CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY -MARGARET KEISLER MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

ESSAY: Chatham: My Town by a River. The history of our town is made up of individual, unique stories. Please share your own distinctive story about growing up in Chatham. Your story may become part of the Chatham Historical Society anecdotal history archive.

When people think about Chatham, they often picture the train station, Main Street, or the Friday night lights at the high school. When I think about Chatham, I think about the creek tucked down in the borough, hidden behind trees, a place you would not notice unless you were looking for it. It runs down Van Doren Avenue, starting at the middle school, continuing past Rowan Road, and on through where the houses stop and the woods begin. It winds quietly through the woods, not dramatic or grand, but steady and constant. That creek has shaped my childhood as much as any classroom, team, or street in town.

I first followed the narrow dirt path down to the water holding my dad's hand. I was small enough that the tall grass brushed my shoulders and the rocks felt like mountains. My dad showed me how to skip stones and how to look under flat rocks for crayfish. He taught me to listen, really listen, to the sound of the water moving over stones. At that age, the creek felt enormous, like it held endless secrets waiting to be discovered.

As I grew older, the creek grew with me. It became a place of independence. What started as trips with my dad turned into afternoons with friends. We built forts out of fallen branches, convincing ourselves they were impenetrable. We hammered together rough treehouses that leaned more than they stood straight. We carved bike trails through the woods, spending hours perfecting jumps and clearing paths. The creek was our workshop, our clubhouse, and our wilderness all at once.

We fished in the shallow bends, sometimes catching nothing and sometimes feeling like experts when we reeled one in. We searched for frogs in the muddy edges and tried to spot turtles sunbathing on logs. We came home soaked, scratched, and exhausted, and completely content.

During COVID, when so much of the world felt uncertain and confined, the creek became something even more important. School was online. Sports were canceled. The rhythms of normal life disappeared. But the creek never closed. The water kept moving. The trees kept growing. The seasons kept changing.

In a time when everything felt paused, the creek reminded me that life continues. I would sit on the bank, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend spaced a few feet apart, and just breathe. It

was one of the few places where I felt normal. There were no notifications, no news alerts, just the steady sound of water and wind. It gave me peace when I did not even realize how much I needed it.

Looking back, I realize that the creek did more than entertain me. It taught me initiative and responsibility. We learned to solve problems when our forts collapsed. We figured out how to organize ourselves to build trails. We cleaned up trash left behind by others because we wanted to protect the place that meant so much to us. It quietly shaped my sense of stewardship and community. The creek was not owned by any one of us. It belonged to all of us, and that made caring for it important.

Chatham is a town defined by community, neighbors who know each other, families who grow up together, traditions that are passed down. My story of Chatham just happens to run along the edge of a small, winding creek. It is where I learned curiosity as a child, independence as a teenager, and resilience during uncertain times. It is where my dad first showed me the world beyond a sidewalk, and where my friends and I built our own.

Years from now, the forts will be gone, the bike trails will be overgrown, and new kids will explore the same muddy banks. The creek will continue to flow as it always has, carrying with it pieces of our laughter, our scraped knees, and our childhood summers.

The history of Chatham is not only in its buildings or records, it is in places like that creek, where ordinary days quietly become lifelong memories. My Chatham is a town by a creek, and along its banks, I grew up.