

## **AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE**

### **Some Notable Chatham Women**

**by Spencer Grey**

Although often overlooked in accounts of the history of Chatham, women have played an essential part in the community since its beginning, exhibiting great courage, stamina, intelligence, and ingenuity.

Perhaps most courageous of all was the first white woman to come to Chatham, Anne Busby Nickerson, who braved the unknown wilds of the new world to accompany her husband, William, when he was forced to leave Norwich, England, because he was a nonconformist who refused to worship in accordance with the practices of the Church of England.

Only 28 years old and knowing little or nothing about what lay ahead, she embarked with him on the voyage to Salem in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They left the relatively civilized town of Salem to settle first in Yarmouth and then to a place known only by the Wampanoag name of Monomoyick and inhabited only by people whom she would have considered savages. There they built their first cottage near Ryder's Cove, probably no more than 200 square feet. Before they could plant a garden, they had to exist on whatever William could shoot, catch, or dig. Besides caring for her children, she had to make the most of the limited food supply to feed them and to do what was necessary to clothe them. Those of us who live today in what became known as Chatham can hardly imagine what it must have been like to face the hardships of life here in 1656.

About 100 years later, when Monomoyick had become Chatham and much more settled and civilized, another stalwart woman, Hannah Doane Knowles, took over the operation of her husband's tavern after his death in the mid-18th century. It was in a prime location at that time close to the meeting house in the town center near the still existing graveyards at the junction of George Ryder Road and Old Queen Anne Road. The tavern, or ordinary, served food and drink to townspeople and travelers. Because of its proximity to the meeting house, the town officers and their friends would adjourn there after the conclusion of their meetings to enjoy a bumper or two of rum and whatever food Hannah was serving.

While Hannah Knowles was tending her tavern, Mary Hinckley Young was saying farewell to her husband, Hiat, as he set out to join the troops of the American Revolution, possibly motivated by the bounty he would receive for enlisting. On the day that he left Mary, "...there was not a dollar in money or a barrel of provisions in the house. Only the old cow in the shed."

She was left with a large family to care for and only her 13-year-old son, Joseph, to help.

She managed to keep going for three years, but then Joseph, 16 years old and tempted by the enlistment bounty and adolescent dreams of glory, was determined to follow his father's example. To deceive the enlisting officer into believing that he was old enough to enlist, he put on a pair of his father's boots with padding in them to raise him up and dressed himself in extra clothing to increase his bulk. So Mary Young was left to care for the family by herself, but with determination and great will power, she held the family together until Hiat was discharged in 1781 to return to his home footsore and weary and without a cent in his pocket. Joseph served for five years until the end of the war, returning home to find the family still struggling in poverty.

In the next century Angelina Nickerson displayed strength and will power when her husband, Simeon, died in

1849 while he was the keeper of the twin lights. Determined to fend for herself, Angelina wrote to President Taylor asking to be allowed to succeed her husband. But the keeper who had preceded Simeon, Collins Howes, decided he wanted the job back and also sent an application to President Taylor. Yet with strong support from the townspeople, especially Joshua Nickerson, she kept Howes at bay. Keeping the lights at that time was especially arduous, as each was lit by an oil lamp that had to be tended throughout the night. Afraid to leave her small baby unattended, she would carry the child up the stairs of each tower every time she had to check the light. She was so fearful of robbers or others who might harm her son that she kept a teakettle of boiling water at hand in case vagrants came looking for handouts. Angelina persevered in the position for 13 years, retiring in 1861.

Another enterprising woman of about the same period was Mary Augusta Gould Young, who was married in 1862 to Seleucus Morton Young, a Chatham mariner. He died at sea of typhoid fever in 1867, leaving her a widow with a six-month-old baby to support. In her home on the northwest corner of School Street and Water Street, she set up a small dry goods store, selling such things as cloth, knitting needles, cologne, and such. She was known in town for her unusual dress, consisting of a man's clothing topped with a white yachting cap.

In the early 20th century, Marinda Gifford Buck, better known as Minnie, showed resourcefulness, ingenuity, and courage when after graduating from Chatham High School she applied to the Philadelphia Dental College (now part of Temple University) to blaze new territory by becoming a dentist when practically no women entered the field. After practicing in Boston for several years, she returned to Chatham and set up her office alongside her father, the town physician. Although married to Benjamin Buck and a mother, she kept up her practice and continued it even after her husband's death in 1920. Apparently she was so short that in order to reach the mouths of tall men, she would climb into their laps. Besides maintaining her dental practice, she was an active member of the community as one of the original members of the local chapter of Eastern Star, as church organist, and as one of the founders of the Readers Club. Members of the Readers Club founded the Chatham Historical Society in 1923, and when they were renovating their newly acquired home, the Atwood House, Minnie was assigned to fill nail holes and other crevices because she was experienced at "doing fillings."



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