



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Station Louisville, Kentucky

Coast Guard Station #276

Location:	Floating station at Louisville, Kentucky, above falls of Ohio River.
Date of Conveyance	1882
Station Built:	1881
Fate:	Station rebuilt in 1928-1929; decommissioned in 1972
Station Type:	<p>The only one of its kind in the world, was established at the falls of the Ohio River at Louisville, Kentucky. The first station, a houseboat, was wooden and placed into commission in 1881, later replaced by another wooden structure, which, in turn, was replaced by a steel hulled houseboat, built in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1928.</p> <p>It was the only inland life-saving station in the country.</p>

Remarks:

Since 1881, the Louisville Lifeboat Station was in operation at Louisville, Kentucky. The station was located just above the falls of the Ohio River and was authorized by an act of Congress on 2 March 1881. It was the only permanently located floating lifeboat station in the world. The reason for establishing a floating station can be found in the typical floods of the Ohio River. The first floating station was constructed of wood by H.T. Cook and John McHenry at the Harvard Ship Yards, Jeffersonville, Indiana. This station was put into operation on 3 November 1881. It remained in use until November 1902, when it was replaced by another wood station. This second structure served until 1928. Then a steel hull station, built at Dubuque, Iowa, was placed into commission. The new station, which arrived at Louisville on April 20, 1929, was 90 feet long and 38 feet wide, larger than the old station.

Louisville's first keeper, Captain "Billy" Devan, served until his death in 1911. Surfman John Gillooly, with over 38 years in service, took over and held the position until his retirement in 1916. After the Gilloly retired, the Coast Guard transferred in two successive warrant officers from the Great Lakes, who, although given proper respect by their men, were never seen as true "rivermen."

Memorable rescue operations include the 1891 rescue of fourteen people on board of the steamer *Hibernia* that, after a severe tornado had hit the Louisville area, was about to go over the falls before coming to a halt near Louisville Bridge. In March 1882 the crew rescued 200 souls from the steamer *James D. Parker* after it had struck a pier of the Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge and sunk. During the floods of 1883-1884, the surfmen of the station "rescued and took to places of safety over 800 imperiled persons, men, women and children--among them many sick and infirm--and supplied food and other necessities to more than 10,000." [USLSS *Annual Report*, 1883].

In 1913, the Louisville Station crew was credited with saving 500 families in a flood at Dayton, Ohio. On 17 February 1914, the steamer *Queen City*, on its way from Pittsburgh to New Orleans got caught in a current at 1:30 a.m. after torrential rains had fallen. The ship headed for the falls – with over 200 people on board. The *Queen City* came to a halt when it hit a rock, but the first few feet of the ship already nosed out over the falls. Two Life-Saving Service boats arrived only five minutes later and managed to rescue all 215 people on board within four hours.

Estimates for the period from 1881 to about 1921 speak of approximately 2,000 distress calls, aid provided to between 5,000 and 7,000 endangered persons, assistance rendered in saving \$6 million - \$7 million worth of property, and 400 dead bodies were pulled in from the Ohio River. The men of the station again played a leading role during the flood of 1937.

Louisville Lifeboat Station operated until 1972. After the disestablishment of the station, the Coast Guard maintained the following activities in Louisville: Officer-in-charge Marine Inspection/Captain of the Port: 4 officers, 5 enlisted men, and 3 civilians; CGC *Obion*: 10 enlisted men; Recruiting Office: 4 enlisted men.

Sources:

Station History File, CG Historian's Office

Galluzzo, John. "Surfman William Drazel of the Louisville Floating Life-Saving Station: America's Only Inland Life-Saving Station." *Wreck & Rescue* No. 14 (Summer 2000), pp. 10-13.

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