

Life In Colonial Chatham

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

When William Nickerson first purchased land from the Sachem Mataquasson, he and his family found hills and meadows covered with forests of huge oak and pine trees interspersed with swamps covered with impenetrable thickets and vines. The only clearings were near the shore that had been created by the natives who wished to live near the water so that they could catch fish and dig shellfish, an easier way to provide food than hunting in the forests.

Building their small, one-story houses was a challenge, as they first had to cut trees from which they would fashion beams from some and use others to saw into boards. Once the framework was erected, they had to make bricks for building chimneys and fireplaces. The earliest houses did not have glass for windows but instead used oiled paper. These early houses were sparsely furnished, with most having only a few chairs and a table in addition to the beds in their bedrooms.

Because the typical Cape Cod house had only three fireplaces for heat, they suffered from the cold during the winter. The fireplace in the kitchen was larger to facilitate cooking, with a brick oven on the right-hand side in which they built a fire to heat the bricks for baking. Once the bricks were sufficiently hot, the ashes were hauled out and baking began, continuing throughout the day.

By the middle of the 18th century the more affluent families had larger, more comfortable houses such as the Atwood House and the Godfrey House, which were the largest and most comfortable house in town at that time. In addition to the large kitchen, the sitting room, and the parlor, they had several bedrooms, with two or more on the first floor and three on the second floor, as well as a central room where children slept on mattresses. The early beds had ropes holding up mattresses that were stuffed with corn husks or hay. Light was provided at first by "lightwood," a piece of pine wood full of pitch, but after they had farm animals to provide the fat for making tallow, candles became common. They also made candles from bayberry berries that provided a fat that was preferable to fat from animals. Because most of the men were mariners, they most likely also had whale oil to light their lamps.

Since all families had gardens sufficient to provide vegetables for their own use, or in some cases to sell to neighbors, food was in ample supply, especially when the vegetables were supplemented by meat from their animals or from game, such as rabbits or deer, as well as fish from the nearby waters. Beans and corn were the principal source of food, providing beans that could be dried and corn meal that was used in several forms, such as corn bread and Indian pudding. The settlers also planted squashes, parsnips, turnips, and carrots. All families had at least one apple tree, and growing wild they found blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, and grapes. In addition to cooking and preserving these foods, the women made soap, candles, butter, and cheese, and did all the spinning of yarn for use in producing clothing for the entire family.

An indication of the extensive property that most of these families had is shown by the inventory of Robert Eldred, one of the earliest settlers. His livestock included two horses, 20 cows, two steers, six heifers, 29 sheep, and 12 hogs. He also had four beehives, three barrels of tar, a plow, irons, pails, chisels, a pitchfork, and other farming tools.

Clearly the homes of the first residents of Chatham were fully provisioned even in the earliest days of the recently created village.

