

PUBLICK HOUSE HISTORY LONG VERSION

The history of the Publick House and the reason behind its success would not be complete unless we started with the history of the surrounding town of Sturbridge. Therefore, we shall begin this tale in the year 1648.

The year 1648 had been a very prosperous year for those inhabiting this new colony across the vast ocean known as the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Most of the inhabitants had disembarked from their long ocean voyage either in Boston, Plymouth or Roxbury townships. In 1644 a man by the name of David Fiske began his new adventure in this unknown land by entering in the town of Roxbury. He was a farmer by trade and longed for a vast expanse of property, which he could never, had been able to afford at home in Stourbridge England. He found work as a farmhand and worked, saving his money to start his new life as landowner and citizen. In the autumn of 1648 he heard that a lot of land was available west of the populated towns and that the land was being granted at a very reasonable price. He ventured west but found very quickly that the land was not devoid of residents. There were many settlements of Nipmuc Indians. However, travel to the west was very easy due to the highly used pathways the Nipmuc Indians used to travel east. In late autumn David Fiske ventured upon a parcel of land that was thickly wooded and hilly. The trees were mostly hardwood and excellent for the purposes of building, burning, and other necessities. The hills provided an excellent vantage point to keep abreast of the comings and goings of the local Indians and all others that might cross his path. There were many streams for water, and so David Fiske scoped out a particular parcel of land and decided to put a claim upon it. Before David could make the trip back east to petition the governor for the purchase of the land, a terrible Noreaster struck. David was forced to seek shelter and seek it fast. He struggled for hours but finally came upon an abandoned den of some sort and settled in. The den was dark, but would suffice until the storm broke and David could make his way east. All of a sudden he could detect the faint sound of puppy whimpers and then the little light that came into the den was blotted out. Next, David heard the loud growls of a fierce animal, but he didn't know what it was. It was a mother wolf home to feed and care for her litter of pups. The story of David Fiske says he remained in that wolf's den for the remainder of the winter sharing the protective space with the wolf family. The place where the den was is called Fiske Hill today and our Crafts Inn sits upon that very hill.

The Indians had a different name for this area. They called it Tantasqua. The translation literally means "Mounds like a woman" because the area had two hills side by side reminding the Indians of a "squaw" or woman. Today, Friendly's Restaurant sits atop the smaller of the two but the second one was removed in the building of the paved road known as Route 20.

After the turn of the century, many new townships had been founded in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Because so much information of what was going on not only in Massachusetts but all throughout "New England" as it was now fondly called could be found in Boston, a central roadway had to be constructed to link



all inhabitants, North in New Hampshire and Maine, Central in Massachusetts, and South in Connecticut and Rhode Island colonies. The end result was the Boston Post Road. It has it start in Boston proper and meanders it was west through Massachusetts into the bordering state of New York. Although the town of Sturbridge did not exist yet, it was about to be born on the central criss-crossing of the Boston Post Road and the Main Indian roadway North and South.

After David Fiske had settled upon what is now know as Fiske Hill, he brought his family over to the colony and settled down to raise and care for his family. During the evening hours he would regale to the youngsters about his many escapades when he lived back in Stourbridge England. All through his life he would remind his children to remember their roots and never forget from where they came. The story of David Fiske was passed down through the generations and many more Fiskes inhabited the area. Along with them were several more families, a grist mill, a blacksmith shop and a tannery. The Fiske families partitioned the governor many times for township, but were always declined. King Philip, a descendant of Massasoit, the Indian who first greeted the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, was becoming quite a problem and the governor wanted to teach him a lesson. Therefore, in 1732 he finally granted the Fiske family's request for township. They named it Sturbridge after the town where their beloved forefather David had once lived. The first thing the townspeople did after receiving word that their petition had been accepted was to build a meeting house. The meeting house was built on a hill so that churchgoers could keep an eye out for marauding Indians sent by King Philip to clear the land of the "white face." Its location can be seen today where the Federation Church is bordering the northern edge of the common. A second grist mill was built and a town pound set up. Soon, because of the excellent location for travelers and fortune seekers, the town of Sturbridge blossomed almost overnight. This trend would continue for the next 120 years. At one point in its history, Sturbridge was much larger than Quinsigamond later known as Worcester, the second largest city in New England.

The Founder of The Inn Built In Sturbridge

The Publick House was founded in 1771 by Colonel Ebenezer Crafts, a colonel with the colonial militia. He was born on September 22, 1740 in the town of Abington Parish known today as Pomfret, Connecticut. He was the twelfth child and seventh son born to Capt. Joseph Crafts and Susannah Warner Crafts. Most of the children had died at birth of during infancy. Only two others, besides Ebenezer, survived to adulthood. He was sorely loved and spoiled while growing up. Anything he desired was given him if the means would allow. And they allowed plenty.

Capt. Joseph Crafts was a naval captain for the crown of England. Although he resided in the colonies he felt a strong allegiance to the crown. He came from a long line of military men and all had served proudly under the flag of England. He was quite successful as a maritime officer and had been decorated several times both here in the colonies and abroad in the motherland. As a result, money was plentiful and hard times were few.

Ebenezer was educated from an early age. In the 1740's the public school system did not exist, so the Captain and his wife hired a well-known tutor to educate the family. At the age of 16 Ebenezer completed his studies. He had been an excellent student and had acquired an education not easily rivaled by any other young man in his community. The art of reading had been done mostly from the family Bible and Ebenezer had



listened intently to the words he read. Upon completing his studies, he decided, much to the dismay of his father, not to go into the military but instead to further his studies and become a minister of the Word of God. At the age of 16 he walked from Abington Parish to New Haven Connecticut and entered Yale University. He graduated from Yale at the age of 19 with a Degree in Divinity Studies. His best friend, Joshua Payne, had also graduated from Yale and was returning home to Sturbridge, Massachusetts where Joshua said was an empty pulpit in the town's meetinghouse. Seeing this as his opportunity to begin the work of the Lord, Ebenezer Crafts set out with Joshua Payne for Sturbridge.

Both Joshua and Ebenezer spoke to the congregation of the meetinghouse each expressing his personal desire to fill the pulpit as Pastor. Only one man could be chosen, and after some deliberation, Joshua was their choice. This left Ebenezer upset and confused. He had been sure the Lord wanted him in Sturbridge. Reluctantly he returned to Abington Parish and to his family.

Not long after his return and upon the insistence of his father, Ebenezer entered military training. Because of his excellent training and keen mind, he excelled and quickly rose in rank. His military training was not with a branch of the crown, however. It was with a coalition of men banding together to oppose the harsh and unfair taxes and levies applied to the people of the thirteen colonies. He had developed a strong friendship during this time with a young man named Samuel Chandler from the nearby town of Thompson, Connecticut. He had a sister who he thought would be perfect for Ebenezer. Her name was Mehitabel and she was a dainty beauty. Ebenezer became smitten with her and they were soon married. They had a son who they name Samuel after Ebenezer's best friend. They had two more children quickly after but sadly they both died in infancy. Mehitabel was disquieted and begged Ebenezer to take her away from such a sad dwelling as theirs. At that same moment in time former friend Joshua Payne, minister in Sturbridge invited Ebenezer to Sturbridge to rekindle their ties. Ebenezer accepted.

While visiting his friend Ebenezer fell in love with a parcel of land that flanked the town common. It was a large parcel with a single room dwelling sitting upon it. Ebenezer discovered it was owned by a Doctor Elisha Marcy. Being a fastidiously strong-willed individual, Ebenezer approached Doctor Marcy inquiring if he might be willing to sell his property. Doctor Marcy declined. Ebenezer persisted and so did the doctor. The last evening before his return to his wife and son, Ebenezer decided to pay the good doctor one final visit. Ebenezer had discovered a new game while he had been out on military maneuvers. This game was called "cards." Before the evening was over Ebenezer had challenged Doctor Marcy to a game of cards, Winner Take All. Ebenezer took all.

Ebenezer returned to his family with the wonderful news that they would be moving to the town of Sturbridge. Better still, they owned the parcel outright and had paid nothing for it. Hearing that the property only had a single room dwelling, Mehitabel inquired of her husband why he wanted the land at all. "We shall build a Tavern!" he exclaimed. And in the spring of 1771 the one room dwelling was torn down and the foundation for what would become the Publick House was put in. Ebenezer's dear friend Joshua Payne and many of the men of the congregation completed construction in the autumn of 1771. Ebenezer, Mehitabel, and Samuel moved in before all the autumn leaves had fallen. A sign was posted indicating that a Tavern/Inn was



opening. That sign would have read either **CRAFTS TAVERN** or **STURBRIDGE TAVERN**. The first is the most likely. Thus, in the fall of 1771, the Publick House was born.

An Innkeeper's Work Is Never Done

When the business opened in 1771, there were thirteen overnight guest rooms, which held four to a bed for the low cost of 3 shillings. There was a mercantile business, which operated out of what is now the Pumpkin Room. Here you would buy sugar, thread, tea, eye glasses, nails, or anything else of necessity. Across the front hallway in what is now the Card Room was the men's smoking room. Here, daily, the men of the town would gather and discuss the latest news and current events. Politics and religion were widely discussed and debated and many are the time things got very heated. Because of the amount of men who would pack the room, it was believed during its construction, that a fireplace would not be needed – a lot of hot air and such! Directly behind the men's smoking room in the area we refer to as the Ladies Parlor was in fact, the Ladies' Parlor. The door, which connects the two rooms, was present in 1771. This was so that the ladies (who were forbidden to enter the men's smoking room or discuss with any of the men the events of the day) could press their ears against it and hear everything going on inside. This was the only way a woman of 1771 could gather the news events of the day.

The kitchen of the Tavern and Inn was a bustling place. Its location was where we now seat our guests in the Tap Room. The fireplace in the room is indicative of the size needed to do all the work of a major business. It has a central beam running from left to right over the source of heat from which chains were hung. From these chains pots of water, stew, or candle wax would be heated through. Because of its design, many women feared the fireplace. Their long aprons, skirts, and petticoats would brush against the embers and burning logs and become engulfed. Fire was the number one cause of death among women in the latter 18th century.

The busiest room in the Tavern was the Tap Room. But its location was where we now seat our guests in The Pineapple Room. It was called the Tap Room for obvious reasons. This is where you would have the innkeeper draw a flagon of rum, hard cider, or brandy from the taps behind the bar for you. In Ebenezer Crafts day, it was said that he was so robust that he could lift a barrel of rum and drink directly from the bunghole or a.k.a. TAP. But, this was not just a place for drink. Meals were served to guests in this room. A light meal was usually included with the overnight fee. However, if you were traveling and stopped for a meal, its cost could be paid either with money or by manual labor.

The front desk was located just inside the front door where we now have an area to hang coats and umbrellas. Behind the desk were mail slots where the townspeople would come to gather or send mail. Ebenezer Crafts would travel to Boston once a week to deliver mail and gather all pertinent info about the events of the colonies. He would return with any mail for the townspeople and hold regular meetings with the men inside the mens' smoking room.



From Then 'till Now

Business boomed from the beginning. Weary travelers on the Boston Post Road almost always stopped for meals and/or lodging. After the independence of our nation on July 4, 1776 business continued unabated.

However, in 1784 this new nation suffered its first and arguably its worst depression. The money you had in your pocket was not worth the paper it was printed on or the ink it was printed with. The rich became poor overnight. The poor became poorer. Without a central banking system in place and no reserve, there wasn't a thing anyone could do but wait and pray. It seemed the United States was going to fail. Worse than that, we would have to ask England for aid and support. This was something no-one would be willing to do. Weary from work, weary from military campaigns, weary from worry, Ebenezer and Mehitabel sold their tavern and moved their three children (two daughters had been born in Sturbridge and had survived) to a parcel of land in the area they called Vermont. There they settled and remained until their deaths having founded the town of Craftsbury, Vermont, which is still there today. Samuel Crafts became the first Governor of the state of Vermont.

Crafts Tavern remained open after the departure of the Crafts family. The new innkeeper collected the fares for rooms and meals with either manual labor or by such things as firewood or eggs or sides of beef. Business was good and the bad times rebounded to prosperity. The town of Sturbridge continued growing until the mid 1850's when disaster struck the town.

With the invention of the steam locomotive came the possibility of moving large amounts of goods from one location to another in record time. The towns and cities that were linked along its railway grew to bursting in record time. Large sums of money were quickly made and business exploded. Sturbridge Massachusetts was selected to be one of the townships along a railway that would connect Worcester Massachusetts to New Haven Connecticut. And for reasons unknown, Sturbridge was bypassed and the railway went through Southbridge instead. Almost overnight, people, businesses, and money fled from Sturbridge and the town almost died. With little more than 700 inhabitants, Sturbridge was now one tenth of its size just a few short months earlier. But still the innkeeper of the tavern remained true to keeping on with great hospitality. He never allowed his doors to shut to anyone. A good meal and a clean place to sleep at a reasonable cost were always available. The business changed hands several times but still kept hospitality its best friend. Then in 1923 the property was purchased as a boarding house for women. It was renamed *The Elms*.

The Elms was a house of hospitality that never allowed a young woman to be turned away. A weekly stipend got her room and board with heat and a shared bath. Its hay-day was passed and repairs were sorely needed. Then came the second depression.



1771
Publick House
Historic Inn & Country Lodge

The Elms almost closed its doors. This would have been the first time since its doors had opened that the chain of hospitality would have been broken. But thankfully a gentleman by the name of Richard Paige had been invited to the Elms to perhaps invest in its future. Ever hear the expression “time repeats itself”? Instead of investing in the Elms Richard Paige purchased the building for a \$1.00 card game bet. It is said that the owner of the Elms had only 50 cents left to play cards with. Richard Paige matched that amount and the hand was dealt. Richard Paige won the hand and offered to take the aging building off the owners’ hands for \$1.00. The man accepted and what we now know as the Publick House was born.

Richard Paige wanted to restore the building back to a Tavern and Inn as it had been originally. All the girls living at the Elms decided to relocate elsewhere giving Richard the opportunity to take down walls or pull down ceilings to find how the building had changed over its life. He single-handedly rediscovered the Crafts Tavern and restored the building to its former glory. In a tribute to Colonel Ebenezer Crafts, Richard Paige allowed the U.S. Army to take over the Publick House in the early 1940’s as a post for soldiers en route for training in other areas. The Publick House moved across the common to a large white house and continued to operate there until the end of WWII when the army vacated this property and the business was able to move back in. Not one day was missed in providing good hospitality.

Since WWII the building has gone through some face lifts and expansions. Innkeepers have come and gone. The bill-of-fare has changed to meet the public demand. Televisions have been added to the rooms. But one thing remains true and constant. An idea was expanded upon in 1771 to provide great hospitality at a price people could afford. 233 years later and without missing a single day in the process, that idea is still a reality.

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