

The Mitchell River Bridge

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Around 1690 William Mitchell, who had married the granddaughter of William Nickerson, established a 40-acre farm that extended westward from the river between Stage Harbor and the Mill Pond to what is now Stage harbor Road, giving his name to the river.

Throughout the 18th century and the first part of the 19th century there was no bridge over Mitchell River, so that to get from one side to the other, it was necessary either to go by land to the north end of the Mill Pond or to cross the river by boat. Most people traveled by boat from the wharf at Stage Harbor to the Joshua Nickerson house on the hill above the river that had been built around 1800.

What became known as Bridge Street was laid out in 1854, and the bridge was built in 1858 by David Edwards and George Atwood at a cost of \$1,300. At that time the bridge was only wide enough for a small horse and carriage to cross. Apparently it had been built well because it did not need any repairs until 1883, and 10 years later the town appropriated \$300 for more repairs.

From that time until the present, maintenance of the bridge usually caused considerable controversy. When a man was injured in 1903 while opening the drawbridge, a committee was appointed to determine if the town could eliminate the draw, but it was found that the town did not have the authority to close it. A motion at town meeting in 1906 to appropriate \$2,400 to build a new bridge was defeated. When it was moved to appropriate \$75 toward the project, that too was defeated, but one for \$ 50 passed. Clearly even then people did not want to spend money for a bridge. Finally, in 1907, the town voted to appropriate \$5,000 to rebuild the bridge.

By 1915 the bridge was again in need of repairs and it was closed for repairs until 1920, but apparently it was not entirely usable even then. In 1925 town meeting appropriated \$9,000 to build a new trestle bridge in the style of the existing one, but that work was not completed until the summer of 1926.

Again in 1949 when the bridge needed extensive repairs, it was enlarged by the addition of a walkway on both sides. At the same time an electric hoist for operating the draw was installed, along with warning signals. Twenty-seven years later in 1976, when the bridge again needed major repairs and rebuilding, the selectmen applied to the state for an appropriation to cover the cost, but the state proposed building a new bridge of concrete, provoking Spaulding Dunbar to write in the local newspaper in March of that year: "All are in favor of retaining the old Cape Cod character of the present bridge...no one, and this is emphatic, wants a modern concrete monstrosity. Not only because the look of such a bridge is contrary to the flavor of the area, but also because such a bridge would encourage speeding of cars."

Even though talk of rebuilding the bridge began in 1976, it was not until 1980 that reconstruction actually began. According to a newspaper article dated 1986: "Six years and some \$600,000 later the reconstructed bridge was reopened."

The battle to preserve this historic landmark has gone on for many years, most recently in 2007, when the state proposed a bridge made entirely of steel and concrete and bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the existing one, but this time the preservationists in town put up a good fight. While they failed to have the bridge made of

wood, they succeeding in covering the sides and deck with wood so that it still resembles the historic bridge.

These struggles to preserve the character of Chatham have gone on for years and hopefully will continue to succeed in the future.

