

Ziba Nickerson

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Born in 1823, Ziba Nickerson was a leading figure in Chatham during the 19th century. As was true of most young men at the time, he first went to sea an early age, signing on for a three-year hitch that took him to many ports throughout the Pacific and as far as Asia. But Ziba decided that one hitch at sea was enough and came ashore to become a teacher at the Old Harbor District School. In the School Committee Report of March 1848, Ziba was praised as “a competent teacher and true to his trust.”

After teaching for three years, however, he decided to retire from that profession and open a store in his large white house on the corner of Main Street and Mill Pond Road. Operating his store for more than 50 years, he carried a variety of goods, including choice family groceries, flour, paper hangings, and a variety of patent medicines. One that most likely was popular was Shilo’s Consumption Cure, which treated not only consumption but also “coughs, hoarseness, asthma, whooping cough, and all lung or throat troubles.” But like most stores of the time, his carried nearly everything that one could need, such as boots, shoes, rubber overshoes, hip boots, crockery ware, and much more. Asserting that he sold at reasonable prices, he had as his motto “More Cash—Less Credit, Better for buyer and seller.”

Ziba was an active member of the community, serving as the clerk and treasurer of the Universalist Parish for 48 years, superintendent of the Sunday School for 33 years and Chatham postmaster of 20 years.

In 1855 Brewer and Baldwin, one of the many small companies that preceded the Western Union Company, built a line to Chatham. The enterprising Ziba quickly recognized the potential of this new means of communication and learned Morse Code, setting up a telegraph office in his store, the first such outlet on the east coast, and possibly in the country. Because that means of communication was so new, not many people understood its usefulness. Consequently, Ziba had only one customer on his first day of business, who came in and bought one cent worth of telegraphing. But in 1861 when the Civil War was heating up, the telegraph office became a hub of activity because people went there to get the latest news of battles. In an interview Ziba explained that “we had a flagstaff in the rear of the office, and when good news came recording the success of our boys in blue that flag went up quickly, and everybody would hurry to the telegraph office.” He also pointed out that in those early days of telegraphy, the operators were responsible for repairing and maintaining the poles and the lines. Busy as he was with his store and the telegraph office, Ziba still found time to act as a marine observer from the tower on top of his house. With the help of a powerful telescope, he and his son William kept watch of the passing vessels to their east, recording all sightings and sending the information immediately to shippers in Boston so that they would be prepared to offload the ships immediately upon arrival in port. They also reported any sightings of grounded or wrecked vessels along the treacherous seas east of Monomoy Point.

But during all his years as a merchant, Ziba retained his interest in education, becoming a driving force behind the movement to open a central graded school, where all students in town would go after the seventh grade. The many people in town who opposed the building of what they regarded as an expensive and unnecessary school referred to it as “Ziba’s folly.” But in spite of the opposition the school was built in 1858 slightly behind the present community center.

It certainly was a proud Ziba who joined in on the ceremony dedicating the opening of the school. The

Barnstable Patriot in reporting the event pointed out that “the music, which was under the leadership of Mr. J. W. Atwood and Ziba Nickerson, was excellent.”

