

Collection #
P 0190

**U. S. LIFE SAVING STATION, MICHIGAN CITY, PHOTOGRAPHS,
CA. 1890S–1900S, 1974**

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Processed by

Barbara Quigley
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Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

www.indianahistory.org

COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:	1 photograph folder
COLLECTION DATES:	Ca. 1890s–1900s, 1974
PROVENANCE:	Gift from Mrs. Loyal Ward Fellows of Indianapolis, ca. 1978
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HISTORICAL SKETCH

The United States Life-Saving Service, the predecessor to the United States Coast Guard, was formed in 1871, with Sumner Increase Kimball as head of the Revenue Marine Division. Approximately 280 stations were built on the East and West Coasts and the Great Lakes to aid in the rescue of shipwrecked people. On 18 June 1878, the U. S. Life-Saving Service was reorganized as a separate agency of the Treasury Department and Kimball was appointed as the General Superintendent. The U. S. Life-Saving Service authorized a station site in Michigan City, Indiana, on 4 May 1882.

The Service purchased land on the east side of Michigan City's harbor from the Michigan Central Iron Company for five hundred dollars. The new station on the shore of Lake Michigan consisted of three buildings, which housed offices, a boathouse with a launch ramp, a berthing area for the crew above the boathouse, a lookout post above the berthing area, a mess room, a smaller boathouse with launch ramp, workshops, and a stable that later was used as the station garage.

The Michigan City station opened when Henry Finch, known as "Captain" to local residents, became the Keeper of the station on 28 April 1889. The Keeper ensured that his crew members were proficient with constant training and drilling. He also accounted for station property, served as an *ex officio* inspector for U.S. Customs, and kept a log of all drills and everything of note. The Keeper lived at the station the entire year, while other crew members were employed only during the active season, which was usually from April to December.

Requirements of men hired to be Keepers included being able bodied, of good character and habits, able to read and write, younger than forty-five years of age, and a master at handling boats, especially in rough weather. Most keepers tended to have extensive experience at fishing, or other maritime occupations, or had worked their way steadily through the ranks of the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Although some keepers transferred from station to station, many remained at one station, or within a small radius. The long years of service in one area made the men experts on the weather and surf conditions.

Finch's first crew consisted of six men, known as surfmen. Surfmen could be no older than forty-five and had to be physically fit and adept at handling an oar. Most surfmen listed their occupations before entering the Life-Saving Service as "fisherman" or "mariner." The number of men composing a crew was determined by the number of oars needed to pull the station's largest rescue boat. Lookout and patrol duties were considered the most important tasks of the surfmen. Each night surfmen began the patrol of beaches for two and a half miles on either side of the station. From a tower high above the station, a surfman assigned to lookout duty kept watch for ships in distress and logged the number and types of ships passing the station. Before 1900, there were very few recreational boaters, so most of the ships in need of assistance were engaged in commerce.

On 5 December 1893, a severe snowstorm swept the area. At 3:00 a.m., the steamer ship *F. W. Wheeler*, carrying a cargo of 2,100 tons of coal from Buffalo on its way to Chicago, grounded sharply three miles west of Michigan City. Keeper Finch had to hire horses and snowplows to open the road to the beach while heavy winds piled ice along the shore. Pulling alongside the *Wheeler*, a rescue boat made two trips to rescue the ship's crew of sixteen men.

At noon, the lookout reported that the ship appeared to be breaking up. The ship was a total loss.

On 16 April 1897, a new Keeper, Allen A. Kent, former Keeper of the station at Manistee, Michigan, succeeded Finch at Michigan City. Kent logged numerous drownings and some routine rescues, as well as the opening and closing of the active seasons, until 4 March 1908, when he left Michigan City to take command of the station in Charlevoix, Michigan. Kent was succeeded by Michael Egle, former Keeper of the station on Plum Island, Michigan. During Egle's time as the Michigan City Keeper, his logs showed that the number of gasoline-powered boats eventually outnumbered all other types of boats in the area. Egle had the distinction of being the last Keeper of the Michigan City Life Saving Station and the first officer of the U. S. Coast Guard Station at Michigan City, when the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service merged to form the U. S. Coast Guard on 28 January 1915.

Sources:

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National Park Service. "US Life-Saving Service" [US Life-Saving Service \(U.S. National Park Service\)](#) Accessed 6 March 2026.

Noble, Dr. Dennis L. "A Legacy: The United States Life-Saving Service" <https://uslife-savingservice.org/wp-content/uploads/A-History-of-the-USLSS-Denis-Noble.pdf> Accessed 6 March 2026.

Noble, Dennis L. "The Old Life Saving Station at Michigan City, Indiana, 1889–1914." *Indiana History Bulletin*, vol. 51, no. 10, October 1974, pp. 136–143, published by the Indiana Historical Bureau, Indianapolis. Reference Room Collection: F521 .I36 v. 51 (also a copy of this article is in this collection)

United States Coast Guard. "Station Michigan City, Indiana" <https://www.history.uscg.mil/Browse-by-Topic/Assets/Land/All/Article/2667582/station-michigan-city-indiana/> Accessed 6 March 2026.

U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association. "History of the USLSS" [History of the USLSS - U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association, Dedicated to Preserving our National Life-Saving Treasures](#) Accessed 6 March 2026.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of nine copy photographs taken at the United States Life Saving Station at Michigan City in LaPorte County, Indiana. Before these photographs reached the processor, someone had written “c. 1900” on the back of most of them. Some of the original photographs were likely taken in the 1890s. One has Keeper Henry Finch identified, so that one would have been taken no later than 1896. Finch may appear in some of the other photographs, too, in which case they also would have been taken no later than 1896. Some of the photographs appear dark and not very clear. All measure 8x10 except for one that is 5x7. One is a photograph of an illustration of the wreck of the *F. W. Wheeler*; this illustration was published in a supplement to *Marine Review* on 14 December 1893. There is also a copy of the *Indiana History Bulletin* for October 1974, which includes the article “The Old Life Saving Station at Michigan City, Indiana, 1889–1914” by Dennis L. Noble.

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CONTAINER

Henry Finch standing in a boat with six seated crew members; men, women, and children are standing nearby [ca. 1890s].

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Photo of an illustration titled “Abandoned Wreck of the Steamer F. W. Wheeler” (illustration done in December 1893).

Folder 1 of 1

Twelve men standing with three dogs on ramp in front of boathouse (c. 1900). (5x7 photo)

Folder 1 of 1

Six men seated in a boat with one man standing (c. 1900).

Folder 1 of 1

Six men in uniform standing in front of the United States Life Saving Station in Michigan City (c. 1900).

Folder 1 of 1

The United States Life Saving Station building in Michigan City (c. 1900).

Folder 1 of 1

Men in a boat in front of the launch ramp at the United States Life Saving Station in Michigan City, with men, women, and children standing nearby (c. 1900).

Folder 1 of 1

Men in uniform standing on launch ramp at the United States Life Saving Station in Michigan City, with women and children nearby. A man in a darker uniform with a dog is also standing near the ramp (c. 1900).

Folder 1 of 1

Men on a boat called the *Geo. B. McClellan*, docked next to the Michigan City Life Saving Station launch ramp where other men are standing. [A steamer called *Geo. B. McClellan* burned to the waterline at dock in Michigan City on 15 December 1898.]

Folder 1 of 1

Indiana History Bulletin for October 1974, volume 51, no. 10, which includes the article “The Old Life Saving Station at Michigan City, Indiana, 1889–1914” by Dennis L. Noble.

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