

Historic Fame Passed Florence By

By HUGH HARPER

If the police had been a little more alert, Florence Township might be in every American history book.

The town's near miss with

immortality goes back to 1804 so no one on the force today can be blamed.

In June of 1804, Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton in a duel at Weehawken, N.J.

To escape retribution, Burr jumped on a horse and headed south. At Florence he had to travel down Schuler's Ferry rd. to catch the boat to Philadelphia.

HE MADE IT

As it turned out, he made it and lived on to a ripe old age. But, as Florence Mayor Kenneth Wilkie says, "If our police had just been on their toes, we would be famous."

The mayor admits, however, that even today, Florence is not a very likely place to catch an interstate criminal. The action probably would take place on the Jersey Turnpike and, as in 1804, sweep right on past the pleasant riverside village.

Even though Florence didn't make the historical big time, it once was quite a famous place in the Delaware Valley. It was in fact, a rather plush resort so popular with Philadelphians that the streets were named for the big city.

DATES BACK TO 1820

Chestnut, Walnut, Broad and Front sts. still carry the local traffic. And, although the old bandstand is gone, acres of park land still line the bluffs above the river at Florence.

The resort days date back to 1820 when a magnificent hotel stood beside the Delaware.

For more than 100 years well-to-do Philadelphians sailed up the river on private yachts and excursion boats to debark at the now-vanished Florence Wharf. Then they would check in to the Florence Hotel.

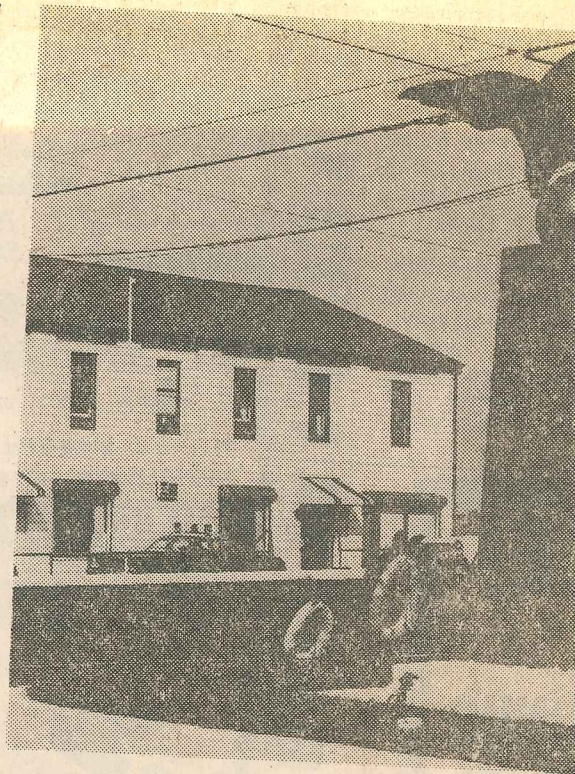
The hotel still stands. But, sadly, none of the voyagers of an early day would be likely to recognize it.

BUILDING CONVERTED

After a long history of glowing entertainment and opulent relaxation, the change in the Delaware River transportation system spelled the end of Florence as a resort. The big edifice stood empty and decaying until, in 1949, the township bought it and turned it into a municipal building.

Today, the town clerk sits just about where the punch bowl used to be. Farther down the hall, the Police Department is centered around the old ballroom bandstand. And when citizens turn out to hear their town council, they sit in folding chairs in the room where elegant divans

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Florence Landmark

The War Memorial as seen from Township Buil

Florence Twp. Missed Chance to Be a Footnote in History Book

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once cushioned the well-to-do vacationers.

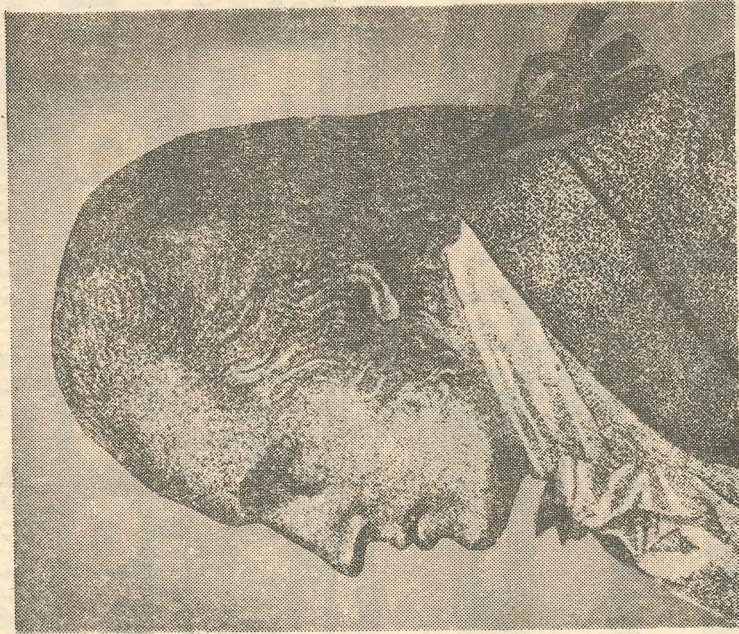
Sadly, neither the exterior nor much of the interior of the building could be preserved in their original forms. The place was neglected too long.

Most of the artistic masonry had to be torn down. The marble pillars collapsed. All but two stories of the once tall hotel were torn out. Inside, plywood and wallboard covered the remains of the frescoed walls.

Occasionally a reminder of the old days turns up. While building a closet last year, workmen uncovered a dumb waiter that once connected to basement kitchens. Occasional digging outside has turned up old bottles and revealed foundations of former stables and out buildings. Other than that, the glory is gone.

OLDEST INDUSTRY

The original town has been around for centuries, but the official township was not formed until 1872, long after the hotel was in business. Then it broke away from



AARON BURR

His arrest could have put Florence on the map
Mansfield Township. The municipality's oldest industry is R. D. Wood Co., which has been making cast iron water pipes since 1803. They took over a foundry operated by a man named Jones who had moved part of the

Weymouth furnace equipment to the site.

In later years, the Roebling Co., now a part of Colorado Fuel and Iron, and DeLaval's condenser and filtration divisions, moved to Florence.

FIRMS EMPLOY 2,500

The three big companies provide nearly 2,500 jobs which is not bad in a township of 8,650 people. (1970 census).

To add a bit of color, Hunt Brother's Circus also headquarters there, which makes it handy for local children who want to run away and become acrobats.

Today, Florence is a quiet, pleasant place with, as Mayor Wilkie says, the dreams of most towns.

"We hope to guide our growth and development so people can continue to enjoy living here," he says. His only regret is the notoriety the place missed in 1804.

THEY'RE PREPARED

Probably only a few citizens in Florence know how close their town came to being famous.

Mayor Wilkie says, however, the township is prepared

to handle the situation properly if anybody tries to escape through the place on horseback again. They have closed and blocked Schuyler's Ferry road and the ferry Aaron Burr rode has been put out of business.