

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Other Eldredge Brother

by Spencer Grey

Of the two famous Eldredge brothers, Marcellus has received more attention than Fisher, possibly because he was 13 years older, but more likely because his gift of the library and his summer home on Watch Hill made him a more recognizable figure. Fisher, however, was equally prominent and in some ways more of a figure in Chatham.

Although both were born in Chatham, they spent most of their adult years in Portsmouth, N.H., where they managed the Eldredge Brewing Company that was owned by their father, Heman Eldredge. In the early years of the company, Marcellus was president and treasurer, but in 1891 he retired, and Fisher bought his share of the holdings, becoming president. In its peak years the company brewed almost 93,000 barrels of beer annually, making it the second largest brewery in New England. It was primarily from this company that the family acquired its vast fortune.

In addition to running the brewery, Fisher served one term in the New Hampshire legislature and was vice president of the Boston and Worcester Street Railway Company, a holding company for several companies that operated lines between the two cities.

In Chatham he lived in the family homestead on the corner of East Main Street and Water Street that still is owned by his descendants. He joined his brother in making investments in town, including giving the Eldredge Public Library his personal library of 5,000 volumes as its seed collection. According to some possibly apocryphal reports, the town fathers at one point contemplated refusing to accept the gift of the library and the donated books because they were being paid for with "tainted" money that came from a company that produced alcoholic beverages (Chatham had been a dry town for many years). To this objection, Marcellus Eldredge said, "If the town doesn't want the library, it can come down faster than it went up." The objection was quickly withdrawn.

On his property Fisher built a large three-story barn, the first floor of which has been described as a mansion for horses, but it also provided space for the family's many carriages. The second floor was a hall that was dedicated on Nov. 19, 1870, as the Temple of Reason, where spiritualist meetings were held every Sunday. At that time the spiritualist movement was sweeping the country as an alternative to traditional religious movements. Spiritualists believe in communicating with the spirits of deceased people through mediums, individuals who reputedly were gifted to make such communications. Like similar groups, those at the Temple of Reason sought direct contact with departed souls through seances in the hope of finding evidence of a life hereafter. In 1879 the Temple closed, however, much to the regret of the many believers in town.

Although Fisher Eldredge must have been kept busy running the Eldredge Brewing Company, which was operating at peak production during the last decade of the century, he began to spend more time in Chatham, especially during the summer, at the family homestead on East Main Street.

In 1889 Eben Jordon, Charles Taylor, Walton Taft, Marcellus Eldredge, H. Fisher Eldredge, and Osborne Nickerson bought Nickerson Neck, Strong Island, and Eldredge Neck for \$5,000 in anticipation of building the

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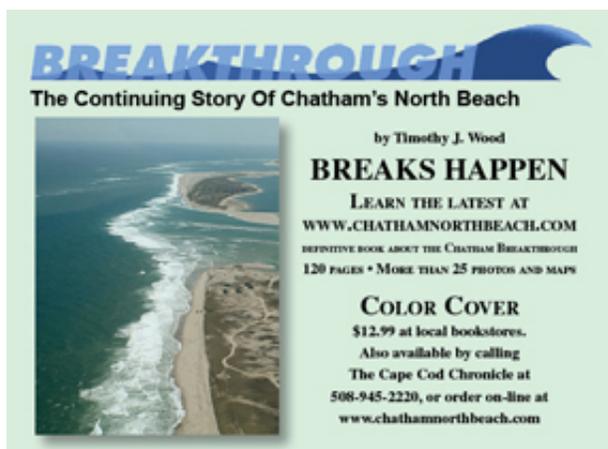
Hotel Chatham on what is now the fourth green of Eastward Ho!. The hotel opened with great fanfare in June of 1890 but operated only four years. In 1895 the trust that had built the hotel was dissolved, and Eldredge Neck was acquired by Marcellus, who transferred it to his mother. After her death in 1900, it was sold to Fisher Eldredge for \$450.

On this 100-acre neck, Fisher proceeded to build his farm, beginning with his residence on top of the highest hill overlooking Crow's Pond. Over the next few years he built a cottage, a huge barn that at the time was considered the biggest barn on Cape Cod to house his prize-winning cattle, and a gate and gatehouse. Next he built a dance pavilion, a carriage house, a corn crib, several large chicken coops, and an ice house.

Eldredge enjoyed entertaining and established the custom of holding an annual husking bee where tables were laid out for as many as a hundred guests to enjoy a lavish dinner. The most famous of these occurred on Oct. 13, 1905, when he invited the whole town to the annual event and at least 500 people attended. An old time Chatham resident told Fisher of a custom where the finder of a red ear of corn had the reward of kissing the girl next to him. To enliven this event, he had his farm manager color fifty ears of corn red, resulting in many kisses being bestowed. Following the husking, the guests were treated to an elegant dinner at the bungalow, followed by dancing in the pavilion.

When Fisher Eldredge died in 1919, he left the farm to his two daughters, who continued to entertain there but who preferred spending summers in the family homestead on East Main Street. During the First World War they gave dances for the men stationed at the Naval Air Station, enlisted men on Wednesdays and officers on Saturdays. Because no one was living on the farm during prohibition, it is rumored that rum runners landed cases of liquor at night and hid them in the underbrush.

In 1925 Sadie Eldredge Wilder bought her sister's interest in the property, and she continued to entertain there but lived in the town at the homestead. In 1948 she sold the entire property to A. Burns Smythe and family, who divided the 100 acres into 96 house lots and promoted it under the name of Harbor Coves.



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The Continuing Story Of Chatham's North Beach

by Timothy J. Wood

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