

## Benjamin Shaw and the Peripatetic Peacock Tavern

Most people familiar with the Litchfield area have driven by the old Peacock Tavern on what is now Rt. 201 in Richmond. Few would know, however, that the tavern was originally Shaw's Inn, and that without moving, the tavern may have been variously in Pittston, Litchfield, Bowdoinham and Richmond. Clason's *History of Litchfield, Maine* doesn't mention the tavern but it indicates that Benjamin Shaw was an early settler of Litchfield. Clason adds that Shaw kept a "store" near the intersection of Cobbossee Stream and the north end of Pleasant Pond. A search of Census and Litchfield tax records provides some interesting facts. First, the Census of 1790 shows that Benjamin Shaw was a resident of Pittston not Smithtown Plantation as Litchfield was then known. It should be noted that in the late 1700's much of what is now Gardiner was the West Parish of Pittston. Second, a search of Litchfield tax records shows that between 1797 and 1810 Benjamin Shaw paid property taxes on both farm land and wild land in Litchfield. He did not pay a poll tax or a tax on a house or barn which indicates that he was a nonresident tax payer. The Censuses of 1790 and 1800 both give his residence as Pittston. The Census of 1810, however, gives his residence as Litchfield and for the first time shows him paying taxes on a house and barn as well as land. What evidence is there to connect Benjamin Shaw to the present-day Peacock Tavern? First, there is a short monograph written about one hundred years ago by Cora (Andrews) Webber entitled, "The old home of Benjamin Shaw, Esq. Once Shaw Inn, now Peacock Tavern." Much of her information came from David Toothaker an elderly Richmond resident who, as a boy, had lived near the Peacock Tavern. Her story seems to corroborate Clason's. She has Benjamin Shaw move his store from the water's edge up to what would become the Post Road and establish the store in his farmhouse. Benjamin, Sr. died in 1816 and Mrs. Webber has his son, Benjamin, Jr. enlarge the house into an "Inn". When the Inn was sold to Edward, "Uncle Ned" Peacock, the name was changed to Peacock Tavern. This is an interesting story, but what moves it from a story closer to being "history" is the small family grave yard behind the tavern. Here are found the graves of Benjamin, Sr., his wife Margaret (Gregg) Shaw, and one of their daughters, Christiana Shaw.

How does one explain the tavern building being in four different towns? First, title to land in this area was hotly contested between settlers and the Kennebec Proprietors. A small scale civil war was going on sometimes known as the “White Indian War.” The surveyor-husband of the famous midwife, Martha Ballard, was among those assaulted by settlers. See Alan Taylor’s excellent book, *Liberty Men and the Great Proprietors*. In short, the land was not well surveyed. Second, much of the eastern shore of Pleasant Pond (then called Cobbosseeconte Pond) was originally claimed by Litchfield. The land where Benjamin, Sr. started out on the shore of the pond was considered to be in Litchfield. When he moved east up the hill to the present tavern location he seems to have felt that at least part of this new location was in Pittston. It is clear that he continued to pay taxes to Litchfield while believing he resided in Pittston. Something changed in 1810 when the Census shows him residing in Litchfield and paying tax on a house and a barn in Litchfield. It’s almost certain that he didn’t move. In 1813 he would bury his wife on the farm which would become the site of the tavern. Litchfield Vital Records show that his wife died in Litchfield. About 1819 much of the land on the eastern shore of Pleasant Pond was transferred to Bowdoinham. In the early 1820’s this land became part of the newly created town of Richmond. For nearly two centuries the tavern has “stayed put.” It’s still in Richmond.