



Where Samuel Downer Kept Store

History, tradition and an air of mystery hover over the old house at 617 East Broad Street in which Mr. and Mrs. David S. Roberts now reside. It once stood below the old brick Academy, facing the church green and near neighbor to the Downer homestead, afterwards known as the Kinch house, at Broad Street and Mountain Avenues. Its architect and builder, Samuel Downer, was so deeply rooted in this soil that early historians claimed for him the distinction of entertaining Washington here, although he was a drummer boy in the army when his commander-in-chief was supposed to have been his guest.

Samuel Downer was born in 1760, the son of a blacksmith whose forge stood on Jerusalem Road, beyond the present Embree Crescent. Young Downer was reared in humble circumstances, but he was shrewd, thrifty and aggressive, and by the time he had reached his thirty-fourth birthday he had accumulated sufficient funds to purchase land in the heart of the village. In 1794, he and Azariah Clark took title to adjoining lots on the north side of Broad Street, from Mountain Avenue to a point near the present Elm Street. Clark built the Town Tavern, opposite the Road to Rahway (now Central Avenue) in the same year, and Downer built his house a few years later, probably about 1796.

Tradition says that Downer kept store in his house, but, if so, only for a short time, for his family was growing rapidly—there were thirteen Downer children—and as his activities as a merchant, banker, politician and churchman increased, he was obliged to look elsewhere for business quarters. Since there could be no more convenient nor central location than his own back yard, he built the store there. Pearson Greaves fixes the date at "about 1804". The store was large, with living quarters on the second floor, and

it well may be that the Downer over-flow lodged here.

Downer died in 1846, and Isaac H. Pierson, who had come here from Morristown to teach in the Academy and was postmaster from 1836 to 1840, took over the store in 1849. Dr. Adrian C. Kinch bought the property, enlarged the homestead (it has since been twice remodeled) and leased the store to James T. Pierson. The new proprietor made it his home as well as place of business; Arthur Pierson was born here and reached into the cracker barrel for nourishment when his father was busy with customers. James T. carried on in the old town tradition. Like the acquisitive Sam Downer, he was an up-and-coming man of affairs—postmaster, politician, Presbyterian deacon, and merchant with a keen eye for a profitable real estate deal. Persons concerned about the doctrines of Calvinism, Republicanism or the high cost of living, dropped into the store to consult with James T. He knew the chapter and verse to fit the case.

Good fortune attending his Yankee ingenuity, in 1882 James T. bought a lot on the northwest corner of Broad and Elm Streets, built a store there and formed a business partnership with W. W. Gilby in the grocery and dry goods business. He then bought his former store from Dr. Kinch and moved it to its present site on East Broad Street and converted it into an attractive residence.

Captain John Sansom, skipper of the fruit steamer "Adirondack," plying between New York and the West Indies, bought the house in 1885 and named it "Stanley Cottage," after the noted African explorer, then in the public eye. Stanley Oval, which Arthur Pierson developed later, derives its name from this source.