

## **Captain Richard Etheridge, Keeper, USLSS**



**Captain Richard Etheridge (far left) and his Pea Island Life-Saving Station crew, circa 1896.**

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Captain Richard Etheridge, a Union Army veteran, became the first African-American to command a Life-Saving station when the service appointed him as the keeper of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station in North Carolina in 1880. The Revenue Cutter Service officer who recommended his appointment, First Lieutenant Charles F. Shoemaker, noted that Etheridge was "one of the best surfmen on this part of the coast of North Carolina." Soon after Etheridge's appointment, the station burned down. Determined to execute his duties with

expert commitment, Etheridge supervised the construction of a new station on the original site. He also developed rigorous lifesaving drills that enabled his crew to tackle all lifesaving tasks. His station earned the reputation of "one of the tautest on the Carolina Coast," with its keeper well-known as one of the most courageous and ingenious lifesavers in the Service.

On October 11, 1896, Etheridge's rigorous training drills proved to be invaluable. The three-masted schooner, the *E.S. Newman*, was caught in a terrifying storm. En route from Stonningham, Connecticut to Norfolk, Virginia, the vessel was blown 100 miles south off course and came ashore on the beach, two miles south of the Pea Island station. The storm was so severe that Etheridge had suspended normal beach patrols that day. But the alert eyes of surfman Theodore Meekins saw the first distress flare and he immediately notified Etheridge. Etheridge gathered his crew and launched the surfboat. Battling the strong tide and sweeping currents, the dedicated lifesavers struggled to make their way to a point opposite the schooner, only to find there was no dry land. The daring, quick-witted Etheridge tied two of his strongest surfmen together and connected them to shore by a long line. They fought their way through the roaring breakers and finally reached the schooner. The seemingly inexhaustible Pea Island crewmembers journeyed through the perilous waters ten times and rescued the entire crew of the *E.S. Newman*. For this rescue the crew, including Etheridge, were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal by the Coast Guard in 1996. The award narrative stated:

*The three-masted schooner E.S. Newman, sailing from Providence, RI to Norfolk, VA ran into a hurricane. Pushed before the storm, the ship lost all sails and drifted almost 100 miles before it ran aground about two miles south of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station (NC) on 11 October 1896. The station keeper, Richard Etheridge, had discontinued the routine patrols due to the high water that had inundated the island. Surfman Theodore Meekins, however, saw what he thought was a distress signal and lit a Coston flare. He then called to Etheridge to look for a return signal. Both strained to look through the storm. Moments later, they saw a faint signal of a vessel in distress.*

*Etheridge, a veteran of nearly twenty years, readied the crew. They hitched mules to the beach cart and hurried toward the vessel. Arriving on the scene, they found Captain S.A. Gardiner and eight others clinging to the wreckage. Unable to fire a line because the high water prevented the Lyle Gun's deployment, Etheridge directed two surfmen to bind themselves together with a line. Grasping another line, the pair moved into the breakers while the remaining surfmen secured the shore end. The two surfmen reached the wreck and, using a heaving stick, got a line on board. Once a line was tied around one of the crewmen, all three were then pulled back through the surf by the crew on the beach. The remaining eight persons were carried to shore in similar fashion. After each trip two different surfmen replaced those who had just returned.*

*For their efforts the crew of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station, Richard Etheridge, Benjamin Bowser, Dorman Pugh, Theodore Meekins, Lewis Wescott, Stanley Wise, and William Irving were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal on 5 March 1996.*

For more information on this rescue and Richard Etheridge in particular, please consult the following recently published book:

David Wright & David Zoby. *Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost Story of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

