

Latest Archaeological Dig Raises New Questions About Chatham's Founding Family

by Debra Lawless

CHATHAM – Last Friday the team excavating William and Anne Busby Nickerson's circa 1664 homestead in Chatham made an exciting discovery – a “ton” of “individual little kernels” of corn and “little beans” dated to the 17th century.

“It's pretty unprecedented in New England archaeology,” says Craig Chartier, director of the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project, who is leading the dig. He does not know of any other New England site where beans — burned beans, no less — have been discovered. It is not clear how the beans and corn were burned, but one possibility is in a house fire. Another possibility is that they were

full of insects, and someone tossed them into a fire in the hearth.

A second exciting find on Friday was a fragment of a skimmer used at the hearth “to take the gunk off whatever you're boiling,” Chartier said. Shortly after that, team member Gary Nickerson found the hand-punched lid of a 10-inch brass bed warmer and devoted the remainder of the day to removing it intact from the soil.

Slowly, the domestic life of the 17th century founders of Chatham is being revealed.

The team began the current dig July 30. As has been the case on most mornings since then, temperatures begin at 78

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Archaeological Dig

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degrees with humidity hovering above 80 percent. Violent thunderstorms put an end to work at 11 a.m. on Aug. 9. The dig is being conducted by the Nickerson Family Association, Inc. (NFA), in cooperation with the Chatham Conservation Foundation, Inc. which owns the land beneath the site. During the weeks that led up to the dig, invasive plants such as honeysuckle were cut back from the area. Several cedar trees that had rooted themselves in the more than 350 years since William and Anne Nickerson left their homestead were also cleared away.

William and Anne Nickerson were the first English settlers in what would later, in 1712, become the town of Chatham. Historical records had led current-day Nickersons to believe that the remains of the homestead were hidden under the ground behind the

Nickerson Association campus at 1107 Orleans Rd. Since June 2016 Chartier's crew has explored the area five times, with the latest two-month dig being the most extensive and probably final dig. The dig is financed by donations from NFA members and by a \$48,000 Community Preservation grant awarded by Chatham voters last May.

As of last Friday, the dig was one-quarter complete and so far, more questions have been raised than have been answered.

Did the house have two hearths, each with its own chimney? This is suggested by a concentration of bricks and rocks at the west end of the house. This may signify that William and Anne Nickerson were people of wealth, Chartier says. During the dig's first week what Chartier described as a piece of a "very expensive" Staffordshire slipware candlestick was discovered, again suggesting that the Nickersons were well off.

Did the house burn in full or in part? Quantities of burned ceramics and nails, molten window glass and the newly-discovered charred corn and beans all suggest a house fire.

"Something happened there," Chartier says. "There was a fire in at least a part of the house."

In the area of what might be the second hearth, team member Greg Lott found a rim of a redware pot, the largest potsherd yet found. Two additional pieces of the pot were later found, allowing the three to be pieced together. In that same area, Lott found a piece of Westerwald pottery from Germany featuring a cobalt blue decoration. And on Aug. 2 Lott found a pipe stem with teeth marks. Were the teeth marks created

Left: Volunteers Bruce Brockway, left and Gary Lott work at the Nickerson Family Association archaeological site. Excavation of William and Anne Nickerson's original homestead has raised some interesting questions about Chatham's first English settlers. Below: A fragment of a redware pot found on the site.

DEBRA LAWLESS PHOTOS



by William? By Anne? By Mattaquasson, the local sachem?

During these initial two weeks the team has progressed toward its goal of exposing the perimeter of the homestead and hopes to complete that task this week. Other questions that remain are: Did the house have a cellar? Where were the outbuildings for the animals? And did William Nickerson run a blacksmith forge on the property, as suggested by the large amount of iron slag found?

The crew consists of Chartier, his son Alden, two assistant archaeologists and four volunteers. Generally Chartier and his son, Gary Nickerson (who retired as a judge in the Barnstable Superior Court the Friday before the dig began), Lott, Blaine Borden

and Bruce Brockway can be found working on the dig. Two additional volunteers rotate in. Each item is labeled and bagged in the field; volunteer Tish Noyes later washes the finds.

With several more weeks to go, Chartier emphasizes that any hypotheses he has now are subject to change.

"One of the things I like about archaeology is the uncertainty of it," he says. "We learn to accept the fact that just because you think something in the morning doesn't mean it's true in the afternoon."

The dig is open to visitors Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. behind the NFA campus at 1107 Orleans Rd. Signs direct visitors from the parking area to the dig site.

26th Annual Arey's Pond Cat Gathering!

Results:

Registered Boats: 84

Traditional Sloop Class

1. "Old Ghost," Alan McClennen
2. "Wimeke," Mike Dunne
3. "Nimble," APBY Daysailer 18', Pete Conway

Cats 19' and Over

1. "Pandora," Burt Staniar
2. "At Ease," Brian Smith
3. "Conjuror," Fred Villars
3. "Nightingale," AP Caracal 19', Bill Nash/Dustin Page

M-18's

1. "Pleasant Dreams," Rick Cain
2. "Sussurus," Mon Cochran
3. "Ripple," Bill Terrell

APBY 16's

1. "Elle," Phil Dickinson
2. "Athena," Nick Athanassiou
3. TBA

M-15's

1. "Near Sing," Chris Smith
2. TBA
3. TBA

APBY 14's

1. "Cat-Atude," David Quincy
2. TBA
3. TBA

Vintage 14's

1. TBA
2. TBA
3. TBA

Baybirds

1. "#21," Helen Kelsey
2. TBA
3. TBA

Compass Classic

1. TBA
2. TBA
3. TBA

Beetle

1. TBA
2. TBA
3. TBA

Due to light wind final results will be posted on Arey's Pond website once available.

Featured Vessel: "Daisy," owner Joe Siedel, built by Ruben Bigelow, 1904.

Alan McClennen Sr. Award: For the boat and owner that best represents the values and traditions of sailing Pleasant Bay: Herb Heidt, "Lestris"

Youngest Skipper: Helena Wiatrowski, "Storm Cat"

The Richter Award: Walter Kangas, "Tuuli"

Farthest Traveled by Water: Bob Tapper, "Silver Fox"

Farthest Traveled by Land: Bill Watson, "Tenacity" & John Pappalardo, AP 14' Cat

Most Beautiful Boat in Fleet: Bob Tapper, "Silver Fox"

Last Boat Towed In Award: Brooke and Skye Davis and Tyler Donofrio, "Slippery 1"

First Time Sailing Cat Gathering: Sarah Queen and Peter Samiljan, "Catimini"

Special Thanks:
Committee Boat: "Sea Robin"

Committee Boat Crew: Harry Terkanian, Megan Donofrio, Marie Gould and Kiara Offley

Cannon provided by: Jim Studley

Race Support Team: Anita Winstanley Roark

Photo Boat: Terry Connelly

Post-Race Help: Travis Block

Land support during the race: The entire boat yard crew for all of their hard work leading up to the gathering and Brooke Davis & the extended Davis/Donofrio/Kelleher family, who help with all aspects of the event!

Thanks to Elli Crocker for painting the beautiful award image. We appreciated the great live music provided by Vern-mon.

Proceeds from the gathering to be distributed to Friends of Pleasant Bay.

2018 Cat Gathering was sailed in memory of Richard Lovis.

Thanks to all who participated!
Please join us for the 27th Cat Gathering in August 2019.

AREY'S POND BOAT YARD

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Anita Winstanley Roark Photo