

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Atwood Street

by Spencer Grey

In the last decade of the 17th century when there were very few roads in Chatham, the two most traveled were the one from Yarmouth to Chatham and the cartway to the stage, which ran from the east end of the Yarmouth road to the stage or wharf at what we now know as Stage Harbor.

When in 1752 Joseph Atwood bought his first 30 acres and built his house, the road to the stage probably was little more than that original cartway, but as the years passed and his children and grandchildren built houses along the road, it became known as Atwood Street. As Simeon Deyo writes in his History of Barnstable County, "This street has long been prominent in the history of the village. Joseph Atwood very early had a store in his house, and more than half a century ago built a building for his trade."

After several years as a sea captain making voyages to the Mediterranean and to Madeira, his grandson, also Joseph, retired in 1814 and built a large Georgian house on his 10-acre farm at the corner of Stage Harbor Road and Cross Street. His son, still another Joseph Atwood, studied dentistry in Boston and became Chatham's first dentist, specializing in "mechanical dentistry" or the production of false teeth. He continued to live in the family house and kept his office there. It remained in the Atwood family until 1955.

A few years later in 1818 upon his marriage to his second wife, Joseph's brother David built a house that is now 252 Stage Harbor Rd., and he farmed a large acreage that extended westward toward the Cedar Swamp. Today that house is owned by his great, great granddaughter, but for a while it was occupied by Abigail McCarthy, the former wife of Senator Eugene McCarthy, who ran for president in 1968 in an unprecedented attempt to unseat an incumbent president of his own party, Lyndon Johnson, because he believed it was time to bring the war in Vietnam to an end.

In 1849 at the age of 24, Levi Atwood opened his grocery store in a barn on what is now the corner of Stage Harbor Road and Cedar Street, and after marrying Phoebe Mason in 1850, he proceeded to build his house next to his store. During the second half of the 19th century when he held the position, the town clerk's office was in his store. The store prospered to the point where Levi's sons moved it to Main Street, where it operated until 1964.

Further down Atwood Street Colonel Benjamin Godfrey, who had led troops from Chatham in the American Revolution, built a luxurious house with paneling more elaborate than that in the original Atwood House. Behind his house on a prominent hill that overlooks the Mill Pond, then known as Tom's Cove, he built a large windmill in 1796. By 1890 this was the only mill of at least seven that once had operated in town that was still grinding corn. But most of the activity in the 19th century occurred at the end of Atwood Street where by the end of the century two of only three operating wharves were located. The third was on Harding's Beach and serviced the fishing fleet. At that time the harbor was filled with as many as a hundred vessels, including schooners, Grand Bankers, sloops, and a variety of fishing boats. To support this fleet there were a number of shops along the shore of Stage Harbor, including David Mayo's blacksmith shop that repaired the iron work on the many boats that came into the harbor, as well as performing the regular work of shoeing horses. Also between the two wharves was the sail loft run for many years by Henry Bates, who later was joined in the business by Charles Howes. A sail loft was important in such a community because not only was it necessary to make sails for the ships, but in the winter when the vessels came ashore, their sails were stored in the sail loft and repaired to make them ready for the next season. Eventually Howes bought out Henry Bates, and when that sail loft burned down, he moved his operation to the building on Bridge Street that we now know as The Sail Loft.

One other important business at the end of this historic street was the marine railway operated by Captain Oliver Eldredge in the last quarter of the century. The railway, which operated for over 40 years, consisted of huge beams in the sand, along which ships were hauled by oxen or horses up on the shore so that they could be

repaired and restored.

Atwood Street, which did not become Stage Harbor Road until 1945, was therefore a hub of activity, not only along the street itself but to an even greater extent at its end along the shores of a very busy harbor.



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