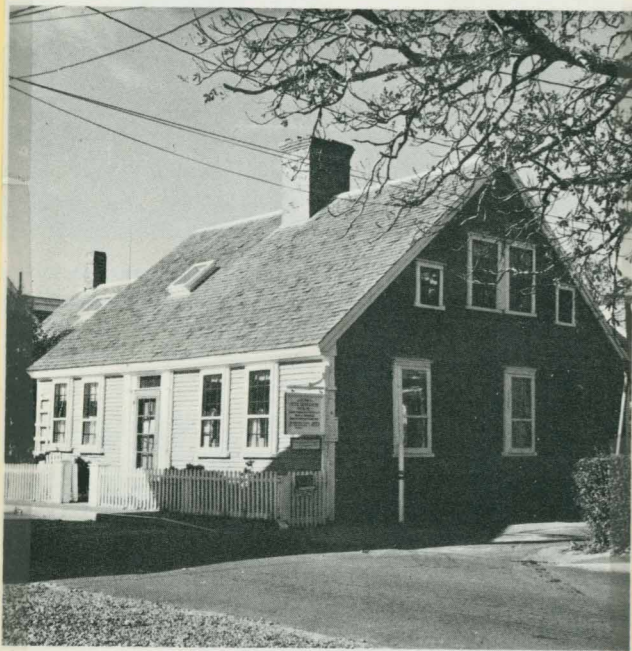


From the leading authority on American architecture:

"The house known as the Seth Nickerson House at 72 Commercial Street, Provincetown is the oldest, most complete standing one. Built before 1750, it is one of the finest examples of Cape Cod architecture."

THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Seth Nickerson House



Built circa 1746 by a ship's carpenter with timbers from wrecked ships.

Date of this folder - - 1980

One of the 5000 entries in the book BEST TREASURES OF AMERICA a 1974 Reader's Digest publication compiled by the MASS. INSTITUTE of TECHNOLOGY, the SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION and others.

John W. Gregory
Oldest House

MEET YOUR HOSTS

AS AN ARTIST. . . John Gregory, owner of the house since 1944, is represented by work in many museums including the U.S. National Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts . . . The publishers of WHO'S WHO have listed him in many volumes since 1938.

As a result of a nation-wide survey made by PRINTS magazine in 1936, he was listed one of the ten most noteworthy graphic artists in New England and one of the seventy three in the country. Questionnaires were sent out to museum directors, critics, artists, etc. The survey included all those producing etchings, woodcuts and lithographs.

He studied four years at the Art Student's League of N.Y. with the distinguished artist John Sloan and others where he was awarded two scholarships. While in New York he was a drawing instructor at Hunter College.

AS A PHOTOGRAPHER . . . he became a TIME photographer in 1956 and sold many photographs to BLACK STAR. In 1948 he was the recipient of the highest honor awarded in this country to a photographer. By "special invitation" of the U.S. NATIONAL MUSEUM he gave a one-month, one-man exhibition of fifty pictorial photographs at the SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. Several are in the permanent collection.

You are invited to view the exhibit of lithographs and photographs, reasonably priced.

Mrs. John Gregory is a concert pianist and teacher.

ABOUT THE HOUSE

The following is the taped part of the tour through the oldest house in Provincetown written and narrated by the owner John W. Gregory. Our visitors sit comfortably in our sizable 14' x 23' "keeping room" while listening to the tape. The personal and taped tour is considered one of the most interesting in the country.

The English art critic John Ruskin wrote "When skill and love work together, expect a masterpiece." This aphorism applies to all great craftsmanship, including this house. Because of its beautiful proportions, compactness and livability it is the kind of dwelling that provided the inspiration for 20th century America's most popular

house design. It stands as a monument to the skill of Seth Nickerson, the ship's carpenter who framed it to last forever. It is a known fact that old Cape Cod houses keep growing more solid and secure than when they were first put together. This, because of the great many 8" x 8" thick oak beams and other age repellent woods that keep on solidifying. All wood was selected carefully from wrecked ships. There are only two things that can damage or destroy this house — neglect or disaster.

In the days when this house was built by shipwright Nickerson (his grave by the way is in Provincetown's oldest cemetery) there was no problem getting all the timber needed from one or more of the many shipwrecks along the north shore of the Cape. These marine disasters were the result of lashing northeasters, dangerous shoals and lack of light houses. For transportation of the heavy timber from a wreck to a building site, a pair of oxen was necessary. Weighing four or five times as much as the average frame house, they took anywhere from a year to a year and a half to build. The houses were known as "land craft" as they were built to ride the shifting sands on their hand-hewn oak sills, and withstand lashing storms, just as their sister schooners rode out the waves. Later on, when bricks were made in this country and no longer had to be shipped over from England, house-raising parties were held, and the houses were lifted and put on low brick foundations. This insured dry sills. A most difficult job considering the great weight of these dwellings, so along with jacks, several kegs of beer provided the essential hydraulic lift.

The large beehive-shaped oven built in the rear of the main fireplace is one of the few left on the Cape, as they are found only in the houses built before 1750. From that date on they were constructed in the front on either side, and higher for more convenience and safety. The women dreaded baking day because it often meant severe burns and sometimes tragic endings to their lives. During the process of heating the bricks in the rear oven it was necessary to keep a large wood fire going in the corner of the fireplace. When a chunk of wood was burning briskly it was shoveled into the oven, and the food that took less time, like bread and muffins, were placed in front. Before the oven door was closed, correct temperatures were determined by holding the hand inside the oven after the embers were raked out. If the hand had to be removed on the final count of ten seconds, it was ready for baking. Those who stuttered usually ended up with a well-done hand.

Baking day was a dangerous one because the women wore long flowing linen skirts and long sleeved blouses. As the basis of linen is highly flammable flax, the women were often burned. Indeed in the archives of many town halls up and down the Cape, records show that a considerable number

of women had become living torches.

Continuing with more pleasant subject matter, I ask you to observe the clipper ship model over the mantel. All sails on this model were carefully carved out of wood. The original ship was a cargo vessel that carried only one or two guns. It sailed during the era of piracy, so gun ports were painted on to keep the pirates and marauders at a safe distance. It is recorded in English history that it was Queen Elizabeth the first who originated the idea and had a good many ships painted with false gun ports. This made her navy appear much stronger than it actually was, perhaps the chief reason England dominated the seas in those days. Another clever idea was the use of the "Quaker guns." These harmless imitations of guns called Quaker for that reason, were fake cannon carved out wood and painted black. They were so lightweight one man could lift one, and, if the ship was in danger of being attacked, the wooden guns were quickly placed in position at the gun ports and could not be told from real ones by those aboard another ship.

There are three kinds of Cape Cod houses — the half house, three quarter and "full Cape." Ours is a full Cape. They usually measure about thirty feet long and twenty eight feet deep. The center door is flanked by two windows on either side. The enormous chimney is located in the center of the house and can be seen outside emerging through the middle of the roof. The cost of a house this size was all of one hundred dollars, a large sum in those days considering the average yearly income was a mere fifty dollars. In place of currency there was the good old barter system. Many items, including needles, hand-forged nails, food and services, were used as a medium of exchange.

The huge chimneys were called anchors because they anchored the houses firmly against all storms. Our chimney weighs about sixteen tons and is seen to best advantage after you climb our steep "ships ladder" stairs and reach "topside." There you will see the pearly white clam and oyster shell mortar that bonds our chimney. A great many shells had to be pulverized, then burnt and mixed with the proper amount of sand and water, as cement had not been invented yet. Three fireplaces were built on the first floor, all connected to the one chimney.

To prevent the chimney from sinking into the Cape Cod sand a large crib, much larger than the base of the chimney was constructed and placed on level sand. This crib, or framework of timber, is like a huge square snowshoe of oak logs criss-crossed. Cribbing under the chimney base has kept our chimney from sinking and by now ending up somewhere in China.

Up stairs the master bedroom can be seen