

Rowan House Is Oldest True Colonial Structure

Traditions, Wrought by Vivid Imaginations, Give False History to Many Old Buildings in Mercer County.



OLD ROWAN HOUSE.

Students of history which deals with Mercer County in Colonial and Indian days very frequently complain of unreliable records and false traditions which are woven at this late period about every building which has been on its foundations anywhere from 150 to 200 years. Tradition has been so built up by fertile imaginations, that now, when one comes up with a quaint house in an isolated and unfrequented spot, approach to the historic relic is made with feeling of awe and eyes alert for port holes out of which peaceful Quakers once discharged guns at the heads of hostile Indians with such deadly aim that anywhere from one to ten aborigines gave up their lives in a single month. When time-worn and worm-eaten doors leading to the interiors of these historic places are opened, there is more straining of eyes, searching for blood stains on floors and walls, made by the life blood of Indians who were brought inside to die after they had received mortal wounds from shots fired out of the port holes.

Just below Broad Street Park, somewhat to the south of Broad Street and about a quarter of a mile from the home of Dr. Charles C. Abbott, there stands an old dwelling on property owned by A. Kinsey Rowan, which has the reputation of having been the scene of many bloody conflicts in the Indian days. Popular tradition has it that apparently plugged holes along the front wall of the house were once mouths through which guns, with sturly Quakers at the trigger ends, belched forth showers of death upon molesting Indians. Further than this, there are persons who will point out dark stains on the floors inside the house, maintaining with bloody resolution that here and there, as indicated by the stains, a Red Man bled to death.

This, of course, is a pretty tale, with its mixture of blood and Quaker heroism. It is not told with intent to falsify, but because young minds have been so persistent with the Indian stories, associating them with the old house, that they have become to be accepted as true. As a matter of fact, there never was a hostile Indian within gun shot of the Rowan house, as it is now called. The places which are said to have been port holes are the remains of timber bases in the wall, supporting a pent house, built on so many of the old time houses to protect the doors and windows of the lower story from the rains and snows. Ends of the supporting timbers are still in the wall, having the appearance that they are plugs in one time holes. As to the blood stains, they are just weather marks on the old floors. These things have proselytized history into false tradition.

OF HISTORIC WORTH.

The Rowan house does not enjoy real Indian history. It is, however, of extreme historic interest and value for the reason that it is the best preserved and most intact Colonial house in this country. It is unquestionably the oldest whole standing relic of the Colonial period. It was built in 1706, by Isaac Watson, who came to America in 1684, from Farnfield, Kent, England. He was the son of William Watson, who, with another son, John, came to America with him. They landed in Philadelphia. In the autumn of 1684 William Watson came up the Delaware River, searching for desirable farm lands. He approved of the bluff woodlands and meadows below Broad Street Park and decided to settle there. He bought the land of the West's Key Proprietors, and on it built a log house, in which he died, near the site of the Rowan house. After the death of the father, Isaac Watson erected the present stone house.

Then this Watson house, none of the Colonial period was more substantially constructed. The stone used were taken from the falls of the Delaware at Trenton. They were transported to the Watson plantation on flat boats. The walls are 18 inches thick from foundation to roof. The original roof is now covered with tin. The old stone chimneys have been rebuilt of brick and dormer windows have been placed in the roof. Otherwise, except for the absence of the old pent house around the top of the first story, the building is as it was when it passed from the Watson family.

In the days of the Watsons there was, of course, always some danger of Indian attack. Realizing this the builder took several precautions to protect his valuables from possible invasion of the Red Men, who never came. The most noteworthy of these precautions are "hunkey"

holes under the flooring. The floor joists are placed on stone piers. Running the length of the house and across the gables, there are two wooden beams about fifteen by twenty inches. In these beams there are holes large enough to hold the valuable possessions of most families of today. These holes were hidden from view by floor boards, certain of which were left unnailed to give easy access to the hiding holes.

PECULIAR CONSTRUCTION.

All of the partitions in the house are of 12 and 16 inches wide cedar boards, indicating the growth of sturly cedar trees on the Watson plantation. There is no lathing or plastering within the house. Isaac Watson, the builder, appears to have been in every sense a successful man. In fact, extending his original possessions was between 700 and 800 acres of land, extending toward the west nearly to Riverview Cemetery and to the east as far as the present home of Dr. Abbott.

William Watson and Isaac Watson, the son, were both engaged as farmers. It is highly probable that they extensively used Philadelphia as their market. Running from the river to the Watson plantation there was a creek which was navigable for small boats to within a short distance of the house built by Isaac. This was known as Watson's Creek. The Indians called it Achpochoquasink, meaning a place for making corn bread. This creek was a short stream with a tortuous channel. It was finally straightened up when the Delaware and Raritan Canal was built.

The original main stream was close to the foot of the bluff upon which the Watson house is built, leaving it at the bend where the bluff turns to face south and southwest; then it continued its course in a zig-zag way until Sandy Point was reached and then made its way into the Delaware River. In 1778 this creek was wide enough to permit passage of an American sloop, for about that time a sloop was fired into and sunk in Watson Creek by a British vessel. This sloop's bowsprit is now deeply buried in the firm earth at the mouth of the creek and trees are growing over it. It is not improbable that this event was largely responsible for the filling up of the direct channel of the creek.

Upon the death of Isaac Watson, the land passed to John Watson, his son, who appears to have closely followed in the footsteps of his father until 1774, when he divided his holdings with William Watson, his son. This division split the Watson farm into two parts, one of them being the land now occupied by John Watson on the northern side of South Broad Street, and the other the farm of Dr. Abbott on the southern side. The Watson farm finally passed to one Joshua Norton, who was succeeded by John Norton, his son. John Norton moved from the Watson homestead and was succeeded there in turn by Benjamin Van Schotok. Later, in 1859, Ephraim Abbott got the place. A. Kinsey Rowan, its present owner, bought it in April, 1862, or 175 years after William Watson had established the plantation.

OWNERS OF BLUFF.

The bluff along the Delaware River, on the New Jersey shore, from where the canal crosses Broad Street at the offices of the John A. Rosblings Sons' Company to Hordentown was entirely taken up and owned between 1673 and 1858 by seven families. At this time not a square rod of it is owned by descendants of the original owners except that which constitutes the farm of Dr. Abbott, adjoining the original Watson homestead tract. John Abbott, great-grandfather of Dr. Abbott, owned the present John Abbott homestead property, and it has since been in the family.

Henry Watson Dunn, superintendent of the Delaware and Raritan Canal, is a descendant of William Watson. He has in his possession a handsome oil painting of Isaac Watson's house. There are a number of Watson descendants living in Hordentown and a few of other original settlers of this land reside in Trenton in the Laurie, Pierson and Schooley families.