

Atwood House Preservation and Restoration

The Chatham Historical Society's centerpiece is the Joseph Atwood House dating from circa 1752. It was presumably built by its namesake in that year, and survives today in its original, undisturbed or altered, mid-18th century condition. It is one of the finest surviving examples



The Joseph Atwood House



Figure 2

of Cape Cod architecture and, understandably, is in grave need of restoration and preservation as of this writing. This house is emblematic and archetypal of many houses that used to dot the Cape's landscape from the late 17th century, gradually becoming refined before devolving into the somewhat diluted and mass-produced iteration that is endemic nationwide. Gone are many of the subtle proportions and details that came to characterize these minimal yet beautiful houses during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

The first houses in the Massachusetts Bay area (and later Cape Cod), were derivations from the English and Dutch small homes endemic to Europe (see fig. 2). The plan of what came to be termed the Cape Cod house was almost purely of 17th century descent, reminiscent of the one-room homes of Plymouth England.¹ The term 'Cape Cod house' was coined by Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College who visited the Cape in 1800 and found the small Spartan cottages so unique that they deserved a regionally-centric moniker.² Dwight continued by describing the orientation of Cape homes as the house being characteristically, "nestled under the lee of a hill covered by shrubby trees. Dwight described these homes as having:

"...one story, and four rooms on the lower floor, and are covered on the sides, as well as the roofs, with pine shingles, eighteen inches in length. The chimney is in the middle, immediately behind the front door: and on each side of the door are two windows. The roof is straight. Under it are two chambers; and there are two larger, and two smaller, windows in the gable end."³

¹ Charles R. Strickland, "The First Permanent Dwellings at Pilgrim Plantation," *Old-Time New England*, XI, 3 (Jan. 1950), 163-169.

² Conally Ernest, "The Cape Cod House: An Introductory Study," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 1960), p. 47.

³ Conally, p. 50.

Interior characteristics were equally austere, consisting of a few chair rail moldings and some paneling usually placed around the fireplace. The walls and woodwork would have received whitewashing during the 18th century, and the floors were kept bare, but scrubbed with sand,⁴ a technique that carried over from the maritime practice of 'holystoning' the decks of ships to keep them clean and bright (as if freshly sanded). Window construction featured 9/6 sash windows, the casings for which

protrude from the walls, as in total the walls are only three inches thick. Front entrances usually had a transom above the door, and some sort of decorative molding framing flanking the doorway. For example, the Atwood House features an urn motif atop the fluted and tapering pilasters. (see fig. 3) The subject for the greatest degree of personal interpretation was the placement of the gable windows, or as Thoreau penned in his book on Cape Cod was as if each builder: "had punched a hole where his necessities required it, and according to his size and stature, without regard to outside effect."⁵ (see fig. 4)

As mentioned, the house currently referred to as the



Figure 3



Figure 4

'Atwood House' was built circa 1752 on thirty acres of land that was deeded to Joseph Atwood that year by Colonel Elisha Doane of Eastham.⁶ Captain Joseph Atwood was known as a 'navigator of unfrequented ports' and was engaged in trading in Amsterdam, the Mediterranean, and the West Indies- most likely Barbados. The timbers for the house were harvested from trees on the thirty acre parcel.⁷ The house is framed using four vertical corner posts hewn to approximately 9"x 9" at the floor planking, flaring to 9" x 12" at the ceiling. Each wall is bisected by an additional post of these dimensions. The sills, plates and

⁴ Conally, p. 51 (Freeman & Kiltredge)

⁵ *Ibid.*, (Thoreau's CC)

⁶ Monbleau, *Mardi's Home Song Chatham*, p. 126. Nickerson, *Chatham Sea Captains*, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*

