

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Some Early Chatham Stores

by Spencer Grey

The first establishments to carry merchandise were taverns, not stores as we know them. Colonial legislators required each community to have at least one public house as a gathering place for residents. In Chatham the earliest known tavern was established by Morris Farris (for whom Morris Island is named) in 1712 near Wreck Cove on Monomoy. About the same time Ebenezer Hawes opened a tavern in Chathamport, which because it was centrally located was more frequented by the residents than taverns on the outskirts. Throughout the years many inns or taverns existed in Chatham, but one of the most notable was that kept by Hannah Knowles near Great Hill in the early years of the 19th century. At that time town meetings adjourned to the Widow Knowles' to swear in the newly elected officials. According to William Smith in his history, "Why this was so can only be surmised, but no doubt there was some attraction and considerable celebrating by the Town Fathers around the widow's punch bowl...."

Other businesses in the early years of the town were mainly those producing goods essential to life at the time, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, and shoemakers, all of whom sold the goods they produced. There was little need for stores, as we know them, as families provided themselves with the necessities. They grew their own crops and raised their own beef, pork, and grain so there was no need for anything else except spices, molasses, and rum. Moreover, they had their own sheep that provided them with wool for spinning into yarn or weaving into fabric.

By the beginning of the 19th century, however, stores began to appear in different parts of town, but the leading merchant was Richard Sears, who operated the store that had been established by his father, Daniel, and was attached to his house that stood about where the Civil War monument is today. As described by William Smith: 'Mr. Sears was a gentleman of the old school with a sort of pompous air and wore his hair tied up in a cue behind. He had a large farm, fitted out fishermen, manufactured salt, had many cattle, sheep and some horses, and in one way and another employed many men and women, who were paid largely out of the store, which furnished nearly everything they needed.'

Around 1830 the first general store of importance was that of Sears and Hardy located close to the twin lights. The store had several owners over the years, but when James Trip joined his father-in-law, Josiah Hardy, they added to the trade lumber, wood, coal, and cured fish.

These early stores carried items that the residents could not produce themselves, usually specializing in English and West Indian goods, such as manufactured goods from England, with spices, molasses and rum coming from the Indies. The more prosperous residents could buy whale oil from Nantucket or New Bedford. Dry goods were important, as people needed silk thread and fabric or cooking utensils. Lard and flour were kept in barrels or firkins. Apparently if a customer required less than a barrel of flour, the merchant would place the barrel on a cloth and saw it in half as one would a log of wood, a feat that only the experienced shopkeeper could perform successfully. Scales in the old stores consisted of a piece of wood hung from a beam by a wire, with a place for weights at one end and a scoop to hold the article being sold at the other end.

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were numerous stores in most of the villages of Chatham, but the largest and most notable were those of Levi Atwood and Ziba Nickerson. Levi Atwood opened his store on Stage Harbor Road at the corner of Cedar Street in 1849, where he stocked an extensive supply of canned goods in addition to the staples of flour, sugar, and molasses. In a few years he decided to add dry goods to his stock, offering everything from a cambric needle to velvets, silks, fine embroideries, and millinery. But as more dry goods stores opened in town, he concentrated more on groceries. In an advertisement that he ran in the June 17, 1862 issue of the Barnstable Patriot, he listed himself as "Chatham Cheap Store," and added that he carried groceries, flour, hardware, nails, crockery, and glassware. More specifically he offered "farmers' tools, paper hangings,

carpets, clocks, looking glasses, school cooks, boots and shoes, paints and oils, and pine and oak wood.' He also bragged that he had the exclusive right to sell containers of "The One Dime Coffee" in Chatham.

In 1851 Ziba Nickerson, who previously had had an interest in the store of Sears and Hardy by the lights, opened his store on the corner of Main Street and Mill Pond Road, where according to an advertisement in the Barnstable Patriot, he offered "choice family groceries, flour, paper hangings, and a variety of the most popular patent medicines." Among those he sold was "Shilos's Consumption Cure," which claimed to treat not only consumption but also "coughs, hoarseness, asthma, whooping cough, and all lung or throat troubles." Besides these basic commodities, his store carried boots, shoes, many styles of rubber overshoes for men, women, girls, and boys, as well as men's hip boots. In local papers he advertised that he carried "crockery ware, etc. etc.," and added that all were "sold at reasonable prices. Our Motto—More Cash—Less Credit. Better for Buyer and Seller."



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