

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Chatham Mining Company

by Spencer Grey

When on Jan. 24, 1848, James W. Marshall discovered a few lumps of gold at Sutter's Mill in California, he probably did not realize the panic he would create in the United States, resulting in the California Gold Rush, with 300,000 men frantically trying to make their way to the gold fields in the expectation of making their fortune.

Considering the familiarity of so many Chatham mariners with sailing around the horn to the Pacific Ocean, it is hardly surprising that in June 1849 11 of them, mostly in their mid-30s, gathered in Boston to create the bylaws and regulation of the Chatham Mining and Trading Company. They were David H. Crowell, Elisha E. Atkins, Kimball R. Howes, Jr., Alvah Ryder, Stephen V. Smith, Mark H. Crowell, Samuel P. Newcomb, Richard Smith, Reuben A. Snow, and John Crowell.

To create the capital for the company, each contributed \$250 (\$7,300 in today's money). This capital was to be used for provisions, cargo, "such implements as the Company may think best, and a suitable house for the Company to live in, at California." Realizing that the venture could be dangerous, the partners stated that neither sickness nor disability would deprive any of them from his share of the profits, and if anyone should die before their vessel reached California, his heirs would be entitled to his share.

The company owned the brig William Penn, and they agreed to sail from Boston as soon as the vessel could be fully provisioned. David H. Crowell was appointed master of the Penn, for which he was to receive 2 percent of the net stock., They supplemented their funds by carrying cargo and passengers. Seven men paid \$150 each for passage, except Ensign Nickerson, who paid \$200, possibly for better accommodations.

In July the company began to provision the vessel and to prepare to embark as soon as possible. They paid Ensign Nickerson \$5.23 for one pick ax, one shovel, spars, poles, and tools, as well as six wash basins, a dozen plates, six pails, a wash board, and a portable furnace.

Fully provisioned and carrying the 10 partners, seven passengers, 10 crew members, and a cargo of building materials, the William Penn sailed out of Boston Harbor on July 28, 1849. They had a smooth voyage down the coast but encountered a hurricane as they reached Florida, resulting in dismasting the ship and setting it on beam ends. Using a jury rig, they limped back to Boston for several weeks of repairs and more provisions.

Setting out a second time on Aug. 29, 1849, they arrived in San Francisco on Feb. 21 after a trip of 154 days. Apparently some of those on board either had been injured or had been taken sick, as the first item in the ledger for that day is \$15.40 paid to the local hospital.

By the middle of March the brig had sailed up the river to Sacramento, the city nearest to the gold fields. All of the crew except Captain Crowell went to the gold fields, but he remained on the ship and opened a bakery, selling cookies to the miners for 50 cents a dozen, a steep price because flour in the area of the mined sold for 21 cents a pound. Obviously a sharp businessman, Captain Crowell began providing room and board for the members of the company under the name of Atkins and Crowell and Company. In accordance with their plans, they had a house built for themselves near the gold fields, where most of them boarded from time to time. Their ledger indicates that sickness was prevalent among them, as there are several entries for payment to Dr. Hart and

for “sundries while sick.”

Captain Crowell took enough time off from his business to join the others in searching for gold in the nearby mountains, but as was so often the case, he was not highly successful, as his find was so meager that he brought it back in a bottle containing small yellow flakes that he nevertheless kept for the rest of his life.

Kimball Ryder Howes, Jr., continued to search for gold for nearly a year, but he died in the mines in California on March 24, 1851. There is a memorial stone in Peoples Cemetery, noting his demise while searching for gold.

Ensign Nickerson settled in San Bernardino and did not return to Chatham until August 1886, when he visited his brother Orick. A report of his visit printed in the Chatham Monitor states that he was a portrait painter in his younger days and that “...several evidences of his skill now adorn the walls of Chatham homes.” The Monitor notes that Nickerson was one of only three of those who sailed on the William Penn still living.



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