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Vineyard Gazette Online



## Lighthouse Bicentennial

By MARK ALAN LOVEWELL

The Gay Head Lighthouse will observe a 200th birthday on Sunday, and friends of the historic structure are putting on a party. Representatives from the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society, the Wampanoag Tribe, U.S. Coast Guard and residents of Aquinnah are holding an open house from 1 to 4 p.m., with formal ceremonies at 2 p.m.

This is a beacon that not only has aided the mariners of Island waters for 200 years, it has been a symbol of the Vineyard heritage. The Gay Head Lighthouse has more maritime history and mystery than any other standing beacon on the Island.

Numerous articles have been written, but it is the people of the lighthouse who possess the memories.

Frank A. Grieder was the last civilian keeper of the lighthouse before the Coast Guard took it over in 1939. His son, William E. Grieder, lives on Nantucket and recalled this week lighting the lantern atop the lighthouse. "I was a kid. I remember being in the lighthouse during the 1938 hurricane," said Mr. Grieder, now 75 years old. The storm destroyed the Hariph's Creek Bridge and briefly separated Gay Head from the rest of the Vineyard. "From the top of the lighthouse I could see that all the bogs and beaches were covered with water. They lost the Coast Guard boathouse at Pilot's Landing."

Mr. Grieder said he could recall teaching his mother, Elsie T. Grieder, how to light the lamp. "We had to clean all 1,008 prisms in that tower," he said. Today, the original Fresnel lantern that stood atop the old light house now stands on the property of the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society in Edgartown. That original Fresnel lens was put into operation in 1856. "My father started running the light in 1937," Mr. Grieder said.

The Fresnel lens was moved to its new home in Edgartown in 1952. Charles W. Vanderhoop, a keeper of the light from 1920 to 1933 lit the Fresnel lens in an installation ceremony.

"I've seen a lot of changes up there," said Mr. Grieder. "There was a freighter that ran ashore under Devil's Bridge [near the foot of the colorful cliffs]. It was smaller than a liberty ship. I remember seeing the Navy use it for target practice. I used to lay on the banks and watch them dive bomb and drop smoke bombs on it," Mr. Grieder said. "I remember watching glorious sunsets. I remember seeing the northern lights at night. When I first saw northern lights, I thought the whole world was burning up," he said.

Living in the old lightkeeper's house right next to the light, Mr. Grieder said, he remembers a very different life up on the cliffs than exists today. "I remember going through the clay and looking for petrified quahaugs and fool's gold and petrified shark's teeth in the clay," he said.

"In 1939 when the Coast Guard took over the lighthouse, they wanted my Dad to sign over to the Coast Guard. He wouldn't do it. In those days the lighthouse keeper was a civilian," Mr. Grieder said.

Robert Kinnecom, 68, of Oak Bluffs has fond memories of the lighthouse, too. His father, Harold B. Kinnecom, was the commanding officer of the Gay Head Coast Guard station. "I have good memories. I remember playing baseball out on the open field in front of the lighthouse."

Between the lighthouse and the edge of the cliffs was another large open field. Mr. Kinnecom remembers a flagpole that resembled the mast of a boat; they called it a breeches buoy. The Coast Guardsmen practiced rescues, firing a cannon at the mast. The Lyle gun would fire a projectile with a line on it to the mast and they'd practice bringing a person back from the mast on the line.

"We'd also play softball and had picnics up there. Every couple of weeks they'd have to clean the Fresnel. I was lucky, I never got stuck with that detail," he said.

Four years ago with the help of the Vineyard Environmental Research Institute, the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society took over the Gay Head Lighthouse. The society is hosting the Sunday event, commemorating the anniversary of the day the light was turned on for the first time on Nov. 7, 1799.

The first lighthouse built on the cliffs was a wooden structure, according to historical society records. Efforts to build the lighthouse were actually initiated by a Nantucketer, concerned about the frequency of shipwrecks in the vicinity. He wrote his congressman in Washington requesting the light. In those days there was heavy traffic along Vineyard Sound, including whale ships, cargo schooners and passenger boats. Every vessel en route from New York city to Boston had to pass through these treacherous waters. In July of 1798, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton asked Congress for $570 for a light at Gay

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Head. On Nov. 7, 1799, the Gay Head Light was lit for the first time and it is believed that the first lamp burned sperm whale oil. The first lighthouse keeper was Ebeneezer Skiff.

Sunday's celebration is free and includes refreshments, storytelling and tours. The historical society is in the midst of a major campaign to raise funds for all of their three lighthouses including the Edgartown and East Chop lights. Donations would be appreciated.

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Page Created: April 13, 1998
Last modified: Nov 5 13:18:38 1999
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