

Captain Joseph Atwood

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

One of the most important players in Chatham's history, Joseph Atwood was born in Eastham on Feb. 19, 1720, and most likely first went to sea when he was 10 or 11 years old on a fishing vessel that worked the waters of Nova Scotia and the Grand Banks. By the time he reached maturity he was sailing on vessels that went to England, the Netherlands and to Caribbean ports.

In April 1742, he was married to Deborah Sears, a descendant of Richard Sears, one of the early settlers of Chatham. According to family records, the wedding was held at her home and the guests were invited to stay for a dance to be held to celebrate the occasion. The long chamber was cleared for the dance, which soon was in full force. While not exactly a sylph, the bride enjoyed dancing immensely and was known for her animation. At the height of the evening Deborah's dancing became especially energetic to the point where one of her feet broke through the floor, causing some dismay but little injury.

In 1749, when he was skipper of the schooner Judith, the owners gave him orders to sail to the Bay of Honduras and then to Amsterdam and back with the warning that while he was in Honduras, the Spanish very likely would try to take over his ship. But if that occurred, they advised him that he was "well-fitted for defense" and was expected to put up a manly resistance, which could have been difficult, as he only had about half as many guns. In 1752 while still going to sea, he decided to establish roots on land and bought 30 acres of land from William Mitchell on what then was known as "the road to the stage" but now is called Stage Harbor Road. There he built the gambrel roof house that still is known as the Atwood House and is the home of the Chatham Historical Society.

At the time it was built, Joseph Atwood's house was the largest and the most luxurious in Chatham. Most people started out with a half house or a three quarter house, but Captain Atwood had acquired sufficient wealth to build what he called "his mansion house." Not only was it a whole house, but it had beautiful paneling in the two front rooms, something that was found in only one other house at that time, namely the house built by the town's miller, Colonel Benjamin Godfrey, now a private home a short distance down the road from the Atwood House.

The second floor of most houses built in Chatham in the 18th and 19th centuries was unfinished, with beams and roof boards in full view, except for one or two finished rooms at one end. The Atwood House has one large finished bedroom with the luxuries of a walk-in closet and a fireplace. The house also is unusual in having a slot in the lower riser of the staircase to put the cat out at night. At the time of its construction and for nearly a century afterwards, it was the finest house in town.

Joseph Atwood's sea-going days continued for many years, and in 1768 his ship was transporting white pine boards, white pine shingles, clapboards and laths to Boston and then to Chatham. When he sailed to the Netherlands and the Mediterranean, he traded salted cod for wine and olives.

After retiring from sea some 16 years later, he became a significant land owner, farmer, and important member of the community. Besides being a selectman, he was a clerk on the pay roll of Captain Benjamin Godfrey. He also was honored with an appointment to Godfrey's militia and to be chosen to go to Boston as a member of the committee of correspondence "to state the right of the Colonists...to be free and independent."

Joseph Atwood's wealth is illustrated most clearly in his will, where he leaves to his heirs his dwelling house, two good cows, a horse, six sheep, two swine, a large mahogany tea table, a high case of drawers, pewter plates, a pewter basin, a brass candlestick, a carriage, many other pieces of household furniture and a pew in the meeting house. Clearly he was one of the wealthiest most and distinguished members of Chatham in his day.

