

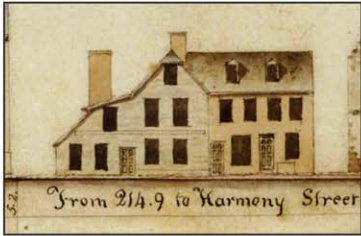
In the Spotlight

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LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale



Sketch of Callahan's Hotel.



The former Spread Eagle Tavern in New Castle, Delaware.



Side view of the Stage Tavern, also known as Bouldens Store building, in middle of photograph.

Photos courtesy of Mike Connolly, New Castle Historical Society.

New Castle Tavern Tour: A walk through history

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

Taverns were just as popular centuries ago as bars are today, and New Castle, Del., just a short drive from Chester County, was one town that had many of them.

Sought out as places to dine and drink, they were important spots where businessmen and politicians discussed commodity prices as well as developments in government. The New Castle Historical Society recently conducted a "Tavern Tour" which took guests all around the town, to establishments which thrived back in the 18th and 19th centuries, structures which still stand today.

Society President Mike Connolly shows his enthusiasm for local history as he brings guests around town, telling them "behind the scenes" stories of local taverns. To start off, he mentions something a bit shocking: the average colonist consumed about four gallons of liquor every year, along with large quantities of beer, wine and hard cider. How could they even function drinking so much? Answer: it was their way of life and since water was often non-potable, drinking fermented or brewed alcoholic beverages was a safe alternative. If you do some quick math, you come to realize that they drank more than one quart of hard liquor every week, not counting other alcohol.

At one time, New Castle was home to several popular taverns, and during its early years when it was called New Amstel, one of those places was The Statsherburg, which translates into "city tavern," which is believed to have stood between Land Street (Now Second) and Minquas Street (now East Third). Historians believe that The Statsherburg was the first tavern operating in the area, dating back to the mid-17th century.

Not far away was the Spread Eagle Tavern on East Second Street, a brick building with a large stone porch and an iron railing. Connolly mentions that taverns often rented rooms to civic groups and for events like dances or balls. The Spread Eagle is known to have rented space on its second floor to a local religious group, a practice which gave rise to a humorous poem:

**"Spirits above
and spirits below—
The spirits above
are the spirits
Divine,
Those below
are the spirits
of wine."**

The Rising Sun Tavern stood at 118 Harmony Street and is known to have been operating before the start of the American Revolution, even though the sign out front states 1796 as its beginning. Over the years the site had several owners and different names, at one point being called The Sign of the Ship Philadelphia.

Think "drive-up" service is a 20th century idea? Not exactly. The southeastern side of the building has a small window which was likely an early drive-through, as people could be served outside without entering the tavern. The Rising Sun and nearly all other taverns had a drawing on their sign (for example, of a sun or ship), so people could easily identify them. As many people in the 18th century were not fully literate, seeing the image helped get them to where they wanted to be.

Some places nominally were hotels, but functioned more like taverns. William Callahan moved to the area in 1819 and operated Callahan's Hotel, across the alley from the George

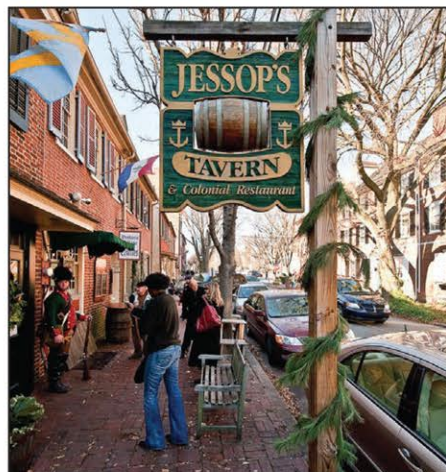
Read House. Apparently the hotel was essentially a bar, as described at the time by local resident Joseph Rogers, who said the place "...was not a hotel. It was more of a drinking saloon..." If you walked through the adjacent alley you could hear men talking boisterously inside the tavern. Their voices were so loud that according to Connolly, when the Reverend Joshua N. Danforth of the nearby Presbyterian Church walked through the area one day, he was very disturbed by the drunken behavior and complained to Callahan to "tone things down." After their discussion, the noise level did indeed decline.

One well known tavern no longer stands, but was an important stopping point for travelers between Philadelphia and Baltimore. The Stage Tavern operated in a building on the north side of Packet Alley along the Strand; it is believed to have been there since at least 1769. According to Connolly, in 1797 James McCullough rented the tavern; his marketing savvy helped bring business. Advertising that the site was a convenient stop for people coming to town by boat and by stagecoach, McCullough offered light carriages to take them to the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Chestertown coach lines which stopped nearby. He also held large patriotic gatherings celebrating American independence. On July 4, 1797 he served guests with a specially cooked "large turtle" which he had procured for their dining enjoyment.

The building often associated with colonial-era food and drink in Olde New Castle wasn't even a tavern for most of its life. Although the structure was built in 1674 and used by cooper Abraham Jessop to produce barrels until 1724, Jessop's Tavern is a relative newcomer to the area. Over



The Jessops Tavern interior.



Jessops Tavern, New Castle, Delaware.



Rising Sun Tavern Sign.

the years, the rustic looking building at 118 Delaware Street functioned as residential housing and numerous businesses. In the 1950s, it

became the Captain's Log Restaurant and in 1974, the Green Frog Tavern. In 1996, the Day family purchased the building and dedicated them-

selves to portraying realistic scenes of early Delaware history by renaming it Jessop's Tavern in honor of the early owner. The interior is beautifully decorated, giving guests the "feel" of an 18th century tavern. While not a part of early New Castle tavern lore, the 348-year-old building which houses Jessop's Tavern today compensates by providing diners a wonderful setting to enjoy excellent food and drink, including more than 200 Belgian and craft beers.

So, if you want a "walk through history" along the Delaware River waterfront, visit New Castle. As you stroll past the old Court House on cobblestone streets, you can almost hear the voices of people raising a toast to the young nation in a town that was very much a part of creating it.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the history of the Chester County/mid-Atlantic region. His latest work is *Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution*. His books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com and on www.Amazon.com. Gene can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.