

A History of the Bell Inn

By W. Eugene Goodrich

Like Keillor House, 'The Bell' is one of the oldest stone buildings still standing in New Brunswick. It was most likely built sometime between 1811 and 1821, but there was once a Dorchester legend that it is much older than that, predating the British conquest of Acadia. According to the legend, fur-hungry freebooters from the New England colonies built the core of the building, perhaps as early as the 1690s, to serve as a small fort from which to carry on their illicit trade with the Miq'mac and Acadians. However, there are several reasons for thinking the legend was just that. We know about it only because of a letter written in 1943 by Cyril G. M. Chapman, a Dorchester magistrate and antiquarian, to Dr. J. Clarence Webster, one of New Brunswick's finest local historians. Among many other things, Webster was the man responsible for restoring Fort Beauséjour and getting it established as a national park. He also had family connections in Dorchester and was very interested in its early history. Although Chapman believed the story to be basically true, he also admitted that "how much is fact and how much is fancy of course I do not know as we have found it impossible to verify or prove false very much of it..." His caution was well founded. There is no documentary evidence whatsoever for a structure of this date, and considerable evidence that it was, in fact, built later. Indeed, even if there had been a building on this site during the French period, it would have been destroyed along with all the other houses in this area during the Acadian expulsion in 1755-57. During the restoration of the building in the 1970s archeologists looked in vain for signs of an earlier construction. The staff of the Historical Resources Administration in Fredericton then undertook an exhaustive search of the deeds of sale preserved in the Westmorland County Land Registry Office to trace the ownership history of the land on which the 'Bell' sits. What follows here is based on what they found, together with my own researches, which were greatly aided by materials collected by Ed Bowes.

The land was part of a grant received by Thomas Keillor in 1786 and promptly sold to his brother, John, in 1787. When Dorchester began to attract settlers after the county court was moved here in 1801-02, John sold off several smaller parcels of it. The one we are interested in went to a Thomas Carter by a deed of sale dated November 20, 1811. Carter, a cousin to John Keillor, was a farmer who was important enough to hold a number of parish offices in Dorchester, to where he moved from Sackville in 1795. There is no mention of a building on it, but Keillor reserved twenty-five square rods (272.25 square feet) for a cobbler's stall. Apparently, he planned to rent it out to a local cobbler, but there is no evidence as to who the cobbler was, or if a cobbler's stall was ever built. Almost certainly, the cobbler was not Keillor himself, although it could have been his oldest son, John Junior, or a hired man. By a deed that was never recorded, Carter sold his lot to a James Hamilton, identified in a census of 1820 as a stonecutter. Hamilton somehow also acquired the small parcel meant for a cobbler's stall—again there is no record of the transaction—and by a deed dated January 29, 1821 he sold both of them to *James* Carter, one of Thomas' nine sons. This time, the deed specifically mentions

“twenty-five square poles or rods *together with a good and sufficient stone house thereupon.*” This is the first mention of a building in the record, and it seems to indicate that it was erected sometime between 1811 and 1821—let’s split the difference and say about 1815 or so—by the stonecutter James Hamilton, who, for all we know, may also have been a cobbler.

James Carter bought the land and the building for £400, a considerable increase over the £100 for which John Keillor had sold the land ten years earlier in 1811—another piece of evidence that there was no building on it at that time. In 1823 Carter sold both land and building to his brother-in-law, Shepherd Frost, for £370, representing a loss of £30. In the deed by which he bought the property from Hamilton, James Carter is identified as a ‘gentleman’. In the deed transferring it to Frost he is identified as an innkeeper. From this we can conclude that the ‘Bell’ first served as an inn in 1821, or soon thereafter, and that it was not very profitable. This is also suggested by the fact that Frost, who is identified as a carpenter in a deed by which he bought a small plot of land from John Keillor in 1823, didn’t stay in the house for very long. Instead, he mortgaged it to Edward Barron Chandler for £150 and moved to the Miramichi. (Besides being a lawyer, Chandler held a lot of mortgages, another explanation of why he was able to build Rocklyn after only ten years of law practice.) In 1832, Frost finally paid off the mortgage and sold the house to Dr. William Wilson, a Dorchester physician and property speculator, for £205. Apparently, it had lost more than half its value since Frost bought it. About the same time, Wilson also bought the lot adjacent to the stone house from E.B. Chandler for only £20. Chandler had paid £42 for it at a sheriff’s sale, so here is at least one instance where he didn’t make money on a property.

Dr. Wilson owned the property throughout most of the 1830s, but he didn’t live in it any more than did Frost. Instead, it appears that after Frost left for the Miramichi, he leased the stone house to Coates Kinnear, and that Kinnear not only lived in it but also operated it as an inn—or perhaps more accurately as a ‘roadhouse’. Coats Kinnear’s successor, George Kinnear, who was identified as a plasterer (I don’t know if he was his son), leased it from Wilson until 1839, when he was able to buy it for £160 from a local carpenter named Brooks—who had previously bought both the house and the adjacent lot from Wilson for £300. It seems that Dr. Wilson was a bit of a real estate shark. George Kinnear was eventually able to acquire the surrounding lot as well, and by 1847 he had built up enough of an inn keeping business—and perhaps made enough improvements—that he was able to sell the works to a couple of farmers named Ambrose Hicks and David Stiles for £490. We know that George Kinnear kept an inn here because he was identified in the deed of sale as an innkeeper, whereas he had previously been called a plasterer. After three years in partnership, in 1850 Hicks bought out Stiles for £200 and in the following year, for £450—in other words for a bit of a loss—he sold everything to Albert J. Smith, the up-and-coming Dorchester lawyer who was just about to win his first seat in the legislature and take on E.B. Chandler and the so-called ‘Family Compact’ of old Loyalists who were allegedly running the province in their own

interest. Later, of course, Smith was noted for briefly becoming premier and delaying New Brunswick's entry into Confederation by about one year.

Although Hicks and Stiles were both identified as yeomen (i.e. farmers) in the deed by which Stiles sold out to Hicks, it seems most likely that the house was nonetheless still being run as an inn until Hicks sold it to Albert J. Smith. I assume this to be so because in the deed transferring it to Smith, Hicks is clearly identified as an innkeeper. I will speculate on what Smith did with it in a moment, but first let's talk about the name of the place. Today, everyone knows it as the 'Bell Inn', but it turns out that it was not called the Bell Inn all the time it actually was an inn. Indeed, it may never have been called the Bell *Inn* until it was restored in the 1970s. The only written evidence we have for the name comes from Magistrate Cyril ('Cy') Chapman, and his only source was his grandmother. In his letter to Dr. Webster, Chapman wrote, referring to a time when "a man by the name of Kinnear ...ran an inn there," that "my grandmother has told me that she remembers that it was known as 'The Bell *House*' and that there was a large flat bell suspended over the door and that it used to creak and rattle all night when the wind blew." In an article published in the March 28th 1950 issue of the Sackville *Tribune-Post* Chapman repeated the story with minor, but perhaps significant, differences in detail. "Years ago a very old lady told me that she well remembered the Bell *Inn* and that a very large wooden bell was suspended over the entrance and that on a stormy night the slumbers of all the near neighbours were greatly disturbed as it swayed back and forth and creaked and groaned on its hangers."

Oral tradition is not generally the most reliable source of detailed information, but this one is probably more sound than most, because Cy Chapman's grandmother would have been the right age to have seen the sign herself. According to genealogist Edith Gillcash, Cy was born in 1860—he was 90 when the article in the *Tribune* was published—so there is no reason to think his granny didn't know what she was talking about, and every reason to believe that the word 'Bell' was in the name of the establishment. But there is an interesting discrepancy between the 'Bell *House*' that Chapman remembered in 1943 and the 'Bell *Inn*' he recalled in the *Tribune* article of 1950. Both terms were used in the 19th century, often interchangeably, but there was a certain implication when an inn was referred to as a 'house', although not the one you may be expecting. 'House' was short for 'house of entertainment', an American term that was also commonly used in early New Brunswick to designate an inn or roadhouse of modest pretensions. The original distinction between an inn and a 'house of entertainment' was that a house of entertainment didn't have a licence to sell hard liquor. However, that soon became a distinction without a difference, as the liquor was simply offered for free—and the price of the meal adjusted accordingly. Essentially, a house of entertainment, or roadhouse, was a private home that offered hospitality to travellers as circumstances permitted, much like a bed and breakfast.

That 'The Bell House' or 'The Bell Inn' was a modest establishment at best during the years before it was sold to Albert J. Smith is suggested not only by the low and

often decreasing selling prices—£300-£400 was no more than would have been paid for any substantial house—but also by the fact that there were two much larger and classier inns in Dorchester during this period that would have drawn off most of the well-heeled clientele. The first was the ‘Dorchester Hotel’—the term ‘hotel’ was just then becoming common for the larger establishments—built about the same time as the ‘Bell’ by a Harry Cornwall and acquired in 1825 by John Hickman, an Irish immigrant who started his new life in Dorchester as a cobbler. By the 1830s it was known as ‘Hickman’s Inn’ and from 1836 until at least 1845 it was the Dorchester stop and overnight stay for one of the stagecoach lines that ran between Saint John and Amherst. Then, shortly before 1838, Andrew Weldon built the ‘Weldon Hotel’ just across the street from the ‘Bell’. (It was later converted to a store and still stands as the ‘Payzant-Card’ building.) Cy Chapman had information that “at the time of its erection, over a hundred years ago, this was considered to be the last word in hotel construction and one of the finest in the Maritimes.” From 1838 to sometime in the early 1850s it was the stagecoach stop for the rival line that put the first one out of business.

With this kind of competition, the ‘Bell’ could only have been the first choice for those on a budget—or at best an overflow for the two larger hotels—unless it was gussied up to attract a premium clientele. But in that case it wouldn’t have been owned by speculators or leased out to plasterers and farmers. So, my conclusion is that, whether it was called ‘The Bell House’ or the ‘Bell Inn’, during the period before 1851, it was an ‘entry level’ hostelry, and probably none too profitable for its owners.

What Albert J. Smith did with it is a bit of a puzzle. He had not yet acquired ‘Woodlands’, his well-known mansion of a later period, and he was just getting started in his legal and political career, so he may have lived here. But I am pretty sure he was never an innkeeper, and there is no record I know of to suggest the house was occupied by anyone else during his ownership. One indication that he may have lived here and made some small improvements to the house is the fact that in 1858, seven years after he bought it from Hicks for £450, he sold it to William Hickman, a son of John Hickman, for £525, making a profit of £75. Of course, it was not unknown for property holders (even if they were lawyers) to profit from a sale having made no improvements, but in this case it is less likely, as Hickman was one of Smith’s most enthusiastic political supporters and a sharp businessman in his own right. Years later, when he had become one of Dorchester’s biggest ship builders, during election campaigns he would send his workers out to heckle candidates who opposed Smith. It is hard to believe that Smith would have failed to give such a good friend value for money.

Whatever the case during the Smith years, the ‘Bell’ was definitely an inn for perhaps a dozen years under Hickman’s ownership. However, it was no longer called ‘The Bell’, but rather ‘Hickman’s Hotel’. This is a little confusing because William Hickman had inherited ‘Hickman’s Inn’, also sometimes called ‘Hickman’s Hotel’, from his father, John Hickman, in 1850. But in 1856, a full two

years before he bought the 'Bell', he sold it to Harry Wilbur. After that it was known both as 'Wilbur's Hotel' and the 'Dorchester Hotel'—until 1895 when it was torn down to make way for the much grander 'Windsor', which unfortunately fell victim to the wrecker's bar in 1956.

We know that Hickman called his new establishment 'Hickman's Hotel' from a description of a stagecoach trip that newspaper owner and local historian W.C. Milner took from Amherst to Moncton in 1860. Milner tells us that the driver changed horses at Hickman's Hotel in Dorchester, and he could not have meant the hotel across the road, as that had been sold to Wilbur four years before. This is the first mention of the 'Bell' (now 'Hickman's') as a stagecoach stop, although stagecoaches had been coming to Dorchester since 1835. Thus, at the risk of marring a good story, I have to inform you that, according to the only evidence we have, the 'Bell' was indeed once a stagecoach stop just as fond local lore would have it. But it was not one for very long, and when it was, it was not called 'The Bell'.

This raises the question of why William Hickman sold the bigger hotel only to buy the 'Bell' two years later. There is no documentary evidence on this, but we know that he was an ambitious, entrepreneurial man – as I said, he later went on to become one of Dorchester's leading ship builders—so perhaps he wanted to raise some capital, which he would have done if, as is most likely, he sold the hotel for more than he paid for the inn. This would have given him the money to buy into the stagecoach line, which he seems to have done shortly before 1858. Quite possibly, he didn't want the bother of running the bigger establishment at the same time as his stagecoach business, especially since the 'Bell' was more than adequate for this.

It may have been the stagecoach business that prompted Hickman to make renovations and additions to the building. To judge from its architecture, the side ell, which once served as a kitchen, dates from this period. This would be confirmed if a story that a local lad told the staff of the Historical Resources Administration is true, that a coin dating from the late 1850s was discovered in the foundation during the restoration of the building. A number of outbuildings were added, including a stable (if there was not one there before) and over the years the property grew into quite an elaborate complex. A less appealing touch, at least to preservationist tastes, was the plaster coating Hickman laid over the stonework of the original part of the house. It was only removed during the restoration.

Exactly how long William Hickman operated the building as Hickman's Hotel is unknown, but it is unlikely to have been much past the early 1870s. What *is* certain is that it was no longer a stagecoach stop after 1872, the year the *Intercolonial Railroad* was completed, and possibly not after December 1868, when the first train puffed its way into Dorchester. So it was a stagecoach stop for only about ten to twelve years, but, as a consolation prize, it was the only one in town during this period. By 1858, the coming of the railroad was obvious to everyone (it had been a-building since the early 1850s and was already just about to reach Sussex from

Saint John), so the longer stagecoach lines on the route between Saint John and Halifax were breaking down into shorter ones in anticipation of their coming demise.

Hickman's was the last stagecoach line to come through Dorchester, and it ran only between Amherst and Moncton, although of course there were connections with other lines at those two places. His coaches carried passengers and mail three times a week between Amherst and Moncton. They passed through Dorchester in the middle of the night on the way up to Moncton, and in the middle of the day on the way back to Amherst. Milner tells us that when the passenger load was light, a small two-horse coach was used. When it was heavier, as it was every fortnight when the English steamer arrived in Halifax, bringing travellers and immigrants into the country, a large four-horse coach, suspended on huge leather springs, rolled and tossed its way over the rough and rutted "Westmorland Great Road," as the highway was called in those days. Another witness tells us that when the big four-horse coach dashed down the hill to the Hickman stables, it was the "event of the day," and always attracted a crowd. Here, the horses were changed, the mails were picked up and delivered, the passengers were refreshed (perhaps with a brief 'wetting of the whistle' in the bar room), and meals and accommodations were offered to those staying on in Dorchester. Unless Mr. Hickman had removed it, on windy nights the guests were still serenaded by the creaking and groaning of the bell that had given the inn its name.

When the stagecoach era ended in Dorchester, Hickman turned the inn into a private residence and headquarters for his far-flung shipping and trading enterprises. It was probably this period, between the early 1870s and Hickman's death in 1903, that the 'Bell', thenceforth known simply as 'Hickman House', reached the height of such magnificence as it ever had. This was not so much owing to its architectural splendours, which remained rather modest, as to its fine furnishings and refined social life. It is said to have been filled with high quality mahogany furniture, silver and plate—the fruit, no doubt, of Hickman's commercial contacts in Boston, New York and other centres of sophistication—while the grounds, although small, were filled with an impressive array of flowers and shrubs. All in all, the house was a worthy setting for the frequent gatherings of Dorchester's social elite, even if it *was* rather small in comparison to E.B. Chandler's *Rocklyn*.

That Hickman House was never considered a pretentious mansion, is reflected in its valuation at the time of William Hickman's death: \$2,500 or £625 in pre-Confederation reckoning. This was only £100 more than he had paid for it in 1858, about a 20% increase in forty-five years. Of course, Dorchester's decline following the end of the ship building boom must have affected property values, but the valuation still suggests that the renovations and additions were not really that grandiose. True to its modest beginnings, Hickman House reflected quiet good taste, rather than vulgar ostentation. And this was not because Hickman was too poor to afford a bigger house. He is said to have left an estate worth \$250,000, more

than five times that of Thomas Keillor, John's prosperous farmer-merchant son and the heir of Keillor House.

William's only son and heir, Charles, inherited the house from his mother, but he was not the businessman his father was—nor was Dorchester the same thriving community—and over the next decades it became more and more obvious that it had seen better days. By the 1920s, Hickmans no longer lived in it, but rented it out to tenants. (Charlie's wife owned it until 1948.) Two of the tenants were Fred C. Bowes, chief keeper of the Maritime Penitentiary, and his sister, Grace. They were the grandfather and great aunt of Ed Bowes, who supplied me with much of this information. Ed's father, Russell Bowes, grew up in the house before moving over to 'The Keillor' in the early 1940s.

Russell had a bit of a tragic tale to tell about the house, or at least tragic to anyone interested in Dorchester's history. There is a safe built into the foundation where the restaurant kitchen is today, and it was once filled with records from William Hickman's shipbuilding and import-export business. One fine day, sometime in the late 1920s or early 30s, Charlie Hickman told Russell to clean out the safe and burn all the old junk. Being just a young lad, Russell was in no position to argue. He did as he was told, and regretted it the rest of his life.

Besides the Bowes family—Fred lived here until his death in 1946—there were other tenants in the east ell during the 30s and 40s. One of them was the Shepody chapter of the I.O.D.E. During the mid 1930s Russell Bowes had a small confectionary shop. In 1948 Charlie Hickman's widow sold the house to Margery Cumming and Albert Filmore for \$1—in other words she gave it to them. I don't know what the relationship was between the new owners and Mrs. Hickman, but if they were not friends Mrs. Hickman must have had the kindest of hearts. It is impossible to believe the property was completely valueless at the time, although a description in the *Moncton Times* that appears to have been written in the mid 1940s does say that the "outbuildings are today gray from lack of paint, slanting and falling for lack of repairs." Miss Cumming had a beauty shop nearby and also ran a small restaurant in the 'Bell'. Garfield Spence, who had a general store across the street to the north, said in an interview that he gave to me and Judy Morison shortly before he died that there was also a small bar in it during the late 40s and early 50s.

By the mid 1960s the building had fallen into disrepair, although there were still tenants in it, including at one point, I believe, a dentist. Fortunately, the Westmorland Historical Society was up and running by this time and, after accomplishing wonderful things with the Keillor House, it began to look wistfully at the 'Bell'. At the Society's urging, the New Brunswick government came on side and, perhaps impressed by the work on Keillor House—and maybe even a little ashamed at having let the Rocklyn covered bridge fall down the year before—in 1976 it bought the property from Marjory Cumming's estate. With the help of a Canada Works Grant, restoration proceeded apace under the general direction of the

Historical Resources Administration in Fredericton and an official grand opening was held on June 28, 1980.

There was considerable discussion over how the building should be used. Suggestions included a folklore research centre, an archive for historical records and a display space for handicraft skills. In the event, however, Sylvia Yeoman and her daughter, Katie, opened a small but very successful tearoom in the south annex. In 1985 or thereabouts, the tearoom was expanded into the rest of the house and taken over by David McAllister and Wayne Jones who turned it into one of “the” places to eat in Canada. In an act of perhaps dubious generosity, about 1986 the New Brunswick government sold the building to the Westmorland Historical Society for the back taxes on it and we have been maintaining it ever since, sometimes with great difficulty. But that’s another story.