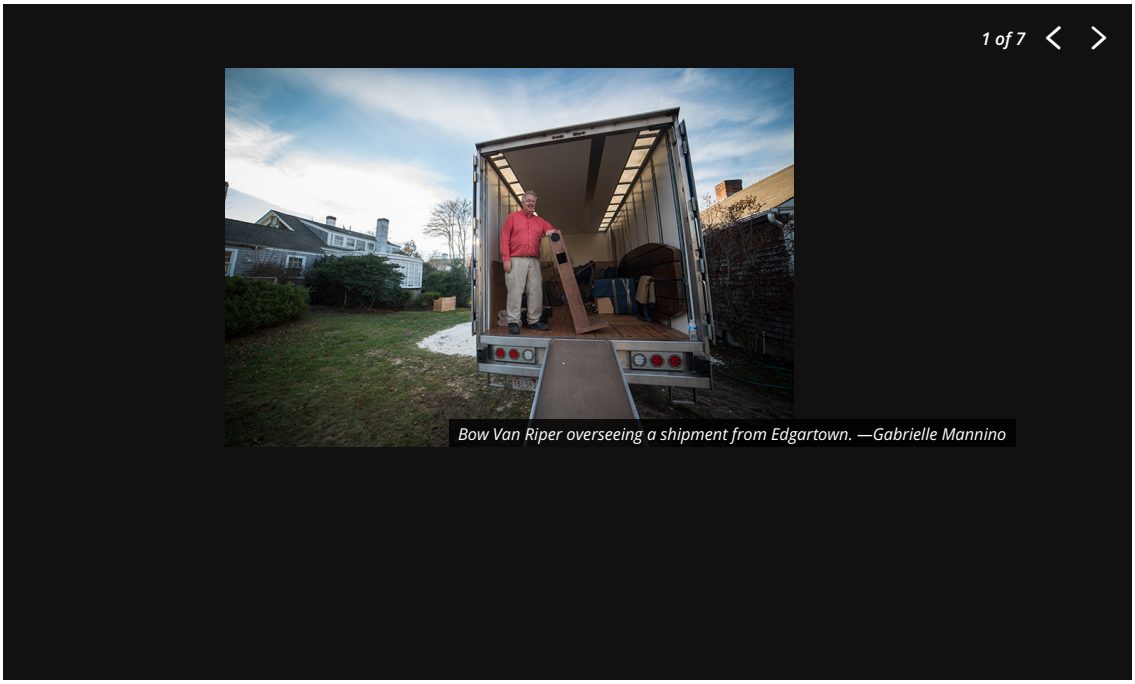
Moving a museum

Transporting the contents of the MV Museum to the Marine Hospital required all hands on deck — and then some.

By **Geoff Currier** - December 12, 2018



Bow Van Riper overseeing a shipment from Edgartown. —Gabrielle Mannino

Last week, the Martha's Vineyard Museum completed its move from the old campus in Edgartown to its new location at the renovated Marine Hospital site in Vineyard Haven. This was no small undertaking.

Included in the move were tens of thousands of archival items, as well as 12,000 three-dimensional objects, including old photographs, scrimshaw, textiles, paintings, Polynesian war clubs, whaling boats, and the pièce de résistance — a priceless first-order Fresnel lens originally used in the Gay Head Lighthouse.

"The number of moving parts in this operation was just staggering," said Bow Van Riper, research librarian at the museum. "One of the remarkable things is that none of us come from backgrounds that make us even remotely experienced to do any of this."

"When it became clear that we were going to put shovel into ground," said Katy Fuller, operations director of the museum, "my boss, Phil Wallis, came to me and said 'We'll need someone on staff to be a liason, and it will only require going to meetings about an hour a week.' I had to laugh; I knew it would be more, but not this much more. I have people come up to me and ask me, 'Do you remember what you used to do?'"

As operations director, Fuller's first order of business was to oversee the renovation of the old Marine Hospital. "The move had been in the works for years," Fuller said, "but the preliminary work began last spring. Since then I've been living off Gantt charts [charts which illustrate a project's schedule] for months. In addition to renovating the old building, barns had to be built to house the museum's boat collections, and a glass

pavilion had to be constructed to accommodate the Fresnel lens."

As might be expected, coordinating the renovation came with its share of hiccups. "The glass for the pavilion arrived," Fuller said, "and our installer said, 'This is specialty glass, I'm not installing it without someone here telling me what I should be doing.' The glass sat for a couple of weeks until an expert arrived."

Then there was the waiting when President Trump's steel tariffs caused a delay in getting the steel for all the storage racks to be constructed in the basement at the new site.

Over on the collections side, Bonnie Stacy, chief curator of the museum, was charged with making sure the entire contents of the museum safely made passage from Edgartown to Vineyard Haven. Fortunately she was able to enlist the aid of Museum Collector Resource (MCR), a company out of Concord, which specializes in moving museums.

"We had been in touch with MCR eight years ago," Stacy said, "to work on a feasibility study to move the museum. So it was a great load off my mind to work with them, because they were already familiar with our collections."

"One of the problems," said Valarie Kinkade of MCR, "was that stuff was squirreled away in crazy places [at the old campus] — under sinks, in rafters, in cupboards … it went on forever."

Kinkade said that packing the ship models alone could take several hours apiece — and there were more than 30 of them. I asked her what was the trickiest thing to pack and she said, "That would be the 20-foot-long Polynesian spear covered with shark's teeth."

"Why was that?" I asked.

"Because it was covered with shark's teeth," she said.

Kinkade said that she looked for specialized people to help with the moving.

"What kind of specialties are you looking for?" I asked.

"People who don't drop things," she joked.

Bonnie Stacy underscored the importance of having workers with sure hands.

"When you move things personally and something breaks," she said,"you get an insurance claim, but when you have a unique object that's important to the history of the Island, it doesn't work that way. If we break something it can't just go to someone who fixes stuff, it has to go to an objects conservator [who specializes in the conservation of three-dimensional works for museums], so you're better off hiring people who know what they're doing."

"We packed up about about 98 percent of the contents ourselves," said Kinkade, "and we physically moved about 10 percent of the more delicate items, like ship's models, ourselves." The bulk of the moving was done by Carroll's and Barnes Moving and Storage, to whom Kinkade, Stacy, and Fuller all gave rave reviews.

"Islands have their own unique constraints," said Kinkade, "and in the case of the Vineyard, there were no storage facilities here where we could move things temporarily, so as a result everything had to go directly from point A to point B."

On Sept. 27, Carroll's and Barnes began moving the large objects. "It was fun," Fuller said, "to see the workers in the new building see the stuff arrive and say, 'Ahh, that's what we're building this for.'"

The moving of the boat collection required special equipment, and Stacy said Prime Marine of Edgartown and Vineyard Haven was a huge help.

"They brought over one of their pneumatic boat trailers," Bow Van Riper said, "and backed up to the boat shed in Edgartown and 'winkled' a lifeboat out of its cradle onto the trailer and brought it into the new shed … It was something to see, sliding the trailer up to the lifeboat like it was threading a needle."

As research librarian, Van Riper had to deal with sorting through all the archival material. "Officially the library had 3,000 or 4,000 books, plus periodicals and maps — boxes and boxes of this stuff," Van Riper said.

When Van Riper was hired full-time in 2017, he was charged with organizing the library and the archives and getting them ready for the move. He had to go through all the books and archives looking for materials that were no longer relevant to the museum's mission, and weed out duplications that wouldn't need to make the move. The duplicate books would be sold at the museum's yard sale, donated to the West Tisbury library's annual book sale, or, in some cases, sold to a rare book dealer. "This is far and away the biggest project I've ever been involved in," said Van Riper, "and the piece where I had direct responsibility was only a tiny fragment of the total job."

Looking back at the entire project, both Fuller and Stacy agreed that moving the Fresnel lens proved to be the most difficult and complicated. "We got a Library Services [Institute of Museum and Library Services] grant," said Fuller, "and that allowed us to hire James Woodward, who is a lampist and specializes in preserving and maintaining historic lighthouses."

The move had to be coordinated with the architects to make sure the lens would fit in the glass pavilion being designed to house it at the new location.

"Woodward took apart the lens and sent parts to be sandblasted and preserved all over the country," Fuller said. "One thousand and eight glass prisms got packed in storage crates and ended up sharing office space with Bow [in Van Riper's office in the Thomas Cooke House on the old museum campus] all summer long." In the beginning of November, the lens was installed in the museum's new glass pavilion, where it will be beautifully showcased and safe from the elements.

On Dec. 1, Carroll's and Barnes moved the last of the archives to the new museum. There would still be plenty of unpacking and organizing to do, but for the moment, Kinkade said, "We had a collective high-five that everything was safely onsite."

"Although it's a great accomplishment," said Fuller, "when the building is done, opened, and all the exhibits are installed — that's when we'll really celebrate."

The museum is planning a soft opening on Jan. 17.