

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Education in Chatham: 1690-1858

by Spencer Grey

When William Nickerson and his extended family settled in Monomoit, education was the responsibility of each family. Since 1642 Plymouth Colony had required parents to teach their children to read, to know the laws, to have an understanding of religion, and to be trained for a calling.

By 1720, however, the community contained 50 or more families, and under the law of that time it was required to have a schoolmaster. In March of that year the town voted to hire Samuel Stewart to be the schoolmaster for the following year with a salary of 25 pounds plus "his diet." Finding this requirement burdensome, the town voted in 1722 to appeal to the General Court to be exempt from it and to be allowed to keep only a school dame, which would cost less than hiring a man, but their appeal was denied.

Consequently in October 1722 the community hired Samuel Legg of Yarmouth as its teacher, and the town was divided into four sections, each one to keep school for three months. In the years immediately following, several teachers served but often for only a year at a time. Samuel Stewart seems to have been the most popular among them, as he served a number of times between 1723 and 1745. In his "History of Chatham" William Smith writes: At the early period the schools were very crude affairs. They were held two or three months in the year in each quarter of the town at some private house. There were no schoolhouses until after the Revolution. The pupils were of all ages, from ten to twenty-five, and no one attended unless he wished to do so or his parents so ordered. The girls never attended. At that early period, it was considered useless for a girl or woman to know how to read or write... Reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic were the only subjects. The master taught according to his own ideas.

In time, however, bookkeeping, navigation and penmanship were added to the curriculum. One of the earliest penmanship teachers was Professor Lyman, who is reputed to have dyed his hair purple. The first schoolhouse was built on Old Harbor Road in 1790, and in 1800 the town was divided into five districts with a schoolhouse in each. These schoolhouses were built and owned by the residents of each district, who managed the school and provided most of the financial support by taxing the parents of the neighborhood according to the number of their children enrolled. One such school described by William Smith was located off Atwood Street (now Stage Harbor Road) on the edge of the Cedar Swamp. It was only 12 feet square, seven feet high, with a four-sided roof that met at its highest point in the center. The door was at one corner, and light was furnished by two small windows on the opposite side. These schoolhouses were small both because they served only children in the neighborhood and because very few girls attended them.

By 1827 the number of school districts in Chatham had grown to 10, and town financial support gradually rose. Each school operated six months a year, three months in the summer and three in the winter. It was the general practice to hire a young woman teacher in the summer

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as she was paid less than a man, but in the winter months a man of brawn as well as brains was necessary to control the often unruly big boys. These schools were wholly ungraded, and in the winter term the pupils were of various ages, from the child of five or six learning the alphabet to young men in their 20s home from sea and struggling to master Bowditch's "American Practical Navigator." Because so many young men aspired to succeed as mariners, there were also private navigation schools.

About 1830 the private Chatham Academy opened in a building near the present QueenAnne Inn. The first teacher was Joseph W. Cross, who had graduated from Harvard in 1828. In 1841 Sidney Brooks, a recent graduate of Amherst College, was offered the position of principal of the Academy. Brooks had been undecided between becoming a teacher or going on to theological school. But his father encouraged him to accept the offer so that he would be spared the expense of providing further education. The school offered the children of more wealthy townspeople a fine liberal education, but in 1849 another private school, the Granville Academy, was opened by Joshua Granville Nickerson on Old Harbor Road where the Bank of America now

stands. The competition drew so many students away from the Chatham Academy that it closed its doors in 1850.

Granville Seminary accepted both boys and girls and offered programs in English, algebra, surveying, navigation, geometry, astronomy, chemistry, geology, mineralogy, zoology, botany, physiology, bookkeeping Spanish, Greek, Latin, music and drawing. Among its more notable graduates were Thomas Sparrow and Horace Taylor who became noted sea captains, and Marcellus Eldredge. In spite of its impressive academic offerings, it closed in 1858 when the town adopted the graded school system and began to support its own public schools.

It was in that year that largely through the untiring efforts of Ziba Nickerson, town meeting voted to build a central school to house a grammar and intermediate school, along with the high school. The opposition to building this school was so bitter that many people referred to it as “Ziba’s Folly.” These foes of “advanced ideas in higher education” called special town meetings every few weeks during the summer of 1858 to try to harass the building committee into rescinding the vote.

Not surprisingly, schools even then were not without their disciplinary problems, as reflected in one school committee report: We fear parents know little of what is done in this school. When there is loafing, and smoking and card-playing in the basement; when there is constant rapping at the schoolroom door by big girls and big boys out of school for no proper purpose; when they are getting late and getting dismissed only to loiter and play and go to ride; when there are rudeness and coarseness in the basement and jumping and wrestling and pushing in the halls and on the stairs—parents must be very strange...to rest satisfied with the school for the moment.

But in spite of the fierce opposition to the building of a central school, the new school opened in October 1858, and a new era in education in Chatham was launched.