



# U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

## Sumner Increase Kimball



A young lawyer from Maine, Sumner I. Kimball was appointed as the chief of the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Division in 1871. He had joined the Treasury Department as a clerk 10 years earlier and had proven his abilities as a manager. Using his hard-earned political know-how, and a good dose of Yankee common sense, Kimball proceeded to completely overhaul the Revenue Marine and the hodge-podge system of lifesaving stations along the nation's coast that were also under the control of the Revenue Marine Division. His impact on both organizations would prove to be immeasurable.

After the Civil War, the Revenue Marine, and the executive branch agencies generally, came under intense Congressional scrutiny. Economy was the name of the game during this time and expenditures were scrutinized across the board. Hence, Kimball decided to order the construction of new cutters not with iron hulls, which entailed considerable expense, but with proven wood hulls. The total number of petty officers and enlisted men was substantially cut and their pay reduced. Kimball also carried out a vigorous "housecleaning" of incompetent Revenue Marine officers and saw to it that discipline was tightened. A special object of his censure was the use of cutters as personal yachts by local Custom officials, a wide-spread abuse during that time. Kimball also put into effect a merit system to determine promotions. He also made one other great contribution to the quality of the Revenue Marine by establishing, in 1877, a School of Instruction, to train young officers. From this move developed today's Coast Guard Academy, which still trains the majority of the Coast Guard's career officers. But his greatest impact came with his work with what would become the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

Since 1848 Congress had been funding strictly volunteer stations, paying for the station and its equipment but relying on the local community to provide unpaid crews when needed. Kimball drew up regulations that set standards for personnel performance, physical standards and station routines. He convinced a parsimonious Congress to increase the funding of the Service to provide for full-time, paid crews, led under the direction of an appointed keeper. New stations were constructed around the coast and were equipped with the finest lifesaving equipment available. In 1878, this growing network of stations was organized as a separate agency of the Treasury Department and was named the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Kimball was chosen as the General Superintendent of the new service. He served in that capacity during the entire existence of the Life-Saving Service until it was merged with the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 to form the new U.S. Coast Guard.

Dr. Dennis Noble, a historian of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, wrote of Kimball: "Kimball was unquestionably the driving force behind the United States' possessing a first-class lifesaving



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organization. Much of the present-day Coast Guard's highly regarded reputation as a humanitarian organization is the result of his organizational skills and management abilities. Many of the routines that he established, such as constant drills with rescue equipment, are just as important today as they were more than a century ago. In the final analysis Kimball was the ultimate bureaucrat: he knew how to work within the federal government. Kimball himself never actively sought the limelight, but he realized that the exploits of his lifesavers were dramatic and could help sway politicians who controlled the purse strings. Hiring William D. O'Connor, a professional author, to write the [Life-Saving Service's] annual reports shows Kimball's genius at what we would now call public relations. The regulations he passed over the years were designed not only to improve the service, but to remove the crew members from reproach. Kimball realized that to create a professional service, and one that was in large part located in small communities, his crews would have to be above petty politics and be seen as a service to the community and the nation. Apparently Kimball lived his life along the same lines. No taint of scandal ever touched him, and his life-style made him as anonymous as the faceless clerks that served in Washington, D.C. Kimball died in that city in 1923, with very little notice." [Dennis Noble, *That Others Might Live: The U.S. Life-Saving Service, 1878-1915* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994, p. 155].