“Barn at Crossed Keys Tavern”

After driving past “Clan Ferguson’s” barn, I continued on Route 350 and noticed this old barn, its siding colored honey-brown mixed with dark charcoal. I had to stop. Next to the barn is an old tavern where a guide was about to take a group of people on a tour. I asked him about the barn but all he knew was that the YMCA at nearby Camp Kern owned it. So I drove into the camp, where my children had spent time many summers ago – though this was my first time here. I met the director who gave me permission to paint it and to take whatever scraps of wood for the frame, which I did. But no one knew much about it. The nearby tavern was a different story.

The tiny tavern, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, traces back three centuries, to a Captain Benjamin Rue, who later operated it. He served in the Continental Army. Probably from Philadelphia – where he enlisted, Rue and another officer raised a company of artillery in January of 1777 and fought in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Things moved fast in those days. Greenhorn settlers against experienced British troops.

He was given the rank of captain dating to 1775, according to his obituary, published in 1823 in *The Western Star & Lebanon Gazette*, and commanded a gun boat on the Delaware River. He also served under General Benedict Arnold when he was placed in command of a “gondola” in the Battle of Lake Champlain. This gondola was, in effect, a gunboat that the Americans could build quickly and cheaply, as described in *The Gondola Philadelphia and the Battle of Lake Champlain*, a book by John R. Bratten. These flat bottom boats could carry lots of soldiers and cannons and they could land easily, without damage, on the shallow shores of Lake Champlain. Captain Rue controlled one of these, which now is displayed in the Smithsonian.

After he finished his military service, he moved to Oregonia in Warren County, Ohio, where he may have lived in this house – built in 1802 – which became a tavern in 1809. However he fell upon hard times and, at the age of 67 in 1818, he appeared in common pleas court in Warren County to claim or clarify misunderstandings about his government pension. According to the old court document, “… he also states that he is now in reduced circumstances and stands in need of the assistance of his country for support.”

After the Cross Keys Tavern closed in 1820, Captain Rue had to seek work elsewhere, which he found at the Golden Lamb, a Lebanon hotel and restaurant dating to 1803. Captain Rue also worked at The Indian Chief Tavern in Lebanon, founded in 1805. Apparently he was not financially successful. He may have been a good soldier, but perhaps he wasn’t a good farmer, which was the most common form of employment in Ohio in those days. He died in 1823.

So, now for the barn, whose history is sketchy. Judging from its weathered wood and construction, it was probably build in the early 1800s. Did Captain Rue build it? I would guess that he didn’t, since he seemed to be having financial troubles then. But, maybe he did. Legend, as related to me from long-time local “historians,” has it that Captain Rue’s brother or brother-in-law, a certain Norman, had a reputation for being lazy. When told to paint the barn, Norman instead wrote his name on the wall. An old picture from the late 1800s, faded and grainy, shows the barn and its foundation stones, next to an old carriage road as well as a gravel road where Route 350 is now.

In 1917 the Dayton YMCA purchased the tavern, the barn, and 468 wooded acres. They restored the tavern, maintained the barn, and turned the land into a camp for young summer visitors, five of whom were my children. Maybe more history about this beautiful barn will surface, but maybe not. Anyway, it remains an Ohio treasure and will be preserved in this essay and in the painting, framed in its own old wood.