

## Why a Nature Center?

Why put a nature center in a park set aside primarily to commemorate an historic event? Is it simply a matter of the penchant of government to expand and out pace its initial mandate? One might as well, ask the question: Why does history take place on natural landscapes at all? The obvious answer can be posited in the form of yet, another question: Where else would it take place? Upon closer examination however, it is notable that nature and history alike are driven by cause and effect. There is a reason for everything and it is the job of the naturalist and the historian to ask the questions that connect the dots of causality. For example: Why did General Washington choose to cross the Delaware here and not somewhere else? In fact, the General chose three locations to concurrently move his army across the river for the attack on Trenton. The other two crossings downstream failed. And, they failed precisely for naturalistic reasons having to do with the tides on the river below Trenton, the river's width at those latitudes, the weather on that famous Christmas night and perhaps, the Little Ice Age climate in 1776. Moreover, the question of Why here and not there, opens a veritable Pandora's box of even more questions. Why was Trenton, the object of Washington's advance, situated where it was? Why was Philadelphia, the nation's capitol at the time, located where it was? Why does the small state of New Jersey have so many Revolutionary War sites? The answers to all of these questions and more reside in an understanding of nature and the relationship between history and the land.

The fields, forests, streams and hills that make up Washington Crossing State Park today, are rife with a history that is informed by nature and a nature that is informed by history. Marine fossils on the banks of the Delaware indicate the presence of ancient seas, bays and lagoons in the area. Projectile points and other stone tools suggest the exploits of prehistoric peoples that once hunted and fished here. The furrowed landscape shows the places where colonial and preindustrial plowshares broke the soil. Hidden among the park's glades, hedgerows and forests are extant springhouses, cellar holes, foundation rubble and other ruins, the vestiges of the homes, farms and businesses of folks that lived and worked here in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Clusters of privet and rhododendron, magnolia, forsythia, spirea, daffodils, and other non-native plants are the only remnants of former backyards and manicured gardens with their imported stock that have long since given way to nature's tendency to reclaim the land. An alert visitor might observe rocks of diabase along some of the park's trails that were carted over from nearby Baldpate Mountain in previous eras and placed on the landscape to mark the property lines and pasture boundaries that once made for good neighbors. Successional forests likewise, reveal the locations of bygone cropland and pasture land. Multiple-trunked trees suggest former timber harvests and forest trees growing in rows indicate the planting activities of the NJ Forest Tree Nursery that was once located in the state park.

Rachel Horne, a well-known British nature artist and naturalist, started the nature programs in Washington Crossing State Park in the early 1960s. Ms Horne apparently understood the history-nature connection and correctly ascertained that

a nature center in this historic place would be necessary to tell the complete story of Washington Crossing State Park and why it is here. The park's first two nature centers were located in retrofitted farmhouses on the property. As Ms Horne moved on, the mantle of responsibility fell to others and was eventually passed down to me. By the time I came on board, the programs had become quite popular and had outgrown the old farmhouses. In 1997 we were able to build the current nature center facility. After some 26 years on the job, it won't be very much longer until I too, hang up my binoculars and put aside my walking stick. What then? In these times of budget deficits and a weak economy, nothing is guaranteed. The mission statement of the NJ Division of Parks and Forestry incorporates the concept of stewardship of both natural and historic resources. My hope going forward, is that the powers that be in state government will continue to recognize the inseparable connection of history and nature and will continue to support the fifty year legacy of one of the oldest year-round natural history interpretive programs in the state. The Crossing is a special place. It is not just another state park, nor is it merely a meeting place of nature and history. It is in fact, an important part our national heritage. As a professional naturalist, I am fond of the metaphor of a runner in a relay passing the baton to the next runner. So, over the years, I have been privileged to pass the baton of conservation to multitude park visitors, including students, scouts and program participants from all over the world. I hope that the State of New Jersey keeps the legacy alive and passes the baton to yet, another generation of naturalists and nature enthusiasts.

**Wayne Henderik** is the naturalist at Washington Crossing State Park. He has degrees from Rutgers University in Natural Resource Management/Wildlife Biology and Agricultural Education. He has worked for several organizations both within and outside of government and has over thirty years experience as a professional naturalist. Having been born, raised and educated in the state, he is the quintessential "Jersey Boy".