

## THE OLD DEXTER TAVERN AT LIVERPOOL, N.S.

Local tradition is that the Dexter tavern was built in 1763, from timber largely cut on the spot, and is therefore the oldest building now standing in the town. It stands on what was known in 1763 as Fish Point, although formally it was called Point Lawrence in honor of General Lawrence, Governor of Nova Scotia when the first settlers came to Liverpool in 1759. After it was fortified during the war of the American Revolution the name became Fort Point.

In 1763 no street or road existed where Liverpool's Main Street now runs. The handful of fishermen, ship-carpenters and merchants who lived in the vicinity of the Point were separated from the main Liverpool community about the Parade by a mile of woods and swamps along the shore, and the usual communication was by boat. The Dexter Tavern was built with its western end beside a small lane running down to the harbor on the inner side of the point. At the foot of this lane a boat ferry went to Sandy Cove across the harbor.

The tavern stands on a steep slope, so that entry to the first floor is at ground level, while the back entry to the basement is at a lower ground level. The building is small, rectangular, with a gambrel roof. The basement is walled with hewn stone, some of the blocks being of great weight, and chinked with lime mortar. The frame is of hewn spruce. The main sills measure 10" by 10", and run the full length of the house, 36 feet. The corner posts of the frame are hewn from 12" by 12" timbers. Originally all the outside walls were clapboarded, and the roof was covered with hand-split shingles. The floors were of very wide pine boards.

The kitchen was in the basement, and all cooking was done on a big open hearth, with brick side-ovens for baking. The well was in a corner of the basement floor. In another compartment of the basement was the storage room for liquor. A partition divided the first floor into two chambers, the tap room and the dining room. For dancing, the partition must have been made in halves, each half on hinges so that it could be folded back, making one chamber of the whole floor. The second floor was divided into two bedchambers, one for the Dexters, the

other for guests. By the use of truckle beds the guest chamber could sleep four and possibly as many as six men.

The tavern was built to face across the Point towards the outer harbor, which could easily be seen from the second story windows. (The Point was then clear of trees, and for a long time there were no other buildings between the tavern and the shore.) The harbor had a bar at the Mersey River mouth. It ran across from the Point to Sandy Cove, and the ship channel, passable at high tide only, was close in to the Point. Thus in time of war a company of men armed with muskets could make things hot for any hostile ship attempting to enter the channel. With a few cannon of medium calibre they could stand ships off at a mile, but they could not prevent ships entering the outer harbor or landing men at Black Point or Moose Harbor.

Thus the Dexter Tavern was in a strategic position, and during the American Revolution it formed a watch post and rallying point for the defenders of the town.

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The house was built for Enoch Dexter, a blacksmith by trade, who made ironwork for shipbuilding and house-building, including spikes and nails. His wife ran the tavern on the lower floor, hence it was always known as "Mrs. Dexter's Tavern." Enoch was born in 1727 in Rochester, Massachusetts, and he married his first wife Jedidah there in 1755. He was one of the pioneers of Liverpool, and his name appears as a "proprietor" in the confirmation grant of 1764. According to tradition the Dexter house was constructed by Cornelius Knowles, a shipwright, who built a house for himself nearby.

Apparently Jedidah Dexter <sup>was</sup> dead about the time of the American Revolution, for Enoch married again in 1776, his second wife being Mary Freeman, daughter of a Liverpool pioneer. She was a woman of large frame and buxom build, and when Enoch died in 1777 she carried on the tavern alone. It was a favorite place for small parties and dances. The taproom served refreshments to people going by ferry to Sandy Cove, to seamen whose ships lay outside the bar awaiting a



tide, to soldiers after the fort was built, to militiamen guarding the Point before the soldiers came. For other purposes it was a meeting place for merchants and captains discussing all kinds of matters from building a schoolhouse to drilling the militia.

The tavern served as headquarters to the Liverpool militia ~~is~~<sup>n</sup> various alarms and excursions during the early years of the American Revolution. The townsmen, nearly all of New England birth, were anxious for neutrality. For that reason they were suspected by the British authorities at Halifax, who long refused to allow cannon for Liverpool's defence. On the other hand Liverpool ships were attacked and seized by increasingly bold Yankee privateers, who came into the outer harbor at night and sent armed boats over the bar to "cut out" merchant vessels anchored in the river mouth.

On one memorable night in May 1778 there ~~was~~ was at last a clash between Liverpool militiamen on the Point and a pair of Yankee privateers anchored just offshore. In the course of the Yankee bombardment several buildings at the Point were hit by cannon or musket balls, including the Dexter Tavern. This was a turning point in Nova Scotia history, the first clear proof that the hitherto neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia were in a fighting mood and taking the side of the King. Queens County ~~then~~<sup>then</sup> comprised a great part of western Nova Scotia, all settled by New Englanders, and Liverpool was the county town.

Now the British authorities at Halifax moved to fortify the little port of Liverpool. In November 1778 a company of the King's Orange Rangers, a Loyalist regiment, arrived at Liverpool. Several cannon followed, and for the first time a real battery stood on what was now to be called Fort Point. The commander of this garrison, Captain Howard, lived in the Dexter Tavern and set up his headquarters there.

The Orange Rangers were a mixed lot of genuine Loyalists ~~from New Jersey~~<sup>from Orange County, N. Y.</sup> and foreigners and riffraff picked up in the streets of New York. On a night in September 1780, through the treachery of some Ranger sentries, a force of

American invaders landed and seized the fort and its garrison practically without firing a shot. Among the prisoners was Captain Howard, surprised in his bed at the tavern. The Americans' intention was to go on and destroy the town a mile away, but a few Liverpool militia ambushed and captured their commander on the way, and after some brief fighting the raiders withdrew, freeing all their prisoners, and leaving the fort and tavern intact.

All in all it was an exciting time for Mrs. Mary Dexter, and it proved too much for her. She became ill with dropsy, and after a long illness died on February 10, 1783, at the close of the war. Colonel Simeon Perkins of the Liverpool militia was one of the pall-bearers at her funeral. She was so huge and heavy that the corpse had to be taken to the grave on a sled.

The house passed through various other alarms and excursions during the Napoleonic wars, and the war of 1812, and was headquarters for the Fort Point guard during annual battery training until after the American Civil War 1861-65. It changed hands eventually to the Wentzel family, whose son Joseph first entered it as a child of three in 1875. He inherited the property, lived in it for many years, and retained possession of it until his death in the late 1950's. He knew much of the story of the old tavern. It remained untouched until about the year 1900, when the interior was changed considerably. In later years Joseph Wentzel put a concrete floor in the basement, replacing the original stone flags, and he filled up the basement well. The present front porch was added about 1925.

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