

# Historic Coins Found At Nickerson Homestead Archaeological Site

by Alan M. Stahl and Gerry Stahl

During the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrims landing on the Cape, it is timely to study the founding of Chatham a couple of decades later. Insight into life in historic times is often revealed by consideration of coinage surviving from then.

Four 17<sup>th</sup>-century coins were found in excavation at the William Nickerson Homesite in Chatham during the summers of 2018 and 2019. The excavation was carried out from 2016 to 2019 by Craig Chartier of the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project under the auspices of the Nickerson Family Association (NFA) on land owned by the Chatham Conservation Foundation (CCF).

The archaeological study of the William Nickerson homestead is arguably the most significant Colonial excavation on Cape Cod. It unearthed the first Chatham homestead and produced hundreds of historic artifacts, which shed significant light on the life of Chatham's founding family. The property where the dig was conducted, adjacent to the NFA's museum site, is now being restored to a public park by CCF. Both the dig and the restoration have been publicly supported by grants from Chatham's Community Preservation Act Fund.

The archaeological site was the home of William Nickerson and Anne (Busby) Nickerson, who immigrated to Massachusetts from England in 1637. They moved to Cape Cod in circa 1664 onto land they had acquired from the Mannamoieet Natives in 1656. Their land corresponds roughly to what is now the town of Chatham.

Among the artifacts uncovered are four coins. The coins are rare finds:

- An oak-tree sixpence coin is the only silver coin minted in colonial Massachusetts that has been reported found on Cape Cod. As described below, it is one of several overstruck six-pence over one-shilling oak-tree coins. However, none of the five others was found in situ—i.e., the others are known only as pieces in modern collections, not associated with their historic contexts. Coins minted in Boston, like this one, were the only silver coins produced in the American colonies.
- An English half-groat coin is the only type of 17<sup>th</sup>-century English silver coin found in the American colonies—discovered at very few locations.
- An Irish copper half-penny coin is one of only three of its kind found in the American colonies.



Massachusetts silver sixpence found at the Nickerson Homestead. MICHAEL KARCHMER PHOTOS



The rare coins were found during archaeological digs at the Nickerson homestead site over the past two years. FILE PHOTO

- An English bronze farthing is further evidence of economic activity at the homestead.

The discovery of four coins on the Nickerson homestead suggest that there was probably considerable commerce taking place at the property, where the family engaged in many productive activities, including running the only forge known on colonial Cape Cod. The many historic artifacts of European and Native American origin recovered at the dig site also reflect lively commerce.

The coin revealing the most local history is a Massachusetts silver sixpence of the "oak tree" series, bearing the date 1652, but probably minted between 1660 and 1667. This is the only find of a colonial silver Massachusetts coin that has been reported on Cape Cod.

This coin reflects the history of the Massachusetts colony. In 1652 Massachusetts passed an act providing for the establishment of a mint in Boston. The Massachusetts series is the only silver coinage struck in the American colonies before Independence; its inception is due to the lack of royal power in England during the period 1649 to 1660. Before that, commerce in Massachusetts was conducted primarily through the barter system, causing various serious difficulties for the colonists involving trade locally and tax payments to England.

The coin found on the Nickerson site is an over-strike, made from sixpence dies struck on top of a cut-

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Continued on Page 37

# Historic Coins

Continued from **Page 33**

down silver shilling (12 pence). Several letters of the under-type show through on the existing coin. The coin was found by a descendant of the Nickersons.

The choice of a tree as the main symbol on the Massachusetts silver coinage may also be seen as a conscious evocation of Native American symbolism and the earliest manifestation of an indigenous American numismatic iconography.

The second coin is a silver half groat (two-penny) piece of Charles I of England (1625-49) from the Tower (London) mint. Comparable finds of early English silver coins have been found in Plymouth as well as in Ferryland, Newfoundland, and

in Jamestown, Va.

The third coin is an Irish copper halfpenny dated 1682. It was found within the brick work at the eastern end of the homestead's hearth. A coin of this type was found in an archaeological excavation carried out in Pemaquid, Maine, and one carried out in Philadelphia, Pa.; it is otherwise unattested in American coin finds.

The fourth coin has been identified as an English Charles II bronze farthing.

The NFA is selling a reproduction of the 1652 silver sixpence; for more information, contact the NFA at [wmnick1107@gmail.com](mailto:wmnick1107@gmail.com).

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