

## **Elijah Crosby, Mariner**

### **AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE**

**by Spencer Grey**

Before the Cape Cod Bank and Trust built its Chatham branch at the corner of Main Street and Stage Harbor Road, a handsome late 19th century house with a covered porch gracing its front and western side stood there. It once had been the home of Captain Elijah Crosby, its first owner.

Like so many boys of the 19th century, Crosby first went to sea when he was 10 years old as a cook on a fishing schooner where his wages were \$3 a month. Beginning his career as a seaman at such a young age, it is not surprising that he became master of the bark Chester when he was 26.

According to the crew list, Captain Crosby was 26, his mate was 18 and was paid \$30 a month, while the others were 30 years old and were paid between \$25 and \$28 a month.

A surviving log of the ship dating from July 14, 1851, through May 12, 1853 provides vivid descriptions of the actions and activities of the vessel, with entries such as: "...at 2 a.m. a sea came aboard the starboard bow...and at 3:20 shipped a sea over the deck and washed several barrels of sweet potatoes overboard. The next morning...at 8, took another sea over the deck which 'stove in' 3 barrels of potatoes and washed over at least two more barrels. The rest of those potatoes were secured and landed safely in Boston."

On another trip from Boston to Mobile in January, the Chester carried a load of ice. AT the end of the 22-day trip, the captain wrote in the log: "All of this day fine and pleasant weather. The stevedores finished discharging the ice, the captain discharged the second mate. So ends the day."

Elijah Crosby often took his wife and children on his voyages, including his daughter, who when she was 87 years old recalled a trip to the Pacific when the mate while looking through his telescope saw a speck in the distance, which upon approaching they discovered to be a distress signal on an open boat. When they drew near it, they found 12 men in an open boat, with one of them lying dead in the bottom.

They took them on board and discovered that they had been floating around for 30 days without food or water after their ship had gone down in a storm. They were so hungry that the captain had to ration their food so that they would not get sick from eating too much too soon. Besides having gone without food for so long, they had frozen their fingers and toes. On one of his shore visits while Captain Crosby was waiting with a crowd for the ferry from Chelsea to Boston, a woman fell off the dock. Without any hesitation Crosby dove into the water and pulled her to safely, injuring his hand in the process. Some weeks later while he was buying supplies at the ship chandlers, the clerk asked him how he had injured his hand. When he explained that it had happened while rescuing a woman from drowning, the clerk replied that her family had been trying to find him to express their thanks. The captain went to them, and they gave him a silver cup with an inscription of thanks for his heroic act.

During his career, Elijah Crosby made coastal voyages between Boston, New York and Philadelphia for 20 years, often carrying bales of cotton. Interspersed with these coastal voyages were trips to European ports, such as Oporto, Portugal, on the bark Schamyl. On one such voyage, he carried, 1,540 barrels of flour and 13,928 bushels of wheat from Boston to Portugal. On a typical return trip from the Mediterranean the cargo

would be casks of olive oil, canary seed, casks of wine, nuts, lemons and oranges.

When he retired from seagoing, Captain Crosby settled in his house in Chatham and went into the coal and lumber business.

