

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Historic New Bridge Landing

by Kevin Wright

The southern end of the Borough of River Edge was originally called New Bridge, after a wooden drawbridge was built across the narrows of the Hackensack River in 1745. This span earned a place in history as the *Bridge That Saved A Nation*, when General Washington and the American garrison of Fort Lee crossed the Hackensack River in the face of the British invasion of November 20, 1776. Eyewitness Thomas Paine immortalized the darkest hour of the American Revolution in his essay, the *American Crisis*, saying, "Our first object was to secure the bridge over the Hackensack, which laid up the river between the enemy and us, about six miles from us, and three from them. General Washington arrived in about three quarters of an hour, and marched at the head of the troops towards the bridge, which place I expected we should have a brush for; however, they did not choose to dispute it with us, and the greatest part of our troops went over the bridge..."

Throughout the long war, the opposing armies repeatedly occupied and contested New Bridge, using the hills and houses in its neighborhood for fortifications, military headquarters, an intelligence-gathering post, an encampment ground and battleground. General Washington identified "New Bridge" as the location of his headquarters while staying at the Zabriskie-Steuben House during the encampment of the Continental Army at Steenrapie (River Edge and Oradell) in September 1780. In a very real sense, New Bridge was the "Crossroads of the American Revolution" and its name is endowed with great historical significance through numerous associations with the struggle for American liberty.

Step forward a century to the arrival of the railroad and we learn that three local property owners, who contributed \$3,200 to build a train station on the Hackensack & New York Railroad when it opened through River Edge in March 1870, chose the name of "Cherry Hill" for the new depot in their neighborhood. Since there is no evidence discovered of a cherry orchard or any important display of specimen trees in the neighborhood, I conclude that the name was a promotional play upon the old name of the Red Hills used to describe a section of the Kinderkamack ridge in the Fairmount section of Hackensack. And how did most people feel about the name change? The *Bergen Democrat* reported that a majority of residents, who attended a public meeting in February 1871, denounced "the imposition attempted by the arbitrary few to override the wishes of the masses, by dubbing the old historical name of New Bridge to the absurd inappropriate name of Cherry Hill."

The name Cherry Hill clung to the area for only thirty-five years. The unanimous sentiment of the citizens of Cherry Hill and New Bridge for yet another name change was expressed at a public meeting on October 5, 1905. A petition signed by two hundred patrons of the Cherry Hill post office requested the Post Office Department to replace the name with that of *North Hackensack*, according to the wishes of the local Improvement Association. Although a reporter for *The Bergen County Democrat* claimed, "that a majority of the citizens opposed such a change," a Postal Inspector conducted a public meeting on Saturday, October 6, 1906, and heard but one dissenting vote. Indeed, local residents believed the so-called Cherry Hill Tornado that had struck ten years earlier, destroying considerable property and several lives, had materially retarded the area's growth. Odium also attached to the name of Cherry Hill because of associations in the public mind with two well-known state prisons of that name, one in Philadelphia and the other in Charlestown section of Boston. Of greater concern, Cherry Hill was widely publicized in the 1890s as one of the most notorious sections of New York, where the "dandies" of New York's underworld were styled the "Cherry Hill Gang." Of immediate concern, Jimmy Brennan, head of the Cherry Hill Gang, was gunned down at the corner of Catherine and Madison Streets just after midnight on January 10, 1905. Despite a number of bystanders, police found the dying man alone and unable to identify his assailants, who shot him twice in the back.

On a whole other level of inconvenience, mail destined for Cherry Hill was frequently misdirected to Cherryville in Hunterdon County. It was hoped that the change of name would augment the efforts of the Cherry Hill & New Bridge Public Improvement Association, which had succeeded in lighting the station and streets in the past year and in beautifying the grounds around the station. According to report in *The Evening Record* on November 14, 1906, the Post Office Department in Washington, D. C. notified the Cherry Hill postmaster that the name of the station would be changed in the near future. The North Hackensack Improvement Association immediately sent correspondence to the Erie Railroad, asking the name to be changed on station signs.

We stand at another crossroads today, where an enlightened interest and pride in the citizens not only of the Borough of River Edge but also of the County of Bergen and even the nation call out for recognition and honor for this significant place in American history.

On March 11, 2003, the Historic New Bridge Landing Park Commission officially endorsed changing the name of the "North Hackensack" postal substation in the Borough of River Edge to the historic name of "New Bridge." That was accomplished several years ago by an act of Congress. Soon we hope that NJ Transit will agreed to return the historic name of New Bridge to its proper place in the public eye and in our esteem by renaming the North Hackensack station.

- There is no town known as North Hackensack.
- The area is historically known as New Bridge.
- The Train Stop is 500 feet from an important Revolutionary War Battleground, Historic New Bridge Landing. The 12 acre park is only 7 miles from NYC & over 5 million residents are within 15 miles.
- The US Post Office changed the name of its River Edge Substation from North Hackensack to Historic New Bridge Landing in 2003.
- Changing the name to New Bridge would help make the site a heritage destination in the NJ Transit transportation system.

