

Bodine's Tavern

by Sara W. R. Ewing

Batsto Citizens Gazette, Fall/Winter, 1967

Back in the days when the industrial heart of southern New Jersey was centered in the Pine Barrens, Bodine's tavern was the first official stop of the Tuckerton stage as it journeyed up the old Philadelphia Road. It stood on the east side of Wading River about two and one half miles south of Martha Furnace and a short distance below Harrisville; now nothing is left to mark the site but a hollow in the ground overflowing with tangled vines, and a few gnarled cedar trees. Scarcely a trace remains of the once much-traveled highway but, nearby, piers of the old "Landing" still thrust their charred heads above the swift-moving stream.

John Bodine, founder of the tavern and fourth generation of his family in this country, was born at Cranberry, New Jersey in 1745. Enlisting in the Revolutionary War, he served for seven years and apparently did his duty well for he was promoted from private to captain. When the war ended, he did what so many retired military men were doing - opened a tavern which became one of the best known inns in the Pine Barrens. After his death, it was run by his widow, Ann, and their son, Jesse, until about 1840.

He chose his spot well, for the refreshing waters of Wading River made the dusty seven-mile ride from Tuckerton a desirable stage stop and, before the eighteenth century had ended, the Wading River Forge and Slitting Mill was built less than a mile upstream, while busy Martha Furnace was not much farther. In fact, the tavern was strategically near the "Landing" where products of the furnace were hauled by wagon to begin their journey to the outside world.

Laboring from sunup to sundown, the ironworkers acquired an almost legendary thirst and "living it up a bit" at the tavern was their favorite pastime. That they enjoyed it wholeheartedly is evidenced by the Martha Furnace Diary:

1810 Feb 8 Williamson gone to Bodine's after steel, also a little sick for some rum.

June 24 Vending & Williamson drunk and fainted going from Bodine's to Sooy's.

1811 June 22 Richard Phillips discharged for getting drunk.

July 27 William Rose & his Father both drunk & lying on the crossway. The old woman at home drunk.

Oct. 8 Election at Bodine's. Men went and gave in their mite and all ret'd sober.

A red letter day But on October 13th the following year, the situation was reversed:

Election at Bodine's. Hands chiefly there. Some very drunk.

In the early eighteen hundreds, all male citizens over eighteen years of age were compelled by law to report to a designated place four times a year for military training. Bodine's Field was the official training ground for men from Martha Furnace-much to the delight of the landlord, no doubt, for the men spent more time imbibing than they did in training. Those days were apt to be the busiest ones of the whole year, so the Bodine's made elaborate preparations for them - metheglin, beer, "stewed Quaker," gin, rum and whiskey - everything was available.

In 1808. David Vann arrived back at the works sober after Training Day at Bodine's and it was worthy of special note in the Martha Diary. The writer recorded carefully that he had "returned regular in the evening," meaning that he had been temperate in his drinking that day.

But not so with Captain Townsend. On April 1, 1814, the diarist wrote:

Captain Townsend was so intoxicated that he did not know the duties of a Captain. At length had a Court martial over him. They brought in for him to pay a half-pint, but refused. Mr. Cramer president. Mr. Townsend got him to plead the case for him. Take care your eye Captain. You may know by this he was not capable. Eden Reed, Gutterman was much the same way.

Obviously, Captain Townsend was unfit for any kind of military training, and this April day was no different from other days or other captains.

Bodine's Field must have been a strange sight on Training Days. If, perchance, the old Tuckerton stage drew up to the tavern, its passengers saw a strange assortment of men on the broad greensward beside Wading River. Army uniforms covered with gold braid and brass buttons were an odd contrast to their possessors' utter disregard of captain's orders, if the captain were sober enough to give any. The sound of fife and drum mingled with their hubbub throughout the day as they enjoyed their favorite recreation -

drinking at Mr. Bodine's bar.

The inn flourished as long as the ironworkers were nearby to sustain it. By 1840, the complex of iron industries scattered throughout the Pine Barrens started to decline and the old hostelry, like others nearby soon became a ghost of its former self.