

WASHINGTON'S DEBARKATION AT
JOHNSON'S FERRY
ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT IN 1776

BY

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An address delivered before
The Trenton Historical Society
November 17, 1932

1932

THE TRENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

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The location of Johnson's Ferry in Colonial and Revolutionary days has been lost to history, although recognized as being situated along the river Delaware somewhere between Trenton and Coryell's Ferry—now Lambertville.

During the military operations immediately preceding the Battle of Trenton in December 1776, the Hessians in their narratives particularly recognized both Johnson's and Howell's ferries as points of strategic importance. These accounts indicate, by inference, that the former ferry was located within the vicinity of McKonkey's Ferry,¹ which operated from the west bank of the Delaware river in Pennsylvania.

General Stryker informs us that Johnson's Ferry was not McKonkey's Ferry,² but that the former was situated "about four miles above Trenton."³ Fifty years ago General Davis said in his "History of Bucks County" that it was questionable whether McKonkey's Ferry and Johnson's Ferry were the same, and intimated that the latter ferry was "probably lower down" the river.⁴ And a recent authority asserts that Johnson's Ferry was the New Jersey end of Howell's, formerly Yardley's, Ferry, operating across the Delaware from Pennsylvania.⁵ Thus historians fail to agree in pointing out the exact location of Johnson's Ferry.

Before proceeding it is obviously necessary to have before us a brief sketch of McKonkey's Ferry. This ferry was situated at the present village of Washington Crossing, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, on a large tract of land taken up in 1684 by Henry Baker, who established the first ferry there, giving the place the name of Baker's Ferry, by which it was known for nearly a century. Henry Baker devised the ferry site to his son Samuel; and after the death of the latter, it was purchased by his son, Samuel Baker, Jr., on March 10, 1763.⁶

By a conveyance made December 5, 1774, the executors of the last-mentioned person sold the property to Samuel McKonkey, when the name was changed to McKonkey's Ferry. On March 21, 1777, Samuel McKonkey disposed of the ferry property to Benjamin Taylor, and it then became known as Taylor's Ferry. It remained in the Taylor family for many years, and when the post office was established there on February 11, 1829, the place was called Taylorsville.⁶

In history this ferry will always be popularly known as McKonkey's Ferry by reason of the fact that its name was indelibly inscribed by General Washington in his Order of March, which directed his troops to assemble at McKonkey's Ferry on Christmas Night in 1776 and there "embark on board the boats" to cross the Delaware while enroute to the Battle of Trenton.⁷

In accepting the Hessian version of the approximate location of Johnson's Ferry, I suspected that it was none other than the New Jersey terminus of the famous McKonkey Ferry, which place now forms part of the New Jersey "Washington Crossing Park." Upon this assumption I conducted my investigations.

About the middle of the eighteenth century the land in Hopewell Township, Hunterdon County, New Jersey, that extended for some distance along the Delaware river above and below the McKonkey Ferry site in Pennsylvania, formed part of a large plantation which was owned by Rut Johnson of Somerset County, New Jersey. On August 30, 1748, the latter person devised this estate by will to his son, Garret Johnson, who then occupied the property.⁸ Garret Johnson by his will dated February 27, 1766, devised the same to his two sons, Robert and Rut Johnson, by directing that Robert should take the "north part," and Rut the "south part," of the plantation.⁹

On August 13, 1770, the High Sheriff of Hunterdon County, John Barnes, sold the above plantation to Abraham Harvey in satisfaction of a judgment which Mary Cubberly had obtained against the executors of the will of the aforesaid Garret Johnson, deceased. The deed given therefor on December 10, 1770, further recited, in part, that the premises were sold "at the house of James Slack, innkeeper at Hopewell."¹⁰ Abraham Harvey by his will probated in the Register's Office at Doylestown, Penn-

apparently both the north and south parts

sylvania, on November 22, 1788, devised the same property in fee to his son, Moses Harvey; and the latter, by his deed executed April 1, 1801, sold the property—containing 247¾ acres of land—to Samuel Tomlinson.¹¹

Through a devolution of title from Samuel Tomlinson down to Isidore P. Strittmatter, the latter in 1922 and 1923 sold and conveyed the remaining portion of the original plantation to the Board of Conservation and Development, on behalf of the State of New Jersey, which now forms the river front of the "Washington Crossing Park." While some of the instruments in this chain of title specifically refer to the "Lower ferry landing," the "Ferry road," and "with the ferry thereon established," no mention is made of the name of the ferry.¹²

In concluding this section of the investigation, I deem it appropriate to furnish a description of the above property, which was rendered by the aforementioned Rut Johnson in "The Pennsylvania Chronicle" for the week of September 25 to October 2, 1769, in the following language:¹³

To be sold a plantation, supposed to be 240 acres in the township of Hopewell, Hunterdon County, New Jersey, situate on the river Delaware. The soil is certain for winter and summer grain, 180 cleared, and about 10 of meadow, the rest thrifty timbered land, an old orchard of natural fruit, a young one ditto of grafted fruit, in full prime, a large frame house with five rooms on a floor, with a cellar underneath, and a large stone kitchen, which is now occupied and has been for some years past as a tavern and ferry, and a spring of excellent water near the door, never known to fail, barn and stables, and a stone shop all in good repair. Any person inclining to purchase may enter on it the first day of May, and have it on easy terms, by applying to the subscriber on the premises.

RUT JOHNSON.

However, from other authentic sources, we find that the name of the ferry which operated upon the above-described property was Johnson's Ferry. This fact is definitely shown by some of its owners, and their lessees, in the several tavern applications they respectively submitted annually to the Hunterdon County Court, and which are now possessed by the New Jersey Public Record Office. The first among these is the application of Garret John-

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son, which was presented by him at the May Term of Court in 1761, praying for a license to continue to keep "a Tavern at his Ferry in Hopewell."¹⁴ Within three months after the death of the latter, his son, Rut Johnson, received a license from the Court of Quarter Sessions on May 20, 1766, to keep a tavern at the same place.¹⁵

On May 19, 1767, James Slack likewise presented his tavern application to the Hunterdon County Court, the material part of which recites: "That whereas Your Petitioner hath Rented the Plantation and Ferry belonging to Rutt Johnston, Formerly the Estate of Gerrard Johnston, known by the name of Johnstons Ferry, Whom Your Worships have been so good as to Indulge with your Licence to keep a Tavern at said Ferry for some Years past." Among the nine subscribers who favorably recommended this application to the Court "for a Licence to keep a Tavern at the Ferry known by the Name of Johnstons Ferry for the Ensuing Year," was John Hart, who afterwards became a Signer of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁶

The tavern application presented by James Slack at the May Term of the Hunterdon Court in the following year is also important and it states, in part: "That your Petitioner did hire the Ferry (late Garret Johnsons) for three Years, one of which is now expired, and paying a large Rent, and but small income by the Ferry, and your Worships Petitioner pretty far advanc'd in Years, humbly craves you will Grant his Leicence the ensuing Year; and your Petitioner will do the best of his Endeavours for Passengers Speedy Ferryage, and Good Economy in his Tavern; * * *." The granting of this application by the Court was also favorably recommended by John Hart and nine other estimable gentlemen, who were friends and neighbors of James Slack.¹⁷

Thereafter James Slack continued to keep a licensed tavern at Johnson's Ferry¹⁸ until he was succeeded by Richard Slack, whose license was formerly granted on May 4, 1779.¹⁹ Perhaps the latter was a son of James Slack, who was probably deceased.

At the May Term of the Hunterdon County Court of General Quarter Sessions in 1786, an application to keep a tavern at Johnson's Ferry was made by Abraham Harvey. This petition is likewise interesting, and it began by saying: "The Petition of

Abraham Harvey of Hopewell in the County Afores^d. Humbly Sheweth that Y^r. Petitioner hath moved to the Ferry known by the name of Slacks Ferry, which he now owns."²⁰

As the ownership of the ferry had passed out of the Johnson family in 1770, and had been in the tenure of James and Richard Slack, respectively, as lessees, for nineteen consecutive years, in the course of time it was a natural sequence that the name of "Johnson's Ferry" would be displaced by "Slack's Ferry." A published map of 1791 shows that Johnson's or Slack's Ferry was then designated as "Harvey's Ferry."²¹ At a later date it was known as "Tomlinson's Ferry"²²—in the last two instances the ferry bearing the name of its owner.

The best and latest authority we have on the operation of the early ferries on the upper Delaware river is Dr. B. F. Fackenthal, Jr., who is now President of the Bucks County Historical Society. He informs us that "As a rule the ferries took the names of the parties owning the land, but often of their operators or lessees, and moreover with a different set of owners and operators on opposite sides of the river." He exemplifies this statement, in part, by showing that in 1736 the Yardley Ferry in Pennsylvania was known on the New Jersey side as Gould's Ferry; the Lumberton Ferry in 1783, was known as Warne's Ferry on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware river, and the New Jersey end as Thorne's Ferry; and in 1764 the Mechlenburgh Ferry (afterwards Frenchtown Ferry) was kept on the Pennsylvania side of the river by John Tinbrook, and on the opposite shore by Daniel Prigmore.²³

From these observations it should be particularly noticed that the persons who presented the several tavern applications to the Hunterdon County Court were, at the time, either owners or lessees of the Johnson Ferry tract, according to the chain of title we have before us. Therefore, there can be no doubt that Johnson's Ferry was actually the New Jersey terminus of the McKonkey Ferry, which was owned and operated by interests entirely distinct from those of the latter ferry.

This assertion is further sustained by the record fact that on September 25, 1766, on the petition of Rut Johnson and others, a public road or highway, three rods wide, was laid out by *metes*

and bounds across the petitioners' lands, which extended "from the Ferry on Delaware, Known by the name of Johnsons Ferry, to the great road that Leads from Trenton to Bellmont," at a point "about two Chains North of the Eight Mile Post from Trenton," within the immediate vicinity of Bear Tavern.²⁴

The only historic interest that can be associated with Johnson's Ferry is the fact that it was the place where General Washington and the Continental Army *debarked* after crossing the river Delaware on Christmas Night in 1776, when enroute to combat the Hessian troops at Trenton. Hitherto this distinction has erroneously been credited exclusively to the McKonkey Ferry.

In view of all the circumstances which I have related it is highly inconceivable how Johnson's Ferry could be lost to history or be confused with other ferries of the upper Delaware, and likewise how the same for generations could be called McKonkey's Ferry, unless carelessly done by a perversion of the facts communicated by tradition or otherwise.

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