



Orleans "Red House" lifesaving station east of Pochet Island circa 1900.

### **CHO Plans New Mission For Replica Of 1872 Orleans Lifesaving Station**

By Jay Stradal

For more than 60 years, the "Red House-style" lifesaving station on Nauset beach stood guard through nor'easters, hurricanes and even a WWI German submarine attack until it was replaced by a newer Coast Guard facility in 1936. Now, the Centers for Culture and History in Orleans (the CHO) hopes to build a replica of the old station for a new mission—to permanently preserve and display the CG36500 "Finest Hours" lifeboat.

A \$55,000 request to the Orleans Community Preservation Committee to develop engineering and architectural plans for the new building was approved. If passed by voters at the May town meeting, first stages of the project could start in July. Completion is expected in 2026. Much of the funding would come from federal, state and private foundation grants. Also, town approval of a long-term lease is needed for the site abutting CHO property at 3 River Rd. Such a lease already exists for the non-profit's Hurd Chapel.

Thanks to a highly dedicated volunteer crew, the 76-year-old wooden boat is fully operational and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A rescue story in itself, it sat fully exposed to the weather after its decommissioning in 1968 until the CHO (Orleans Historical Society) acquired and restored it in 1981. Forty years later, thousands of people come to Rock Harbor annually from across the country and abroad to see this

national treasure and hear about the *Pendleton* disaster and “the greatest small-boat rescue in Coast Guard history.”

Many wish the CG36500 could stay in the water indefinitely, but that is not practical. Maintenance, fuel and insurance costs are rising, mechanical replacement parts are scarce, and it is becoming more difficult to find experienced volunteers to operate the boat. So, plans are necessary for its future preservation and year-round display ashore.

While the Orleans Red House station and the CG36500 lifeboat come from different eras, they represent the finest traditions of the Coast Guard and outer Cape lifesaving history beginning with the Massachusetts Humane Society in 1786. Nearly 100 years later, Sumner Kimball (a former Orleans schoolteacher) was appointed Chief of the U.S. Treasury Department’s Revenue Marine Division, later the U.S. Lifesaving Service. He obtained a \$200,000 appropriation from Congress to professionalize the service and improve facilities, including nine standardized lifesaving stations on Cape Cod in 1872.

The Orleans station was one of those, painted red (including the roof) for visibility, thus the “Red House” name. They were 1½-story frame structures, 42 by 18 feet in size, with shingled walls and gable roof that gave them a triangular appearance. A boat room and mess hall with a stove for heating and cooking were on the first floor. Upstairs were the crew sleeping quarters and a spare room for shipwreck survivors.

Each station was staffed by a Keeper, or Captain, and six or seven surfmen. By 1902, the Orleans station was equipped with three surf boats, two beach carts with guns and breeches buoys, a powerful torch light and a horse.

Early in 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed a law creating the U.S. Coast Guard. In 1938, the old Orleans station, “scene of many stirring events” according to *The Cape Cod Standard Times*, was torn down. The property was turned over to the General Services Administration in 1954, and ultimately to the National Park Service in 1970.

The CHO intends to keep the CG36500 and its protective Red House lifesaving station together for generations to come.

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