1. In discussing George Freeth, legendary surf historian John Heath “Doc” Ball wrote, “Too little is known about a great and colorful figure in California’s aquatic history.” For over seventy years, much of Freeth’s life has been passed down to ocean lifeguards and surfers through oral history. Understandably in this process many myths and incorrect information have been given. Therefore the author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the tireless assistance of Elyane Alexander, Dave Kastigar, and the late Gloria Snyder in going through hundreds of rolls of newspaper microfilms to carefully document the life of George Freeth. The author also wishes to thank L.A. County Lifeguard Chief Karl “Bud” Bohn, Charles Johnson, Sandy Hall, and Daved Marsh for their unique insights into surf culture; fellow historians Elyane Alexander, Ron Love, Gloria Miranda, Brad Reynolds, Hank Silk, and Jim Kraft for their editorial assistance; Captain Dave Story and the Los Angeles County Lifeguard Trust Fund; as well as the generosity of the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, for helping to finance photo work and microfilm costs; and Professor William Doyle, Jackie Booth, Shirley MacDonald, William and May Borthwick, the Los Angeles Athletic Club, the Hawaiian State Archives, the City of Redondo Beach Historical Museum, and the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum without whose support and assistance this project would not have reached fruition.

2. George Douglas Freeth, Jr., is buried in Oahu Cemetery (2162 Nuuanu Ave., Honolulu). His grave site is located in Section 10, Lot 100, Plot Number 6. His cremated remains share the grave site with his younger brother Alexander Rupert (1885-1888).


4. George Freeth, Sr., like his father-in-law, was English-born and bred. The son of Major General James Holt Freeth of the British Royal Engineers, George, Sr., and his brother Edward, took to the sea, both men rising to the level of Master Mariner. Each would captain ships, with George Freeth, Sr., often sailing routes between Hawaii and San Francisco, as well as from Honolulu to Layson Island in the Pacific.

5. A photo of George as captain of the Healani Swim Team appears in the February 16, 1907, edition of *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*.


8. One New England missionary in Hawaii, Hiram Bingham (1798-1869), reflected in 1847 that “The ... discontinuance of the use of the surfboard, as civilization advances, may be accounted for by the increase in modesty, industry, and religion. . . .” in Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-One years in the Sandwich Islands* (Hartford, CT: H. Huntington, and New York: Sherman Converse, 1847) 17.


10. A good account of Ford’s founding of the Outrigger Canoe and Surfboard Club can be found in Leonard Lueras, *Surfing: The Ultimate Pleasure* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1984), 68-74. In 1911, local surfers, including Duke Kahanamoku, became disenchanted with the club and its growing elitism. The dissenters, many of whom were local beach boys, formed their own club called Hui Nalu (“Club of the Waves”). Its first “Commodore” was Edward Kalelehoalani “Dude” Miller, who was one of George Freeth’s closest friends.


12. The Congressional fact-finding tour of Hawaii lasted more than two months, from May 8 to mid-July 1907. Among those on the tour were 28 members of Congress. In the early days of the tour, when Freeth was accompanying the delegates, several of the legislators and their aides went to Waikiki Beach where they attempted to learn to surf, presumably under Freeth’s instruction. *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, May 11, 1907.


17. Based on documentation provided by the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum, the sport of surfing was first demonstrated in California in July of 1885 by three members of the Royal Hawaiian Family, Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana and Princes David and Edward Kawananakoa. The three young men, who attended St. Matthews Military School in San Mateo, spent several summers in the

18. On June 17, 1930, Hawaii’s first new ship, the *USS Kamehameha*, was launched at the standard shipyard at Pearl Harbor. At 6,500 tons and 550 feet in length, the ship was designed for the U.S. Navy by the Boston-based firm of C. W. Treadwell and Company. See *The Hawaiian Advocate*, June 18, 1930.

19. Hawaii’s first shipyard was the San Francisco-based company of John Muir, who was granted a land grant of approximately two acres by the Territory of Hawaii in 1854. The company was formally incorporated in 1855 and built thirteen vessels for the Royal Hawaiian Navy and the government of Hawaii. See *The Hawaiian Advocate*, June 18, 1930.

20. On June 28, 1865, the first Hawaii Explorer was launched by the Country Steamship Company to provide regular service between Honolulu and San Francisco. See *The Hawaiian Advocate*, June 18, 1930.

Verge, “Freeth, King of the Surfers” pp. 82-105.
beach resort community of Santa Cruz. The city’s local paper, The Daily Surf, first reported their surfing in its July 20, 1885, edition. While other local beachgoers would take up the sport in the wake of the princes’ exhibition, surfing had limited appeal there due to the region’s cool ocean temperatures and large waves.


19. Although some have speculated that Freeth was lured to Redondo Beach at the behest of railroad and land magnate Henry E. Huntington (the nephew of the better-known Southern Pacific developer Collis P. Huntington), there is no evidence to support such a contention.


22. The ocean waters off California remain extremely treacherous. Ocean drownings today, however, are rare given the year-round professional lifeguard services provided by various coastal municipalities. In 1999, for example, on the stretch known as Venice North (Beach), which is less than two miles in length, over two thousand ocean rescues were performed.

23. The Daily Outlook, May 29, 1907.

24. Ibid., May 14, 1907.

25. From two original handbills in the Jerry Witt scrapbook, City of Redondo Beach Historical Museum.


28. The Daily Outlook, August 24, 1907.

29. Ibid., November 9, 1907.

30. Ibid., June 11, 1907.


32. On October 23, 1907, the Venice lifesavers voted 24 to 3 to remain independent of the U.S. Volunteer Lifesaving Corps. In late July 1908 the Venice Lifesaving Corps agreed to become part of the federal government lifesaving service. See The Daily Outlook, October 24, 1907, and July 27, 1908.

33. Ibid., November 11, 1907.

34. Ibid., December 17, 1907.

35. The Venice Pier was also known before 1921 as the Abbot Kinney Pier.

36. Accounts of Freeth’s rescue and that of his crew were compiled from the December 16-17, 1908, editions of the following newspapers: The Daily Outlook, The Los Angeles Times, The Los Angeles Tribune, The Angeles Express, and The Herald Examiner.

37. The Los Angeles Times, December 17, 1908.

38. This article is quoted at length in The Honolulu Star Bulletin, June 6, 1952.

39. The sworn affidavits and nomination letters for Freeth’s Congressional Gold Medal are found in the National Archives, under the name of George Freeth, Jr. The affidavits and letters were originally submitted to the United States Treasury Department which, at the time, had jurisdiction over the United States Volunteer Life-Saving Service.

40. The Congressional Gold Medal remains the highest honor a civilian can receive from the United States government. Each recipient is given a specially minted gold coin that denotes his particular achievements. Recipients include Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa, and Rosa Parks.

41. The Los Angeles Times, January 2, 1909.

42. An interesting account of lifesavers and their reliance on and use of lifeboat crews along the New Jersey coastline in 1916 can be found in Richard G. Fernicola, Twelve Days of Terror: A Definitive Investigation of the 1916 New Jersey Shark Attacks (Guilford, Conn.: The Lyons Press, 2001).

43. It is important to note that Freeth was not alone in taking the lead in changing the concept of “lifesavers” to “lifeguards.” British-born Captain T.W. Sheffield (1870-1952), a champion swimmer who later settled in Santa Monica, was a leading figure in professionalizing the local lifeguard corps to be on constant patrol. A copy of his unpublished biography is in the Los Angeles County Lifeguard Archives, Manhattan Beach.

44. Although Freeth has been credited by several writers with being the first to introduce water polo to the United States, the game was already being played along the East Coast before his arrival in California. See The Pacific Commercial Advertiser, February 3, 1907. In February 1907, several Hawaiian swim clubs organized together to form the island’s first water polo league, of which Freeth and his Healanis swim team were members. The Pacific Commercial Advertiser, February 22, 1907.

45. Not only was Freeth an explosive scorer, at one point he moved to the position of goalie and had four straight shutouts, a feat as rare for a water polo goalie as a no-hitter is for a baseball pitcher.

46. The Redondo Breeze, April 18, 1912, and The Redondo Reflex, April 25, 1912.

47. The Redondo Reflex, November 8, 1912.


49. The Redondo Reflex, June 21, 1912.

50. Ibid., June 11, 1913.

51. Ibid., March 7, 1913.

52. The Redondo Breeze, May 31, 1913.

53. The Redondo Reflex, July 12, 1913.

54. The Redondo Breeze, September 13, 1913.

55. Ibid., October 4, 1913.


58. The San Diego Rowing Club Minutes, Collection Number 8, San Diego Historical Society Research Archives.

59. Ibid., Minutes for November 8, 1917, and December 27, 1917.

60. From May 8, 1918, Inquest Report, Schuyler Kelly, Coroner, Medical Examiner’s Office, County of San Diego.

61. The San Diego Union, May 12, 1918.

62. Ibid., July 17, 1918.

63. Ibid., March 20, 1919.


65. Ibid.

66. The San Diego Union, December 7, 1918.
70. The San Diego Union, April 12, 1919.