

Richard Skidmore has been keeper at the Gay Head Light for 31 years. *Mark Alan Lovewell*

Longtime Lighthouse Keeper Retires

Kate Dario *Monday, July 19, 2021 - 12:33pm*

Since the opening of the original wooden Gay Head Light in 1799, no keeper has served longer than Richard Skidmore. For 31 years, Mr. Skidmore has overseen the Island beacon perched at the westernmost edge of the Vineyard that has guided mariners for hundreds of years.

Last Tuesday, his tenure came to an official close at the Aquinnah select board meeting with the confirmation of his retirement.

Selectmen expressed their appreciation for his decades of commitment to the town and its iconic lighthouse.

“I’d like the record to show our gratitude for his service for the lighthouse for the last 31 years,” selectman Thomas Murphy said. “He’s been a tremendous asset to this community, he’s been an advocate for our town and the lighthouse and we wish him well in his retirement.”

Prior to Mr. Skidmore, the longest-serving keeper was the first one, Ebenezer Skiff, who served from 1799 to 1828.

Mr. Skidmore has presided over years of change at the lighthouse, including when it was moved back from the ragged edge of an eroding cliff in 2015.

Speaking briefly to the Gazette by phone after the meeting Tuesday, he gave special recognition to prior keepers and the hard, around-the-clock work that accompanied their job.

“[Ebenezer Skiff’s] duties were so much more physical and life affecting. His whole life was the lighthouse. He lived there, and he had to tend to it every day for many hours,” he said.

Mr. Skidmore said his own modern-day role was less about keeping the light aglow and more about being a storyteller.

“I’m the lighthouse keeper as the point for history to be told,” he said.

He said he will miss handing down history to the next generation of lighthouse aficionados.

“It’s so rewarding to me to have a group of 20 or 40 kids . . . second graders, sometimes fourth graders, but you can see them get enraptured by the stories,” he said.

He said he wanted to make sure the young people of the Island understood “their own history.”

He recalled the 2015 move, which he was involved in from start to finish.

“It only moves 134 feet, but . . . we’re told by geologists it is meant to keep us safe for over 100 years,” he said.

Until the town appoints a new keeper, Mr. Skidmore will be available to help in the event of an emergency.

Meanwhile, he said he will use his newfound free time to pursue various artistic endeavors.

“I’m a writer, photographer and filmmaker as well, so to be able to focus on those things is going to be really rewarding for me,” he said.

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