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EDITORIALS

Overlooked historic site

New Bridge Landing gets a needed boost

CONSIDERED DEAD in the water as recently as last summer, efforts to acquire a key piece of property to serve as a public gateway to one of the most historic sites in New Jersey are finally back on track, and none too soon.

It's been almost 228 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence was met with a British assault on New York and the beginning of a military occupation that lasted for eight years. A future for the new nation appeared bleak when Gen. George Washington and what remained of his Continental Army retreated from Harlem to White Plains and then to the garrison at Fort Lee, only to be forced into another hasty retreat by the approach of British troops up the Palisades.

Trekking across Bergen County with the British in hot pursuit, Washington approached the narrows of the Hackensack River where today the borders of Teaneck, New Milford, and River Edge meet. They crossed a wooden bridge – the first land crossing above Newark Bay – and then escaped across New Jersey into Pennsylvania, only to recross the Delaware a month later and take Trenton on Christmas.

The rest, as they say, is history.

But what happened that November day in 1776 near the corner of what is now Main Street and Hackensack Avenue in River Edge is history, too – some of the most significant in all of New Jersey – and it may be that the small historic park tucked away off a jughandle at New Bridge Landing commemorates the bridge that saved a nation.

Pushed largely by the Historic New Bridge Landing Park Commission, the area and its three historic homes have seen some improvements in recent years.

However, the site will never be fully accessible to the public with-

out the acquisition of land for a suitable public entrance and interpretive center. It now appears that finally could happen.

In 1999, the state commission obtained a \$1.1 million grant from the National Park Service and focused on buying the Bergenfield Auto Parts salvage yard that fronts the park on Hackensack Avenue. Negotiations have been tedious and complicated, primarily because the state by law cannot purchase polluted land, nor can it pay more than the appraised value. When the owners of the property refused to allow the site to be tested for petroleum distillants last summer, progress ground to a halt.

What has changed is that state Environmental Protection Com-

missioner Bradley Campbell, at the urging of the commission and local officials, obtained a court order to conduct the required soil and water testing, and results are expected in about a month.

No matter what the outcome is, the tests will allow the commission to move forward with purchasing the site and developing it after any necessary clean-up is performed.

In addition to its key role in the American Revolution, the area has a 400-year history of importance to native Americans, the Dutch, and colonial Americans because of its unique geography and ecology. It was a stagecoach stop in the 1800s to Paulus Hook, now Jersey City, and its unusual iron truss swing bridge, built in 1888, is New Jersey's oldest. It's listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The area has tremendous potential as a tourism and educational attraction.

Clearing out the salvage yard and building a visitors center and public accommodations will go a long way toward providing visibility and preserving this important part of New Jersey's heritage.

What's surprising is that it has taken so long.



Steuben House, one of the three historic homes at New Bridge Landing.