

The Founder

by Spencer Grey

In 1630 William Nickerson and his wife Anne (Busby) were living in Norwich, England, where he was a well-established weaver. His life was being made very difficult, however, because he was a non-conformist at the time of Bishop Wren, who looked with disapproval on any who were not members of the established church, the Church of England. Consequently, he and his wife made the courageous decision to sail to the New World, arriving in Salem in June 1637. From there they went to Boston, where Anne's family recently had settled, but before long, William, always one to avoid any restrictions on his freedom, went to the recently settled town of Yarmouth. Even that newly established community was too restrictive for one who was known for chafing under nearly any restriction on his activities.

Learning that land to the east bordering on the Atlantic Ocean was under the control of Mattaquason, chief of the Monomyicks, he approached the Sachem and negotiated the purchase of four square miles of the area bordering on what is now Ryder's Cove. The price he paid for that land was "...a shallop, 10 coats, six kettles, 12 axes, 12 hoes, 12 knives, 40 shilling in wampum, a hat, and 12 shillings in coins." Following that purchase, he made three more: first, the property between the Oyster Pond (as named by Nickerson) and today's Stage Harbor, secondly most of what is now South Chatham and some land slightly further west, and thirdly the area now known as Tom's Neck (lands east of Stage Harbor to the Atlantic Coast, now the site of Chatham Light).

The land acquired from these agreements totaled about 4,000 acres, but the negotiations were verbal and the significance of the transactions was unknown to the natives, who had no understanding of land ownership. In acquiring his land Nickerson bargained directly with the Natives instead of first obtaining permission from the Colonial authorities. Because of his failure to follow the law, he was summoned to Plymouth to answer for his transgression, to which he answered that he had acted in ignorance of the regulation. For this infraction of the law he was fined 90 pounds.

At that time Nickerson and his extended family (his sons and daugh-

ters and their families) were the only white people living in Monomoyick, but they had established a close relationship with the Native Americans in the area. In 1661 he deeded about 50 acres south of the Oyster Pond in an area we now know as Stage Neck to his daughter Elizabeth, who was married to Robert Eldred.

Built in 1664, Nickerson's first house was a simple cottage on the shore of Ryder's Cove, near the freshwater creek (now Muddy River) that flows into the cove. The houses built in those early days of the settlement were no more than 200 square feet in area, but Nickerson enlarged his to accommodate his expanded family,

including the families of his several children. Still, the houses were simple structures with rough board floors and walls and oiled paper windows. Nickerson's sons and daughters and their families acquired other sections of the settlement, where they built their own houses.

In 1678 a trading ship visited several of the coves and harbors in Chatham. Unfortunately the captain was very sick and soon died of what most likely was smallpox. The disease spread to those living on the shores, infecting a large number of the residents, many of whom died.

Because Plymouth Colony required every community to have a meeting house or church, the residents of Monomoy first met this requirement by attending the church in Eastham, about seven or eight miles away, but that involved a five hour ride on horseback or in a wagon. Because of this inconvenient situation, William Nickerson and his greater family applied to the court to form their own community, to which the court consented on the condition that they build a meeting house, hire a minister, and provide a house for him. In this way William Nickerson and his fellow inhabitants could now gather together, raise money by taxing the property owners, choose a constable and assessors, and in all ways become a town.

Throughout these years William Nickerson was the leader of his family and of the others who had braved this relative wilderness to settle here. On Sundays he assembled the inhabitants, gave readings from the Bible, and preached to them for most of his 85 years. Nickerson remained at the central figure of his community until he died in 1690.



AT THE
ATWOOD HOUSE