Atwood House Preservation and Restoration

he Chatham Historical Society's centerpiece is the Joseph Atwood House dating from circa 1752. It was presumably built by its namesake in that year, and survives today in its original, undisturbed or altered, mid-18th century condition. It is one of the finest surviving examples



The Joseph Atwood House

of Cape Cod architecture and, understandably, is in grave need of restoration and preservation as of this writing. This house is emblematic and archetypal of many houses that used to dot the Cape's landscape from the late 17th cen-



Figure 2

tury, gradually becoming refined before devolving into the somewhat diluted and mass-produced iteration that is endemic nationwide. Gone are many of the subtle proportions and details that came to characterize these minimal vet beautiful houses during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

The first houses in the Massachusetts Bay area (and later Cape Cod), were derivations from the English and Dutch small homes endemic to Europe (see fig. 2). The plan of what came to be termed the Cape Cod house was almost purely of 17th century descent, reminiscent of the one-room homes of Plymouth England. The term 'Cape Cod house' was coined by Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College who visited the Cape in 1800 and found the small Spartan cottages so unique that they deserved a regionally-centric moniker.2 Dwight continued by describing the orientation of Cape homes as the house being characteristically, "nestled under the lee of a hill covered by shrubby trees. Dwight described these homes as having:

> "...one story, and four rooms on the lower floor; and are covered on the sides, as well as the roofs, with pine shingles, eighteen inches in length. The chimney is in the middle, immediately behind the front door; and on each side of the door are two windows. The roof is straight. Under it are two chambers; and there are two larger, and two smaller, windows in the gable end."

³Connally, p. 50.

Interior characteristics were equally austere. consisting of a few chair rail moldings and some paneling usually placed around the fireplace. The walls and woodwork would have received whitewashing during the 18th century, and the floors were kept bare, but scrubbed with sand,4 a technique that carried over from the maritime practice of 'holystoning' the decks of ships to keep them clean and bright (as if freshly sanded). Window construction featured 9/6 sash windows, the casings for which

protrude from the walls, as in total the walls are only three inches thick. Front entrances usually had a transom above the door, and some sort of decorative molding framing flanking the doorway. For example, the Atwood House features an urn motif atop the fluted and tapering pilasters. (see fig. 3) The subject for the greatest degree of personal interpretation was the placement of the gable windows.



Figure 3

or as Thoreau penned in his book on Cape Cod was as if each builder: "had punched a hole where his necessities required it, and according to his size and stature, without regard to outside effect." (see fig. 4)

As mentioned, the house currently referred to as the



Figure 4

'Atwood House' was built circa 1752 on thirty acres of land that was deeded to Joseph Atwood that year by Colonel Elisha Doane of Eastham.6 Captain Joseph Atwood was known as a 'navigator of unfrequented ports' and was engaged in trading in Amsterdam, the Mediterranean, and the West Indies- most likely Barbados. The timbers for the house were harvested from trees on the thirty acre parcel.7 The house is framed using four vertical corner posts hewn to approximately 9"x 9" at the floor planking, flaring to 9" x 12" at the ceiling. Each wall is bisected by an additional post of these dimensions. The sills, plates and

*Connally, p. 51 (Freeman & Kittredge)

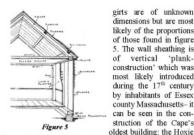
"Ibid, (Thoreau's CO

Monbleau, Marcia. Home Song Chatham, p. 126. Nickerson, Chatham Sea Captains, p. 22.

7lbid.

³ Charles R. Strickland, 'The First Permanent Dwellings at Plimoth Plantation', Old-Time New England, XL, 3 (Ian. 1950), 163-169.)

² Connally Ernest, "The Cape Cod House: An Introductory Study." The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 1960), p. 47.



girts are of unknown dimensions but are most likely of the proportions of those found in figure 5. The wall sheathing is 'plankvertical construction' which was most likely introduced during the 17th century by inhabitants of Essex county Massachusetts-it can be seen in the construction of the Cape's

Figure 6

house in Sandwich (fig. 6), which was built in midseventeenth century.8 To the vertical planking shingles are nailed directly on the outside, and on the interior portion, lath was fastened to the planking, to which plaster was applied.9 On the Atwood house, a planked wainscot (running horizontally) of sorts is evident below the window sill line. This construction methodology yielded a

wall of approximately three inches thick

The roof of the Atwood house is somewhat different from the average Cape dwelling in that it is of Gambrel construction. This type of framing was developed, not surprisingly, by the Dutch in an effort to gain a little more space in a given roof height. As mentioned, this type of roof was not common in Chatham or the

Cape, but Atwood, as a traveler of distant ports, would have been exposed to this style of roof construction if not in Amsterdam proper, then at the very least in the port of New York City, which subsumed the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam in the late 17th century.

The roof, that which protects everything beneath itwhether inspired by architecture of what is now New York

City or a distant port in Europe - is in precarious condition. If something isn't done soon, it too may pass into history. According to the report executed by Brian Pfeiffer in 2008, approximately thirty percent of the roof framing and planking is rotten. In response to this, the Society has braced the roof (fig. 7) and has begun to fundraise at an accelerated pace. and have, as of this writing, raised around twenty-five thousand dollars to at least begin the fundraising process in ear-



Figure 7

nest. It is estimated that we will need to raise approximately three to five hundred thousand dollars to cover the

> cost of restoring the Atwood house, and returning it to a stable and responsibly restored condition for posterity. Some of you have already given generously, and many of you are hearing of this pressing issue right now. I realize that the economic climate is difficult- but I also urge you to give whatever you can to help us restore this national treasure; no gift is too small! Please make checks payable to the Chatham Historical Society, and please indicate on your contribution that your gift is to be used for the

Atwood House Preservation Fund. Act now and insure that this historical treasure and Chatham icon will be safely passed into the hands of our children.

- Mark Wilkins

Connally, p. 52.

^{*}Connally, p. 54.