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The Tale of America's Most-Popular, Least-Known Cracker

The very New England history of the Westminster Cracker Company, purveyors of clam chowder's favorite sidekick.

By [Katie Lockhart](#)

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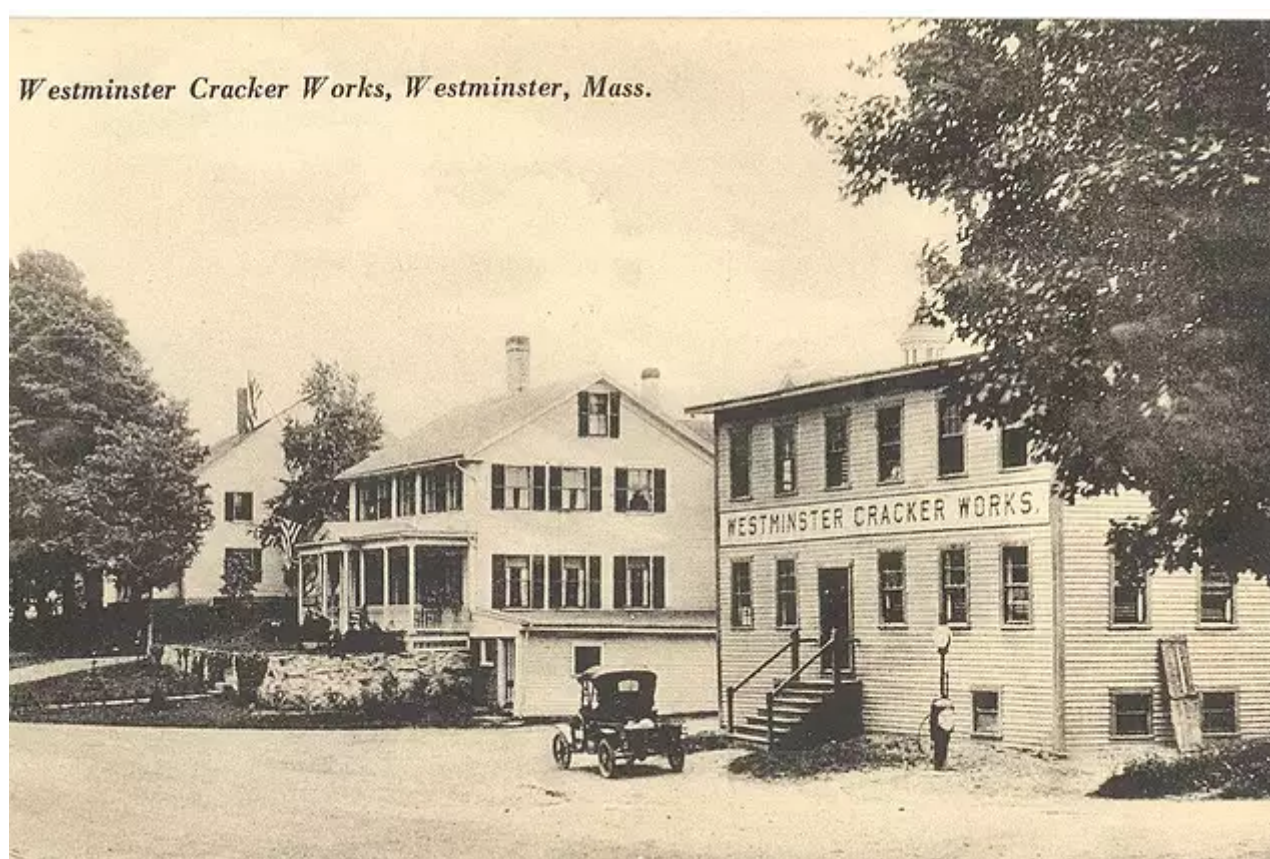


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Out of all of the things that New Englanders hold dear, their sports teams and their chowder (pronounced "chowdah") rank pretty high. A perfect compliment to a blustering winter evening, for some, this regional soup is as much about the oyster crackers as it is about the clams.

Next time you sit down with a bowl of [creamy chowder](#), look down at the packaging. I'll bet you, nine out of ten times, they'll be oyster crackers from [Westminster Cracker Company](#). While the average eater wouldn't notice the name brand, it's a symbol and a significant source of pride for the small Massachusetts town of Westminster (population 7,665). So much so that there is a yearly [Cracker Festival](#) with live music, games, food and, of course, plenty of crackers.



Photograph courtesy of the Westminster Historical Society.

I was born and raised in the small, rural town of Princeton, right next to Westminster. My father grew up across the street from the Westminster Cracker Company, the famous colonial-style house on all its packaging. And the now-former vice president and general manager of Westminster Cracker Company, Keith Dunn, built my childhood home in the early-1980s during his contracting days.

As with most New England institutions, there's a long and storied history full of sarcastic humor and honest intentions behind that red brick Colonial logo. The company's start dates back to 1828, although Adam Exton is credited with creating the

cracker in 1847. These small, vaguely oyster-shaped bites are reminiscent of a Saltine or a soda cracker, but tastier and more addictive—made with just seven ingredients.

While there were many companies like Westminster Crackers in the 1800s, serving their local communities via bakery and horse-drawn carriage, it was the longest-running cracker bakery in the country before it shut down operation in the mid-1980s.



Photograph courtesy of the Westminster Historical Society.

The cause for the creation of the oyster cracker dates back to before the American Revolution. Oysters were a popular item, and thus, a depleted source of food in Great Britain says Betsy Hannula, Curator at the Westminster Historical Society. "With many of New England's earliest settlers coming from England and a plentiful source of oysters on the coast, they were a popular food for immigrants and Native Americans before that."

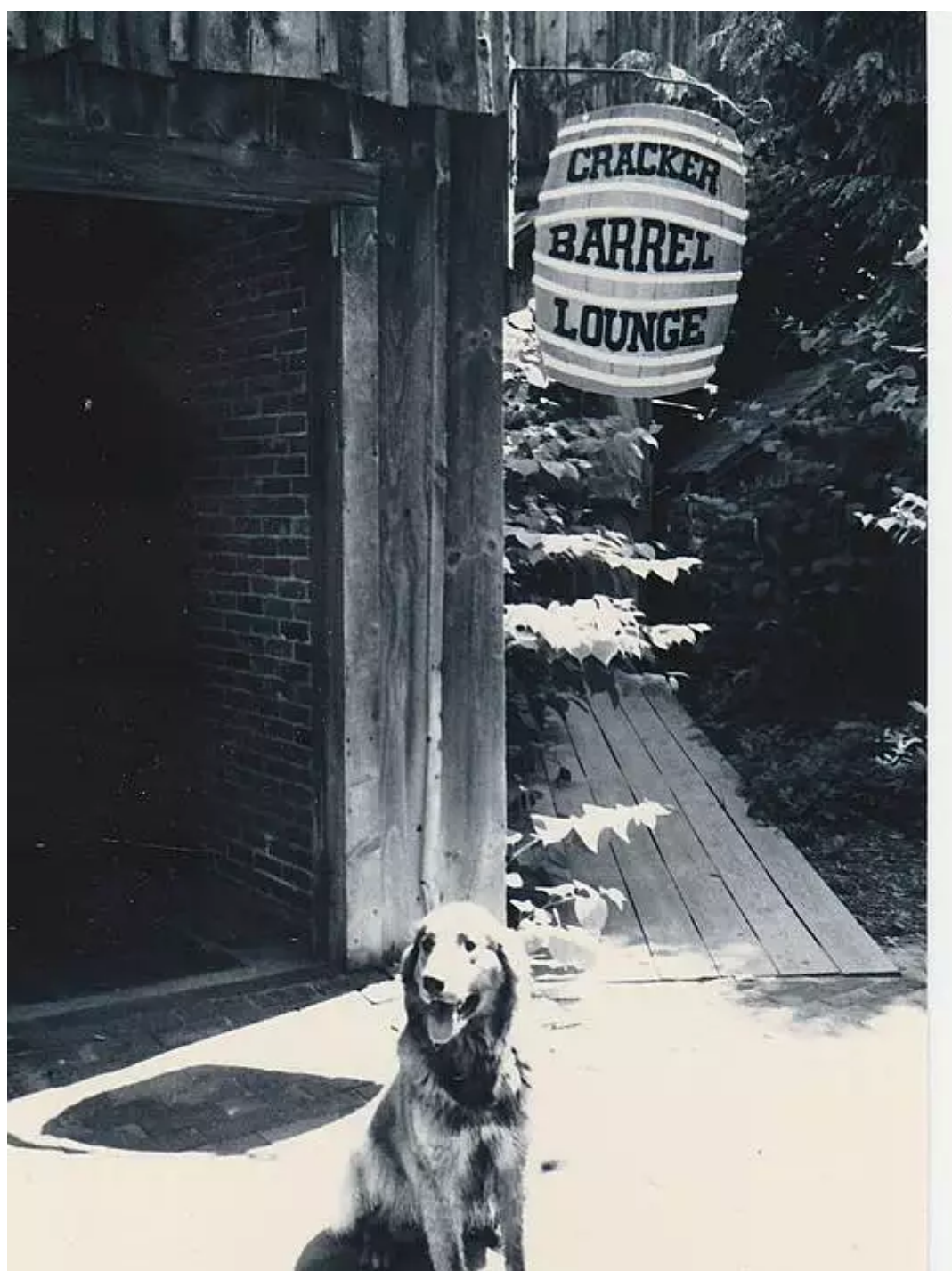
"I believe that Americans in the 1800s loved oysters because they were readily available, and therefore cheap," says Hannula. Thus, the creation of the oyster supper. "Oyster suppers were very trendy in Worcester County, Massachusetts, and frequently mentioned in the diaries, journals and ads from the late 1800s and early 1900s," says Hannula. "And, of course, the Westminster Cracker Bakery was able to cash in on that eventually."



Photograph courtesy of the Westminster Historical Society.

In the 1940s, the company started to produce cracker meal, a product for another growing food trend—the TV dinner. During the 1950s and 1960s, TV dinners and frozen foods were all the rage, so in 1968 the manufacturing of crackers was discontinued to meet the cracker meal demand. Pillsbury noticed the premium cracker meal and in 1982 bought the tangible and intellectual property of Westminster Cracker Company to coat items like their Gorton's Fish Sticks.

But the legal agreement gave the Dawley family the rights over the crackers and the company name. So in 1987, Dunn and his cousin Peter Dawley, a fourth-generation member of the Dawley family who owned the company since 1893, decided to revive the cracker business.



Photograph courtesy of the Westminster Historical Society.

But instead of reopening the signature red-and-white Westminster building where the crackers originated, they moved production to Rutland, Vermont, near where Dawley lived. The pair started baking crackers on a small scale, using early 1900s equipment and signature red brick, baking just 200 pounds an hour as opposed to other cracker companies producing 10,000 pounds an hour.

Marketed as a specialty cracker sold in boutique markets and country stores, the business floundered. But it hit its stride once one of its investors started selling pre-portioned 1/2 oz. crackers and two-pack squares to famous Boston mainstays like Union Oyster House from the back of his Ford pickup. You'll still find the crackers there today, and at thousands of other restaurants across the country.

In 2009 Dunn and Dawley sold the incorporated company to LaSalle Capital in Chicago. Today, they sell to over 400 major food distributors in 47 states, thousands of mom-and-pop restaurants, and nationwide chains like Applebee's, Legal Sea Foods, The Capital Grille and Cracker Barrel.

Next time you're in your local diner having a cup of soup or ordering a bowl of chowder from a high-end steak house, take a second look at the bag of crackers before tearing in. You'll recognize the red colonial house from Westminster, Massachusetts.

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