History

The Gay Head Lighthouse was the first lighthouse constructed on Martha's Vineyard. In 1796, because both islands were deeply involved in the whaling industry, maritime traffic had increased to the point that Peleg Coffin of Nantucket wrote his Congressman asking for a light to be erected at Gay Head. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was granted $570 by Congress for that purpose. In 1799 The Commonwealth of Massachusetts deeded two acres and four rods to the federal government for the site of the Gay Head Lighthouse. President John Adams approved the contract with Martin Lincoln of Hingham to build a wooden lighthouse structure with a keeper's cottage and outbuildings. This authorization was to help facilitate safe passage for shipping traffic through the hazardous Vineyard Sound between the Gay Head clay cliffs and the Elizabeth Islands. In the area westerly of the clay cliffs is the infamous Devil's Bridge, which is composed of a submerged shoal and rock formation. On November 7, 1799 the light was turned on for the first time. The light was most likely a "spider" lamp of several wicks in a shallow circular pan filled sperm whale oil. Ebenezer Skiff was the first appointed keeper. After the building was completed, Paul Revere provided some copper and tin used to augment the weatherproofing of the Light.



In 1844, the octagonal wooden light tower was moved back 75 feet from the eroding clay cliffs by John Mayhew of Edgartown at a cost of $386.87. By the early 1850s the tower was in disrepair and again threatened by the eroding clay cliffs.

1852 saw the Federal Lighthouse Board issue a 760-page report stating that Gay Head Lighthouse was "not second to any on the eastern coast, and should be fitted, without delay, with a first-order illuminating apparatus." In 1853 lighthouse keeper Samuel Flanders reported to the *Vineyard Gazette*: "Gay Head is to have a new lighthouse, 5 or 6 rods back from the present one, a new dwelling house is also to be erected". $13,000 was appropriated for the building projects, as well as to make improvements to the light apparatus.

In 1854 the light was upgraded to 14 lamps and larger reflectors. The previously dim Gay Head Light was now bright enough to be confused with the second order Fresnel lens that was in the Sankaty Light on Nantucket, and at least one shipwreck occurred. In August 1854 Congress approved $30,000 for the construction of a new brick tower to fit a first-order Fresnel lens, and a new keeper's residence also made of brick. As a result, the existing 52 feet tall conical brick tower and dwelling were constructed by Caleb King of Boston in 1855 and the lamp was lit in 1856. The bricks used to construct the light were composed of clay harvested from the nearby cliffs or the nearby Chilmark Brick Works. It was equipped with a whale oil fired, first-order, **Fresnel lens** standing about 12 feet tall, weighing one and a half tons, and containing 1,008 hand-made crystal prisms, with a bright flash every 10 seconds. Before being shipped to the United States, the Fresnel lens commissioned for the Gay Head Light was exhibited at the 1855 Paris Exhibition of Industry, and won first-prize. At the time of installation, Gay Head was listed as one of the most important lighthouse locations in the United States. Therefore, it deservedly became one of the first lighthouses in the United States to receive a first-order Fresnel lens. After installation, the Gay Head Light received considerable publicity. This resulted in many tourists visiting the light via steamship and other transport systems of the period.

On May 15, 1874, the beam pattern was changed from just flashing white to three whites and one red, to distinguish Gay Head from all other lights along the East Coast.

1902 saw the replacement of the brick keeper's cottage with a wooden structure after a number of unexplained illness and deaths had occurred in the brick dwelling.



Charles Vanderhoop, Lighthouse Keeper

Charles W. Vanderhoop, Sr., a member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), became the first Wampanoag keeper in 1920. He and assistant keeper Max Attaquin, also a Wampanoag, remained until 1933. The light has had a total of 18 principal keepers and 10 assistant keepers.

A high intensity electric beacon replaced the Fresnel lens in 1952. The Fresnel lens was donated to the Martha's Vineyard Museum and was installed in a new tower on the museum grounds by the Coast Guard. By 1956 the Gay Head Light was fully automated and the keeper's cottage was torn down.

From 1956 to 1985, the automated Gay Head Light was sparingly maintained by the United States Coast Guard. Due to US Coast Guard Congressional funding shortages through the 1970s and early 1980s, various lighthouses around the United States were designated for destruction because the structures were expensive to maintain, and no longer served as vital aids to navigation. This obsolete designation was precipitated by enhanced satellite GPS and other electrical maritime navigation aids. In the mid-1980s, due to United States Coast Guard funding shortages, the Gay Head Light along with two other Martha's Vineyard lighthouses (East Chop Light and Edgartown Harbor Light) were listed for destruction. As in other similar lighthouse removal projects, the United States Coast Guard would dismantle or raze the existing lighthouse and, if deemed necessary, replace the light with a low-maintenance iron spindle structure top-mounted with a strobe light.

The three threatened lights on Martha's Vineyard were saved through the objecting federal petition and Congressional testimony of Vineyard Environmental Research Institute (VERI) founding President William Waterway Marks, and VERI Chairperson John F. Bitzer, Jr. In 1984, VERI received the support of Senator Ted Kennedy and Congressman Gerry Studds during and after the Congressional hearings to save the three island lighthouses from being dismantled and/or razed. Following the Congressional hearings, the United States Coast Guard licensed the three lights to VERI in 1985 for thirty-five years. This lighthouse license gave complete control over the management and maintenance of Gay Head Light structure (except the aid to navigation) and its surrounding grounds. After receiving the lighthouse license, VERI undertook a series of fundraising activities that engaged the community of Martha's Vineyard. The proceeds from the lighthouse benefits were applied to a major restoration of the Gay Head Light, and plans were made to open the light and grounds to the public.

The Gay Head Light was reopened to the public in 1986 for the first time since its closure in 1956. In 1986 lighthouse tours and public lighthouse sunset gatherings once again became available to the community and visiting tourists. Between 1986 and 1990, various Assistant Keepers were appointed by the light's Principal Keeper, William Waterway Marks, including the appointment of Charles Vanderhoop, Jr., son of Charles W. Vanderhoop, Sr. (Gay Head Light Principal Keeper 1930-33).

Keeper Charles Vanderhoop, Jr. became renown for his lighthouse tours with island school children. Charles enthralled island children with his stories of being born and growing up in the lighthouse while helping his father during the 1920s and early 1930s. Charles also visited island schools where spoke to children and worked on lighthouse programs with teachers

In the summer of 1990, William Waterway Marks appointed Richard Skidmore and Joan LeLacheur as Assistant Keepers. In 1994, VERI transferred its license to the Martha's Vineyard Museum. During President Barak Obama's 2009 vacation on the island he and his family were given a personal tour of the lighthouse by Joan LeLacheur.

Today, the US Coast Guard remains the owner of the lighthouse structure and property. The Martha's Vineyard Museum holds the light's license and manages maintenance and access. The Coast Guard will be listing the Gay Head Lighthouse as excess property in August, 2013, at which point the Town of Aquinnah plans to apply for ownership.





Charles Vanderhoop, Jr. (left) gives a tour to Chilmark School students

Share / Save