

Benjamin F. Witbeck

(Interview)

Jesse Cotton, caretaker at Prospect Hill Cemetery, Guilderland, referred me to Mr. Witbeck.

Cotton referred to the McKown Tavern as "Four Mile House" as he recalled it in his youth. He said it was later known as Witbeck's Hotel or Tavern and then was owned by William Witbeck.

I left Cotton and drove to Oaks Grill and Filling Station, where I was directed to Witbeck's residence, a short distance down Western Avenue. I called, unthinkingly, at dinner hour but was courteously received by Mrs. Witbeck, and after a brief wait, Mr. Witbeck introduced himself.

The Witbeck's home is most pleasantly situated, quite comfortable, and large - and I found myself immediately at home -- so much so it was well after 10 pm when I departed.

Mr. Witbeck was a gold mine of information and what was more surprising, something of an enthusiast as well. As we talked I saw his interest was as great as my own - and results quickly followed.

Greatest of my discoveries was knowledge of two McKown Taverns: the original tavern on King's Highway on property now a part of the Albany Country Club, and the second or 1793 tavern on Western Turnpike.

I asked about the reported tavern site on the Albany Country Club property. Witbeck informs me it was the original McKown Tavern; that McKown was not only a large property holder but a politician. Knowing of the plan to construct a new highway leading into Albany from the Western Country John McKown planned accordingly; in 1793 he built a commodious tavern on his land south of the tavern on the King's Highway and at that time in an undeveloped country: the Western Turnpike at the time, it seems, was still on paper. Because of this McKown built a road connecting his old tavern property on King's Highway, then known as the Schenectady Road, with his new tavern (1793) and sat back quite satisfied with his strategic move, to await the building of the Great Western Turnpike past his new tavern, and the dreamed of inflow of business. In the meanwhile (after 1793) the old tavern was closed

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as a hostelry.

In or about 1799 the turnpike was opened, and a dream came true.

This is something as the story was told me by Witbeck.

To complete the story, it is said McKown in 1797 gave a deed for the right of way through his property - 6 cents was the stated consideration for the strip six rods wide (99 feet) and possibly  $3/4$  miles long.

We were seated in Mr. Witbeck's home: "Would you like to visit the site of the old tavern?", he asked. Would I! He got his car and we were off down Western Ave. to the main entrance of the Country Club. We drove westerly through the beautiful club grounds - magnificently landscaped pine bush countryside - sand dunes growing verdant covering of grass completely hiding the barrenness and ugliness of the typical King's Highway of two centuries ago, along winding roads overhung with heavy foliage. He shot to the bottom of a small hollow between dunes over corduroy road, and up out of the hollow to a level plain surrounded by wooded hills or dunes, and as the old road swung in a wide curve to an opening between hillocks, the car was brought to a stop on the club grounds. It was nearing dusk. There was nothing to denote the site of the tavern and Mr. Witbeck was uncertain as to its former site. There was a large tree topped dune on the right hand side of the road - probably north side. Locust trees covered the top much as at the old Picard site at Verfburg. Scrub Lilac bushes were on the easterly side, at an elevation above the plain. It is possible the old tavern stood under the hill as at the Picard and Truax sites - the hill acting as a windbreak. If so X will mark the hill on the sketch. The sketch from a photograph owned by the Albany Country Club and made in 1889 when the one-time tavern was the club house of the old fox hunting club-men - if the building was the original tavern it was in 1889 a very old building - and Mr. Witbeck assures us the McKown building was not used as a tavern after 1793.

A towering elm and a mound of refuse said to have been removed from the old barn when torn down a few years ago marks the site of the barn on the opposite side of the road (south side?).

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We crossed the road from the locust hill to the dune back of the barn site on the top of which is the #7 tee of the golf course, teeing off in a northerly direction over a rough onto a beautiful fairway. A marvelous view of typical pine bush country is obtainable from the tee atop the dune, a view that must be far more beautiful than the view of the 1790's before landscape artists tamed the wild countryside thereabouts. The old road passing the tavern site winds about the locust covered hill north-westerly(?).

A white marble "marker" much like the Lydius St. survey markers, will be seen atop the dune back of the barn site.

The tavern property was the original Albany Country Club grounds as I understand it. That was back in 1889. The club owns an excellent photo of the old tavern, with fox hunting gents of the period and queer looking (today) conveyances standing about the "clubhouse" of 1889.

Alfred Sabey of Happ Road earlier informed me the old tavern building was torn down 20 or more years ago. He said it was a plain two story structure and at the time it had an 8 foot porch all around.

Sabey said the building was about 40' x 30' and the photo shows a building of this size - without the later porch.

A topographical map shows a short extension of old King's Road eastward of Fuller Road. This extension - then little more than a driveway - swung in a northerly direction to a building on or under a hill noted as 260 feet above sea level. While no check has been made as yet, I assume this building or spot represents the old tavern site.

It was at this site McKown catered to the travelling public for many years - to 1793.

This was the second of four taverns on Kings Road in 1767.

Mr. Witbeck tells me McKown after building his Western Turnpike tavern in 1793, years before the turnpike was built - opened a road over McKown land connecting the King's Highway with the new tavern and it was not until 1799 that the turnpike was opened to traffic. Was this connecting road the Fuller Road of today?

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Witbeck refers to "John" McKown as the 1793 proprietor. Early records refer to "William" McKown as proprietor.

Witbeck has offered to cooperate in a further study of the old tavern and will seek data and more photos.

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June 12, 1940