

PRESERVATION SNAPSHOT

This monthly feature highlights recent and fascinating National Register listings and eligible properties, tax act projects, compliance review success stories, as well as outstanding local efforts in New Jersey's historic preservation.

Buildings in the Battles of Trenton

Trenton, NJ



Photo: gilderlehrman.org

It was a snowy Christmas on December 25, 1776 in Trenton, New Jersey. While blustery to the adults, it no doubt heightened the local children's excitement when they went to bed anticipating playing outside in the morning. Instead, the small town of Trenton was awakened by the sounds of cannon fire, shouts and galloping horses. So began the First Battle of Trenton in the Revolutionary War.

Several Trenton buildings remain that were involved in the battles of Trenton. There were two separate battles led by General George Washington and his exhausted troops. The first occurred on December 26, 1776, and the second one week later on January 2, 1777. Significant are the Trent House, Eagle Tavern and Douglas House. We will examine the leading roles of three others: the Trenton Friends Meeting House, St. Michael's Episcopal Church and the Old Barracks. All six are noteworthy in the development of Trenton in the Colonial era.

Let's back up almost 100 years in America's young history to 1679 when Trenton, New Jersey was founded by a Quaker named, Mahlon Stacy. Stacy went on to serve as a justice of the peace, and member of the Colonial Assembly. The history of the town is intrinsically linked to the Quaker Friends community, as members of the Friends Society were integrally involved in the development of Trenton throughout the 18th & 19th centuries.

Trenton Friends Meeting House

As a flourishing Quaker community, the Friends constructed their new Meeting House in 1739 on Hanover Street. It was a plain red brick, two-story building laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers and a gable roof. The date “1739” appeared in blue glazed bricks in one of the gable end walls. This may very well be the earliest example of patterned brickwork in Mercer County, NJ. It was also only the second religious structure in Trenton at the time.

The Meeting House was built by the Friend and mason, William Plasket “during the reign of King George II.” Plasket was also one of the first councilmen for Trenton when it received its Royal Charter in 1745.

The Meeting House flourished until the Revolutionary War. At that point, the repeated commandeering of the building for soldiers’ quarters, and the number of members expelled for supporting military activities reduced the numbers who attended meetings, when they could be held.



Trenton Friends Meeting House
Photo: Trenton Historical Society

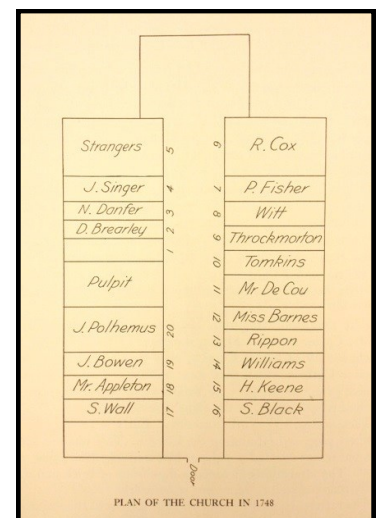
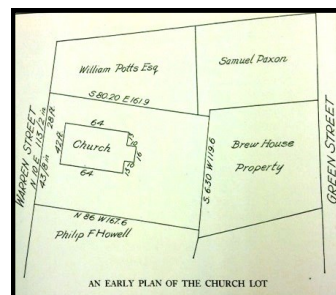
St. Michael’s Episcopal Church

Nine short years after the Meeting House’s construction, the local Church of England in America (Episcopal) congregation (as they would later be known) built their first Trenton structure in 1748. This was one of the oldest parishes in New Jersey, having organized years earlier in 1703.

The original gabled frame building on Warren Street was approximately 40’ square, and was the parish of many leading Trenton families. The churchyard contains several notable graves, including Revolutionary War figures David Brearley and Jonathan Rhea.

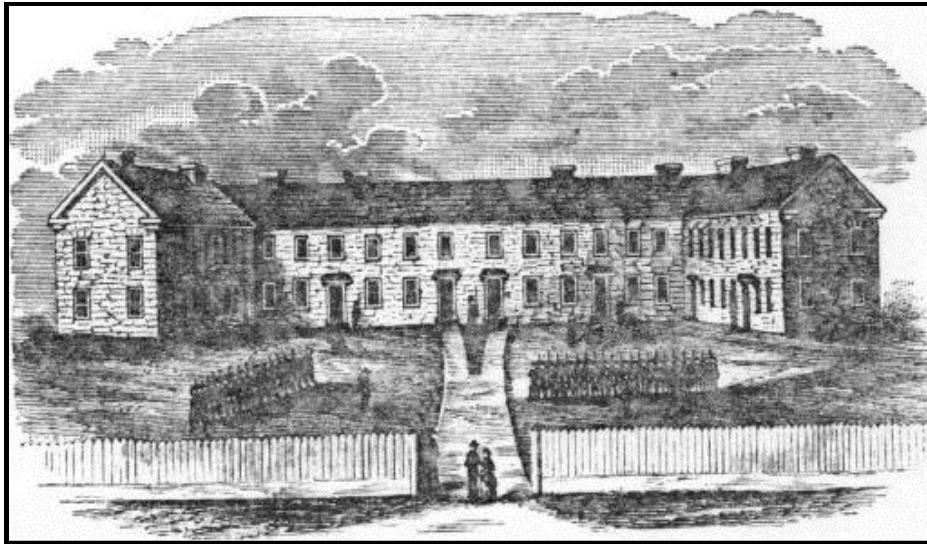
During the American Revolution, services were suspended at St. Michael’s because of the mixture of Loyalist and Revolutionary sentiment in the congregation. Many of the congregants were prominent in the move for independence. On July 1, 1776, St. Michael’s Church was closed by action of the Vestry, only seven days before the Declaration of Independence was read on the steps of Trenton’s Hunterdon County Court House. The church’s bell was carried away to prevent it being made into bullets (later returned, but given to Trenton Academy).

During the Hessian occupation of Trenton, the building was used as a barracks & stable, with artillery pieces stored in the churchyard.



St. Michael’s Church Lot Plan (I)
& Floor Plan (above)
Photos: NJSHPO

Old Trenton Barracks



Drawing of Old Barracks Trenton, NJ | Photo: Rutgers Alexander Library

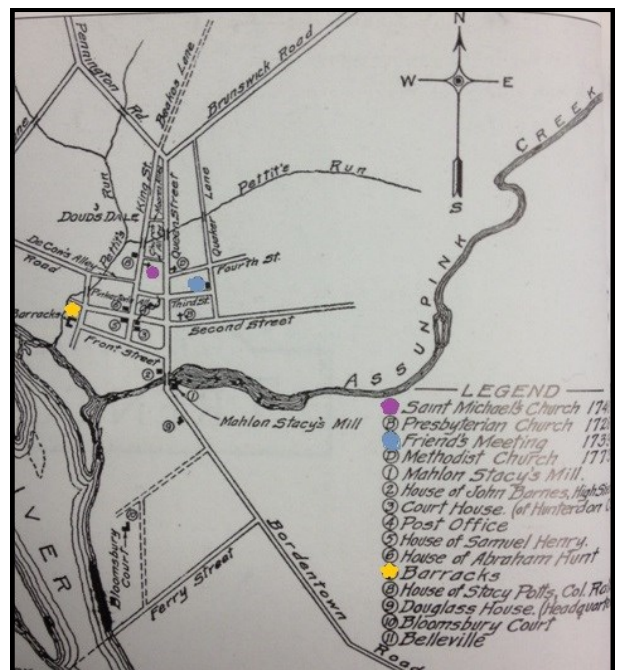
Ten short years after the Episcopal Church's establishment, 1758 saw the construction of a Trenton barracks building on what is now called, Willow Street. Erected by the NJ General Assembly to house 300 British troops during the winter months of the French & Indian War, it was one of five similar structures built around Colonial New Jersey to avoid housing troops within private households, which was technically against British law. The other four barracks were located in Burlington, Elizabeth, New Brunswick & Perth Amboy. Trenton is the only one remaining.

The first British troops to occupy the Old Barracks were part of the Inniskilling Regiment of Foot, composed almost entirely of Irishmen. According to an 1895 "History of Trenton" by Francis Bazley Lee, "Their peculiar dress created much interest among the people of the town."

The Old Barracks was used every winter through 1763. It was then, at the end of the French & Indian War, that the British soldiers left the Colonies. Without military occupants in the building, the Assembly ordered the sale of all furnishings and rented the Old Barracks.

Eleven years later, when the Revolutionary War began, the Old Barracks was again occupied by a succession of British, German and American soldiers, as well as prisoners of war.

Two weeks prior to the First Battle of Trenton, a party of English dragoons and some German Yagers arrived to occupy the building for the winter, along with a large number of Tory refugees from Monmouth & Burlington counties, who wished to place themselves under the protection of the English King. All were no doubt involved in Trenton's surprise battle the day after Christmas.



Locations of the three Buildings

*Image adapted from:
Trenton Historical Society*

The First Battle of Trenton

Christmas evening in 1776, General Washington and his army, horses and artillery had crossed the Delaware River approximately ten miles north of Trenton. This maneuver involved repeated ferrying of boats from Pennsylvania to the Jersey side in the freezing cold, sleet and blowing snow. Without resting, the troops began their snowy night march on foot, to surprise the Hessian army in Trenton just after dawn on December 26th. The battle lasted a mere 90 minutes, and netted Washington over 800 prisoners and new military provisions.

This First Battle of Trenton was fought largely on the two main streets of Trenton, around and near St. Michael's churchyard, the Trenton Barracks and Trenton Friends Meeting House. All of these buildings housed Hessian soldiers.



*"Crossing the Delaware"
Painting by Mort Kunstler*



Hessian Colonel Johann Rall, who commanded the Hessian troops, was at a friend's home Christmas evening playing cards/chess when he received a note of warning that the Continental Army was approaching. He put it in his coat pocket without reading it. The Colonel was shot in the early morning attack, and died later that day.

Colonel Johann Rall

Photo: Wikipedia

The Friends Meeting House, whose wooden floor already bore the marks of the quartered soldiers' bayonets, was damaged by cannonball fire in the east gable during the nearby fighting of the First Battle of Trenton.

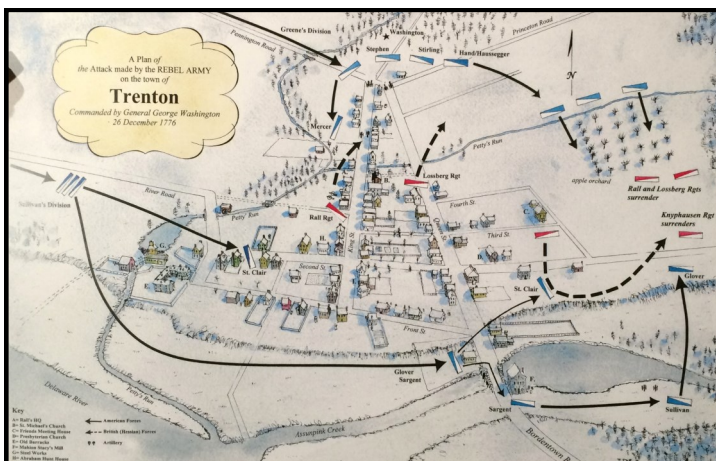
It was in the apple orchard adjacent to the Meeting House where the remaining Hessian troops surrendered.

Following the battle, Washington's army and their captured prisoners crossed the Delaware River back into Pennsylvania to regroup, replenish and revive their men and horses.



First Battle of Trenton

Photo: paintingandframe.com



*Map of First Battle of Trenton
Image: Old Barracks Museum*

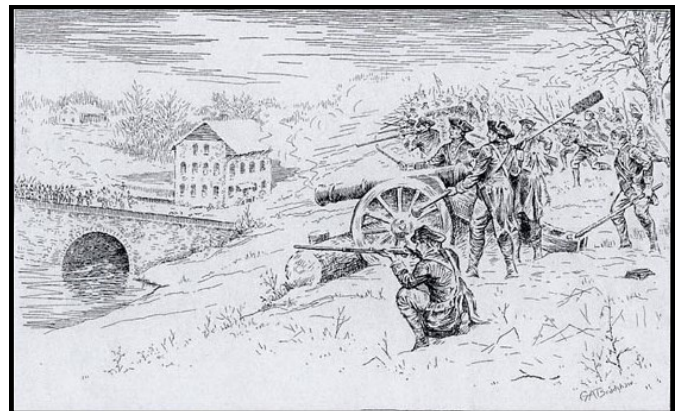


First Battle of Trenton colorized engraving by Everett

Photo: tavernkeepers.com

The Second Battle of Trenton

The Second Battle of Trenton occurred one week later in the late afternoon of January 2, 1777, when the British returned to march on Trenton. The Continental Army had taken control of the town and turned the British army back for the night. Facing what they perceived to be near certain defeat the next day, however, they marched out of Trenton during the night while fooling the British Army into thinking they were still present.



Second Battle of Trenton etching by George Bradshaw

Photo: Trenton Historical Society

The Continental Army went on to defeat the British in Princeton the next day before marching on to set up winter quarters in Morristown, NJ.

During the Second Battle, the Meeting House was again near the fighting and was occupied that night by British dragoons.

Later in the war, the Continental Army removed the pews from St. Michael's and used the building as a hospital. It required significant repairs before services were able to resume in 1783.

The Old Barracks housed American soldiers for the duration of the war. Its last military occupants were patients when it was also used as a hospital. Over 600 invalid and sick soldiers were brought here after the siege of Yorktown, Virginia in 1781.

Combined, the two Trenton battles were considered a significant turning point of the Revolutionary War.

Historic Designations

All three of these notable, historic structures are listed on the National & State Registers of Historic Places under Criterion A in association with events surrounding the first & second Battles of Trenton 1776 & 1777. In addition, the Old Barracks is designated a National Historic Landmark.

Trenton Friends Meeting House – NR listed 2008

St. Michael’s Episcopal Church – NR listed 1982

Old Trenton Barracks – NR listed 1971; NHL listed 1972

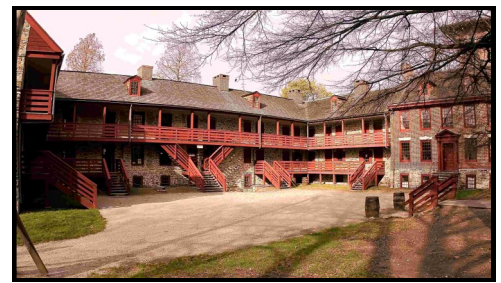
The Friends Meeting House and St. Michael’s underwent significant alterations and additions in the 19th century, altering their original appearances, as shown in the photos below.



Trenton Friends Meeting House
Photo: Wikipedia



St. Michael’s Episcopal Church
Photo: blog.xfree.hu



Old Barracks
Photo: Old Barracks Museum

Additional Sources: US Department of the Interior, National Historic Landmark Nomination, "Old Barracks;" US Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places Registration, "Trenton Friends Meeting House;" US Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places Registration, "St. Michael’s Episcopal Church."



Colonial era homes | Photo: learning-adventures.org

PRESERVATION SNAPSHOT ARCHIVES

2016

- Trenton's Pottery Industry, Trenton, NJ February 2016
- Art Deco & Art Moderne Architecture in NJ January 2016

2015

- Buildings in the Battles of Trenton, Trenton, NJ December 2015
- Hinchliffe Stadium in The Silk City, Paterson, NJ November 2015
- Harleigh Cemetery and its Famous "Residents," Camden, NJ October 2015
- School's Out at the Boylan Street School, Newark, NJ September 2015
- Catboats ... Jersey Cats ... A-Cats, Barnegat Bay, NJ August 2015
- Lucy, the Elephant, Margate, NJ July 2015
- Mount Tabor Historic District, Parsippany-Troy Hills, NJ June 2015

If you enjoy Preservation Snapshot, you may also enjoy:

New Jersey 350 Archives

