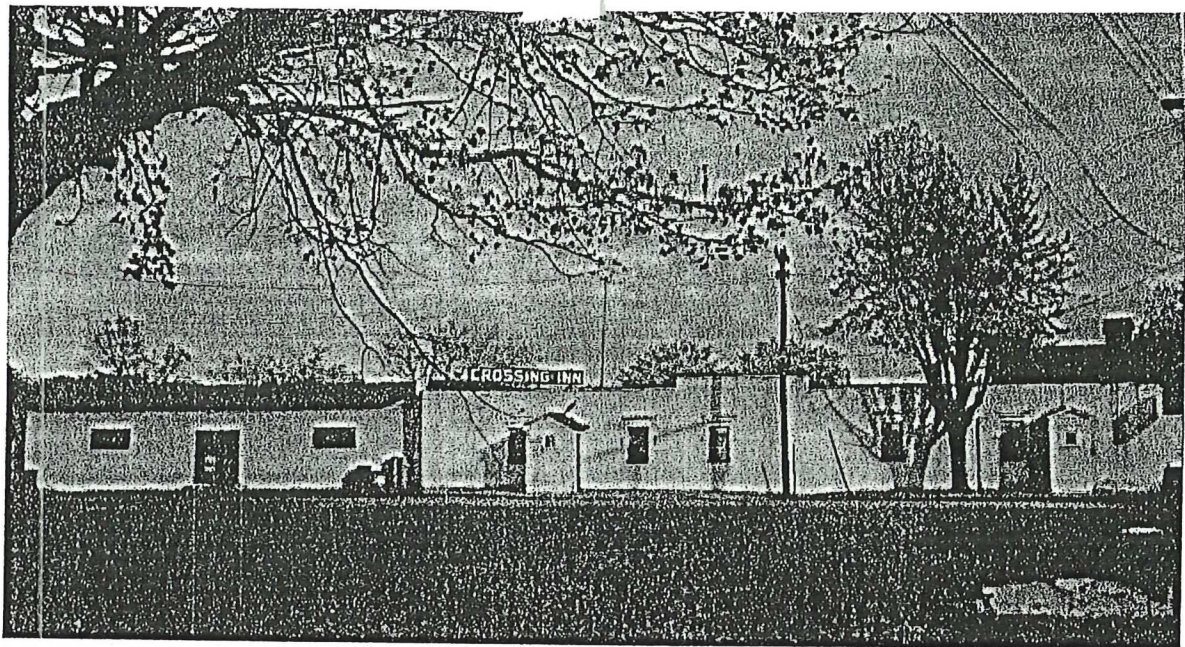




THE CROSSING INN

Jazz and blues in Lawrence? Famous bands and top performers? Huge crowds? Yes, Eggerts Crossing was home to one of the largest and liveliest African American nightclubs in New Jersey during the 1950s and 1960s. The Crossing Inn attracted famous bands and vocalists from as far away as Atlanta and drew crowds of up to 850 people. It was a profitable venture that brought entertainment and excitement to the neighborhood.

Famous performers who delighted patrons at the Crossing Inn included Ella Fitzgerald, who appeared twice, Count Basie and his big band, Louis Jordan, and Ray Charles. Other stars included Little Richard, Dinah Washington, Tina Turner and Lou Rawls. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, African-American musicians were rarely invited to sing and play on television or in big nightclubs for white audiences and popular black singers and bands did not command huge salaries. Black musicians who now are famous found it convenient to perform at the Crossing Inn between bookings in New York and Philadelphia. Local musicians also entertained the crowds at the Crossing Inn. Bill Lacy and his band performed there frequently and Bill has vivid memories of those lively evenings.

The Crossing Inn was first a neighborhood tavern, a bar and restaurant located in a small building at the corner of Cheverly and Albemarle roads in Eggerts Crossing. It began in 1944, when John (Big John) Wyrick and a partner successfully petitioned the Township Committee for a liquor license. The partners pointed out that the existing bars and taverns in nearby Eldridge Park did not want "the colored trade." According to Fred Vereen, the Inn was open on weekends and developed a good business, especially on Sundays, when the bars in Trenton could not open until late in the day, while Lawrence Township permitted an earlier opening. Many Trenton folks would come to the Inn.

The Crossing Inn added its nightclub in the mid-1950's, when Frank E. (Big Ed) Vereen, one of Fred's older brothers, became a part owner with Big John Wyrick. Big Ed, who loved music, jazz especially, saw potential for a profitable nightclub in the area that would showcase black musicians. He constructed a large building behind the existing bar and restaurant. The Crossing Inn's nightclub was 75 feet long, built

of cinder block covered in white stucco paint. It boasted a red neon sign 25 feet long by 4 feet high on its roof that could be seen from as far away as Route 206. Inside, the large room had a stage along one side, with a wrought iron front railing and steps at each end. Colored lights were strung overhead in front of the bar and around the room. Tables and chairs dotted the floor, but there was room for dancing. In addition to the main bar beside the stage, there were smaller bars in two corners, and a third corner held a kitchen. Big John Wyrick was in charge of the main bar and Fred Vereen was also a bartender. On nights when famous entertainers performed, local residents cooked for the club's patrons, preparing fried chicken, fried fish, pork chops and potato salad, for a price of \$6. Admission charges ranged from \$4 to \$12, depending on the entertainment. Drinks were \$2.50.

Patrons usually arrived at the Inn between 8:00 and 9:00 pm and the club closed at 2:00 am, so there was plenty of time for music and dancing. In addition to his bartending duties at the Inn, Fred sometimes was pressed into service as a maitre d', dressed in a tux, along with Aaron Biddle and several other friends. Fred also, on occasion, drove visiting performers to the train. He recalls how he enjoyed taking The Platters, a famous African American singing group, to breakfast at the Trent Diner (now Chrystal Diner) after their performance at the Crossing Inn, before getting them to the train to New York.

Big Ed Vereen managed the Crossing Inn. He hired the star performers through music agents in New York and employed local musicians when needed. Big Ed advertised the nightclub's entertainment with printed placards put up in restaurants, bars and stores throughout the Trenton area and into Pennsylvania. The Crossing Inn's shows were publicized on WBUD in Trenton and also on radio stations in Philadelphia and New York. Big Ed also recruited bartenders, waitresses, cooks, and parking attendants. On nights when a big crowd was expected, there would be as many as 25 employees, most of them residents of Eggerts Crossing. Parking became a big problem, as there were only two small parking lots. On busy nights at the Inn, patrons' cars jammed the streets, parked in driveways and yards. Crowd control could be a problem and an Eggerts Crossing resident, Moses Underwood, deacon of the local Baptist Church, was hired to direct parking, handle disorderly customers and keep out under-age would-be clubbers. On more than one occasion, local police were called in to handle disorderly, and probably inebriated, patrons. The Crossing Inn sometimes also had Sunday afternoon performances and many white jazz lovers attended these sessions.

A serious brawl occurred at the Crossing Inn on only one occasion, the night when James Brown gave a very brief performance – just two songs – before moving on to a scheduled performance in New York. Disappointed and disgruntled patrons protested loudly and vigorously, feeling that they had not gotten their money's worth. Police and firemen intervened, using water hoses to quiet the situation. Although chairs and tables were overturned and six patrons were arrested, of whom four escaped in the melee, no one was injured.

Nightclub fires are notoriously dangerous. The Crossing Inn suffered two fires, which inflicted great damage on the buildings, although no one was injured, because the Inn was not open when they occurred. A fire in 1954 was so destructive that, according to an article in The Trenton Times, "The entire wine and liquor stock of the tavern...was destroyed. Flame spread heat was so intense that the keys of the piano at the other end of the 75 foot building were melted." Coins in the Inn were actually melted together by the heat, according to Harold Vereen, who witnessed the destruction as a boy. Much later, when the Crossing Inn had been closed for many years, the building was totally destroyed by fire in 1980 and its lot was cleared.

Big Ed Vereen left the Crossing Inn and its nightclub after the liquor license he held with Big John Wyrick was sold to Wyrick's brother, Thomas Wyrick, together with Augustus C. Brown and Mamie Viola Brown in 1957. *The Crossing Inn nightclub flourished until the top African-American performers began to appear on television, gained fame and could command high fees for their nightclub acts in big cities.* According to Fred Vereen, "People would pay New York prices in New York, but not in Eggerts Crossing." The profitable nightclub that had brought star performers to the Crossing closed as a result.

Most of this information comes from Mary Tanner's 1995 article on the Crossing Inn, for which she researched Lawrence Township records and newspaper archives, and interviewed Fred Vereen, his brother Ed Vereen, and A.C. Brown, Jr. Fred Vereen, Helen V. Holmes, and Bill Lacy have supplied additional information.