

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF EBENEZER TUCKER

by E.R. "Duke" Dupuis

To report on the life of Ebenezer Tucker is a very enjoyable assignment, as it is a very interesting journey down the trail of American history.

Reuben Tucker, Ebenezer's father, arrived at Little Egg Harbor from Orange County, New York about the year 1745. He married Ruth Sulse of Long Island who was related to the Headley family who settled at Barnegat and other places along the Jersey Shore. Shortly after his arrival to the area Reuben Tucker purchased Short Beach from Ephraim Morse, Sr. Morse was the first white man to settle on Short Beach. Reuben erected a one story structure among the sand-dunes on his island for the "health and entertainment" of pleasure seekers and invited some fishermen to share the new facilities with him. Shortly thereafter, the island became known as Tucker's Beach. It is interesting to note that the sea reclaimed Tuckers Island & Beach nearly two hundred years later, in 1927.

Ebenezer Tucker was born on Tucker's Island on November 15, 1757. The island, at the time of his birth, was known as Short Beach and was a part of Little Egg Harbor Township. Ebenezer had been born into this world as a British subject. He was born during the reign of England's King George, II. and also lived a part of his life under King George, III who reigned over the British Empire at the time of the Declaration of Independence. He had an older brother, Stephen. It is not known how much older Stephen was than Ebenezer. It is very probable that Stephen too, was born on the island. Ebenezer also had seven sisters: Margaret, Elizabeth, Sarah, Rebecca, Ruth, Julia and Nancy.

When Ebenezer was eight years of age, his father purchased property on the west side of Middle of the Shore and the family moved to the mainland. That was where Ebenezer would spend part of his next eighty years. With the coming of the summer, the Tucker family moved back to their island for the season. In the year 1765, Reuben Tucker decided to meet expenses at his seaside home by renting rooms that were not needed by his family. With the renting of rooms by the elder Tucker, his home on the island became the first seaside resort along the New Jersey coast.

Ebenezer's first wife, Catherine was the daughter of Colonel Aaron Buck of Monmouth County. Their children were Reuben, Samuel, Mary, Aaron, George Washington, Eliza and Catherine. Catherine passed away June 24, 1799 at the age of thirty seven. Shortly thereafter, on October 8, 1802, Ebenezer married Phoebe Ridgeway, the daughter of John and Suzannah Ridgeway. Of that union were to come two more Tucker children, Suzannah and Josephine. Phoebe passed away on November 5, 1808 at the very young age of twenty five. Ebenezer was then fifty years of age. He would not marry again.

The American sailor had been very well trained in the art of smuggling and privateering. They had been forced into both ventures by the acts of Great Britain which served only to toughen their spirit during the Revolutionary War. At the start of the War for Independence we find that America had a free navy in place.. Chestnut Neck was the only privateering port in the Little Egg Harbor region, and it became a very successful port for the privateers. Ebenezer Tucker was a licensed privateer with a letter of "marque" issued by the Continental Congress to operate his vessel "Kitty." Letters of marque, to operate a vessel as a privateer, were for a very short time issued by the governors of the each state. The governor of New Jersey did not issue any of those letters. The captains from this area that requested letters of marque were informed that, in order to get their letter, it would be necessary for them to go to the Custom House in Philadelphia to make application. After a very short period of time, the Continental Congress became the sole authority for the issuing of the letters of marque.

It has long been stated that Ebenezer Tucker served in the Continental Army with General Washington at the battle of Long Island. Extensive research has been made on that claim without any documented evidence being found that he did serve. At the close of the war, Stephen Tucker, Ebenezer's older brother, a Loyalist, was forced to take refuge in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in disgrace with the new nation. He was one of many in the area who had to leave the country under the same circumstances.

Ebenezer purchased the Joseph and John Gaunt farms at Middle of the Shore at the close of the Revolutionary War. With that purchase, he became the owner of the greater part of the village. Shortly thereafter Ebenezer built the Union Hotel at the corner of the main intersection of the village. Today that would be at the southeast corner of Route 9 and South Green Street.

Ebenezer was very involved in local real estate and had vast holdings in this area as well as other parts of the state. He built a general store on the east side of the Union Hotel, in which he sold goods which he had imported from Cuba. That store also served as the office for the port of Little Egg Harbor and later as the Port of Entry. Many of us remember that store as Horner's Grocery. Tucker was a shipper and trader which enabled him to procure merchandise for his general store in Tuckerton. Most of the merchandise that he traded for came from Cuba and was paid for with lumber products from his mills. Tucker provided employment to many of the local people. He was the first business man in the area to make an attempt to move a part of the local economy from the bay to solid ground with the manufacturing of lumber products.

Records have not been found that tell us where Ebenezer received his education, or where he studied law, at which he was so successful. For his knowledge in law it is very probable that he studied and apprenticed with a law firm in Philadelphia. We do know that Ebenezer had a very successful law office



The large stone obelisk marking the burial place of Ebenezer Tucker towers over the old Tuckerton Methodist graveyard on North Green Street. Its size and stature testifies to the importance of his life and influence on the town and the surrounding area. (July, 2003 photo)



Catherine Tucker's stone sits next to her husband Ebenezer's stone in the Tucker family plot in the old Tuckerton Methodist Cemetery.

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Ebenezer Tucker

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and practice at Mt. Holly which was, and still is, the seat of government for Burlington County. With the lack of modern day transportation and communications, it was necessary for Ebenezer to be in residence at Mt. Holly much of the time. Tucker was appointed a "Justice of the Peace" for Little Egg Harbor with the adoption of New Jersey's Constitution in 1784. That appointment was made because of his vast knowledge of maritime law which eventually led to his appointment as a Judge of the Burlington County courts.

Ebenezer held many offices of trust in his lifetime. He was a Freeholder for Burlington County from Little Egg Harbor from 1816-1824. He was also a lay judge for the County of Burlington from 1820-1825 where he served in the Courts of Common Pleas and as a judge of the Orphan's Court. He was elected to the 19th and 20th Congress in which he served from 1825-1829. He served in that great body with two future United States presidents, James K. Polk and James Buchanan, as well as the famous Tennessee frontiersman, "Davy" Crockett. During his tenure in that august body, Ebenezer never spoke on the floor of the house, nor did he ever introduce any legislation to be voted on.

Tuckerton became a ship building center, and Ebenezer went into ship building. He had for a long time been supplying planks & timber to the area ship builders. He was the owner of a saw mill and several large tracts of standing timber in the area which provided him with a ready supply of timber for his saw mill.

Ebenezer was involved in many enterprises in the area during his lifetime. One that did not go to fruition was the proposed "Camden & Egg Harbor Railroad" which had received its charter March 10, 1836. The railroad had authorized capital of \$200,000.00 to build and to operate a line from Camden to Quaker Bridge, McCartyville (later to become Harrisville), and on to Tuckerton. That project fell through and the line was never started. Thus, Ebenezer Tucker never became a railroad baron.

The district of Little Egg Harbor was named a Port of Receiving in 1791 with Ebenezer named the Solicitor for the port under the supervision of Aaron Dunham, the Collector of the Port of Entry at Burlington as documented in the Congressional Record of 1791. Lambertville, in Hunterdon County, was also under the supervision of Dunham at the Port of Burlington. Five years later, in 1796, the District of Little Egg Harbor was made a Port of Entry with Ebenezer Tucker as the Collector of the port.

There are many versions to be found as to how Tuckerton acquired its name. We do know that the village had many names over the

years, before being named for its most prominent citizen, Ebenezer Tucker. Through his influence, Tuckerton became the first postal town in Burlington County on January 1, 1798. At that time there were no more than a dozen postal towns in the state. Tucker served as Postmaster from 1806-1825, when he resigned from those duties to become a member of the 19th and 20th Congress. He would again serve as postmaster of the Tuckerton office from 1831 to the hour of his death in September of 1845 at the age of eighty eight.

In the year 1818, Tucker became a member of the Masonic fraternity, by petitioning Mt. Holly Lodge #18 for membership. Two years later, he along with eight other members of Mt. Holly Lodge, petitioned the Grand Lodge of New Jersey at New Brunswick to form a York Rite Lodge at Tuckerton. That request was granted, and Tuckerton Lodge #43 was given a warrant to function as a lodge. It still functions to this day, but its number has been changed to #4.

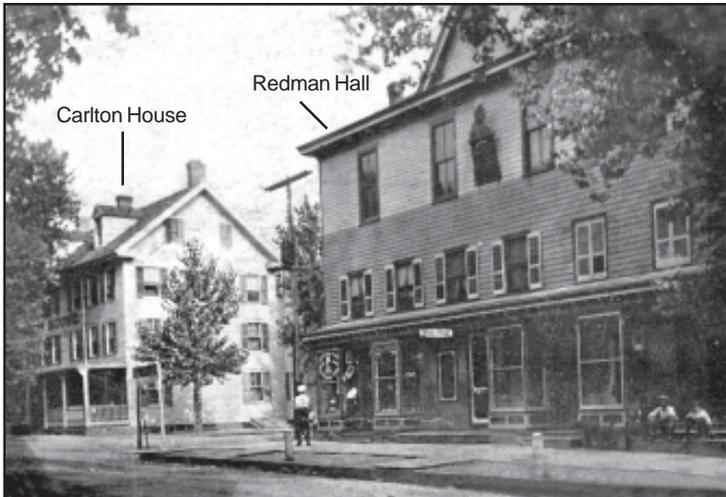
Tucker is remembered to this day as the father of Tuckerton Lodge. When the lodge was first instituted at Tuckerton, it met on the second floor of the Union Hotel on the Green Street side of the building. The lodge used that room for meetings until the death of Tucker on September 5, 1845, when the lodge moved to its present location at Wood and Church streets.

During his life time Tucker was the witness to many important events that took place in the world. He witnessed the rise and fall of many governments, kings and emperors. He followed the many events which led to the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte of France. He was also a witness to the war of 1812, when America's old adversary, Great Britain, attacked our country with a vengeance. In fact, Great Britain did destroy our nation's capitol at Washington, D.C. in that war. We should all be thankful that our American forces were able to match the British in strength.

Ebenezer Tucker had the honor and distinction of serving the first eleven presidents of our country, starting with George Washington and ending with James K. Polk. In his lifetime he had seen our country change from colonies under the British monarchs to a democracy under our own elected leadership. Tucker's children were raised and educated as aristocrats. His sons, Aaron and Samuel, became successful doctors. Aaron married Elizabeth, daughter of Charles Carroll, Jr. of Maryland. She was the granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Tucker lived to be eighty-eight years of age, which was an amazing feat in his time. He is remembered as an aristocratic gentleman of his time. During his time he had been a shipper, a trader, a merchant, a lumberman, and mill owner, ship builder, a patriot, a speculator and developer of land, an owner of the privateer vessel "Kitty," and a long time postmaster of Tuckerton.

Ebenezer Tucker had practiced temperance every day of his life so it is not unusual to find that he had delivered several addresses before the temperance society of Tuckerton. His last address to them was made on July 4, 1844 at the age of eighty seven. Ebenezer Tucker lived to be four score and eight years of age. He passed away on September 5, 1845. It is ironic that he, an attorney, had never drawn up a will bequeathing his belongings to his children or to anyone.



The first meetings of the Tuckerton Masonic Lodge, founded by Ebenezer Tucker, were held in the old Union Hotel which was built by Ebenezer Tucker on the southeast corner of Main Street & South Green Street. It was later expanded and remodelled to become the Carlton House. (Photo courtesy of Tuckerton Historical Society.)

We thank our guest columnist, Duke Dupuis, for his article on Ebenezer Tucker and hope that others are motivated to also send an article, story, or a Letter to the Editor.

