



CAROL ROSS

*The revitalized Black Bass Hotel in Lumberville has been named to the National Register of Historic Places.*

## **Bridget Wingert: Happy to Be Here On the list at last**

Historical, you say? By whose judgment?

It doesn't matter that a building looks old, that the date over the front door is 1745, that it was known as a tavern for rivermen and canal barge crews and that photographs showed it as a tourist attraction in the 19th century. In today's world, the Black Bass Hotel was not a genuine historic building until it was certified by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

When Jack Thompson bought the Black Bass last year, it was part of the Lumberville National Historic District but the building itself was not certified as historic by national standards. So when the rehabilitation began, the owner faced two sets of standards for construction – Solebury Township's and the federal government's separate building codes.

Since Solebury did not have a historic and architectural review board (HARB), the current zoning practices took precedence over historic considerations for the building. The owner's plans and the township requirements collided and that's when Barbara and John Hencheck stepped in.

"The federal code preempts the state's, which preempts the local building code," John Hencheck said after the hotel's grand opening last weekend.

The Henchecks, who live in Lambertville and have volunteered their time for historical research in that city, contacted Thompson. They knew there could be a misunderstanding about the historic designation. For example, John Hencheck said, the local code might require the wrong mix of concrete for the massive 300-year-old stone wall that supports the old building or modifications that might not be appropriate.

The Black Bass is as significant for its use as an American building can be and its setting on the river is unsurpassed – it looks out on the pedestrian bridge to Bulls Island, N.J., built by John A. Roebling and Company in 1947. The Delaware Canal, empty now after recent floods destroyed the towpath bank on the river side, is another scenic wonder and a mark of the village history.

The Henchecks has a special interest in the Black Bass. Their wedding photograph was taken on the Bulls Island Bridge and they celebrated the first New Year's Eve of their marriage at the Black Bass. Barbara, who grew up in Sergeantsville, N.J., crossed that bridge every day for her first job – at the Black Bass. She worked for Herb Ward, the owner, who purchased the hotel in 1949.

"It was a drinking man's bar – with a ladies entrance – in those days," John Hencheck said, but Ward added a kitchen and started turning the hotel into a country inn that attracted celebrities from

New York and Hollywood and around the world.

The hotel had closed in 2007 after the third flood in less than two years closed River Road for many months and took away the commerce and tourist trade that it needed to survive. Thompson bought it and the Lumberville Store at auction and was committed to restoring the buildings in a historically correct manner.

Thompson was being held to the local standards, which were not the same as national standards, Hencheck said. He asked the Henchecks to do the legwork that would get the building certified as historic by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The next step would be to have it listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Henchecks accomplished those goals in record time. They were fortunate to have a head start with the research that had been done by Gwen Davis, who had done the research for the Lumberville National Historic District, which was approved in 1984.

But for the Black Bass certification, the researchers had to present the structure in a broad historical context. "The Delaware River was a superhighway in the 1700s," John said. "It delivered goods that would go to New York, London, the Caribbean, South America. It brought the latest fashions from London to the outback. The American settlers lived rather sophisticated lives because of trade on the Delaware." And the rivermen stopped at the "Temple Bar," the original name of the Black Bass, for refreshment and to meet "charming ladies."

And the history of the Revolution, the role of Lumberville as a Tory stronghold, even the notorious Moses Doan's ties to the village, the early post office, the lumber yard, all added up to a the broad scale needed to get national recognition.

The Henchecks started in April and had confirmation of the National Register status in time for the inn's opening. John carried an e-mail from Gov. Rendell's office with him to a Friday night reception. He had expected the governor to be at the Black Bass that night.

But Rendell sent regrets that he could not attend. The state budget deadline was keeping him in Harrisburg. John handed the e-mail printout to Loraine Thompson hoping she would keep it as a sign of the importance of the event.

And it was a most important event. Lumbervillians were thrilled with the restoration and delighted that commerce had returned to the village that had been quiet for too long.

It was, they said, a significant step to recovery of their hometown – and it affirmed their optimistic community spirit.