

Historic Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard has new home

By **JIM AXELROD CBS NEWS** May 30, 2015, 8:32 PM

AQUINNAH, Mass. -- The question facing a team of expert movers on Martha's Vineyard: How do you move an iconic 160-year-old, 400-ton national treasure?

The answer: Very carefully, and very slowly -- about a foot every minute.

Len Butler, the man in charge of relocating the Gay Head Lighthouse, says the speed -- or, rather, the distinct lack of it -- is for a reason.



Crews work to move the Gay Head Lighthouse inland, away from the edge of an eroding cliff.

"If enough of the bricks cracked, it could be catastrophic -- it could come tumbling down," Butler said.

The lighthouse was raised six feet off the ground and pushed down soap-lathered steel rails by two hydraulic pistons. The delicate operation was done under the watchful eye of Richard Skidmore, who's been the lighthouse keeper for 25 years.

"I have to say that it is just a gratifying moment, to have the reality of the care of this building

manifested," Skidmore said.

CBS News first met Skidmore in 2013, when the lighthouse was just 46 feet away from the fragile cliff's eroding edge. At the time, he made a dire prediction.

"We've put a date of 2015 -- It has to be moved by that year. Or it would tumble into the sea," he said then.

Two years later, after almost \$3.5 million was raised to pay for the move and restoration, the crews went to work.

There's been a lighthouse in this location since 1799. The current one was built in 1856, when the channel below the bluff was the busiest shipping lane in the country, and the boats were guided by the beacon on the hill.

The new location, 135 feet inland, should be far enough back to protect the lighthouse from future erosion for at least another century -- or hopefully long beyond that.

"It's amazingly gratifying to see the love for this monument, which I see as being a love for the history of this place," Skidmore said. "This is the emblem of our shared past."

Now that the move is complete, the lighthouse should be back open to the public sometime in July.