

Chatham At War



by Spencer Grey

Shortly after the Provincial Congress decreed in December 1774 that the colonists should cease using British tea after March 1, 1775, it was evident that war with the British was imminent. In response to this pending threat, Chatham, along with the other towns, organized a militia under the command of Colonel Benjamin Godfrey. Mostly these men were employed in protecting local ships that often were attacked by the British, both to capture the vessels and to enlist their crews in the British military. Another duty of the militia was to provide soldiers for the Continental Army. The town had to pay a bounty for each soldier who enlisted, the cost of which became a significant burden to its budget, causing appropriations for schools to be suspended, the minister's salary withheld, and other town functions not being funded. Ultimately, the town had insufficient funds to cover the cash payments, forcing them to meet the demand with payments made in grain.

The War of 1812, which most residents had opposed entering, caused considerable trouble to the vessels sailing from Chatham, interrupting them as they left or returned to port. Rhoda Howes, wife of Collins Howes, wrote an article for the Boston Globe in which she recalled the presence of a British ship that anchored off Chatham, preventing the fishing boats from going to the Banks. It would leave periodically, at which point the fishermen would sail to the Grand Banks. Other than that inconvenience, the War had little effect on the lives of Chatham people.

The most costly effect of the war upon the town was in the depletion of maritime activity. Fishing and coastal trading was seriously impeded, and local ships frequently were captured. At the beginning of the war the town had 30 vessels and 200 men engaged in such activity, but at its end only four or five were actively fishing. Moreover, the townspeople lived in constant fear of attacks, resulting in a decrease in local business activity.

The cost to the town of the Civil War was even greater than that of previous wars. After the firing on Fort Sumter, the residents of Chatham began holding public meetings to express support for the Union, to raise money for that effort, and to provide a bounty of \$200 for each volunteer, plus \$4 a month for each member of the families of those enlisted men. The quota for Chatham during the war was 232 men, but the town actually sent 264. The greatest cost of this war, however, was in the approximately 620,000 lives lost out of the 2.4 million who served, mostly in battle, but almost as many died from their wounds, as medical treatment was often unavailable or inadequate.

Far more significant and more disrupting of lives in Chatham was the First World War, which began in 1914 but which the United States did not enter until 1917. To protect the country and its ships from attacks by German submarines and other warships, the United States built a series of airfields along the Atlantic Coast, one of which was the Naval Air Station on the edge of Pleasant Bay in Chathamport. In addition to eight Curtis seaplanes housed there, one large hanger was the home of a huge Navy B-class blimp. The planes and the blimp would patrol the Atlantic Coast to spot any German vessels that might be lurking too close to the mainland.

As Tim Weller explains in “Three Centuries in a Cape Cod Village,” the wars brought a swarm of service personnel to Chatham, some of whom were housed at the air base, but others in homes around town. During the Second World War there were military men and women all over town. The WAVES who operated the Marconi Radio Station were housed at Rose Acres Inn on Cross Street, Navy personnel relaxed at the Wayside Inn, and the Chatham Bars Inn garage on Chatham Bars Avenue became a USO Center.

Another change to the routine of their lives was the rationing of meat, sugar, and cigarettes, and other items. Furthermore, houses in towns along the coast installed opaque black window shades that were kept lowered throughout the night, and headlights on cars were painted black along the tops to reduce the level of light shining out over the ocean to avoid silhouetting ships at sea. Throughout that period 14 percent of the town’s residents were serving in the military.

These and many others were the changes that war brought to Chatham.

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE