Intoxicants not for sale

Built in 1762, the Wyman Tavern is among Keene’s most historic places, in part for having been the assembly point for 29 local militia men in April, 1775 before they marched to Lexington, Mass.

The structure served as a tavern for 40 years, which begs the question: What did the tavernkeeper serve?

Answer: In its initial years the tavern likely offered the same spirits that could be found at other taverns, including rum, cider, Black Strap (an inexpensive swill containing rum and molasses), Flip (a home-brew ale mixed with rum, sugar and sometimes egg), malt beer and brandy.

But in December 1788 Col. Isaac Wyman announced in an advertisement that he was finished with intoxicating drinks. One history of Keene praised Col. Wyman as being ‘a pioneer temperance man.’ However, in 1925, the Repertory, a local history monthly that was published in Keene, reported that there might have been another reason. Here’s the Repertory’s take on Col. Wyman’s decision: “Our investigations of the subject lead us to believe that it was not the cause of temperance per se which influenced his actions so much as the conditions which the sale of liquor on his premises brought about, as records of this particular period show that much drunkeness and disorder prevailed in public houses, especially on Sundays, causing much activity on the part of the tythingman.”*

(* A tythingman was an officer of the peace.)
Temperance and the law

The thinking in Swanzey

“From the first settlement of the town to 1830 most people believed that no harm resulted from the moderate use of spirituous liquors, and their practice was in accordance with their belief. It was believed that a person could withstand a severe cold or great heat better after having drank a limited quantity of liquor. It was used by all classes of people both on festive and mournful occasions, at the raising of buildings, at military parades, on the farm and in the shop…

“Whenever the voters of Swanzey have acted on the liquor question, the vote has always been against the licensing and sale of liquor when that has been the issue, and in favor of suppressing the sale of it; but there generally has been liquor sold in the town in defiance of law and the public sentiment of the people.”

- “The History of Swanzey, New Hampshire from 1734 to 1890” by Benjamin Read, Salem (Mass.) Press, 1892

Enforcing the law in Walpole

“In September 1901 a meeting was called in North Walpole to take action on whether officials were doing their duty in enforcing the liquor laws. There were 300 present. After some difficulty in getting a chairman and secretary, the meeting was opened to discussion. After fifteen minutes of silence the meeting was adjourned.”

A temperance pledge in Temple

“1. That we consider the use of ardent spirit as a beverage a sin against God, and an offense against the church;

“2. That we will not make any use of it except as a medicine;

“3. That we will not frequent and spend our time in those places, except when called by duty, where ardent Spirit is freely drank and sold.”


A change in economic fortune in Jaffrey

“The wayside inn, for the accommodation of the passing traveler, has fallen from its high estate through the introduction of the railroads; and from the same cause, along with the introduction of other beverages, the institution of temperance societies, and the passage of prohibitory laws, the glory of flip* has departed, and its name is almost forgotten.”

As is the case today, early settlers in Cheshire County included more than a few home-brewers. All a person needed to get started was a supply of good water, grain, hops and yeast.

As for breweries, only one shows up in the history books – the imposing Mountain Spring Brewery by the side of the Cold River in Walpole. Built in 1877, the place was big: five stories of sturdy brick. The brewers kept the product cool with 600 tons of ice. Annual output at the peak was 15,000 barrels of lager, apparently enough to encourage the Boston & Maine Railroad to build a line right up to the brewery’s loading door.

The enterprise, which employed 11 workers at its height, was hit by a couple of fires (with a wink, a town history alludes to “temperance activity” in the region), and it also went through a number of ownership changes before closing for good in 1907. There’s a lasting memento in the town’s Brewery Road. Glass bottles from the brewery – clear in color and embossed – can be found online.

In 2011 an enterprising man named Jeffrey Lyons produced a short video based on a visit to the former brewery site, where a few stone foundations remain. You can catch the video on YouTube (search for “Mountain Spring Brewery.”)
A President’s beer recipe

“Take a large Siffer [Sifter] full of Bran Hops to your Taste.

“Boil these 3 hours then strain out 30 Gall[ons] into a cooler put in 3 Gall[ons] Molasses while the Beer is Scalding hot or rather draw the Molasses into the cooler & St[r]ain the Beer on it while boiling Hot.

“Let this stand till it is little more than Blood warm then put in a quart of Ye[a]s[t] if the Weather is very Cold cover it over with a Blank[et] & let it Work in the Cooler 24 hours.

Then put it into the Cask -- leave the bung open till it is almost don[e] Working -- Bottle it that day Week it was Brewed.”

- From George Washington’s hand-written recipe for “Small Beer” – a porter made with molasses
Other varieties of drink

A cider story

“As the thrifty young orchard came to bearing, cider was the common drink, taking the place of beer in Germany and wine in France. Its market value was about fifty cents a barrel. Farmers put ten, twenty and even fifty barrels in the cellar for the year’s supply of their large families. ‘One village of forty families in Massachusetts made 3,000 barrels in 1721.’ Charles Francis Adams tells us that ‘to the end of John Adams’s life a large tankard of hard cider was his morning draught before breakfast.’”

- “A History of the town of Keene from 1732, when the township was granted by Massachusetts, to 1874, when it became a city” by Simon G. Griffin, Sentinel Printing Company, 1904

A rum story

“To provide the means of supporting its soldiers in the field, it became necessary for the State to levy taxes upon the towns. Sometimes the taxation was in the nature of raising a stated amount of specific articles, instead of money. Thus, they had a ‘beef-tax’; and in August 1781, an act was passed for supplying the Continental Army with ten thousand gallons of West India rum, of which the share assessed upon Dublin was forty-six and a half gallons. Any town neglecting seasonably to furnish its proportion, was to forfeit ‘one Spanish milled dollar or other silver or gold equivalent, for each gallon in arrears.’ Instead of the West India, ‘good New England rum, in the proportion of six quarts of the latter to one gallon of the former,’ might be furnished as a substitute.

“It appears that Dublin, for some cause, failed to furnish its proportion of the article, as the receipt of a deputy-sheriff shows the payment, at a subsequent time, by one of the selectmen, of the amount of the town’s ‘rum-tax and cost …’ “The History of Dublin, New Hampshire,” by Rev. Levi W. Leonard, printed by John Wilson and Son, Boston, 1855