

Chatham's Portrait Artist

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by Spencer Grey

In the Atwood House there are a number of portraits of members of the Atwood family who lived in the house during the 19th century, all of them painted by Giddings H. Ballou, who at the time he executed them was married to Azubah Atwood Taylor.

The son of the first president of Tufts University, he was educated by his father during the years he operated a private school for boys. With this instruction Ballou was qualified to enter college, but his deep interest was in art. He trained himself to paint, leading him to pursue a career as a portrait painter. Possibly because of poor health, he decided to settle on Cape Cod, and as he writes of his arrival there, "We well remember how blankly we stared [at the desolate dunes] when many years ago, on a bitter December morning [in 1840], after a wave-tossed, sea-sick night, we staggered up the cabin steps of the little packet" to disembark in Provincetown. Shortly after his arrival when he had just turned 20, he was paid \$10 for painting the portrait of a young sailor, Isaac Small, of Truro.

There is evidence to suggest that shortly after this visit to Truro, he traveled abroad for several years, where he seems to have spent some time studying the works of the great painters. In fact, he does not seem to have been back on the Cape until 1847, and his work at that time shows more professionalism.

At this point he settled in Brewster, where he resided for the next six years, boarding with the Copeland family and entering into the village life. He associated with a number of young unmarried women there, including one Augusta Mayo. Ballou and these acquaintances wrote papers that they read at meetings in the newly formed Brewster Ladies Library. Augusta Mayo remembered that "...Mr. Ballou and Mr. Dugan, along with the Freeman girls...met to read Hume's 'History of England' one evening a week." She also reports that in October of 1843, Ballou joined some of the ladies of the town in a "dramatic entertainment" for the benefit of the library, which she and her friends had recently established and funded. The "dramatic entertainment" was a farce entitled "Poor Pillicoddy," in which Ballou played the part of Captain O'Scuttle.

Apparently he earned his keep by painting portraits of townspeople, but he raised his price for each work from \$10 to \$15 and eventually to \$20. Apparently running out of potential portrait sitters in Brewster near the end of 1853, he moved to Chatham, where a few years later he painted the portrait of the daughter of Joseph Atwood, the dentist, which now hangs in the southwest sitting room of the Atwood House.

In 1856 he was hired for the threemonth winter session at the school in Whitewash Village at the end of Monomoy Point for a salary of \$35 for the term. He continued to hold this position through the winter of 1860-61. In an article he wrote for Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1864, he described that experience:

Into this place came Pedagogue to induct the delights of literature into the minds of the hardy young Monomoians.... Asked by a local, "But how do you get on with the boys? Rather tough customers, they are, eh?" Pedagogus replied: "Not very...None of them over six feet, except Big Hugh, and he's tolerable good-natured. Not many of 'em can lick me—perhaps not."

When the Civil War began in 1861, Ballou, as secular editor of the Gospel Banner, a Universalist weekly, began

reporting news from the battlefields, working either from telegrams sent from the front or from information available in Washington, D.C., where he was living.

After the end of the war in 1867, Ballou returned to Chatham and married Azubah Atwood Taylor, widow of Captain James Taylor, who had died at the age of 45, and a sister of Joseph Atwood, the dentist, who lived a few doors away from her on the corner of Cross Street and Atwood Street, now Stage Harbor Road.

Regardless of this marriage, Ballou stayed on in Washington for several years working as a statistical clerk for the Department of Agriculture, but around 1875 he returned to Chatham to live in his wife's house on Cross Street. In spite of failing health, he continued to serve as local "enumerator" for the town's census.

He died in June 1886, after what has been described as "a long and lingering illness," possibly consumption, and was buried in the Atwood plot in Union Cemetery. In his obituary he was described as "modest and retiring" but those who knew him well found him to be intelligent, well informed, and witty. His legacy includes more than two dozen paintings, all portraits of residents of Brewster or Chatham.

Information from the Atwood House Museum archives was used in this article.

