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JOHN DAWSON - 1742

Crooked Billet Inn, Hatboro, Pa.

John Dawson was probably born in London; died in Philadelphia, Pa., 27 November 1742. He married, probably in London, c. 1703/4 Dorothy (-) who died at Pikeland Meeting, Kimberton, Pa.

John Dawson was a hatter in England who at the turn of the 18th century suffered severe financial reverses in Southwark, mainly caused by the fact he was a Quaker. When he sought to ease his financial distress by "breaking into the mint" (going into bankruptcy) the local Quakers turned against him. When John Dawson sought to inscribe on the Friends' records the birth in 1705 of his daughter Ann, the birth note was returned to the father with the message, referring to his bankruptcy, that "Friends could have no unity with him because of his debts, and defrauding his creditors." When John Dawson and his family left England and arrived in Philadelphia, between 1705 and 1710, he did not bring with him a certificate of clearance which was required in transferring from one Friends Meeting to another.

In Philadelphia John Dawson and his family set out in a northerly direction from the city toward Abington. He carried his hatter's tools, household utensils and young Ann in a lime wagon. The path he chose out of Abington was difficult. He had to open a road with an axe and a spade until he reached an area where there was an abundance of rabbits. A good supply of rabbit fur was needed for his business, the making of top hats. He constructed a log cabin for a temporary dwelling until he could erect a more permanent building. John Dawson must have opened his road before 1711, for in that year the "Old York Road" was laid out. It passed along the Dawson property and served as a stage coach road from Philadelphia to New York.

It is recorded in the Dawson and Longstreth manuscripts that Ann Dawson assisted her father in building a stone house by serving as his mason-tender. She carried stones in her apron.

Dawson called this stone building, "The Crooked Billet Inn." The name was derived from a bent crooked twig, or stick, which he placed over the doorway. While tending the Inn he also engaged in his hatting business. The position of his Inn on the Old York Road insured its success as a place of refreshment for travellers. His hatting business was equally successful.

As John Dawson did not have a certificate of clearance he could not affiliate with Abington Friends Monthly Meeting. Several members of Abington Meeting took the matter in hand and wrote the Friends at Horslydown Meeting in London to request that the debts of John Dawson be forgiven. He was forgiven and lived within Abington Monthly Meeting until he removed to Philadelphia about 1740. Historian John F. Watson stated that the Dawson family resided in the first brick house in Philadelphia, at the corner of Second Street and Church Alley where John died on 27 November 1742. [Later records revealed it to be the fifth brick house]

The settlement which grew up around John Dawson's Inn on the Old York Road was first named Crooked Billet. Later to honor its first settler it came to be known as Hatborough, the name in use at the time it was organized in 1871. The name was later shortened to Hatboro and the top hat and walking stick symbol which characterized the origin of the borough was retained.

Travellers who stopped at the "Crooked Billet" were assured an honest meal and refreshment for man and beast. John and Dorothy Dawson, practicing Friends, saw to that. The Inn's reputation did not diminish after the death of its founder in 1742, for its location assured it patronage on the stagecoach road. General Washington made mention of his visit to the "Billet" in his reports and dispatches of one of the skirmishes of the Revolution that was fought at Hatboro.

A plaque has been placed on the Watson Building in Hatboro, the original site of the Inn:

THE CROOKED BILLET

1705

John Dawson, Hatter from London, England, built this house, probably the first of stone in the community, and here followed his trade, which gave Hatborough its name.

Later it became a tavern or a Stage House on the Philadelphia-New York Post Road and was known as the "Crooked Billet."

In Washington's letter to Congress in 1777 he mentions the "Billet Tavern".

Marked by
Civic Committee of the Neighbors
Hatboro, Pennsylvania

1924

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-by Fay Hood Shuman
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