

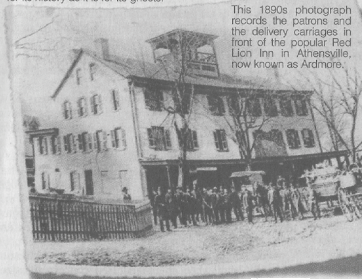
Our colorful TAVERNS

By Kathy O'Loughlin
For Main Line Media News



The Blue Ball Tavern may be as famous for its history as it is for its ghosts.

This 1890s photograph records the patrons and the delivery carriages in front of the popular Red Lion Inn in Athensville, now known as Ardmore.



The Black Horse Inn, circa 1720, at City Line Avenue and Old Lancaster Road in Bala Cynwyd.

Back in the 17th century a man who may have had too much to drink might start seeing elephants and lions and black bears. But only one of those animals was seen because someone drank too much. The others were all names, and colors, associated with Main Line taverns.

Several of the taverns of the 1700s and 1800s had colorful names. As in an actual color, often followed by an animal or another easily recognizable figure, like a tree. Besides offering a catchy name, the colors and objects were often used because they would be easily recognizable to travelers who may not have known how to read.

"A farmer did not have to be able to read. He could recognize a Red Lion, George Washington, William Penn, a Spread Eagle, the Turk's Head, painted on the sign outside. They were like street signs and information booths for visitors seeking directions to relatives or locations of houses, farms, blacksmiths, lumber yards," reads a section on taverns and inns in the Lower Merion Historical Society's book, "The First 300 - An Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion Township."

"For travelers making their slow and oftentimes weary way from Philadelphia to Lancaster, the 1700s was the most important floor of their journey was the way to an inn which gave them shelter for the night as well as refreshment during the day," writes Emma Patterson in the history of taverns in Radnor Township. Patterson penned the "Year Towns and My Town" column for the *Suburban and Wayne Times* from 1949 to 1958.

Taverns Double as "Living Rooms"

"Taverns and inns served many purposes other than as bars and hotels. Taverns were the living rooms for most neighbors because houses were small, ill-lit, crowded with children, and bereft of extra food and drink. A host would naturally entertain his cronies at the local tavern. Courtships were exchanged in the form of drinks, and deals sealed by beverage. The taverns also served as spaces for serious business: voting place, post office, general store," reads "The First 300."

Along the 61 miles between Philadelphia and Lancaster, a traveler could stop any of 65 taverns. "The traveler never was faced with a horrible death by thirst," reads "The First 300."

"There were many kinds of taverns. 'Drovers' of cattle had favorites, which had pasture land behind, or nearby, to accommodate huge numbers of animals with water and fodder available. These were the 'long roads' and the Red Lion in Athensville was especially favored with its original 30 acres. Well before the Revolution, the 'Ordinary' supplied a nectar of a fixed price, as well as a warming drink. Some catered to a better class of customer than the 'long roads.' There were 'tap houses' run by Irishmen beginning in the 19th century. These catered to farmhands, immigrants and roustabouts. Houses of refreshment along the Schuylkill's canal catered especially to the muleteers responsible for driving mules to pull canal boats. Brawls, murders and intense domino games characterized some of the river taverns," reads "The First 300."

The Black Bear Tavern, built in the 19th century on the sloping hill known as Bear Hill at the east end of what is now Paoli, was popular among wagoners and teamsters.

A Green Tree and a Red Lion

Built in 1796 as a hotel, general store and tavern, this inn not only had a colorful name, but was also on a colorful street, Greenfield Avenue, by its intersection with what was then called Lancaster Pike in the town of Athensville, now known as Ardmore. In the inn's attic was a ladder leading to a tower at the top of the building that was used as a lookout, offering a view of several miles, for messengers in the very early days of the inn's life.

The Red Lion was not the tavern's original name. Another colorful one had precedence: the Sign of the Green Tree, with a history that dated back to around 1796. "Malcolm Gunn first began to dispense refreshment at the Sign of the Green Tree. In 1808, Green Tree was sold to John Siter (Sider), who, we believe, changed the sign to depict a Red Lion. Historian William Buck, writing in 1859, claimed that the old building was torn down and the present, fine three-story hotel erected in 1855 and kept by Horace 'Rash' Litzenberg, who retained the name Red Lion," reads "The First 300."

Litzenberg is described in "The First 300" as "the most important man in the village: businessman, farmer, banker and mainstay of the Lower Merion Baptist Church. A man small in stature but filled with energy, integrity, willing and able to toss a man twice his weight into the turpentine if it seemed to him 'a good, honest, Christian necessity.'"

"During his reign the Red Lion Inn was more than a tavern with rooms to rent upstairs and 30 acres out in back for herds of cattle on route to Philadelphia stock pens. Its east wing housed a general store where village necessities were stocked and drovers swapped yarns around the stove; in a corner there was a bar, open til 10 o'clock, closed on Sundays. Three times a week

a wagon pulled by two horses made a trip to the wharves on the Delaware River to replenish merchandise. Later, back in Athensville, willing hands unloaded goods in exchange for 'many a sarsaparilla, etc., particularly the etc.," wrote Josiah S. Pearce, who himself may have rolled a barrel of mackerel or two for Mr. Litzenberg," reads "The First 300."

The clerks at the general store also worked as bartenders in the lattice-enclosed stall where the liquor, glasses and pump water were, as well as the pump water. The room had some chairs and a barroom stove for the guests to warm themselves during the colder months. The inn secured its water from a spring at the corner of what is now known as Greenfield and Lancaster avenues. A creek ran from the spring all the way down to the old Karakung Creek, now known as Cobbs Creek.

There was a large barn at the back of the inn. It was used every Saturday night for auctions as people came from all over the countryside to auction off their heirlooms or to buy another's cast-offs. The barn was also used as the very first site of the Merion Fire Company of Ardmore. Its first equipment consisted of a meager barrel on wheels and a score of buckets.

"Eventually failing health forced Litzenberg to retire. Several others ran the inn, including Litzenberg's son-in-law, as the inn's popularity continued. The Pennsylvania Railroad advertised rates for summer guests at the Red Lion at \$8 and \$10 per week in 1884."

Prohibition proved to be the tavern's downfall. By the early 1900s, the Autocar Company all but surrounded the old inn, which eventually was used as office space for the company.

Black and White Horses and the Military

Among the colorful inns that had a military slant to them was the Black Horse Inn, built around 1720 at City Avenue and Old Lancaster Road in Bala Cynwyd. William Stadelmann, who served as the supervisor of highways for Lower Merion Township, owned the inn in 1778. During that time he helped recruit militiamen.

"At the old Black Horse Tavern, Gen. James Potter had established a picket of Pennsylvania militia. It was too exposed, both to the elements and to the British, to allow for an effective end to the campaign. For the winter, the Americans needed to be farther from the British in Philadelphia and Germantown. So after six weeks, Washington began to move his troops across the Schuylkill River on Dec. 11, 1777. He headed for Matson's Ford, near what is now Conshohocken."

Another colorful inn with a military past, the White Horse Tavern in Chester County, is also highlighted in "The First 300." "The British and Americans clashed in the first battle after Brandywine on September 16 outside of Lower Merion Township, near White Horse Tavern off Goshenville Road. It was the 'Battle of the Clouds' when torrential rain wet ammunition and the patriots again bowed in defeat."

These weren't the only taverns that had a military past. So too did the King of Prussia Inn. "British spies were known to congregate there seeking information about the troops at Valley Forge," reads "The First 300."

A Blue Ball in Daylesford

The Blue Ball Tavern at Old Lancaster and Russell roads in Daylesford was featured in the April 1880 issue of *Harper's Magazine* in an article entitled "Six Skeletons of Long Ago." In it the Blue Ball is called "one of the most famous of all the old hostleries that once dotted the Lancaster Turnpike."

"The Blue Ball allowed the drivers of packhorse trains and Conestoga Wagons to gather around blazing fires as they paused to eat and later to sleep during the tedious treks along the old Conestoga Road," writes Emma Patterson in a multi-part series of the inns and taverns of "Radnor and Tredekin Townships that ran in the *Suburban and Wayne Times* in 1952.

Bernhard Vauler had acquired the tract of land and the first small Blue Ball Tavern in 1759. The tavern sat on a 200-plus-acre tract of land in Chester County that was originally deeded to Owen Roberts by William Penn in July 1714. In 1735 Robert Richardson bought the site. It then became known as the Blue Ball Tavern. For a short period of time in the middle years of the 18th century the name was changed to King of Prussia by Conrad Young, a new owner from Germany. "The traveling public and residents do not seem to have approved of the change on the signboard, so the inn continued to be known as the 'Ball,'" writes Patterson.

Describing the inn in 1952, as it was being remodelled for use as a private home, Patterson said the house boasted five fireplaces, all with original mantels, original wooden floors and Dutch doors from the living room to the porch that featured "a cross to keep out witches, small animals and urchins. Of the five fireplaces, a first-floor one was so wide and deep one can literally sit in 'the chimney corner.' Blackened by the smoke of two centuries, the huge fireplace still has in it the old hand-forged crane, and the 'lazy boy' on which many kinds of food were

baked. It is a matter of tradition that when this room was the kitchen for the old inn, the backlog for the cooking fire was dragged in at one door by a horse, which was driven out the opposite door after the log had been rolled to the fireplace."

Ghostly Guests at Blue Ball Tavern

Another color associated with the Blue Ball Tavern is white - as in white ghosts. These eerie tales of ghostly guests at the inn have been passed down from one generation to another and from one magazine and newspaper article to another.

"Because of the ill repute of one Priscilla Robinson, a descendant of the builder of this second Blue Ball Inn, there are many gruesome and ghostly tales told in connection with this house, probably more than about all other inns on the turnpike put together. These are stories of murders and a hanging, of limp bodies dropped down through a trap door, of shallow graves there by the roadside in the sun, in front of its door America has passed in historic procession - pack-horse trains, ox carts, Conestoga wagons, pushing always into the West."

The Jan. 4, 1902 issue of the *North American* ran a special feature article entitled "Six Skeletons of Long Ago." When a family was remodeling the inn to be used as a private home, six human skeletons were found under the cellar floor. "These human structures were complete, although some showed broken bones or cleft skulls. It is certainly an interesting question how many persons were done away with at the inn during the years from 1809 to 1860," muses Patterson.

The May 1929 issue of *House Beautiful* features photos of the inn, along with some of the ghostly superstitions. "In spite or possibly because of its ghost. It is a friendly old house sitting there by the roadside in the sun. In front of its door America has passed in historic procession - pack-horse trains, ox carts, Conestoga wagons, pushing always into the West."

A decade later in a March 12, 1939 issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* there were "posed pictures in its rotogravure section portraying the sinister events that supposedly took place in the old inn during the ownership of Prissy Robinson."

"According to these tales, peddlers who often carried goodly sums of money with them frequently stopped at the inn to spend the night. Before the great fireplace in the old kitchen Prissy would serve them steaming suppers along with a glass of hot rum. When these some peddlers went up to the room over the kitchen they would find a keg of whiskey and a pammkin beside the bed. After partaking freely of the whiskey they would be in a sleep too deep to be roused by the stealthy figure that would creep in the door. A quick sharp blow - and another limp figure would be dragged down the narrow stairs, to be hidden until a shallow grave could be dug in the beaten earth floor of the kitchen or in the orchard!" writes Patterson.

"Still another tale concerns a woman guest at the Blue Ball who recklessly displayed a large quantity of money at supper in the old kitchen. Next morning her body was found hanging from the wall that still encloses the boxed stairway. Her death was called suicide. However, so many doubted the truth of this that the suspicions of the entire countryside were aroused. And as a consequence many would no longer venture into the Blue Ball Inn after dark!"

"At any rate, so the story goes, the ghost of Prissy Robinson, once roused from her long sleep by the wretched man who dug the skeletons of those she had buried, was seen flitting around the house and grounds. Strange sounds have been heard and bureau drawers have been seen to open of their own volition - or so it is said. At any rate Prissy is supposedly looking in these drawers for clean garments to replace her own blood-stained ones!" continues Patterson who says after Prissy Robinson's death in 1860 "less credence was given these scary stories. Many who know her regarded her as a sharp-tongued old scold who probably did no one any actual harm."

Prissy's Hollow and Widow's Bridge

While there may not be a color in the names of either of these two sites, they both have a family connection to the Blue Ball Tavern.

Prissy's Hollow was a ravine running north from behind the Blue Ball Tavern, named for Prissy Robinson. "She was known for both her sharp tongue and her sharp temper," writes David Schmidt in an article entitled "What's in a name?" that appeared in January 2003 in the *Main Line Life* newspaper.

The Widow's Bridge was the nickname given to a stone bridge over the Chester Valley Railroad, as Swedestord Ross curved to enter the bridge from below. The bridge was the scene of many accidents as a result of its crooked location. The 'widow' was the widow Rees, née Mary Moore, the widow of Col. Abel Rees, who died shortly after the War of 1812 from wounds he received in the war. Widow Rees, who was the sister of Prissy Robinson of the Blue Ball Tavern, lived into the 1880s," wrote Schmidt.