

A Pine Barrens Odyssey to Camden

Traveling Tuckerton's Old Stage Road

By PAT JOHNSON

Twelve-year-old Leah Blackman's trip in 1829 from Little Egg Harbor to Camden by horse and buggy on the old Stage Road was an arduous affair.

The poor little girl no doubt suffered buckboard butt as she and her father bounced along the sand roads through the pines, though of course she was too prim to mention such a thing. Certainly she recalled the cold of their January trip, a trip taken to purchase a silk dress, gold earrings and a black-fringed shawl for her fashion "tasty" mother and to visit relatives in Philadelphia.

The cold affected her legs and feet so that she could hardly stand when they stopped for the night at Samuel Swain's hotel in Marlton, she recounted in her writings. It took them a day and a half to travel the route.

On a recent warm, March day a group of five local history lovers retraced her route and back again in just five hours by super-cab pickup. The route would take them through thick pine forests, past the cellar holes of long-departed inns and forgotten towns.

Bass River historians Steve Eichinger and Pete Stemmer had ridden the route at least twice before, and Eichinger had written about it for their historical newspaper, *The Bass River Gazette*. Eichinger, a forest ranger for some 30-odd years, knows the pinewoods like the back of his hand. "He's the Daniel Boone of Bass River. He can see where an old road was, when all I can see is trees," said Stemmer.

For this trip the two had invited the great-great-grandson of Leah Blackman, Lyle Richards, a local historian from West Creek, to join them, as well as archeologist Budd Wilson from Green Bank. Four of the five voyagers left the Acme parking lot in Tuckerton in Eichinger's truck and picked up modern-day Stage Road a block away. We traveled on macadam past new housing developments.

"We're going to start at Leah (Mathis) Blackman's birth place," said Stemmer.

We turned off the pavement at Munion Field Road and bounced along the first of many sand roads we would travel that day. At Millie Road we found the site of the old homestead,

but, alas, the sandstone foundation has been carted off to make someone's fireplace. Now there is just a space between trees and the ever-present Indian grass of the Pine Barrens.

"There used to be a patch of Lily of the Valley here 100 yards square, the largest I've ever seen, probably the largest in the state," said Eichinger. But this, too, had gone — most likely in the repeated controlled burns the state forest fire rangers periodically set to rid the forest of undergrowth.

Eichinger and Stemmer then discussed which route little Leah must have taken to walk to her school in Mathistown over by Mathis' Pond (also known as Robert's Pond) on Route 9. Whether she walked east or west, north or south, the truly amazing thing is how much she begged her mother to let her go to school as she chronicled in her *Leah Blackman's Old Times and Other Writings*, edited by Steve Dodson and published by the Tuckerton Historical Society.

Richards delights in recounting this fact about his ancestor to present-day schoolchildren when he volunteers at the Tuckerton Seaport. "They have a hard time believing it," he said.

So we started on our "stage coach" trip to Camden from what would have been Leah's front door.

"They left at 2 or 3 in the morning, way before daybreak and in the middle of winter," noted Stemmer.

We backtracked to Stage Road and rode to Pilgrim Lake campgrounds, where we stopped at the corner and peered into the first of many depressions in the earth. "That's the foundation hole of the Red Tavern," said Eichinger. "It was built before the Revolutionary War, and was also known as the Bass River Hotel."

Inns or taverns were built every six miles or so along the stage roads for passengers to rest and, most importantly, for their horses to rest and be watered.

When Stage Road seemed to dead-end at a T with Route 679, Eichinger continued across and into the woods on a sand road that ultimately led to a private home. Looking off into the woods, Eichinger pointed out where West Stage Road used to be, a sand road that went through Leektown and Morgan's

Bank and finally to Maple Avenue in New Gretna. This phantom road was still being used in the 1920s, said Eichinger. We eagerly took his word for it; the pines and oaks growing in the "road" looked the same as all the others.

Now we took a side trip to Green Bank to pick up our archeologist friend, Budd Wilson. Back in New Gretna on Route 679, we went up a hill that I'd never noticed before but Eichinger knew as "Sand Hill," a spot that drivers of both horses and cars used to detour around before the road was paved, presumably in the 1930s.

At a spot across from a mailbox sporting a shadow-cowboy (one of those black silhouettes made out of wood that seem to delight rural folk), we veered off into the woods again on another nondescript sand road. Now we were heading toward Quaker Bridge, Bodine Field and Harrisville, or Harrisville.

The pines seemed to close around us. Eichinger navigated expertly through patches of hubcap-deep "sugar" sand. It's called sugar sand because it's as gleaming white as any beach on Long Beach Island.

"I traveled this in a Model-A Ford when I was 20 years old, in 1960," said our host.

Eichinger and Wilson had a conversation about "Leek's wharf" on the Wading River, directly across from where Eichinger now lives in New Gretna. Supplies bound for the iron forges deep in the pines and for metropolitan Tuckerton used to be off-loaded at the wharf.

Wilson worked on the archeological digs in Batsto from 1958 to 1963 with Jim Starkey and on Martha's Furnace in 1968. Both were iron towns that sprang up in the pines where bog iron bubbled up along the banks of rivers and streams.

Before 1850, the area was known as Wading River Forge, then McCartyville, then Harrisville, said Eichinger. Wilson said alongside the Wading River Forge was a slitting mill, used to make iron nails.

We pulled out into an area that used to be a settlement around Bodine's Tavern and now is called Bodine's Field. The tavern was built in the 1790s on the east side of the Wading River by John Bodine, who had been a captain in the Revolutionary War. After the war, tavern licenses



Photographs by Pat Johnson

ROADS OF HOME: (Top right) Local historians (from left) Lyle Richards, Pete Stemmer, Budd Wilson and Steve Eichinger (shown at Wilson's house in Green Bank) recently traced the Tuckerton Stage Road all the way to Camden's Cooper House (top left). The trip took them through the Pine Barrens, past vanished taverns and iron forge towns. The group traveled over sugar sand roads -- and the Batsto River (above left) and Quaker Bridge (above right).

were given preferentially to officers and widows of officers as a way to pay them back for their loyal service, explained Stemmer.

The young country's militia used to practice their drills at Bodine's Field. After the Revolution, it was compulsory for all men to report to a designated place four times a year for military training – and they usually congregated near a tavern, Stemmer said.

Not far from the where the tavern once stood was a place called Hay Landing, said Eichinger, where hay was unloaded from barges plying the tannin-stained waters of the Wading River. Now a back eddy of the river practically lapped at the edge of Bodine's Tavern's cellar hole.

Richards jumped into the depression and looked at the few remaining Jersey fieldstones caught in the roots of a red cedar tree.

Not far from Bodine's Tavern and Field was the town called Martha and Martha Furnace. Workers here, as well as the passengers from the stage and the well-traveled road to Camden and Philadelphia, made up the bulk of Bodine's customers.

Harrisville was a paper mill that turned salt hay as well as rags from urban areas into paper. Many scows must have traveled up the Wading River to Hay Landing.

Next stop on our Stage Road was the Washington Tavern, also called Sooy's Tavern. Joseph Wharton (who in the late 1800s amassed nearly a hundred thousand acres of Pine Barrens, called the Wharton Tract) kept cattle on the fields around this site; the stone remnants of a large silo barn, an underground storage for silage, is not as old as the tavern foundation would have been. All trace of the tavern – built in the 1790s – is long gone.

Here five sand roads converged, all roads that carried commerce through the pines. One went to Green Bank, one to Friendship, one to Speedwell, another to a town once called Eagle, and, of course, Batsto.

"Are We There Yet?"

Another five miles through the pines brought us to another tavern cellar hole, called the Mount Tavern. This one is notable because it was the first stop that Leah Blackman and her father made on their cold, January trip. At this point they stopped to get warm; they had traveled four hours and about 15 miles.

"I wonder if Leah ever said to her dad, 'Are we there yet?'" said Richards.

We continued through the pines toward the Batsto River and Quaker Bridge. At one point Wilson told us we had just crossed "Brewster's Cripple." A cripple is an intermittent stream, which is different from a sponge. A sponge is a boggy area that was made by retreating glaciers, said

Wilson. Something about the prevailing winds would have carved out some depressions. Anyway, a sponge has no brook or rivulet feeding it – it seems to fill from above and below.

Eichinger said when he worked at Batsto as a forest ranger, he used to wander in the mansion's library. "I'd pick out books that used to describe what the area looked like then, and it looked like a desert."

Wilson agreed. "I used to tell people it was nothing like a pristine forest; it was more like a dirty Pittsburgh. You could stand in Batsto and see the forges and the smokestacks all around. They cut down all the trees. There were 17 iron furnaces, and 13 furnaces were operating at the same time. Each one used 1,000 acres of wood a year to make charcoal; while they were in operation, a quarter of a million acres were cut."

Wilson estimated the oldest trees in the area were the ones planted in the forge workers yards, such as but-tonwoods and the odd but fragrant catalpa trees, as well as the seed trees they would leave periodically to reseed the forest.

"Every once in a while you'll see a huge pine," contributed Eichinger. "Maybe that was the seed tree."

Wilson said the last forge was built in 1814, and they all seemed to go out of business at once in the 1840s, when coal (to replace charcoal) and a superior grade of iron ore were discovered in Pennsylvania.

Finally we came to the Batsto River at Quaker Bridge. Today's bridge is made of steel, replacing the wooden bridge that Quakers had made in order to travel from Burlington City to the Little Egg Harbor Meeting House in Tuckerton.

Eichinger and Stemmer wondered aloud at the historical reports of drownings at old "swimming-over areas." Quaker Bridge was a swimming-over spot before the bridge was built. "It just isn't that deep," said Stemmer. Then someone remembered people of that era generally did not know how to swim.

Another tavern stood here once, aptly named the Quaker Bridge Tavern.

In Atsion we came out onto Route 206. Atsion was also an iron forge town; established in 1765, it made iron stoves, among other goods. The mansion house, with its iron sills, still stands. After iron stopped fueling the economy of Atsion, cotton was brought in to be made into thread.

At the crossroads with Route 620 were two taverns: the Pipers Tavern and Ephriam Cline's Hotel, where Leah and her father stopped again to water their horses.

We took modern Route 620 toward Camden. It's also called the Tuckerton Road, a nod toward its historic roots. We were getting close to the Delaware River now. We stopped in Marlton at the site where Samuel

Swain's hotel used to be, now a Wawa. Leah and her dad spent the night at Swain's and feasted on buck-wheat cakes, Jersey sausage, butter, cranberry sauce and cucumber pickles for dinner before retiring to sleep between cold linen sheets.

We ate our paper bag lunches and watched the traffic flow by.

"What would Leah have thought about this?" Richards mused.

We entered the stream of traffic and pushed on toward our destination, Copper's Point in Camden, where the Blackmans would have boarded a ferry to Philadelphia.

Richards noted that Leah and her father would have risen at 3 in the morning in order to make the ferry.

It was late in the afternoon as we drove through the row house slums, originally built at the turn of the century, some still inhabited, some just burnt-out shells. Razor wire ran along the tops of a warehouse.

A bit upriver from the Ben Franklin Bridge, we were stopped in our tracks by a construction company sign. In the distance, large cranes were moving materials about on the banks of the river. There wouldn't have been anything to see at the river, said Stemmer. The ferry slips are gone. But where the river road made a turn, a large building made completely of Jersey sandstone was still

standing, completely encircled with a high chain link fence. We gingerly sidestepped sewage leaking out into the street from the curb line to read a bronze plaque riveted on its side. This was the Benjamin Cooper house, built in 1734 and headquarters of the British and Hessians during the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777. After the war it was also a tavern, and those waiting for the ferry might have stood on its porch, if it was raining, Eichinger suggested.

I tried to imagine a little girl standing shivering on a January morning, waiting for the ferry, excited because she was going to shop in the luxury of 1829 Philadelphia.

Back in the pickup we battled road signs, got turned around but finally headed back toward the pines, fleeing the urban "progress."

"When you come here and see this," said Eichinger, "you can really appreciate what the Pinelands Commission is trying to do (in preserving the Pine Barrens). If it weren't for them, what would we have?"

Mindful of the time, Eichinger headed toward Route 70 and the shore points. Soon the expanse of the pine trees on either side soothed our South Jersey native souls. ♦

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