

THE BLACK HORSE TAVERN

By Ellen Knight¹

It was a landmark in the area for about a century and a half, a stopping place for stagecoach travelers, a meeting place; it even once gave its name to the village that turned into Winchester – it was the Black Horse Tavern.



For about a century, from the 1740s (or earlier) to 1835, the Black Horse Tavern operated as a hostelry on Main Street not far from the juncture with Washington Street. In the 1790s it was on the stagecoach routes from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Portland, Maine, and until the railroad arrived to provide a different stopping point, the area was frequently called Black Horse Village.

The history of the tavern goes back to the time when much of what is now Winchester was part of Woburn. In 1724, William Richardson purchased two parcels of land from members of two of Winchester oldest families, the Converses and Richardsons. The southern boundary of his new lot lay along the line between Woburn and Charlestown (later the boundary between Woburn and Medford).

Nathaniel Richardson, who researched the tavern history in the late 19th century, wrote that, "It is positive that while William Richardson owned the estate, from 1724 to 1728, the Black Horse Tavern was built."²

Since it was first described as a "mansion house," the building may not have begun its existence as a tavern, but by the time of David Wyman it definitely was such. Wyman acquired the property in 1743 and was described as "innholder" in his will of 1750. The property then included the house, barn, shed, and 34 acres of land.

It may have been Wyman who named his establishment "Black Horse Tavern." The name appears in a 1754 deed for a part of the property inherited by his brother James.

The property passed through many hands. It also changed size. When Joseph Pierce sold "a place known as the Black Horse Tavern" in 1768, it contained 53 acres. In 1806 it was up to 80 acres.

During the Revolutionary War, the tavern was owned by Noah Wyman. It was surely a place in which the locals congregated to talk over the news. However, Richardson dispensed with one story of George Washington stopping at the tavern by calling it "a wholesale fabrication. George Washington or his shadow never honored Woburn with his presence."

Henry Chapman in his *History of Winchester* tells another story, stating that “the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, meeting at West Cambridge (Arlington) on April 18, 1775, adjourned to meet the next day at the Black Horse Tavern in South Woburn.”³ As other sources say the Committee met in Cambridge after the fighting in Lexington and Concord and as Chapman does not give a source, his story is unverified. A tavern in Arlington was also called the Black Horse Tavern.

According to Richardson, the tavern continued to pass from one owner to another. Wyman Weston acquired it in 1806. The tavern was popular and largely patronized while he was owner, but in 1827 “he experienced religion and stopped selling liquor from the bar of his hotel.”

The next innkeeper, Joshua Davis, “was a high liver and a frequent patron of his own bar,” wrote Richardson who heard stories from Davis’s nephew. Through Davis’s time, Richardson said, the tavern had a sign which swung from the corner of the house, later from a post, and later from an elm tree (which reportedly stood on what is now the southerly corner of Black Horse Terrace).

Davis also had a golden ball mounted upon a post, south of the house. Richardson wrote that Davis said, “The golden ball is for my city friends, and the Black Horse for my country friends.”

Davis died in 1835, the year the railroad came to town. “Mrs. Davis had the ability and tact to keep a good public house,” but “her husband dying without means, she had to leave the Black Horse Tavern. And from that day the house was closed to the public.”

“With his death the light and life of the Black Horse Tavern went out,” Richardson wrote. The next owner, Noah Johnson, who bought the place in 1836, reportedly took down the tavern sign. Nevertheless, the building continued to be known as the Black Horse Tavern.



The building also continued to be used for public functions. "The first singing-school taught in South Woburn of which there is any remembrance, was in the winter of 1838-39, in the hall of the once famous Black Horse Tavern," choir master David Youngman recalled.⁴ When the first church was built in 1840, the choir was able to move there. However, the church was not appropriate for rehearsals of the first Winchester band, formed about 1850, so its first headquarters was the Black

Horse Tavern.

The building continued to be a prominent one. It provided a name to the Black Horse Hose Company, located near Symmes Corner, one of the town’s four volunteer companies formed in the 1870s to run with hand-drawn hose carriages.

The property continued to pass from one owner to another, and land was sold off from the building lot. In 1892 Richardson wrote that “not a few gentlemen of worth live on Prospect St. and own lots taken out of the Black Horse estate.”

The tavern’s final owner was Preston Pond who led an unsuccessful drive to raise funds to save the building, then in disrepair, and had it torn down in 1892.

The tavern, however, was never forgotten. The name Black Horse Terrace serves as a reminder of its location. The barn survives, moved to 250 Washington St. In 1973, the insignia of the Black Horse was adopted by the Historical Society and appears on its signs and its newsletter, the *Black Horse Bulletin*. Downtown, the name was recalled at the Black Horse Bootery and more recently was given to a new Black Horse Tavern on Waterfield Road.



¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan 28, 2010. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Richardson’s 32-page history of the Black Horse Tavern is located in the Winchester Archival Center.

³ Henry Chapman, *History of Winchester, Town of Winchester*, 1936, p. 105.

⁴ David Youngman, “Singing-Schools in South Woburn,” *The Winchester Record* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1885).