

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Early Chatham Stores

by Spencer Grey

Because Colonial legislators required each community to have at least one public house as a gathering place for residents, the first establishments to carry merchandise were taverns, not stores as we know them. In Chatham the earliest known tavern was established by Morris Farris (for whom Morris Island is named) in 1712 near Wreck Cove on Monomoy. About the same time Ebenezer Hawes opened a tavern in Chathamport. Because it was centrally located, it was more frequented by the residents than taverns on the outskirts.

In those early years there was little need for stores, as we know them, as families provided themselves with the necessities. They grew their own crops and raised their own beef, pork, and grain so there was no need for anything else except spices, molasses, and rum. Moreover, they had their own sheep that provided them with wool for spinning into yarn or weaving into fabric.

Around 1830 the first general store of importance was that of Sears and Hardy located close to the twin lights. The store had several owners over the years, but when James Trip joined his father-in-law, Josiah Hardy, they added to the trade lumber, wood, coal, and cured fish.

These early stores usually specialized in manufactured goods from England and West Indian goods, such as spices, molasses, and rum. The more prosperous residents could buy whale oil from Nantucket or New Bedford. Dry goods were important, as people needed silk thread and fabric or cooking utensils. Lard and flour were kept in barrels or firkins. Apparently if a customer required less than a barrel of flour, the merchant would place the barrel on a cloth and saw it in half as one would a log of wood, a feat that only the experienced shopkeeper could perform successfully. Scales in the old stores consisted of a piece of wood hung from a beam by a wire, with a place for weights at one end and a scoop to hold the article being sold at the other end.

In 1835 Elisha Howes opened a store on Main Street that was considered to be of a higher class than the other stores in town. Because he was a fastidious person who did not want to deal with any products that might dirty his hands, he shunned the usual items of a grocery store and carried mostly dry goods, making his establishment one of the most attractive in town. Ladies of the village would not buy dry goods anywhere else until they first had examined Elisha's stock. Because his was one of the few stores open evenings, it was a favorite gathering place for boys to spend their spare change on nuts or candy and chat about the activities in town that captured their interest. Another attraction for them was the fact that Elisha was one of the first to burn coal in his cylinder stove that never seemed to go out, keeping the store always warm and inviting.

One of the town's schoolmasters, who at the time was boarding at the nearby tavern of Bangs Snow, was given a live horseshoe crab, a creature he knew nothing about but found so fascinating that he took it to Elisha to learn its name and history. Eager to help the schoolmaster, Elisha told him that it was called a horndingler and that he could take it home to Vermont to propagate them there. Several days later, Mr. Snow, the schoolmaster's landlord, noticed a very disgusting odor in his lodger's room. The schoolmaster told him that the offensive smell was coming from his trunk where he had put the horseshoe crab so that he could take it home at the end of the school term. In 1840 a stranger named William Eaton set up a store in the central part of the village that had more of a flair than those of his competitors. It was stocked with all kinds of goods, including boots, shoes, dry goods, groceries, crockery and, as reported in the Chatham Monitor, "...everything calculated for the success of

a first-class store, backed up by the smart, enterprising habits of the proprietor.” Even though his incursion was resented by the local merchants, they were obliged to allow his store to remain in town.

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were numerous stores in most of the villages of Chatham, but the largest and most notable were those of Levi Atwood and Ziba Nickerson. Levi Atwood opened his store on Stage Harbor Road at the corner of Cedar Street in 1849, where he stocked an extensive supply of canned goods in addition to the staples of flour, sugar, and molasses. A few years later he added dry goods to his stock, offering everything from a cambric needle to velvets, silks, fine embroideries, and millinery. In an advertisement that he ran in the June 17, 1862 issue of the Barnstable Patriot, he listed himself as “Chatham Cheap Store,” and added that he carried groceries, flour, hardware, nails, crockery, and glassware. More specifically he offered “farmers’ tools, paper hangings, carpets, clocks, looking glasses, school cooks, boots and shoes, paints and oils, and pine and oak wood. He also bragged that he had the exclusive right to sell containers of “The One Dime Coffee” in Chatham.

In 1851 Ziba Nickerson opened a store on the corner of Main Street and Mill Pond Road, where according to an advertisement in the Barnstable Patriot, he offered “choice family groceries, flour, paper hangings, and a variety of the most popular patent medicines.” Among those he sold was “Shiloh’s Consumption Cure,” which claimed to treat not only consumption but also “coughs, hoarseness, asthma, whooping cough, and all lung or throat troubles.” In local papers he advertised that he carried “crockery ware, etc. etc.,” and added that all are “sold at reasonable prices. Our Motto—More Cash—Less Credit. Better for Buyer and Seller.”



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