
Nickerson Homestead Site Identified

Archaeological Dig Finds Evidence Of Hearth And Home Of Chatham's Founder

by Debra Lawless

CHATHAMPORT – An archaeological team digging in the woods behind the Nickerson Family Association's property on Orleans Road last week made a spectacular find: the site of the circa 1664 homestead belonging to William and Anne (Busby) Nickerson, the founders of Chatham.

“Locating the site of William Nickerson's original homestead is a great find for the Nickerson Family Association and for the town of Chatham,” said Ron Nickerson, until recently the vice-president of the NFA.

About a decade ago the Nickersons sank a granite marker into the ground to com-



Bruck Brockway of Brewster digs a test pit while Blaine Borden of Dennis sifts the soil.

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Two fragments of Staffordshire slipware from the hearth. DEBRA LAWLESS PHOTOS



The floor of the hearth: granite stones and bricks.



Archaeologist Craig Chartier and Ron Nickerson of Chatham.

memorate the approximate site of William and Anne’s homestead. As it turns out, the Nickersons who put in the marker were not off by much – the homestead’s hearth lies only about 50 feet from the marker. The Nickersons were the first European settlers in Chatham, establishing the community first known as the village of Monomoyick before obtaining a charter

as the town of Chatham in 1712. The Nickersons came to America 380 years ago, settling first in Salem, then Yarmouth before building their homestead on the shore of Ryder’s Cove in 1664.

For five days last week Craig Chartier, director of the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project, and his three-man crew sifted the soil they shoveled from test

pits in an area straddling land owned by the NFA and by the Chatham Conservation Foundation (CCF). Historical records had led the Nickersons to believe the evidence of the homestead was hidden under the ground in this overgrown area tangled with honeysuckle and other invasive plants that had to be cut back to allow the archaeologists to work. The dig marks the fifth time that Chartier’s crew has explored the area since June 2016. On the four previous occasions the crew dug about 15 test pits; this time around, they devoted 40 hours to a full-fledged dig funded by the NFA in cooperation with the CCF.

Shortly before 8 a.m. each day the crew parked in the NFA’s lot and trudged along the muddy path through the woods to the dig. For most of the week temperatures hovered in the 70s with humidity near 100 percent under overcast skies. Mosquitoes waited for the men at the woody fringes of the cleared area.

During the first few days the four men, who paired off and worked with one digging and the other sifting, found fascinating items such as a 17th century gunflint, a Native American spear point, Native American pottery fragments, window lead, a German stoneware fragment and lots and lots of broken pipe stems. The crew also found a pipe stem of English origin dated between 1661 and 1688. Smoking was common in the 17th century.

“If you’re looking for an artifact that tells you William Nickerson was living here, that’s it,” Chartier said.

Each item was cataloged and bagged. As the week progressed, Chartier graphed and analyzed material from the test pits and developed a clear pattern of where household trash had been strewn, further narrowing down the site of the actual house to an area of undergrowth northwest of the trash.

The breakthrough came toward the end of the week when Bruce Brockway of Brewster and Blaine Borden of Dennis began excavating a pit that contained many broken bricks and mortar. Under the bricks were regularly-sized local stones that the Nickersons could have collected on the beach in nearby Ryder’s Cove.

“It looks like the floor of the hearth,”

Chartier said on Saturday morning, the fifth day of the dig. By now the weather had changed, with the humidity lower and a chill in the air at 59 degrees. “It makes it a really definitive thing.” The crew spent the day defining the walls of the hearth—its width and depth. They also found two fragments of Staffordshire combed slipware dating to the 1670s, increasing the probability that Anne Nickerson herself cooked meals in this hearth.

By late afternoon the crew had determined that the hearth measured eight by eight feet. “This is a well, well used hearth,” Chartier said. He added that he was surprised at how well-preserved the hearth was as he expected it would have been “jumbled up” bricks.

Meanwhile, stains in other test pits indicated where post holes may have once been sunk, possibly indicating the corners of a house that measured 35 by 35 feet. (To get an idea of the size, this would make William Nickerson’s house a bit larger than the 19th century Caleb Nickerson Homestead that stands at the front of the NFA property.) Chartier believes the hearth stood in one corner of the house rather than in the center. Chartier’s theory is that the house was a “hall and parlor”-style house facing south. The hall would have been larger than the parlor, with the chimney and hearth on one end of the house. The crew did not find many nails, suggesting that perhaps when the Nickersons no longer lived in the house someone dismantled it and moved it to another location, Chartier said.

At about 4 p.m. Saturday afternoon, as the crew began to pack up their gear and load their cars, Chartier summed up the week’s finds. “So much of it screams a pioneer living on the edge, using Yankee ingenuity,” he said. The mix of Native American and English pottery fragments could indicate amicable relations between the pioneers and the natives.

Chartier will now devote about 40 hours to analyzing the finds from the dig and another 40 to writing a comprehensive report. After he issues the report in about a month, the Nickersons will have a fuller understanding of how their ancestors lived.