

Peaked Hill Life Sloop "Trumbull"
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Brave Men Died In Skipper's Folly

Horace Snow, Sr., who dropped by the other day after priming a pump nearby, planned to take home with him the last of his scrapbooks, full of local news of long ago. He was dissuaded from it when he was shown an assortment of letters from Advocate readers asking for more from the correspondence of the late Mort Small, for many years North Truro correspondent for The Advocate. Horace has owned an extensive collection of newspaper clippings covering Mort's long career as marine observer for Boston ships' brokers and as Advocate correspondent.

One letter from a reader asked for details about the loss of three local members of the U.S. Life Saving Service, on November 30, 1880 when they perished after rescuing four crew members of the sloop Trumbull, and were returning to the vessel to remove its captain and pilot. The drowned men were Capt. David Atkins of Peaked Hill Life Saving Station (in later years dismantled) and Surfmen Elisha Taylor and Stephen F. Mayo.

Here are excerpts from Mort's report of the disaster: "About 3 a.m., Tuesday, Charles P. Kelley (crew member of the Peaked Hill Station) was walking his beat on the beach when he discovered a vessel approaching the outer bar. He lighted his warning signal, then hastened to the station to inform Capt. Atkins of the vessel's danger. The Captain at once called his men, ran out the life boat and launched it into the surf. He had for his crew Taylor, Mayo, Kelley, Isaiah Young and Samuel O. Fisher. Kelley had volunteered to go in place of John L. Cole, who was left ashore to tend the signal lights. The vessel had struck on the bar and was being pounded frightfully, seas threatening to tear her to pieces in a short time. The life boat reached the Trumbull safely and four of her crew were taken into it, leaving on board her captain, Henry Elwell, and the pilot, Theodore Pool."

Mort says there was room in the life boat for the captain and pilot but the two men "refused

to get into the boat as they wanted to save their clothes which were on the sloop." Life Boat Capt. Atkins and his men, battling heavy seas, safely landed ashore their four charges from the sloop.

"No sooner was this accomplished," writes, Mort, "than the brave men started back again for the unfortunate vessel. Just as they reached her the second time, however, the vessel swung around and off, her boom striking the boat and capsizing it instantly. Three of the men, Young, Kelley and Fisher, clung to the boat for awhile, then struck out for shore. Capt. Atkins, with Taylor and Mayo, clung to the overturned life boat for a longer time, and it is supposed, got so thoroughly chilled, they were unable to swim."

Young, Kelley and Fisher reached shore spent and exhausted, but alive. Young was dragged from the surf by the signal tender, John Cole, who had remained ashore to keep signals

lighted on the beach. One of the sloop's rescued men was sent to Provincetown for aid. A Provincetown doctor — he is called "Dr. Crocker" — succeeded in reaching the station without more delay than might be expected in his journey over the dunes. Surfman Young was revived at length though he remained partially disabled.

The lifeless bodies of Capt. Atkins, Taylor and Mayo were brought ashore by crewmen of the Highland Station — that of Capt. Atkins had been swept by the surf to a point nearly a mile South of Highland Light. Mort Small severely blames the captain and pilot of the Thumbull who "were willing to risk the lives of a gallant crew in a heavy surf in order that they might save a few dollars' worth of clothing" and he charges that "the two men on the sloop (later rescued) offered no assistance whatever to the drowning men."

The drowned men were Provincetown natives. Capt. Atkins, who had been nine years in charge at Peaked Hill Station, left a wife and three children. Elisha Taylor left a wife and four children and Stephen Mayo, a dependent father. And a New York newspaper correspondent who later reviewed the story of the disaster, noted that the wi-

dows were "supporting their young families by their own exertions and dependent on charity should they become sick or disabled."

"Their husbands," he wrote, "lost their lives in one of the most perilous and arduous of Government services but because they did not serve in the Army or Navy, their widows and children are denied a pension. This is the Congressional idea of justice."

Thereafter Mort Small campaigned for telephone communication between the hard-pressed Life Saving stations as he had previously campaigned for higher pay for their crews. His efforts stirred Provincetown folk, joined by many from Truro, to send a signed petition to the federal government requesting telephonic communication between the outlying stations. It came eventually. Foot patrols between stations continued for many years. In the late '20's, and probably afterwards, Coast Guardsmen were still patrolling the ocean shore on foot.