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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC Chicamacomico Life Saving Station

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER East side N.C. 12 at SR 1247

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Rodanthe

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

1st

VICINITY OF

STATE

North Carolina

CODE

37

COUNTY

Dare

CODE

55

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER: None

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Chicamacomico Historical Association
% Woodrow Edwards, Chairman

Also:

National Park Service
% William Harris

STREET & NUMBER

National Park Service
Manteo, North Carolina 27954

CITY, TOWN

Waves

VICINITY OF

STATE

North Carolina 27982

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Dare County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Manteo

STATE

North Carolina 27954

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

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Near the main building are a number of outbuildings, all of them wood shingled gable roof structures with modest cornice returns. Located just a few feet behind the main station is the kitchen, a three-bay-wide by two-bay-deep building with a central entrance on the south side. The entrance leads directly into the dining area; the kitchen proper is in the north end where an interior chimney stack pierces the ridge of the roof.

The storage buildings, with the exception of that used for paint, have retained their entrance ramps. Other appurtenances on the property include three cylindrical water tanks with conical roofs, a cistern located between the kitchen and main station, and a lattice work flag tower situated between the main station and the boat house.

The original station, which formerly stood at the beach, is now located a few hundred feet to the east of the 1911 building. It is a one-story-plus-attic frame structure covered with board and batten. The original gable roof rectangular building was expanded on the east side and the roof extended at the same angle. A smaller area was added to the southwestern corner and the roof extended again at the same angle. Care was taken to transfer the original board and battens onto the extension to give the structure a uniform appearance. The surface of the first level of the building is covered with regular board and batten; however, above the chamfered belt course, the ends of the boards are pierced and cut into a circular pattern. Single ornamental boards flank the two windows in the gable end and fill the space between them. A blind oculus is centered above the pair of windows; beneath them, chamfered boards are applied in imitation of half timbering. The circular ended boards continue down the sides and around the south end. The fenestration of the south end employs a pair of pointed arch windows with a tiny rectangular one above. A large double door and a smaller, but similar pair on the east side open into the boat storage room. When the station was in operation, ramps led down from these openings to the ground. To the west of the boat storage room is an equipment storage area, and toward the north a mess area. The second floor was allocated for dormitory space.

The primary interior walls of the original station-boat house are finished with three horizontal ranges of diagonal sheathing. A chamfered X set in a rectangular panel occurs beneath each window.

Chicama

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But the most spectacular rescues were made with surfboats. A horse and wagon pulled the boat across the beach to the surf. Until the early 1900s the boats were powered only by oars, since before the invention of the internal combustion engine, machinery was too cumbersome to be effective. Lifesaving crews referred to rowing as using "armstrong engines." Once a surfboat was launched into the pounding surf, the crew faced the exhausting task of rowing to the disabled vessel to rescue its occupants. The use of engines and self-bailing boats made rescue operations easier and more efficient.⁴

In the early days of the Lifesaving Service, its stations were only manned in the winter months, but by the 1920s they were staffed year round. A proper watch was kept at all hours by the surfmen, and it included both a stationary lookout in the tower of the station and a beach lookout who walked a prescribed patrol on the beach, traveling to a certain point and then returning to the station. At Chicamacomico walking the beach patrol meant that each lookout standing that duty covered a total of seven miles during his watch. Upon sighting a ship in distress the lookout lighted a Coston light to notify the ship that aid was being summoned, and the surfmen then began their operations--usually either using the Lyle gun or the surfboat depending on the weather and the position of the incapacitated vessel. Lookouts also fired flares on many occasions to warn ships that they were getting to close to land and might run aground.⁵

As a vital aid to ships plying off the treacherous shoals and surf of Hatteras Island, the Chicamacomico Lifesaving Station was the headquarters for several daring rescues in the late nineteenth century. One such rescue was that of the Strathairly, a 1,236-ton schooner-rigged screw-steamer, which encountered a fog north of Hatteras and stranded a mile and quarter south of Chicamacomico on March 24, 1891. Despite overwhelming resistance from dense fog, tremendous winds, and tumultuous surf, the courageous surfmen from the Rodanthe outpost managed to pull seven crew members from the sea after they were forced to abandon the wrecked Strathairly. Despite the heroic efforts of the lifesavers, nineteen of the steamer's crew perished in "one of the most disastrous wrecks in the history of Hatteras Island."⁶

On another occasion in April, 1898, the men manning the station managed with heaving lines to pull from the boiling surf, three crew members of the Schooner, Fessenden, which had broken "like a piece of fragile pottery dropped on a stone wall."⁷ It was a disaster which might have been avoided had the captain of the vessel heeded the alert warnings of the surfmen on the previous day when he anchored in a position vulnerable to high winds and strong currents. The lifesavers made still another rescue during the San Circaco hurricane of 1899. When a three masted schooner, Minnie Bergen, was blown aground by high winds only a mile and a half from Chicamacomico, the surfmen brought all seven members of its crew to safety by using the Lyle gun and the breeches buoy.⁸

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On August 16, 1918, a German submarine, U-117, was lurking off the North Carolina coast, laying mines and watching for Allied ships. On that same day the British tanker Mirlo, with a crew of fifty-two and a cargo of gasoline, rounded Cape Hatteras heading north to Norfolk. The commander of the submarine spotted the tanker through the vessel's periscope, and at 3:30 that afternoon the Germans fired a torpedo that struck the Mirlo amidships.

The captain of the tanker was William Roose Williams, a veteran sailor. When his ship was first hit by the German torpedo he attempted to beach her, but two subsequent explosions split the vessel in half, and he gave the order to abandon ship. Meanwhile at the Chicamacomico Station, the tower lookout, Leroy Midgett, sighted the explosion and called down to the keeper, Captain John Allen Midgett. "Captain Johnny" (as he was known to his crew and the local inhabitants) ordered out all hands, who after three unsuccessful attempts to launch the motor-powered surfboat No. 1046 into the high and dangerous surf, finally got the craft beyond the breakers.¹⁵

While the surfmen were launching their boat, part of the crew of the tanker had managed to successfully board three life boats and to get away from the burning wreck safely. But a fourth boat capsized, throwing its occupants into the sea. The other boats attempted to rescue these men, but suddenly another explosion erupted, and gasoline and oil floating on the surface of the water caught fire. This explosion put fire between the crew in the boats and the unfortunate men in the water, clinging to their overturned craft. Captain Williams believed that the fire was too intense and the sailors in the lifeboats too exhausted to attempt another rescue of the men in the water. Besides the fire was so close, the captain recalled, that "we were almost burning and it was only by the strenuous efforts on the oars that we managed to save our lives, the fire following us within a few feet for half an hour at least." The men trapped by the fire seemed doomed.¹⁶

But then into the midst of the fire and smoke came "Captain Johnny" and the men of Chicamacomico. On his way to the rescue Midgett hailed Captain Williams and instructed him to wait for his return before attempting to land his lifeboats on the beach. Midgett warned Williams that the surf was so rough it would be necessary to transfer the occupants of the lifeboats to the self-bailing surfboat No. 1046 before attempting to navigate the turbulent waves. Captain Williams told him of the fate of the sailors trapped in the fire and beseeched the surfman to try somehow to save their lives.

As the Coast Guardsmen approached the stricken tanker they saw barrels of gasoline explode aboard the ship sending sheets of flame a hundred feet into the air. They felt the intense heat from the burning gasoline and oil and choked on the rolling black smoke. Steering around the oil slick the rescuers found an opening in the inferno through which they saw the surviving crewmen of the tanker clutching the overturned lifeboat. The surfmen skillfully maneuvered their frail wooden surfboat through the narrow passage, and surrounded by singeing flame, they pulled from the sea the exhausted and hysterical six

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The Chicamacomico Lifesaving Station at Rodanthe was established in 1874, one of seven established in the state by the United States Lifesaving Station at that time. The 1874 board-and-batten station was converted to a boathouse when a new Shingle-style station and its outbuildings were built in 1911; the buildings from both eras survive as the most complete lifesaving station complex in the state, a vivid reminder of an exciting era in the history of the Atlantic coast. The most celebrated rescue accomplishment by the men of Chicamacomico, under the leadership of "Captain Johnny" Midgett, was in the sinking of the British tanker Mirlo, August 16, 1918. The heroism displayed by the men of Surfboat 1046 was later rewarded by medals of honor from the British and American governments.

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²¹See deed of August 3, 1975, Rodanthe-Waves-Salvo Civic Association to Chicamacomico Historical Association, Inc.; and correspondence to Shine Hamilton, Woodrow Edwards, and others concerning the title, in Survey and Planning files and in files of Chicamacomico Historical Association.

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- Smith, Darrell Hevenor and Powell, Fred Wilbur. The Coast Guard: Its History, Activities and Organization. Service Monograph of the United States Government No. 51. Washington: Institute for Government Research, 1929.
- Stick, David. Dare County: A History. Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1973.
- The Outer Banks of North Carolina, 1584-1958. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958.
- U. S. Treasury Department-U. S. Coast Guard. "Report on Chicamacomico Lifesaving Station," by Edwin C. Bearss. Federal Records (microfilm), Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

