

NEWS & NOTES *continued*

NEW JERSEY NOTES

On a Cold December Day

The story of a hidden treasury and a loose-lipped barmaid is often eclipsed by George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River.

➤ SINCE I HAVE a personal interest in the numismatics of our colonial and confederation periods, it should be no surprise that I also have developed an interest for the history of those days. The year 1776 is dear to me and many of my like-minded friends. Nationally, we celebrate that momentous year every July 4, but in Trenton, New Jersey, we mark it every December with a reenactment of George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River.

Most readers know about the Battle of Trenton, during which Washington and his army crossed the Delaware, surprised the Hessian garrison, and achieved a landslide victory on the morning of December 26, 1776. However, few are aware of the events concerning the British Army's arrival in Trenton, New Jersey, earlier that year.

When an army moved by foot

and wagon, word of its pending arrival traveled much faster than the army itself. In late November or early December 1776, New Jersey State Treasurer Samuel Tucker met with farmer John Abbott in a tavern in Trenton. Knowing the British were on their way, Tucker asked Abbott to hide the state treasury and papers at his farm to prevent capture by the army when it arrived, and Abbott agreed. Little known to them, a barmaid overheard their conversation...but more about her later.

As New Jersey treasurer, Tucker possessed sheets of New Jersey bills authorized by state legislation on February 20, 1776. Once

printed, the sheets were delivered in equal amounts to the two signers. After the first signatures were added, the signers exchanged the sheets and placed their signatures below the first one. The stacks were then given to the treasurer, who was directed to add his signature to £1,000 worth of notes at a time and use them as needed

to carry out state business. In West Jersey, the authorized signers were John Hart (signer of the Declaration of Independence), Samuel How (Burlington County deputy for the Provincial Congress) and Samuel Tucker (treasurer). In early December, the



▲ New Jersey treasury bills required three signatures to be valid. Not Actual Size

treasury consisted of bills signed by two and three men; only notes with three signatures were usable.

This emission of bills (the first since 1764) represented four authorized denominations: 6 shillings, 15 shillings, 30 shillings and £3. As an anticounterfeiting measure, the rag-paper notes featured the watermark NEW JERSEY and incorporated reflective mica flakes. The bills' fronts were printed in black and red ink, while the backs were rendered in black and pictured Benjamin Franklin's leaf-print design in the center. The Royal Arms were displayed on the front left, and the top and side devices displayed elaborate representations of the denomination, again to deter counterfeiting and to discourage raising the stated value.

But back to the barmaid. Her name was Mary Pointing, a Loyalist and probably the wife of a British Army officer. (Loyalists supported King George III and not the Revolutionary cause.) When the British Army entered Trenton on December 8, 1776, Pointing revealed the location of the state treasury to a British officer!



▲ John Abbott's Hamilton, New Jersey, home (above) served as the hiding place for the New Jersey State Treasury. Only the right half of the house existed in 1776. (The large three-bedroom addition at the left was constructed in 1840.)

PHOTOS: RAY WILLIAMS

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▲ This 15-shilling note bearing only two signatures was just one of many seized from Abbott's farmhouse.

Not Actual Size

On December 9, 1776, Lieutenant Thomas Hawkshaw, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Abercromby, marched 20 troops for about 5 miles to Abbott's estate and searched the farmhouse. They found a trunk in the attic that contained the partially signed bills. The fully signed bills were hidden in the basement, stashed in the bottom of a bin covered

with broken pottery, and went undiscovered.

It should be noted that a British document of protection for John Abbott was issued on December 9 on behalf of Colonel Rall and signed by General William Howe's aide-de-camp, Captain

Friedrich von Muenchhausen. To receive immunity, I assume Abbott took some type of loyalty oath to the British after the documents were found in his residence. In fairness to Abbott (and later to Tucker), none of us can really say what we would sign if our lives depended on it!

Tucker was captured on December 14, and applied for and was granted British protection by Colonel Rall on December 17. Eight days later, Washington led his army in a wonderfully successful surprise attack on the Hessians

stationed in Trenton. Colonel Rall was killed after being struck by a musket ball, and was buried in an unmarked grave in a Trenton churchyard. Tucker lived the rest of his life under the cloud of signing Rall's document.

I can only imagine what fun some soldiers might have had on leave after capturing large quantities of money from the enemy! So besides remembering December 1776 for just the Battle of Trenton, we also can remember the capture of part of the New Jersey state treasury, giving us two distinctly different collectable bills to enjoy.

There is an old saying that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. So what can we learn from this article? Don't conduct important business in a tavern within earshot of a barmaid!

I am a member of the Colonial Coin Collectors Club. I urge anyone with an interest in Colonial currency to visit www.colonialcoins.org.

—Ray Williams