



SCHWARTZ *Report*

DIRECT: 302-234-5202 • OFFICE: 302-239-3000
www.charlieschwartz.com

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OUR OWN SLEEPY HOLLOW

Over the many years serving as your Schwartz Reporter, I have told many stories based on personal experience, etc. This one remains a favorite.



Some years ago, I chaperoned an overnight expedition for our younger son and some of his Sanford School classmates at Ashland Nature Center with midnight nature walks, camp fires and all. Arriving home the next morning, he told his mother: "Boy it's really scary down by that old covered bridge." This statement was, of course, much poo pooed by his older brother who said he was just afraid of shadows. That episode returns to my memory as I cross that little bridge at this time of year.

A search of the records of the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges shows that there are 28 covered bridges in the state of Delaware but only three are deemed "authentic". All of them are in New Castle County. They are Smith Bridge over the Brandywine Creek and the Wooddale, and Ashland Bridges over the Red Clay Creek.

Pennsylvania is the site of the first known covered bridge built in America and has the most remaining covered bridges in the country, 212 in 37 counties. Interestingly, that first covered bridge which spanned the Schuylkill River was not intended to be covered. At the suggestion of Judge Richard Peters, whose estate bordered the river at the bridge, it was roofed, sided and painted. Such refinements were well received and thus became common. The purpose of covering timber bridges was more than decorative, however. Roofing strengthened the entire structure and covering the bridge members protected them from the elements, thereby allowing them to last longer. So it was the protection of the bridge not travelers over it that was deemed paramount.

Covered bridges are known by the type of framing and truss work with which they are constructed. For

example, the Ashland Bridge is known as a Town bridge, for the crisscrossed diagonals or lattice work found on its interior walls. Connecticut architect, Ithiel Town received a patent for this truss design in 1820, and the Ashland Bridge dates to about 1850.

In the countryside, covered bridges were also said to be more soothing to livestock being driven over them as these spans were built to resemble barns. Existing almost always in places of quiet and solitude, they did indeed

provide shelter to travelers caught in a storm or places to court your sweetheart, from which the term "kissing bridge" originated.

Though you wouldn't know it, at some times of the day given the hub bub of traffic as folks rumble over the Ashland Bridge crisscrossing from the Red Clay Valley to the Pike Creek Valley, there are quieter moments in this little dale. As the poet might have written, it is at twilight and early morn.

Here is a Washington Irving description from one of his best known Sketch Book tales, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: "Not far from the village, perhaps about two miles, there is a little valley, or rather lap of land, among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world. A small brook glides through it, with just murmur enough to lull one to repose; and the occasional whistle of a quail, or tapping of a woodpecker, is almost the only sound that ever breaks in upon the uniform tranquility." One could almost evoke these same images Irving wrote of Tarry Town and Sleepy Hollow when reading Nancy Sawin's descriptions of Hockessin and Ashland two hundred years ago. She writes in her Hockessin Diary circa 1929: "...It was in the heart of a beautiful valley through which run[s] the Red Clay Creek. There were two covered bridges. Rolling farmlands spread east and west of the Red Clay Creek." There are only two things missing from her description, Sleepy Hollow's churchyard, which could easily be supplied by a reference to Saint Patrick's

Cemetery on nearby Ashland Clinton School Road. The other is, of course, a lanky schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane.

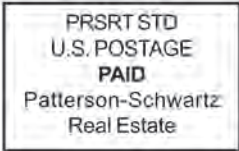
Halloween is approaching and the more imaginative of the kids on their twilight exploration from an Ashland Nature Center overnight (and deprived of their I-phones) might envision the specter of which Irving writes. It was alleged to be that of a galloping Hessian trooper minus his head. "...Having been buried in the churchyard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head; and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes passes along the Hollow, like a midnight blast, is owing to his being belated, and in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak."

They might shudder at the thought of that headless Hessian urging on his black steed. They'd certainly scream as he picks up the jack-o-lantern perched on the pommel of his saddle and thunders after them over the mist shrouded bridge. There were, you know, Hessian soldiers encamped round the Hockessin Meeting House 245 years ago and the back of the nearby Jackson homestead on the Lancaster Pike became a graveyard for British soldiers. So, it is not inconceivable that one could have lost his head somewhere between the skirmish at Cooch's Bridge and the battle on the banks of the Brandywine. He might be looking for it still. Happy Halloween!



Charles E. Schwartz II, CRB
7234 Lancaster Pike, 100A
Hockessin, DE 19707
302-234-5202
Fax 302-234-5212
cschwartz@psre.com
www.charlieschwartz.com

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