

Citizens – Captain James Henry Curran, USLSS

By Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



*C1909 - Captain Curran and the Lifesaving Crew: Those who have been identified are Back Center Lufe Pugh; Back Right Frank Coleman; Front Right Ben Aley.*

Information indicates that James Henry Curran was born in Michigan on 1 September 1859. He came to the White Lake Area as the new Captain of the Lifesaving Station in July 1908 following the departure of Captain Bedford.

According to a newspaper account on 17 September 1908 the White Lake Life Saving crew proved their alertness in getting to a ship in distress. The large grain barge, P. P. Miller, hailing from South Chicago and bound for Buffalo got off course in the thick smoky weather and ran ashore near Little Pointe Sable. Word was sent to both the White Lake and Pentwater crews, but despite the fact that the boat was about twice as far from White Lake as Pentwater, our crew was the first to arrive and lend assistance to the disabled boat. The Miller was too hard aground to release herself, so the Pere Marquette car ferry was summoned and after tugging at the stranded vessel several hours was successful in pulling it off. Our lifesaving crew stayed by the Miller until she was safely off the beach and after a 17-mile trip with their surfboat reached the station in good shape. Needless to say, Captain Curran was very pleased with the work of his valiant crew.

To give you some idea of the size of the Barge, the Miller was 354 feet in length, 48 feet beam, 28 feet depth and a gross tonnage of 3845. She was owned by J. E. Ball of Buffalo and valued at \$275,000. Frank Wenheimer was the captain of the Miller which carried a crew of 21. There were also five passengers aboard. The Miller had a cargo of corn and wheat valued at \$95,000.

On 3 February 1909, Captain Curran married Mary Conklin-Matthews in Paw Paw. She had previously been married and brought her 14-year-old son with her. They had no children of their own. They ended up divorcing on 27 May 1920 in Van Buren County.

Members of the Life Saving crew in December 1909, when the station closed, included: Surfman Charles Paget, Ben Aley, Frank Coleman, Henry Vanoort, John W. Johnson, George Robinson and Elsworth LaVille. They are probably the ones pictured above but who's who is unknown.

In July 1910 Surfman Frank Coleman resigned his position at the White Lake Life Saving station and took a position as assistant lighthouse keeper at Kenosha, Wisconsin.

April 1911 showed the crew as: Charles Paget, Benjamin Aley, Elsworth Laville, John W. Johnson, Herbert Vanoort, Orville Lee (sub) and John VerBeek. Lafayette Pugh who had been a member of the crew for a number of years left for Frankfort where he became be a member of their Life Saving crew.

In early April 1912, while crossing the lower part of the lake, John Murray broke through the ice and was plunged into the lake where the water was about forty feet deep. Patrick Powers and Guy Watkins who were nearby witnessed the accident and attempted to reach Mr. Murray with a line but it fell short. Captain Curran of the USLSS hurried to the scene and started to crawl over the ice to the drowning man. He finally succeeded in reaching him and pulling him out on the ice. Mr. Murray was in the water ten minutes and was handicapped in raising himself because of a paralytic stroke he suffered last fall that left him in a feeble condition. Mr. Murray was 66 years old at the time and while he suffered considerably from the chill he will recover.

In June 1913, the government had plans to remodel the Lifesaving station which had been built in 1886. When the work was completed, White Lake would have a new up-to-date station with such modern conveniences as bath tubs and lavatories and a complete water works and sewer system.

The present structure was moved back 50 feet from its present site and enlarged to accommodate a new power surf boat to be added to the equipment as soon as the station is completed. A great deal of cement and concrete was used for the foundations and approaches.

Cement walls were built under the station and new improvements were made with a view of improving the grounds and station as well as making it substantial and permanent. White Lake and Grand Haven were the first two stations in the district to receive extensive improvements this season.

Two changes in the life saving crew were also reportedly made during the month of June 1913. Ray Storms was transferred from Big Point Sable to White Lake and William Leahman from Chicago was coming here as well. Charles Paget, the oldest member of the crew had been here for 17 years. The other crew members were Ben Aley, John Verbeek, John Johnson, Glen Talant.

When the station opened in April 1915, the crew consisted of Charles Paget, John Johnson, Glen Talent, Will Lehman, David Wing, John Palmer (sub), and Ben Aley.

At the end of the 1916 season, Captain Curran was transferred to Beaver Island and was replaced by Captain John Barnard.

In February 1917, Captain Curran dropped by the area for a visit with friends. He was recently transferred from Beaver Island to Chicago where he had an executive office in the Coast Guard station. By April 1918, Captain Curran will have served 30 years in the service and he expected to retire and make Montague his home.

On 15 March 1917, Henry Curran, was reported missing, as he had not reported for duty for a few days at the Chicago station where he was listed as a surfman. If he was not found by April 1, it would be considered desertion, and he would have to forfeit a \$75 a month pension due to him. He was finally located in a Muskegon rooming house where he had been laid up with illness. He was able to return to Chicago where he retired.

Capt. Henry Curran died in South Haven on 20 August 1926. He is buried in Lakeview Cemetery in South Haven.