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STORIES of New Jersey

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THE OLD BARRACKS

Just off the business center in Trenton, in the shadow of the State House, stands an old building that has represented New Jersey at two world's fairs. Thousands of people saw its duplicates at San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 and at Philadelphia's Sesquicentennial Exposition in 1926. It is planned that it will again represent the State at the New York World's Fair of 1939. Veteran of two wars, witness of changing times, the Old Barracks, more than any other structure, means New Jersey.

Neither the French nor their allies, the Indians, came very close to Trenton during the French and Indian War (1754-63). But the reports of massacres in northwestern New Jersey and western Pennsylvania were enough to frighten settlers into asking for the protection of British troops. The British officers decided that Trenton, the largest town in the northern Delaware valley, was a suitable point from which to direct military operations.

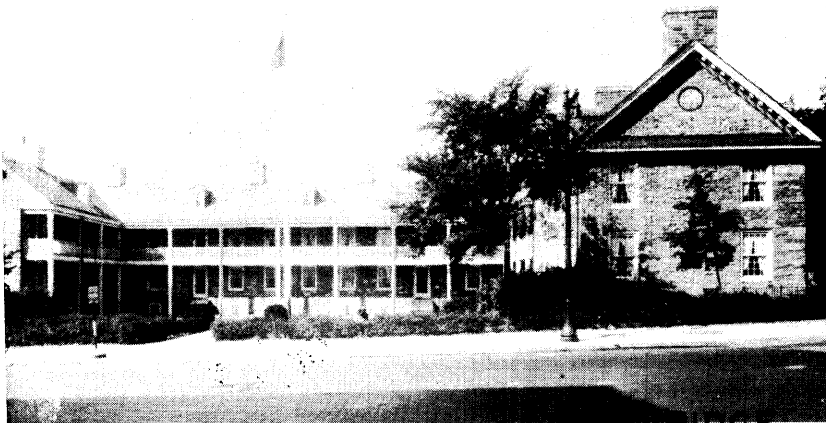
As the troops crowded into Trenton the colonists had to pay for their safety by giving up their privacy. Soldiers had to be quartered in the wood and stone houses of the town, and the citizens began to resent having to share their small comforts with their protectors. The quartering of troops on citizens throughout the colonies later formed the basis for one of the complaints against King George III, in the Declaration of Independence.

On March 31, 1758, local officials and many of the people who lived in and around Trenton sent a petition to the Colonial legislature, then meeting at Burlington. They could not bear the burden of having soldiers quartered with them "night and day," the petition read.

The legislature immediately appointed a committee to study plans for barracks at Trenton and other places where the people were similarly inconvenienced. The committee recommended that a barracks for 300 soldiers be built at Trenton

in the "most cheap" manner possible, not to exceed a cost of £1,400. Four other barracks at Burlington, New Brunswick, Elizabethtown and Perth Amboy were also planned.

Approximately an acre of ground at the west end of Front Street was bought by the commissioners for



The Trenton Barracks



The Courtyard Corner

£40; local stone was brought to the site; and masons and carpenters worked feverishly, urged on by the townspeople, who were anxious to be relieved of their houseguests. In December 1758, seven months after the work had begun, enough of the building was completed to accommodate 150 men; by the following March the barracks was finished.

Two stories high, with a main section 130 feet long, the building of sturdy, undressed stone with white lime mortar formed three sides of an open rectangle. The two wings were 58 feet long, and the width throughout was 18½ feet. Around the interior court were square columns, built to the overhanging roof and supporting

a second-floor balcony. Doors opening on the balcony permitted communication among the larger rooms on the second floor. Each entrance on the main floor had a stoop leading to the court.

By December 1759 an addition to the north wing had been completed to accommodate the officers, who were still quartered with the townspeople. This two-story Colonial building of the same material as the barracks proper is variously referred to as the Officers Quarters, Colonial House or Colonial Mansion.

Throughout the remainder of the war troops were continuously quartered in the building. Red-coated British regulars and Jersey Blues became a common sight in the town. On one occasion a regiment of Highlanders in their bright plaid uniforms stopped a while at the barracks.

For two years following the war the barracks stood empty. Then in 1765 the Colonial Legislature, anxious to get some return from the large building, passed a bill to sell "the perishable articles" and to rent the barracks to private families. The State reserved the right to use the building for its original purpose should the need arise again.

Until the outbreak of the Revolution the occupants of the barracks were not disturbed. Then, on November 7, 1776, just before the retreat across New Jersey from Fort Lee, General George Washington wrote to Governor William Livingston informing him that the Continental Army expected to use the Trenton Barracks as headquarters. Of course, in the flight that followed, establishing headquarters anywhere in New Jersey was impossible. But the pursuing British, hindered by their many wagons of plunder taken from towns and farms along the way, did stop here on December 8, 1776. Fifty Hessian jagers stationed in the barracks made use of the fine mahogany furniture stolen from the parsonage of Newark's First Presbyterian Church. Meanwhile, Tories driven from other New Jersey communities were lodged in the building under the protection of the British troops.

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In the early morning of December 26 the town was invaded by the American forces, who had crossed the river a few miles north. A number of Hessians made a stand near the barracks, fired one volley at the advancing Continentals and fled. This Battle of Trenton, coming so soon after a precipitate retreat, encouraged the Colonies to further efforts for freedom.

When informed of the loot left in the building by the fleeing Hessians Washington ordered it all returned to the proper owners, whether patriots or Tories. A tablet near the barracks now commends this deed.

When peace came in 1783 the Trenton Barracks was once more closed. With no further use for the building the State Legislature, unwilling to go into the real estate business as did its predecessor, passed a bill on June 1, 1786, to sell the property.

Trenton citizens seemingly lost interest in the old building, for there was no protest when it was decided to tear part of it down in 1813 to permit the extension of Front Street to the State House.

About 40 feet of the north end of the main section was demolished for the roadway and narrow sidewalks. The stone walls of the north wing were replaced by brick and the wooden balcony was removed. The interior was remodeled into apartments.

The south portion, also used in part for dwellings, retained its stone exteriors, but the wooden balcony was removed. Probably because it was white-washed, this section got the name White Hall, and that name stuck even after the building was taken over by the Widows' and Single Women's Home Society in the early 1850's.

In 1889 the Daughters of the American Revolution passed a motion to have the barracks purchased and maintained as an historic landmark. Fortunately, at the same time, the Widows' and Single Women's Society was seeking new quarters, and White Hall was put up for sale. A group of women organized as the Purchase Fund Committee, collected \$6,314.20 and bought the old, L-shaped portion of the barracks. Reorganized as The Old Barracks Association, this same group of women opened the building to the public in 1902.

Gradually the plan for the Old Barracks was expanded to include not only the maintenance of the existing buildings but the reconstruction of the historic structure to its original form. The late Chancellor Edwin Robert Walker searched for drawings, descriptions, bills, records--anything that would give a clue to how the Barracks looked originally. In a letter which received a wide circulation he detailed all the facts he had unearthed from dusty documents.

On April 27, 1911, the State Legislature provided

Officers' Quarters



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for the purchase of land in the vicinity of the Barracks. The City of Trenton authorized the vacating of the property on Front Street to provide a suitable approach to the building. Following an appropriation to reconstruct the Barracks, The Old Barracks Association in 1914 gave its portion of the building to the State. In return the Association was made the sole manager of the Barracks for all time.

Over a period of seven years the State expended \$103,500 for restoration of the building, and it has contributed \$2,500 annually since 1917 for maintenance. Additional income is derived from the 10¢ admission charge and rentals from patriotic groups which lease meeting rooms.



Peggy Warne Chapter Room

The societies which meet in the Barracks have furnished their rooms in Colonial style. Chairs, tables, secretaries, desks, a complete set of curly maple bedroom furniture, spinning wheels and highboys are arranged on the first floor.

Notable among the exhibits are a collection of Continental currency (one of the best in the world) and several pieces of Chinese porcelain used in an American home about 1790. The armory on the second floor includes, among many fine examples of Colonial and Indian weapons, a flintlock pistol made by Simon North, first official gunmaker in the United States, and swords carried by prominent Revolutionary officers. Paintings of Washington, the New Jersey signers of the Declaration of Independence and other famous Colonial figures decorate the walls. Only in the rooms of the Society of Colonial Dames, containing exhibits of about the 1820's, are the furnishings later than 1799.

The Barracks is open to visitors weekdays from 9:00 A. M. to 4:00 P. M.