

The Enduring Impact of a Native Son

By Susan Mulgrew

During the late 1800s the population of Chatham was declining. Many people, including Marcellus Eldredge, thought the town's fortunes could be improved by developing it as a summer resort. Marcellus was born in Chatham in 1838 but fourteen years later his family moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire where his father owned a mercantile and shipping business. In 1858 his father and Michael Fisher founded a brewery where Marcellus, starting as a clerk, quickly rose through the ranks. By 1875 Marcellus was the president and treasurer of what became known as the Eldredge Brewing Co. The success of the brewery made Marcellus quite wealthy, but although he made his fortune in Portsmouth and was active in its affairs, he also remained devoted to the town of his birth.

The Eldredges spent the summer months in Chatham and Marcellus made a significant investment in the town in 1884 when he purchased a large property known as Watch Hill. Soon rumors spread that a hotel was going to be built there. A year later the town's Selectmen voted to exempt the Watch Hill parcel and its proposed hotel from taxes for a period of twenty years. In defense of this controversial decision Levi Atwood, editor of the Chatham Monitor, wrote "It is quite evident that Mr. Eldridge (sic), since he has purchased the hill, proposes to erect a public building on it for the accommodation of summer company . . . he has a commendable regard for his native town and wishes to do something for its permanent benefit and is considering this as one of the plans from which may issue benefits to all the citizens."

It would be another decade before a hotel was built on Watch Hill, but in the meantime Marcellus immersed himself in other projects. After a quarter century of failed negotiations to persuade the Old Colony Railroad to extend its tracks to Chatham, it became evident that the only way for the town to have rail service would be to build its own branch line. In 1886 the Chatham Railroad Company was formed and raised capital by issuing stock. Marcellus was one of the largest stockholders and for a number of years served as the company's president. A few years after the railroad's 1887 completion the ground near the depot, whose sandy soil often mired heavily-laden horse-drawn wagons, was amended and a florist was brought in from Boston to plant flower beds along the depot's elliptical drive. When some shareholders questioned these expenditures, they learned that the project had been privately paid for by Marcellus. He understood the importance of the depot in providing one of the first impressions visitors would have of the town.

With rail service established but accommodations insufficient to meet demand, the Chatham Real Estate Trust, consisting of Eben Jordan, Marcellus Eldredge, Charles Taylor, Osborn Nickerson, and Walter Taft, presented plans in December 1888 for the construction of a luxury hotel in Chathamport. Completed in 1890, the Hotel Chatham was known for its elegant

amenities but it struggled financially. Its remote location required guests arriving at the depot to endure an uncomfortable trip over miles of sandy roads to reach the hotel. This inconvenience, combined with an economic downturn beginning in 1893, ultimately led to the hotel's closure in 1894. Marcellus bought the property and moved some of the furniture and later some of the buildings to the Dill House (later called the Hotel Mattaquason) which he built in 1894-95 just north of his elegant summer home on Watch Hill. This hotel proved to be a success, remaining in business until 1956.

Marcellus also promoted the establishment of upscale summer homes near Chatham's eastern shore. In 1893 he petitioned the town to create a "boulevard" between Main Street and Old Harbor Road. The town's Selectmen initially expressed concern about the cost of the project, but with the road commissioners' estimates coming in below what had been anticipated and Marcellus offering to donate \$1000 to the town if the road was constructed (nearly one third of the cost of construction and equivalent to over \$28,000 in 2019), the Board unanimously approved the project. This street was called the Boulevard until the name was changed to Shore Road in 1937.

One of the final and most the enduring investments Marcellus made in the town was the library that bears his family's name. Over the years he and his wife Mary (Dill) had financially supported the town's small library but Marcellus felt that this library was inadequate and decided to donate a new library to the town. During the library's dedication on July 4, 1896 George W. Rankin, who had been hired to curate the new library's collection noted, ". . . Mr. Eldredge decided to erect a building which, while filling the needs of a library for many years to come, would also in itself prove to be one of the chief attractions of the town, a building architecturally beautiful in design and finish." Then Marcellus expressed his sentiments, ". . . I have felt that I could do no greater service to my native town and the many friends I have here, than by establishing this library to aid in bringing into our midst the means for education and knowledge which were denied to me and many of you in the years gone by. I trust that this library will stand during all coming time as a lasting tribute of my love and regard for our beautiful town . . ."

Marcellus Eldredge died unexpectedly at the age of 59 in 1898. In his will he bequeathed an additional \$20,000 to support the library.

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