



Founded 1970

# Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton  
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## November Meeting Program about Riverton History

The Historical Society of Riverton will meet on November 30, 1998 at 8:00 pm in the Riverton Public School Media Center (Library) for a general meeting of the membership, followed by an interesting and informative program about the recent approval of a large portion of the Borough of Riverton as a State Registered Historic District.

The program will be presented by Dan Campbell of the Historical Society and Keith Betten of the Historic Riverton Nomination Committee (HRNC). The HRNC is a non-profit corporation that was created to submit the State and National Register District Nominations to the NJ Historic Preservation Office.

The evening's program will be a "dress rehearsal" of a slide program that the HRNC will create, with cooperation from the Historical Society of Riverton, to outline the history of Riverton, and the qualifications of Riverton to be listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. The program will feature a history of Riverton and many slide views

of Riverton.

This is a unique opportunity for members of the Historical Society to view the preliminary slide presentation and make comments about the program before it is put into its final form. The final form of the program is expected to be a video tape which will be archived at the Riverton Free Library and made available to the public.

Later in this newsletter you will find an excerpt of the Historical Narrative that was submitted for the State and National District Nominations. For further information and beautiful slides of Riverton buildings, please attend our meeting.

All persons are invited to attend this meeting of historic interest. The Riverton School is located at Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton, NJ. Attendees should enter through the main doors facing Fifth Street. The school building and meeting room are handicapped accessible. There will be a short refreshment period after the meeting and program.

## Riverton Building News

*This is the first in an occasional series of reports from the Historical Society of Riverton - about buildings in Riverton and their status of history, recognition and restoration:*

**The Riverton Yacht Club (RYC)** has created a new non-profit affiliate - the Riverton Steamboat Foundation, which has allowed it to apply for a grant from a federal transportation fund. Based on the historic value of the former Riverton Steamboat Landing (now the Riverton Yacht Club pier), as the only remaining steamboat landing on the Delaware River, The Steamboat Foundation received a \$919,000 grant to spend on restoration of the Yacht Club pier. The shorings surrounding the pier have been failing for many years due to the ravages of the river. The pier restoration pro-

ject is expected to begin in 1999, cost over a million dollars, and take over six months to complete.

**The Pennsylvania RR Section Shed** now moved to Riverton Memorial Park, has undergone some minor restoration by the Friends of the Riverton Park. Dan Campbell was unable to convince the Park affiliates to move the building closer to the railroad track in order to maintain the historic connection between the building and its original use. The Shed has received a few carpentry repairs and has been placed on concrete pier foundation at its new site near the tennis courts.

**The Collins Building** (brick commercial building on Main Street at the railroad) has a new porch under construction based on a design idea

*continued on page 2*

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### **Riverton Buildings**

*Continued from front page*

by Dan Campbell. The addition to the Main Street facade will be a brick faced porch with new steps to each of the shops, and a wheelchair accessible ramp to one side.

**Town Clock Project** (not a building). The Riverton Improvement Association (RIA) has proposed to install a town clock in the downtown area. The proposed location will be on the triangular vehicular traffic island at Broad and Main Streets in front of the bakery. RIA, led by Bob Thomson, is selling commemorative bricks with personalized inscriptions which will help to finance the clock project. The bricks will be installed on the ground around the clock. You may have seen the signs around town encouraging you to "think bricks".

Betty Hahle has expressed her opposition to the project as re-creating an item that never appeared in Riverton's History. Betty presented her strong opposition to the project at recent Borough Council meetings, and at the previous Historical Society general meeting. On the other hand, the clock is not a permanent structure, such as a building, and as such meets NJ State Register criteria as a removable item.

*Readers of this newsletter are encouraged to contribute observations, questions, and comments about Riverton Buildings which would be valuable information to the rest of our readership.*

## ***Schedule of Meetings***

**JANUARY 25, 1999 - MID-WINTER MEETING.**

Program to be announced

**MARCH 8, 1999 - SPRING MEETING.**

Program: Trees of Riverton Barry Emmens, Chairman of the Riverton Shade Tree Commission will enlighten us about the number and varieties of the public trees of Riverton, including their history, care and periodic replacement.

**MAY 10, 1999 - ANNUAL MEETING.**

Annual election of new officers, program to be announced.

## **Yesterday...Instead**

Frequent readers of the Gaslight News know that Betty B. Hahle has written many splendid columns in this section entitled simply *Yesterday*. In this edition, we give Betty a well deserved rest before the holidays. The following is an excerpt of text written by Keith Betten and edited by Betty Hahle for the recently approved State Register Application for the Historic District of Riverton:

The "new town of Riverton, New Jersey, beautifully situated on the Cinnaminson Shore of the Delaware, eight miles above Philadelphia" was perhaps the very first planned community to emerge from the "Gothic Revivalist" movement; a mid-19th century response to the burgeoning industrialization and urbanization of American society. The town's founders were members of the urban mercantile aristocracy who sought to establish, in a rural setting, a picturesque refuge, removed from the pressures of city life. Based on their concept, Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan developed the town plan and designed Riverton's first buildings. Today, very nearly one hundred and fifty years later, within the Riverton Historic District, the vision of the town founders, the innovative plan created by Sloan, and the standard for architectural quality established at the outset remain clearly evident—rendering it a place of genuine historical and architectural significance.

Throughout its first fifty years, the American nation strove to look like, if not always to act like the society which Thomas Jefferson envisioned it to be. Steeped in classical studies, Jefferson held the Roman Republic as the ideal—largely agrarian and governed wisely by farmer/statesmen. To underscore the link between the two cultures, Jefferson purposefully resurrected Roman architectural forms, suggesting that the monumental buildings of ancient Rome serve as the model for American public architecture and incorporating Roman forms in the buildings he, himself, designed. The shift in the source of this inspiration from Rome to Greece in the 1820's and '30's served to make "Classical Revival" practically an official American architectural expression as the Greek Revival style lent itself successfully, everywhere, to both imposing and modest structures.

By the mid-point of the century's second quarter, however, it was becoming increasingly evident that Jefferson's vision had been seriously flawed. Although vast stretches of the country remained rural, even unexplored, the pulse of the nation was being felt in its cities where industrialization was making America a very different place. Crowded, grimy, and often unfriendly, the metropolis was a new phenomenon which did not fit the mold crafted by Jefferson. Out of the effort to re-imagine an America wherein cities were to play such a commanding role, the "Gothic Revivalist" movement was born. Part of the greater wave of reformers (including Andrew Jackson, Horace Mann, Dorothea Dix and Ralph Waldo Emerson) whose thoughts, words, and actions

*continued on page 3*



## Yesterday

*Continued from page 2*

would change the economic and social environment of the United States, the Gothic Revivalists concerned themselves with the importance of the private dwelling in shaping the character of the nation. In the words of Andrew Jackson Downing, the movement's most prolific spokesperson:

*A good house is a powerful means of civilization...when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country we know that order and culture are established...It is the solitude and freedom of the family home in the country which constantly preserves the purity of the nation and invigorates its intellectual powers.*

Such sentiments struck a cord with many Americans, but they resounded most vibrantly within that class which Downing's contemporary, architect Samuel Sloan referred to as the "new men of commerce and industry" whose fortunes were made in the city, but who increasingly longed to escape its day-to-day rigors. Concurrent advances in the means by which people traveled lent real credence to their longings. For the first time, it became possible for men to consider living, at least part of the year in the country, and commuting on an intermittent, if not on a regular basis, to their businesses in town. In some cases this arrangement was achieved through the construction of a traditional country house, set in its own estate, but more frequently, beginning in the 1850's the ideal became the establishment of entirely new communities—groupings of country residences which functioned as a whole to embody the virtues espoused by Downing and the Gothic Revivalists.

The most famous of these was and is Llewellyn Park which was developed in the hills of West Orange, New Jersey between 1853 and 1869 by chemical manufacturer Llewellyn P. Haskell as a community of "country houses for city people". Within an easy rail commute of New York City, Llewellyn Park was everything that Downing had envisioned and more. Dwellings designed in the picturesque Gothic Revival style by Alexander Jackson Davis were set amidst hundreds of pastoral acres; no house was to be built on less than an acre of land, no building was to be used as a shop or factory and no fences were to be allowed. In addition to the private holdings, the Park was graced by a fifty acre public "Ramble" - a stretch of rustic paths and scenic overlooks which invited residents to enjoy their natural surroundings. Llewellyn Park has been called America's first "garden suburb"; the primogenitor of countless planned communities to follow.

Pre-dating Llewellyn Park by two years, and obviously nurtured within the same school of thought was Riverton, founded in 1851, in a rural area several miles north of Philadelphia, on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. The community's founders were, almost to a man, men of business in the city, who had ties, familial and/or economic with the farmlands of

Burlington County (where Riverton would be located). Their surnames were among the oldest and most respected in the region. Of the ten, all but one were related by blood or marriage and all but one were members of the Society of Friends. In addition to three sets of brothers; Robert and William C. Biddle, Dillwyn and William D. Parrish, and (half brothers) Caleb and James Clothier, the group included Professor Charles D. Cleveland, Chalkley Gillingham, Daniel L. Miller, Jr., and Rodman Wharton.

By the way in which they envisioned and conceived their town, these men proved themselves to be true Gothic Revivalists. The 120 acres of farmland they purchased from fellow Quaker Joseph Lippincott in 1851 were bounded along their southeastern length by the Camden and Amboy Railroad, thus providing them with an efficient link to the city; the source of their wealth. The northwestern length of the purchase fronted on the Delaware River—the primary means of reaching Philadelphia, via steamboat, but more importantly, the river would give the town its focus, for it was the intention of the founders that everyone who was to make this place their home, would have unfettered access to the river bank and to the panoramic view its gentle bend discloses. As provided for by the town plan and deed restrictions, that access is guaranteed to this day—making the town's name, as the founders surely intended, more a description of its reason for being, than a mere reference to its geographical location.

To create the town plan, the founders engaged the services of Samuel Sloan, an architect who had an office in that part of the city wherein their businesses were located and who had risen to sudden prominence through the design of a universally applauded "Norman Villa" called Bartram Hall on the west bank of the Schuylkill River. As evidenced by references in his soon to be issued publication *The Model Architect*, Sloan viewed the relationship between setting and structure as primary, noting that:

*However simple or picturesque, however full of grandeur or quiet repose the landscape, its crowning feature ought ever to be the structure, whether humble or stately, that denotes the habitation of man. Both should be in complete harmony and adaptation; for hillside and plain, grove and riverbank, each and all convey a meaning which can never be disregarded without a sacrifice of architectural taste, of propriety, and generally of comfort.*

The founders of Riverton offered Sloan a rare opportunity to apply these principles to the design of an entire community.

The terrain with which Sloan was presented was not nearly as extensive nor as varied as that out of which Alexander Jackson Davis would form Llewellyn Park in West Orange. The 120 acre site measured just short of a half mile at its widest point and the river front was about equal to that in length. Added to those constrictions were the fact that the two principal boundaries, the

*continued on page 4*

river bank and the Camden and Amboy tracks were more or less converging straight lines, and the land, until it finally met the river, was quite flat. Despite these limiting factors, Sloan deviated from a traditional city grid by converting the old road from the river to Westfield Friends into the town's principal thoroughfare and by retaining the sharp bend it made 1600 feet from the river. The streets which Sloan laid out east of Main Street were straight, while those to its west conformed with its bend, allowing for some variation in lot shape. The size of the 105 lots designed by Sloan varied too, with the most generous facing the river, but all were of dimensions ample to allow for Downing's "smiling lawns". Street widths, building lines and fencing restrictions contributed to a sense of openness and freedom of space.

As requested by the town's founders and as designed by Sloan, commercial structures were to be kept to the barest minimum. Because the town could only function as envisioned if transportation needs were met, Sloan's plan included a pier with a "station house" for a steamboat landing and shelter for passengers, and a railroad station to encourage regular train stops. Additionally, Sloan designed a village store, and retained an extant farm house on the river front, which for some time had been used as a boarding house for visitors to the area. No other businesses were expressly anticipated, there was to be no industry, and deed restrictions specifically forbade the manufacture or sale of liquor.

But the most innovative feature of his plan can be found on the river front, where Sloan's design reflected the founder's aspirations precisely. His siting of the street closest to the river, called Bank Avenue, corresponded with that line along the shore from which the final descent to the river began, thereby creating a natural promenade from which the river could be viewed. With no construction permitted (except for the pier with its "station house"), by plan and by deed restriction on the river side of Bank Avenue, an unobstructed view of the river was afforded. The area between the street and the river was laid out in open lawns, planted with trees and shrubs to add interest, and retained by a uniformly designed river wall. Although held privately by the owners of the properties across the street, free access to this stretch of green bank was assured, creating in effect, if not in fact, a public river front park for the people of Riverton.

Although they had envisioned and apparently anticipated a modest extension of their community beyond its original limits, expansion outside of Sloan's plan would not happen during the twenty-year life of the Riverton Improvement Company, the business entity which was formed by the founders in March of 1852 to oversee the development of the town. Nevertheless, when new streets (Lippincott and Thomas) were laid out in 1877, they mirrored their predecessors in direction and dimension, and lots and housing stock were reflective of the standards set a generation earlier. Still more significant is the fact that the "park" was extended along

the river where it met this new section and the deed restrictions which had secured the open space in conjunction with Sloan's plan were adopted by the owners of the newly developed properties. This tradition would be repeated when the final western expansion was undertaken in 1882 and again when the last of the river front, to the east, was developed just after the turn of the century.

The Riverton Historic District contains more than 500 structures that include the core and later extensions of a planned "suburb" which was designed for the Riverton Improvement Company, in 1851, by the then ascendant Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan. The Riverton Historic District is entirely located within the Borough of Riverton, Burlington County, New Jersey. Riverton fronts on the Delaware River, approximately 10 miles northeast of central Philadelphia where many of the town's founders and first residents were employed and lived during the winter months. From an historical perspective, the core of the borough and of the district is Main Street which served, long before the founding of the town, as the road by which area farmers traveled to the Westfield Friends Meetinghouse and to Moorestown, to the east. It would become the primary artery of the community in Sloan's plan; fed on one end from a steamboat landing on the river, and at the other from a station stop on the Camden and Amboy Railroad.

An overview of the district's buildings finds that while a few of the more ambitious houses are masonry, most of the houses of Riverton are of frame construction reflecting the town's origins as a community of summer "cottages". Ornamented and enlivened by the stylistic details that represent the evolution of American domestic architecture after the middle of the 19th century, the houses of Riverton form a unified ensemble of architectural richness. In addition to its houses, Riverton contains a varied group of historically significant institutional and commercial buildings located on or near Fourth Street, which was at the center of Sloan's original plan, and within what would eventually become the "business district", in close proximity to the railroad tracks. As the 19th century wore on, and into the early 20th century, with the evolution of regular mass transit, and ultimately with the popularity of the automobile, construction continued, infilling many of the undeveloped lots between the river and the business district and in the previously undeveloped area which lay southeast of the tracks. Because of the location of the golf course and country club on the southern-most edge of the community, a second cluster of large houses was constructed in that area, facing the greens, during the first decades of the early 20th century. Although almost entirely developed by 1929, Riverton's small town character, set so close to a major urban center and departing so markedly from the later 20th century housing developments of its immediate neighbors, has maintained its allure; all but a very few lots are now developed—attesting to Riverton's continuing desirability as a place of residence.