

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

A Chatham Murder Mystery

by Spencer Grey

On Nov. 15, 1772, when Captain Joseph Doane of Chatham was on board his schooner in Cape Cod Bay, he saw a vessel flying a distress signal. Coming alongside, he discovered it was the Schooner Abigail, Thomas Nickerson of Chatham, master, en route from Boston to Chatham. When he boarded the Abigail, he confronted a horrifyingly gruesome scene. Her deck was covered with blood, and the captain, his cousin, Sparrow Nickerson, and his brother-in-law, Elisha Newcomb, all lay there, clearly having been murdered. Chests had been smashed open and rifled; a rum barrel with its head stove in was almost empty, and only one member of the crew, Ansel Nickerson of Chatham, also a cousin of the captain, remained alive. Although highly agitated and distressed, Nickerson was able to present his version of what had occurred.

The previous evening, he asserted, they had been hailed and stopped by a topsail schooner, and as four boatloads of men rowed toward the Abigail, Nickerson lowered himself with a rope over the stern of the ship to escape what he believed either were pirates or English sailors planning to impress them into the British Navy.

While he remained out of sight, the intruders killed everyone on deck, except a 13-year-old boy named William Kent, whom they took with them after they had raided the contents of the chests and drunk most of the rum in the barrel. Nickerson heard them discussing whether or not to burn the Abigail, but fortunately for him they decided against it and returned to their schooner.

Although Captain Doane found Nickerson's account plausible, he nevertheless reported the incident to the county judge, Edward Bacon, Esq., of Barnstable, who was less convinced of the young man's veracity. After other vessels had scoured the area for evidence of any pirate foreign vessels and found none, Bacon sent a copy of the report to the governor and had Ansel Nickerson locked up in the Barnstable jail for further questioning.

In the meantime, news of the bizarre and bloody incident reached as far as Boston, where a young attorney named John Adams read it and recorded in his journal that he considered it a "mysterious, inexplicable affair."

Even though Captain Doane could not corroborate all of the evidence provided by Nickerson, it seemed unlikely that he could have overpowered and murdered three members of the crew, and moreover there was no clear motive for his doing so. Nevertheless, Bacon was sufficiently suspicious to have him sent to Boston to be tried for murder on the high seas by a special Court of the Vice-Admiralty.

The trial was scheduled for July of 1773, and John Adams and Josiah Quincy, Jr. were appointed counsel for the defense. The defense maintained that Nickerson was a lucky survivor of a pirate attack and was in no way responsible for the murder of the three men and the pillage of the cargo. At the end of a five-day trial the jury returned a tie vote, resulting in Ansel Nickerson's acquittal. Yet John Adams was not totally convinced of Nickerson's innocence, as he wrote in his diary after the trial, "I know not to this day what judgment to form of his guilt or innocence."

Because the facts of the case remained murky and Nickerson remained under a cloud of suspicion, he apparently left Chatham and settled on the island of Eleuthra in the Bahamas. Even though there were uncorroborated reports that he confessed to the crime on his deathbed, the whole episode remains a mystery to this day.

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