



# Gaslight News

September 2009

Historical Society of Riverton

vol. XXXIX, no. 3 (#137)

Founded 1970

Riverton, NJ 08077

Incorporated 1978



Detail of undated vintage postcard

The HSR mixes things up with a change of venue for the September meeting. At various times, a market, drug store, furniture store, and now home to The New Leaf Tea Room & Gift Shoppe, 606 Main Street will open at 7:30 p.m. on September 22 for a Special HSR Meeting. Space is limited so R.S.V.P. by 9/15.

## HSR plans fall schedule of board meetings, special events, and public education programs

**Special combined gen'l membership & Board meeting to be held at The New Leaf on Sept. 22nd**

Society members, whose dues are current, are encouraged to join us at board meetings. If you plan to attend, R.S.V.P. to Gerald Weaber by September 15th at 856-786-6961 for the September 22nd meeting and by November 15th for the November 30th Board Meeting. Refreshments served.

### Meet & Greet for members at the New Leaf Tea Room September 22

Join us at the New Leaf Tea Room & Gift Shoppe, 606 Main Street on Tuesday, September 22nd, 7:30-9:00 p.m. for a

Historical Society of Riverton Meet & Greet for Members. The agenda includes a Board meeting & Halloween Ghost Tour update; help us identify people in the Parry Sister's photograph albums (Beulah & Susanna) circa 1912-13 recently donated by Elsie Waters and Bill Probsting; and recognition of Riverton home owners who have completed recent restorations.

R.S.V.P. required by September 15th if you plan to attend as seating is limited. Please call Gerald Weaber at 856-786-6961.

See **HSR PLANS** on 2

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## The Fine Grounds of the Riverton Athletic Association

**Before the first Tour de France, and long before Lance Armstrong there were pioneering wheelmen like A. W. Fuller and F. M. Dampman**

It is 5:50 PM on Saturday, June 8th, 1895, and according to a *New York Times* reporter, "two dusty riders" were the last of eighteen relay bicycle racers heading toward "the fine grounds of the Riverton Athletic Association."

This exciting bicycle race, viewed by thousands along a 150-mile route from New York City to Riverton, NJ, was held during the decade called the Golden Age of the Racing Bicycle. As bicycle construction and roads improved, bicycles became a democratizing sport—affordable and accessible for many people. Owning a bicycle was cheaper, and sometime faster than using a horse (although one biting comment from a non-biker was that at least

a person could eat the horse!). Even liberated ladies, if they would sport the new "bloomer" trouser fashion and forgo their stiff corsets, could ride a bicycle. Horse racing was not officially sanctioned, especially by the Victorians, due to its ties to gambling and rumors of fraud. However, the family fun of riding a bicycle and the sport of bicycle racing was considered healthy and invigorating. The major threat to one's morals was the concern that church



**F. M. Dampman, the winner of the individual match race made the trek to Riverton in ten hours, forty-three minutes.**

See **FINE GROUNDS** on 2

## Innovative schedule promises exciting programs, invites member involvement

This year marks the 200th birthday of President Abraham Lincoln. Come to the Tea Room and step back in time as actress and historian Jo Ann Tufo delights audience members with her portrayal of Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln. Jo Ann is a Philadelphia-based professional actress, comedienne and lecturer who trained at the famous Walnut Street Theater. She has performed live at the Union League, Walnut Street Theater, and the US Constitution Center. Her television work has been seen on Discovery Channel, History Channel and CN8. This promises to be an exciting and educational program.



### HSR PLANS from 1

#### Halloween Ghost Tour returns Saturday, October 24th, 7-9 p.m.

See more details regarding advance ticket sales and departures at bottom of page 5.

#### Mary Todd Lincoln arrives at the New Leaf Tea Room November 7th



HSR will sponsor a first person interpretation of the life and times of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln featuring actress and historian Joann Tufo on Saturday, November 7th at 2:00 p.m. This special program will be set against the backdrop of the elegant New Leaf Tea Room at 606 Main Street, Riverton. Refreshments served. Call the New Leaf at 856-786-0323 for details on advance ticket sales.

Proceeds benefit the Historical Society of Riverton.

#### Members are invited to HSR Board Meeting on November 30th

The Board of the Historical Society of Riverton plans to have a working meeting at the Riverton Public School Media Center on November 30th, at 7:30-9:00 p.m. If you plan to attend, R.S.V.P. is required by November 15th. Please call Gerald Weaber at 856-786-6961.

#### More to come in 2010

In the spring, McDermott's Handy, another favorite, returns for St. Patrick's Day. Plus, the current Riverton School, built in 1910, celebrates its 100th Birthday in 2010, so there is much more to look forward to as the Historical Society of Riverton prepares to engage its members in the pursuit of understanding and appreciating our local history. -JMC 

## Bicycle racing in Riverton began with the Riverton Ball Club but ended by 1909

FINE GROUNDS from 1

attendance would diminish in deference to enjoying a scenic Sunday ride along ever-increasing numbers of good roadways. Riverton, being a progressive town, enthusiastically embraced this new pastime and sport.

#### The 'Rivertons' begin and gain a fine reputation among amateurs

Oddly, bicycle racing in Riverton began with an amateur sporting club, the Riverton Ball Club. Founded June 19th, 1865, it was among many popular clubs in town. There was the Cricket Club, with its 100 members at one point, the Gun Club, founded in 1877, which lasted until 1906, the Golf Club (1900) and, of course, the Yacht Club, founded in 1865 and one of the oldest in the country.

Over the years, various lots were loaned or

Mrs. Patricia Solin, retired Riverton school librarian, and VP of the Riverton Free Library Association, returns to this publication with another well-researched article of local interest. She was the webmaster responsible for helping to launch the online history of Riverton called The Riverton Project at [www.riverton.k12.nj.us/rivertonproject/project.html](http://www.riverton.k12.nj.us/rivertonproject/project.html) She is also a volunteer for the Pennsylvania Schoolship Association and Seaport Museum.



Photo of the 1872 Riverton Ball Club of whom *Sporting Life Magazine* said in April, 1922, "...this club made the game it is today". (provided by Bill Hall)

leased to the Riverton Ball Club, including "Biddle's apple orchard" and "Miller's Grounds" (leased in 1870) where not only was baseball played, but also cricket, football, and tennis. To create an outstanding ball field at Miller's Grounds, trainloads of soil and sod were hauled from the Tacony section of Philadelphia to Riverton at a discounted price by the Pennsylvania

Railroad. However, in order to have their own permanent field, land was purchased from the Lippincott property at the corner of South Broad Street and Thomas Avenue on April 29, 1885, and the ball field was moved to that location.

The Rivertons, though amateurs, had quite a fine reputation as baseball players, and were once presented an award in 1890 at the Union League Club in Philadelphia as the best amateur baseball team in the area. Another team affiliated with the Riverton area was the Riverton-Palmyra Athletics, a baseball team in the International League for men of color.

**As baseball participation waned, cycling in Riverton gained traction**

However, by 1893, participation in the Baseball Club had diminished due in part to the expense that the players had to personally absorb in order to play the sport. One article from the time stated that the club withdrew from the Philadelphia Suburban League because they wanted to remain “strictly amateur ball and nothing else.”

The Ball Club decided that it wanted to enlist more members as well as gain increased financial support by changing its focus from baseball to bicycle racing, new rage. So on March 21, 1894, the Riverton Athletic Association was founded and the ball field was leased to the cycling club. In one year, the new RAA had 250 members which included “the ladies.” While the Ball Club remained in existence, it remained small.

**Bicycle racing began in France and spread to US**

The world’s first recorded bicycle race was held in Paris in 1868. By the 1880s bicycle design and the roads and tracks that they used had improved, and it even had its own sport stars. Racing clubs numbered in the hundreds, and a new magazine entitled *LAW (League of American Wheelman) Bulletin and Good Roads* provided guidance to enthusiasts about the



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Columbia Chain Wheels . . . \$75  
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Art catalogue of Columbia  
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Columbia bicycle advertisement 1898

best bicycles and improved terrain for cycling and racing.

**Riverton’s state of the art track declared “finest in the country”**

Now that the RAA had leased the Lippincott field, they made improvements. A quarter-mile track, considered by the famous New Jersey cyclist, A. A. Zimmerman as the “finest in the country” was laid. Also on the grounds was a ticket office, “a large and commodious clubhouse ...with separate

apartments and all conveniences for both ladies and gentlemen,” bleachers, and a grandstand that could accommodate 3,000 people -- improvements totaling more than \$14,000. This new cycle track was dedicated on July 4th, 1894 and was the first in the area to offer night racing because of the newly-installed electric lighting.

**The race is on!**

Perhaps to increase readership, *The New York Times* began to sponsor and report bicycle races. Their second, well-publicized race would pit local, famous wheelmen from the tri-state area against one another in relay teams as well as invite individual cyclists to complete in a 150-mile race from the Times building in Manhattan to the newly-built racing track in Riverton, NJ. During the day of the Times relay and individual match races, the track at Riverton would hold its own race competitions.

Members of the RAA and citizens

See **FINE GROUNDS** on 4

**Also on the grounds was a ticket office, “a large and commodious clubhouse ...with separate apartments and all conveniences for both ladies and gentlemen,” bleachers, and a grandstand that could accommodate 3,000 people**

*The NY Times*, June 4, 1895

An undated photograph of Riverton’s track. Note the banked track, clubhouse, two-wheeled bicycles, and ticket structure at the far corner. Bleachers and a grandstand are off-camera.

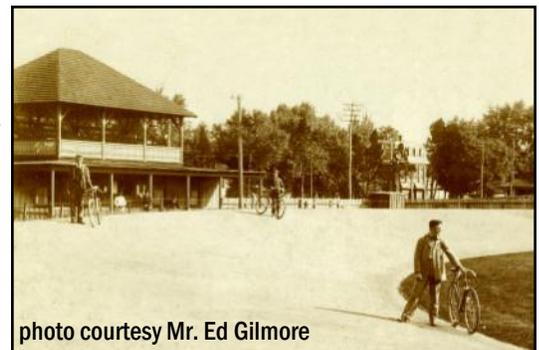


photo courtesy Mr. Ed Gilmore

# The Golden Age of bicycling in Riverton would not last as development took its toll



Special race prize  
*NY Times*, June 4, 1895

**"...fun has a very strong hold on the swell set down this way."  
"Grand Finish of the Race", *NY Times*,  
June 9, 1895**

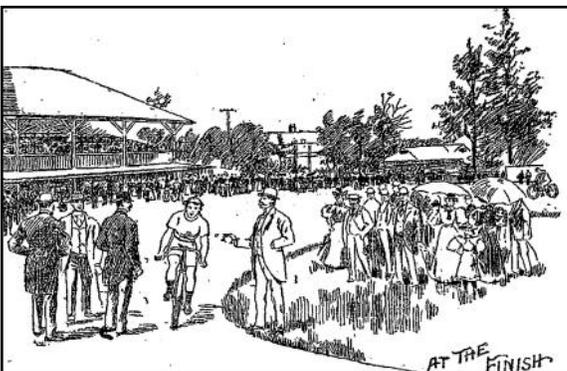


Search the *New York Times* archives at all the way back to 1851 at  
<http://www.nytimes.com/>

Many articles can be viewed for free; some have a \$3.95 fee.



The end of the 1895 race at Riverton's track as depicted in the pages of the *NY Times*, June 9, 1895



## FINE GROUNDS from 3

collected money to purchase diamonds, the award to the principal winning racers, along with silk banners, and a gold medal for the individual winner with the best time. The man with the second-best time would be awarded a Times gold medal. The Association authorized a further improvement to the field; they paid for a runway to be built, linking the street to the track. An official program was printed. For a nickel, spectators and referees, alike, could keep track of the winners of each of the local racing heats as well as the Times event. The local heats included: novice (15 entries), one-mile open (46 entries), one-mile handicap (60 entries), and five-mile handicap (42 entries) – 163 racers, in all.

Class A cyclists were invited to participate in the Times race. A committee was formed to select eighteen of the best relay racers, dividing them between three teams - New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, and placing the riders along the 150-mile course at each interval of the 25-mile stops. Also promoted was a challenge match between two well-known wheelmen, A. W. Fuller of Brooklyn and F. M. Dampman of "the Keystone State." Individual competitors who were to race the entire route were to start ahead of the relay racers.

The Times race relay points were set: starting in New York City, then Paterson, Morristown, the Wheatsheaf Hotel (Surelay, NJ, between Elizabeth and Rahway), Woodlawn, then on to Riverton, the finish. A map with specific street names and their turns was published in the *Times* so that, not only could the

cyclists know the route, but it also provided ample notice for "thousands upon thousands of people ...to watch its progress as it winds through the beautiful valleys and over the fertile hills of New Jersey."

## The end of the race and the end of an era in Riverton

The individual racers left New York City between 7 and 7:30 a.m., with the relay racers at 9 a.m. The weather could not have been better. At the end of a day of local racing, the Riverton bicycle stadium was packed to capacity, awaiting the end of the relay and the winner of the individual meet. The crowd in "perfect pandemonium" cheered as two relay cyclists entered the track, a wheel's distance apart and took their last lap. In the end, the New Jersey team won, scoring the most points. F. M. Dampman, at times soaring past relay teams, made the trek to Riverton in ten hours, forty-three minutes, "a marvelous record." A. W. Fuller arrived about two hours later, tired, "plucky" and "disgusted with the series of accidents such as a "smashed wheel and a broken tire." The last individual race challenger arrived in Riverton at nearly 10 p.m.

The glorious day of bicycle racing in Riverton was not to last. Amateur racing at tracks began a decline, and so, too, the ability for local Rivertonians to sustain their beautiful bicycle track. According to Riverton historian, Betty Hahle, by 1909, unable to pay the rent on the leased land, the track was demolished and the land sold for housing.

Yet, some things do not change. As the *Times* noted, "...fun has a very strong hold on the swell set down this way." Yes, we Rivertonians still enjoy sport and our town.

-MRS. PATRICIA SOLIN



# Law of Attraction works on Nellie Bly photo

Was it Oprah who said that if you positively think about the things you want then you will get them? In the May issue of *Gaslight News* I put out to the universe my wish for a photo of the steam engine Nellie Bly in Riverton. And here 'tis below.

Actually, it was through the kindness of Riverton residents Mr. and Mrs. Don Deitz that the image now becomes available. Like many of us, Pam and Don find themselves organizing scrapbooks, shoeboxes, and loose stacks full of family photographs and slides going back for generations. Pam's father, Benjamin Percival, now passed, was an avid photographer who chronicled many of the milestones for the clan.

And there, amidst the old baseball team and christening photos was this photo. Mr. Percival must have snapped the perfectly timed image just as the Nellie Bly passed the Riverton Station. The negative for it was in an envelope with the caption, "Nellie Bly" but no date.

The original square negative was cropped and enhanced with Photoshop to produce the photo below. A survey of my "car expert" friends determined that the photo is from 1948 or 1949. The far right is a '48 to '49 model Buick. The cars in the center are '39 and earlier. Other opinions invited.

A search of your own family photographs may turn up the very view of an event, house, business, or street which would be of great interest to someone else.

If you have any photos of historical interest, vintage postcards, or ephemera which you would donate to the HSR or allow to be scanned, please contact me. Call 856-764-1551 or email [jlmccormick@comcast.net](mailto:jlmccormick@comcast.net)

But next time I am asking the universe for the winning Pick 6 Lotto numbers.

-JMC 



What are these girls doing? Bring your guesses and recollections to the next meeting. Photo submitted by Mrs. Cheryl Smekal.



The Nellie Bly Express continued to run from New York to Atlantic City until the early 1960s. Today, NJ Transit's River Line runs along the same tracks as the Nellie Bly. Passengers can cross the street to enjoy a "Train Wreck" sundae at the Nellie Bly Olde Tyme Ice Cream Parlour and relax in the Victorian setting which is a tribute to the dare-devil female reporter.



# RIVERTON HALLOWEEN GHOST TOUR RETURNS

Join the Historical Society of Riverton on Saturday October 24th, 2009, for the return of the popular haunted trolley tour of historic Riverton featuring re-enactments of local ghost stories. Favorite apparitions from 2006 are sure to make a reappearance and new haunts are promised, too.

First trolley boards at 6:50 and leaves at 7:00 p.m. sharp. All tickets are timed and

specify departure times.

Advance ticket purchases begin September 22nd at the New Leaf, 606 Main Street Riverton. Call 856-786-0323.

Tickets \$12.

Proceeds benefit the Historical Society of Riverton.

BOB BEDNAREK, Committee Chairman  
Past President, HSR

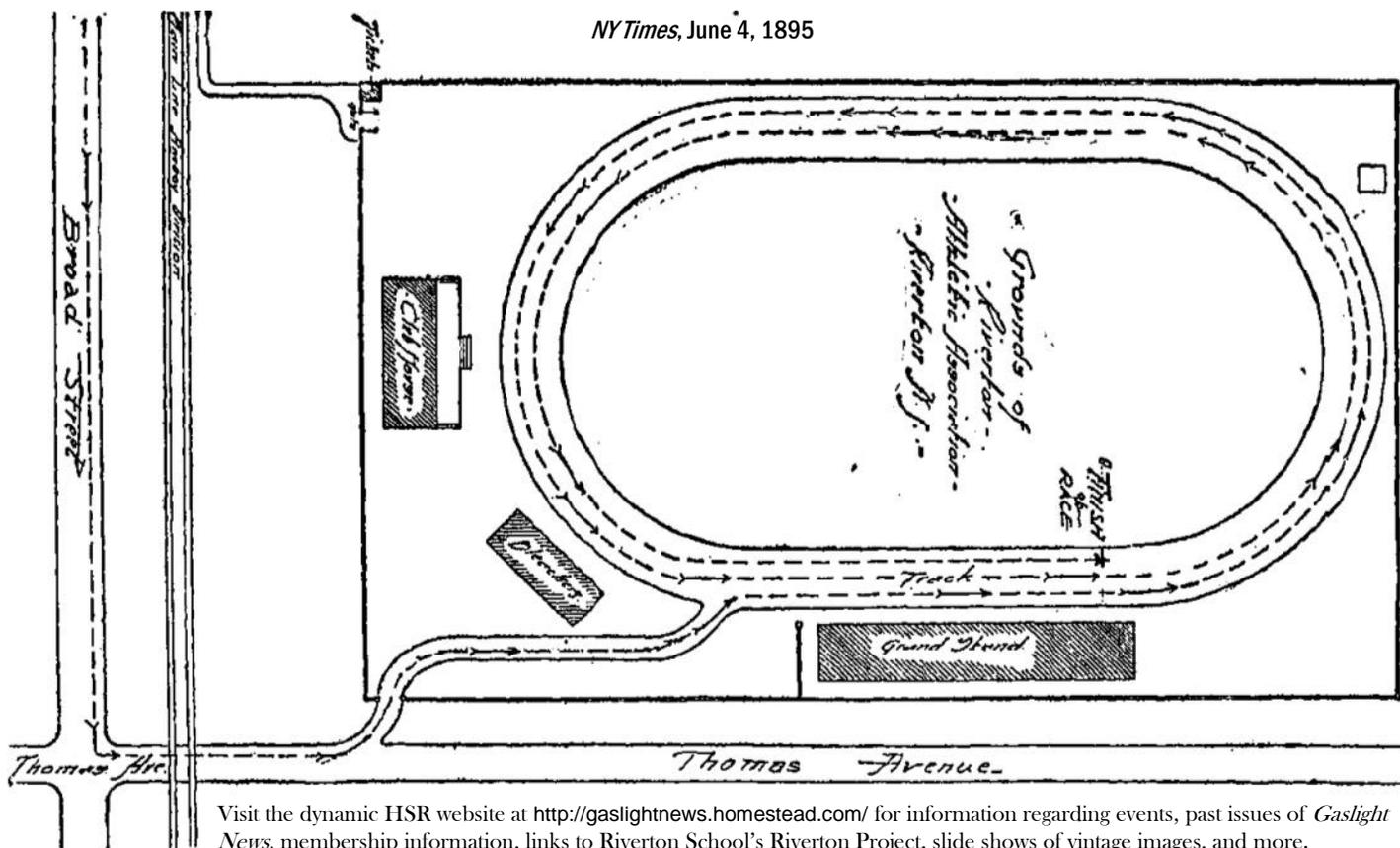


Blackbeard and crew at the 2006 Ghost Tour

⑥ THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

Post Office Box #112  
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 856-786-6961

NY Times, June 4, 1895



Visit the dynamic HSR website at <http://gaslightnews.homestead.com/> for information regarding events, past issues of *Gaslight News*, membership information, links to Riverton School's Riverton Project, slide shows of vintage images, and more.

Readers: Find inside a feature article by Mrs. Patricia Solin on the Golden Age of Cycling in Riverton. Also, glimpse HSR plans for the fall and see the newly discovered picture of the Nellie Bly express train.

## Gaslight News

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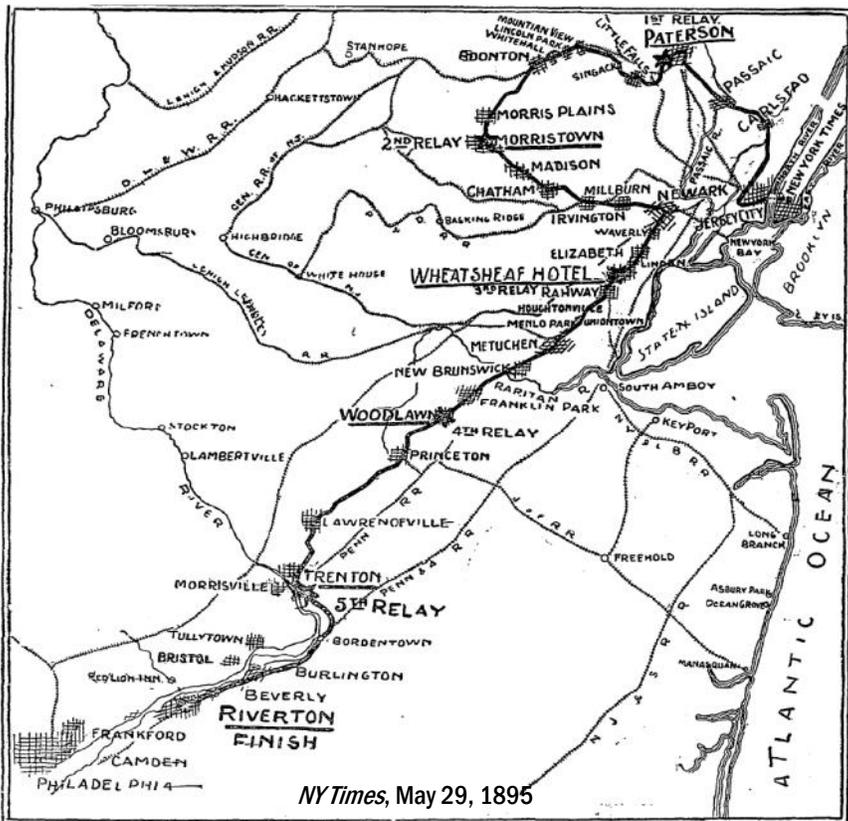


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NY Times, May 29, 1895

Map Showing the Relay Points in The New-York Times 130-Mile Bicycle Relay Race.