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Sankaty Lighthouse being readied for move to safer ground

By Joshua Balling
Managing Editor

On Tuesday morning, Sankaty Light stood a hair over 72 feet tall. By the end of the day, the historic island icon at the end of Baxter Road had grown about a foot.



Photo by Jim Powers
Old playground equipment from the long-gone lighthouse keeper's home in front of Sankaty Head Light on Tuesday.

After months of planning and site work, which included cutting holes in the lighthouse's foundation and bracing it with massive steel I-beams, workmen from Expert House Movers of Maryland began lifting the structure with hydraulic jacks in preparation for its move to stable ground about 400 feet to the northwest, near the fifth hole of the Sankaty Head Golf Club. In its current location, the lighthouse sits less than 75 feet from the edge of a steep and eroding cliff, one or two major storms away from catastrophe.

By yesterday afternoon, they had jacked up the structure another 14 inches or so, bracing it with additional wooden cribbing atop the I-beams.

The move itself is planned to begin on or around Oct. 1, said Bob Felch, president of the Sconset Trust, the organization that now owns the historic beacon that for 157 years has stood sentinel on the island's eastern edge.

It is a process that will occur slowly, with the lighthouse inching along rails and gradually descending a 12-foot grade to its new home about 280 feet from the bluff.

Between now and then, workers from Expert House Movers and International Chimney of Rochester, N.Y., which is in charge of the project and has successfully relocated lighthouses like Block Island Light, Cape Cod Light and Cape Hatteras Light in North Carolina, will spend most of their time further bracing and stabilizing the lighthouse and clearing a move path to the golf-course site in preparation for the move.

So far, three men – Expert House Movers owner Jerry Matyiko, Mike Landen and Gabriel Ventura – have been responsible for the lion's share of the work, girdling the outside with metal cables to maintain the structural integrity of the 550-ton lighthouse, digging an eight-foot pit to access the foundation, stabilizing the interior with a series of cables, and ultimately, raising it more than two feet off the ground.

"I'm blown away that three guys could do this job. It's amazing. They really know their stuff," Sconset Trust executive director Erika Mooney said Tuesday morning at the site. A few feet away, a criss-crossed latticework of railroad ties, steel I-beams and other cribbing supported by heavy-duty hydraulic jacks was being maneuvered into place.

The sound of the surf crashing against the base of the bluff less than 100 feet away was a constant reminder of the reason for the move, which including some extensive restoration once the light is mounted on its new base, will cost about $4 million.

Later in the day, the job site was crawling with representatives of the Sconset Trust, a film crew from the BBC, island documentary filmmaker John Stanton and a number of amateur photographers all waiting anxiously to see the oldest original aid to navigation on the island pried loose from the earth.

It was an excruciatingly slow process, in many ways almost invisible to the naked eye, but by the time they were finished, the lighthouse was suspended 10-12 feet off the ground.



Photo by Jim Powers
Hydraulic jacks are used to raise Sankaty Head Light in preparation for its upcoming move.

Engineers had thought the foundation might break away from the main body of the lighthouse as it was jacked up, but that didn't happen. Now, much if not all of the original foundation can be used at the new site, Felch said.

"It was an excellent lift. The foundation was completely intact. That's great. We were speculating that there might be some separation and there wasn't any. A lot of that foundation can be used on the new site," he said.

On Wednesday, after the structure had been jacked up about 10 inches, Landen and Ventura continued to brace the two massive green steel I-beams on which the lattice of wooden beams and smaller

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girders supported the lighthouse, as Matyiko kept careful watch from the tailgate of a 10-wheeler containing the compressors that controlled the hydraulics backed up to the edge of the pit from which the foundation was excavated.

The lighthouse is owned by the Trust, but will remain an active aid to navigation. The light itself will be maintained and controlled by the U.S. Coast Guard, who will soon issue a notice to mariners that its location is being changed, and that service will be disrupted during the move.

Because the Coast Guard has asked that the light remain active as much as possible during the move, a temporary power source will be provided to keep the lantern lit, at least at night, Felch said.

"Basically we've rigged up an industrial extension cord to keep the power on, because the Coast Guard has indicated to us that they want the light on as much as possible, but it will probably be off during the days of the move," he said.

The Trust is hoping to involve and accommodate the public as much as possible, although the Trust is still working on the logistics of crowd control and public access, Felch said. Starting on the day of the move, Baxter Road from Bayberry Lane north will be closed to vehicular traffic, although pedestrian access will still be allowed to at least the perimeter of the site.

On Tuesday, Mooney and project manager Peter Hull were evaluating the bluff overlooking the ocean as a site for a possible spectator area.

The Trust's current inclination is to encourage spectators to use the tour-bus turn-offs along Polpis Road, and to bring binoculars for the best unobstructed view of the entire moving process.

The Trust has also been having – and plans to continue having – public events in conjunction with the move.

The Wee Whalers preschool visited the site Tuesday, and senior citizens from the Saltmarsh Center have also toured the area.

In the spring, elementary school students were asked to artistically articulate their visions for how the lighthouse will be moved. The results will be exhibited starting Sept. 25 at the Nantucket Atheneum.

"It is an historic landmark. It's an island icon," said Felch of Sankaty. "You would be hard-pressed to go into an art gallery on Nantucket and not find a painting of Sankaty Head. All three of our lighthouses are indelibly imprinted on our psyches as to what is special about Nantucket. Sankaty Light is a special landmark, not just for Sconset but for the whole island. It gives a sense of place, a good feeling to people. If you wipe it off the map, the east end of the island is not going to be the same," he continued.



Photo by Jim Powers
The Sankaty Light beacon shines through though the fog Wednesday evening.

"My feeling is that you've got a structure that has been there since 1850. It's the oldest lighthouse on the island from the standpoint of original construction. As such, it should be preserved. Islanders in general, both year-round and visitors, are very preservation-minded. Preservation is important. It gives us a link to the past."