

## **ROANOKE ISLAND FREEDMEN AND THE PEA ISLAND LIFE-SAVING STATION**

In the 1870's, some of the island's black army veterans--men whose families had lived in the Roanoke Island freedmen's colony--found jobs as surfmen in the U.S. Life-Saving Service, which had opened seven stations on North Carolina's coast. Until 1880, the men served with white men at various stations along the Outer Banks in integrated or "checkerboard" crews. In 1880, Sumner Kimball, the general superintendent of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, appointed Richard Etheridge keeper of the Pea Island Station. Etheridge had served in the 36th U.S. Colored Troops. In the spring of 1865, he and William Benson had written a letter on behalf of the soldiers in the 36th complaining about conditions in the Roanoke Island freedmen's colony.

The six surfmen serving under Etheridge during his first year as keeper included Lewis Wescott, William C. Davis, William Daniel, William C. Bowser, Henry Daniel, and George Riley Midgett. All apparently had connections to the Roanoke Island freedmen's colony; four of them, plus Etheridge, had signed a December 1867 letter requesting permission to stay on the island. The Pea Island crew soon gained a reputation for being the bravest life-saving crew on the Carolina coast.

### Projects:

1. Using material available on the Website devoted to U.S. Life-Saving on the Outer Banks, research the purpose and exploits of the U.S. Life-Saving Service on the Carolina coast.
2. Research the Descriptive Books of the 35th, 36th, and 37th U.S. Colored Troops for information about the army veterans from Roanoke Island who served as surfmen at the Pea Island Station during its first year of operation.
3. Read about Richard Etheridge and the accomplishments of the Pea Island Life-Savers in the Epilogue of Time Full of Trial. Read more about the efforts of the Pea Island Life-Savers in the rescue of the E.S. Newman. Research the traits of the Pea Island Life-Savers. What can you learn from the postwar exploits of the Pea Island Life-Savers? For further information about the men who served at the Pea Island Station, read David Wright and David Zoby's Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost Story of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers (2001).