

History on the scrap pile (Steuben House)

northjersey.com | December 31, 2007 | Mike Kelly



Is this any way to treat history? Of course not. But this is life -- and land -- at New Bridge Landing Park in River Edge. When will someone fix this? That question has lingered for decades over the sliver of land along the Hackensack River that was home to a narrow bridge that saved George Washington's army in 1776 -- and perhaps the Revolution itself. Today, the place is treated like a forgotten uncle, hidden from traffic by an abandoned junkyard, an apartment complex, a fenced-in transformer station and a parking lot for a former pizza restaurant. Out of sight, out of mind.

Things are so bad now that one of New Bridge's prime advocates, Kevin Wright of River Edge, recently announced that he was resigning from a state job promoting New Jersey's historic spots. People "do not see this as sacred ground," said Wright, a former president of the Bergen County Historical Society. "There is something fundamentally clueless" about the lack of interest.

To understand Wright's passion, consider this history:

The fall of 1776 was not a good one for George Washington's résumé. By late November, Washington was holed up in a Hackensack house, near what is now the Bergen County Courthouse. His army was in shambles and demoralized. To many American leaders, Washington was increasingly viewed as incompetent.

It's no wonder that Thomas Paine, who had essentially embedded himself in 1776 with American soldiers in Fort Lee, was in the midst of writing "American Crisis" and the famous line: "These are the times that try men's souls."

At dawn on Nov. 20, 1776, Hessian and British army units sneaked across the Hudson River and up the Palisades cliffs in Closter. The idea was to encircle the tired American army at Fort Lee. And if Washington could be captured, there were plenty of trees in Bergen County to hang him from.

But Washington saddled up his horse and galloped to Englewood, where he met up with panicked American soldiers. With British and Hessians only a few hundred yards behind

him, Washington led his troops over the narrow wooden bridge across the Hackensack River. That spot is now called "New Bridge Landing."

"It was really the moment that Washington rode out and took command of the army," Wright says -- and plenty of historians agree. With Washington's soldiers safely across the Hackensack, American engineers disabled the bridge and delayed the British long enough for Washington to escape all the way through New Jersey and into Pennsylvania -- and then return a month later with his famous Christmas crossing of the Delaware River to win the tide-turning Battle of Trenton. Last week, Revolutionary buffs paid homage to Washington in Trenton. In River Edge, New Bridge Landing was deserted, quiet, forgotten. The irony was not lost on New Bridge's advocates. "Washington would have never won in Trenton if New Bridge was not there," said Tim Adriance of Bergenfield, a member of the county historical society and a specialist in restoring Colonial homes. "But no one seems to recognize that." It all seems so easy to fix. And yet, it all seems so complicated.

One problem seems to be jurisdiction. The site is technically a state park, but it is administered by a park commission whose members are appointed by surrounding towns and Bergen County. Another problem is the lack of a full-time curator. And then there is the old junkyard property that could be a museum and visitors' center if only the land was cleansed of toxic waste. New Bridge's advocates secured \$1 million in federal funds to buy the junkyard in 2000. But after the junkyard auto parts were moved, state workers never capped the land to prevent the spread of toxic substances.

The state never even took down the old junkyard fence or sign. "There is no doubt the state directed its attention to other places," said state Sen. Loretta Weinberg, who has campaigned for years to gain recognition for New Bridge Landing. "It's a little jewel on the Hackensack River. But improvements are a long time coming." The junkyard is one example of the neglect. Another is flooding.

For years, Wright lived with his family at the Steuben House, the Colonial-era home given in gratitude to Washington's aide, Maj. Gen. Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. When the Hackensack would flood, Wright moved the home's collection of Colonial artifacts upstairs. But Wright left the house several years ago -- he needed a bigger place for his wife and three children. When the Hackensack overflowed its banks last April, 2 feet of water swept through Steuben House. Among the damaged artifacts was a journal kept by Gen. Nathaniel Greene. Today, some historical items are stored in tractor-trailers on the site. But even if the artifacts were displayed again, the site is lacking basic restrooms for visitors. Parking is limited, too. Perhaps the most tragic casualty is Kevin Wright. "I've given my life to this," he said. "I'm retiring out of frustration."