Ida Lewis
HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

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Ida Lewis was an American lighthouse keeper who was known as a hero after rescuing many people from the seas.

Ida Lewis was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1842 and when her father was appointed as the lighthouse keeper of Lime Rock Light, she moved there with her family in 1857.

Lighthouses are towers, buildings, or other types of structures on coastlines and, during Ida Lewis' time, used oil burning lamps with a system of lenses and reflectors to focus beams of light. These lights helped ships find safe harbor as they returned from being at sea. **Lighthouse keepers** had to light the lamp and make sure it kept burning throughout the night. They also had to clean the lenses and reflectors so the light would shine bright.
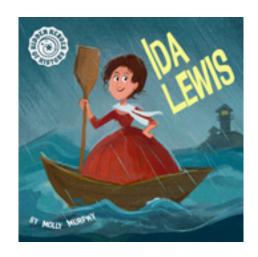
Lighthouses were often found in very remote places, and Lime Rock Light was located on a small island off of Newport, near where Ida was born. Most lighthouse keepers in Ms. Lewis' time were men, but families would take on much of the work to help make sure all of the important duties and tasks could be completed.

Shortly after arriving on the small island, Ms. Lewis' father became very ill so her mother was appointed as Lime Rock Light's keeper. This meant that at the young age of 15, Ms. Lewis began assisting her mother with lighthouse keeper's duties, while also helping to take care of her family.

Lime Rock was completely surrounded by water, and the only way to reach the mainland of Newport was by boat. One of Ms. Lewis' duties was to row her younger siblings to school every weekday in her **skiff**, or small rowboat, and fetch supplies from town whenever they were needed. She developed superior water skills and became known as the best swimmer in Newport.

Ida Lewis made her first rescue at age 16! In 1858, four teenage boys were traveling around the bay near Lime Rock Light. One decided to climb the **mast** of the boat and the boat capsized (turned over in the water) so Ms. Lewis got into her skiff, rowed out to them, pulled them into her boat and saved all four of them.

During her life, Ms. Lewis rescued at least 18 people and it's possible that number is closer to 25. During one rescue, she went out to help three men who were in danger because they had been trying to save a sheep during a very strong wind. When Ida Lewis got the men to shore safely, they begged her to row back out in the wind and save the sheep. So, she turned around, and knowing she wouldn't be able to lift the sheep into the boat, tied it to her skiff and towed it back to shore.

There were so many amazing rescues that Ms. Lewis performed in her life. She pulled men out of ice while wearing a dress - which would have been quite heavy during her time, with multiple layers of fabric. She helped a man get his foot unstuck from the bottom of a rowboat when he unwisely decided to stand up and his foot broke right through the bottom of the boat.

She also gave out dry clothes, treated folks for **hypothermia**…and at the age of 27, she carried out her most famous rescue. It was during a snowstorm and she was sick with a cold and fever. Two soldiers were in danger of drowning and were spotted by Ms. Lewis' mother. Without stopping to put on her coat or boots, Ms. Lewis rowed out into the snowstorm and saved both soldiers. After the rescue, she had to spend time recovering from hypothermia and frostbite on her feet.

After the snowstorm rescue, Ida Lewis became incredibly famous and was known as 'the bravest woman in America." People wrote to her, sent her gifts, depicted the rescue in their artwork and she was even visited by President Ulysses S. Grant.

The City of Newport renamed the Fourth of July in 1869 as Ida Lewis Day. Money was raised to build her a rowboat named 'The Rescue' but it was very fancy and ultimately impractical. There was such a media frenzy around Ms. Lewis' rescue that, in the summer of 1869 alone, about 9,000 visitors came to the very small island of Lime Rock. Some even staged their own peril in the hopes of getting rescued.

Ida Lewis made more rescues later in her life and continued her daily work as a lighthouse keeper. But she still was not officially recognized as the lighthouse keeper at Lime Rock. That wouldn't happen until 1879, a few decades after she had started shouldering most of the responsibility of the job.

Ms. Lewis was honored with medals and other recognitions during her lifetime. Much later, in 1924, Lime Rock was renamed Ida Lewis Rock. Then the lighthouse itself was renamed Ida Lewis Lighthouse, quite an honor since lighthouses are usually named after geographic features. In fact, Ms. Lewis is the only lighthouse keeper to have ever been honored in this way.

Ida Lewis spent much of her later years on the island alone, with some help from one of her surviving siblings. But she said this about the job and the boats she saw from her island: "I*t's part of my happiness to know they are depending on me to guide them to safety.*"

Glossary

Lighthouse – towers, buildings, or other types of structures designed to emit light from a system of lamps and lenses. They once were beacons that ships used to help with navigation. And they often marked dangerous coast-lines so ships could avoid crashing. Today, technology has replaced most lighthouses and their keepers as the method ships use to reach safe harbor.

Lighthouse Keeper – the person who maintains a lighthouse. Their duties include: clean, paint, and repair all buildings on the light station when needed; maintain all mechanical equipment at the light station; maintain light-house log book and record all daily light station activities; and take weather readings every day and record in log book.

Skiff – a shallow, flat-bottomed open boat with sharp bow and square stern.

Mast – a tall upright post, spar, or other structure on a ship or boat, in sailing vessels generally carrying a sail or sails.

Hypothermia – a condition where the body loses heat faster than it can make heat. It can happen when a person is exposed to cold air, water, wind, or rain.

Give it Some Thought

- What are you thinking about the most after you read about Ida Lewis' life? How does her story make you feel?
- What do you think Ida Lewis cared about the most with her job as a lighthouse keeper? Do you think she cared about being famous?
- Ida Lewis spent most of her time alone on Lime Rock Island—how do you think being alone made her feel?

Use Your Imagination

Lighthouses are symbols of hope and security. They are shining beacons of light that help guide us safely home when we feel lost and insecure.

Ida Lewis was a protector too and felt it was her duty to be someone people could count on to guide them to safety no matter what would happen to her. She once said: "*If there were some people out there who needed my help, I would get into my boat and go to them, even if I knew I couldn't get back. Wouldn't you?*"

Think about who and what makes you feel safe, then write down your thoughts by answering these questions:

- Describe the people in your life who, like Ida Lewis, are always there to help guide you through the difficult times.
- Describe your lighthouse—what are the places that make you feel safe and protected?
- Can you be a lighthouse for others? Describe the many ways that you are (or can be) a symbol of hope, friendliness and comfort for those in need.