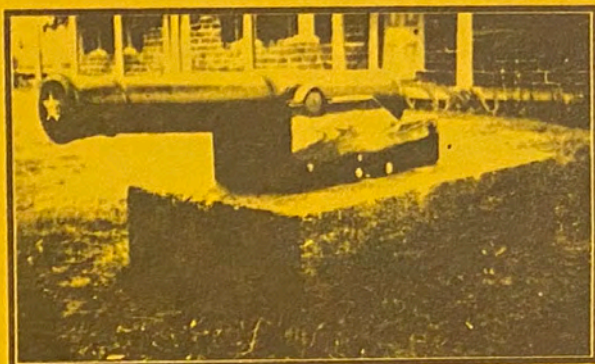


A CHURCH, A CANNON AND OLD BERGEN

by Reginald McMahon



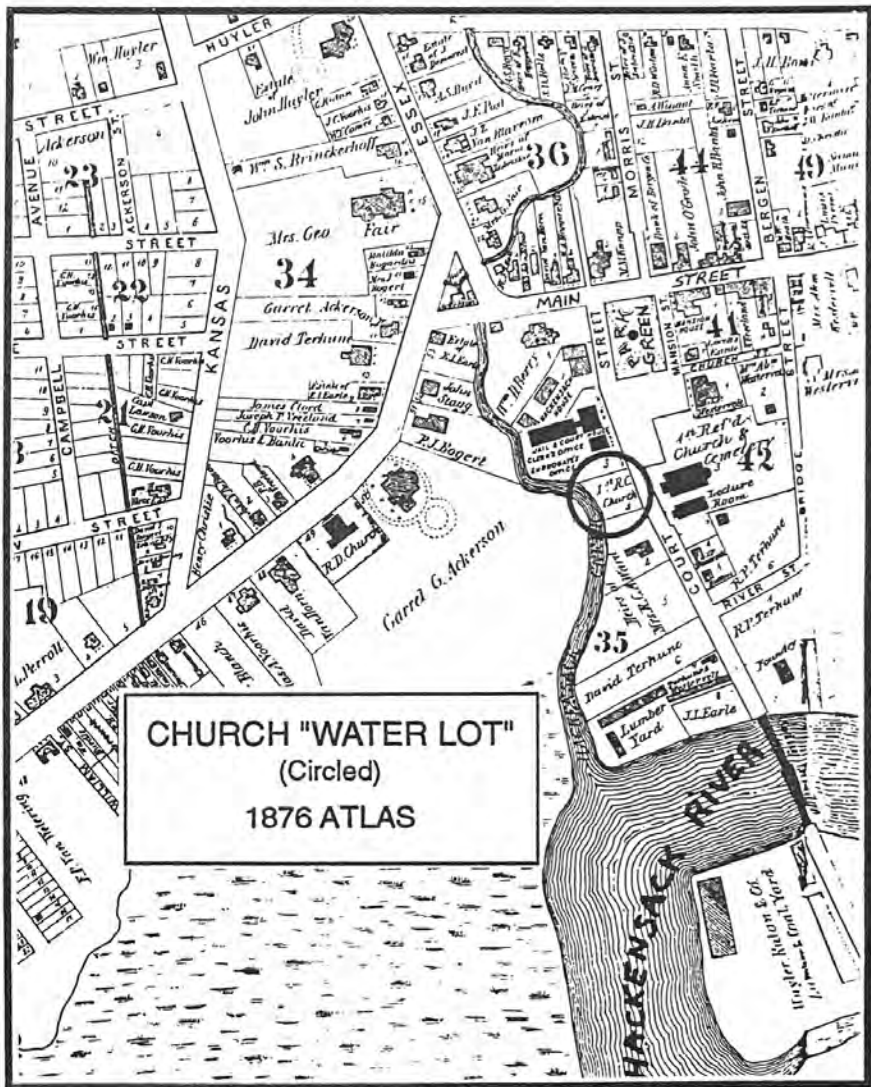
A BCHS MONOGRAPH

A CHURCH, A CANNON AND OLD BERGEN

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CHURCH "WATER LOT"
(Circled)
1876 ATLAS

A CHURCH, A CANNON AND OLD BERGEN

By Reginald McMahon

The title of this study came to mind while researching the original "Consistory Minutes of the Church on the Green in Hackensack, New Jersey." The pertinent entry, dated October 6, 1859, read: "Resolved that Peter R. Terhune and Jacob J. Terhune be a committee to procure the removal of the cannon house and the cannon from the lot in front of the church."¹ The resolution sparked my curiosity, not only about the origin of a cannon standing on this historic church property but a probable link to the vintage artillery piece known as "Old Bergen."

Sparse as the church record was, it did offer clues. Obviously, it predated the Civil War,² and the cannon was a relic of an earlier time. More to the point, however, was the location and mention of a "cannon house." The latter probably was a magazine for storage of powder and shot and may have served as a shelter for the gun and wooden carriage. The installation strongly suggests use as a weapon of war.

Equally suggestive is the location. The "lot in front of the church" was also called the "water lot." In early days, it faced a tidal inlet of the nearby Hackensack River, first known as "Doctors Creek" and later named "Hackensack Creek" (see map, opposite). Navigable for a short distance, it coursed into the heart of the old Village of Hackensack. Here, a cannon would be in a strategic position to oppose an enemy sailing up the Hackensack River and into the mouth of the creek.

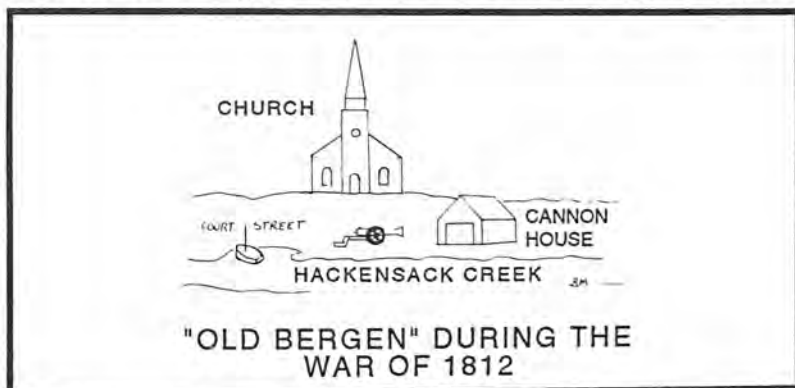
In early days, the potential enemy could only have been the British with their formidable and far ranging naval power. They were our adversary in both the Revolution and the War of 1812. For reasons which follow, I have concluded

that the church cannon was a relic of the latter conflict.

The reason for situating a gun and magazine on church owned land may be because it was simply the only available lot at the desired location. Certainly it was not put there for secular ceremonial use; only a national emergency would have persuaded the church fathers to have such a weapon literally at their front door.

In any event, by the latter part of 1859 the church decided to improve the water lot, and removal of the old military installation was the first step. The property, measuring some 72 feet along the creek, was then "docked in and filled up," a fence erected at the stream edge with a railing for "tying of horses" and a horse shed was built on the site. In short, a church parking lot was created. Fifty years later, the water lot became county property in anticipation of a new county courthouse and jail complex that was planned for the site and adjacent area.³

The former landscape may be difficult to visualize today. There was a greater slope to the land between the church, situated on a slight rise, and the lowland bordering the



"OLD BERGEN AS it may have appeared in front of the First Reformed Church and Hackensack Creek during the War of 1812.

creek. Here, there was a considerable tidal rise and fall, and, particularly during frequent floods, the shore line was often muddy and slippery rendering much of the aptly named water lot useless until it was filled in.

A Church, A Cannon and Old Bergen

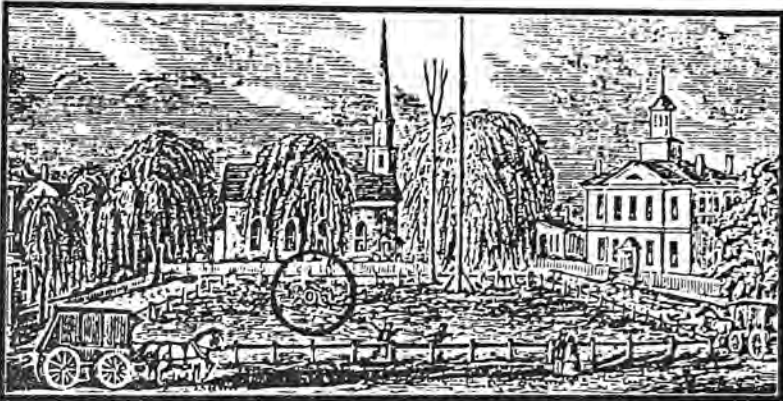
The present viewer sees a different view. With his back to the church door and a gaze directed down the steps and across Court Street, there is only the macadam of the county parking lot. The waters of the creek have long disappeared from sight, diverted underground when today's courthouse and jail was built.

In the latter part of 1859 or early 1860, the cannon house, long empty of powder and shot, was dismantled. As for the cannon, the most logical explanation is that it was moved a short distance away to the Hackensack Green. Unless there was more than one piece of artillery in the vicinity at that time – an unlikely prospect – its appearance on the Green was depicted in a sketch made by 1865.

The Green was an obvious choice. The church considered the land to be their own property, and it would have been a simple matter to wheel the gun on its own carriage from the water lot. The Green was a large open place which included not only the present park but land adjacent to the church cemetery. Often the site of public gatherings, ceremonies and celebrations, it was surrounded by the church, courthouse, hotels and offices in the center of old Hackensack.

At this time the Green was not held in esteem for its aesthetic appearance, particularly when compared to descriptions and pictures of the later Victorian period. A Hackensack newspaper reported in 1858 that the "idea of having a beautiful park, instead of the present miserable apology for a green is too valuable to be lost."⁴ Improvement plans led to a controversy between the church and village concerning legal ownership;⁵ neither side were able to prove their assertion although historic title was invested in the church. The church, however, laid no claim to the cannon which was used by various groups as a ceremonial piece.

The aforementioned 1865 sketch was published in the 1868 edition of "The Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey." The illustration features the Green, the west facade of the church and adjacent buildings. Small but



"OLD BERGEN" CANNON (circled) on the Hackensack Green in 1865. The church is at the center and the 1819 courthouse at the right. (From "Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey, 1868)

recognizable is the cannon on a double-trail field carriage situated on the east side of the Green near the church cemetery. An earlier but similar view of the area is in the 1844 edition of the same work but without the cannon since it still would have been on the water lot and not in view.⁶ Both illustrations are reasonably accurate renditions of the surrounding structures with little reason to suspect that details of the Green, cannon and carriage are not truthful records as well.

The cannon on the Green was known as "The Bergen" but when the name was acquired remains unknown. Perhaps, the christening dates to the installation in front of the church. Old timers remembered the piece. According to one recollection published in 1902 but of an earlier time, the gun stood on the Green near a flag pole which was "surmounted by a Cap of Liberty" where "the old iron cannon . . . boomed forth its voice of terror" on every Fourth of July.⁷ Another story relates how on Independence Day of 1858 the gun "contributed a boom for every star in the flag."⁸ Since there were thirty-two states at this time, the old weapon could still perform, at least with blank charges. In 1858 "The Bergen" was still housed on the water lot although it may have been wheeled to the Green for the ceremony.

A Church, A Cannon and Old Bergen

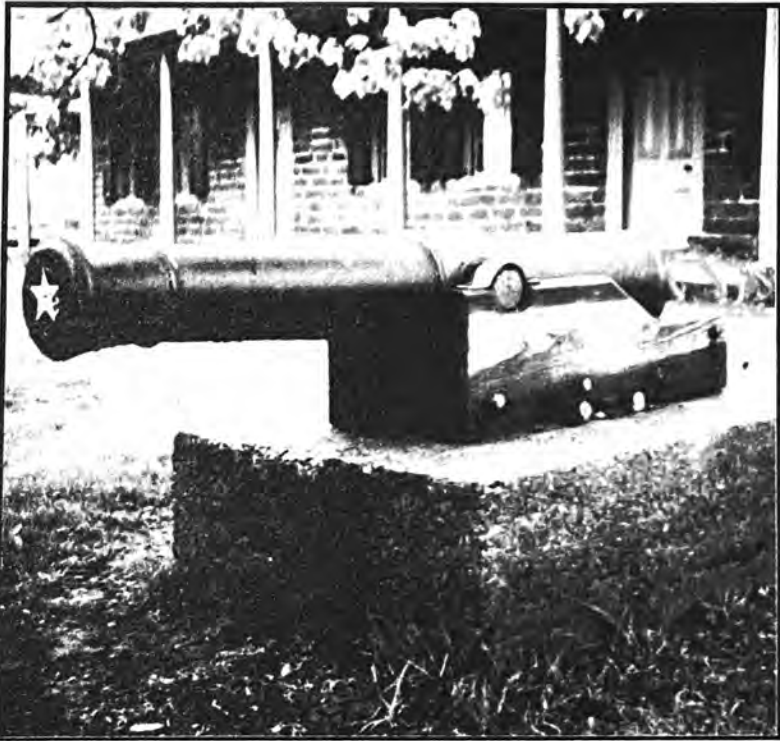
Eight years later and across the Green at the Bergen County Courthouse, the Board of Freeholders voted to purchase a cannon of their own. Abstracts of their meetings in 1866, provided by historian Fred W. Bogert, reveal that the Governor of New Jersey was asked to provide "a cannon for use on special days for celebrating those days by the county." However, the "Governor declined to issue same," and no further action by the Board was recorded.⁹ There is no explanation why the Freeholders sought a cannon while "The Bergen" still stood almost at their doorstep.

Meanwhile, the venerable old piece continued to sound its "boom" in front of the courthouse until sometime in the late 19th century. Age may have caused its retirement from the scene as well as availability of modern artillery for ceremonial use through the auspices of the active National Guard at the Hackensack Armory.

By the turn of the century, "The Bergen" was in private hands. In 1902, "bereft of its carriage," it was on the property of James M. Van Valen's home in Hackensack.¹⁰ A well-known judge, his law offices were at the Bank House overlooking the Green where he would have been aware of the old cannon. Also, Van Valen was a Civil War veteran and a retired General of the National Guard,¹¹ all of which may explain his personal interest in obtaining the historic piece.

After the Judge's death in 1904, it "occupied a conspicuous place on the lawn of the late lawyer Abram DeBaun on Hudson Street, Hackensack." DeBaun had been an early Trustee of the Bergen County Historical Society and after he moved from Hackensack in 1919, the cannon "came into the possession of the Society."¹² When Frances A. Westervelt published her 1923 "History of Bergen County," she noted that the carriageless gun was stored in the cellar of the Johnson Library in Hackensack.¹³

Now considered a museum piece, "The Bergen" was affectionately dubbed "Old Bergen," the name by which we know it today. Some, however, still wished the antique to



"OLD BERGEN," FORMERLY "The Bergen," was mounted in front of the Steuben House in River Edge, in 1941. (Photo, Claire K. Tholl)

participate in celebrations. A newspaper story reported that it would "be heard again on the next Fourth, all rumors to the contrary" and "some overseas men (World War I veterans) will be asked to take a chance at firing off a salute, providing 'Old Bergen' will hang together long enough." According to the article, the ancient weapon was "in possession of the Bergen County Historical Society, and is guarded closely."¹⁴

The Society's headquarters was transferred from the Johnson Library to the newly renovated historic Von Steuben House in River Edge, and by Flag Day of 1941 the cannon was mounted in front of the building with appropriate ceremony.¹⁵ Aimed toward the iron bridge (New Bridge) as if to repel an invader crossing the Hackensack River, the old

A Church, A Cannon and Old Bergen

piece would no longer fire even a ceremonial salute; the muzzle was spiked with a decorative plug.

After two decades of "defending" New Bridge, vandals toppled the gun from its mount in 1961. The Society desired to remount it but on a carriage of appropriate vintage. As a first step, it was necessary to ascertain the age of the piece. Often it was thought to be a relic of the Revolution, but this assumption was never verified. A committee was formed to investigate, and thus began my personal involvement with "Old Bergen."

I inspected the cannon which was lying on the ground beside the wrecked mount, the top or vent side up. The metal was still in excellent condition, free of rust encrustation that so often is the fate of old iron. There was no evidence of paint, nor were foundry cast marks visible which would have aided in identification.

After taking photographs, I measured the various sections and drew a sketch (see drawing, pg. 10). "Old Bergen" was 5 1/5 feet in length and had a muzzle bore of 3 3/4 inches. The information was sent to the National Park Service since they were custodians of an array of cannon at old forts and battlefield sites.

My correspondence established "Old Bergen" to be a six-pounder, smooth bore field gun designed for a wheeled artillery carriage. The age of the piece, however, was conjectural as the Park Service was not familiar with guns prior to 1837.¹⁶

Although there was a resemblance to guns manufactured after 1837, when United States artillery became standardized, several discrepancies were apparent including the fact that it should be bronze rather than iron. Concerning its age, one suggestion offered which would account for the puzzling differences was that it was a "hybrid" Confederate States of America piece manufactured by a private foundry in the South.¹⁷ Since "Old Bergen" predated the Civil War, the hypothesis was not valid.



CANNON ALONGSIDE WRECKED mount in front of Steuben House, 1961. (Photo, Reginald McMahan, 1961)

Fortunately, and in the meantime, fellow trustees and historian James M. Ransom had been in contact with the West Point Museum. Curator Gerald Stowe inspected the piece and estimated that it was manufactured within the years 1810-1825. It is of interest to note that this date may account for the hybrid look in comparison to later standard models.

A Church, A Cannon and Old Bergen

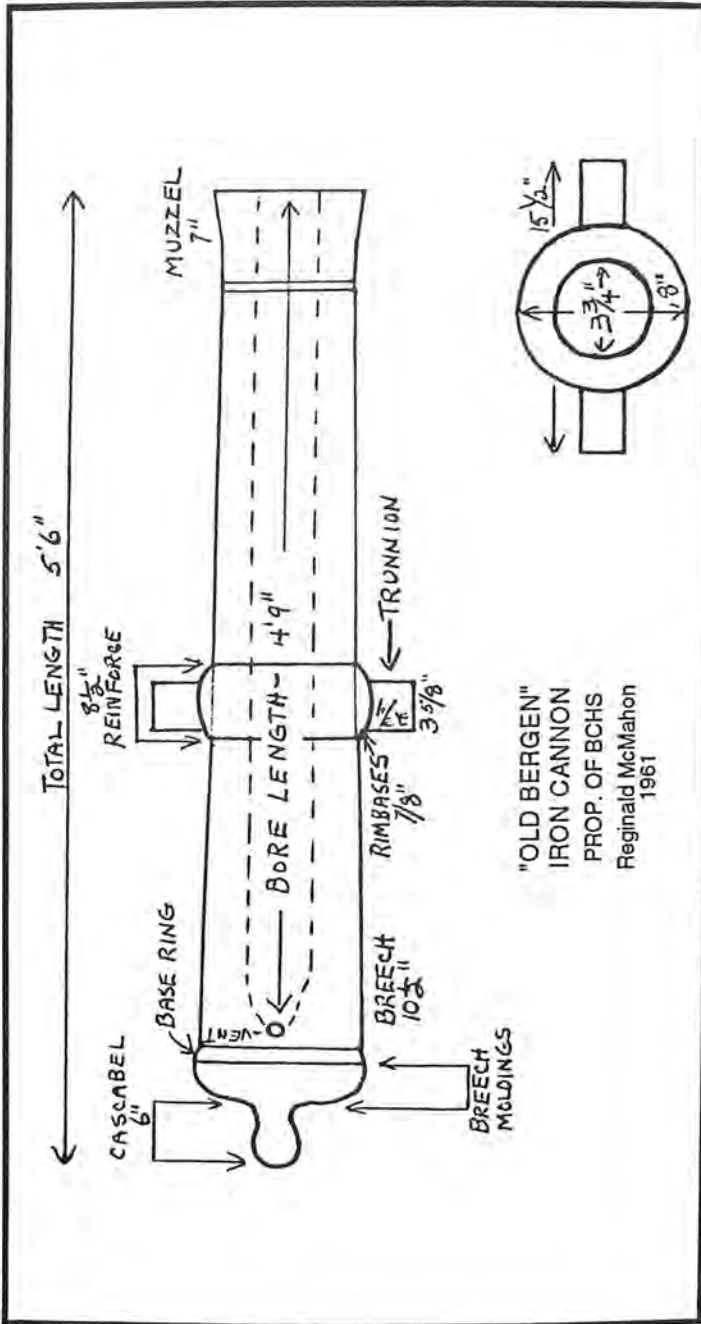
The period of manufacture encompassed the War of 1812 when United States artillery "did most of its fighting with iron 6-pounders."¹⁸ The prospect of British naval raids was real, especially in the nearby New York harbor area and possibly, incursions inland via the Hackensack River. There were those in the village who well remembered the last British presence some thirty years earlier when they burned homes and the courthouse during the Revolution.

The new threat would have been a spur for protection. The work-horse iron gun of that time had ample range to cover approaching enemy ships. Local militia probably manned the piece with many a drill and practice "boom" to startle the villagers. "Old Bergen," however, never fired a shot in anger but its presence would have served as reassurance to the town in its second war with the British.

Meanwhile back at New Bridge but some 150 years in the future, "Old Bergen" was remounted in front of the Von Steuben House. An authentic field carriage was vetoed because of expense and fear of future vandalism.

I should conclude with an invitation to see the venerable old piece of ordnance with its heritage of war, church, and happy celebration. However, on the night of May 9, 1980 "Old Bergen" disappeared. Thieves, obviously strong-armed, lifted the hundreds of pounds of iron from its mount and its fate remains a mystery.

Possibly vandalism, the cannon may have been dumped in the river where its weight quickly sunk the piece beneath the soft silt. More logical, however, is a motive of robbery with intent to sell to an unsuspecting collector. If so, the gun may now rest far from home, perhaps gracing a lawn in the South masquerading as a Confederate relic, or somewhere west or north disguised with black paint and mistakenly prized as a trophy of the Revolutionary War. Hopefully, there will be a future chapter in the history of "Old Bergen" in which it will be found and returned to its native soil.



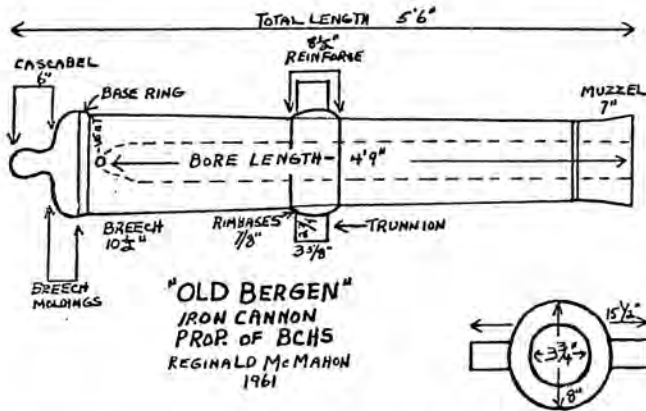
"OLD BERGEN"
IRON CANNON
PROP. OF BCHS
Reginald McMahon
1961

CANNON MEASUREMENTS WERE SENT TO various military museums and it was determined to be a six-pounder, smooth bore field gun designed for a wheeled artillery carriage.

NOTES

1. Original ms. records, First Reformed Church of Hackensack "1845" volume.
2. Many guns were placed in village parks after the Civil War. For instance, the Parrot Cannon on the Hackensack Green was installed in 1908 and had been used in the siege of Charleston, South Carolina. 1942 deposition of James A. Van Valen, Bergen County Historical Society.
3. Church Records; 1909 deeds, Books 713, p. 562 and 719, p. 293, Bergen County Courthouse.
4. *Hackensack Journal*, July 3, 1858.
5. "Church Consistory Minutes." The 1765 church charter of incorporation gave property lines that included what would be the future Green.
6. 1868 edition, p. 81, "Northern View of the Public Buildings in Hackensack, N.J.;" p. 81, "View of the Courthouse and Church, Hackensack."
7. George J. Ackerman, "Recollections of Hackensack," *Bergen Evening Record*, August 15, 1902.
8. Eugene K. Bird, "Rambling Reminiscences," 1922. Bird, Editor of the "Hackensack Republican," appears to have quoted an old newspaper clipping.
9. "Minutes of the Board of Chosen Freeholders," March 12 and May 21, 1866. A cast iron cannon would cost \$300. See also "Bergen County Democrat," March 16, 1866.
10. Ackerman "Recollections."
11. Reginald McMahon, "History of the Bank House" (1980), p. 9-10.
12. *Bergen Evening Record*, updated clipping, Misc. Files, Bergen County Historical Society.
13. Vol. II, p. 480. Westervelt reprinted Ackerman's 1902 "Recollections" but substituted the current location.
14. See note 12.
15. Claire K. Tholl, "The 75 Year History of the Bergen County Historical Society" in "Bergen History" 1977 Anniversary Annual, p. 75.

STOLEN! HISTORIC CANNON



CIRCA 1810 IRON CANNON STOLEN FROM THE GROUNDS OF THE BERGEN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN RIVER EDGE, NEW JERSEY, ON MAY 9, 1980. THE ORIGINAL IRON FINISH IS IN GOOD CONDITION BUT NOW MAY BE PAINTED AND DISGUISED AS A REVOLUTIONARY OR CIVIL WAR PIECE. ANY INFORMATION REGARDING ITS WHEREABOUTS WILL BE TREATED CONFIDENTIALLY. CONTACT THE BERGEN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BOX 55, RIVER EDGE, NEW JERSEY, 07661.

THE AUTHOR SENT copies of this flyer to dozens of museums and historic parks across the country in the hope that information would lead to the cannon's recovery.

16. Personal correspondence: Harold L. Peterson, Albert C. Manucy, Dr. James C. Hazlett, Jan. and Feb. 1962.
17. Ibid.
18. Albert C. Manucy, "Artillery Through the Ages" (Washington, D.C., 1956), p. 12.

