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FOUR MILE HOUSE

Inn On Its Way Out

By Elias B. Bull

"The last stage coach left Charleston in mid afternoon. About three quarters of an hour after we left the city, the coachman blew a horn to let the tavern keeper know how many passengers he was bringing with him. Shortly afterwards we drew up in the yard of a country tavern called the Four Mile House.

"The owner, a Mr. Ellis Sutcliffe, very courteously met us as we alighted and escorted us inside. After we had washed up, we went into the dining room for our evening meal. It was well cooked and prepared for the tired traveler. It was a very well kept place and about the average for a stage coach tavern.

"In the morning, after a hearty breakfast, we again embarked on our trip to the interior.
....."

With little alteration, the above could be from the diary of any traveler during the first twelve years of the 1800s.

The Four Mile House was only one of the many stage coach taverns which were scattered along the major thoroughfares, much as motels are today.

The tavern was originally called the Six

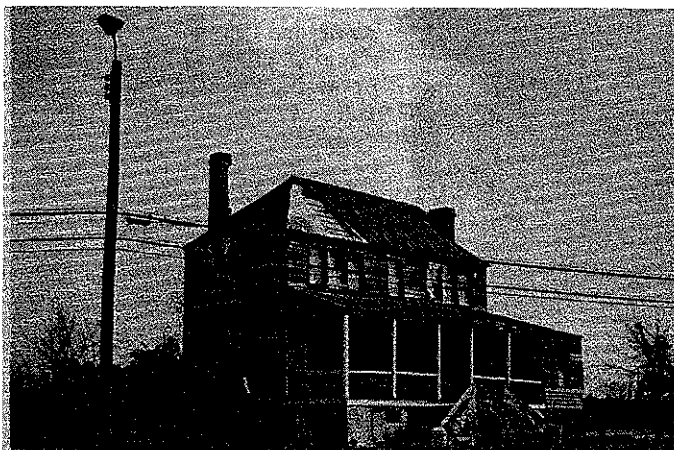
Mile House, probably due to its distance from Charleston's city limits, and seems to have enjoyed a fairly favorable reputation for a time. The first mention of it as the Four Mile House Tract is in a 1786 deed of sale from James Donovan to John Bowen. (The original Four Mile House apparently burned some time after the Revolution.)

As is the case with so many of these country taverns, the names of the owners are lost. In this case, those of only two survive: Ellis Sutcliffe was operating the tavern at the time of his death at the age of 36 on Sept. 14, 1812 and the next operators seem to have been the Fishers.

John and Lavinia Fisher were quite a pair for they led a gang of highwaymen who specialized in relieving their guests of their money and, in some cases, of their lives. Besides the Four Mile House, the Fishers also ran the Five Mile House. In due course of time, the citizens of the area became quite irate at the Fishers' doings and burned down the Five Mile House and possibly the Four Mile House as well. (If the latter was burned, it must have been rebuilt on the same spot.)

In 1820 the Fishers were convicted of mur-

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FOUR MILE HOUSE (continued)

der after the discovery of skeletons in the tavern cellar. The Fishers were imprisoned in the old Exchange building, so the story goes, while awaiting execution. John Fisher escaped, vowing to return and rescue his wife, but was recaptured on Sullivan's Island. He was said to have been very contrite and gone to his death like a Christian.

Lavinia, on the other hand, shocked the mob who had come to see her hanged by screaming as she stood on the gallows: "If you have a message you want to send to hell, give it to me; I'll carry it!"

It should be said here that taverns in those days, as a rule, were not what they are now. Most of the social and fraternal organizations met in the taverns, where food and mixed drinks were served and lodgings were provided. The country or stage coach taverns, having less competition than the city ones, were more social centers for the countryside. The latest news and gossip was spread by stage coaches to the taverns and there diffused to the people.

In spite of its prominent position during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the South, there seem to have been no real studies made of the tavern as an institution.

For example, was there such a thing as a set design or type of architecture for a tavern as there is for a hotel or motel? Or could any

Charleston's Newest Preservation Group

Charleston's newest group of history buffs, with a membership of more than 150, received its national charter April 1.

Among major goals of the local chapter of the National Railway Historical Assn. are the establishment of a rail museum and the return to the city of the historic locomotive "The Best Friend."

The first American railroad to use steam power in regular service began operations here in 1830 with "The Best Friend." The locomotive now is in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Railroads have given the group a small locomotive, two coaches and a caboose. To raise funds, excursions on steam trains are planned.

Wilbur D. Shults, a master mechanic for the Southern Railway, is chapter president. Other officers are Cole D. Walters, first vice president and national director; Louis Condon, second vice president, and Mrs. Walters, secretary and treasurer.

building be a tavern by the simple installation of a bar and/or tables?

In regard to furnishings, there is a type of table called a tavern table, specifically designed for that use. It is essentially rectangular in shape, large enough to seat two to four persons, and has a brace below the top which connects to all four legs. Yet, Dr. Anne King Gregorie, in her History of Sumter County, has a photograph of a drawing of four persons seated around a table in a tavern. The table has three legs joined fleur-de-lis style to an inverted horn-shaped table. So, was there more than one basic style of tavern table?

As to the furnishings, was the china used heavier than the regular household china, or thicker to withstand constant use, such as the china used in bus stations and hotels of 20 years or more ago? What of the furniture and table silver?

As to games, backgammon was played at these taverns and quite possibly chess and checkers. Whist and pinochle seem to have been the card games. In some of the taverns, certainly the city ones, balls were held as regular events. The country taverns usually sponsored horse races. The Quarter House had a race track near it.

In the earliest days, wines and rum were the favorite beverages. Bourbon was invented in Berkeley County in 1680 or thereabouts, but the local whiskey never really came into use in the earliest taverns. The earliest liquor laws concerned the use of rum punch and stabilized the size of bottles so the customer would not get cheated. Wine and rum continued to be the favorites until after the Revolution, when whiskey and other liquors became more readily available.

The unsettled time following the Revolution and later the rise of the railroad as a mode of travel led to the decline of the country tavern as a community center. The Civil War put an end to its existence. Its place was taken by the hotel, and now by the motel.

So there on Meeting Street Road stands one of the --- if not THE --- last of the stage coach taverns still standing within at least a 40-mile radius of the city of Charleston.

For those who do not know it, the tavern is on the east side of the road, about two miles north of the city limits in an industrial area. The roof is gone off one side and the top of one chimney has fallen off.

It would make an excellent tea room and tavern museum. Since it was in existence as a tavern for at least 60 years, the yard should yield some excellent artifacts. There seems to be room enough in the yard for parking space, or room for an historical marker: "Here stood the Four Mile House..."