

Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Humane Society, modeled on Britain's Royal Humane Society, was established by an act of Congress in 1796. The Massachusetts Humane Society was an all-volunteer, purely humanitarian organization; all early efforts were directed at saving lives rather than ships or cargo. Initially funded entirely by private donations from Boston physicians and shipping merchants, the Humane Society began by erecting Huts of Refuge, equipped with blankets, firewood, and food rations, along treacherous Massachusetts shorelines. The first



Life Boat manned by Cohasset Crew April 2, 1918

three huts were positioned in Scituate, Hull, and Lovells Island (adjacent to "the Narrows" through which all shipping passed prior to 1902) after 13 people froze to death on Lovells in the early 1800's after surviving a shipwreck. The Huts were positioned in locations that allowed shipwreck victims who had made their way to shore to aide in their own salvation and avoid dying of exposure.

Eager to expand its service to shipwreck victims, the Humane Society built its first lifeboat station, in Cohasset, Massachusetts, in 1807, equipping it with a 30-foot, cork-lined lifeboat. Thirty-four years later, in 1841, the MHS had expanded to include 81 stations with 18 boats along the coastline. [image] The service endeavored to locate huts and lifeboat stations at the most treacherous locations, and painted the huts bright red, in hopes of their being readily seen by survivors. While the preponderance of Humane surfmen were of European descent, the crews reflected their communities, and, for example, the Martha's Vineyard Gay Head crew was composed entirely of Wompanoag men.

