

Chatham Emigrants

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by Spencer Grey

During the past 50 years we have become accustomed to an influx of people to Chatham, greatly increasing its population and expanding the activities of the town. But as Mary Ann Gray has shown in the Chatham Historical Society's book "Three Centuries in a Cape Cod Village," there were four mass emigrations from Chatham early in its history. The precise impetus for such emigrations varied, but the hope of a better and more prosperous life elsewhere was a common factor.

The first exodus occurred in 1711 when 13 families packed up their meager belongings and moved to Duck Creek, Del., where they expected to find a better life with more opportunities. Thirty-six years later, in 1747, 12 men, dissatisfied with their prospects on Cape Cod and attracted by the promise of land at low prices, pulled up roots to move to an area in New York State known as the Oblong, a strip two and a half miles wide.

In 1753 a more appealing area that needed settlers was Nova Scotia, which offered plentiful fish, luring about 300 men and their families away from the Cape. Some went there only seasonally for the fishing, but many decided to settle there, in spite of the difficulties of such a move. Besides the uncertainties of locating in a relatively unsettled area, such a move meant leaving family, friends and neighbors and a familiar neighborhood.

At that time the governor was Charles Lawrence, who wished to repopulate the province that had lost many of its inhabitants when the original French settlers had moved to Louisiana because they did not feel comfortable as Catholics living in what had become a Protestant community after the British took Canada from the French.

The next exodus occurred in 1760 when a number of people from Chatham went to Liverpool, Nova Scotia, southwest of Halifax, to set up a fishing community. But they soon found that the area contained a very large number of huge white pine trees that were ideally suited for ships' masts, not only for local use but also for exporting to shipyards in other locations.

The fourth and final emigration from Chatham was in 1790, when many people from Chatham moved to Maine to take advantage of unsettled lands along the Penobscot and Kennebec Rivers. Members of this emigration were from families whose names are familiar in Chatham, such as Collins, Nickerson, Godfrey, Doane, Kent, Eldredge and Ryder. Perhaps the most notable of this group was Enos Collins, who was the first mate on Godfrey's vessel *The Rover*. Collins changed the name of this ship to the *Black Jack*, an especially appropriate name because under the command of Captain Joseph Barss in 1812, she roamed the seas capturing American ships, taking 11 off the coast of Cape Cod in one week. On one day alone he took nine fishing schooners with cargoes totaling \$50,000. On a later voyage he captured eight or nine more ships with values up to \$90,000. The authorities arrested him at Portsmouth, N.H., where he was kept in prison for many months before being allowed to return to Nova Scotia.

The large amount of prize money he had acquired from capturing those ships made him sufficiently rich to become part of the Halifax elite and to marry into one of their prominent families. He founded the Halifax Banking Company in 1825, which now is known as the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. He died a very wealthy man in 1871, leaving an sizable estate that now is the site of Saint Mary's University.

