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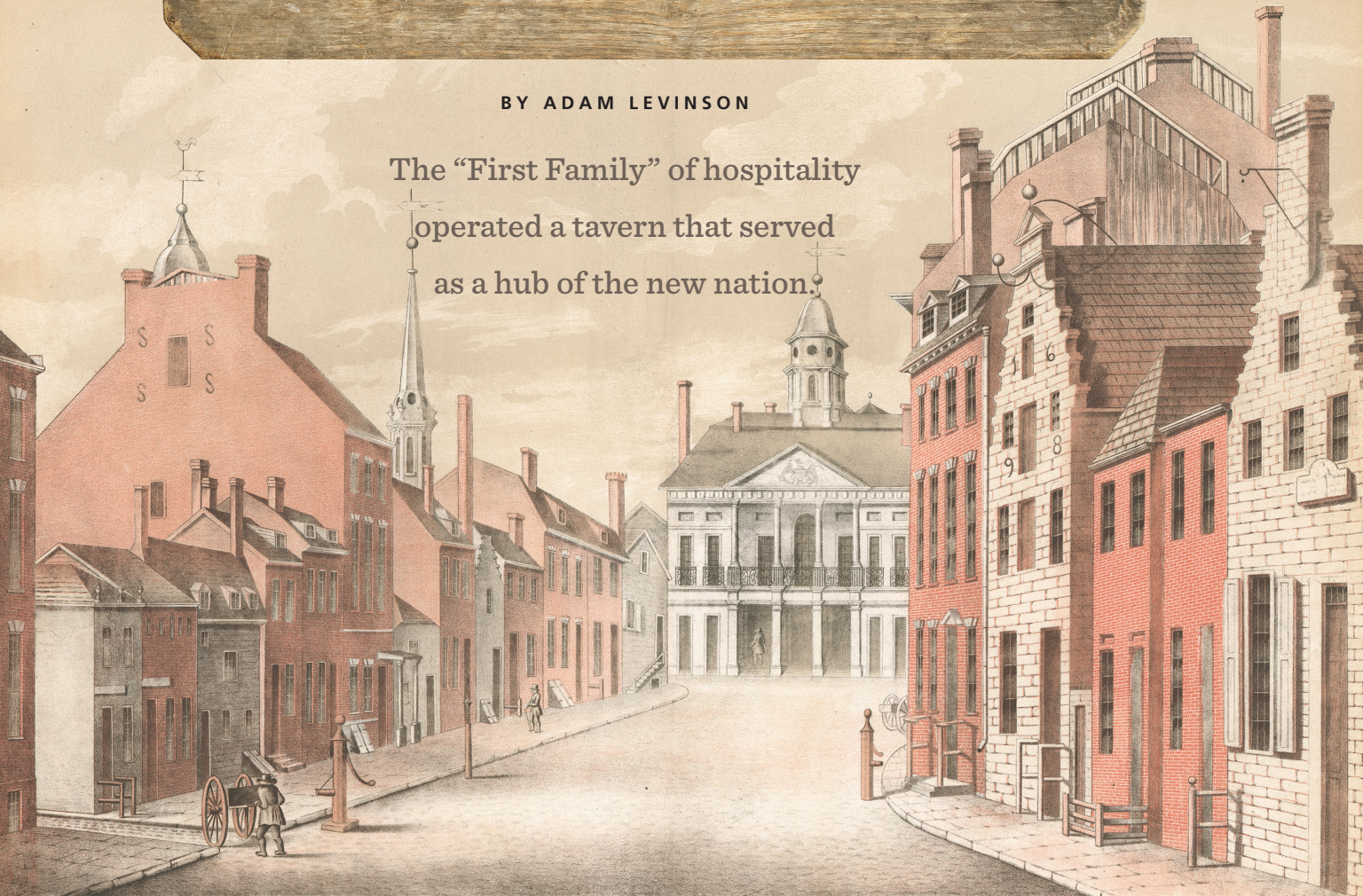
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SIMMONS TAVERN

BY ADAM LEVINSON

The “First Family” of hospitality
operated a tavern that served
as a hub of the new nation.



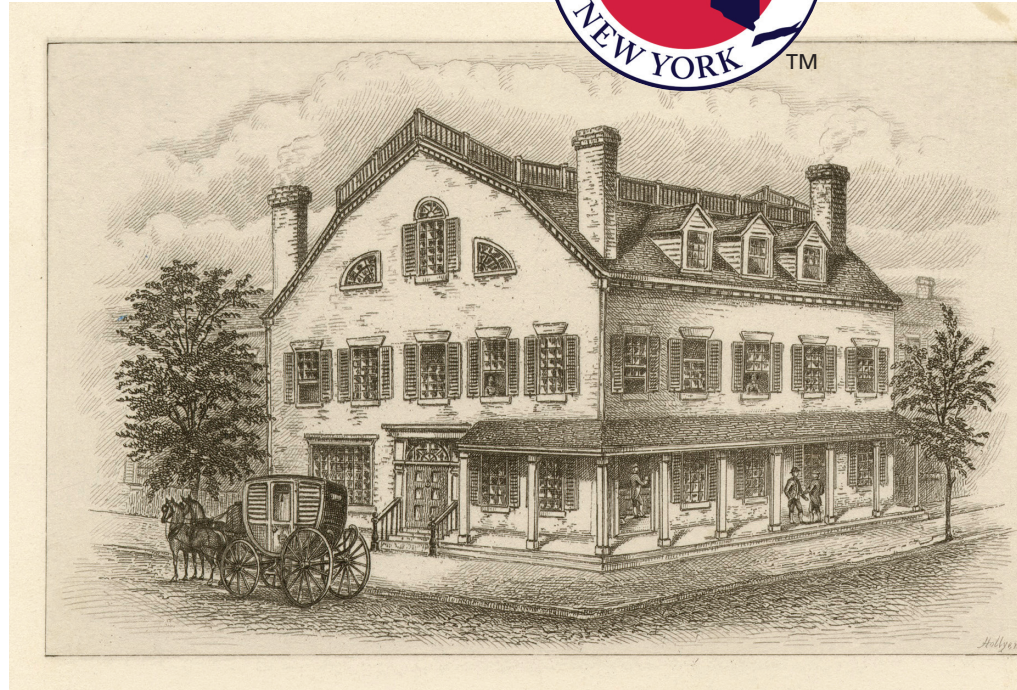
Federal Hall and adjacent buildings, 1797 | NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



The central role of taverns in early American history cannot be overstated. As public meeting spaces, taverns and inns were waystations and communication hubs, facilitating commerce, travel, and democratic engagement. When New York City served as the country's capital from 1785 to 1790, Simmons Tavern was frequented by the founding generation, due to its prominent location directly across from Federal Hall in New York City.

On the northwest corner of Wall and Nassau Streets at 63 Wall Street, Simmons Tavern was doors away from the law office and home of Alexander Hamilton and other prominent members of the New York bar. This may help explain why the New York Manumission Society was established at Simmons Tavern in January of 1785. Other organizations which regularly held meetings at Simmons Tavern included the trustees of Columbia College (formerly King's College), the New-York Society Library, the Society for Relief of Distressed Debtors, and a variety of other civic organizations. Simmons Tavern also hosted governmental and court-related functions, including juries, grand juries, city committees, and private arbitrations.

New research reveals that Simmons Tavern and Fraunces Tavern in New York formed an inter-connected network with the City Tavern and Miss Dalley's boarding house in Philadelphia. It is not surprising that the proprietors of these patriotic businesses were in fact an extended family of siblings—the Dalley, Fraunces, and Simmons families.



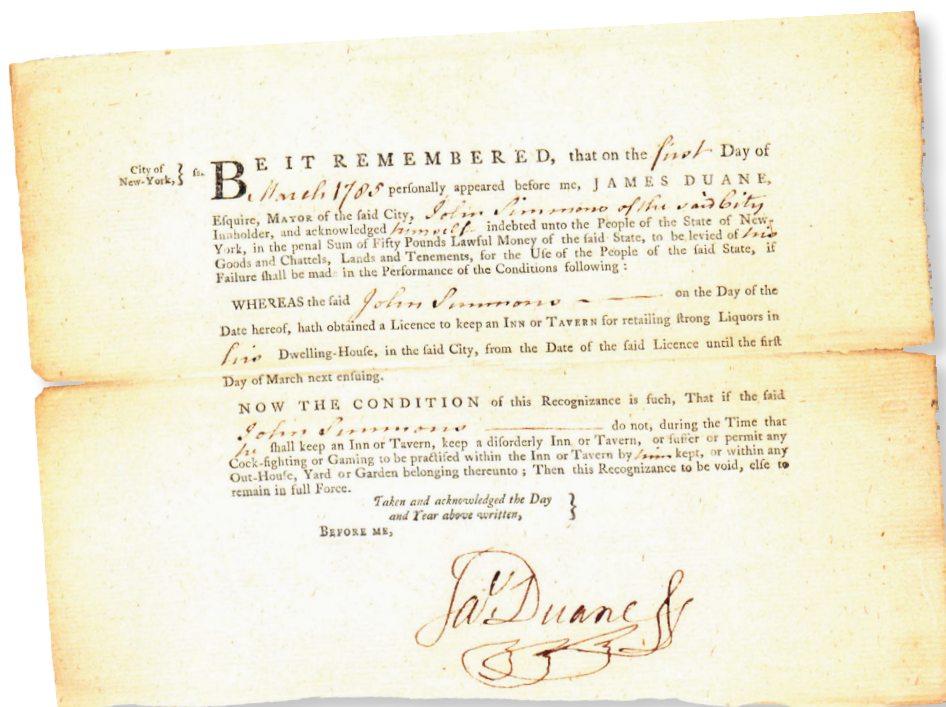
Fraunces Tavern, 1777 | NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

First Family

The extended Dalley-Fraunces-Simmons family operated several of the most important boarding houses and taverns in the late eighteenth century. Brother Gifford Dalley was the doorkeeper to the first, second, and third Congresses, when he wasn't operating City Tavern, the Merchants' Coffee House, or Dalley's Hotel in Philadelphia. Sister Mary Dalley operated a boarding house in Philadelphia, which catered to the members of the founding generation for decades. Significantly, Gouverneur Morris, Alexander Hamilton, and Elbridge Gerry boarded with Dalley during the Constitutional Convention in 1787. An historic marker application pending with the State of Pennsylvania would honor Dalley and her long overlooked Philadelphia boarding house.

Sisters Catherine and Elizabeth operated famous taverns in New York. Catherine Dalley married John Simmons, who operated Simmons Tavern. Elizabeth Dalley married Samuel Fraunces, the proprietor of the well-known Fraunces Tavern. Samuel Fraunces also served as the steward of President George Washington's household in both New York and Philadelphia.

John Simmons's name first appears in newspaper advertisements circa 1770. He originally opened his tavern under the sign of Peter Warren, a famous British admiral. It is unclear how long Simmons marketed his tavern using Warren's name. Prior to the Revolutionary War, Simmons Tavern periodically hosted meetings of the Common Council of the City of New York, the city's governing body consisting of the mayor and city



Simmons Tavern license | SERIES JN522, NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

aldermen. The minutes of the Common Council in the 1770s refer to John Simmons as an “innkeeper” and “innholder,” terms which were used interchangeably. As the City of New York reimbursed Simmons for the cost of “liquor,” it is clear that alcohol was served in his “house,” even during grand jury proceedings. Examples of official city meetings held at Simmons Tavern include jury proceedings inquiring into the death of Mary Murphy in August of 1773 and committee meetings involving city water supplies, wells, and pumps in 1775.

Revolutionary Sentiments

In 1776, John Simmons, who was born in England, served in the American Second Regiment of the New York Troops commanded by Colonel James Clinton, a private volunteer militia. Before the British captured New York City, the New York Provincial Congress authorized a raid on Fort George on August 22, 1775, to remove almost two dozen

cannons from the British fort at the “Grand Battery” at the southern tip of Manhattan. The British got wind of the raid and the warship HMS *Asia* fired its cannons on the battery, damaging the upper part of several houses in Manhattan in what became known as the “Raid on the Battery,” New York’s first military engagement of the Revolutionary War.

John Simmons and his brother-in-law, Gifford Dalley, were given leave by the New York Provincial Congress to meet with Captain George Vandeput of the HMS *Asia*. While details are sparse, it is reasonable to assume that Simmons and Dalley, the American representatives selected to meet with Vandeput, were trusted members of the community. It is unclear why Samuel Fraunces was not selected to meet with Vandeput, as Fraunces Tavern was damaged by the British cannon fire. Yet, due to his connections to the Sons of Liberty, it would not have been wise for Fraunces to voluntarily board a hostile British naval ship.

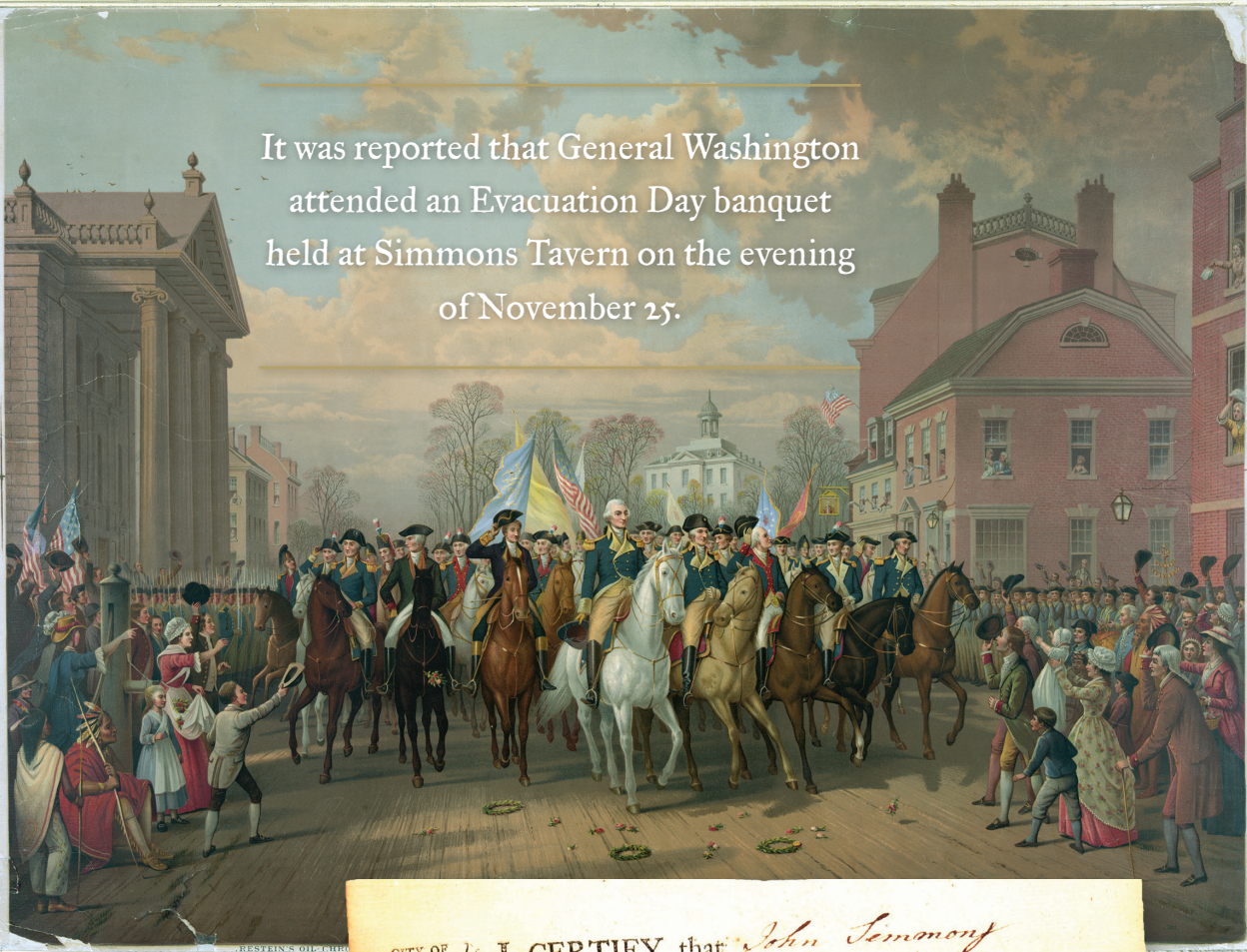
A year later, in late August, the British captured Manhattan in the Battle of Long Island. The British held the strategic port city from September of 1776 until Evacuation Day in November of 1783. During the British occupation of Manhattan, Loyalists flooded into the city, while those supporting the Revolutionary cause fled. Although there is no direct evidence of when John Simmons and his family left New York City, legal historian David G. Chardavoyne notes that “indirect evidence makes clear that they must have fled when, or soon after, the British arrived and they did not return until the fighting was over.” The Simmons family spent at least part of the war years in Philadelphia, which is further evidence of the close connections between the Simmons and Dalley families.

Simmons Tavern Reopens

Pursuant to the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War, the British departed New York City on November 25, 1783. It was reported that General Washington attended an Evacuation Day banquet held at Simmons Tavern on the evening of November 25. Consistent with this claim, newspaper reports confirm that a committee of prominent New Yorkers met at Simmons Tavern on November 19, 1783, to plan security and the protocol to receive Governor George Clinton and General Washington.

New York City’s first post-independence mayor, James Duane, was sworn into office on February 9, 1784, at Simmons Tavern. The Common Council continued meeting at Simmons Tavern through March 30, 1784, while City Hall was being repaired following the British occupation. The tavern was likely selected as the temporary replacement for City Hall

It was reported that General Washington attended an Evacuation Day banquet held at Simmons Tavern on the evening of November 25.



Above: *Evacuation Day and Washington's triumphal entry into New York City, November 25, 1783*

Right: *Receipt for Simmons Tavern license, 1785*

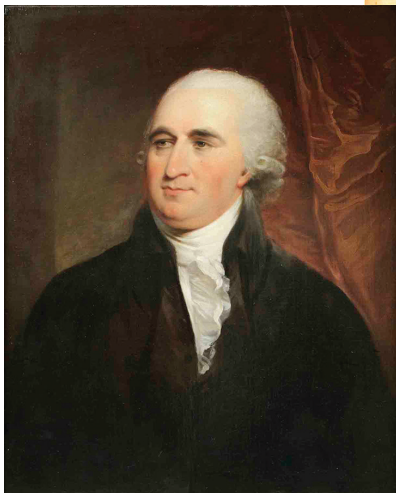
Below: *James Duane, 1805, painting by John Trumbull*

CITY OF
NEW-YORK.

I CERTIFY that *John Simmons*
hath agreed for the Excise as a Tavern-Keeper;
and hath paid for Excise, — L. 24 6 0
And for Licence, *South Ward N^o 3* 0 16 0
Given under my Hand, the *1st* Day
of *March* - 1785.

Abm. P. Lott

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due to the popularity of its owner, who has been described by contemporary historians Michael and Arianne Batterberry as a "fixture on Wall Street." The fact that Simmons Tavern was conveniently located across the street from City Hall no doubt also played a role in its selection. City records reflect payments for "public dinners" to celebrate American Independence on July 4th and Evacuation Day on November 25.

By 1788, New York City contained 330 licensed taverns, yet Simmons Tavern was, according to Chardavoyne, "one of the city's most popular establishments and its owner one of the city's most prominent tavern keepers." John Simmons even appears in Washington Irving's letters to his friend Henry Brevoort.

Perhaps the most consequential meeting held at Simmons Tavern was on January 25, 1785, when the New

Be it remembered that this 20 day of Nov 1790
 Personally appeared before Nicholas Bayard Esq Alderman
 of the out Ward of the City of New York West Brancher Junr
 (with whom I am, and for many years have been, well
 acquainted and that he is worthy of credit and good faith
 and do believe that what is set forth in the above
 memorial. to be true) and being sworn on the Holy Evangelia
 of Almighty God declares that what is set forth in the
 said memorial is just and true to the best of his
 calculation knowledge and belief

22
 MTS
 Inquisition undertaken and taken at the dwelling house
 of John Simmons Innholder situated in the North Ward of the
 City of New York on Monday the thirteenth day of September in the
 year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety before
 Robert Boyd Esquire Sheriff of the City and County of New York
 by virtue of a writ of the People of the State of New York to the said
 Sheriff directed and to this Inquisition annexed to enquire of
 and upon certain matters therein contained specifically the
 oath of John Young, Thomas A. Bailey, Thomas Phelps
 William G. Forbes, A. Schuchard, M^r Cullum, William
 Wilson, Samuel I. Whitcomb, Garret Coff, Robert Nichols
 Thomas Persell, James Cogges and Henry Burdett all
 of us a good and lawful citizen of the County of the aforesaid
 Sheriff who say upon their oaths that the said Delinquent
 in the said writ named hath sustained Damages by occasion
 in the said writ contained besides his Costs and Charges by him
 about his said writ that he has expended the fifty four pounds
 thirteen shillings & three pence — and for the said Costs
 and Charges to his personal testimony whereof all the
 said Thomas Persell, James Cogges and Henry Burdett the
 said Sheriff and I, the undersigned have known the said
 said and that the day and year above said

John L. Whitcomb
 Garret Coff
 Robert Nichols
 James Persell
 James Cogges
 William Burdett

John Young
 Thomas A. Bailey
 Thomas Phelps
 William G. Forbes
 A. Schuchard
 M^r Cullum
 William Wilson
 Samuel I. Whitcomb

Activity at the tavern included a
 host of court-related proceedings.

THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL

York Manumission Society was established. The Manumission Society met quarterly at Simmons Tavern for many years, including in April of 1787, the month before the Constitutional Convention convened in Philadelphia.

Mundane Meetings

Other civic and business meetings held at Simmons Tavern were decidedly more mundane. From 1784 until John Simmons's death in 1795, an enormous variety of meetings took place at the tavern. Newspaper advertisements and legal notices indicated that the activity at the tavern included meetings of the trustees of Columbia College, the tax assessors for the City of New-York, the Regents of the University of the State of New-York, the trustees of the New-York Society Library, the Society of Distressed Debtors, Whig members of the

Election inspectors for the election of delegates to the New York Ratification Convention met at Simmons Tavern in April of 1788.

Episcopal Church, and the faculty of the College of Physicians of New-York, along with a host of court-related proceedings.

Not surprisingly, Simmons Tavern also played a role in the ratification of the Constitution in New York. Election inspectors for the election of delegates to the New York Ratification Convention met at Simmons Tavern in April of 1788. In 1789, Simmons Tavern was again used as temporary quarters for City Hall when the newly re-named Federal Hall was being renovated for the new federal Congress.

After John Simmons's death in 1795, Catherine Simmons continued to operate the tavern. She later relocated to Washington, DC, where she lived with her eldest son, William, until her death in 1818. Sadly, Simmons Tavern was torn down years ago. Thankfully, Fraunces Tavern continues to operate today as a restaurant, pub, and museum at its iconic location at 54 Pearl Street in Manhattan.

Focal Point

In an age before electronic communications, taverns provided a mechanism to share breaking news, conduct business, and exchange political views in an emerging democracy. Taverns were a focal point, according to



Wall Street, showing Simmons Tavern in the foreground, 1784

historian Benjamin L. Carp, for “political discussion, for social clubs, and for meetings of all kinds.” They also served as transportation hubs, “key nodes in Atlantic networks of communication.” It is no accident that stage coaches between New York and Philadelphia regularly departed from the “stage-office” across from City Tavern. Tickets and schedules for stage coaches and packet boats were available at the stage office (or designated boarding houses), depending on the particular stage line.

Historians have long recognized the key role played by taverns and

boarding houses during formative periods in American history. Archival records confirm that delegates to the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention were very familiar with Simmons Tavern and Fraunces Tavern in New York. City Tavern and Miss Dalley’s boarding house in Philadelphia similarly played an important civic function in Philadelphia. The newly discovered connections between these taverns and the extended family who operated them opens new avenues for research as America 250 celebrations are set to begin in 2026. ■

The *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York: 1675–1776* were published in eight volumes in the early twentieth century. They provide detailed information about the governance of the City of New York during the colonial period. Yale University and the New York Public Library hold papers of Washington Irving, including his letters to Henry Brevoort. The Library of Congress and Columbia University maintain large holdings of the papers of Alexander Hamilton, including his cash book, and the *Jay Papers*, which detail the founding of the New York Manumission Society. Archived newspapers contain many contemporary accounts relating to taverns in New York. Secondary sources include W. Harrison Bayles’s *Old Taverns of New York* (1915); David G. Chardavoyne’s *A Hanging in Detroit: Stephen Gifford Simmons and the Last Execution Under Michigan Law* (Wayne State UP, 2003); Benjamin L. Carp’s *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (Oxford UP, 2007); and Julius Goebel’s *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton* (Columbia UP, 1964).

Adam Levinson is a lawyer, lecturer, collector of antiquarian texts, and founder of the history website *Statutesandstories.com*. His book, *America’s Founding Hosts: The First Family of Hospitality*, is forthcoming from SUNY Press in 2026.

For more by this author, see “State Travel Expenses a Bane for Even a Founding Father,” Fall 2021.