



HISTORY MADE PERSONAL

Chads' Ford Barber Shop Sign

By Gene Pisasale



Most people walk or drive right by barber shop signs without thinking twice. Yet if you walk up the stairs of the Christian Sanderson Museum into the Pocopson Room, your eyes will quickly note a rustic gem produced just after the turn of the 20th century hanging on the right side wall. What captures the visitors' attention is the "Chads' Ford Barber Shop" sign painted by N.C. Wyeth, famous artist and illustrator.

This wooden relic is approximately seven feet wide and five feet high, with two arcs cut into the top center flanking a black shaded five-pointed star. Hanging on the wall behind the arc cut-out on the left side is a photograph of Chris Sanderson, posing as Rip Van Winkle in an American Legion production at Longwood Gardens in June 1937. On the right is a winter scene of Chadds Ford, snow blanketing a parking area in front of the barber shop bearing the famous sign. Painted in black is a silhouetted portrait of General George Washington, his cockaded tri-cornered hat the mark of a commanding officer. He is looking to the right at the young Marquis de Lafayette, who fought with Washington's troops at the Battle of the Brandywine and six other engagements of the Revolutionary War, including the final victory at Yorktown, Virginia in October, 1781. The placement of Lafayette on the right may have held some significance for the artist, as Lafayette is known to have ridden his horse on Washington's right side as they marched triumphantly through the streets of Philadelphia in August 1777 before their first battle together. Below these portraits is written THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE WASHINGTON & LAFAYETTE HAD A VERY CLOSE SHAVE. History buffs recall the Battle of the Brandywine as the largest land battle in North America up until the Civil War, a conflict which Washington lost, but survived to fight another day.

The sign's weathered surface reveals its exposure to the elements over many years. It is known to have hung outside the barber shop going back over 85 years to at least 1926. In June 1998 students from the joint University of Delaware/Winterthur Program in Art Conservation were engaged to help restore the sign which is made of five wooden boards coated with white and black paint. The entire sign had been covered with a "yellow material from Du Pont" by Andrew Wyeth, giving the structure a canary-yellow tint. Diligently working under the direction of Joyce Hill Stoner, Ph. D., then Chair of the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, art restorers managed to stabilize the widespread cracking and flaking paint, while retaining its historic, earthy charm. You don't have to touch the surface to understand how fragile it is, just as fragile as Washington's rag-tag, undersupplied army was fighting against the British.

So, the next time you pass a barber shop, think twice about how delicate and unstable the beginnings of our young nation were... and how two patriots- George Washington, a Founding Father... and the Marquis de Lafayette, a Founding Son of the American Revolution... had a very close shave back on September 11th, 1777.

The Christian C. Sanderson Museum - A Man's Life, A Nation's History. An eclectic array of art, military memorabilia, presidential artifacts, local history and collectibles. History like you've never seen it before! Open March through November, Saturday and Sunday, 12pm to 4pm. Visit us at 1755 Creek Road (old Route 100), Chadds Ford, just north of Route 1, or at www.sandersonmuseum.org. Also open by appointment, call 610-388-6545. For information on the author of this article, visit www.GenePisasale.com.