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The Little House with a Big Story to Tell

BY DIANE M. GILBERT

WITHIN A DENSELY POPULATED NEIGHBORHOOD AND BUSY INTERSECTION IN DARTMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS, THE DIMINUTIVE AKIN HOUSE STANDS PROMINENTLY, INTERPRETING LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR ERA AND BEYOND.

BUILT TWO YEARS into the reign of King George III by British subjects, the five-room, post-and-beam Cape witnessed the changing

allegiance of its owners and their contributions to building an independent American republic through 241 years of family ownership.

The house stands near Dartmouth's coastline, less than a mile from Padanaram harbor in an area

known as Potter's Hill. With its early architectural elements, footprint, and first-storey floor plan unchanged, the circa 1762 house (with attic and cellar) is one of the earliest of its type still extant in Dartmouth. Originally built on a parcel of 18 acres, it now

In restoring the so-called "keeping room" in the Akin House, the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust chose to leave much of the original architectural fabric exposed, including the ceiling beam across the fireplace wall, whitewashed wall boards to the left, and two chamfered joists. The mantel replicates one from the c. 1764 Hanford-Silliman House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Period paint colors were used on the wood trim, mantel, and floorboards.



KENNETH HOWLAND, COURTESY OF DARTMOUTH HERITAGE PRESERVATION TRUST, INC.



LEFT A 2004 photo shows years' worth of damage to the plaster ceiling and walls. In the 20th Century, a gas heater connected to an old stove pipe heated the room. **RIGHT** In 2018, when historical masons dismantled the keeping room fire box and Greek revival beehive oven, they uncovered the original rear brick oven. They restored the fireplace to working order.

sits on a three-quarter-acre lot.

Subject to study by historians and memorialized by photographers, the home's basic history was told in various publications about Dartmouth throughout the 19th Century. In his 1858 book *History of New Bedford, Massachusetts*, historian Daniel Ricketson included the Akin family as early proprietors of Dartmouth and listed the house among those erected before the Revolutionary War, describing it as the "Old Akin house, on an old crossroad near Padanaram, with its stone chimney."

Few pre-Revolutionary War houses survive in Dartmouth, and unlike what was customary by the 19th Century, the Akin House footprint and style were never adorned with wings or ells, though it underwent some interior updates and decorative embellishments during the Federal and Greek revival periods.

In the early 1900s, it even served as a set in the silent film *Down to the Sea in Ships*, which chronicled the whaling industry in mid-19th-Century New Bedford and was shot on location in New Bedford and Dartmouth. In an early scene, the main characters visit "the old homestead," filmed at the rear entry of the Akin House.

FAMILY LINE

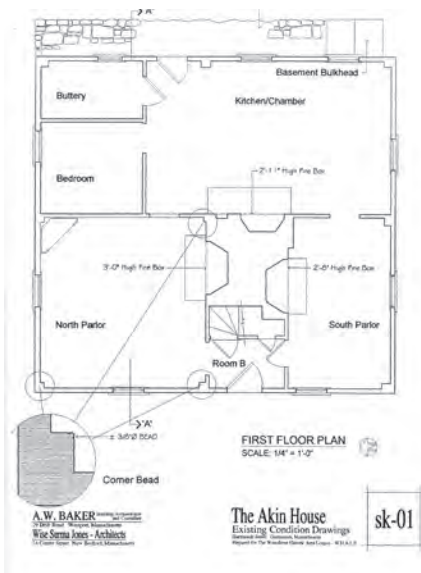
The Dartmouth branch of the Akin family emigrated from Scotland circa 1663, with David and Mary Akin first

A display area in the southeast side of the keeping room shows an original end tie beam, corner post, and joist. New walls and beams are whitewashed to contrast with original materials. The room is simply furnished.





LEFT A 1905 photo of the Akin House, by Fred Palmer, appears in the c. 1908 manuscript of early Dartmouth houses compiled by local historian and surveyor Henry B. Worth. The barn barely visible at left no longer stands. **RIGHT** This is how the Akin House appeared in 2001, before restoration, with boarded-up windows. The century-old bow in the roof remained as part of the restoration so as not to disturb the stability of the structure.



settling in Newport, Rhode Island. They had three sons, and the eldest, John, moved to Dartmouth in about 1692 after marrying Mary Briggs and purchasing land on Smith's Neck along the west side of the Appona-gansett River and south of Dartmouth village from his wife's uncle.

John Akin added to his land-holdings two decades later, purchasing farmland in Dartmouth village, now South Dartmouth, for £550 after marrying second wife Hannah Sherman. Between his two wives, he fathered eight sons and eight daughters. Sons James, Benjamin, and Elihu had ties to the surviving Cape house, which tells their stories and

those of other Akin family members.

In 1723, John Akin, acting in his capacity as tax assessor, along with three other selectmen, "refused to collect taxes imposed by the General Court of Massachusetts for the support of ministers, for which act of insubordination they were imprisoned in the common jail [15 months] at New Bristol," according to the 1918 *History of New Bedford*, by Zephaniah Pease.

When the case was argued before the King's Privy Council, the judges ordered that the selectmen be released and the taxes remitted—a notable decision for the Society of Friends, ending persecution of the religious sect known as Quakers. John Akin passed this independent spirit to his sons.

During British rule, the Akins became some of the wealthiest men in town. Presumably in preparation for shipbuilding, Elihu likely trained as a shipwright in Newport in about 1747. By 1761, James and Elihu Akin were managing a thriving shipyard business at the foot of Prospect Street near Dartmouth harbor. They also owned mansions, a tavern, and other businesses in the village, aiding in the economic development of the

The restored house, as it now appears, has a deck with a chair lift off the back to provide access for all visitors.



WALLPAPER CONSERVATION

In 2017, as restoration workers were removing 20th-Century wallpaper over 19th-Century plaster and lath in the south parlor, they uncovered earlier layers of paper.

With a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors, the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust hired Lorraine Bigrigg and Deborah LaCamera, senior partners and conservators at Studio TKM Associates, Inc., Somerville, Massachusetts, to investigate and conserve the wallpapers.

The conservators identified three layers: a printed vine pattern paper, newsprint beneath it, and a block-printed palmette paper, with a pattern of radiating palm-like petals, that was applied directly to a whitewashed wide-plank wall.

To date the wallpaper, the conservators reviewed the historical context: materials and techniques of manufacture, color and design elements, and how and where the paper was installed within the room. They also assessed it for structural stability, patterns of wear and deterioration, and its overall appearance.

Given the age and style of such a modest house, they surmised that the walls (and ceiling) had been whitewashed many times seasonally before anyone considered decorative elements. No family records indicate why this room was chosen to decorate with wallpaper so early in its life.

The palmette design likely required separate wood blocks to print the red and blue elements. In two sections of the room, the conservators found 40- and 52-inch wallpaper lengths without seams, suggesting the paper dated to the 1820s or later, soon after continuous roll paper was



Walls in the south parlor have been preserved as is to show the layers of wallpaper and newsprint uncovered in 2017 during the interior restoration.

invented in England. The paper's width was 19½ inches.

Scientists from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum determined the red colorant to be hematite and the blue to be Prussian blue, both of which were available to wallpaper manufacturers in the early 19th Century.

Remnants of the palmette design appear as delicate tracery, like stenciling, on the walls, the result of silverfish eating the background paper, which was applied with wheat paste while avoiding the pigmented designs.

The newsprint, used to insulate and smooth the wall, was applied on top of the palmette paper, presumably to prepare the wall before applying the vine pattern wallpaper. "Washington, May, 18 31" and "New Bedford, Jan 24, 1846" found on the newsprint suggest that the later papers were installed during or after 1846.

The simple black and white trailing vine pattern was printed on Prussian blue paper likely with rollers, a relatively new technology in the mid-1800s. The small sample fragments

yielded no date stamps on the back to confirm an exact date of printing.

Because the papers have survived as well as they have in this environment, the conservators recommended an archaeological approach to preservation—stabilization with minimal intervention.

Today, the south parlor walls reveal these early layers of wallpaper fragments just as they were originally installed.

The Trust is still investigating the origin of the designs. To protect the space, the number of visitors viewing the room at any given time is limited.



LEFT Early-1800s palmette wallpaper was applied directly to the whitewashed walls.

RIGHT Newsprint served as a base for applying a newer vine-patterned wallpaper in the mid-1800s.





Leah Carreiro with “Tea to Sea,” a group of 18th-Century cookery reenactors based along the south coast of Massachusetts, checks a skillet of meat balls cooking on the keeping room hearth.

southern coastal part of the township.

The house that would become Elihu Akin’s last dwelling place was built by Job Mosher, a carpenter, for his wife, Amie Akin, the daughter of Elihu’s business partner and half-brother, James. Five years later, the young couple decided to leave Dartmouth, perhaps to live near Amie’s uncle David in New York State. They sold the house with about 18 acres to Captain Jonathan Delano, who soon afterward died at sea.

In December 1769, Elihu Akin purchased the reduced 13-acre property from widow Lydia Delano. Elihu’s brother Benjamin Akin, Esquire, Justice of the Peace, recorded the sale on June 12, 1770. The property was conveniently located about a mile from Elihu’s mansion and business holdings. Initially, he likely hired tenant farmers to till the land and live in the house.

CHANGE IN FORTUNE

The Akin family’s support for independence, and the likelihood that the prosperous coastal traders engaged in privateering during the Revolution, brought them unwanted attention from British troops, who burned New Bedford and neighboring villages in September 1778. Three

Tories, expelled from Dartmouth and banished from Massachusetts at the instigation of Elihu Akin, directed British troops to the Akin family homes and shipyard.

During an address on September 14, 1864, for the 200th anniversary of Dartmouth’s incorporation, prominent New Bedford resident William W. Crapo recounted this history, noting, “This act of the British army appears to have proceeded from motives of retaliation and punishment rather than for purposes of plunder. Our harbor had from the beginning of the war been noted as a rendezvous for privateers, and the damage inflicted upon English commerce by the whalers of Dartmouth had excited the deepest resentment.”

Crapo continued, “A family of Akins, strong Whigs, had been chiefly instrumental in the expulsion of the Tories, and they were the principal sufferers by this raid. Captain Elihu Akin’s dwelling house and a new brig on the stocks were burned. The dwelling house of James Akin, his brother, and also a house belonging to Meribah [and John] Akin, were fired and burned to the ground.”

However, Elihu’s farmhouse on Potter’s Hill, as well as his family and those of his brothers, escaped the

assault. In 1780, the Massachusetts General Court awarded Elihu and James Akin some reimbursement, but the total compensation for all of Bedford (village) was only £1,200, so the amount the Akins received barely came close to the value of their losses.

Elihu relocated to the farmstead with his wife, Ruth Perry, and some of their younger children. After her death, he married Ruth Allen, had another son, and lived in the house until his death in 1794 at age seventy-four. Son Joseph inherited the house as an adult, and it later passed through daughters until subsequent family owners began renting it to tenants.

A NEW PURPOSE

Although Akin descendants continuously owned the house until it was sold in 2003, they leased it to tenants for fifty-plus years before it went uninhabited in the late 1980s. Having completed several restoration projects in New Bedford, the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHAle), in partnership with the people of Dartmouth, stepped in to save the Akin House from demolition resulting from neglect.

WHAle officials hired preservation consultant Anne W. “Pete” Baker, who coined the phrase “The Little House with a Big Story to Tell.” The late architectural historian and author of *Collecting Houses: 17th Century Houses—20th Century Adventures* (2003) had a go-to reputation for documenting and saving historic houses across southern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Her report on the house confirmed, “The Akin House is an excellent example of the classic Cape Cod building type and as a cultural resource is representative of a local building tradition tied to the 17th- and 18th-Century farming community of South Dartmouth. As such the house stands in marked contrast

During a summer outdoor event at the Akin House with the Massachusetts Archaeology Society, member Frederick Robinson displays Native American tools, including knife points, comparing them to modern tools.

to the area's existing 19th [and 20th] century town houses.”

Grants, private organizations, and generous donors provided funds for the initial phase of restoration work, which included stabilization and weather remediation; removing a later dormer; post, beam, and joist replacements and restoration; repairs to the siding; and a new roof.

In 2008, WHALe transferred the property to the town through a mutual agreement that the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust would take over the preservation and restoration of the house and premises.

During two additional phases of work to address other structural deficiencies and restore the interior—including rebuilding the original hearth, repairing the other two fire boxes, and adding a deck for universal accessibility—the Trust opened the house periodically so the public could view the restoration work, which was completed in 2018.

Today the Trust operates the house as a living history museum and study house, highlighting original architectural elements, artifact displays, educational programs, and interactive events intended to promote curiosity and interest in local history while instilling a passion for preservation.

For visitors, the narrative of the house and its inhabitants provides a personal intimacy with local ancestors rarely found in historic house museums while inviting those who visit to share their own family stories. *

Diane M. Gilbert is president of the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust, Inc. (www.dhpt.org), which strives to “preserve Dartmouth’s heritage from the foundation up.”

An 18th-Century-style redware plate with slip-trailed decoration by potter Stephen Earp of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, is displayed with pottery sherds found in the cellar. Other redware and ceramics used by the Akin family are also on display.



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