

WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK

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## INTRODUCTION

Washington Crossing State Park is located in Mercer County about eight miles north of Trenton along the Delaware River.

It was ~~here~~ the Revolutionary Army crossed the Delaware on Christmas night 1776 preceeding the Battle of Trenton.

Today the park extends one mile east of the riverbank and contains 807 acres. It serves a variety of uses with its picnic areas, historic areas, nature center and Open Air Theater.

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## ESTABLISHMENT OF A PARK

A committee of the Knights of Columbus held a public meeting in Trenton in 1909. At this meeting a resolution was passed that Governor Fort appoint a commission for the purpose of properly marking the point where Washington crossed the Delaware. The movement for establishing such a memorial officially began in 1910 with the establishment of the commission. In 1912 the first land--100 acres of the Blackwell estate--was purchased. In 1915 the functions of the commission were merged into the Department of Conservation and Development which enlarged and developed the project.

The original park was to be on both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey sides of the Delaware, not less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile along the Delaware River and extending at least a quarter mile inland from the River on the New Jersey side. The park was set up so the historic areas wouldn't be cluttered with recreational facilities. Included in the plans was the purchase of the Ferry House, the erection of a monument in the park, landscaping and road construction, and use as a national military camp-ground.

## LAND ACQUISITIONS

Originally the area was the campground of the Lenni Lenapi and Delaware Indians. Later it was settled by farmers from England and the European mainland.

The first record of anyone owning the land was in 1699 when Rut Johnson acquired acreage of land bordering the Delaware and north of present day Route 546 and south of what is now called Belle Mountain. The land was bequeathed to his son, Garrett in 1749. Garrett established a ferry and tavern on the south boundary (Nelson House). When he died in 1766, his son, Rut, received the southern part of the land including the ferry and tavern. The land also included some acreage east of this (our Ferry House and Flag Museum).

In the 1770's Johnson's estate was sold to pay creditors. It went through several hands until in the 1840's Nelson acquired the part of the land where the Nelson House now stands. In 1903 Isidor Strittmater bought another part of the Johnson land (where our present day Ferry House and Flag Museum are). The last part of the Johnson tract was purchased by Blackwell in 1913 (area of State Nursery buildings, Baggaley and chief ranger residences).

By 1925 all of this land was purchased by the state.

Between 1925 and 1928 approximately 68 acres were purchased in the area that is now Green Grove, Sullivan Grove, Visitor's Center field, and the area of Continental Lane near Bear Tavern. Most of the land was purchased from Lavinson, Boscarell and Dzbenski.

In the late 1930's and early 1940's 80 acres were bought from the First Mechanics National Bank.

After these purchases, no land was acquired until 1963 when with the help of the Green Acres Program approximately 480 acres were acquired. Among the property the park purchased was the Wolfe tract by what is now the Open Air Theater, Niederer land with the pond and barns still present, Phillips Farm along Brickyard Road, and the Lippincott and Harbourt House where the Nature Center now is.

The property that was last acquired is known as Cedar Bliss. The Frankel tract was purchased in the early 1970's.

## GEOLOGY & WILDLIFE

The Washington Crossing area is located within a basin that was formed as a result of faulting. The area then gradually was filled with sediments eroded down from the sides of the basin and deposited by streams and rivers. Consequently, the area contains mostly sedimentary rocks-red & black shales and coarse conglomerates.

The region is characterized by round hills and broad valleys. Part of the area is in a flood plain.

The only surface water is the Delaware River. There are two small streams in the park, but these are subject to seasonal conditions.

Originally the vegetation was deciduous, but now it is about 50% evergreen.

The wildlife in Washington Crossing State Park consists of deer, small game animals, and birds. There is fishlife in the Delaware and Raritan Canal and in the Delaware River.

## PICNIC AREAS

Through the efforts of Work Project Administration in the late 1940's and the 1930's, many areas of the park were landscaped and beautified. This included the picnic areas of Green Grove, Sullivan Grove, and Washington Grove. The areas then were favorite spots for family picnics.

Today Green Grove holds 300 people for picnics and has a pavillion while Washington Grove holds 500. Sullivan Grove is no longer a cooking area but still contains swings and a pavillion with a bike rental. A new Grove, Knox Grove, was added in the 1970's. It holds 600 people for picnics. Although still favorites for family picnics, large groups now enjoy the areas.

## FERRY HOUSE

The Ferry House is an old restored tavern that was once thought to be the place where Washington and his staff officers met to discuss plans for their attack on Trenton. It was known for over 50 years as the McKonkey Ferry House. However, research now shows that the McKonkeys never owned land on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. The original owner and operator of the Ferry House was Garrett Johnson who inherited the land from his father, Rut. The original home contained what is now the tap room, the kitchen, and the loft. Garrett enlarged it in about 1767 to include six other rooms. At the time of the Revolutionary War, the ferry was known as Johnson's Ferry, although it was run by James Slack.

When Strittmater purchased the house, it was in an advanced state of disrepair. Since he was interested in Washingtonia, he restored and repaired the house. He worked hard to convince the State of New Jersey of the historic significance of the site.

After the state purchased the land and building, they renovated it. They also purchased the museum's collection of 18th century furniture, utensils, and weapons for the opening in 1926. Only three rooms were furnished historically. The other six rooms were used for storage and to house the caretaker.

After a robbery and the retirement of the caretaker, a sophisticated alarm system replaced the need for a live-in caretaker. Because of this, the State of New Jersey is presently making plans for the renovation of the old living quarters in order to make the entire house open to the public.

Although the house is still furnished as a tavern, historians now believe that the Ferry House was probably the homestead of the Johnson plantation and the Nelson House was actually the Ferry Tavern of the 18th century.



### NELSON HOUSE

During the Revolution this house was the ferry and tavern where Washington and his men met after the Crossing on December 25-26, 1776. In the 1840's, after it was purchased by Alystyn Nelson, it was a 22-room hotel. In the early 1900's it was struck by a steel beam from a passing train.

The Nelson House was torn down to its present stature in the 1930's. It is open for public viewing during the Spring, Summer, and Fall. It is manned by staff who were hired by the Washington Crossing Association. Time and hours are as posted.

### FLAG MUSEUM

This building was once part of the Johnson farm. The building, renovated in the 1930's, once housed a drafting room for the Trenton Park Development staff. The original meetings of the Washington Crossing Association were held in the building. This Association, which consists of local residents interested in developing the park, established the Flag Museum in 1963. Originally, it contained flags and was used to show historic movies. Presently, this structure is closed to the public, due to renovation.

Starting alongside this building is a path known as Continental Lane. Extending one mile into the park, it is the path which General Washington and his army took to Trenton before the Battle.

### BEAR TAVERN

Bear Tavern was built in 1740. It was a stopping place for farmers taking goods to Trenton. It was the spot to which Washington marched after crossing the Delaware before turning to Trenton. It had many owners until it became a farm. It was turned over to the state as part of Washington Crossing State Park at the dedication ceremonies on June 6, 1926.

The building is now used for the park headquarters where the public can obtain information and permits.

### VISITORS CENTER

This building was established in 1976 to facilitate the park's historic interpretation. It contains a museum of the American Revolution, a multi-media electric map explaining the ten days, and to impart information. There are rest room facilities.

### STATE FOREST NURSERY

The State Forest Nursery was established in 1926 by the Bureau of Forest Management. The first superintendent of the Nursery was Mr. Blackwell, who owned the land previous to the state.

The purpose of the Nursery is to raise forest tree seedlings for reforestation of unused and abandoned state lands.

The present Forest Nursery at Washington Crossing State Park contains 42 acres of clonal orchards and seedlings under the direction of Jack Baggaley. The Nursery staff plants about a million seedlings per year.

### OPEN AIR THEATER

The OAT was established by the Washington Crossing Association in 1964 for outdoor performances. The light shack was constructed by park personnel, while the concession stand and back stage buildings were built by members of the Association. The first performance was held in the summer of 1964 to celebrate the New Jersey Tercentenary. The proceeds of the shows are used to make improvements on the theater after the cost of performances are paid. Earlier activities included concerts while the more recent emphasis has been on plays and musicals.

### NATURE CENTER

The Nature Center was established in 1964 after the acquisition of the Harbourt House. The center consisted of displays with nature trails.

In 1967 the Nature Center was moved to the present location in the Lippincott House where the display area was enlarged and more trails added.

At the Nature Center, park visitors have the opportunity to observe small exhibits, listen to brief lectures, or go on a nature tour. A trail for the blind has been developed and is available. There is a bird blind for observing the many different species of birds that arrive throughout the year.

DELAWARE & RARITAN CANAL

The canal, which runs for 66 miles along the Delaware River, was established in 1838. It was used for barges pulled by animals that walked along its banks.

The D & R canal used to be under the jurisdiction of Washington Crossing State Park but in 1974 it became a state park by itself. Today it is used mostly for canoeing and fishing.

## GIFTS TO THE PARK

Throughout the years since the park opened, many gifts have been presented to it. Early donations include the Colonial Ferry House Garden, a replica of the gardens at Mt. Vernon, donated by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1926. Also included was the Honeyman Memorial Fountain near the river. It was donated by the New Jersey Patriotic Order Sons of America in 1930 in memory of John Honeyman who served Washington and the Continental Army as a spy. The most significant of the private contributions was the George Washington Memorial Arboretum donated by Charles Lathrop Pack and Arthur Newton Pack in 1932 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birthday of George Washington. It contains trees and shrubs native to New Jersey. Most of the recent contributions to the Park have been to the Nature Center and Outdoor Theater.

## ACTIVITIES IN THE PARK

Over the years since its dedication on June 26, 1926, the Park has served a variety of uses. Primarily a picnic and recreation area for several years, it became important to local residents when travel was restricted during blackouts in the Second World War.

Some of the activities that have been held in the park are the National Campers & Hikers Rallies, Trenton Kennel Club Dog Shows, Delaware Valley Horsemen's Association Trail Rides, Boy Scout Camporees and summer day camps, and cross country track meets.

Future plans for the park will continue to emphasize its multiple use areas -- natural, historic, and recreational. With the passing of the Bicentennial, many people have become more interested in their heritage. With this fact in mind the historic areas may grow in importance as they were when the park first opened.

## TRENTON BATTLE MONUMENT

Located in Trenton at the "Five Points" where Warren and Broad Streets and Pennington, Brunswick and Princeton Avenues converge, the Trenton Battle Monument stands where General George Washington and his Continental Soldiers opened their attack on the Hessians on Christmas night, 1776.

Visitors have an excellent view of the area from the observatory at the top of the monument, 150 feet above the street. The cornerstone of this column was laid on December 26, 1891. The dedication took place two years later in 1893. The construction was financed by Federal, State and private funds under the supervision of the Trenton Battle Monument Association.