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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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# Idawalley Zorada Lewis (-Wilson), Keeper, USLHS



*Ida Lewis, date unknown*

Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society

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**Born:** 25 February 1842

**Place of Birth:** Newport, Rhode Island

**Date of Enlistment/Appointment:** 1879 (served as a keeper, unofficially, from 1857 to 1879 along with her mother after her father, the keeper at Lime Rock Light, became ill in 1857 and passed away in 1872--her mother was appointed as the official keeper until 1879)

**Retired:** She died of a stroke while on duty, 24 October 1911

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Ida Lewis is one of the most famous personages to have ever served in the Coast Guard or in the case, the U.S. Lighthouse Service, one of the Coast Guard's predecessors. She gained national notoriety during a time when most women in the United States were not in the professional workforce nor on the national stage. She overcame the biases of the time, through skill and professional ability, to become the official keeper of the Lime Rock Light Station, a position she held until her death.

She met a president, Ulysses S. Grant, a Vice-President, Schuyler Colfax, made the cover of Harper's Weekly, a national publication, in 1869, was featured in stories in Putnam's Magazine and The New York Tribune, and received accolades and awards from around the country. (A poem about her appears below.) Surprisingly, most of the attention was not due to her first-rate skills and abilities as a lightkeeper but rather for her abilities as a life-saver. In fact, she was known as "The Bravest Woman in America," a title bestowed upon her by the Society of the American Cross of Honor. Light keepers were frequently asked to risk their lives to saved the shipwrecked or others in danger of drowning and Ida Lewis did just that countless times and received the nation's highest award for lifesaving. She was an expert small boat handler and was quite skilled with oars. Indeed, she could "row a boat faster than any man in Newport [RI]."

She was officially credited with saving 18 lives during her 39 years at Lime Rock and was awarded the [Gold Lifesaving Medal](#).

For more information, check the chapter on Ida Lewis in the following publication:  
Mary Louis Clifford & J. Candace Clifford. *Women Who Kept the Lights: An Illustrated History of*

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## **IDA LEWIS TO THE RESCUE**

The mother is trimming her lamp above  
For the day is wild and drear;  
That the Lime Rock Light might greet the night  
With its steady blaze of cheer.  
The daughter sits at her work below  
For the girl is used to toil;  
Plying her oar with a willing hand,  
Or feeding the lamp with oil.  
The mother looks on the angry sea,  
And thrills to a sight of dread  
A sinking boat, with a drowning crew,  
Mid billows that roll o'erhead.  
She would bring them aid--but her  
strength is past--  
She can only weep and wail,  
As with hurried step she hastens down  
To tell the terrible tale.  
But Ida, ready and prompt at need,  
Has rescued many before;  
Nor heeds the gale as o'er stone and weed  
She flies to the rock-bound shore.  
Her brow is bare to the beating rain;  
She feels not the driving storm;  
Though winds may moan and the gray gulls sail  
And the wintry tide run strong.  
Now quick to her boat, with practiced hand,  
She launches the fragile bark  
It hath brought ere [sic] now through swelling seas  
To the sinking man an ark!  
But ne'er before, when it cleft the tide  
From shipwreck to seek and save,  
Was her woman's arm so sorely tried  
By the strife of wind and wave.  
Then Ida on- to the rescue spring!  
Of the three! the boy is gone!  
Thought two still cling to the slippery keel,  
Yet they cannot cling there long.  
On Ida! on! Though the billows rage.  
For the prey so nearly won!  
Yet your feeble arm shall cheat their wrath,  
And your work of love be done.