

# STUMBLING ACROSS NIX'S MATE



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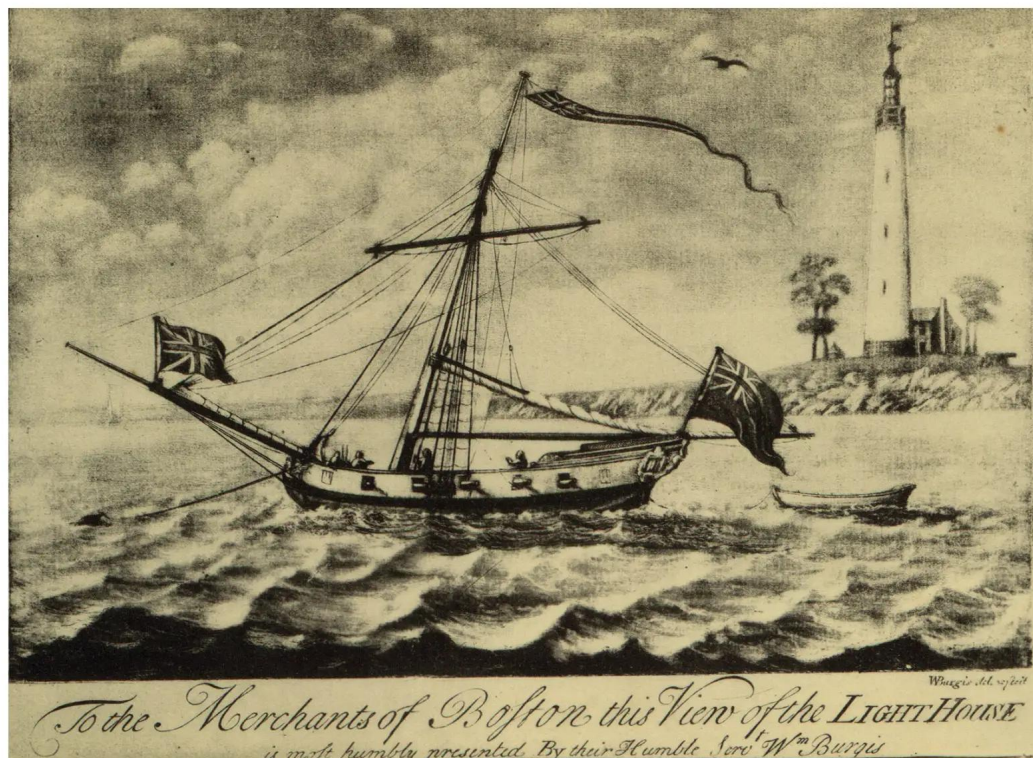
The first swimmer to reach the Boston Lighthouse crawled over a tiny island

While humans have been running and swimming for millennia, the sport of swimrun was only officially established in 2002 in Sweden when a beer-fueled bet turned serious.

But swimming and running haven't always been completely mutually exclusive undertakings, and at least one incidence of a swimmer making landfall during an event impacted how the lengthy history of the swim would be told.

On 29 August 1909, 40-year-old Viennese marathon and Olympic swimmer Alois Anderle became the first person to succeed in swimming from the mainland of Boston to America's first lighthouse, the Boston Light, on Little Brewster Island in Boston Harbour.

At the time – before much of East Boston had been dredged from beneath the sea – the swim was reported at anywhere from 10 to 15 miles depending on the source; a “stormy and wind-

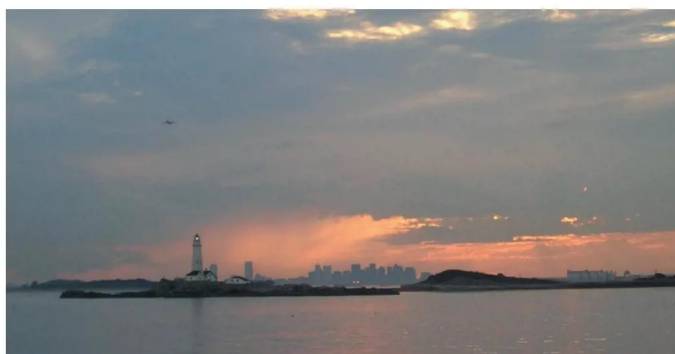


swept stretch” no less, according to *Boston Globe* sports editor Jerry Nason in a 1932 article he penned about the history of the Boston Light Swim. “In those days, the annual light swim, boys and girls, was a sporting event second to none on the summer schedule,” he noted.

In that piece, Nason described the Austrian as “a brawny shouldered, barrel-chested individual whose vocation was that of a deckhand and whose chief diversion was breasting the brine in quest of long-distance swimming glory.”

While Anderle had long been listed as the first to bridge the gap between mainland and lighthouse, Nason reported, “that, mayhap, is incorrect. It was claimed by many that Anderle had crawled across a short strip

Boston Light, America's first lighthouse



Boston Light at sunset

of sandbar near his goal and thereby forfeited his right to claim the accomplishment.”

The sandbar in question is Nix's Mate, a rocky shoal that's marked today by a black-and-white pyramidal daybeacon that sits atop a granite base. At high

tide, the marker seems to float on the surface of the sea, but low tide reveals the surrounding pebble-covered spit that has brought down many vessels over the centuries.

Once upon a time, the island was larger; in 1636, harbour



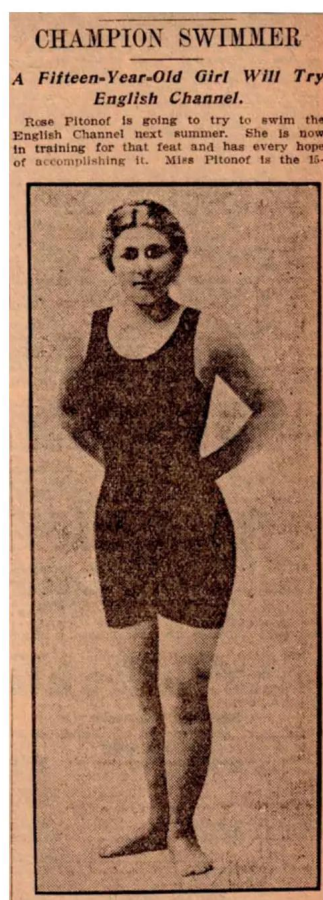
## SWIM HISTORY



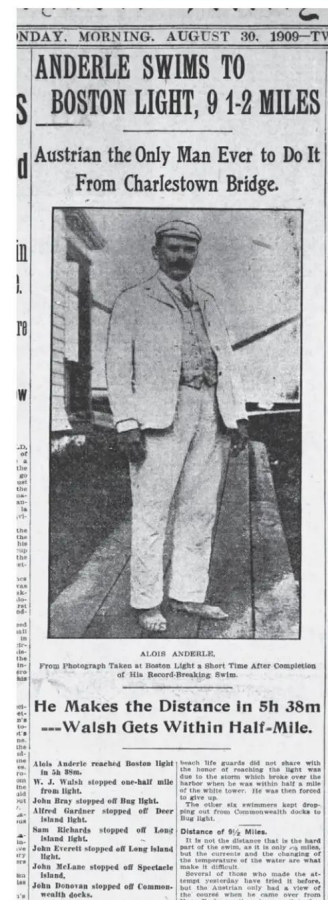
Pirate captain William Fly



Nix's Mate beacon



Rose Pitonoff



Alois Anderle

pilot John Gallop was granted the 12-acre landmass, which he used to graze sheep. Legend has it the island earned its unusual name after Captain Nix's ship returned to Boston Harbour following Nix's death at sea, for which his first mate was accused of murder. The mate vehemently denied his guilt, and in his final act before being hung from a gallows constructed on the island, he cursed it, predicting it would fall into the sea.

Whether his curse was partially to blame or not, mining for slate and landfill shrank the island to its now much smaller size. Despite its diminutive status, Nix's Mate looms large in pirate lore. In 1726, pirate captain William Fly was executed and gibbeted on Nix's Mate so his lifeless body could serve as warning to other seafarers considering a life of piracy.

Anderle's tangle with Nix's Mate surfaced immediately after his swim, as reported by a *Boston Evening Transcript* report dated 30 August 1909:

"Eight swimmers essayed the task yesterday morning, all taking the water from the [Charlestown] drawbridge pier between eight and nine o'clock, Anderle

going overboard at 8:42. He followed the usual course and left the water at the light at 2:20. The only thing to mar the merit of his performance was the fact that he got into shallow water inside Nix's Mate, and he was obliged to crawl over the bar on his hands and knees for about five yards. As he was unaware of the existence of the bar, it is evident that he did not deliberately take advantage of the shallow water."

Anderle, who competed at the 1900 Paris Olympics but did not finish the men's 4000m race there, had built a successful long-distance swimming career over the preceding 10 years in Europe before heading to America. Among his achievements, in November 1899, Anderle became the Austrian champion in plunging – a quirky off-shoot of swimming that was contested in the 1904 Olympics. That simple event saw competitors dive in and glide face-down for 60 seconds without any additional propulsion; whomever drifted the farthest won.

Swimming to Boston Light took considerably more propulsive effort, but

because of Anderle's short stint at Nix's Mate, officially, Rose Pitonoff, a plucky 15-year-old Boston native, is considered the first person to have successfully swum to the Boston Lighthouse, which she did on 7 August 1910.

The newspapers had a field day announcing her feat, with the *Globe* reporting "not once from the moment the tips of her toes left the planking of the pier at Charlestown bridge until the tips of her fingers touched the cold rocks at Boston Light last evening did any part of her anatomy come in contact with anything out of the water except a small glass of eggnog, which was all the nourishment she took during her long journey."

*Elaine K Howley is an American marathon and ice swimmer. Based in Boston, Elaine is a freelance journalist and editor who loves to swim. As well as a regular contributor to Outdoor Swimmer she coaches and supports others swimmers with their swim-goals.*