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WILLIAM CONKEY

Tavernkeeper, Pelham, Massachusetts, 1772

WILLIAM CONKEY was born William McConkey on September 17, 1717 at Worcester, MA to Alexander and Margaret McConkey.* He died in 1788 in East Pelham, MA.† In or very near the year 1740, he married first Mary Young, who was born about 1720, probably in Worcester. William and Mary removed to Pelham from Worcester soon after their marriage, settling in the eastern section of town (later part of Prescott, one of five towns lost to make way for the Quabbin Reservoir). In about 1742, the “Mc” was dropped from his name, it appearing in records from that time as “Conky” or “Conkey.” Mary died at Pelham on September 9, 1754.‡ Their children were six in number, recorded at Pelham.§

[torn]jah, known to be Hannah, b. 30 Apr 1742; m. 21 Oct 1760 at Pelham, MA to John McCrelles.

Martha b. 14 Feb 1743; d. 29 Jan 1749.

[torn] daughter, known to be Margaret, b. 28 Apr 1746; m. 1 Oct 1767 at Pelham, MA to Robert Hamilton; they had at least one son, Job, rec. at Pelham.

[torn] son, known to be David, b. 11 Sep 1748; d. 31 Mar 1828 at Pelham, MA; m. 29 Apr 1773 at Pelham, MA to Sarah Hunter; at least 4 ch.

[torn] son, known to be William, b. 1 Feb 1751; m. 30 Mar 1786 at Pelham, MA to Mary Maklam; at least 5 ch.; he bought, with his father, supplies for Conkey’s Tavern from Johannet & Seaver, Boston, 11 Feb 1774.

[torn] son, known to be Alexander, b. 17 May 175[3]; d. 17 Jan 1847 at Prescott, MA; m. 11 Jun 1776 at Pelham, MA to Mary Peebles (b. 22 May 1752 at Pelham, MA; d. 1 Apr 1820 at Pelham, MA); at least 2 ch.

On November 17, 1755, at Pelham, William married his second wife, Rebekah Hamilton,†† the daughter of Thomas and Margery Hamilton. Rebekah was born at Worcester in 1727 and died at Pelham on July 3, 1811.‡‡ With her, William had seven children, recorded at Pelham:*

* Franklin P. Rice, *Worcester Births, Marriages, and Deaths* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Society of Antiquity, 1894), p. 172.

† Gravestone, Quabbin Park cemetery, Belchertown, MA.

‡ *Vital Records of Pelham, Massachusetts to the Year 1850* (Boston: Stanhope Press, 1902) [hereafter, “Pelham VR”], p. 163.

§ Pelham VR, pp. 26, 98, 162-3; and see Salome Hamilton, *The Genealogy of the Hamilton Family from 1716 to 1894* (Minneapolis: A. C. Bausman, 1894), ref. but not seen.

** Charles O. Parmenter, *History of Pelham, Mass. from 1738 to 1898* (Amherst, MA: Press of Carpenter & Morehouse, 1898), pp. 482-5, and particularly, p. 485.

†† Pelham VR, p. 98.

‡‡ Salome Hamilton, *supra*.

Margery b. 6 Dec 1756; m. 15 Nov 1780 at Pelham, MA to James Abercrombie (d. 14 Dec 1836 at Pelham, MA); at least 8 ch.
 Thomas b. 28 Mar 1758; m. (int.) 21 May 1784 at Pelham, MA to Elizabeth Paluske; at least 6 ch.
 Ezekiel b. 15 Jun 1761; m. (int.) 24 Dec 1784 at Pelham, MA to Elizabeth Thompson; at least 5 ch.
 Martha b. 1 Apr 1764; d. 21 Oct 1839 at Pelham, MA; m. (1st) (int.) 14 Aug 1781 at Pelham, MA to Micah Pratt; m. (2nd) (int.) 10 Jan 1792 at Pelham, MA to David Houston; at least 3 Pratt ch., and at least 5 Houston ch.
 John McCrelles b. 27 May 1767.
 Mary Rebekah b. 28 Feb 1771; m. (int.) 25 Oct 1786 at Pelham, MA to William Choat, Jr.; at least 2 ch.
 Joel b. 28 Oct 1773; m. (int.) 2 Jan 1796 at Pelham, MA to Molley Thompson.

In 1743, William was elected hogreeve, followed by public service as surveyor of highways, fence-viewer, and selectman. He was licensed as an Innholder in 1772.[†] The tavern was two stories high, and each floor contained only two rooms. There was, of course, also a cellar, where the liquors and cider were stored. Tavern records show that in 1769, he paid £1 for 1,000 nails, and in 1776 the town paid him £1 for conveying provisions to Revolutionary soldiers in Watertown, some 80 miles away. With his death in 1788, the tavern continued under the management of his son William.

Conkey's Tavern, located in a valley of Pelham, Massachusetts, played an important role not only in Massachusetts history, but also in the history of the United States. It is famous as the home base of Shays' Rebellion, a post-Colonial uprising that greatly affected the final form of the US Constitution and the decision to authorize a strong central government. The rebellion-related discussions that occurred within the tavern setting give some insight about the role colonial taverns played as places not only to momentarily escape life's cares, but also as sanctuaries of informed, sophisticated debate.

[T]he selectmen were Pelham's chief administrative officers, with a host of responsibilities. They had been given these responsibilities earlier that spring by the annual town meeting. In fact, however, they had been selected well before the annual meeting. Every year, at Conkey's Tavern and other Pelham watering holes, men met and discussed who was best suited to run the town. Here most of the politicking took place, and here was where basic decisions

* Pelham VR, pp. 24-5, 97-8.

† Charles O. Parmenter, *supra*, pp. 249-50. He was re-licensed regularly through the year 1784. The language of his 1772 license reads:

William Conkey of Pelham is licensed to be an Innholder Retailer and Common Victualer in his dwelling house there for one year next ensuing and the same William now here in court recognizes to ye Lord the King as principal in the sum of ten pounds and Messrs. Curtis Loomis of Southampton and Eli Parker of Amherst also came here and as sureties for the said William annexed to ye Reconsaizance prescribed for Innholders by act or law of this Province in such cases made and provided entitled an act for the Inspecting and suppressing of Disorders in licensed Houses etc.

were usually made. The annual town meeting, in most instances, just ratified the results.... Virtually every town in western Massachusetts had a similar setup.*

More often than not, Conkey's customers were his Scots-Irish neighbors from the hardscrabble hills and hollows of Pelham. Most of these families emigrated from the English-imposed hardships of Northern Ireland in 1718, settling in the frontier town of Worcester. Over the next two decades, the English Puritans and Congregationalists of Worcester burned the Presbyterian church, rioted, and otherwise made life uncomfortable, so that beginning in about 1738, dozens of Scots-Irish families moved en masse to their own new community some 45 miles west. The rock-strewn hills were good for lumbering and grazing, but not much else. Townsfolk did not include the idle rich or privileged gentry.

In 1758, William Conkey built his village home in Pelham in a remote location, one-half mile from any other building amid the FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR. The structure would later become his Tavern.† Scots-Irish families often functioned as isolated picket lines when Native American war parties were on the move. Certainly, Pelham residents were on the ramparts 160 miles west at the siege of Fort William Henry and in other campaigns, just as they would later march the 80 miles to Concord, Lexington, and Bunker Hill whenever an alarm was sounded. So when Landlord Conkey served up rum, brandy and wine from his cellar, those raising a tankard were often hard and wary veterans.

The tavern ceased operation when William Conkey, Jr. died in 1841. The abandoned building was destroyed in the 1880s. The American Museum in Bath, England bought everything having to do with Conkey's Tavern. The museum faithfully recreated the interior main room, using the original massive stone fireplace lintel, with the neatly chiseled inscription "William Conkey June Ye 21st AD 1776."



David Davies, #04-10

Conkey's Tavern
from www.arps.org/amhersthistory

* Leonard L. Richards, *Shays' Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle* (Philadelphia: 2002), p. 5.

† Charles O. Parmenter, *supra*, pp. 482-5.