

## **They Made Their Fortunes Elsewhere**

### **AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE**

**by spencer grey**

During the early years of Chatham most men lived and worked their entire lives on Cape Cod, but by the 18th century some moved away and made their fortunes elsewhere.

One of the first to do so was David Sears, son of Richard Sears, whose land holdings extended from the head of the Oyster Pond easterly to the ocean. When Richard died in 1761, his wife remarried and moved to Boston, taking her three sons, Richard, David, and Daniel, with her. Richard soon returned to Chatham, but his brothers remained with their mother and her new husband in their home on the corner of Tremont Street and Temple Place. The couple educated their children so well and gave them such excellent early training that when David was 12 years old, he started his own business, for which he showed exceptional ability.

He was so unremitting in his efforts and managed his fortunes so well that by the time he was 22 he had amassed a sizable fortune, and by the last quarter of the 18th century he was one of the largest property owners in New England. With the unrest leading up to the American Revolution, he sailed to London to conduct his business in a more stable environment.

At the end of the war he returned to the newly created United States and engaged in privateering during the Presidency of John Adams and later became active in the India and Canton trade. At home he became active in Boston ventures, such as the First Bank of the United States, where he was the first director. When he died in 1826 he left an estate larger than any other in Boston at that time, thereby establishing the Sears financial dominance in Boston that lasted into the 20th century.

At the beginning of the next century Captain Benjamin Godfrey, the nephew of Colonel Benjamin Godfrey, ran away to sea when he was 9 years old on a voyage to Ireland, where he lived for nine years. After returning home in 1812 he again went to sea and commanded several merchant ships, the last voyage being almost disastrous, as he was shipwrecked and nearly lost his life.

In 1826 he settled in Matamore, Mexico, where he acquired a large fortune. When he was attacked by guerrillas while carrying silver across the country and lost all \$200,000 of it, he became sour on Mexico and moved to New Orleans, where he acquired another fortune before leaving there in 1832. At that point he settled in Alton, Ill. and founded, along with W. S. Gilman, the trading company of Godfrey and Gilman. Another son of Chatham who made a fortune elsewhere in the 19 century was Samuel M. Nickerson. Born in Chatham on June 14, 1830, Samuel Mayo Nickerson was the son of Ensign Nickerson, Jr. and Rebecca Nickerson. His early education was obtained in the public schools of Chatham and Boston, but in 1847 he went to Apalachicola, Fla. where he joined his elder brother in operating a successful general store, remaining there until 1858 when he married the daughter of Isaac Crosby of Brewster. When his business in Florida was burned out, he moved to Chicago, where he established a distillery. Upon becoming the president of the Chicago City Railroad in 1864, he found the demands of the position so demanding that he retired from the distillery. When the First National Bank of Chicago was formed, he became its vice president. In 1867 he became president and immediately built a new bank building, which was considered the best fire-proof building west of New York City, as attested to by the fact that it survived the great fire of 1871.

In 1883 he commissioned the architectural firm of Burling and Whitehouse to design and build a large and imposing house that occupies an entire block. It was noted for its fine woodwork, stained glass and tiling and was considered one of the finest houses built during the Gilded Age of the late 19 century. Today it is the home of the Driehaus Museum which is one of the country's leading private collections of works by artists of the late 19th century, such as Louis Comfort Tiffany.

