



**The Bonnell Tavern  
Redevelopment Project**



## **Executive Summary:**

The Bonnell Tavern has been a landmark in Clinton, NJ since it was established in 1767 by Lt. Colonel Abraham Bonnell. It was operated as a tavern until 1870 and by 1770, had become the meeting and voting place for the northern section of the county. In the latter part of 1775 political activities at the tavern became even more important when Charles Stewart returned from attending the Provincial Congress of New Jersey as delegate, called a meeting of local residents at the Bonnell Tavern, and organized a regiment of "minutemen". The militia bill that was passed on June 3rd, 1775 triggered this meeting at the tavern on June 19th, of 1775, during which the officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hunterdon County Militia Regiment were elected. The Tavern became the headquarters for this regiment in which Abraham Bonnell served as a Lieutenant Colonel. This was the regiment which was ordered by the Provincial Congress on February 15, 1776 to march to New York under the command of Charles Stewart, by then a colonel. These patriotic militiamen soon joined forces with Major General Charles Lee.<sup>1</sup>

During the Eisenhower Administration, in about 1956, Interstate Highway Construction of Interstate 78 divided the Bonnell farm and the landmark tavern was dramatically affected. Using the powers of eminent domain the 60 acre farm was purchased by the government leaving only the building and 1.8 acres of land at the intersection of Rt. 173 and Interstate 78. In 2004, the Hunterdon County Cultural and Heritage Commission identified the Bonnell Tavern as one of the 6 most imperiled places in the county.

The Bonnell family believes that the best use of the property would be to preserve the building as a modernized restaurant, emphasizing all of the charm and historical significance of the structure and site. Clinton's Main Street would then be flanked by its two most important historic structures, The Clinton House and the Bonnell Tavern, as it was hundreds of years ago. Early in 2008, the governing bodies of the Town of Clinton and Union Township informally declared that this plan would be of great interest to them.

The restaurant would be built in the existing structure. The main 3 story wooden building would house the public areas, while the kitchen and other modern amenities would be located in a new adjacent structure. The renovation would provide a 4-5,000 square foot footprint for the restaurant. Historical memorabilia would be placed in the rooms and corridors of the restaurant and tavern to highlight the role the structure played in the revolution, the underground railroad, the Sons of Liberty, and the history of Hunterdon County.

Funding sources are being considered by the Bonnell family. The property would be leased to an experienced and suitable operator.

## **Bonnell Tavern History during the Revolution:**

Hunterdon County gave much to the cause of the Revolution, and Clinton had a number of prominent patriots. One was Abraham Bonnell who was made Lieutenant Colonel of the Second Regiment of the Hunterdon County Militia in 1777. By that time he had participated in discussions that culminated in the Declaration of Independence. More than a decade earlier, on March 11, 1766 at the home of David Reynolds, he had been selected as one of the Sons of Liberty, an appointment which was approved at a Town meeting at Ringoe's Tavern two weeks later.

Although the tavern itself sits just across the town border in the Township of Union, the Bonnell Tavern has been associated with and played a prominent role in Clinton's early history and there has been a tavern on this site as early as 1764. Abraham Bonnell, who was licensed as a tavern owner in 1764, had operated the Boar's Head tavern in Ringoes prior to opening the Bonnell Tavern in 1767. As one of the most prominent land owners in the area, he devoted much of his

efforts to political affairs. The family patriarch migrated from Cheshire, England in 1630. Abraham's great grandfather, Nathaniel Bonnell, built what is today the historic Bonnell home in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Apart from being the meeting and voting place for the northern section of the county, the tavern remained a fixture in the community until 1870 under Abraham's son Clement and succeeding Bonnell descendants. The tavern, once named "The Gypsy Girl" by William Bonnell, was also part of the Underground Railroad, which moved Southern slaves to freedom in the northern states.<sup>2</sup>

**Present day:**

The tavern is currently owned by Henry C. Bonnell, of New York, NY, a 5<sup>th</sup> great grandson of the original operator Lt. Colonel Abraham Bonnell. Mr. Bonnell believes that an adaptive reuse of the property as a casual restaurant would be the best way for the site to be maintained in its historic context.

**The Hurdles:**

This project will require the cooperation and assistance of the governing bodies of the Town of Clinton, the Township of Union and the State to obtain use code variances, DEP waivers, licenses to operate and serve liquor, water/sewer connections, and property access approvals.

Several local and State variances and approvals may be required once a site plan is finalized. A variance would be required to use the property in the Town of Clinton for parking associated with a restaurant (located in Union Township). In order to increase the building's footprint, another variance would be needed for the 2007 NJDEP requirement increasing the stream buffer zone from 50 ft. to 150 ft. Approvals would be needed to build a bridge to access the property from the northern edge of the property in Clinton.

Increased water and sewer service would have to be authorized and supplied by the Town of Clinton. Water service from the Town of Clinton to the house currently exists and was in use until the mid 1980s.

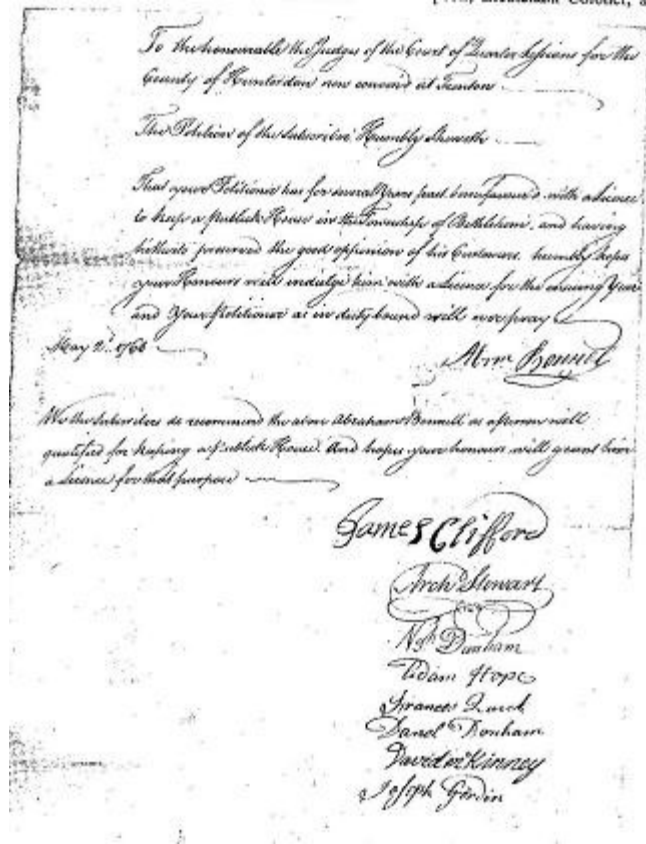


**References:**

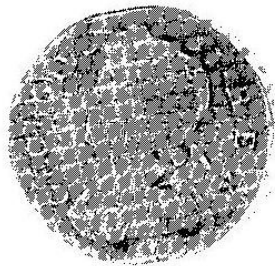
1. Union Township Historical Society, Union Township Rural Recollections, Bradford Press, Flemington, NJ, April, 1988

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**Interesting Historical Facts:**



**Bonnell Tavern License:** Though the tavern was licensed as early as 1764, Abraham Bonnell received this license in 1768. This beautifully written document is a clear indication of the wealth of the applicant. Dated May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1768.



**A Lucky Coin:** This English penny, dated 1738 and another one, dated 1737 were placed under the threshold of the Bonnell Tavern at the time of construction. They were discovered in the late 1950s.



**Present Day Bonnell Tavern:** The tavern is structurally sound and stands on the 1.8 acre parcel at the intersection of Route 173 and 178. The main 3 story structure and original bar room have been kept structurally sound and dry while the house has been vacant for the past 50 years.



**Save the Bonnell Tavern:** The plan is for a vibrant tavern and upscale restaurant as it once stood on the New Brunswick to Easton road.

**The Team:**

The Bonnell Family has assembled a trusted team of local professionals, dedicated to the preservation of this landmark building. The team consists of:

**Lead Civil Engineer:** Wayne Ingram  
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