

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Challenges At The Atwood House: Crusie vs. Betty

by Steve Burlingame

Not all is fun and games at the Atwood House. Not by a long shot. It is challenges, too, but not always the challenges of hard work, budget limits, docent levels or space. It is sometimes the challenge of identification.

At a recent workshop of Atwood House docents, two long-term docents led a tour of other docents and dialogued about a number of items hoping for consensus. They discussed the recipe for flip, a colonial drink of rum, ale, raw eggs, sugar and nutmeg. It was heated by inserting a hot poker into the drink. So far so good; near unanimity about the Colonial items in the Atwood House. There was even agreement as to the Argand lamp, which graces the south parlor table and named for Aime Argand, a Swiss inventor. The lamp was very popular until shortly after oil was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859. Whale oil had become expensive and the new kerosene began to compete. It was one-fifth the cost of whale oil, smelled better and burned brighter. So long Mr. Argand's lamp.

A review of the birthing room where babies were born and other household members in need of care were quartered was also agreeable. It was a room just off the kitchen or keeping room, small in size but sunny and warm (by 18th century standards). Most importantly of course was that there was always a worker or two or three in the kitchen preparing meals, sewing, spinning or fire tending. Visitors find it hard to believe that the fire in its active or banked state burned 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (great in the winter but not so comfortable in summer). The fireplace served as both furnace and stove. The bake oven was used once a week to bake great volumes of bread and pies, both meat and fruit, for the Atwood family which initially consisted of two parents and seven children. There were probably some hired hands to feed as well. A fire was built in the igloo-shaped oven very early in the morning as it took two to three hours to heat the bricks and all day to do the baking. No discussions of electric vs. gas in those days.

All went well until there was discussion of the fat lamp that hung from a spike impaled in the mantle. Of course the primary source of light was the fireplace but lamps were used to supplement it and lead one to bed. Candles were one source of supplemental light but gave little light, burned quickly and were expensive and labor intensive. The cheap way out was to purchase a small metal fat lamp which burned whale oil, fish oil or animal fat, thus its name. Sheep fat seemed to be the fat of choice. Our lamp is a lamp within a lamp so that drippings could be caught. There is an elongated lip to hold the wick, cotton if you had it or a dried reed if you did not. It was at this point that agreement ended. It is a double crusie, said one; no, it is a Betty lamp, said the other. It is too, it is not, it is too, it is not. The training tour then ended with an agreement to disagree pending more research.

Subsequent research answered the question. When you get a chance, come see our double crusie lamp on the mantle of the kitchen fireplace (or the keeping room) at the Atwood House. We do not have a Betty lamp to show you but we sure would like to have one and seek a donation if there is one gathering dust around your house. Or simply buy one for us.

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