

A paper read before the Greenfield Historical Society April 27, 1948

THE OLD TAVERN FARM
BY HELEN GERRETT

June 4, 1953

The name of Samuel Hinsdale appears very prominently in the early history of Greenfield and Deerfield, and the same name in the following generations has a connection with this landmark, the Old Tavern Farm. In order to know the succession of events and the people that led up to this tavern, the early records are of help in putting together this story which is both authentic and traditional.

A Samuel Hinsdale built the sixteen-room building of a pin-frame structure; also the ballroom with the much-discussed spring floor, in the early 1700's. Five fireplaces provided the heat, and the opinion has sometimes expressed that the chimney was built first and then the house built around it.

One of the roads out from Greenfield winds northerly over the meadows which lie west of Green River, and up the gorge to Colrain; on into Vermont, and finally over into New York State. Prior to 1700 daily papers and railroads had not been established in this region, so recently freed from the Indians, and the stage coach brought in the traveler and the news of the events of the times. Taverns to aid the wayfarer and provide a livelihood for the innkeeper naturally sprang up along these routes, where no doubt problems of the government and milder gossip were argued with much interest and amusement.

When the town of Dedham petitioned for an additional grant of land to compensate for nearby tracts that were signed over to Natick, a Robert Hinsdale of that town was one of the members appointed to seek further territory. These men naturally travelled inland and to the west for weeks, and finally came upon the land which makes up this valley. They named it Petumtuck for the Indians of that tribe already here, and reported it the best land seen so far, "rich, level, and fertile."

In 1669 this Robert Hinsdale was well established here in Deerfield, as it was later called, but fate overtook him as he and three of his four sons were killed at Bloody Brook in 1673. The surviving son, Samuel Hinsdale, had married Mehitable Johnson and in 1673 a son Mehuman was born to them, the first white child in this new Deerfield town. Samuel was a rich land-owner by this time, having made his own selection and broken and broken up many acres which were afterwards confirmed by the colony, and thereby he became the first permanent settler. Mehuman grew to manhood and married, but he and his wife fell into the hands of the Indians in 1704, and it was three years before they were able to return from Canada.

It was their son Samuel, born in 1708, who made this story possible. He followed his father and grandfather as another successful landowner, and took lands at the north, then known as Green River, and with his brother Darius built a small house in the upper meadows. He lived there only a short time, and then erected across the road the tavern known now as the Old Tavern Farm, and became a landlord, as the records show a license granted to him for its operation in 1746. This inn, then called Hinsdale Tavern (the sign is now in Memorial Hall in Deerfield) became the center of activity for that area, and since has known many interesting years. The brook which ran by at the north became the Hinsdale Brook, and the name Samuel Hinsdale appears many times in the Greenfield records of early important events, as he was a distinguished figure in affairs preceding the Revolution and Provincial Congress.

Samuel Hinsdale was one of the first board of selectmen of Greenfield when the town was incorporated in 1753. He became wealthy for a man of that time. He and his brother operated a still in connection with the tavern so that pure liquors in unstinted quantities could be furnished, and yet in 1773 when the church and town were one,

it was voted that Samuel Hinsdale as a committee from the church "return thanks to Mr. Davis Wells for a gift of a cushion for the Rev. Roger Newton, the first minister, to lean on."

The travelled highway ran very close to the front door, as they all did, and the accuracy of the coach driver in pulling up close to the stone steps is evident, as a definite curve in the lower stone has been worn by the cramping of the wheel, and can be seen even now.

The bar room at the left of the front door was the gathering place for both native and traveler and the bar from which the spirits were dispensed is still preserved. A display case for tobacco and a mosey drawer were added later. The two cupboards at the top apparently held both cheap and expensive liquors, as one door has a keyhole very much worn by use, which would lead one to believe that the less expensive liquors were more in demand. No doubt jugs kept the reserve supply, as two sections in the base of the bar were for that purpose. We have only three articles which we are certain were part of the bar-room equipment; the toddy iron, one barroom chair, and one of the jugs. The excess storage for the stock was in the cellar in the wine compartment, a part of the base of the chimney. The cider barrels went down the large bulkhead. The stone steps are still in place and the skids on which these kegs were eased down now hang on the same hooks in the cellar.

Of course there had to be both front and back stairs to the second floor. Those at the front of the tavern are the so-called fan stairs, very steep and part of a very small front hall, so narrow that the wide front door is double hinged to allow it to fold back so that people can pass by. An Indian lock - which is a wooden bar set in two iron braces - is the only lock this door has ever had. The back stairs go up from the dining room to the dance hall and also to a long narrow hallway, off which are the sleeping rooms. The large, probably

expensive rooms are on the front of the house and the small cheaper ones at the back. One of the large bedrooms adjoins the dance hall where the ladies could leave their wraps before going in to dance.

This ballroom is a quite large, attractive room with an arched ceiling. It was first lighted with candles, and later oil lamps were hung from two chandeliers which are still in place. Later, wall lamps were put up to give more light. It must have made a pretty, quaint picture with the costumes, dim lights, and guests watching the dances from the benches which extend around two sides of the room. The musicians were in a little "fiddlers box" at the farther end, small, to be sure, but large enough to also include the prompter. The spring floor made the dancing gay and easy for those accustomed to it, and it served as a safety measure in absorbing the vibrations.

I can find but one recorded event in connection with this dance hall, and that is when John Wells and Moses Arms of Deerfield rode up the old Shelburne road to escort the daughters of Captain Agrippa Wells, Mary and Patience, to the wedding of Diana Hinsdale and Elijah Dwight of Belchertown. That was on Sept. 27, 1774. Reference is made to this event in one of Mary P. Wells Smith's books: "The young couples rode by horseback down the new road and up through the Greenfield Meadows to Samuel Hinsdale's. They found a large party assembled. A wedding supper was served, after which the ceremony was performed by Rev. Roger Newton. The young guests danced until well after nine o'clock. It was so late that it seemed unwise to go up the mountain that night, so they stayed at Daniel Arms' house and rode on home the next morning, with much of interest to relate."

Of course every tavern had a blacksmith shop, and one of Samuel Hinsdale's brothers was the first blacksmith. The shop was built at the rear, between the house and the brook. It was a combination house

and shop and the architecture was in perfect Cape Cod style. It was used this way for about a hundred years until a new one was built across the road in front of the inn. At that time the space which had been used for shoeing the horses and oxen was finished and became the parlor of the old house. Old deeds refer to butternut trees as boundary markers, and as the floors are made of wide butternut boards it is possible that these trees were cut to convert the shop into a home. The sign of the last blacksmith can still be seen painted along the front: "H.A. Ewers - Blacksmith."

The wide flat stones are still at the front and back doors, and the house is now the attractive home of Mr. and Mrs. Wesley B. Foss.

There were changes from time to time. Samuel Hinsdale the builder dies in 1768 and his son Ebenezer ran the tavern for a while. In 1836 he sold it to Ebenezer Thayer who was the landlord until Henrey A. Ewers purchased it in 1850. The porch across the front seems to have been added later, as my grandfather, who bought it in 1858 often told of Mr. Thayer's experiences in getting the wide stones used for the floor down from the quarry in Charlemont. It was a three-day trip to get them, and three pairs of oxen were used to draw each load.

The tavern barn was originally across the road where the house of Donald W. Clark now stands, as only the transient horses were kept in the small shed adjoining the hotel. The present large barn was built in 1865 by my grandfather. At that time the timbers were cut and numbered, and then men gathered for a "raising", when it was put up and pins put in to hold it together. It is interesting to note that a passing traveler gave the workers the news of the assassination of President Lincoln. This was three or four days after the event, so you see news travels faster now. The slate on the roofs of both house and barn came from the Guilford, Vt., quarry, and this was also hauled by oxen.

Some of the early "modern" improvements, although primitive to us were rather unique. A large brass kettle still in the kitchen is set in a brick hearth. A fire was kept burning there most of the time, so that there might be an abundant supply of hot water. Under the kitchen floor is a cistern about ten feet deep and eight feet in diameter. This held the rain water run from the eaves by means of tin pipes. Its purpose was twofold: to provide extra water for washing when the supply from the spring was low, and also for fire protection. The trap door could be opened and the water bailed out. Water for cooking and drinking ran into a large tub in the kitchen from a spring a half-mile up the mountain-side. Normally this was fine, but not too ample during a dry season.

One or two events connect the location with Deerfield events. According to history the Indians and their captives camped the first night after the burning of Deerfield in 1704, on the plateau just across the brook to the north. About fifty years ago my father had planted this field, and when digging in the fall a scalping knife came up with the potatoes. It might well have been lost there at that time.

The Deerfield cannon, a relic of the war, accepted the hospitality of the hotel for a while during the years when its ownership was in dispute. It appeared in its rightful place on Deerfield common from time to time until spirited away to other places and hidden from Deerfield eyes. Occasionally it got up to Greenfield. History tells that a group of Greenfield men brought it from Deerfield with oxen and buried it in the buckwheat field of Henry Ewers, The inn-keeper. Young men from Deerfield soon came up to look for it, but the local boys had a friend in Mr. Ewers, who told them they could bury it under the ell of the hotel for safety, where it stayed for three or four years. But when the young men of the Meadows heard of its hiding place they wanted to take it out and see just what it would do. Fearing an accident, Mr. Ewers asked

Henry Briggs, the blacksmith, to help get it out from its hiding place and hide it elsewhere. So they took away some of the boards of the back room of the tavern, found the cannon under the floor, placed heavy chains round it, hauled it out with a yoke of oxen, moved it across the yard, and buried it again near the barn, now the garage of the Foss residence. One morning Mr. Briggs discovered that during the night someone had been looking for it, punching the ground with an iron bar, but had just missed it several times. It remained there during the next winter until the dispute had been settled, when four men came up from Deerfield and put the cannon back once more in its rightful place. These men earned a supper and \$10 for their venture, given to them by Mr. Abercrombie.

When the railroad became a means of transportation the hotel activities started on a downward trend, and about 1860 the inn-keeping business was closed, although the dance hall was used for a while. Grandfather took over the old tavern in 1858, brought his bride, Melinda Plumb there in 1859, and it has since been in the family, just as dear to its present owners as to those of the past.