

EDITORIAL

Hearth And Home

By all accounts, William Nickerson was a bit irascible. A weaver who left Norwich, England with his wife Anne Busby in search of greater freedoms in the New World, he first settled his family in Salem, then moved to Yarmouth, which in 1640 would have been akin to a tiny village in the wilderness. “By all accounts he was a willful man used to having his way, and impatient with bureaucracy,” Dana Eldridge writes in the opening chapter of “Three Centuries in a Cape Cod Village, the Story of Chatham,” published by the Chatham Historical Society for the town’s tercentennial. Nickerson, essentially, wanted to be left alone, and he found a place where that could happen: the very elbow of Cape Cod, an area devoid of European settlers populated only by the local Native American tribe, the Monomoyicks.

He bought four square miles near Ryder’s Cove from the sachem Mataquason in 1656, then spent the next 16 years fighting with the authorities in Plymouth over his failure to get their permission for the purchase. Nonetheless, in 1664 or so, Nickerson built a “rude cottage,” as Eldridge describes it, near a fresh-water creek that emptied into Ryder’s Cove. From that one small homestead, and William Nickerson’s refusal to live by any one else’s rules but his own, grew today’s Chatham.

The recent discovery of the Nickerson homestead site by a team of archaeologists working for the Nickerson Family Association has great significance both for the organization and the town. Not only does it confirm the location of the first home built by a European in Chatham – within 50 feet of where the site was believed to be – but it tells us that the building was larger than expected, about 35 by 35 feet, not really surprising considering the Nickerson’s had nine children who survived past infancy. The eight-foot-square hearth had a base of locally collected stones and was well-used, according to Archaeologist Craig Chartier. From the other artifacts discovered during the dig, we know that Nickerson – both William and Anne, maybe? – smoked clay-stemmed pipes and probably used both locally made and English and German pottery and china in their everyday lives.

There’s a certain sort of comfort that comes from knowing exactly where Chatham’s first family lived and worked. They would have had close contact with the Native Americans, and the choice of homestead locations may have been influenced by the locals, who knew the best places to fish and shelter from the elements. As the village of Monomoyick grew, it spread out, the center of William Nickerson’s community moving as the population grew and economic and social forces exerted their pulls. It would be interesting to find out what happened to the original Nickerson home, whether it was moved, disassembled for its constituent parts, or abandoned by subsequent generations.

The Nickerson Family Association anticipates a final report on the archaeological dig soon; we’ll be curious about their next step and how the homestead site will be preserved. The Nickerson artifacts, we hope, will be made accessible to the public as a display in the Caleb Nickerson Homestead, located on association property not far from the original Nickerson house. In the meantime, some items from previous digs are part of an exhibit at the Cape Cod Museum of Fine Arts titled “Mysteries and Revelations, Discovering Cape Cod’s Museum Treasures.” The show, which features items from 36 Cape museums and institutions and runs through Nov. 26, highlights objects and stories that reveal little known facts or mysteries about the peninsula. The Nickerson homestead find clears up one of Chatham’s enduring mysteries, and helps bring the earliest chapter in the town’s history into better focus.