

# Got Work?

## The legacy of the New Deal and WPA in New Jersey

### EXHIBIT RATING SYSTEM

★ Very amateurish; factual errors; poorly displayed.

★★ Factually correct but poorly displayed.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well displayed.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship and display quality.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email [gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)

#### Exhibition:

#### Got Work? New Deal/WPA in New Jersey

Cornelius Low House

1225 River Road

Piscataway, NJ

<http://co.middlesex.nj.us/culturalheritage/museum1.asp>

Tel.: (732) 745 4489

Closes: June 30, 2014

Admission: Free

Parking: ★★★

Kid-Friendly: ★

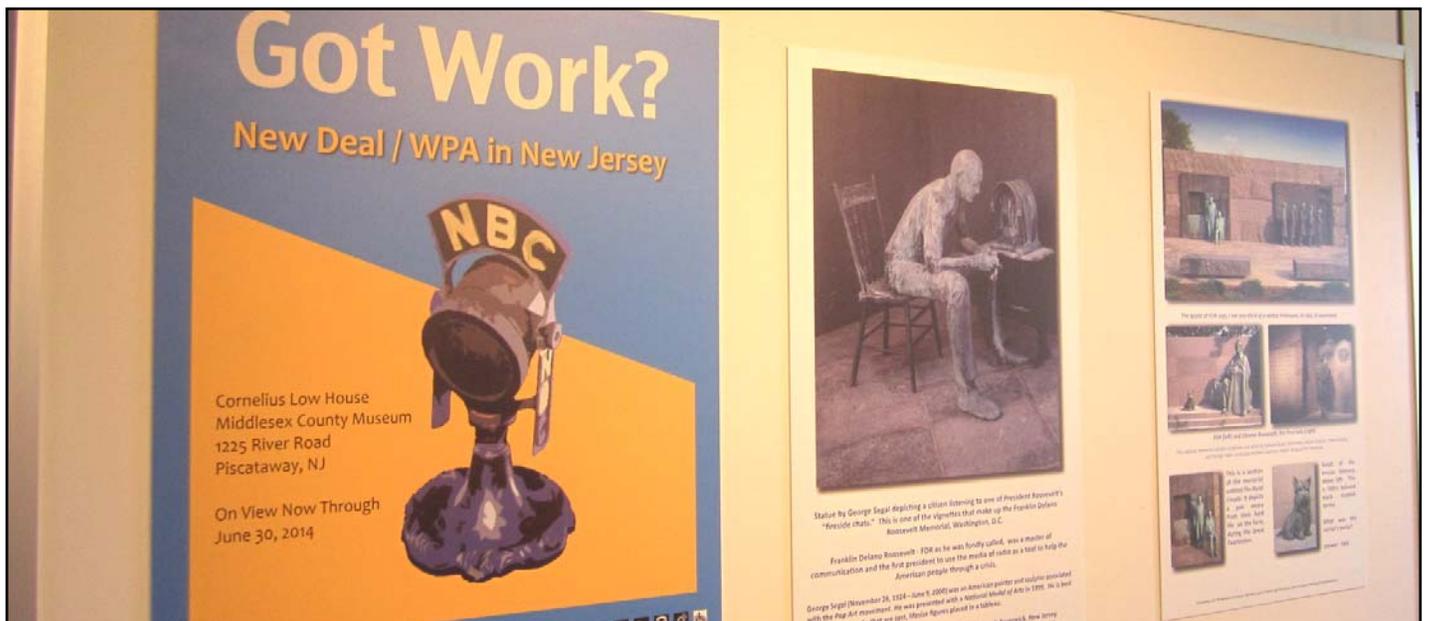
Handicapped Accessible: ★★★

Exhibit: ★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

History is periodically punctuated by disasters of a sufficiently egregious scale to imprint themselves onto the collective cultural memory, as benchmarks by which all future events become measured. If you want to accuse someone of being the worst of the worst kind of evil, Adolph Hitler's name is readily-evoked. The "-gate" suffix is tacked onto any political scandal one would like to elevate to the example of Richard Nixon's Watergate. Any military conflict one fears becoming a quagmire is invariably described as America's next Vietnam. When it comes to economic disasters, the touchstone becomes the Great Depression.

In most instances, fortunately, it seems like the latest calamities never



### EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

★ Not enough parking.

★★ Not many spaces but enough for a small museum/site.

★★★ Plenty of parking.

### EXHIBIT KID-FRIENDLY RATING SYSTEM

★ Not really something young children will enjoy.

★★ Older children may find interesting.

★★★ Children of all ages will enjoy.

Some exhibits may not be for children but institutions may offer programs specifically for interpreting the displays for kids and school groups. Contact the museum or site.

### EXHIBIT HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

★ Not accessible.

★★ Partially accessible or requires advance arrangements.

★★★ Fully accessible.

quite live up to their historic namesake analogies. The Great Depression was certainly not the only depression the economy suffered, though it is arguably the direst. Additionally, it took place not all that long ago, allowing it to linger in the collective psyche in a way earlier events do not. We may lament contemporary economic downturns, and certainly they have very real impacts on people's lives. Yet all we have experienced to date pales in comparison with the depths of what happened in the United States and around the world in the 1930s and into the prewar 1940s. It was a truly global disaster, its effects reaching to some degree into nearly every corner of the globe. The desperation it caused made heroes out of people like Bonnie and Clyde in America; made Adolph Hitler seem like Germany's savior; and even inspired an anti-monarchy revolution as far afield as in Thailand.

The causes of the Great Depression are many and some even still subject to debate—and beyond the scope of this review. But the most obvious fallout was record amounts of unemployment. Joblessness in the U.S. went from an average of 3.2% in 1929 to a peak of 24.9% by 1933. Indeed, it remained above 20% from 1932 to 1935. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration responded to this unparalleled crisis with a series of domestic economic programs collectively known as the "New Deal." They were designed to bring about what is called the three Rs of Relief for the unemployed poor, Recovery of the economy to normal levels, and Reform of the financial system to avoid such a catastrophe in future.

Roosevelt's New Deal for America played out with a wide variety of programs and regulations—everything from ending Prohibition to the Glass-Steagall Act. But it was the Works Progress Administration (later renamed Works Projects Administration in 1939) that historians consider to have been the largest and most ambitious. Both skilled and unskilled



Artifacts of the Civilian Conservation Corps or CCC

among the unemployed would be put to work on public works projects such as constructing buildings or roads and improving the nation's infrastructure. But relief went beyond the intuitive manual labor trades. The WPA also employed musicians, artists, writers, actors and directors in large arts, drama, media, and literacy projects.

While we think of the Great Depression in global and nation terms, of course, it was also a very localized phenomenon for individuals and families. The influences of the New Deal and WPA in New Jersey are the subjects of an interesting exhibit at the Cornelius Low House in Piscataway: "Got Work? New Deal/WPA in New Jersey"

While I was somewhat aware of the WPA's legacies in the Garden State, I don't think I truly appreciated just how much of what we think of as being part of New Jersey's identity comes from that period. Looking just at the construction projects it funded, the list on the wall of the exhibit includes such iconic structures as: the Lincoln Tunnel, Jersey City Armory, Matawan Regional High School, additions to the Jersey City Medical Center (now The Beacon), Roosevelt Stadiums in Jersey City and Union City, Rumson Fair Haven Regional High School, Rutgers Gardens, Rutgers Stadium, and Weequahic High School.

Beyond such obviously manmade things, the WPA added and embellished New Jersey's more natural landscapes as well, in part out of dire necessity. As if to add insult to injury, the 1930s also witnessed the Dust Bowl, sending thousands of families out of the Midwest and to the coasts, adding to the burdens as they too searched for work in communities already bowed by high unemployment. Part of the cause of the Dust Bowl had been a naive misuse of land—the prairie grasses whose roots kept the soil in place during periods of drought had been cleared to make way for crops. With nothing to hold it in place, winds across the plains after a severe (if not unusual) drought carried the land aloft as far as the east coast, even briefly choking out the sunlight in New Jersey and the surrounding areas. To the already critical stress of economic collapse was added the grim specter of famine. Soil science and conservation took on national importance, and could also be used to provide some jobs.

The New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps—CCC—recruited single men between 18 and 35 to be sent to all corners of the country to plant trees and create parks and state forests. It was rugged work that netted a man \$30 a month (roughly \$500 in today's dollars). The catch was \$25 of it

had to be sent back to parents or other family to help stimulate local economies back home.

The CCC planted some 3-billion trees and constructed over 800 new parks throughout the nation. For many, not unlike the military experiences to come in the next decade, it was the first time they would travel outside their home states and mingle with a more diverse crowd. Among them, of course, were many young men from New Jersey. A trunk and camping supplies along with other memorabilia is on display. But, again, the interesting part is really on the walls—the list of state parks and forests either created or improved thanks to the CCC: Roosevelt Park in Edison, Cheesequake State Park, Vorhees State Park, Hackle Barnet Memorial State Park, Ringwood State Park, Bass River State Forest, Belleplain State Forest, High Point State Park, Jenny Jump State Forest, Penn State Forest, Stokes State Forest, etc.

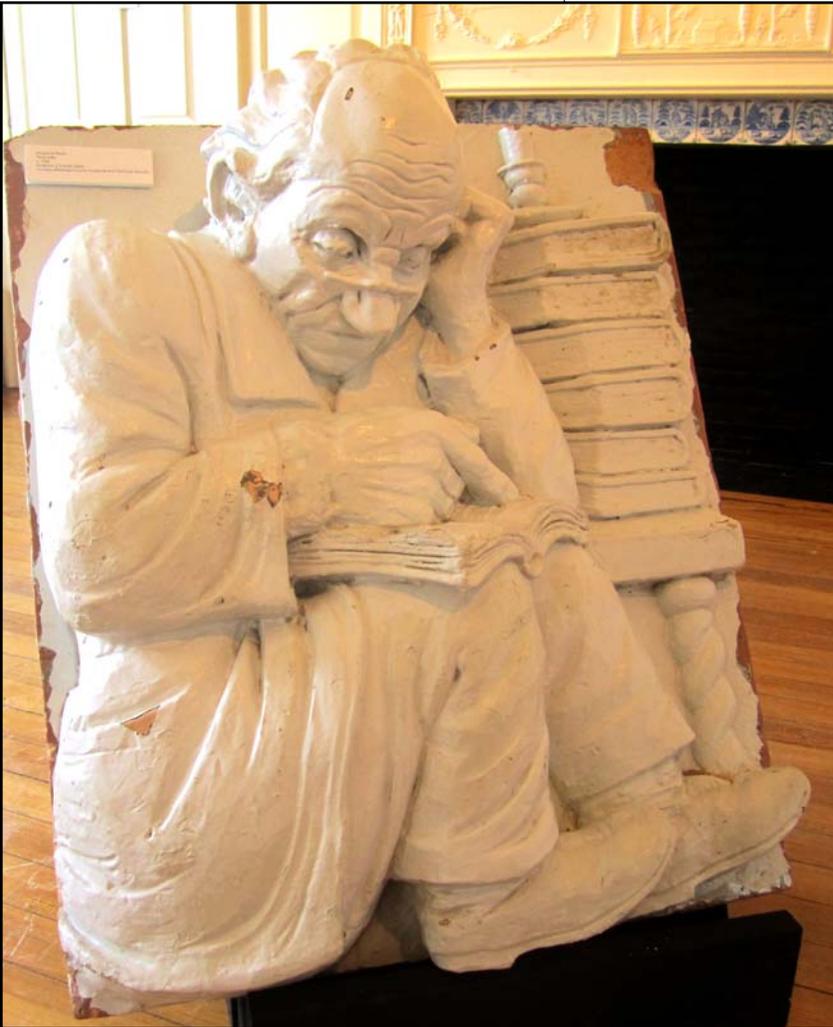
What made the WPA ambitious was that it encompassed more than the material needs of buildings or soil conservation—it extended into the intellectual and cultural life of the nation as well. The arts in all their forms were to be encouraged, not only to give work to artists, but also to support the moral uplift and sense of civilization such pursuits often provide. Not only were new public buildings to be constructed, but they were to also be adorned with bas-relief sculptures and murals. In New Jersey alone, 2,566 murals would be painted and 17,744

sculptures created. Sitting in the middle of several of the exhibit rooms are massive terra cotta bas-relief pieces from buildings courtesy of the Middlesex County Vocational and Technical Schools.

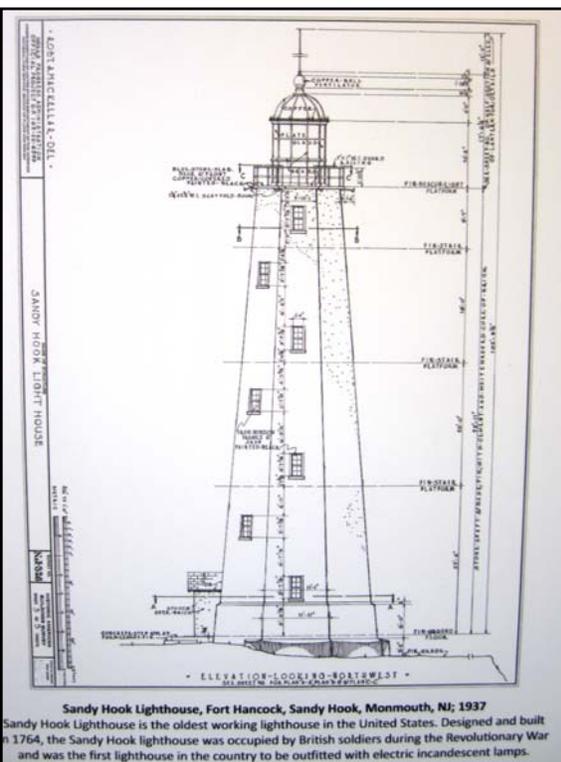
Various reproductions of posters from the era announce WPA art shows in New Jersey, all in the distinctive art deco graphic style. Artists produced a large body of WPA-sponsored paintings and prints.

The performing arts were also supported through the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). One of the more interesting offshoots of the FTP was the Negro Theatre Project. Organized by such well-known actors as Orson Welles and John Houseman, it gave a much-needed boost to the legitimacy of African-American theater. Among the branches of the NTP—called “units”—was one located in Newark, New Jersey.

There is a certain irony in how the New Deal also supported history. Today, we sometimes feel as if we have to fight for every scrap off the



A terra cotta bas relief sculpture created under the WPA c. 1936



**A HABS drawing of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse**

table, yet back then, the federal government funded what would become among our most valuable resources. In 1933, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) hired people to go make a survey of as many of the antique buildings as they could find, in every corner of the nation. New Jersey abounded in such buildings, and professional architectural historians and conservators, as well as amateur historians, still value the plans, elevations, and reports created by the HABS project. Several New Jersey examples are enlarged and on display. (The program was expanded in 1969 to include the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and in 2000, was added the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS).)

Among the debts owed by historians to the New Deal is the Federal Writers' Project. In addition to supporting the literary culture of the U.S., it included a Historical Records Survey and an Ethnic Survey. The former did for historic records what HABS did for buildings. The latter captured some of the vanishing voices of earlier generations of immigrants and natives alike. Many display boards are devoted to excerpts of interviews done with the Irish, Eastern Europeans, Italians, Russians, Jews, and others who had come to America at the turn-of-the-century, many settling in places like Newark and Jersey City. Audio recordings of some of those interviews are also available for the visitor to marvel at—vernacular history in, literally, its own voice. The 1930s was also a time when the last living African-Americans to experience slavery firsthand were passing from the scene. Interviews offered one last opportunity to save that history from obscurity. Focusing on New Jersey, among the stories displayed is that of Peter Lee, interviewed in 1936, whose family had been in the service of Colonel John Stevens' family in Hoboken since 1748.

Visitors are free to take brochures with selections from the WPA Slave Narratives, Dutch Immigrants in New Jersey, and Italian Immigrants in New Jersey.

Despite these efforts at preserving an American culture, many were left wondering if the American Experiment had failed. Perhaps it was time to find a new way of doing things. Communism and socialism held an appeal for many as an alternative. Even the federal government, for a little while between 1935 and 1936, was left wondering if it didn't make sense to reconfigure American life on some communal level. The Resettlement Administration (RA) was created to relocate struggling families from both urban and rural areas into communities planned out by the federal government. With its four divisions—Rural Rehabilitation, Rural Resettlement, Land Utilization, and Suburban Resettlement—the RA held the ambitious goal of moving 650,000 Americans from the drought-ridden land into "greenbelt cities." These were communities surrounded by a 'green belt' of open space. The plan was for cooperative communities that smacked a little too much of "socialism" for many in Congress and the



Poster advertising a WPA exhibition of New Jersey artists in Newark.



program was never adequately funded.

Readers may already have made the connection between the word “greenbelt” and the place of Greenbelt, Maryland. But many will likely not know that there was to be an RA greenbelt community in Greenbrook, New Jersey that was never built. Nevertheless, there was one example of the concept built in the state, known at first as Jersey Homesteads, in Monmouth County. The Bauhaus architect Alfred Kaster was brought in to design homes and public buildings. This experiment is cooperative living never quite took root, however. Socialism was becoming a dirty word and by the late 1940s the federal government had withdrawn entirely. The place was reformed and renamed Roosevelt, in honor of its origins. There is an historic district today, and the exhibit includes free walking tour maps and one of the original blueprints of the street layout.

“Got Work?” may be a little more “text-heavy” than some previous exhibits. But the curators did an excellent job of presenting enough information to be interesting without getting too bogged down. Even visitors familiar with the New Deal era will likely be impressed by just how strong the imprint of the WPA—and the rest of the “alphabet agencies”—really was on New Jersey. Seeing it represented all in one place, in all its diversity, gives a wonderful sense of scale and context.

### **The House: A study of a Colonial New Jersey family, of their descendants, of their home, and of some correlative matters**

Dr. Charles Kaufman

2012, Self-Published

ISBN-978-0-9886729-0-1

Softcover, 417 pages, Black and White, some color

Research: ★★

Writing Style: ★★

Publishing: ★

Review by Gordon Bond

The timing of Dr. Kaufman’s book is fortuitous in two ways, one being personal for the reviewer. As I type this, I am surrounded by a cross between a warehouse and warzone. My wife and I are in the arduous process of sifting and packing the joint accumulations of over six years so we can move into our newly-acquired condo in the Forest Hills Historic District of northern Newark—a building constructed in 1927. Being the unrepentant history nerds we are, one of the things we talked about doing not long after we unpack is to research the history of our new home. So the premise of *The House* strikes a timely cord—Kaufman has done the same sort of thing, albeit on a broader scale of years, with a full house and property dating much farther back than 1927.

The other is that Dr. Kaufman chose to write his book at a time when

## BOOK RATING SYSTEM

### RESEARCH

- ★ Inadequate research; factual errors; nothing original
- ★★ Well-researched but could have gone into greater depth
- ★★★ Excellent research; in-depth

### WRITING STYLE

- ★ Poorly written; errors; amateur
- ★★ Good writing skills
- ★★★ Excellent style; engaging

### PUBLICATION

- ★ Amateurish layout; poor quality images
- ★★ Typical professional layout
- ★★★ Excellent layout, creative

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self-publishing is only as far away as the nearest Staples or Office Depot. This has been a mixed blessing, of course. There are probably more self-indulgent, endlessly tedious tomes in the world than works of quality that would have otherwise remained uncreated. As a self-published work, *The House* could have been another well-meant but decidedly personal creation, of interest solely to the author and perhaps his family. It is, fortunately, rescued from such a dismal fate by the wonderfully engaging writing style of Dr. Kaufman. I was pleasantly surprised when I found myself caring about his house and the surrounding history, though I have never seen it in person and lack the same personal connection he obviously does—and would likely do so even if it not resonate with the similar exploration I find myself embarking upon.

When Rhoda and Charles Kaufman first encountered the house in 1963, they were shopping at a nearby farm and the property was in desperate need of rescue—a “Victorian wreck,” as he puts it. It was also for sale. And so began their fifty-years as the latest stewards of a home that has stood in various incarnations in Hillsdale, New Jersey, tucked up in Bergen County, not all that far from the New York State border (a location that would prove important). For the historically-inclined like the Kaufmans, this was a dream come true—their own personal research, preservation, and even archeological project.

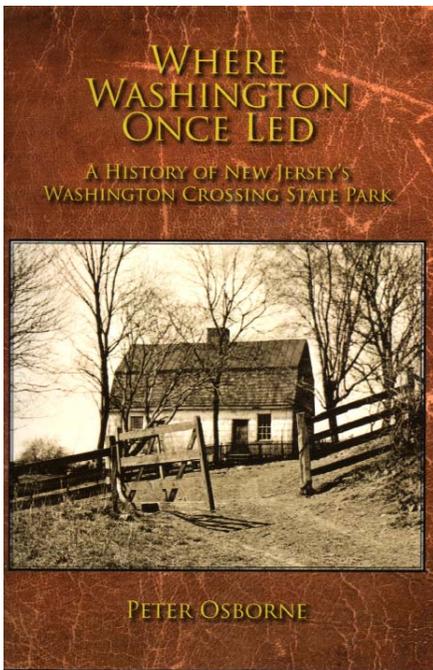
They traced the property, which would come to encompass an ice house, carriage house, and barn, back to its first European settler, Lucas van Tienhoven, c. 1695. It passed through owners with Dutch names until 1747, when it came down to Hendrick Storm, who married into the previous owner’s family. It would remain in the Storms family through six generations until 1921, when it passed to Frank Liveright until 1952. Kaufman’s descriptions of his unannounced visits to his old estate as an old man in a dented gray Dodge are delightful. The image stands in contrast to the wealthy vigor of his younger days, when “the house” was the scene of parties of alleged wildness—claims given some credence by a raid on a huge still kept in the barn in 1938.

Throughout the process of restoring the house, the Kaufmans came across evidence of previous owners in alterations, additions, and even artifacts found beneath attic floorboards. Like any building of sufficient vintage, it held traces of the lives it once sheltered.

*The House* is exhaustive in its research of every aspect of the buildings, property bounds, owners, and interactions of the various occupants with history. In some respects, it reminds me of the perfunctory historic structures reports that are the stock and trade of professional architectural conservators. But where they are, by propriety, formal and dry, *The House* is a rambling celebration, full of soul and replete with wry wit and obvious adoration.

The property's proximity to the New York State border meant that it would be inevitably sucked into at least the earliest disputes over exactly where that line should be drawn. Kaufman describes how "[t]o enter the precincts of the New Jersey-New York border wars is to court howling madness," and expresses relief that only the earliest are legitimately within the scope of his work. What follows is a thorough romp through and accounting of that contentious morass.

In terms of construction, the book itself can't hide its amateur's origins—the binding makes “cracking open” the book a literal experience. Yet it somehow only manages to add to the delightful charm. *The House* is clearly a labor of love, and it is that infectious zeal that will make this book of interest to any of us who share similar passions.



### **Where Washington Once Led: A History of New Jersey's Washington Crossing State Park**

Peter Osborne

2012, Yardley Press

ISBN-978-0-9860305-0-5

Softcover, 491 pages, Black and White

Research: ★★★

Writing Style: ★★

Publication: ★★

Review by Gordon Bond

Following our Revolution, Americans were eager for *American* heroes. We had, after all, just defeated one of the mightiest—if not *the* mightiest—military powers on earth and set off on our way to create a system of government unlike much of what the world had seen to date. The wise founders and the brave “Patriots” were to be venerated, while the nastier and ignoble antics of the Sons of Liberty were to be brushed aside as insignificant aberrations. We were a proud new nation, worthy of an equally proud creation myth. In the years to come, historians have increasingly nudged the Founding Fathers from their pedestals, wresting history from a foggy hero-worship into the harsher light of academic scrutiny. It is an intellectually honest, if sometimes discomfiting process.

Yet for me, one event has remained largely undented by the stones of historic reality. Washington's crossing of the ice-choked Delaware River on the frigid night of December 25<sup>th</sup> into the 26<sup>th</sup> in 1776 remains an epic achievement worthy of a Hollywood action movie. Attending a reenactment a couple of years ago and listening to the actor playing George Washington reading from Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis*, those famous words stirred emotion—“These are the times that try men's souls...”

Regardless of how our relationship with George Washington as both Founding Father and human being may ebb and flow, the facts of how critical the maneuver would come to be in turning the tide of the war

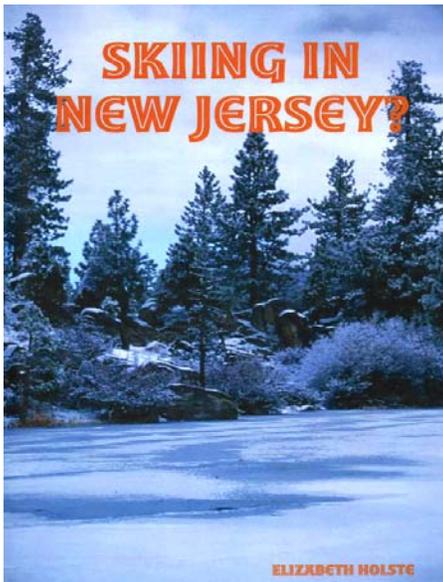
remain—Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze’s historically inaccurate if iconic painting notwithstanding. That it would remain one of our collectively-cherished memories of the war is understandable. What form the commemoration of that memory would ultimately take, however, is the subject of *Where Washington Once Led: A History of New Jersey’s Washington Crossing State Park*, by Peter Osborne.

The concept of preserving an American building or a place solely because of the history that happened there dates back at least to 1850, when the house of Jonathan Hasbrouck, in Newburgh, New York, became the first publicly-owned building to be preserved because it had served as Washington’s headquarters. But Washington’s crossing presented some unique challenges in as much as it spanned a river between two states and encompassed more than one building or specific location. It involved not only interpreting the event, but considerations of preserving both buildings and landscapes, while making it an accessible place for recreation as well as history.

Osborne states up front that his book was not going to attempt an account of the event itself—there are plenty of excellent books that do that quite nicely. Instead, he picks up the story more or less where Washington left off—how the dream of memorializing the event took shape as early as 1895, the difficult road to fruition in 1927, and the subsequent development to the present day. Such things are never easy, let alone on the ambitious scale of the crossing. The story of the eventual park includes false starts, politics, champions, and the shifting paradigms of how to interpret and present history. It would receive boosts in interest from various anniversaries and broader celebrations that re-pique public interest in their history and suffer under the Great Depression and wartime rationing. The WPA would be responsible for many improvements (see the above review of the exhibit on the WPA in New Jersey!).

The development of the park over time reflected an interesting evolution in emphasis and purpose. To cite just one example, Osborne points to the erection of monuments in the 1920s and 1930s. The state park officials at the time saw the primary purpose to be as a memorial and any recreation facility was to remain subordinate to that mission. The idea of the park as both a memorial and a place of recreation—an important part of our current understanding of “heritage tourism”—had yet to take root, evidently. Even the popular annual crossing reenactments—a tradition since 1953—have not been without their controversy, as described by Osborne.

Sometimes people get the impression of history being stagnant and dull. Washington Crossing State Park, however, is a dynamic place, with a dynamic history reflecting changes in how we relate to our past that can be just as instructive and entertaining as the events it memorializes. It was



especially interesting to read the personal accounts of some of the Superintendents as well as Osborne's own observations in a chapter called "A Year in the Life of the Park." Osborne has done a wonderful job bringing that long story to life with this comprehensive history.

### **Skiing In New Jersey?**

Elizabeth Holste

2005, Self-published

ISBN-978-1-4116-6037-3

Softcover, 188 pages, Black and White

Research: ★★

Writing Style: ★✶

Publication: ★★

Review by Gordon Bond

I have never skied in my life, and, truth be told, am perfectly fine with that fact. But even I know that of all the things the Garden State is known for, having slopes to hit isn't among them. So I was intrigued when Elizabeth Holste suggested I might be interested in reviewing her book titled with the obvious question: *Skiing in New Jersey?* I am always interested in exploring unusual angles for approaching the state's history, so even though the book is now eight years old, I told her to send a copy.

Holste begins with a self-described "fast" history of skiing, from remains of ski equipment found in the mountains of Norway from between 5000 and 7000 B.C. through Michigan's 1887 ski club through the Civilian Conservation Corps cutting of trails through the U.S. Army's 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division who skied undetected into Italy during the Second World War. New Jersey, however, features in none of this (aside from New Jerseyans who were in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division).

Nevertheless, in early 1900s, people explored the hillier parts of the Garden State on skis and local farmers soon learned they could make extra money in winter by letting people for a small fee ski and sled down snow-covered hills on their land. Early tow-rope contraptions were concocted, some using automobile motors to speed skiers back up the hill for another run. Indeed, rusted tow-rope pulleys are all that remains to mark some of the early ski areas.

Eventually, adult race leagues were organized, culminating with the New Jersey Ski Racing Association in 1980, out of which have come a number of college, World Cup, and even Olympic ski competitors. Among those to win medals in the Winter Olympics were Donna Weinbrecht of West Milford (gold, 1992) and Danny Kass of Vernon (silver, 2002)—obvious sources of pride for their respective hometowns, who each note the accomplishments on their welcome signs.

Many New Jerseyans of a certain age will remember the name

Bamberger's from the department store chain started by Louis Bamberger of Newark. What may not be as well-recalled is how the company was active in the promotion of the sport in the 1930s. This made sense since they sold skis and equipment in their sporting goods departments. WOR radio station started in the corner of the sports department in their Newark store and broadcast ski condition reports. They even had an indoor slope, covered in soap crystals, where would-be buyers could test out skis. In the 1930s, the company sponsored "snow trains"—passenger train service to take skiers from Newark to High Point State Park, as well as ski areas on Pennsylvania.

Perhaps it is because I am not into skiing myself, but I had no idea just how many ski areas used to be in the Garden State—thirty-seven, according to the list in Holste's book. I say "used to be," because of the striking fact that all but three are no longer open. While some went back to the 1930s and 40s, the peak seems to have been in the 1960s. All but the remaining three were closed before 2000. Remaining are Campgaw Mountain in Mahwah (opened 1961), Hidden Valley (1976) and Mountain Creek (1998), both in Vernon.

The remainder of the book is devoted to short descriptions of these ski areas, complete with copies of old advertisements, photos, and other memorabilia.

As someone coming out of the professional graphics and publishing world, I can't help but make a criticism of the lack of quality in some of the image reproduction. But, that aside, I have to say that *Skiing in New Jersey?* offered me a glimpse into an aspect of New Jersey's recreational history I hadn't previously appreciated. We all know about the Jersey Shore or the state forests, but this was something new. Even skiing fans may find this history surprising as they have become so naturally used to going to Vermont, New York State, or Pennsylvania. And, for those who remember these places, this book will likely bring back a lot of memories. While not exactly "ancient history," that so few remain means that Holste has created an early chronicle of what historians may soon come to recognize as the lost era of skiing in the Garden State. 