



Tapsters, Saloonkeepers, and Bartenders in the Family

By David A. Norris

CALL THEM TAVERNS, BAR ROOMS, SALOONS, OR BEER HALLS, THEY have for centuries not only served drinks, but also provided space for relaxation, socializing, and collecting news and gossip. Inhabitants of places without official community centers found that taverns or saloons could be used for voting places, political meetings, or court sessions.



Some early country taverns were landmarks, standing near ferry landings or stagecoach stops. (Library of Congress)

In ancient Rome, customers drank wine in a *taverna*. Originally, *taverna* meant shed, but apparently so many “sheds” served wine that the word came to have a new meaning. Taverna became “tavern” in medieval England, and taverns appeared in British North American colonies in the 1700s. The authorities kept an eye on taverns by requiring licenses for them, but these businesses were essential to everyday life. Besides serving drinks and providing a social space,



Saloon fights are a staple in western movies and TV shows, but saloon keepers also had to worry about burglaries, fires, and violating local ordinances. (Public domain)

taverns also might offer meals, rooms, and stabling for overnight visitors. Often, a tavern stood near a ferry landing, offering travelers a place to stay while waiting to cross a river.

By the early 1800s, the word tavern had picked up an unpleasant connotation in the US, bringing to mind dirty and dimly lit establishments full of drunken and unsavory characters. Owners began calling them bar rooms in the early decades of the 1800s, and then a bit later, saloons. A saloon, which came from the French *salon*, meaning “room”, sounded much more appealing than a tavern. Besides drinking establishments, there were also oyster saloons, bowling saloons, daguerreotype saloons, and ice cream saloons.



“The Office” was a popular saloon name; customers could slip away to their favorite saloon by saying, “I’m going to the office”. (The Daily Review, Wilmington, N.C., 24 November 1875, North Carolina Newspapers)

Quite a few saloons put on a show of elegance and sophistication. Finely crafted shelves backed with mirrors held bottles of liquor