The Early History of Lifesaving

Sailors! Heav'n prosper you on land and wave,
Yet know, ye pass a shipwreck brother's grave.

Plato, 3rd century, BCE

Not all is left to land, nor all to sea,
Both, now I'm dead, have equal parts in me:
My flesh was food for fish: on this cold beach
My bones, cast up by the reckless ocean, bleach.

Epigram by Antipater of Thessalonica ca. 10 BCE

The Chinese lifesaving model was copied by Europeans when the “Institution for the Recovery of Drowned Persons” was established, in Amsterdam, in 1767. Similar organizations were established in Britain in 1774, in France in 1878 and in America, when the Massachusetts Humane Society was founded in 1785.

When adventurous sailors began heading out in their caravelles and junks to explore the world in the 15th century, very few of these travelers could swim and horrific tales of shipwrecks and appalling tragedies abounded all over the world. Using simple navigation and often-inaaccurate charts, the fates of crew and passengers were generally in the grip of the elements. Shifting shoals, dense fogs, sudden storms, fire, ice and other floating hazards as well as design flaws and pilot errors, were all accepted and understood as risks of travel.

In 1708, the Chinkiang Association for the Saving of Life, on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River near Nanjing, China, established the first known paid lifeguard stations anywhere in the world; their job was not to oversee swimmers but to retrieve the bodies of drowning victims and revive people who were not quite drowned. By the mid 18th century, the Chinese were using lifeboats, had developed methods of resuscitation to revive the “apparently drowned,” paid rewards to volunteers who made rescue attempts and gave awards for acts of heroism. But China was not a swimming culture; all of these efforts reflected the idea that water was dangerous, and drowning was what happened when you got in the water.

By the mid 1800s, America’s remote fishing villages, long abandoned by Native Americans had been transformed into the summer resorts of the rich and famous in Cape May, Atlantic City and Long Branch, New Jersey; Coney Island, NY and Newport, Rhode Island.

As Americans gained more wealth and leisure time, and ferries, trains and trolleys made trips to these resorts more affordable, wearing a bathing suit at the beach became a cool and trendy thing to do. In spite of the concerns of moralists, the beach became a place where “promiscuous humanity” could take a “moral holiday” from the chains of Victorian culture. But as more and more non-swimmers took to the waters, tragic drownings became commonplace.
The Beach

Swimming manuals began to appear in Europe in the mid-1500s, and physicians began to tout the health benefits of bathing in the mid-1600s, but "bathing" activities were generally confined to the upper-classes. By the mid-1700s, London newspapers were advertising swimming pools "convenient for swimming or for gentlemen to learn to swim in," with instructors available.

The General Slocum Disaster
Horror in New York

What was supposed to be a pleasure cruise turned into a nightmare. Nearly 1,000 women and girls drowned when the famed New York excursion boat, "General Slocum" caught fire on June 15, 1904. In many cases, the difference between life and death was the ability to swim no more than 50 yards. Like the Princess Alice disaster, this tragedy created a demand for swimming pools, mandatory swimming lessons in schools and created the moral dilemma that asked, "how can a woman learn to swim and still wear modest clothing?" It was New York City's worst disaster prior to 9/11.

Keeping in mind that Victorian social morality demanded the downplay of a woman's sensuality, in the context of swimming, the near-naked costume worn by Agnes Beckwith smacked of depravity. Guidelines for swimming were very rigid, even as late as the 1920s, requiring separate swimming areas for men and women. With almost no pool open to women, schoolgirls in New York City learned to swim fully clothed.

In 1783, when the British Prince of Wales, later King George IV, and other aristocratic celebrities began spending summers at Brighton, the resulting publicity touting both the health benefits and pleasurable aspects of sea bathing - such as rejuvenation, invigoration, relaxation and relief from the summer heat - it encouraged a new fad that transformed what had once been inhospitable seaside fishing villages into pleasure resorts for upper-class partiers.