

Historic Widow White's Tavern bit the dust with nary a note

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BERNARDS TWP. — In an irony that takes on extra poignancy during the Fourth of July weekend, it is safe to say that downtown Basking Ridge is best known for a Revolutionary War site that no longer exists.

The site, Widow White's Tavern, is invariably mentioned in any description of Basking Ridge because it was there that Continental Army General Charles Lee was captured by the British on Dec. 13, 1776.

The inn stood near the southwest corner of South Finley Avenue and Colonial Drive, opposite the convent of the St. James Roman Catholic Church. Today, however, there is not so much as a trace of it.

"Supposedly, this is the site," said Margaret Murphy of Colonial Drive, whose home is near the old foundation. "There had been a sign up at one time but somebody took it."

While there may not be a sign to mark the spot, the story behind it appears in a countless number of books.

Lee was second in command behind George Washington when he decided to leave his troops in Bernardsville and spend the night at Widow White's Tavern. In the morning, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a small British patrol and was carried away wearing nothing more than a night shirt and slippers.

The incident became a major scandal. That, along with the common view that Lee was arrogant and reckless, have made his capture a popular element of Revolutionary lore.

Private Residence

The circumstances behind the demise of the building itself are not nearly as clear. However, there is no question that Widow White's Tavern still stood as an altered but occupied private residence as recently as the 1940s.

According to "Historic Somerset," written by J.H. Von Horn in 1965, the "last vestige of the original building (a fireplace) was destroyed a few years ago when the residence of the late Franklin Conklin Sr., was demolished."

By then, the structure had undergone numerous incarnations as an inn, a farm and a summer home. Its early history was detailed in a paper written

by Oscar M. Voorhees in 1933.

In the mid-1700s, the home was owned by Samuel Brown who married Mary Whitaker of Mine Brook. In 1763, Brown died and the home was left to his widow.

Within a year, Mary Brown married Ebenezer White. They lived together in her house until Mr. White died and Mary became "Widow" White. She was about 50 when Lee paid his fateful visit and was still alive in 1794 when she wrote her will.

The subsequent ownership of the house was detailed in a paper written by Dr. William Pennington in 1887.

The house passed through many hands, with a Frenchman named Charles De Loney first renting it. In 1820, a Dr. Boyle lived in the house when a would-be assassin shot at him through a window, prompting him to move.

William Lewis later bought the house and added to it, "leaving the room in which Gen. Lee was taken prisoner, intact." The next owners included Stephen Bennett, a Mr. Morris, James H. Thompson and Colonel J.F. Cox, who was listed as the owner on an 1873 map. A banker then bought the site and sold it to Malcolm Thompson.

Thompson's son, Edward C. Thompson, was interviewed by *The Bernardsville News* just after his 90th birthday in 1952. He said the former Widow White property was then a 106-acre farm, with strangers coming to the door all the time to ask to go through the historic farmhouse.

A similar story was told in "Somerset County — 250 Years," by the Somerset Press. "Once a sign, 'Lee's Lodge,' graced the door, but so many came intending to explore the house from top to bottom — some even demanding to be fed — that it was taken down and much of its history forgotten."

In 1902, Newark industrialist Franklin Conklin Sr. bought the site as a summer home. However, the history of the house was far from forgotten.

A newspaper article from 1906 noted that the original structure had been "very much smaller" and "looked quite different."

Another newspaper article, from 1907, said Conklin had "modernized" the structure and changed its interior



WHITE'S TAVERN, Basking Ridge

but had retained one room "exactly as it was 131 years ago ... a pretty little chamber on the second floor where General Lee was making a late breakfast when the troop of British cavalymen galloped over ..."

Around that time, two large colonial revival homes were built on either side of the Conklin home and were soon occupied by the owner's two sons, Franklin Jr. and Ludolph.

"The Conklins had a series of houses. Three, I believe," said Priscilla Bruno of North Finley Avenue. "They represented the privileged people from New York who liked to be here for the summer."

In April 1943, Conklin died at age 85. His obituary in *The Bernardsville News* noted that his summer home "is the site of the historic Widow White's tavern."

The obituary would mark the last time this newspaper would refer to Widow White's Tavern as an existing structure. The fate of the building does not appear to have been reported.

John Placko of Colonial Drive, who once worked for Franklin Conklin Jr. as superintendent of the estate, said there was "no sign at all" of the building when he was hired in May 1950.

Other longtime residents said they had no idea when the building was torn down.

Fred W. Kampmier III, a past president of the Basking Ridge Historical Society who now lives in Connecticut, had a vague recollection.

"It seems to me, there were claims of a lot of alterations and that it really did not represent what it had been," Kampmier said. "There were no rules or regulations at that time, just maybe a handful of people who had concerns."