

Ocean County To Purchase Old Cedar Bridge Tavern

by Victoria Ford



*The Original Bar;
Cedar Bridge Tavern*

If walls could talk, the Cedar Bridge Tavern's pine partitions would have a very long and fascinating story to tell – a story of pioneering and war and victory, of love and loss and loyalty.

Located along an unpaved road in Barnegat just a half-mile or so off busy state highway 72, the structure is perhaps Ocean County's oldest and most historically significant. It was constructed in the 1740s and is the site of the Battle at Cedar Bridge, the last documented land engage-

ment of the American Revolution.

Stafford Township Historical Society president and Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission member Tim Hart described the building's survival after all this time as "a miracle of history," considering the potential threats posed by residential and commercial growth and development, road construction and forest fires.

The credit for the good overall condition of the property today is owed entirely to its owner and occupant of the past 50 years, 82-year-old World War II veteran Rudolph Koenig, who bought it in 1959. At that time, according to Koenig, the parcel was 200 acres and the purchase price was \$12,000. The building itself, when he bought it, was in a state of disrepair.

"You fell through the floors," he said. So he cut and laid new pine flooring, repaired the windows and so forth. Over the years, Koenig, a union electrician by trade, took great care to fix what was broken while preserving the building's original integrity.

In the 1970s, he said, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation bought and preserved all but five of the acres.

"He deserves a historic preservation award," Hart said of Koenig. He explained the building has fared far better, having

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been occupied, than it ever could have otherwise. Empty, it would have been a sitting target for vandals, squatters, arsonists, whomever.

Happily, the tavern's future is as safe as its past was lucky, thanks to the cooperation of several likeminded people at the county level, including the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders, now finalizing the purchase of the building and surrounding acreage for \$120,000, with the goal of restoring the Cedar Bridge Tavern and securing its rightful place on the National Register of Historic Places.

As part of the agreement, Koenig will continue to live in the building for the rest of his life. Thereafter, the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation will assume responsibility for the property's management, maintenance and care. The process of getting the building on the Register will begin as soon as the county gains control of the property and could take as long as two to three years to complete, according to Hart.

Parks department director Mike Mangum said only minor details like survey and title transfer remain before the deal is finalized, and "we are hoping to get that done relatively quickly."



*Northwest view of the tavern taken in 1938
by Nathaniel R. Ewan as part of the
National American Buildings Survey.*

The tavern has long been on local historians' radar. In fact, it was the only building in the county deemed worthy of inclusion in the 1930s' National Park Service's Historic American Buildings Survey, the very earliest federal historic preservation program, which sought to document the nation's architectural heritage

and to interpret its historic resources.

Hart said the number of owners the building has had in its lifetime is not known, but half a dozen or more known innkeepers have been identified, and much more research remains to be done. The more people come forward with helpful knowledge or information about the building, the richer the picture of its history becomes, he explained.

While it is a relief to see the county's efforts of the past few years finally coming to fruition, Mangum said, there are many challenges yet to face.

"Now the hard work starts," he said, referring to laying out the framework of a long-term plan for preservation.

Looking ahead, Mangum said, “(the county) will make a significant investment in the place, to restore and preserve it,” which, when the time comes, will require the expertise of specialized historic preservation architects, he said.

Of course, none of the hands-on work will begin while Koenig is still living there and, in that sense, the county is hoping to have a good, long time to get their plans together.

“It’s his home, and we have to be mindful of that,” Mangum said.

As for the site’s possible future uses, “the Freeholders are the ultimate decision-makers,” he added.

A Trip Into the Past, Both Near and Distant

A visit to Koenig one cool, early autumn afternoon found him relaxing in the shade at a make-shift picnic table, enjoying the fresh air and the company of some old friends. He was happy to guide a couple of curious guests on a tour of his gardens and home, chatting and clearing a path as he went - stooping to move aside a wire basket full of freshly picked peppers, shuffling through the odd handful of paperwork, dusting off an old book – and noting points of interest in every room.



*A present-day view of the tavern.
Photo Credit: Jack Reynolds*

Originally from Brooklyn, Koenig served in the United State Navy and found himself on a torpedo boat in the South Pacific during the Second World War.

“I did my three years and I got out,” he said, but not before earning a Bronze Star medal, awarded for heroism. After completing his military service at the age of 21, he moved to New Jersey with his parents; he was 34 years old when he became the owner and caretaker of one of the county’s most valuable pieces of property.

In the eat-in kitchen, which was added on sometime around 1820, he said, a framed news story about the tavern from a March 1934 issue of the *Courier-Post* hangs on a wall above an antique round-top, claw-foot dining table, cluttered with miscellany.

In addition to being a collector of antiques, Koenig, it seems, is a man of great many hobbies, evidence of which

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can be found everywhere – in the fish-filled ponds and the lush flowers, vegetables and herbs he grows outside and in his greenhouse off the kitchen (“I live off the garden there,” he said. “At least I know what I’m eating”); in the half-finished projects lying about the yard, the garage-cum-workshop and, of course, the house. “Curious,” he offered with a shrug, in the way of an explanation. “When I want to know something, I go to the books,” he said. “No fiction.”

And there, in a room off the kitchen, stands the heart and soul of the Cedar Bridge Tavern: the original solid pine bar, its top and shelving completely intact, which Mangum later described as “probably the oldest and best example of that around.”

To wonder what conversations took place within those walls, in front of that fireplace; to imagine some of the earliest New Jerseyans, sitting at the bar and drinking, laughing and scheming together; to see the effects of time on the painted wood, cut from the very trees that surround and protect the building is to feel, somehow, the very weighty presence of the past.

The story goes, the secluded tavern served as a Loyalist hangout and hideout where the notorious and dastardly Capt. John Bacon and his band of murderous, plundering Pine Robbers took both refreshment and refuge.

In late December 1782, Capt. Richard Shreve of Burlington County’s light horse infantry, along with Capt. Edward Thomas of the Mansfield militia, found and fought Bacon and his men at the tavern’s nearby bridge over Cedar Creek, which would lend its name to the affair. Local residents rushed to Bacon’s aid, helping to successfully fend off the militia’s attack. Bacon escaped unharmed that day, only to be found again months later, and killed, just a few miles away in what is now Parkertown.



This December marks the 225th anniversary of the Affair at the Bridge at Cedar Creek. The public is invited to attend the special ceremony and historic presentation scheduled to take place at the Cedar Bridge Tavern on Dec. 27 at 2 p.m., at which time representatives from the county will

publicly announce its purchase of the site. For additional information about the anniversary celebration, contact the Stafford Township Historical Society at (609) 597-0410.