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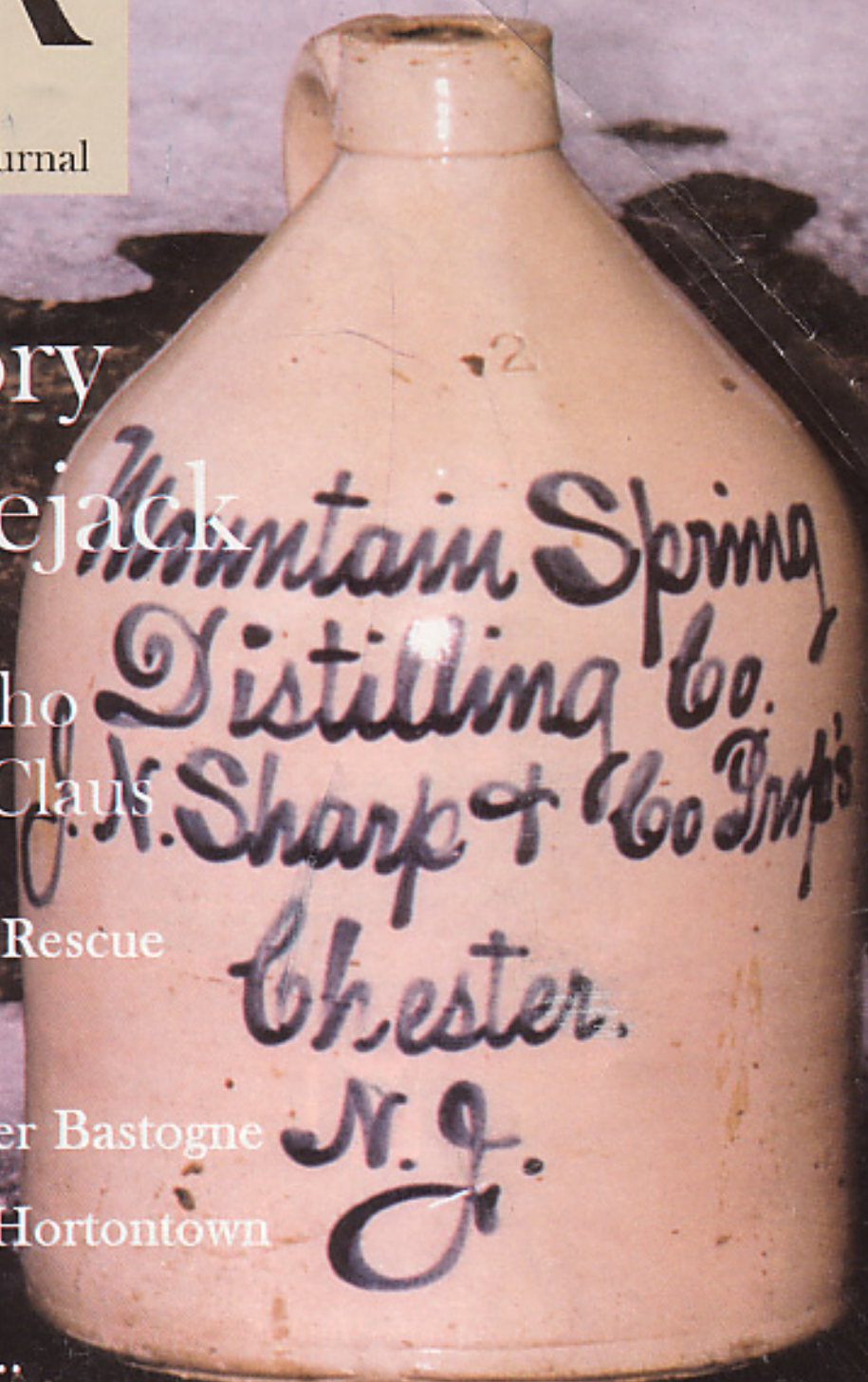
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The Peapack Caverns

BY C.G. WOLFE

According to legend, local Lenape Indians would take refuge in the limestone caves beneath what is now Peapack, when enemy Mohawk-raiding parties would attack their villages. It wasn't until 1902 however, that the caverns were officially "discovered" by workers of the Todd Lime Quarry.

Workers at the quarry had an idea that there were caves beneath them for sometime but the fissure in the rock that appeared to be the only opening was too narrow to climb through. Finally in 1902, curiosity got the better of two employees and they dropped a couple of sticks of dynamite into the crevice and blew a hole wide enough to crawl through. What they found inside astounded them

After squeezing through the hole and wriggling through a narrow passage, the two men came to a chamber that was high enough to stand up in. The chamber was 100 feet long and 20 feet wide. The walls were covered in shimmering limestone and stalactites dripped from the dome-like ceiling.

At the far end of the chamber, they found another passage and clawed their way up a 20-foot incline to discover a second chamber similar in size and as beautiful as the first. A reporter from the *Newark Evening News* explored the cave shortly after its discovery and described the chamber as, "weird in the extreme."

"As you enter with a lantern or miners hat," he wrote, "the stalactites flash from the dome as though suspended



The entrance to the Peapack Commercial Cavern around 1902. Pictured from left to right are quarry owner Philip Todd, Ruth Riegle Burrell, Clarence Belton, Archie Belton, Seymour Johnston, Marion Johnston, and Mrs. Thomas Johnston. (Photo courtesy of Ruth Hill Thomson)

in air, while the sides of the cavern glow with a mellow-red light. Before you is a formation of reddish crystals, shaped like a pulpit, and above that what looks like a frozen waterfall."

At the far end of this upper corridor was a third chamber that even surpassed the grandeur of the first two. It was circular with a lofty, "gothic" ceiling that "no architect ever designed...in more graceful lines." Opposite to the larger chamber was a passage that led to an underground lake with water as opaque as the air.

As news spread of the incredible caverns, folks flocked to Peapack to get a first-hand look. Enterprising merchants stocked up on overalls, lanterns, and miners helmets and one of the quarry's workmen, Elias Guest, allegedly put an old door in front of the entrance and began charging admission. Soon the local Methodist church put in walkways and a gate and was given permission to charge 25 cents admission. After a week it was reported that souvenir hunters strip-

ped most of the stalactites from the caves, but the sightseeing tours continued until 1907. No one is sure why the caverns were closed, but the entrance was sealed and the quarrying operation continued.

In 1958 more caves were discovered beneath the quarry when 600 tons of limestone mysteriously disappeared. The stone had collapsed into an underground chamber that contained 300 to 400 feet of passageways, with a series of branching rooms. The largest was some 50 feet in diameter and one of the rooms reportedly contained a small pool of water.

Though many former school kids have confessed to playing hooky and taking refuge in the caves over the past few decades, the entrances have been lost to history. Today a residential development sits atop the underground wonder and for now the legendary caverns remain a faded memory from the past.

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