

AN AMERICAN TAVERN TABLE?

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Most books on American furniture include at least some reference to a type of object described as a 'tavern table', usually a small four-legged table. Few if any of these objects, however, can be documented as having been actually used in a tavern.

One possible exception to this is an eighteenth-century table now on loan to Strawberry Banke Museum from the Warner House Association of Portsmouth. This large gate-leg table (Fig. 1) is now back in its purported original location in the William Pitt Tavern, a locally important inn built in 1766 and now part of Strawberry Banke Museum.¹ Although one might wish that there was more documentation to substantiate the modern tradition, the rather severely plain appearance of the table, its considerable wear, and some small clues raise the intriguing possibility that the table is indeed a rare example of late eighteenth-century tavern furnishings.

According to a twentieth-century tradition, published in *The Portsmouth Herald* on 3 August 1936, the object in question was 'an old American table of pre-Revolutionary days which came from the Earl of Halifax and William Pitt Tavern, which was erected in 1770 [sic]. Washington, Lafayette, and Louis Phillipe of France once sat at this table.' The table was then located in the kitchen of the McPhaedris-Warner House, where it was part of a loan exhibition entitled 'Ancestors at Home' held at that important historic house in 1936.

Twenty years later, in 1956, the Warner House Association purchased the table from Robert King Atwell, a professor at Columbia University whose family was from Portsmouth. It is not known how the table came into the possession of the Atwell family, and no record of the table before 1934 (with the exception of the inventory evidence cited below) has yet been found. There has been a long relationship between Pitt Tavern and New Hampshire Freemasons, and the Atwells were active Masons in Portsmouth, suggesting one link between the table and the Atwells.

The evidence provided by the estate inventory of John Stavers, innkeeper, taken 18 October 1797, is suggestive but somewhat inconclusive.² Stavers built the tavern in 1766 and operated it until his accidental death. The marvellously detailed room-by-room document includes two entries that may refer to this table. In 'lower room No. 1' there was a mahogany table described as being '4 feet long' and valued at \$8; 'Room No. 4' on the first floor included a 'Large black walnut table 5 feet' valued at \$3.50. The table in question is 3 feet 9 inches wide across the stationary leaf, and is also 4 feet 10½ inches deep with its two leaves in the open position. The table's primary wood appears to the naked eye to bear a strong resemblance to walnut (and it has been catalogued as such for years), but recent investigation, confirmed by microanalysis, indicates that the table is actually made of mahogany, with beech as a secondary wood. Thus, if an entry in the inventory does indeed correspond with the surviving table, it is probably the reference to the mahogany table '4 feet long'. This mahogany table was among the most valuable articles of furniture in the inventory, exceeded in value only by a mahogany eight-day clock (\$30), a 'four post maple bedstead on trucks with Canvas bottom' (\$20.50), and a 'fluted four post Canvas bottom bedstead of Cherry tree/new' (\$10).



1. Gate-leg table, probably Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1770-1800. Mahogany with beech side rails. Height 30 in.; width 45 in.; depth $19\frac{3}{16}$ in.; depth open $58\frac{1}{2}$ in. Owned by the Warner House Association, Portsmouth. Strawberry Banke Museum (L1987.3)

The table is a functional object that shows evidence of considerable wear and tear over the years, as one might expect from a tavern table. The large leaves are each fashioned from a single wide board and have rounded edges. The original end stretchers have been lost, and modern end rails have been dovetailed in place as reinforcements. The castors are additions, and the hinges are probably replacements.

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REFERENCES

1. The Pitt Tavern is discussed in Donna-Belle Garvin and James L. Garvin, *On the Road North of Boston: New Hampshire Taverns and Turnpikes, 1700-1900* (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1988), p. 19 and passim.
2. Rockingham County Probate Records, docket 6384.