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Akin House: The Elihu Akin House Narrative

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The Elihu Akin House
762 Dartmouth Street
South Dartmouth, Massachusetts
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The Elihu Akin house, located at 762 Dartmouth Street in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, is one of the oldest homes remaining in the town. Its age alone would give the house architectural importance, however, the Akin family were instrumental in the development of South Dartmouth. Pre-dating the Revolution, the small five-room house has been circa dated on the basis of citations by two of the area's most distinguished historians. Daniel Ricketson in his *The History of New Bedford, Massachusetts*, written in 1858, includes it in his list of early surviving homes as " the Old Akin house, on an old cross road near Padanaram." Mr. Ricketson cites only one other house in Dartmouth and notes that the Akin house was one of three that had a stone chimney.

One of his 1908 unpublished manuscripts owned by the New Bedford Whaling Museum's Kendall Institute has a photograph of the house and a brief discussion of its history.

Worth's notation reads in full:

"The Akin House (Elihu Akin) Built around 1762 – Located on the east side of the road between New Bedford and Padanaram, the top of Potter's Hill, owned in 1907 by Mrs. Nehemiah Waterman. The land was part of the John Russell farm.

John Russell to Job Mosher, carpenter

Job Mosher to Jonathan Delano, Jr.

Administrator of Jonathan Delano to Elihu Akin

By will to sons Joseph and Abraham

1839 Property divided and the part east of the New Bedford road, with house, went to Joseph Akin. Administrator of Joseph Akin to his daughter, Mrs. Waterman."

Worth added, "This is the earliest five-room house in this section, and was built by Job Mosher about 1762. After the Revolution, Elihu Akin occupied this house to the time of his death"

What is now the Towns of Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, and the City of New Bedford were invaded and largely burned by the British in 1778. The raid on the then booming shipbuilding area of South Dartmouth resulted in the near destruction of the Akin family. The chance survival of the small house on Potter's Hill gave the Akins what few residents of the entire area had – a home which remained in the family until its sale to the Waterfront Historic Area League in 2003.

Dartmouth, Massachusetts was first visited and described by English explorer Bartholomew Gosnold in 1602. Settlers from Plymouth Plantation, wishing to escape the scrutiny of the First Comers and to establish their own homesteads moved to Southeastern Massachusetts. By the time of King Philip's war they had established farms and small settlements in South Dartmouth, Russells Mills, Bedford Village, at the Head of the River near Acushnet and in Fairhaven. Later the vast area of "Old Dartmouth" became the towns of Acushnet, Fairhaven, Dartmouth, Westport and the City of New Bedford.

The Russell family was among the first great landowners in the area and the Dartmouth Street land where the Akin house sits was originally part of the John Russell farm. In 1762 house carpenter, Job Mosher purchased land from the Russell's and built the house. Preliminary research on the Moshers indicates that this branch of the family left Dartmouth in 1764 and eventually settled in Michigan. According to Henry Worth the property was sold in 1767 to Jonathan Delano, Jr. After his death the estate sold in 1769 to Elihu Akin. The Akins were doing very well in the years before the Revolution and the house and land were undoubtedly purchased as an investment. Elihu's true focus was down the hill at the waterfront where he had started shipbuilding, owned the license for a tavern, a wharf at the foot of Prospect Street and built a fine home

The son of Captain John and Hannah Sherman Akin, Elihu was born on August 6, 1720. The family of Scottish descent lived for a time in nearby Rhode Island. According to family historian Robert Akin, Elihu had been a shipwright in Newport as late as 1747.

As the Revolution approached, rational arguments over independence ceased and passion took over. The war allowed payback for old slights and hurts. Not everyone wanted a war with England, which had been home. In South Dartmouth Elihu Akin had earned the public trust and had great influence. After the outbreak of war at Lexington and Concord, Tories were expelled from the town and Akin was behind the expulsion. They fled straight to the British army and offered their services. In September 1778, they returned to Dartmouth.

According to historian, Leonard Bolles Ellis, "Padanaram did not escape the attention of the British, for on Sunday, (September 6, 1778) barges loaded with soldiers were sent to that village and several houses were burned. Most of them belonged to the Akin family, who were enthusiastic supporters of the American cause, and had been instrumental in expelling Richard Shearman, Eldred Tupper, and William Castle from the vicinity. Tradition says that it was information from these men that caused the property of the Aikens to receive the special attention of the enemy. The first two named are credited with acting as pilots to the squadron."

Zephaniah W Pease in his History of New Bedford quoted several after the fact accounts. The age of the reporters explains occasional discrepancies of fact.

Statement of Perry Russell "Eldad Tupper and Joseph Castle resided in Dartmouth. They

were Tories and were driven out of town by the Akins. Captain Elihu Akin, father of Jacob, Abraham, etc., was a strong Whig, in consequence of which they joined the British and piloted them into Padanaram. They burnt Captain Elihu Akin's house and a new brig on the stocks. Inquire of Caleb Shearman. Don't know whether it was at the time Bedford was burnt or not. Perry Russell says he has seen Caleb, who says they burnt Captain James Akin's and Captain Elihu Akin's dwelling houses and a new brig on the stocks the next morning after they burnt Bedford. They went in with two row –gallies. Seth Tallman says he can remember when there were but five houses in the village but can't tell which they are."

Statement of Caleb Shearman, 80 years old, March 15, 1840 "British fleet came up the bay Saturday afternoon. Sunday morning several barges came around to Padanaram and burnt Elihu Akin's house, the father of Abram; a two-story house, standing where Akin's house now stands. Also James Akin's house, brother of Elihu and father of Justin Akin; set on fire; stood where John Rushforth, Sr. stands. Set on fire the Meribah Akin house, called the Stone House. Reuben Smith lived there, and his wife (an Irish woman) put it out several times. Also burnt a brig on the stocks ready to launch owned by Elhi Akin. Richard Shearman, reputed father of Nathaniel Shearman, and Joseph Castle and Eldad Tupper were Tories and went off with the British. The two first were pilots. (The Rushforth house is in Padanaram, next south of the southeast corner of Elm and Prospect streets)"

The Akin family lost everything except the house on Potter's Hill and surrounding land. Elihu moved his wife and children there. In 1780 Elihu Akin and James Akin received compensation funds from the Massachusetts General Court. The total amount for all of Bedford, however, was only 1,200 pounds, which did not begin to approach the Akin losses.

Another of Henry B. Worth's, circa 1908 unpublished manuscripts, Padanaram History, was transcribed in 1978 by Richard C. Mulready. The original material and the transcription are in the collection of the New Bedford Whaling Museum's Kendall Institute. The rather disjointed history has several references to Elihu Akin. It needs to be noted that the Akin family was a large one and Elihu, a child of a second marriage. These marriages had in effect given Captain John Akin two families of different generations. In explaining the division of Captain Akin's property, Worth notes, "Elihu Akin acquired the tracts that were left to Ebenezer and Joseph and built his house on the South West corner of Prospect and Water. This was burned by the English in 1778 and his son, Abraham, built the present house on the same foundation where his house had been burned. Elihu Akin lived the remainder of his life in the old house at the top of Potter's Hill and the corner of Rockland and Dartmouth streets."

The manuscript continues, "The loss by the British raids was a severe blow to Elihu Akin from which he never recovered. His wharf at the foot of Prospect Street and his ship yard and other property were burned as a retaliation for his zeal in the course of the Continental Revolution."

Akin however had won the respect of the community and for twenty years after the war, the village was called Akin's Wharf in his honor and to commemorate his early shipbuilding. By the early 1800's, however, the wealthy Laban Thatcher used his influence to rename the village, Padanaram. Still for nearly a generation the Akin's name stood for their village.

Elihu Akin's son, Joseph grew up in the house and his daughter, Julia Ann, later married an up and coming young man from New Bedford, William Canfield. He had gone whaling and then after returning to New Bedford in the dead of winter was ordered to row the ship's captain to shore. William Canfield's feet were frost bitten so badly he never went whaling again. William Canfield then published several newspapers centering on the whaling industry during the 1840's including the Register, the Morning Register, and the New Bedford Register. Later he ran a New Bedford hotel called the Sheridan in what is today the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park.

Julia Akin's son, the great grandson of Elihu Akin, became one of the great figures of the Gilded Age. Although born in New Bedford on June 28, 1855, Richard Albert Canfield must have visited his grandfather Joseph in Dartmouth and heard stories of his great grandfather's life during the Revolutionary war.

Alexander Gardiner in his biography, *Canfield: The True Story of the Greatest Gambler* states that Richard Canfield spent most of his thirteenth summer actually living with his grandmother in the Akin house. He writes: ..it was decided that the time had come for him to help support the family. An attempt to get work in Providence failing, Richard paid a visit to his grandmother at her farm in South Dartmouth and with that as a home base set out for New Bedford each day to make the rounds of the stores to see if they could use a boy. Returning each night to the old farmhouse with the story that he couldn't get work, he was gently upbraided by Grandmother Akin. Why didn't he just settle down and help her on the farm? Or ship on a whaling cruise? Young Dick laughed at the idea of farm work."

His entry in the Dictionary of American Biography, Volume II, begins "familiarily known as "Dick" Canfield to the vast sporting public who played for high stakes, art connoisseur, manufacturer, and Wall Street operator was born in New Bedford where he now lies interred." Canfield whose career might not have pleased his Presbyterian forebears, lived on a grand scale, invented a variation of Solitaire still called Canfield, collected important American furniture and was a friend of painter, James McNeil Whistler. Whistler's last portrait was of Canfield. In the 1880's he ran a great gambling house next to Delmonico's Restaurant in New York City. "This brown stone house, entered by the elect through great bronze doors put in by Canfield, extravagantly furnished, and fitted out with valuable and beautiful ancient potteries and paintings became the center of New York gambling gentry." .

In the 1890 Richard Canfield moved out of New York City to Saratoga Springs and created the Saratoga Club complete with a race track. A third casino in Newport, Rhode Island is today Canfield House known for "elegant dining in a formal Victorian

atmosphere".

At a time when a time when gambling was neither respectable nor legal, Canfield is written of as an exception to the rules, he was considered a gentleman who ran an honest house. After making a great deal of money, he devoted himself to collecting English furniture. He spent six months of each year in England and bought his finest pieces of Chippendale from impoverished members of the nobility only too happy to hand their collections over for hard dollars.

Canfield's great love was for paintings. His collection was considered the second greatest collection of James McNeil Whistler's in America. The last portrait Whistler painted was of Canfield and he called it "His Reverence". Although Canfield sold most of his Whistler's in 1914 just before his death, he kept the portrait and left it to his only son.

Richard Albert Canfield invented a variation of Solitaire "Canfield" and won the nickname "The Prince of Gamblers." He had homes in New York City and the Elmwood Section of Providence, Rhode Island. His wife, Genevieve Martin was the daughter of a shoemaker from Pawtucket, Rhode Island and preferred to live in Rhode Island. Canfield had a daughter, Grace, who visited him often in New York and a son, Howland Dartmouth Canfield.

On December 11, 1914 at the age of only 59 Canfield died after a freak accident in New York. His death received front-page coverage in the New York Times. The December 12th headline read, "Richard Canfield Killed by a Fall – Famous Gambler's Skull Fractured When He Stumbled on Subway Steps – Driven Out By Jerome – Closed Saratoga Club in 1907 – After That Was A Manufacturer with Home on Madison Avenue" The Times described him as "once the best known gambling resort proprietor in the country."

The paper went on to add, "Besides being the best known and wealthiest individual gambler in the world, Canfield was a man of many parts. He was cultured and refined in his manner and his knowledge of ceramics and paintings was real and reliable. He possessed a fund of general information that made him a ready talker on almost any subject. Thus, with his calling and character, he was an unusual figure."

"Canfield acquired a wide reputation as an art connoisseur, his judgment in ceramics and paintings being recognized everywhere. His collection of ancient vases, bas-reliefs, and pottery of all kinds attracted attention wherever it was exhibited. He made the second largest collection of Whistler paintings in America. It was sold to M. Knoedler & Co. last March for a price in the neighborhood of \$300,000."

New Bedford's *Morning Mercury* ran its own front page report on December 12th, with the headline - "Richard Canfield Killed by Fall – Gambler, Who Made Millions at His New York and Saratoga Clubs Born in City and Spent His Boyhood Here – Probably Will Be Buried Here"

“His fad was art. Indeed it was more than a fad with him. It was the one thing in his life outside of his family that he really enjoyed. He was a connoisseur. In his home in Providence he had one of the finest collections of paintings in this country.”

“To one who understood art or who was capable of giving intelligent ear, Mr. Canfield would talk by the hour of his paintings – of those that he would like to possess and of those that he believed had been accepted by the world at a false valuation. He knew every school of painting and had his own ideas concerning its merits and demerits.”

Richard Canfield is buried in New Bedford's Oak Grove Cemetery. In 1930 Alexander Gardiner published his biography, *Canfield: The True Story of the Greatest Gambler*. Canfield was perhaps the greatest and most intriguing figure produced by Dartmouth and New Bedford. The survival and restoration of his mother's girlhood home should reawaken interest in a sadly obscured portion of area history.

In 1921 the Akin House became a part of film history as a location for *Down to the Sea in Ships*. The silent film classic clearly shows the condition of the Akin house in 1921. The house is called the “Old Homestead” and appears in a late sequence of the film. The film's hero, actor, Raymond McKee enters through a gate at the rear of the property. He studies the house, walks to it and sits on the rear steps. A barn and shed are visible to the right of the house. The dormer is present. The film provides the only photographic evidence of the barn and shed. It also provides visual evidence of early twentieth century landscaping and the presence of a wall and gate on the rear property line.

The Akin House is described in the official program for the film's premiere on September 25, 1922.

“The Old Homestead – The house is more, than two hundred years old, and the sag in the roof has been there for a century. During production an elderly woman told Mr. Clifton of having played in the house when she was seven years old and in turn of hearing her grandmother tell of using the house for a play-ground at the age of seven/ It may be interesting to note that this is the birthplace of the late Eugene Canfield, the noted gambler and sportsman.”*

*This is incorrect **Richard** Canfield was the son of Julia Akin; however, he was born in New Bedford. There is documentation of extended visits to his grandmother at the Akin House.

Down to the Sea in Ships contains rare footage of a whaling voyage filmed on the Wanderer and the Charles W. Morgan. The whaling footage is considered the best ever filmed and among the rarest. The height of the New Bedford whaling industry was the mid-nineteenth century long before film was available. Portions of the film were regularly shown at the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

The romantic plot is set in 19th century New Bedford and onboard a whaling ship. Other film locations included the Seamen's Bethel, the Weston Howland house in Fairhaven,

the Apponegansett Meeting House, the W. A. Robinson oil refinery and the New Bedford wharfs. Both whaling ships, Charles W. Morgan and the Wanderer were used to film the whaling voyage.

The film was financed by New Bedford residents who formed the Whaling Film Corporation. Director Elmer Clifton was an assistant to the legendary D.W. Griffith and went on to have his own distinguished career. The film made Clara Bow a star. Technically it was her second film second film; however all of her scenes were cut from her first film. The lead was played by Raymond McKee. He later became a scrimshaw artist and collector. . His son donated his father's collection to Mystic Seaport.

Down to the Ships in Ships was released nationally on March 4, 1923 after its world premiere at New Bedford's Olympia Theater. Recently the film achieved new life as a meticulously restored DVD. An original print is at the UCLA Film Preservation Library in California.

In 1922 the house was filmed as "The Old Homestead" in the silent movie, *Down to the Sea in Ships*. Filmed from the rear, the footage gives us valuable confirmation on the appearance of the Akin House at that time.