



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**“None but a
donkey would
consider
it unfeminine to save
lives.”**

**Ida Lewis
Recipient, Coast Guard
Lifesaving Medal**



Ida Lewis: The Bravest Woman in America

In 1869, Ida Lewis captivated the country’s imagination as [“the bravest woman in America”](#) for her daring rescue of two soldiers whose boat had capsized in Newport Harbor, RI. Until her death in 1911, Lewis would rescue many others, and become the only woman until 2020 to receive the Coast Guard’s Lifesaving Medal, one of the nation’s highest honors.

[Born](#) Idawalley Lewis in 1842, two years later, her father was appointed keeper of Rhode Island’s Lime Rock Light Station in Newport Harbor. The family moved with him to the small rocky island.

At the time, lighthouses served critical functions,



MISS IDA LEWIS, THE HEROINE OF STONEWALL.—[From an Illustration in Harper's Weekly, N. Y., July 31, 1869.]

including national security and insuring safe passage of ferries and commercial ships. Located near the Army's Fort Adams, the Lime Rock Lighthouse also served as a beacon to vessels transporting military personnel. In 1857, Lewis's father suffered a stroke and her mother assumed his duties. However, with an ailing husband and younger children to tend, the job was too much for one person. Twelve-year-old Lewis stepped up to help. When her mother died in 1879, the position officially became hers.

Physically demanding, the job included on-going repair and maintenance of the lamp, its reflectors, and its mechanisms. Daily tasks involved following a strict schedule to keep the lamp burning with oil, lighting it at sunset and then trimming the wick at midnight. At sunrise, the lamp had to be extinguished. Lewis' duties also extended to rescuing shipwrecked survivors. She often braved rough seas and risked her own life to save others.



HEROIC ACTION OF MISS IDA LEWIS.—RESCUE OF TWO DROWNING SOLDIERS IN NEWPORT HARBOR.—[From Harper's Weekly, N. Y., July 31, 1869.]

Although it was still an unusual position for women to hold, Lewis wasn't the [first female](#) keeper. Established in 1789, the Lighthouse Service was the country's first Public Works act. It later merged with the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939. Although there were no specific policies preventing women from becoming keepers, most received their appointments only after the death or incapacity of a spouse. Between 1828 and 1905, 122 women served as official lighthouse keepers.

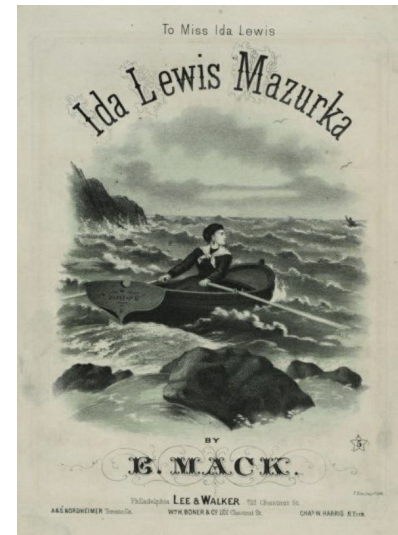
From an early age, Lewis developed her skill with boats [rowing](#) her siblings to the mainland and back every day for school. She was also a [strong swimmer](#). In 1858, she made her [first rescue](#) saving four young men whose boat capsized in the harbor. Her most famous rescue occurred in March 1869. One stormy night, Lewis' mother spotted two soldiers clinging to an overturned boat. Braving the foul weather and the icy water, Lewis set off in her row boat. She pulled the men into her boat and ferried them to safety.

As hundreds of newspapers recounted the daring rescue, overnight, Lewis became a national hero. She received numerous awards for her bravery and her

image was reproduced on national magazine covers including [Harper's Weekly](#). Even President Ulysses S. Grant [visited](#) the Lime Rock Lighthouse to meet Newport's courageous young woman.



That same year, the town designated July 4 "Ida Lewis Day" and held a parade in her honor. Assorted memorabilia, including Ida Lewis-themed hats, ties, and photographs were sold. One photo of Lewis wearing a nice dress and adorned with jewelry while also holding an oar, was reproduced as post cards. Her celebrity was further imprinted onto the national psyche through the publication of illustrated sheet music with songs and dances composed in her honor. These included "The Ida Lewis Mazurka" and the "Rescue Polka Mazurka." In one summer alone, some [9,000 visitors](#) came to Newport to meet her.



Although there is no evidence that Lewis supported women's suffrage, its leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton also visited Lewis at Lime Rock. Anthony allegedly purchased a souvenir photo of Lewis to display on her desk.

Lewis became a cultural icon, even if a nuanced one. [According](#) to historian Jenifer Van Vleck, on one hand, Lewis exemplified women's capacity for courage and heroism; on the other, she was portrayed in feminine attire unsuitable for rowing or rescuing anyone. It would still be more than fifty years before women could vote, and nearly eighty years before they could serve in the military. Regardless, Lewis became the highest paid keeper in the country, earning \$750 per year.

Lewis' fame catapulted in 1881 when she saved two soldiers who had fallen through ice while walking across the frozen harbor. Combined with her other rescues, this earned Lewis one of the nation's highest honors, the Gold Lifesaving Medal. Until 2020, Lewis was the only woman to have received this honor. Other recognition followed, including a [monthly pension](#) for her heroism from industrialist Andrew Carnegie. The total number of rescues Lewis made is [disputed](#), but estimates run as high as thirty-six people. Lewis performed her last rescue at age sixty three.

Lewis remained at her post until 1911 when she [suffered a stroke](#) and died. That night, the bells in Newport Harbor tolled for her.

Lime Rock Lighthouse was [renamed](#) the Ida Lewis Lighthouse in 1924 and is the only one named for a keeper. Today, it is on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). In 2018, Arlington National Cemetery honored Lewis by [naming a road](#) for her, making her the first woman to receive such recognition. Lewis, however, is buried at Island Cemetery in Newport, near the lighthouse she once managed.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask Yourself: Why are so many brave women who risked their lives for others forgotten?

Ask a Friend: What are the lessons we can learn from Ida Lewis?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com



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