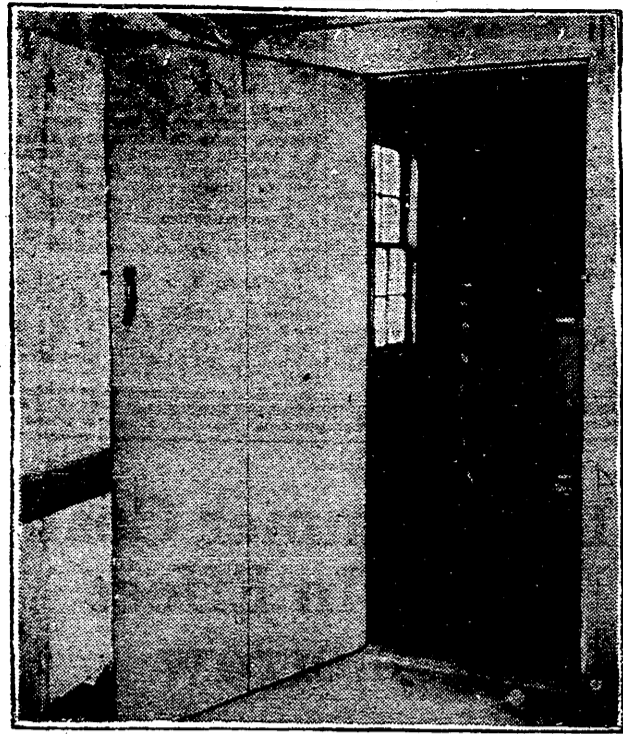


# Bear Tavern to Be Restored As Part of Memorial Park Project

## Controversy Yet Rages Over Part That Old Landmark Played in America's History, But It Is Authentic Revolutionary War Relic



By Marc P. Dowdell

Under provisions of an act sponsored by Senator A. Crozer Reeves, which passed finally in the Assembly during the closing sessions of last week, the Department of Conservation and Development is authorized to add some 50 acres to the 350 previously authorized to be incorporated in New Jersey's Washington Crossing Park. At the same time the annual appropriations bill included an item of \$12,000 for the expenses incident to acquiring Bear Tavern and the lands surrounding it. Chancellor Walker, acting unofficially for the State, holds an option on the tavern and some 42 acres of land. It is expected that shortly after July 1, when the appropriation becomes available, the deal will be concluded. Another parcel of about 11 acres is under negotiations for purchase.

Bear Tavern is one of the most important landmarks connected with the Battle of Trenton. Moreover it is one of the few remaining authentic Colonial structure heretofore and its restoration to good condition and its preservation as a memorial to that gallant incident of the Revolution, the turning point in the long struggle for independence, is something in which the whole nation should be interested.

Since 1924, when Dr. Carlos E. Godfrey, director of public records of New Jersey, took issue with the late General William S. Stryker's account of the march on Trenton and fixed Bear Tavern as the point where the Sullivan and Greene divisions separated instead of at Birmingham (New Trenton Junction), has been one of the chief points of controversy among local historians. It was a bombshell which Dr. Godfrey exploded at the March 20, 1924, meeting of the Trenton Historical Society. His studies of original documents had cleared up several obscure points in local history, and his arguments before the society were so well buttressed with documentary evidence that many of his hearers accepted his version almost at once.

General Stryker's reputation as an accurate and painstaking historian who spent 27 years of his life searching the records and writing and re-writing his history of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, has secured as a Banquo's ghost to many of the historians and they are reluctant to admit that the General might have been wrong.

for accuracy is so esteemed that a staunch coterie stand by his words and spend their energies looking up means of proving their accuracy.

On page 139 of Stryker's book he takes up his story of the march from McKonkey's Ferry, where the little army had all been gathered, between 3 and 4 a. m. of December 26, 1776. Here are his words:

"It was almost 4 o'clock on Thursday morning when the army was formed for its march from the Eight Mile or McKonkey's Ferry to Trenton; but at last, when the chain of sentries placed by General Stephen around the landing place had been called in, the order was given to 'shoulder your firelocks, the weary tramp in cold and sleet commenced, and

"Our gallant troops, with bayonets fixed,"

"To Trenton marched away."

"Instructions had been given to the men to march quietly, keep in good order in the ranks, give prompt obedience to their officers, and to bear in mind the emphatic password, 'Victory or Death.'

"Although still dark, it was feared that the loyalists in the vicinity would betray them. We have seen that these fears were well founded, but the officious labors of the Tory farmer were of no avail.

Slippery Roads Slowed March

"It was a cold and cheerless morning. The ground was still covered with snow, and at times a storm of hail annoyed them. The slippery condition of the road retarded their progress very much, and the want of proper clothing made their condition pitiable indeed.

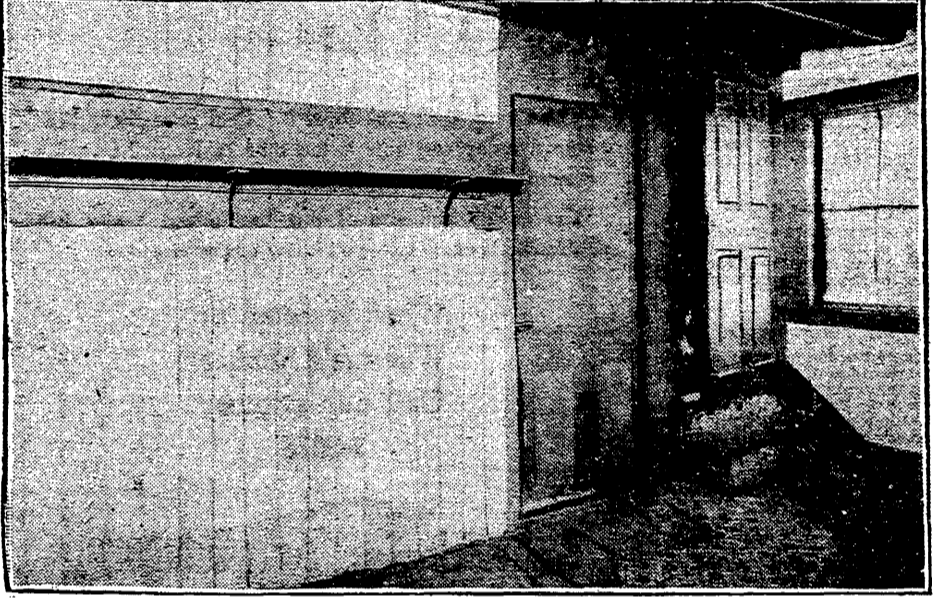
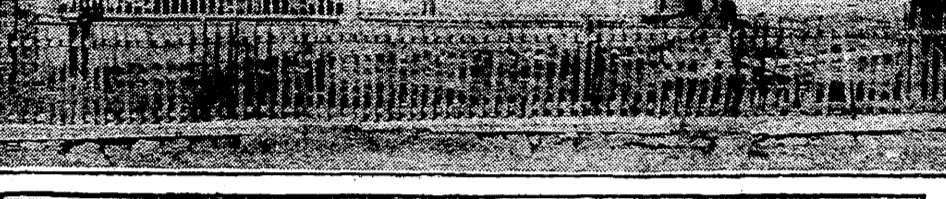
"The army marched in column from the river to the Bear Tavern, a distance of about a mile, and then, moving silently past the quiet farmhouses and through forests of hickory and black oak on the River Road, they came to Birmingham, somewhat more than three miles from the tavern. The general officers frequently spoke to their men, and urged them to retrace the disasters on Long Island and at Forts Mifflin and Mifflin, and the sorrowful retreat through New Jersey.

"Before they reached Birmingham, Captain John Mott, a gallant officer who had come from the Northern Army with Maxwell and St. Clair to recruit men for the new establishment of the New Jersey Continental Line, but who had volunteered to guide the troops on a road on which he himself lived, being armed with a fuse, and walking in advance of the line, found that his priming powder was damp, although he had covered it with his handkerchief. He mentioned the fact to General Sullivan, who, finding that all the men were in the same predicament, called out, 'Well, boys, we must fight them with the bayonet!'

"When this mishap was announced to General Washington, he sent a similar report by his aide-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel B. Webb. Then

Staunch Coterie Defends Stryker

And thus the merry war of words goes on every time the subject is mentioned within the hearings of the partisans. It is too bad that, for the sake of peace, General Stryker did not record in detail his authorities for his statement that the troops marched to Birmingham where, at the inn, Washington refreshed himself with breakfast while his men halted briefly for the same purpose. All the original documents with the single exception of the memoirs of Major James Wilkinson written and published 40 years after the event favor the Godfrey version. And yet Stryker's reputation



Upper left—Centre hall of Bear Tavern, where the painting shows the plane marks left by the carpenters when they shaped the boards by hand from great pine logs. Upper center—Exterior view of Bear Tavern as it is today. Much careful restoration work will have to be done to reproduce this landmark in its original condition. Upper right—Old tap room showing hospitable fireplace and corner cupboard. In recent times the fireplace has been closed up to afford a j'ai for a stove. Lower left—Dining room of the tavern, with its great fireplace boarded up. The ceiling is of hand-hewn beams and the doors show the marks of old-time craftsmanship. Lower right—Dr. Godfrey's map showing the route of Washington's march as reconstructed from official orders and original documents.

equal, being between four and five miles, with perhaps a little advantage for General Sullivan's division on the River Road."

"Thus it was that General Stryker set the stage for the historic battle of armed forces, and, unwittingly, for a less sanguine but perhaps almost as thrilling a battle of historians.

"Against this statement of what happened Dr. Godfrey has marshalled the following facts:

"First, Washington's Order of March to Trenton which was issued after a Council of War at General Greene's headquarters in Samuel Merrick's house on the Pennsylvania side of the river. This specified, after naming the units which were to form the two divisions that Greene's, the second division, was to lead the march from McKonkey's Ferry and was to march by the Pennington Road, and that Sullivan's first division was to march by the River Road.

"Godfrey's thesis is based on a general outline of the road as it existed. He said, regarding this point: "The road in New Jersey which led from the (McKonkey's) ferry was known as the Pennington Road and ran east of north, and one and a quarter miles from the river it crossed the River Road at Bear Tavern, eight miles from Trenton; two miles further it crossed the Scotch Road, and one and a quarter miles still further it met the direct road from Trenton about seven miles from Trenton on the old road from the village of Pennington to Trenton."

"The distance from Birmingham to Trenton by either route was nearly

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"When the Continental troops reached Bear Tavern on the Pennington Road it is generally believed, and especially by those who reside within the vicinity of Trenton, that both divisions of the army were then wheeled to the right, into the direct road, and led down that way by Washington to the village of Birmingham; when he, with Greene's division, crossed over from this point to the Scotch Road, while the second division continued down the River Road to attack the enemy at Trenton.

"In tracing this version of the march of the troops from Bear Tavern to the present River Road did not then exist.

"As I have remarked, the distance from Bear Tavern by a circuit of the Pennington and Scotch Roads was only a mile longer than that between the same points on the River Road; besides, the former route was comparatively level in comparison with the tortuous River Road in the deep ravine at Jacob's Creek, and by reason of these natural conditions troops could make the circuit referred to in sufficient time to enable both columns to accompany the battle which was fought shortly after Greene's division had entered upon the Scotch Road.

"Therefore, in compliance with the order of march, when the head of the column came from McKonkey's Ferry to Bear Tavern, General Washington, with Greene's Division, continued along the high way to Pennington and made a circuit to Trenton by the Scotch Road; and when the rear division, under General Sullivan, came up to the tavern, it immediately turned to the right, and passed down the River Road."

"Naturally, Dr. Godfrey's version of this tale has come under severe fire. John J. Cleary, president of the Trenton Historical Society, believes he can present sufficient evidence in favor of the Stryker version to make the question of division at Bear Tavern or Birmingham an open one. He cites Stryker's meticulous scholarship and the 27 years of painstaking research which went into the preparation of his book. He points out that the documents used by Godfrey were familiar to Stryker as well. Testimony that Stryker's work in general as a historian was extremely accurate has been given by Dr. William Starr Myers, of Princeton University, who edited and checked up Stryker's posthumous volume on the Battle of Monmouth. Cleary enters the field of deduction when he reasons that since Washington's marching order was written near Newtown before he had traversed the section of New Jersey about McKonkey's Ferry, it might have been changed as the march began.

"Might not the local guides have told Washington when he reached the ferry that he could divide his troops just as well at Birmingham, with the advantages that would continue as a united force several miles further into the enemy's country?" is one of his queries.

Another point adverse to Godfrey goes back to the account of the march

which was published March 18, 1843, in the State Gazette by the Rev. Eli F. Cooley, for many years pastor of Ewing Presbyterian Church, which would have been a landmark for Greene's division and it followed the route Dr. Godfrey defends.

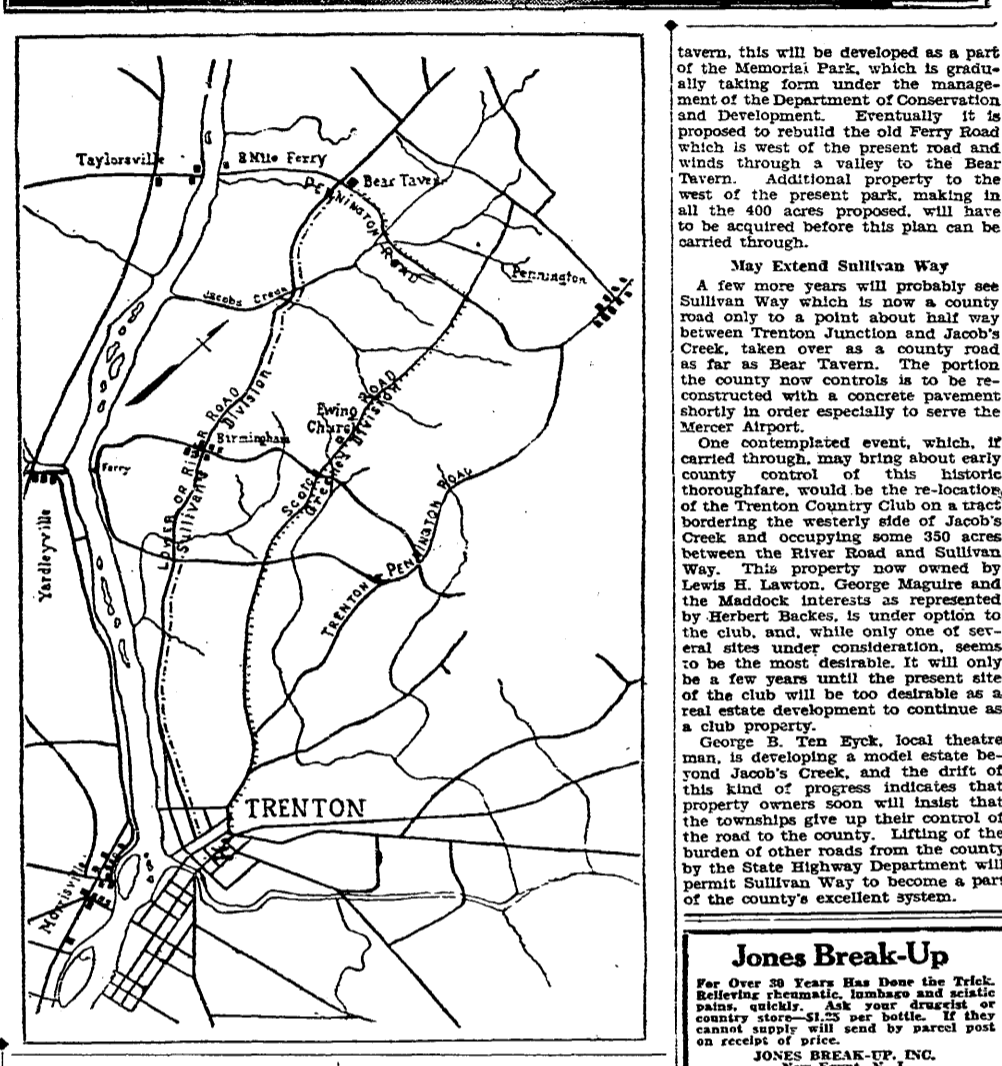
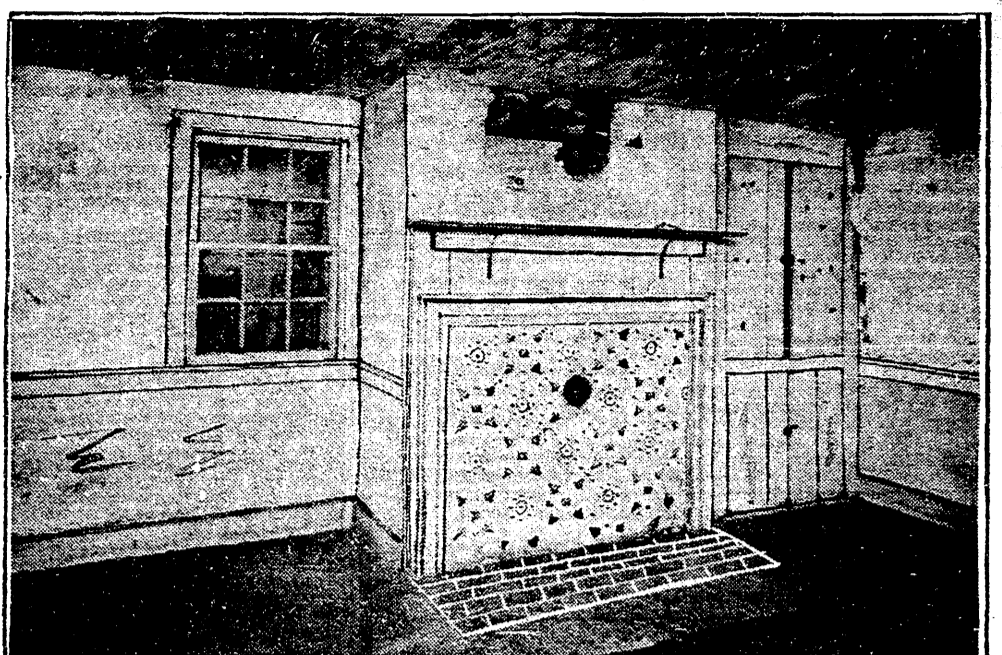
None of Parish Recalled Troops

Cooley was a careful genealogist and historian. He spent much of his spare time questioning older members of his parish who could recall events taking place here in 1776 and yet does not differ from the Wilkinson account followed by Stryker, which declared that the troops divided at Birmingham.

"Certainly, if Washington had passed Ewing Church some member of the parish living nearby would have told Dr. Cooley about it, and he would have been the first to claim that honor for his church," said Mr. Cleary, "that he did not do this, Mr. Cleary believes to be one of the best evidences available today that the Wilkinson version was correct."

"On the other hand, Colonel Henry D. Paxon, president of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, himself a student of the Trenton campaign, has accepted the Godfrey version as correct and included his map in a recent pamphlet pointing out landmarks on a trip from Philadelphia to Washington Crossing Park."

In all probability one of the patriotic societies will take over the maintenance of the tavern as a monument to Washington's heroic undertaking. It has been suggested that the Sons of the American Revolution might appropriately be the body to do this. As for the land surrounding the



tavern, this will be developed as a part of the Memorial Park, which is gradually taking form under the management of the Department of Conservation and Development. Eventually, it is proposed to rebuild the old Ferry Road which is west of the present road and winds through a valley to the Bear Tavern. This property now owned by the county now controls is to be reconstructed with a concrete pavement shortly in order especially to serve the Mercer Airport.

One contemplated event, which, if carried through, may bring about early county control of this historic thoroughfare, would be the re-location of the Trenton Country Club on a tract bordering the westerly side of Jacob's Creek and occupying some 350 acres between the River Road and Sullivan Way. This property, now owned by Lewis H. Lawton, George Maguire and the Maddock interests as represented by Herbert Beckes, is under option to the club, and, while only one of several sites under consideration, seems to be the most desirable. It will only be a few years until the present site of the club will be too desirable as a real estate development to continue as a club property.

George E. Ten Eyck, local theatre man, is developing a model estate between the Trenton Country Club and this kind of progress indicates that property owners soon will insist that the townships give up their control of the road to the county. Lifting of the burden of other roads from the county by the State Highway Department will permit Sullivan Way to become a part of the county's excellent system.

May Extend Sullivan Way

A few more years will probably see Sullivan Way which is now a county road only to a point about half way between Trenton Junction and Jacob's Creek, taken over as a county road as far as Bear Tavern. The portion of the county now controls is to be reconstructed with a concrete pavement shortly in order especially to serve the Mercer Airport.

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