

IN FOCUS

by John W. Gregory

Keeping "Open House" for the benefit of summer people has certain drawbacks—loss of privacy, minor damage caused by completely unrepressed children whose doting parents belong to the modern school of thought, the leading idea of which is to supplant the rod with reason and always the voice of reason must be in dulcet tones, etc. There are however from the anthropological standpoint rewarding features—such as the amusing and interesting remarks that people make about our ancient house and sometimes its occupants.

Dutch Oven Fireplace

Before quoting some of the remarks and observations I would like to tell

Provincetown's Oldest House

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for old postcards



Oldest House in Provincetown

up the chimney flue. The operators of the ovens had a very quaint way of determining the proper temperature for baking. After the fire had burned down the embers were raked out and the hand was thrust into the oven and held there for a slow count of ten. If after the count was finished it was too hot to hold any longer the temperature was just right for baking.

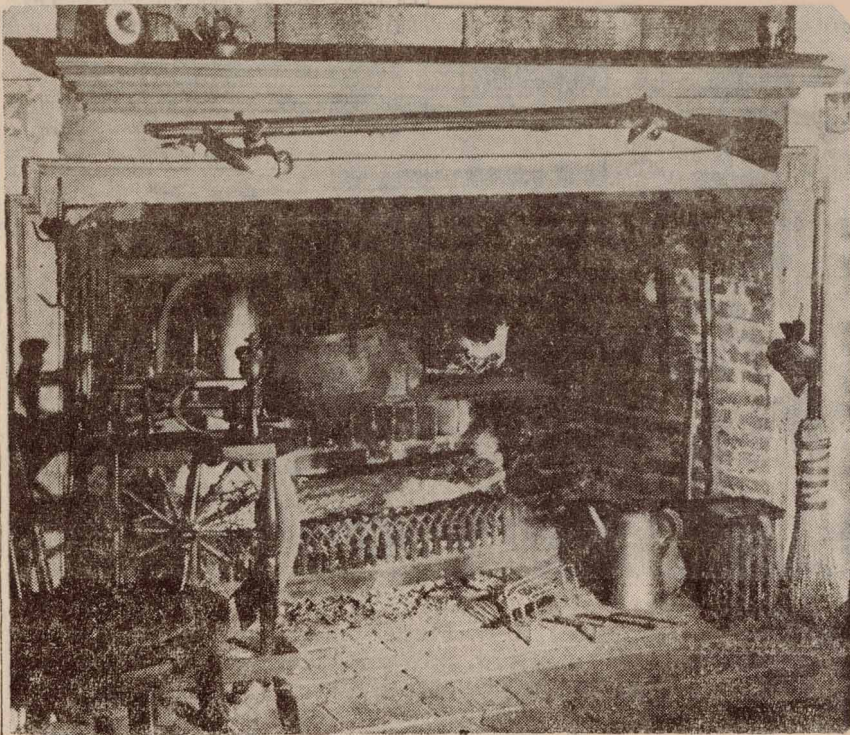
We often wonder what happened if someone stuttered or perhaps could not count to ten. The results might be a painfully burnt hand or half baked food. However when the temperature was just right the things that took longer to bake like beans were placed, with the aid of long handled paddles, in the rear of the oven and bread, muffins and other things that took less time were placed near the front of the oven. Incidentally the oven is so large, one of the largest on the Cape in fact, it would hold at least ten good-sized loaves of bread. Seth Nickerson, the man who built our house and several more in our neighborhood, had a good sized family and needed a large oven. I learned some things about this old timer who was a wonderfully skilled ship's carpenter from the Seth Nickerson now living in Hyannis. The original Seth was his fourth great grandfather so it is not hard to realize that our house dates back between two and three hundred years.

Now to the remarks of people. As you know we have a large circular cellar with a sand floor that was used for food storage. These cellars are often referred to as root cellars for root vegetables were buried at a certain depth in the sand in the fall to preserve them and would be dug up in

the winter when needed. The cellar is about fourteen feet in diameter and the main part of our house, and of course the oldest part is a great deal larger. Nevertheless some woman asked me, "Mr. Gregory, how in the world could they build a square house on a circular cellar?" To this day I cannot think of an answer to that one

By the way you may wonder why the cellars were built circular. For two reasons. One—the engineering principle was applied that a cylinder provides the greatest resistance to equalized pressure; in this case the pressure from the sand around it. Another, as bricks were very valuable in those days because of the fact they were imported the circle provided more usable sand area than a square or rectangle would have provided and

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you something about our Dutch oven fireplace (reproduced) that I photographed some time ago. You will note that the oven is built in the rear of the fireplace. This is proof of its antiquity for from the date 1750 on, the ovens were built on either sides and much higher for more convenience. Some mason in the year 1750 had the idea he would save women a lot of stooping and misery from burned fin-

gers and singed hair. A fire was built inside the oven and for fuel they used drift wood or kindling placed over bricks or stones the way we do at the beach. The oven is dome shaped and made entirely of imported English hand made bricks. There is no flue in the oven but due to its roundness there is a fine circulation of air so wood burns very quickly and the smoke escapes out the oven door and



OLDEST HOUSE, PROVINCETOWN

- 1956 -

John W. Gregory

Picturesque Dutch oven fireplaces such as this are found in many early Cape houses.