

## Wading River Little Changed Over The Years

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The village of Wading River, in Burlington County's Bass River Township, is named for the picturesque Pine Barrens stream which flows through its midst. Comfortable frame homes, some of them ornately Victorian and a few with "store fronts," spread out along the main street, Route 542, which veers sharply south toward New Gretna after it crosses the river. Another road, Route 633, continues straight toward Leektown.

Like most Pine Barrens towns, family roots go away back. But once in a while a stranger falls under the charm of this remote village and I like to think of the elderly couple from North Jersey, newly retired, who found their particular Eden in the old McKean place twenty years ago.

A pleasant, two-story home, its narrow front porch faces the road just east of the bridge and a tree-shaded side lawn slopes gently toward coffee-colored "cedar" water. The husband spent most of his days on the river but his wife continued, in a way, an old McKean family tradition. The McKean family kept a general store here a hundred years ago and this woman opened a bake shop. That's how we met them.

Even in the soft comfort of a car, exploring the Jersey pines can be hungry work and one chilly fall day we spied a sign, "Fresh Cookies," hanging beside the front door. The aroma of freshly-baked molasses cake filled the house when we walked in. It was delicious. After that, the "Cookies Lady" was a regular stop on our explorations, no matter which way we left home.

But one day the sign was gone. The shop was closed and we soon found out that the "Cookie Lady" had been taken sick and both she and her husband had gone back to Newark. So ended another episode in the long line of people who have known and lived in and loved the little village of Wading River.

It was known as Bridgeport a hundred years ago when Leah Blackman wrote her HISTORY OF LITTLE EGG HARBOR. John Mathis Sr. once owned the land. He sold it to Captain John Leake (also spelled Leek and Leak) whose son, John, a surveyor, became a captain in the Burlington County Militia during the American Revolution. It was John the third, a grandson, who probably sold his inheritance to Robert McKean.

Legends grew around Captain John Leake, Sr., and his bones, long in the grave, acquire flesh and blood in their telling. He knew and enjoyed the richness of his land.

Leah Blackman tells us that he "fared sumptuously." And he also had an eye for beauty, for his wife, Martha, daughter of Samuel Rose, Sr. of Parkertown, is said to have been "as beautiful as a rose," albeit she must have been a hardy one. She and her husband had seven children and possibly eight.

We know, too, that John Leake, Sr. was a religious man. Long before a church was established in the village, he welcomed traveling ministers to his home. John Brainard, the saintly Presbyterian minister-missionary, wrote that he preached at the home of "John Leake near Wading River" on his trips through South Jersey, and, when John Leake, Sr. wrote his will on 5 May 1777, he left a piece of ground to the "people of Bass and Wading River" for a Presbyterian Meeting House and burial ground.

Today, genealogists flock to the small burying ground on the hillside in back of the old McKean home. Known as the Adams-Leek-McKean Cemetery, it is the last resting place for John Leake, Sr. and his wife, as well as generations of men and women who, somehow, made a comfortable living off the land and water.

It undoubtedly holds those, too, who once belonged to Wading River's short-lived Methodist Church. Established by that sect's doughty itinerant ministers in the 19th century, it has long since been discontinued.

In 1824 another place of worship was built in the village, a Friends Meeting. The Minutes of Little Egg Harbor Friends recorded that a committee was "appointed to open a subscription for buying a lot and building a meeting house at Bridgeport" on 6th mo 10 1824. The "house," a frame building, was to be "22 x 28 and one story, ten foot posts." It was built under the indulgence of Tuckerton Monthly Meeting and by 13th of 1st mo 1825, the Minutes recorded that "Bridgeport succeeds Bass River as an indulged meeting."

Soon the great divisiveness was to appear among Friends, separating them into Orthodox and Hicksite groups, and on 14th of 7th month 1828 Tuckerton Meeting “disowned Lucy Ann Evans, Elizabeth Cox and Margaret Randolph for joining another Meeting” (Hicksite). Because of its Hicksite connections, the Bridgeport Meeting was “laid down on 12th of 6 mo 1829” by Tuckerton Friends, but, in spite of this, it continued to flourish for a few years. Gradually, members moved away or died, and at the end Lucy Ann Evans, a prominent Friends minister and wife of Jesse Evans, manager of Martha Furnace, was left alone. She attended Meeting and sat during worship in her usual seat, the sole minister and audience.

The Friends Burying Ground stood behind the meeting in a grove of trees, not far from the Adams, Leek, McKean Cemetery. Today, its few remaining stones, almost lost in tangled undergrowth, tell us the names of a few people who worshipped here:

- In memory of Lucy Ann Evans, wife of Jesse Evans, who departed this life September the 18th 1834 in the 65 years of her age.
- Lydia, wife of John Hallock who departed this life on the 20th of 8th mo 1830, aged 53 years.
- In Memory of Godfrey, son of Godfrey and Mary Louise Jerew who died May 28, 1848, aged 9 years, 10 months and 14 days.

Then, there was “E. Kindl. 1825” and “Mary Catherine Lippincott,” both stones sunk deep into woody earth.

They were a hardy folk, these people along the river, adapting their needs to the yield of the land. Well-kept gardens produced food; streams abounded with fish; river bottoms made excellent pasture land; and seemingly inexhaustible woods of pine, oak, and cedar meant that a man could have all the work he needed to keep a family.

Pine was manufactured into pipe or burned to charcoal; later, shipload after shipload of pine and oak cordwood were exported to coastal cities. Cedar, used for shingling, was especially needed to make staves for hogsheads, since most commodities were shipped aboard sailing vessels in these large, cumbersome barrels. Cedar swamps were in great demand, especially those with a landing on the river.

Perhaps it was an excellent stand of cedars which attracted John Richards (1784-1871) to Wading River in 1813. At the age of 29, he bought a cedar swamp and moved his young wife and growing family into a newly built home with a store. According to his grandson, Louis Richards, he also built a bridge across the river.

Born in Pennsylvania, John Richards became fascinated with the iron industry in 1807 during a visit to his great-uncle, Colonel William Richards of Batsto. From that time until he died, iron was to be his constant lodestar. When his cousin, Samuel Richards, hired him in 1819 to oversee his newly purchased ironworks at Atsion, John Richards sold his holdings at Wading River and never returned.

Products of the forest, shingles, cord-wood, and charcoal, no longer wait to be shipped, but life has changed little. One feels the same easy, neighborly pace in this Pine Barrens village, just one street wide, its comfortable homes outlined with green lawns and gardens, and its river banks still a tangle of holly, cedar, and laurel - an oasis in the Jersey pines.