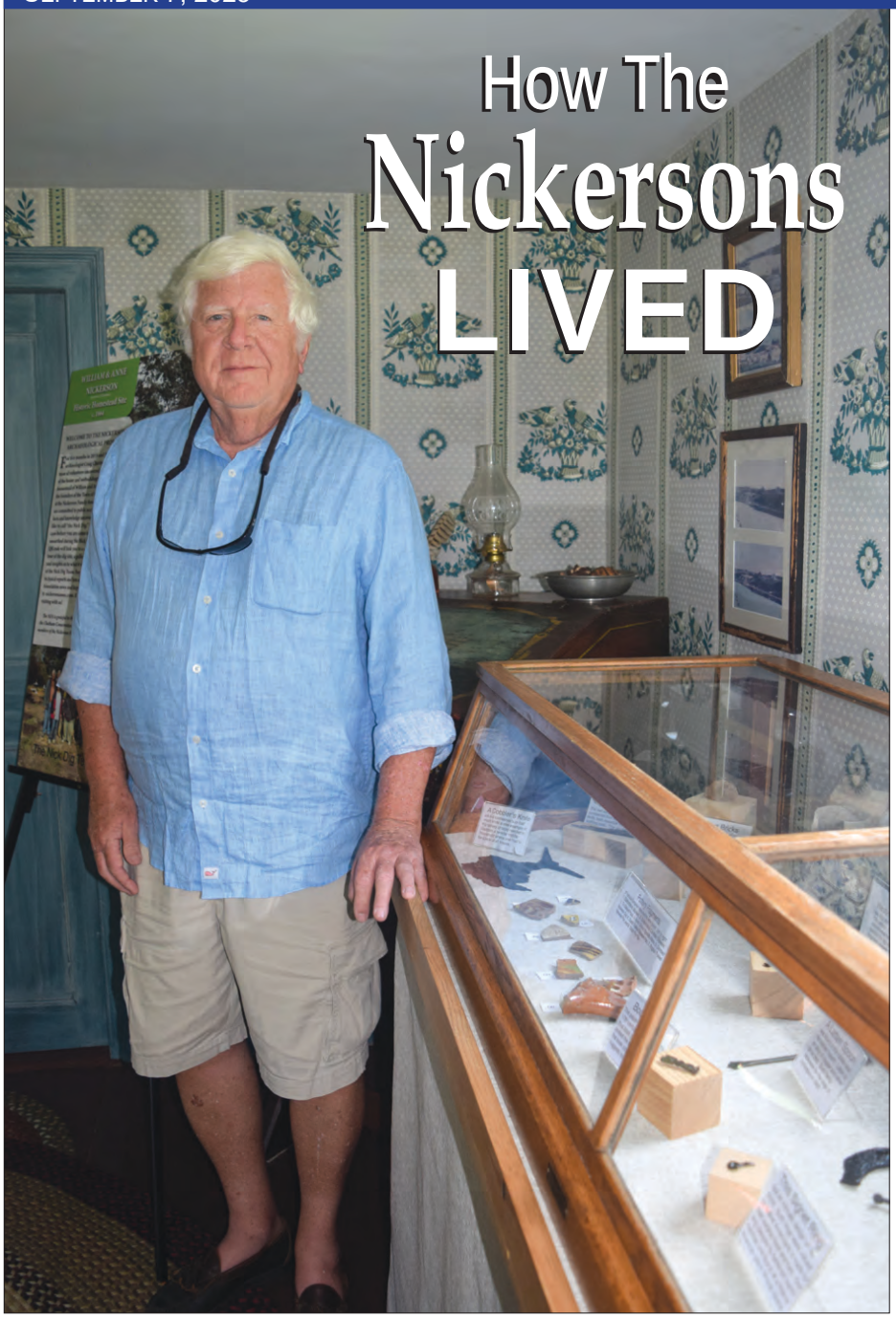
SEPTEMBER 7, 2023



Gary Nickerson with the display case filled with artifacts from the archaeological dig at the homestead of William and Anne Busby Nickerson. TIM WOOD PHOTOS

Display Of Archaeological Artifacts Gives Insight Into Lives Of Chatham's First European Settlers

by Tim Wood

More display space. Right now, that's Gary Nickerson's fondest wish.

Nickerson has organized an exhibit of artifacts discovered during archaeological digs at the site of the homestead of Chatham's first European settlers, William and Anne Busby Nickerson. Tucked against a wall in the parlor of the Caleb Nickerson Homestead on the Nickerson Family Association campus on Orleans Road in Chathamport, the display case holds just a fraction of the thousands of items found during the digs in 2018 and 2019. Boxes and boxes of artifacts are stored in the building's basement.

"This is the start of a larger project," Nickerson said of the display. The association would eventually like to be able to provide access to the items to other groups, such as the Chatham Historical Society, as well as local schools.

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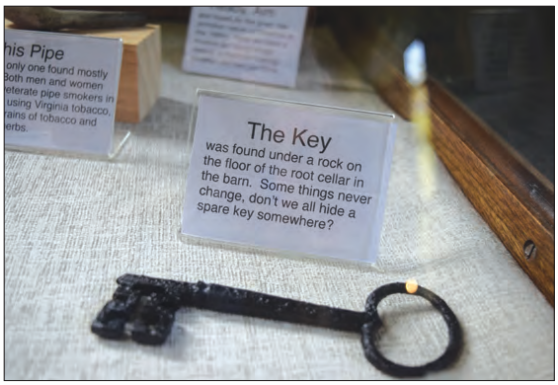

This key was found underneath a rock in the barn.

The excavation has been covered up but is accessible to the public at the rear of the Nickerson Association property. QR codes posted at the site provide information about what was found where; the webpages can also be accessed through the association's website, nickersonassoc.com.

Pieces of pottery made up a large share of the artifacts. TIM WOOD PHOTOS

Nickersons

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The items come from what Nickerson called "easily one of the most archaeologically rich settings in New England," the small tract of land behind the association campus believed to be where the Nickerson's built their home around 1664. It's not clear what happened to the home after the couple died in the late 1680s — there is evidence of a fire at one time, but more likely the building was demolished and usable parts salvaged. But Nickerson said the site was never built on again, leaving the artifacts from the lives of his ancestors to be discovered by a future generation.

The artifacts themselves are on loan to the Nickerson Association from the Chatham Conservation Foundation, which owns the property on which the Nickerson homestead stood.

"They've been terrific," he said about the foundation's support for the association's efforts.

After sifting through the boxes and boxes of artifacts, a few dozen of the best preserved items were chosen for the initial display. Some reveal that the Nickersons were pretty well-off for the time, such as a sword hook, "a very unusual piece," Nickerson said, and a book clasp, which indicated that they were literate (not a given at the time). Other items include the remnants of a cobbler's knife; one of the Nickerson sons was known to work in leather, Nickerson said, and the find may indicate that William Nickerson, a weaver by trade, also worked with other materials.

A large key was found underneath a rock in the barn cellar, perhaps placed there much as people today put a key under a mat. More likely, said Nickerson, is that the key, which is slightly bent, was thrown away after it was no longer useful. The key was discovered on the last day of the dig, he added.

Craig Chartier, the archaeologist who supervised the dig, assembled a jug made of Westerwald pottery out of pieces found at the site. Made in Germany, the piece is high-end for the time and was probably imported from Britain.

"The pottery was amazing," Nickerson said. A wide array of pottery shards were found at the site, including some rare pieces, several of which are on display. Native pottery was also found in a four-foot-wide by four-foot-deep storage pit, along with shells and food debris, including a 12-inch oyster shell and a shark vertebrae bead. The items were carbon dated to between 658 and 1022 AD, Nickerson said, indicating that the site chosen by the Nickersons had been at least used if not occupied by Indigenous people going back centuries.

Many pipe stems were also found as well as intact pipes. "We could fill a banker's box with the pipe stems," Nickerson said. "They were the cigarette butts of their day." Many people, both men and women, smoked pipes at the time, and would break off and discard a small piece of the stem when sharing it with another. Some of the stems bear markings indicating their manufacturer; the pipes were imported from England or Holland, because the pipemakers guild blocked pipe manufacturing in the Colonies, Nickerson said.

Some of the most significant finds from the dig are not on display. They include numerous coins, including a silver half-groat (two penny) minted in London at the Tower Mint in 1644 or 1645, found by a 10-year-old boy during "kids' day" at the dig; a rare Oak Tree sixpence minted in Boston around 1660, one of the first coins to be minted in the Colonies, at a time when the flow of currency from England was cut off due to the English Civil War; and a 1682 Irish half penny found around the east hearth that may have been lost when the home was being demolished.

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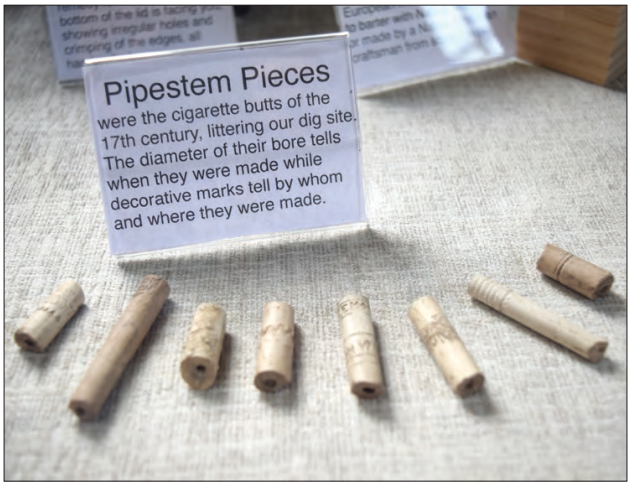
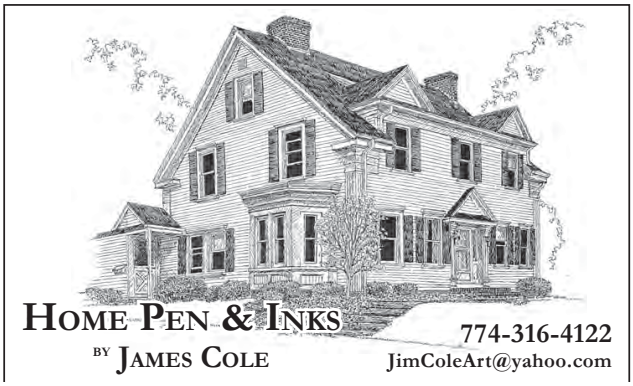
Some of the funding for the dig came from the town's community preservation fund, and Nickerson would like to see the artifacts given wide exposure.

"I want to get these out of the basement so people can see how our ancestors lived," he said.



Pipe stems were one of the most common items found in the dig. "They were the cigarette butts of their day."