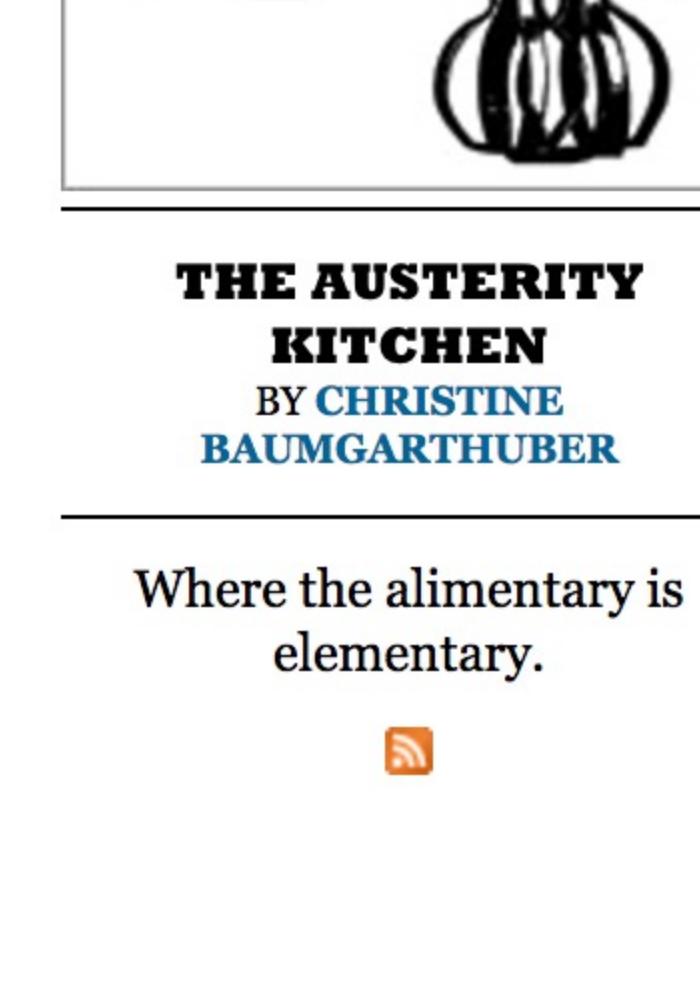


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July 18, 2013



THE AUSTERITY
KITCHEN
BY CHRISTINE
BAUMGARTNER

Where the alimentary is
elementary.

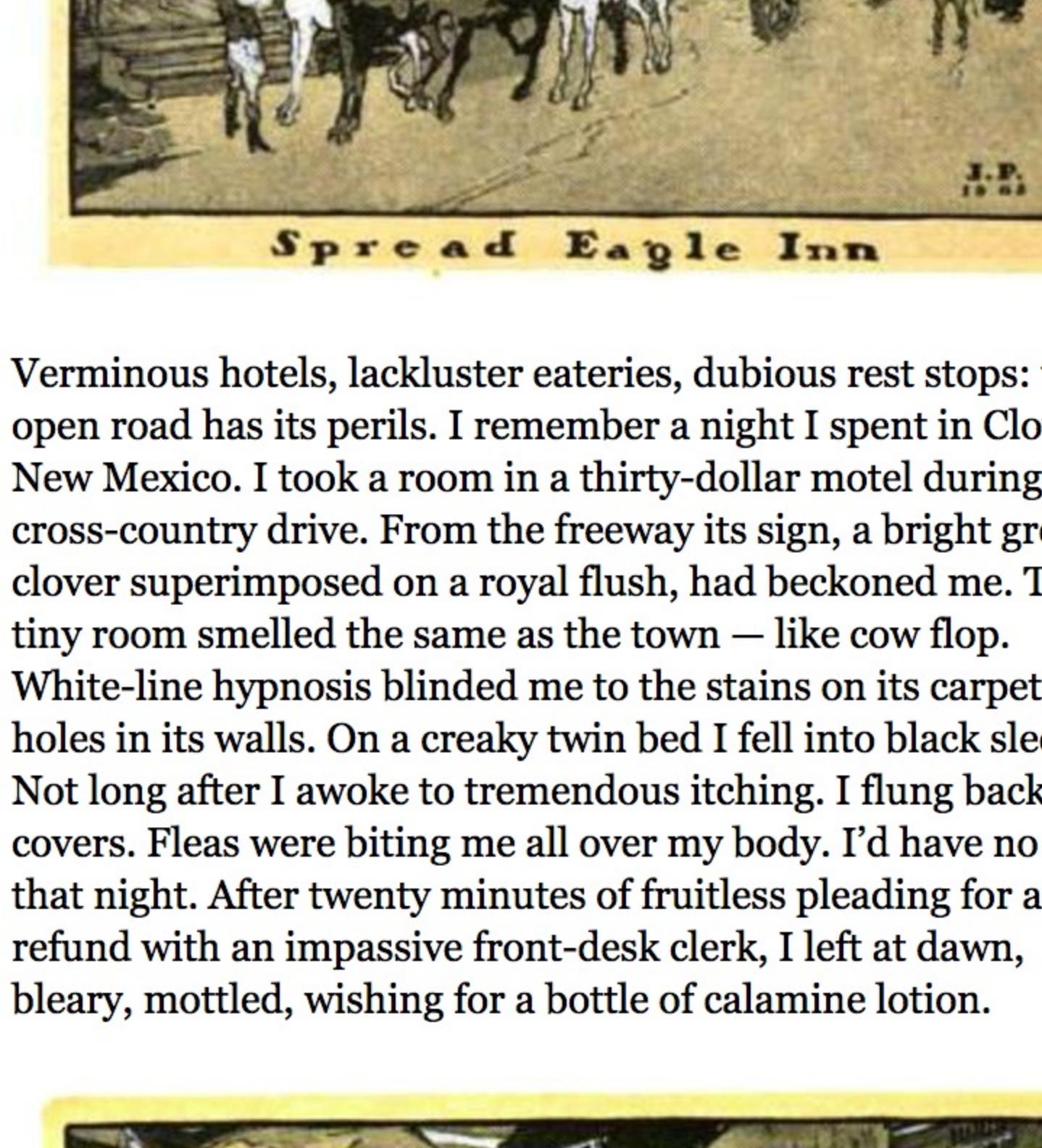


"This life at best is but an inn, and
we the passengers." —James Howell

The Inn Crowd

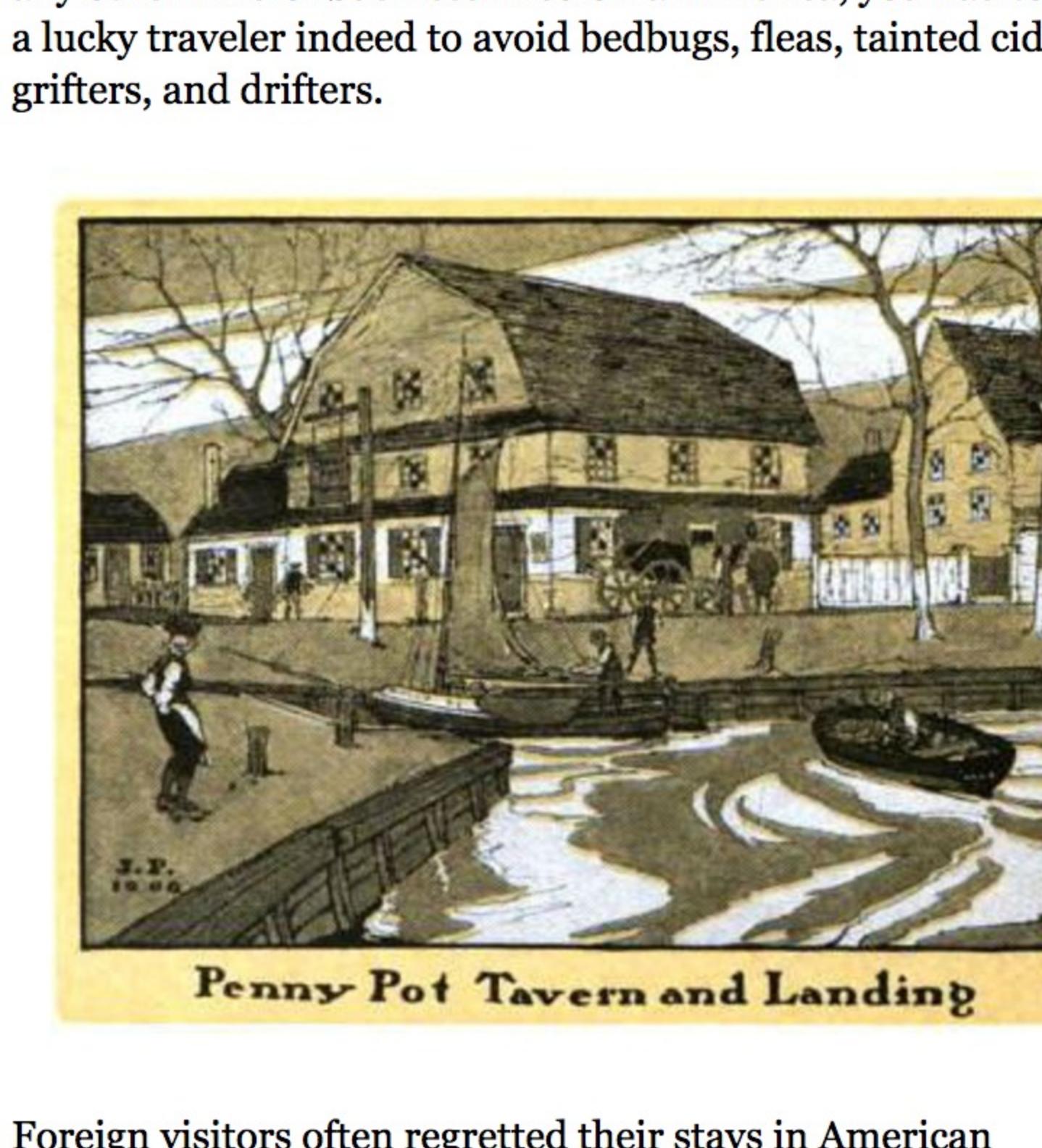
By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

*Bad food and lousy beds didn't keep early American taverns
from turning a tidy profit*



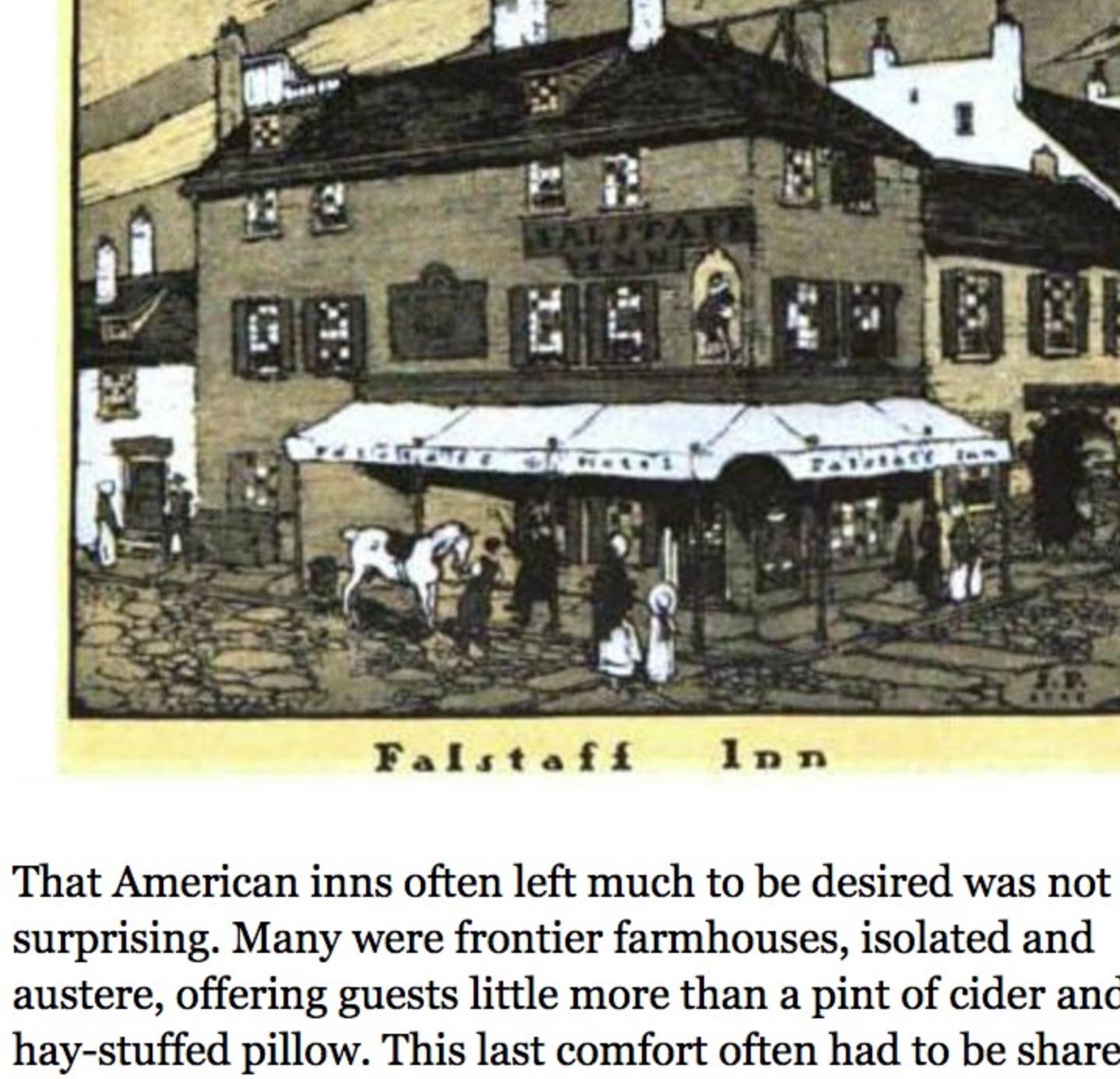
Spread Eagle Inn

Vermilion hotels, lackluster eateries, dubious rest stops: the open road has its perils. I remember a night I spent in Clovis, New Mexico. I took a room in a thirty-dollar motel during a cross-country drive. From the freeway its sign, a bright green clover superimposed on a royal flush, had beckoned me. The tiny room smelled the same as the town — like cow flop. White-line hypnosis blinded me to the stains on its carpet, the holes in its walls. On a creaky twin bed I fell into black sleep. Not long after I awoke to tremendous itching, I flung back the covers. Fleas were biting me all over my body. I'd have no rest that night. After twenty minutes of fruitless pleading for a refund with an impulsive front-desk clerk, I left at dawn, bleary, mottled, wishing for a bottle of calamine lotion.



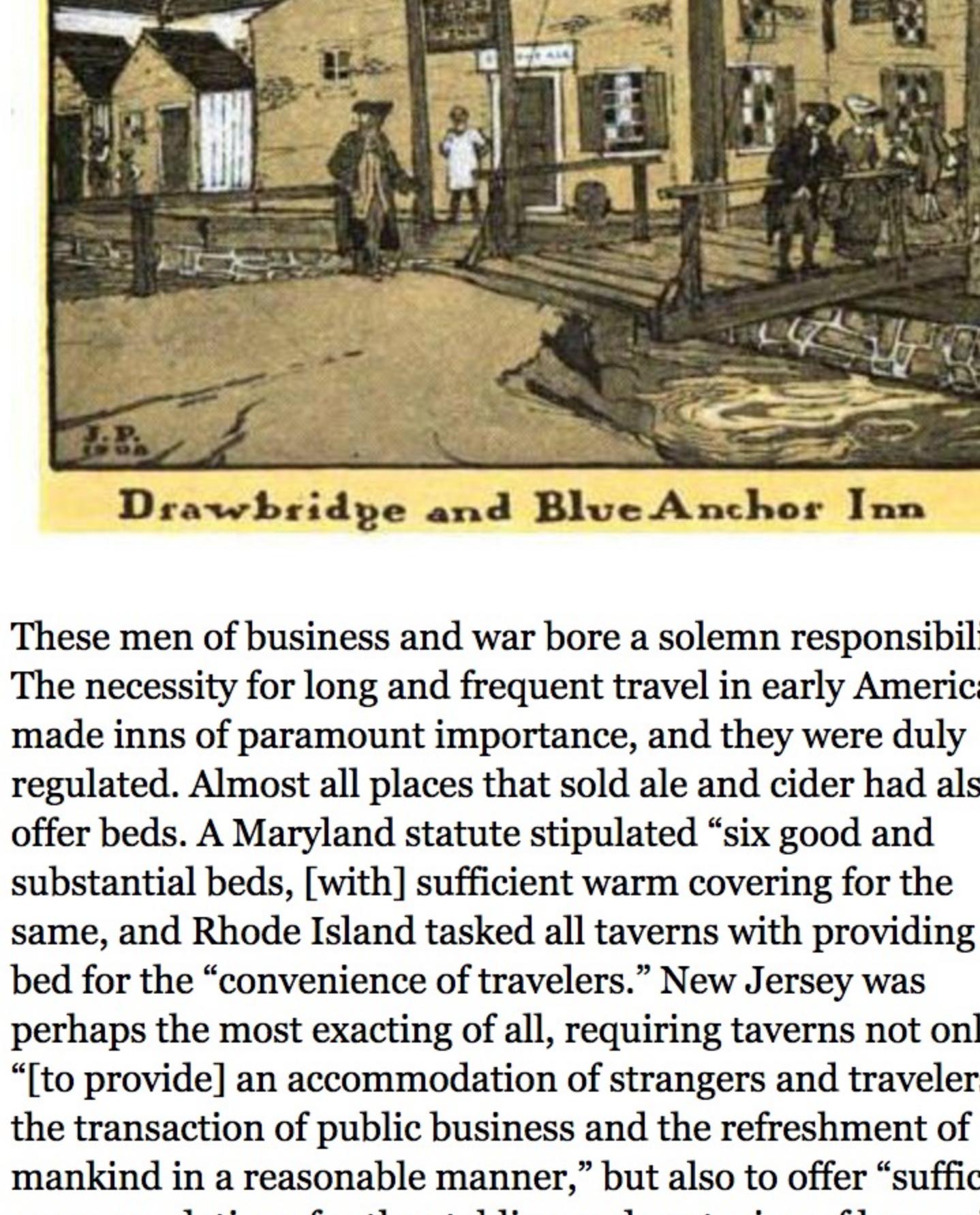
The Three Crowns

"There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn," Samuel Johnson wrote. As my experience in the Clovis motel suggested to me, this likely owes less to any inherent felicity than to relative scarcity. Finding cheery accommodations is much like water dowsing or snipe hunting. In early America this was even more true. Though inns and taverns (the two were synonymous) outnumbered any other kind of business in colonial America, you had to be a lucky traveler indeed to avoid bedbugs, fleas, tainted cider, grifters, and drifters.



Penny Pot Tavern and Landing

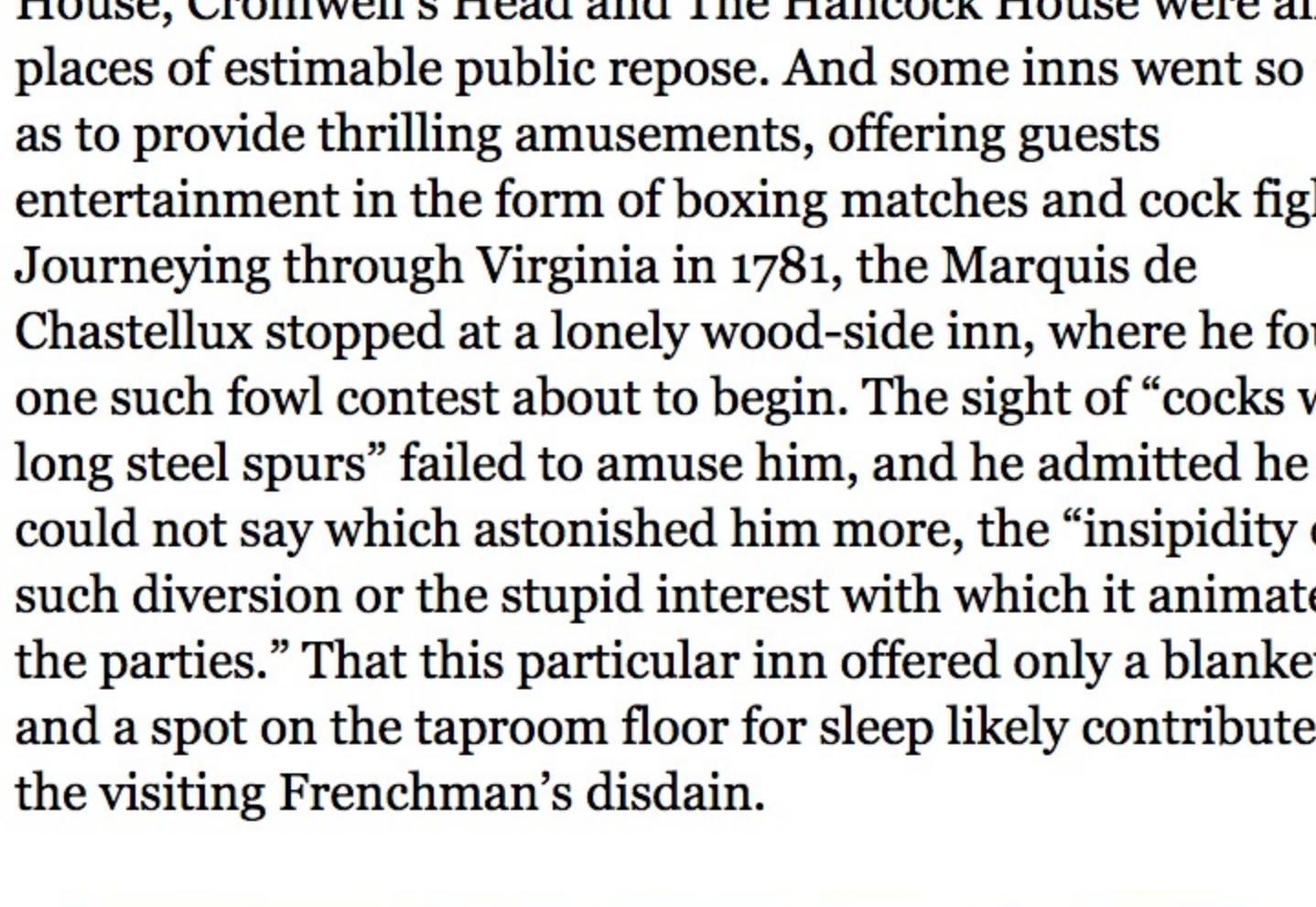
Foreign visitors often regretted their stays in American taverns. Irishman Isaac Weld found "filthy beds swarming with bugs" on his visit. Charles Dickens, staying in an inn outside of Pittsburgh, complained of linen "as yellow as the little rivulets" of tobacco that ran from seemingly every man's mouth and of tablecloths crawling with "a sort of game not on the bill of fare." Conditions deteriorated as one traveled south or west. This Margaret Hall discovered when journeying between Washington and New Orleans in 1828. Everywhere she went fleas plagued her. "We bring them along with us in our clothes," she wrote in her record of her travels, "and when I undress I find them crawling on my skin, nasty wretches." Such discomfort appeared altogether ordinary. In New Orleans, Hall saw women delousing their children "according to the method depicted in an engraving of similar proceeding in the streets of Naples." In his 1832 travel account *Six Months in America*, Englishman Godfrey Thomas Vigne reports that Cincinnati inns, though they served tasty fare, teemed with "the worst of vermin." So vicious did the nighttime assaults of Cincy's lice prove that they caused Vigne to dream of "the most unconnected subjects, — bullfrogs, and universal suffrage, for instance."



Falstaff Inn

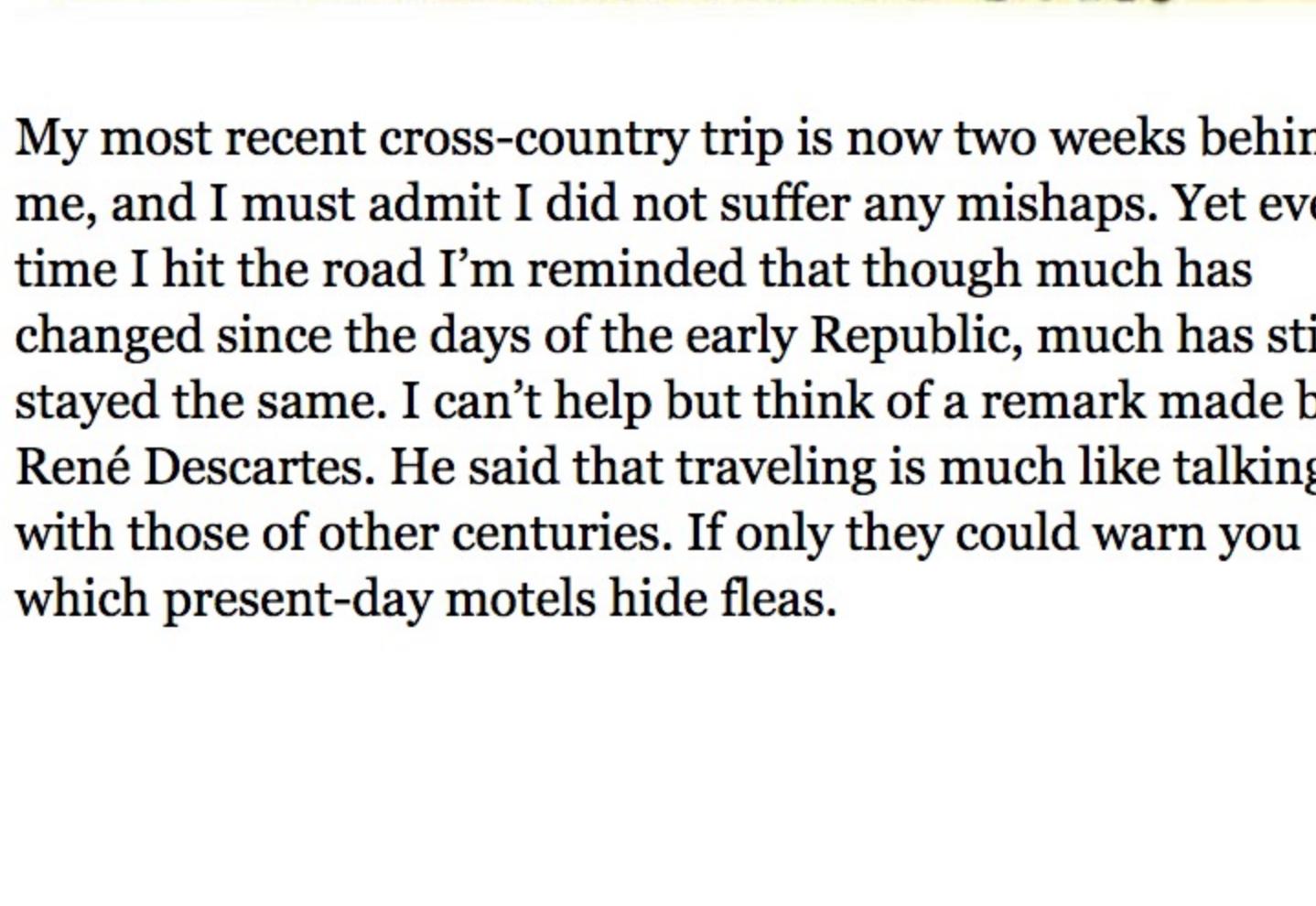
That American inns often left much to be desired was not surprising. Many were frontier farmhouses, isolated and austere, offering guests little more than a pint of cider and a hay-stuffed pillow. This last comfort often had to be shared, as John Adams and Benjamin Franklin discovered one night in a New Brunswick, New Jersey inn.

The unsavoriness of many American taverns and inns belied the fact that, at least around the time of the Revolution, innkeepers and publicans could be numbered among the most revered members of a community. They hailed from the ranks of former deacons, assemblymen, town clerks, and justices of the peace. Traveling through New York state, one British visitor remarked on the number of "lawyers, ex-judges, and former members of the legislature who kept tavern." Even those who once bore muskets didn't shy from the cider barrel. Innkeeping proved a popular occupation for Revolutionary War veterans seeking to restore fortunes lost during the hostilities.



Drawbridge and Blue Anchor Inn

These men of business and war bore a solemn responsibility. The necessity for long and frequent travel in early America made inns of paramount importance, and they were duly regulated. Almost all places that sold ale and cider had also to offer beds. A Maryland statute stipulated "six good and substantial beds, [with] sufficient warm covering for the same, and Rhode Island tasked all taverns with providing one bed for the convenience of travelers." New Jersey was perhaps the most exacting of all, requiring taverns not only "[to provide] an accommodation of strangers and travelers, the transaction of public business and the refreshment of mankind in a reasonable manner," but also to offer "sufficient accommodations for the stabling and pasturing of horses."



Black Horse Inn Yard

Though many inns earned their bad reputations, some of them did provide excellent service. Thomas Anbury, noted the inns he stayed at were "equal to most in England," featuring "commodes rooms," "tasty provisions, and attentive

Illustrations from *Inns and Ale Houses of Old Philadelphia* (1909)

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