

## A Brief History of the Dartmouth Akins & the Akin "Farmstead"

While the successful Akin families lived near the harbor, property purchased by Elihu Akin on Potter's Hill ca. 1769 was used to grow food, support an orchard, and grow livestock, while some tenant farmers likely lived in the little farmhouse.

### The Revolutionary War Era

Shipbuilder and coastal trader Elihu Akin was an early leader of the Sons of Liberty in Old Dartmouth, working to advance the cause of American freedom from Great Britain. After the outbreak of war at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Akin led the effort to expel three British loyalists (Tories) from Dartmouth, and get them banished from Massachusetts. The Tories later helped the British army and navy attack Bedford Village (New Bedford) and Padanaram Village in south Dartmouth in September 1778. The Tories who led the British attackers to Padanaram Village pointed out Akin's shipyard, warehouses and home, as well as several other Akin family houses. Most of the village was destroyed by soldiers. Elihu Akin was forced to relocate his family to the 18-acre farmstead on what is now Dartmouth Street, near Clark's Cove where he lived until his death in 1795. His widow, Ruth Perry Akin, looked after the property until son Joseph was old enough to manage it. [The property remained in family ownership until 2003.]

In November 1778, the Akin family had more bad news – their son Jonathan had been captured by the British sailing a ship from Dartmouth to Bordeaux. Some say it

was a privateer vessel. Young Akin escaped from a British prison, but then was taken prisoner by the French Navy while trying to escape England; he wrote to American Commissioner Benjamin Franklin from a French prison asking for help securing his release. With John Adams help, Akin and other Americans were freed with an order from the King at Versailles. Jonathan returned safely to Dartmouth and married; he died in 1790.

### The 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Well into the 1860s, Joseph Akin owns and lives on the property mentioned in his will as "...his homestead, consisting of a dwelling house, out buildings, and thirteen acres of land." On February 8, 1863, Joseph Akin dies. His widow, Hannah Howland Akin, lives in the house, later inherited by seven daughters.

Meanwhile one of the daughters, and Elihu's granddaughter, Julia Ann [b. 1820, d. 1884] marries New Bedford mariner William Canfield in 1843. Canfield, an ex-whaler, went on to publish several newspapers centering on the whaling industry during the 1840s. Later he ran a New Bedford hotel called the Sheridan. After being widowed, Julia Akin lived at the Akin House until her death. Her son, Richard Albert Canfield [b.1855, d.1914], became one of the great figures of the Gilded Age, with a far-reaching reputation as a professional gambler, New York casino operator, and patron of the arts. As a young man, Canfield regularly visited the Akin farmstead, to see his grandmother Hannah Howland Akin and later his mother Julia.

### In the Movies

In 1921, the Akin House became a part of American film history, being used as a location for the Elmer Clifton silent movie, *Down to the Sea in Ships*. The silent film classic shows the Akin house, called the "Old Homestead" in a late sequence of the film, which also depicts Dartmouth's Apponagansett Meeting House and contains rare footage of a whaling voyage filmed on local whaleships the *Wanderer* and the *Charles W. Morgan*.

### The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Waterfront Historic Area League [WHALE] rescued the Akin House from the threat of demolition in 2003 with the support of Dartmouth's Community Preservation Act [CPA]. In 2008, the deed was transferred to the Town of Dartmouth, and the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust [DHPT] took over temporary stewardship of the property under a lease agreement with the Town of Dartmouth. DHPT has continued the work begun by WHALE to oversee the preservation and restoration of the property with additional CPA funds and private donations. This important cultural resource will become a center for living history education.

Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust, Inc.

Research by Peggi Medeiros and Larry Robert Akin

Compiled by Diane Gilbert