

ALFRED HOYT BILL
CONSTANCE M. GREIFF

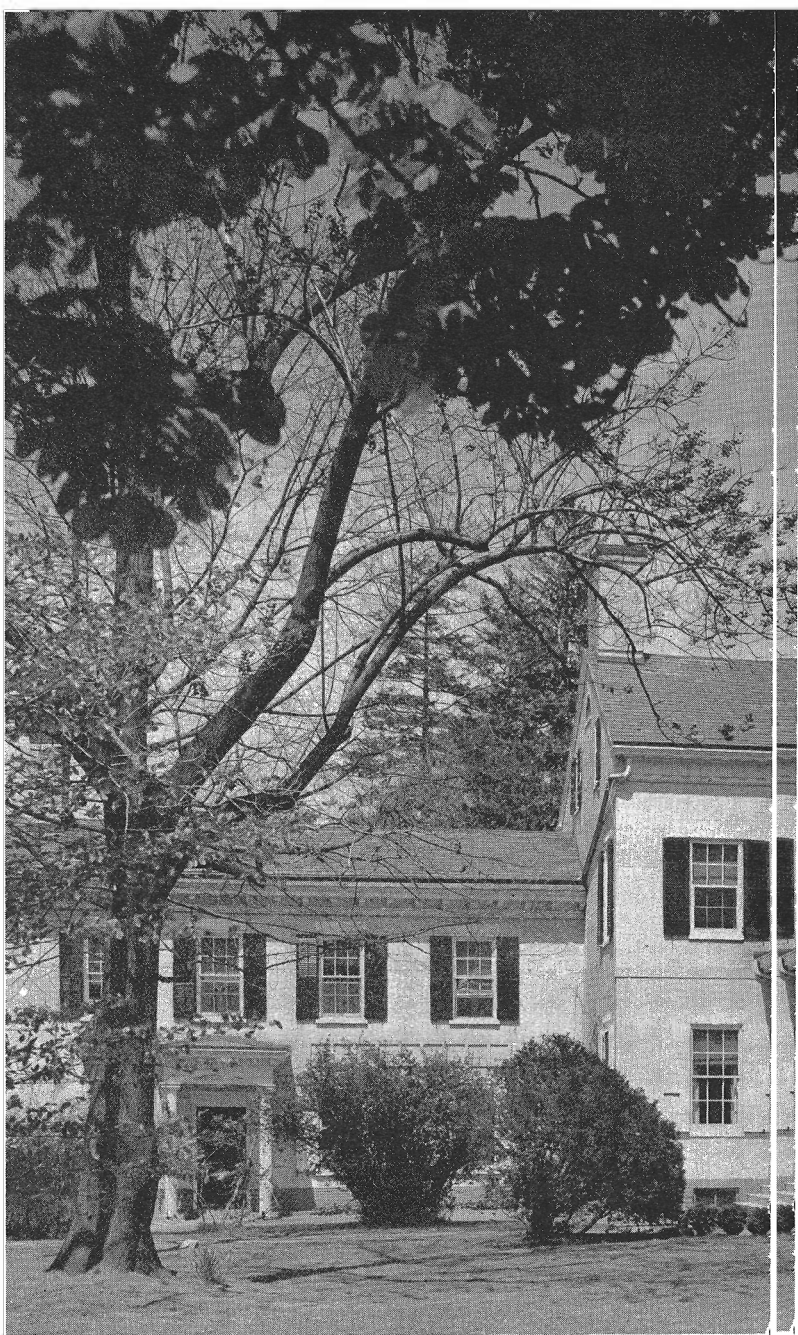
A House Called Morven

Its Role in American History, 1701-1954

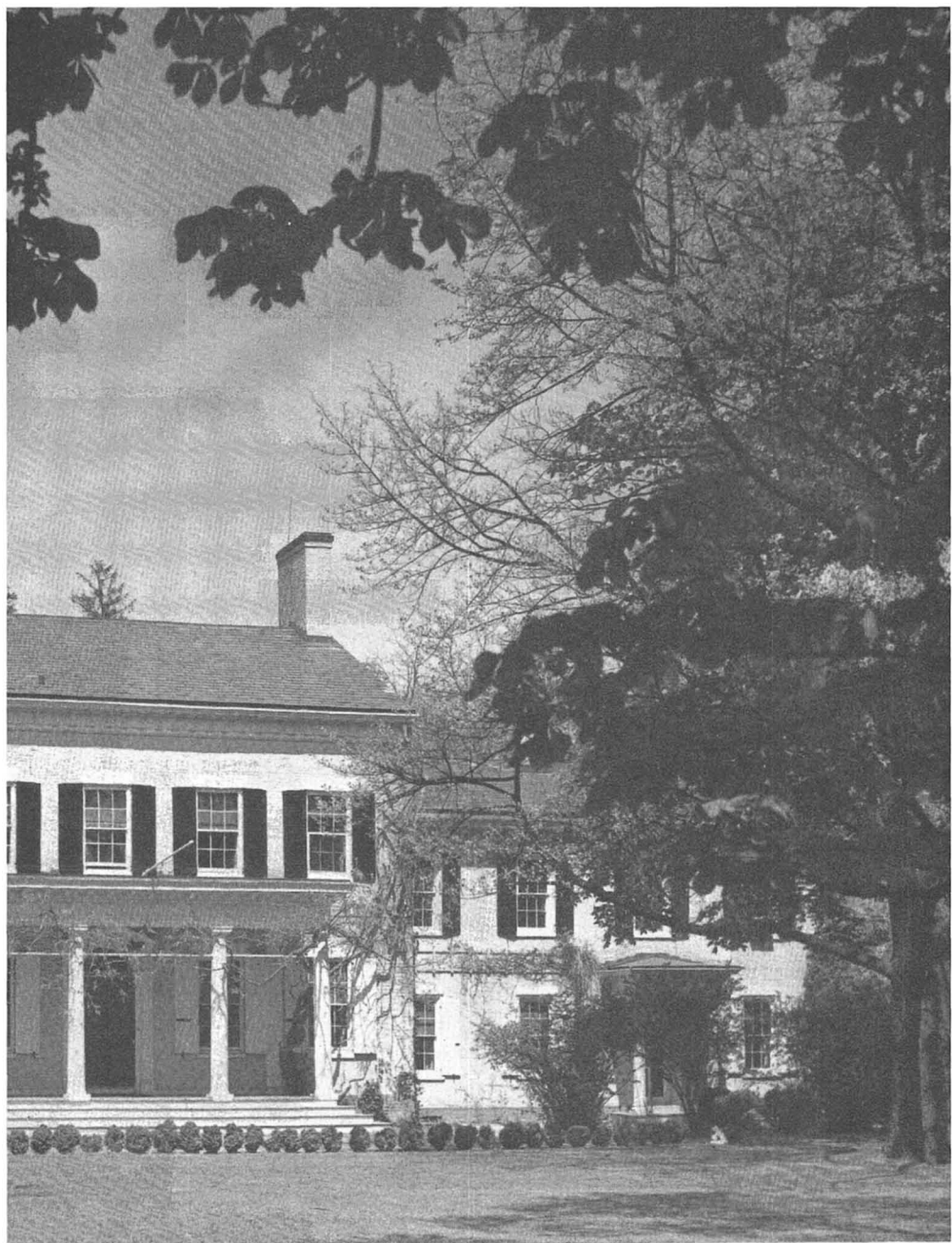


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A House Called
M O R V E N



By ALFRED HOYT BILL, *in collaboration with* WALTER E. EDG
with an essay on the architecture by GEORGE B. TATUM
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A House called **MORVEN**

ITS ROLE IN AMERICAN HISTORY, 1701-1954

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FOREWORD

There can be no foreword without a past.

IN JUNE 1922 I first had the privilege of visiting Morven. President Warren G. Harding was the main speaker at the dedication of the War Memorial Monument across the lawn from the mansion.

The President had invited a number of guests to accompany him from Washington, including myself and my colleague in the United States Senate, Joseph S. Frelinghuysen; Senator Frederick Hale, of Maine; and Speaker of the House of Representatives The Honorable Frederick Gillette, of Massachusetts. The special guests were entertained at luncheon at Morven.

The house was then occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Stockton. She was a gracious hostess, and I was greatly impressed by the simplicity and charm of the historic mansion.

Twenty-odd years later, while I was serving my second term as governor of New Jersey, Mrs. Edge and I were motoring through Princeton and on passing the premises it occurred to me that my wife would enjoy looking through the old house. We drove in and the caretaker willingly permitted us that privilege. The property had been leased to General Robert W. Johnson, but at the time he was not in residence.

We were endeavoring to locate a temporary home in or near Trenton, and Mrs. Edge was so charmed with Morven that I immediately made enquiries as to the possibility of securing it. George A. Brakeley, Vice President of Princeton University, came to the rescue, and General Johnson kindly agreed to transfer his lease to me.

It then occurred to me that if this shrine could be purchased, I would eventually present it to the state to be used as a governor's mansion or a museum, thus preserving all its historical associations for posterity.

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The Stocktons then in possession, members of the family that had owned Morven for two hundred and forty years, accepted my offer without any conditions. I then publicly stated that I would ultimately present the property to the state.

On June 18, 1951, Governor Alfred E. Driscoll approved a legislative joint resolution accepting the gift for the state, which graciously provided that the Edge family should remain in possession as long as they desired. However, while appreciating the offer of the state, Mrs. Edge and I have now turned the property over, and we hope it will be occupied by successive governors.

Stratford, Monticello, and other residential shrines have glorious pasts, but I greatly doubt if any American manor can claim more interesting incidents and historical associations than can Morven.

The following pages will recite the entrancing part Morven has played in the history of New Jersey and the nation.

WALTER E. EDGE

Princeton, New Jersey
September 28, 1953

P R E F A C E

THE traveler entering or leaving Princeton, New Jersey, by way of Stockton Street (Route U.S. 206) may easily miss seeing the fine colonial mansion that stands on the north side of the road two or three hundred yards to the west of the junction of that street with Nassau. His glance will be caught by the tall, white monument that rises above the double row of Japanese cherry trees to the east of the house and will be distracted from it by the lofty tower of Trinity Church and the ornate front of Thomson Hall opposite. Standing some hundred yards back from the roadway, moreover, on the far side of a broad lawn, the mellow front of yellow brick, with its white shutters and hospitably broad, white portico, is obscured by the umbrageous branches of many splendid trees.

But the mansion deserves much more than the slight glimpse that the passer-by can get of it. It has stood there since the days when the road in front of it had only lately changed its name from the Old Dutch Trail to the King's Highway—two hundred and fifty years. It is, with possibly one exception, the oldest house in the Borough of Princeton, and for close to two centuries it has borne the name of Morven, which was given to it by the most distinguished of its mistresses.

Situated about midway between New Brunswick and Trenton on the overland link of the old amphibious route between New York and Philadelphia, the wealth, enterprise, intelligence, and public spirit of its owners made it not only the nucleus of the settlement that was to become Princeton but a center of civilization, culture, and statesmanship from its earliest days. For more than two hundred years the house was owned by the Stockton family, passing from father to son for five generations from the Richard Stockton who built it, and returning to the direct line of inheritance after an interval of possession by a collateral descendant in the sixth generation. In colonial days its owners were judges of the supreme court,

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members of the Royal governor's council, and frequently his hosts when he toured the province. Under Morven's roof were made the plans that brought the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) to the little eighteenth-century village, and much of the money for that purpose was pledged there.

There, too, the cause of American Independence was anxiously debated and finally wholeheartedly embraced; and from its door the Richard Stockton who was its owner at that time went forth to the Continental Congress to sign the Declaration of 1776. He lost his liberty and his health in the cause, and the British revenged themselves upon him by reducing one wing of his home to smoking ruin. His son, grandson, and great-grandson sat in the United States Senate: one of these in the House of Representatives also. His grandson, Robert Field Stockton, developed for the United States navy the first propeller-driven warship in the world and shared with Frémont the glory of the conquest of California. It was he also who pioneered the project of the canal that linked the Raritan River with the Delaware, and he had a large part in the construction of the railroad that soon followed it.

Such men naturally attracted distinguished visitors, and Morven was always famous for its hospitality. Washington was a guest there both as commander in chief of the Continental armies and as President. The family papers record the visits of seven other Presidents of the United States while they were in office; and there were several, James Madison among them, who were probably entertained there as private citizens.

Other guests not less notable were the Marquis de La Luzerne, King Louis XVI's ambassador to the infant United States, and Lafayette, who revisited the scenes of his youthful exploits after a stormy interval of more than forty years. Among others who were entertained there were the first ambassador from the Netherlands, Major Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, Light Horse Harry Lee, Generals Nathan-

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ael Greene, Israel Putnam, and John Sullivan, the painter Sully, Daniel Webster repeatedly, such assorted divines as Jonathan Edwards and Bishop George Washington Doane, every president of the College of New Jersey and of Princeton University, Eliot of Harvard and Butler of Columbia. Doctor Benjamin Rush, the famous physician, and Elias Boudinot, President of the Continental Congress, were frequent visitors as brothers-in-law of the family.

A considerable part of the following narrative, like much of what has already been written of Morven, rests necessarily upon oral tradition. The fire by which the British destroyed the east wing of the house consumed almost all of the papers related to its history up to that time. Much of its life for the past hundred and seventy years is reflected in letters and documents that have been accumulated in the Princeton University Library and elsewhere; a few remain in the possession of various members of the family. But for a number of episodes that have the ring of truth I have been able to find no documentary evidence and I have accepted them at their face value.

The record of the genealogy of the family becomes confused here and there. The two historians of the family occasionally disagree both with each other and with local historians of Princeton. The genealogical tables that I have been able to examine are sometimes in disagreement. When such cases became involved in the story of the house, I have done my best to accept what seemed to me the most probable solution of the difficulty. If my judgments have been contrary to the accepted belief of any of the present members of the family, I can only plead the excellence of my intentions and beg them to accept my profound apologies.

For valuable suggestions and information, and for invaluable encouragement, in the writing of this book, I am deeply indebted to Professors Julian Parks Boyd, Walter Phelps

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Hall, William Starr Myers, Duncan Spaeth, and Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, of Princeton University;

To Princeton neighbors: Governor and Mrs. Walter E. Edge, Mrs. Walter Lowrie, Mr. Howard Russell Butler, Jr., Mr. Edward L. Pierce, Mr. James R. Sloane, Mrs. Richard Stockton 3rd, Mrs. Bayard Stockton 3rd, the Misses Stockton, and Mrs. Richard T. Anderson, who gave me the benefit of their personal memories of Morven and were otherwise helpful;

Also to Doctor L. H. Butterfield, of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Judge Sidney Goldman, of Trenton, General Robert W. Johnson, of New Brunswick, Mr. and Mrs. J. Potter Stockton, of Spring Lake, Mr. R. N. Williams 2nd and Mr. N. B. Wainright, of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Mr. Roger H. MacDonough, of the New Jersey State Library, Mrs. Maud H. Greene, of the New Jersey Historical Society, Mr. Howard I. Hughes, of the Trenton Free Public Library, and the members of the staff of the Manuscripts Room of the New York Public Library.

My hearty thanks are also owing to Doctor Colton Storm, of the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, for the photostat of a letter from Richard Stockton to Doctor Benjamin Rush; to Mrs. C. Welles Little, of Hagerstown, Maryland, and Doctor Spaeth for the loan of Stockton papers and documents in their possession; and to Mr. Arthur Conger, of Princeton, for allowing me to examine his collection of Morven and Stockton memorabilia.

And I have the pleasure of recording my gratitude to Doctor Henry L. Savage, Doctor Howard C. Rice, Jr., Mr. Alexander P. Clark, Mr. Malcolm O. Young, and Mr. Alexander Wainright, of the Princeton University Library, and Professor Henry A. Jandl, of the School of Architecture, for their expert, untiring, and friendly assistance.

On that portion of the book which deals with the architectural style of Morven valuable aid and criticism were gener-

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ously given by Harold Donaldson Eberlein, by Professors Donald D. Egbert and Henry A. Jandl, of Princeton University, and by Professors David M. Robb and Robert C. Smith, of the University of Pennsylvania. The plan and view of the south façade of Morven were drawn by Jovko Ilvonen and were based in part upon measured drawings by Professor Jandl.

ALFRED HOYT BILL

Princeton, New Jersey
September 28, 1953

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CHAPTER I

By the "Light Within" and the "New Lights"

IT WAS probably the year 1701 that saw the building of the house. Certainly it had long been finished eight years later. There were already finer houses in the British American colonies, but few finer in the rural districts of the Jerseys, where simple frame dwellings with clapboard walls plastered inside with clay had only lately replaced the primitive "Pallisadoes" of the first settlers; and certainly there were no others so fine on the road between the falls of the Delaware and Inian's Ferry on the Raritan.

On the crest of the long ridge that rises gradually from the crossing of the Millstone River to drop steeply to Stony Brook some five miles to the west, it stood foursquare, its forty-five-foot front of native brick rising two stories and a half above the surrounding fields, which had been woodland less than a decade before. The road in front of it—once the Assanpink Trail of the Lenni Lenape, the Delaware Indians—had been known as the Old Dutch Trail since 1655, when Peter Stuyvesant seized the Swedish forts on the lower Delaware; and it had only lately become the King's Highway. The quickest route between the Delaware and New Amsterdam, it had served the Dutch couriers and the few travelers with strength and courage to face its difficulties.

There had been peace with the Indians for more than half a century. The Dutch had spread from Manhattan across the Hudson to the hills of Bergen. Emigrants from New Haven had founded New Ark in 1666. Colonists from Long Island had crossed Arthur Kill to build Elizabeth Town, where the trail began. But once these outposts of civilization had been left behind, the traveler plunged into dense forests, stumbled down steep and sudden slopes to brawling brooks or the treacherous fords of swampy creeks, and was confronted mid-

By the "Light Within"

way in his journey by the wide Raritan, where tide and current combined to imperil his passage.

Less than thirty years before the building of the house William Edmundson, a Quaker missionary who crossed the Jerseys on his way to Maryland in 1675, had found the country a howling wilderness. Benighted and deserted by his Indian guide, he made his way back some ten miles next morning to the "Rarington River" and "a small landing place from New York, whence there was a small path to the Delaware Falls." By that path and "by the good hand of God" he reached the falls next day but saw "no tame creatures by the way." For some *wampampeg* an Indian, his squaw, and his boy took him and his companions across the Delaware in a canoe. They swam their horses over and traveled along the west bank of the river for several miles but even thus far found no inhabitants.

Not long after this, by order of a court at New Castle, a ferry replaced the Indian canoes at the falls. In 1686 John Inian established his ferry across the Raritan where New Brunswick now stands, and owing to Inian's efforts for the opening of the country, ax and mattock transformed the old trail, which had been "nothing but a footpath for men and horses between the trees," into a road that could be used by wheeled vehicles. That same year Robert Fullerton, the first English settler in the region north of the Raritan, established himself on his farm. South of the Raritan Doctor Greenland had already built his house a mile or two west of the point where the road crossed the Millstone. In 1690 Daniel Brinson settled on the east side, near the present site of the village of Kingston. But the country was still practically virgin wilderness when, six years later, a half-dozen Quaker families settled some five miles to the southwest (about two miles from the center of the present Borough of Princeton) where the road dropped down to cross the brook that the Indians called Wapowog.

Clarke, Olden, Fitz Randolph, Horner, Worth, and Stock-