**Dedham Museum & Archive**

**Trivia Q&A – 03.25.2022**

**Question:** In the 1790s, the keys to this County building were often left hanging in the barroom of the nearby Gay Tavern on Court Street. What was the purpose of the keys? The answer may astound you.

**Image #1:**   
Caption: Gay Tavern, 73 Court Street. Photo by Mrs. A. R. Thayer, 1926. Collection of Dedham Museum & Archive.

**Answer:** The keys were to the cells of the first Norfolk County Jail in Dedham.  
**Image #2**  
Caption: Though the original wooden 1795 jail no longer survives, the location can be seen on this 1888 map where the house of [Mrs.] E. S. Adams is located, to the right of the Episcopal [St. Paul’s] Church. By the date of this map, the stone jail on Village Avenue had been built and is also visible. Map of Norfolk County by E. Robinson, 1888. Collection of Dedham Museum & Archive.

Naming Dedham as the County Seat in 1793 meant that county buildings needed to be erected. This included a jail. In October of 1794, innkeeper Timothy Gay deeded a parcel of land on Highland Street to the Town for the first County jail, which was built by early 1795. The first prisoner was held in the jail that February. The land was adjacent to the location of his tavern—and where the jailkeeper (his son), sometimes kept the keys after locking up for the evening; there were no guards at the jail overnight. According to records in the Archive, before 1802, the tavern was also used for prisoner overflow.

The jail was a wooden frame building that had a series of cells and one large room. It was heated by stoves on which tarred rope was boiled, which, when cooled, the inmates would pull apart for oakum (used for caulking seams and packing joints) that was then sold at market. This work continued from 8:00 a.m. through to sunset, with only one break for dinner, which consisted of salt pork, wheat, rice, beans, peas, potatoes, and molasses. The meals were prepared at the jailor’s residence and brought to the prison.

This wooden framed jail is where the convicted murderer Jason Fairbanks was held until, after the August 1801 trial, the “Goal [was] broken by [a] mob. Jason Fairbanks and others escaped.” This will be the subject of a future Trivia (there is still dispute by some as to his guilt).

On April 26, 1816, a decision was made to build a new jail, to be made of either brick or stone. Land was purchased from the heirs of Isaac Bullard on Village Avenue, around the corner from the first jail. At a cost of $15,000, a new jail was built in 1817/1818 (that was not so easily broken out of). The old wooden 1795 jail was used as a House of Correction until it was eventually razed. In 1850, the brick 1817/1818 Village Avenue jail was removed and the original section of the last jail to be built in Dedham was erected. In the future, we will publish a Trivia about this structure.

Information for this week’s Trivia is from Dedham Museum & Archives’ research files; Robert Hanson, *Dedham, Massachusetts, 1635-1890*; James Parr, *Dedham: Historic and Heroic Tales from Shiretown*; Frank Smith, *Dedham in Picture and Story*, no. 4.; J. W. Worthington, *Dedham Historical Register*, “Early Dedham Jails.”

Information about the Dedham Museum & Archive (Dedham Historical Society & Museum) is available at [www.dedhamhistorical.org](http://www.dedhamhistorical.org). For questions and comments regarding our Weekly Trivia, please call 781.326.1385 or email, [Info@dedhamhistorical.org](mailto:Info@dedhamhistorical.org). If you enjoy learning about Dedham’s history, consider supporting our efforts by becoming a member. To **Become a member and *Belong to Something Lasting***, visit [www.dedhamhistorical.org](http://www.dedhamhistorical.org).