

Archaeologist Recalls Unearthing ‘The First Cape Cod Mansion’

by Elizabeth Van Wye

CHATHAM – What was it like to retire to Cape Cod in the mid 1660s? That was a question that archeologist Craig Chartier asked himself while overseeing excavations over the past five years at the homesite of Chatham founder William Nickerson and his wife Anne.

More than two dozen people turned out recently for the Protect Our Past virtual Speakers Series presentation by Chartier, focused on what was learned in the explorations at that site.

In 2016 when he learned about the Nickerson Family Association’s efforts to pinpoint the Nickerson homesite, Chartier was intrigued. The group’s headquarters on Orleans Road was located on some of the four square acres originally bought in 1656 from the Monomoyick leader Mat-taquason by William Nickerson. Centuries later, a marker had been placed where the homesite was believed to be.

After meeting with the Association members to discuss a possible excavation at that site, Chartier confessed to having “not a lot of hope” that anything would be found. “Those markers are usually not accurate,” he said. He was intrigued by the project though, wondering what a house built in the mid 17th century on what he called “the

edge of the world, the far eastern portion of Cape Cod” would be like. “I thought it might be a small house,” he said, “but that was not what we found.”

The area where the marker had been placed on the Nickerson Family Association site, adjacent to land owned by the Chatham Conservation Foundation, was overgrown and swampy. “There was only one little area to dig there,” Chartier recalled.

Chartier focused on digging test pits on more hospitable parts of the site near the headquarters building. Bruce Brockway and Blaine Borden, two local volunteers, were anxious to dig near the marker. Chartier found one nail of recent vintage. Digging near the marker, Borden and Brockway struck historical gold. Ceramics dating from the later 17th century, clay pipe pieces also from that era and a 17th century post hole like that used in houses of the time were uncovered.

Now that it was clear that the homesite was in fact near the original historic marker, the Nickerson Family Association and the Conservation Foundation worked together to clear that part of the site of the honeysuckle and other invasive exotics, Chartier said.

Once cleared, “we found not a swamp

but a high knoll - the perfect spot for a 17th century house,” Chartier recalled. “It was a one-in-a-million shot.”

In 2017, with funding from the Community Preservation Act and other sources, work began in earnest. Redware plates, jugs, slipware, pans and pipe stems were all found. A post hole was discovered. Was this the Nickerson homestead? “It was not only that time frame, but there was no one else there. It had to be them.” But what size was the home? That was still unknown. “I was still thinking it was a little cottage,” Chartier said.

In 2018 the group, with Community Preservation Act support, excavated a larger area. They discovered evidence that part of the house had burned when the chimney collapsed. Volunteer Gary Nickerson found a 1652 Oaktree sixpence. “He thought it was a washer,” Chartier said, but it was real, one of only a few such coins found in Massachusetts.

They also discovered a wooden palisade or fence built around the house. King Philip’s war was underway at the time and although the area was not affected, they may have felt “better safe than sorry,” Chartier said and so they enclosed the house with a palisade. When they were able to outline the house, it turned out to

be 16 by 50 feet. Chartier was astounded at the size. “It is an unheard of size on the frontier,” Chartier said, calling it “the first Cape Cod mansion.”

In 2019 further excavation on a cellar hole revealed a possible outbuilding or barn. Also found was iron oxide, leading Chartier to wonder if Nickerson had possibly dabbled in metallurgy.

What comes next? The artifacts that were uncovered will eventually be going to the Nickerson Family Association for curation, Chartier said. Excavated dirt is being saved for analysis. “We hope to find seeds,” Chartier said. Exhibits are also already being planned by the Nickerson Family Association as well as the Atwood House museum.

Chartier believes there is an abundance of undiscovered archaeological resources on Cape Cod. He encouraged anyone who thinks there might be remnants from past inhabitants to explore further.

“It’s important to know what you have,” he wrote, adding that it’s the best way to encourage long-term preservation.

Next up in Protect Our Past Lecture Series will be June 17 at 5 pm. Author Nils Bockmann, will speak on his book, “Peleg Nye, The Jonah of Cape Cod.” For more information go to protectourpast.org.