

As the Quern Turns: Highlighting Aspects of Tavern Life at Cedar Bridge

By Lucas DiMartini

Life during the revolutionary war was challenging and different. Since there was no running water, bathrooms did not exist. Instead, people used toilets in small, separate buildings called outhouses or bowls used as bedroom toilets, called chamber pots, to do their business. There was no electricity, so people needed to use candles and fireplaces to light their homes. Cooking was often done on a hearth fire before gas stoves were invented. Most importantly, without automobiles, travel was slow, taxing, and mostly done on foot, on horseback, or in a horse-drawn carriage, or stagecoach. While they were still subjected to the struggles of colonial life, Taverns would often provide respite for other strugglers of the time.



Fireplace in dining room.

Photo credit: Tom Spader

Several miles on horseback or carriage were taxing, and travelers and their horses needed regular breaks for food and warmth. Taverns were often made to be the resting places these people needed along the harsh travelling road and were especially important in the winter. Cedar Bridge Tavern itself was a stop along a major stagecoach route and was very popular. Because of the convenience, taverns were an important social hub where many important topics were discussed by patrons. After recognizing the importance that taverns had on communities and travelers, the taverns were taxed and regulated. Potential tavern keepers of great repute could get a license to run a tavern. To do this, they needed two extra beds beyond what the family would use, and the signatures of twelve sober men. The prices for all services provided by the Tavern were standardized, and changing these prices would result in the revoking of the tavern license. Cedar Bridge Tavern was subject to the Monmouth County standards. Cedar Bridge's oldest tavern license and menu can be viewed at the Tavern.

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Bar room fireplace.
Photo credit: Tom Spader

Those looking for a meal would often find it served buffet-style at designated times of day. The three mealtimes were slightly different and in a different order: breakfast, dinner, and supper. Dinner was the largest meal, but a hearty breakfast was also served. Much of the tavern cuisine was the result of farming or hunting. Breakfast at Cedar Bridge Tavern might consist of eggs, bacon, bread, or coffee. Dinner and supper might feature pickles, sausage, beef steak, chicken, oysters, clams, butter, and buckwheat cakes. Examples of these food items are on display at the bar room of Cedar Bridge. People staying the night were usually looking to drink, as well. Ales and hard ciders were usually locally brewed, sometimes even by the tavern keeper. Before and during the Revolutionary War, rum was the most popular drink in the colonies and was imported from the West Indies. However, once whiskey brewing started locally it became incredibly cheap and very popular.



Historic shelves behind Bar.
Photo credit: Tom Spader

Bread was an important part of the colonial diet, and much of the flour required for bread making was created from locally grown wheat. Stone grinding was the most common flour making method of the time. The tool used for hand grinding flour is called a quern stone. The quern stone had convex grooves and was used in conjunction with a “handstone” with concave grooves that went on top. Together, they created a simple, stone-grinding mill. First, wheat “berries” were placed in the central hole, called the hopper. The grinding action was created when the handstone was spun using its handle. Then you had flour. A stone-grinding quern mill is on display at Cedar Bridge and can be tested out.

Another major aspect of tavern enjoyment was sleeping. Beds of the time were very simple. Instead of the modern mattresses of today, people in colonial times slept on ticks. Ticks were cloth sacks that resembled large pillows. Fancy ones were filled with down feathers, but the lower-end ticks at Cedar Bridge were filled with straw. Lodging was cheap at only 9 cents, but this did not guarantee a room or even a bed, it meant entitlement to a spot on a bed. Since Cedar Bridge Tavern was such a popular place, travelers staying the night would often have to share beds with other strangers. Keeping proper etiquette usually meant that bedmates would attempt to lie still and keep to themselves, but people still often tossed, turned, and snored. Also, keep in mind that colonial people would rarely bathe. Still, communal sleeping among families and strangers was a relatively common practice. If you would like to see what the sleeping experience was like at Cedar Bridge, you can see the beds on display. One can easily imagine and experience most aspects of tavern life through the displays at Cedar Bridge as well, so come check them out!



Replica straw mattresses.

Photo credit: Tom Spader