

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Salt Works Of Chatham

by Spencer Grey

As we walk through an eighteenth century house, such as the Atwood House in Chatham, we are aware of the very limited means of preserving food. Vegetables and fruits could be stored with some success in the small brick cellar, but milk had to be produced daily, and fish and meat could only be preserved with salt.

It is not surprising, therefore, that except for fishing, the earliest and most important industry on Cape Cod was the manufacture of salt. Prior to the American Revolution salt had been imported from Europe, but with the coming of war and the resulting blockade, it no longer was available. Dennis is credited as the site of the first salt works established there by John Sears about 1776.

By 1800 there were salt works in most Cape Cod towns, but Chatham, with its many bays and coves, was especially well suited for the trade. Christopher Ryder's father, Reuben, established the first salt works on the shores of Pleasant Bay at the beginning of the 19th century, followed shortly by his neighbor Ensign Nickerson. By the end of the first decade of that century, salt works also covered the shores east of the village and of the Mill Pond, Oyster Pond, and Stage Harbor. Joseph, John, and Sears Atwood had salt works below their house on the north side of Mitchell's River. By 1830 there were at least 80 works in town. In 1835 David Crowell said that he could see 28 windmills in Ryder's Cove alone.

Under the right conditions the sun would evaporate sea water, leaving salt crystals. Those conditions required proximity to a supply of sea water, a windmill to pump it, and containers suitable to expose it to the sun. The water was conducted through hollow logs to shallow pine vats that were 12 to 20 feet square and nine to 12 inches deep. Three vats were placed on an incline so that water could flow from one to the other simply by lifting a board. In the first vat, called the water room, sea animals and plant life were removed. The second vat was called the pickle room, and here much of the lime was precipitated before the brine flowed to the third vat, known as the salt room. Here crystallization occurred until salt could be raked out and placed in warehouses to dry. The salt thus produced was in the form of large crystals suitable for salting fish or meat, but for table use the crystals had to be ground.

A proper salt works would have several, or even many, of these sets of three vats, and some of the larger works covered many acres. Of course evaporation would occur only on dry sunny days, and rain would dilute the brine. To avoid dilution the vats were provided with covers shaped like peaked roofs that could slide over them. Others were hinged so that they would be pushed over the vats. This work usually was done by boys too young to fish, as a roof could be moved by two of three of them. The entire process of evaporation would take several weeks and could only be accomplished between April and October.

Local fishermen were the obvious first customers for the salt, but with so many salt works operating, there was an ample supply for export by packet boat to Boston and New York. The archives at the Atwood House Museum contain a certificate signed by Mulford Kendrick asserting that he had inspected salt from the works of Ensign Nickerson and authorized it to be loaded on the sloop Ohio on July 25, 1830. The industry continued to grow, reaching its height in the 1830s, and in 1837 the salt produced by the 80 works in Chatham was 27,400 bushels.

By the middle of the century, however, several events occurred that led to the rapid decline in the salt industry on Cape Cod. First among these was the repeal by the federal government of the tariffs on imports, including that of salt. About the same time, salt springs were found in abundance in New York, Virginia and Kentucky, where wood for making vats and for boiling the water was abundant, resulting in salt production at a much lower price than was possible on Cape Cod, where wood that had to be imported from Maine was becoming more expensive.

Although the number of operating salt works began to decline at this time, salt nevertheless was produced for

another 35 years, but more and more it was solely used by the local fisherman to preserve their catch. The salt works in Chathamport remained active into the 1870s, and the last one to operate was that of Jesse Nickerson on Ryder's Cove that finally ceased operation in 1886.



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