



## Station Salmon Creek, New York

### USLSS Station #2, Ninth District

<b>Location:</b>	East side of the mouth of Salmon Creek, Lake Ontario
<b>Date of Conveyance:</b>	1877
<b>Station Built:</b>	1877
<b>Fate:</b>	The station was destroyed by fire on 27 March 1886.

#### Remarks:

The 1886 USLSS *Annual Report* noted:

"The life-saving station at Salmon Creek, (Ninth District,) Lake Ontario, New York, was destroyed by fire on the night of the 27th of March, 1886, between 10 and 11 o'clock. The station had been closed all winter and the keeper, who resides about half a mile distant, had on that day received an order to enlist his crew in readiness for reopening on April 1st. This order had been complied with, and the keeper had laid in a supply of provisions, everything when he withdrew and locked the doors shortly after 6 in the evening appearing to be all right. At about 11 o'clock that night he was aroused from sleep by a neighbor with an alarm of fire, down by the lake, in the direction of the station. The fire was supposed to be at Wright's Hotel, not far away. Keeper Chapman immediately hastened to the scene in the company of his neighbors, and then found that it was the station itself on fire. The outbuildings were even then almost destroyed, so rapid had been the progress of the flames. Upon opening the door of the main building, on the opposite side, to procure fire-buckets, the men were driven back by the sudden outburst of smoke and flames from within, and their efforts were futile. The fire in the main building seemed to be independent of that on the outside, and this led to the belief that it was of incendiary origin. The station, with its outfit, was entirely destroyed,

not an article being saved. Active efforts have been made to discover the guilty party, but thus far without success." [*Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service For the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1886* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), p. 58.]

Although his station and all of its equipment had been destroyed in the fire, Keeper Edwin Chapman nevertheless continued on duty that year with a few volunteers and a skiff until the close of navigation on 15 December 1886.\*\*

\*\*Our thanks to Francine Glassic for this information.

### **Keepers:**

Marshall E. Parker was appointed keeper on 24 March 1877 and was removed on 17 November 1885.

Edwin E. Chapman was appointed keeper on 17 November 1885 and was still in charge when his station was destroyed by fire on the night of 27 March 1886.

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Historian and researcher Francine Glassic, an expert on the Salmon Creek Station and its crew, also noted the following:

Salmon Creek Station (No. 2, Dist. 8/9, Lake Ontario, Oswego County, NY).

Locally, this station was also referred to as Texas, or, Mexico Point, as it was situated on Mexico Pt. in the town of Texas, NY, about 4 or 5 miles north of the village & town of Mexico. Opening date of March 24, 1877 . . . An article from the Oswego *Daily Palladium* of Saturday, September 8, 1877 (p. 4, col. 6) has the following headline:

"DESERVING OF A REWARD FOR SAVING HUMAN LIFE"

"...Keeper Parker has been instrumental in saving the lives of eleven persons during his term of office, and had it not been for his prompt action in this case..."

Less than a year later, on July 29, 1878, quite a different picture was painted when the yacht ISABEL capsized opposite the station 3 mi. out. Due to the gale conditions, the three persons clinging to the drifting capsized hull were too low in the water to be seen by the life-saving crew. The survivors and the same public &

press who had previously praised them, now vilified them. This kind of reaction from the public was quite common and I have found examples regarding other stations. In the early years the Life-Saving Stations were mostly ignored by the local press, unless they did something wrong. At any rate, Station No.2 was cleared in an investigation by District Superintendent David P. Dobbins.

An incident that seems to have slipped under the radar without any disciplinary action by Dobbins, occurred July 9, 1885 (1886 *Annual Report of the USLSS*, p. 65-66); although I have often wondered if it contributed to Keeper Parker's removal. Three lawyers from Mexico secured the services of one of the surfmen as a fishing guide, while another surfman was in a skiff nearby. It's possible the surfman was on leave, but I think the situation raises eyebrows. During the excitement of catching a fish (which was said to be 6" long), they capsized the boat and the life-saving crew had to come to their rescue. The lawyers were so grateful, they even wrote a letter of acknowledgement to Kimball! I've always wondered if he dispatched someone to investigate.

I found this item probably 8 yrs. ago, oddly enough in one of our Rochester papers, the *Post Express* of November 18, 1885:

"A NEW LIFE SAVING STATION KEEPER [Edwin E. Chapman was appointed keeper on 17 November 1885]

The Secretary of the Treasury yesterday appointed E.E. Chapman to be keeper of the Salmon Creek life saving station, Lake Ontario."

This led me to the Mexico Town Historian to request more info. She sent me copies of several clippings from scrapbooks. Many of these are un-dated and are probably from the weekly *Mexico Independent*. Fortunately this one "is" dated and is from November 25, 1885:

"Capt. M.E. Parker has been removed by the government as keeper of the Life Station at this place, and Edwin E. Chapman has been appointed to fill the vacancy. Mr. Chapman, the new incumbent, is 29 years old, and has had seven years experience at Big Sandy, as surfman. He arrived late Saturday night and took possession. The ex-keeper has been in the service eight years. On his retiring from office the crew presented him with a \$11 chair, which was a surprise to Capt. Parker. It was a strong token of their good will toward their late keeper."

I've not been able to find the reason for his removal. But I recently found on the

web, a list of Civil War soldiers who were granted pensions. Knowing he was a veteran, I searched & found his name there. It said he received two wounds, one ball destroying the big toe of the right foot. The other ball entered the left thigh, rendering permanent lameness of that leg. The disability was stated as permanent & total, dated June 13, 1865 at Fort Covington. It is curious that a man who was considered to be totally disabled could have been found fit to be keeper of a life-saving station. I am now wondering if he was removed because his disability caught up with him, and he was no longer able to pass the physical exam during inspection.

Hopefully he got to use his \$11 chair during the winter, because come Spring he had to ship out as a watchman on the steam barge ANNIE SMITH, disability or no, as there were mouths to feed. Tragically, he died in an accident at only 40 yrs. old when he walked into an open hatchway and fractured his skull on the keelson. This occurred at Manitowoc, WI, Saturday, August 14, 1886. He left a wife and 7 children. He is buried in the Mexico village Cemetery, along with two other USLSS keepers: William E. VanAlstine, first keeper at Big Sandy, and George N. Gray, keeper of our station at Charlotte, and my No.1 hero. (the death of Parker is cited in 2 sources: an Aug. 16, 1886 clipping from a scrapbook in the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society, probably from a Buffalo paper; and articles from the *Oswego Daily Palladium* for August 16, 17, & 19, 1886.)

I have a number of small clippings regarding the arson. It was universally condemned by the local populace. The fiend was never found out, as far as is known, although Special Agent W.S. Young of Ogdensburg (probably from Dept. of Customs) was dispatched around April 23rd to conduct an investigation. The local papers said the results of this inquiry were not made known to them.

There were promises of re-building the station, but it was never carried out. The *Annual Reports* continued to list the station until 1910, with the notation "destroyed by fire". This was long after the station at Niagara was commissioned in 1893 and any hope of re-building Salmon Creek probably had vanished 20 yrs. before.

Meanwhile, E.E. Chapman retained his commission for the season (*Oswego Palladium*, Tuesday, April 13, 1886, p. 4, col. 4) and one of the old metallic lifeboats was sent over from Big Sandy Station (*Jefferson County Journal*, Wednesday, April 27, 1886, p. 8, col.1). He performed service on several occasions with one or two volunteers from his old crew, mostly using a tired old skiff, the metallic boat used only once. (Four of these Francis boats were repaired by our own Capt. Doyle of Charlotte Station in 1883, by orders of Dobbins of Buffalo. Two were sent up, and two down. I believe one went to Oswego and the other to Big Sandy.)

It is probable that Chapman was simply relieved of duty at the end of the 1886 season, rather than resigned. He is reported to have driven with a volunteer 5 miles north to Selkirk in subzero temperatures on 2 December. A small schooner had driven ashore, but the crew had already reached shore in their own boat. According to the 1886 Annual Report, the other stations on Lake Ontario and Erie closed for the season on 15 December, so Chapman undoubtedly remained on duty until then.

E.E. Chapman had a remarkable 42 year career in the USLSS/USCG. He was the first man to advance from a cook to the rank of Lieutenant Commander (George E. Jackson, also from Ellisburg, was surely the 2nd, and had over 45 yrs. depending on your source.) Chapman began as cook at Big Sandy in 1878, was surfman in 1880, then made keeper at Salmon Creek in 1885, had his station burned out from under him, and through it all remained on duty. He was made keeper at Oswego when Blackburn retired, & remain till 1892 when he was made 9th District Superintendent to fill the shoes of the illustrious Dobbins at his death.

He saw the transition to gasoline powered boats and the formation of the Coast Guard and earned the respect & love of so many of the men that he came up through the ranks with, or who worked under him. Most of them served as bearers at his funeral. He retired in 1920 and died in 1931. A number of years ago when I came across his grave in Ellisburg Cemetery, I was shocked & saddened that there wasn't even a flag or any hint of this man's contributions! A few years ago I took upon myself the mission of decorating the graves of these forgotten men. Last year I did between 50 & 60, and each year I find more.

Francine Glassic

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