

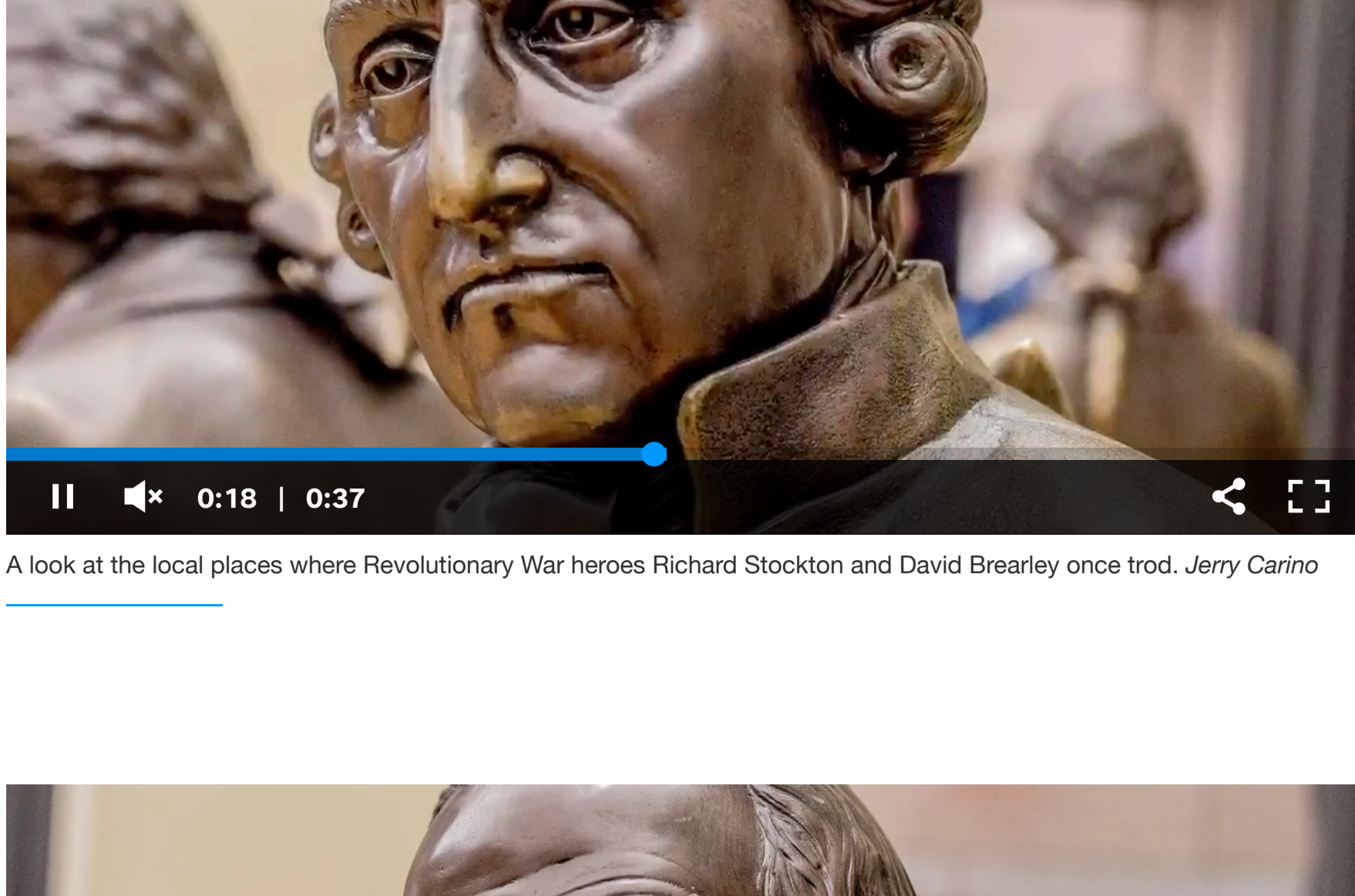
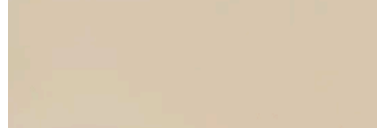
Abducted, forgotten: A tale of two Founding Fathers in Monmouth County

Richard Stockton and David Brearley were pivotal to our nation's birth. Their stories, which unfolded locally, reveal just how messy history can be.



Jerry Carino
Asbury Park Press

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A look at the local places where Revolutionary War heroes Richard Stockton and David Brearley once trod. *Jerry Carino*

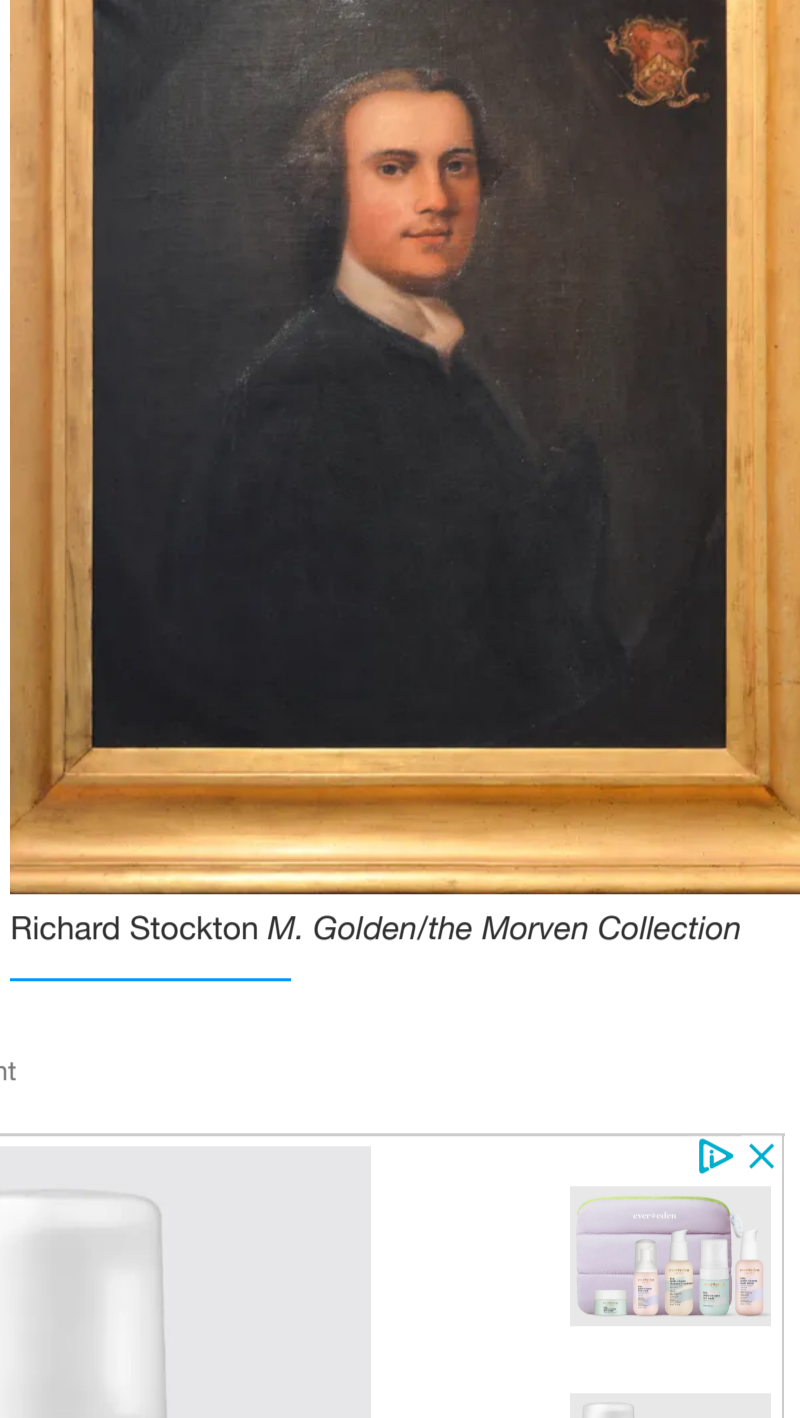
Imagine the hysteria if one of New Jersey's most prominent citizens were roused from bed and taken hostage in the middle of the night. Not just abducted, but dragged naked along a major highway, then clapped into leg irons and tortured. That's what happened to Richard Stockton in 1776, four months after he signed the Declaration of Independence, as he tried to hide from the British in Monmouth County.

On the other end of the county, the crown offered a reward for the capture of Allentown attorney David Brearley, but he managed to avoid Stockton's fate. Good thing; Brearley would go on to frame some of the most important parts of the U.S. Constitution.

As another July 4th approaches, this is a tale of two Founding Fathers and how history gets remembered.

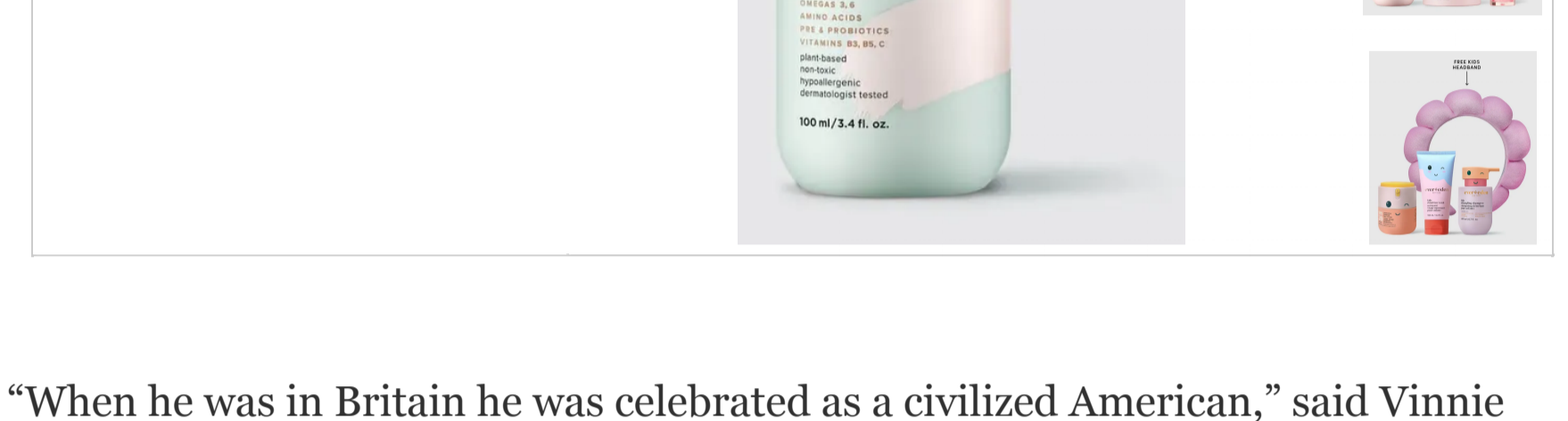
The Stockton controversy

Richard Stockton risked a great deal as the first New Jerseyan to endorse the Declaration of Independence. A respected jurist who inherited the bucolic Morven estate in Princeton, he was admired by the royal court and actually had tried to persuade King George to compromise with the colonists.



Richard Stockton M. Golden/the Morven Collection

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"When he was in Britain he was celebrated as a civilized American," said Vinnie Dicks, a Sea Girl author who has done [extensive research on the Stockton family](#). "So it was probably a big affront when he actually did sign the Declaration of Independence."



Morven Museum in Princeton *The Morven Collection*.

When the British invaded New Jersey, Stockton relocated his family from Morven to the Monmouth County home of friend John Covenhoven. Someone ratted them out; both men were ripped from bed during a nighttime raid there and force-marched (at least one letter from the period has Stockton naked) up to the British headquarters in Perth Amboy.

A slain patriot, a historic letter and the push to preserve a NJ battlefield

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Where, exactly, did this notorious abduction take place? The Covenhovens owned property ranging from present-day Marlboro to Wall. Dicks believes it was in the Glendola County Historical Commission, is convinced it was at the site of Federal Hall in Marlboro — a historic home that still stands along Route 520. Tom Murphy, a historian at what is now Morven Museum, thinks it was in Freehold.



Federal Hall in Marlboro, shown here, may have been the place where Richard Stockton was abducted. *Jerry Carino*

All three agree on one crucial thing: After a month of brutal imprisonment and starvation, Stockton took a loyalty oath to the king in exchange for his freedom and sat out the rest of the war. As Murphy notes, many patriots took similar oaths under duress. Stockton just happened to be the most visible.

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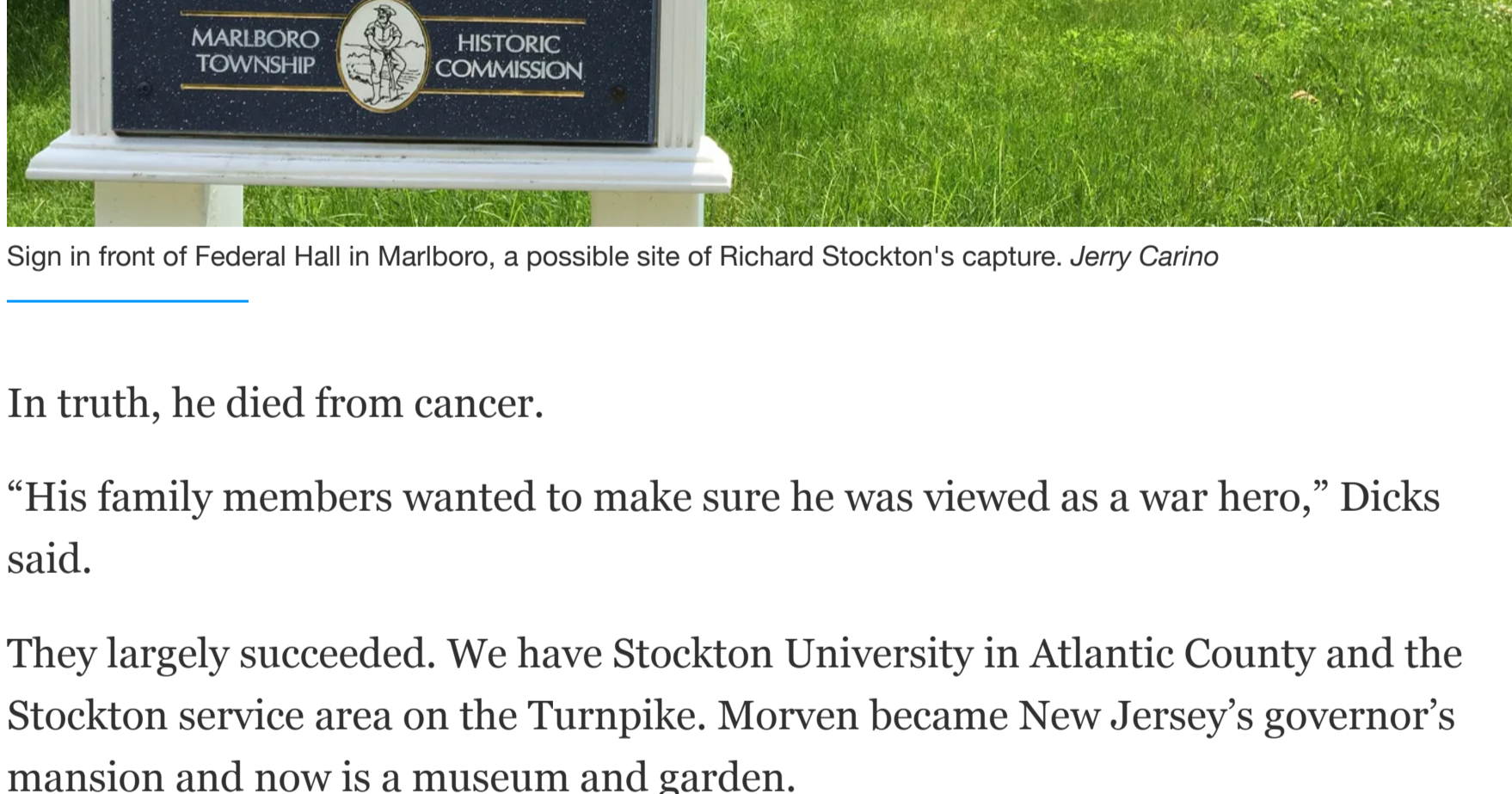
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"I don't blame the guy because if any of us were tortured, who knows what we would sign," Fabiano said. "But there is that pall cast over his reputation because of it."

Bloody shrapnel discovered at Monmouth Battlefield: first of its kind

That's been a topic of debate among history buffs. It's clear that Stockton emerged from custody as a broken man in terms of health and wealth (the British ransacked Morven). This was emphasized by his influential offspring — his son became a U.S. senator and his grandson a Navy commodore and war hero. Stockton's 1781 death, the story went, was the final consequence of his prison-induced breakdown.



Sign in front of Federal Hall in Marlboro, a possible site of Richard Stockton's capture. *Jerry Carino*

In truth, he died from cancer.

"His family members wanted to make sure he was viewed as a war hero," Dicks said.

They largely succeeded. We have Stockton University in Atlantic County and the Stockton service area on the Turnpike. Morven became New Jersey's governor's mansion and now is a museum and garden.

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Inside the U.S. Capitol, there are statues of two significant figures from each state. New Jersey chose Richard Stockton as one of them.

David Brearley: forgotten founder

You may not know much about David Brearley, but you know his work.

As a judge, he laid the groundwork for the 12-person trial jury and the concept of judicial review — the ability of a court to strike down a law.

As a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he chaired the committee that set the length of a presidential term at four years, created the office of vice president and established the Electoral College.



David Brearley's home office in Allentown was located at this spot along Main Street, which is now a chiropractor's office. *Jerry Carino*

"He really did have quite a fascinating life," Fabiano said. "He was held in high esteem. If it wasn't for his untimely death in his 40s, he would have been more well-known as a founding father."

Brearley died in 1790, shortly after George Washington made him a federal district judge. Today there is scant evidence of him in Allentown, where he lived and worked as he rose to prominence.

Revisiting Middletown's colonial murder mystery

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"They're going to demolish an old gas station and turn it into a pocket park," Fabiano said. "The town has discussed different ideas, and one of my ideas would be to put a statue of Brearley there."

David Brearley High School in Union County is named in his honor, and that's about it. No college, no rest stop, no museum in Allentown.

Whereas Richard Stockton's powerful descendants kept his legacy strong, Brearley's lone son became a sailor and disappeared at sea.

This architect of the Constitution first practiced law out of his home at 7 South Main Street. Today, it's a chiropractor's office.

Carino's Corner appears Mondays in the Asbury Park Press. It will resume in August. Email Jerry at jcarino@gannettmj.com.

Morven Museum & Garden is hosting a [free celebration July 4, 12-3 p.m.](#)

