station close to the present Regulus Avenue. The bachelors lived where the Training Center Commanding Officer now lives. While on duty, the surfmen remained in the station house where there were quarters.

Col. Woodhouse remembers that the remains of a ship were left on the beach for many years while he was a boy. Two wrecks occurred soon after the arrival of the Wood-house family. One was the *Nellie W. Howlett*, a coastal schooner which grounded in October 1903, three miles south of the station. All eight people aboard were rescued by breeches buoy. The other was the *Henry B. Hyde*, said to have been the finest and fastest three-masted sailing ship built in this country since the clipper ship days. (Figure 22.) All 13 people aboard were rescued. The ship remained where she grounded 21 -) miles south of the station from February to September 1904 when an attempt was made to refloat her. However she ran aground again a quarter mile south of her former position and finally was abandoned after salvage of the cargo. A detailed account of this wreck can be found in the Norfolk Virginian Pilot, July 4, 1954, and in the Reader's Digest.) The nameplates of both these ships, nearly ten feet long, used to be mounted on the wall of the station until it was torn down. They cannot now be located. A 1905 survey shows these wrecks located at Lat. 36° 44.84'N and 36° 45.50'N.

When Earl was 15 years old, he used to substitute as a surfman. This task included patrolling the beach halfway to the next station when the visibility was low. At the halfway point, a brass tag or colored flag was passed to the neighboring patrol. This procedure insured that the patrols were actually carried out. There was no school within commuting then; so he was educated by a tutor for the first three grades. After that he went to school in Oceana.

Captain Woodhouse was ill during the period from 1917 to 1920. During this time, his number one surfman, Roy Dudley, became acting Keeper. Mr. Dudley lived in a house which he built for his family just to the south or southeast of the station house. Mr. Dudley now resides in Virginia Beach.

It was during this period that the Life Saving Service ceased to exist as a separate service. The service had not received the recognition and financial support it deserved, and the members had not been given retirement and other benefits enjoyed by the Armed Forces. In 1915, an act was passed merging the Life Saving Service with the Revenue Cutter Service and creating the U. S. Coast Guard. Dam Neck Mills station became station #163 of the new Coast Guard. An interesting history of the Life Saving Service and the merger with the Cutter Service can be found in "The Compact History of the United States Coast Guard" by Bloomfield.

The next Keeper of the station was Captain Charlie Capps, now deceased. He was relieved by Captain Henry Nelson Holmes about 1924. Charlie Gray's house was located close to the present Married Officer's Quarters farthest to the north. He worked at the station from 1927 until 1939, through the transition period from a life saving to a signal station. He resides now at Virginia Beach. Captain Holmes was Keeper during the 1933 hurricane. The station was badly undermined and it was necessary to put sheet piling into the foundation. The sea came across the street to the Captain's home at the present Commanding Officer's quarters, rose to the level of the porch, and flooded his car in the garage. Col. Aubrey Holmes, his son, was trying to drive his car home by the road from Camp Pendleton. He was almost home before the engine quit; so he spent the night in his car. Next morning, a few feet ahead of him, he saw a river 8 feet deep and about 40 feet across where Redwing Lake was overflowing back into the ocean. After the storm, the surfmen closed this new inlet with logs on which they bulldozed sand. This storm wiped out all the fishing shacks from the beach and deposited them on the far shore of Lake Tecumseh. The original life saving station also was destroyed by this storm.

The U. S. Coast Guard signal station was moved to Dam Neck from a building on 16th Street in Virginia Beach now used as a telephone office. Ralph D. Fisher, a retired Coast Guard Lieutenant Commander who owns a home on Old Dam Neck Road, was stationed there as a Radioman 1/c in 1938 and 1939. The man in charge at that time was Chief Radioman Kischassy who retired in California. The complement of the station was six radiomen, three surfmen and one cook. The occupant of the Commanding Officer's house at that time was Major Richard C. Coupland, U. S. Army, who was stationed at Fort Story. Mr. Fisher remembers a severe hurricane in 1937, which seriously damaged the station, tearing off the porch.

Chief Kischassy was relieved by C. C. Musick, now retired and living in Ocean View. Chief Musick encountered problems when the Navy anti-aircraft target sleeves dropped into his antennas, where they became entangled. His assistant was Mr. Rosser, son-in-law of Captain Holmes who was the former Keeper of the station. The station suffered more hurricane damage during his tour, almost losing the galley (a separate small building).

The Coast Guard signal station continued to function at Dam Neck until World War II when larger facilities were needed. The station was then moved to Oceana and operated out of the building now used by the Naval Air Station for their horse stables. Problems developed when the Naval Air Station expanded. The antennas caused a flight hazard. A final move was then made to Pungo, where "Norfolk Radio" still operates.

---

**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: Costano 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.

