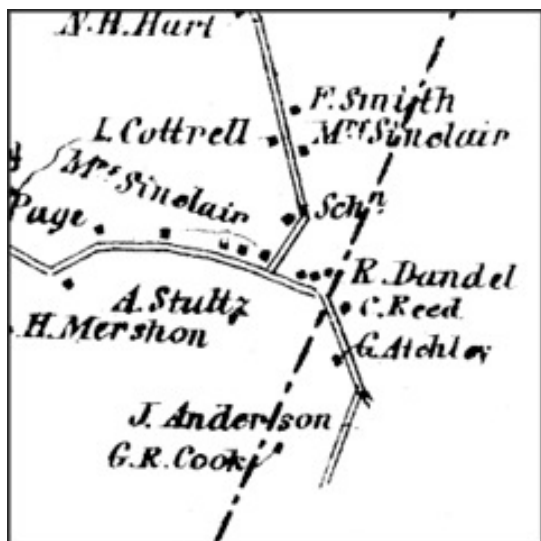




FEDERAL CITY ROAD



How did Federal City Road get its name? Is it one road oddly separated in the middle or two different roads? For 2.5 miles, half of it passes through Hopewell Township; then, after a fifth of a mile break at Pennington/Lawrenceville Road, it continues for 2.2 miles in Lawrence and into Ewing Township. The northern section, all within Hopewell Township, meanders around and up and down, much of it through Mercer Meadows County Park. It feels like an old-fashioned country road as it goes from Delaware Avenue in Pennington southwest to Lawrenceville/Pennington Road. The southern section is quite different, more modern and suburban. One section is like a boulevard with a landscaped median. It goes in a straight line except for one slight bend from Lawrenceville/Pennington Road to Ewingville Road. Actually, that second part is 54 years older. Neither part of it leads to either Trenton or Princeton, two of several places that briefly served as the nation's capital in 1784 and 1783 respectively. Instead, Federal City Road passes through a site between Pennington and Lawrenceville that was proposed as a capital city by a group of optimistic patriots (or land speculators).

In the years between the surrender of the British at Yorktown in 1781 and the decision of the Congress to create a District of Columbia on the bank of the Potomac River in 1790, a tug of war was waged between North and South. Both New York, where Washington was inaugurated, and Philadelphia, where the Constitution was conceived, were ruled out. For the first time in history, a nation decided to create a new city to serve as the seat of government. According to *A Capital Place: The Story of Trenton* by David Collier and Mary Alice Quigley, a list of pre-requisites for the seat of government was published in a Maryland newspaper in July 1783:

1. It must not be a state capital nor a commercial center
2. It must be a port
3. It must get current news
4. It must have laws against "public turbulence"
5. It must be centrally located
6. It must not be under state or local law.

New Jersey did pursue its choice. In 1784, Congress passed an act offering 20,000 square miles and even appropriating \$100,000 to build a Federal City. One such site was to span the Delaware River from the falls at Lambertson upstream 6 miles. But the decisive blow to any New Jersey location was probably a letter from George Washington in February of 1785 stating his preference for a more convenient location on the Potomac.

Despite the lack of a navigable port, one location that some local citizens believed might be part of a capital city was an area around what is now the intersection of Pennington/Lawrenceville Road and Federal City Road. It is today the location of the Twin Pines Athletic Fields and Little Acres Farm Market. Even though the proposed city was never built, the name stayed associated with the location. According to a 1951 article by Helen Zavitkovsky, who interviewed some descendants of 18th century families, there exist only "theories and old tales" about the origin of the name. The family of Daniel L. Cook surmised that because their ancestor was an ardent Federalist politically, he may have suggested the name. The more widely held belief is that land speculators anticipated that the Trenton/Delaware River location would sprawl as far as the Hopewell Valley. At any rate, in 1817, long after the completion of Washington, D.C., when Hunterdon County laid out a new road to connect Pennington/Rocky Hill Road with Pennington/Lawrenceville Road, it was unofficially called Federal City Road. The road was later extended north to Delaware Avenue in Pennington. A neighborhood of two or three houses developed near



LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS



its intersection with Pennington/Lawrenceville Road. Since there was a road of that name leading to it, the settlement became known as Federal City.

The other road now called Federal City was laid long before the Revolutionary War or any thought of a national capital. In 1763, a road two rods (33 feet) wide was laid out by the Commissioners of Hunterdon County. Like most roads in the era before the automobile, the road itself was not given an official name but was identified by the landowners at each end. It is described in the Hunterdon County Road Records as running from a road to Trenton through Richard Howell's property, on a line between Green and Hendrickson to the Shabacunk Brook. It was sometimes called the road to Yardley Ferry or the Ewing/Princeton Road. Much later it came to be called Federal City Road as well, presumably because it led to a community of that name. A real community thus grew out of a hypothetical one.

In the 1830's a one-room school was built and called Federal

City Road School. It first appeared on an 1849 map at the last bend in Hopewell Federal City Road before it intersects Pennington/Lawrenceville Road. By the 1860's, there were around a dozen homes, a blacksmith, a dressmaker and a shoemaker in the hamlet. The school, given the number 9 by the Hopewell School District, served the children of the area until 1910. One of its last pupils was Alice Blackwell Lewis, whose 1973 book *Hopewell Valley Heritage* contains wonderful personal reminiscences of fetching water from a well across the road. She even wrote a poem directed to the schoolchildren being bussed to school in Pennington. It contains this verse:

“There some have proved quite studious,
Others seem quite witty,
But do they know the history
Of their Federal City?”

Ms. Lewis's book contains a charming 1885 photograph of 19 Federal City School pupils and their teacher. The boys are on the left, and the girls in their pinafores are on the right as they were in the classroom. In 1915 the little red schoolhouse with pink trim burned down, and the last remnant of a hopeful little community vanished. It lives on only in the name of two roads.

— *Janet Bickal*

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