



# Gaslight News

November 2009

Historical Society of Riverton

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Founded 1970

Riverton, NJ 08077

Incorporated 1978



PHOTO - SUSAN DECHNIK

The HSR meeting is to take place at Riverton Public School at 600 Howard Street, Riverton, NJ, at 7:30 p.m. November 30, 2009.

## HSR combined Board and general membership meeting to conduct business Nov. 30

Meeting to be held at Riverton Public School Media Center 7:30 pm

Society members, whose dues are current, are encouraged to join us at the next board meeting November 30 at 7:30 pm in the Media Center at Riverton School, 600 Howard Street, Riverton, NJ. If you plan to attend, R.S.V.P. to Gerald Weaber at 856-786-6961 by November 25th so that provisions can be made for seating and refreshments. It will be a working meeting in which members and the Historical Society of Riverton Board shall conduct business

and action shall be taken. Expected to be on the agenda are discussions regarding HSR sponsored programs and events for 2010 including the return of McDermott's Handy for St. Patrick's Day, an observance of the 100th birthday of Riverton School, and more. Please plan on attending and helping the Historical Society of Riverton to continue to engage its members in the pursuit of understanding and appreciating our local history. -JMC

Once again, Mr. Gerald Weaber, President of the Historical Society of Riverton, informs and entertains our readers with an absorbing profile of the fascinating Fitler family. He began research for this intriguing article last December and has been diligently pursuing more details since. It is complete in this issue.



## Fascinating Fitlers among the movers and shakers since Riverton's early days

The cast includes a Mayor of Philadelphia, millionaire industrialists, an author, rope makers, auto makers, golfers, a Second Lady of the US, and a horse show ribbon winner!

Just about everyone associated with Riverton knows of the Biddle family for the role that it has played in the founding and development of our town in its early years. But some have never heard of the Fitler family and their strong ties to the Biddles and the mark they left on local history.

broad administrative powers under the new Bullitt Charter of 1885. Fitler won wide support for mayor based largely on his reputation as a successful Bridesburg businessman. Edwin H. Fitler had old-fashioned ideas believing that public officials should be honest. Before Fitler took office it was common for the chief of police to collect one dollar a month from the 6,000 saloon keepers so that they could open their side doors on Sunday contrary to the law. Fitler appointed an honest man to be the chief of police. In a few weeks a dozen of the most notorious payers for police protection were sent to prison.

Mayor Fitler's family prospered, enabling five of his grandchildren to raise families in Riverton. The Philadelphia mayor lived in Philadelphia throughout his life in a

See **FITLERS** on 2

### In this issue

**HSR BUSINESS MEETING Nov. 30**  
- JOHN McCORMICK 1

**A MAJOR FEATURE ARTICLE, THE FASCINATING FITLER FAMILY**  
- GERALD WEABER 1

**MRS. LINCOLN TAKES TEA AT THE NEW LEAF**  
- GERALD WEABER 2

### As new mayor of Philadelphia Edwin H. Fitler had an old-fashioned idea—honesty

In 1887 the small town of Riverton was barely thirty-six years old when the City of Philadelphia elected its first charter reform candidate in Mayor Edwin Henry Fitler. Riverton's prosperity in the 19th century was tied to the largess of the Philadelphia merchant class and its wealth.

The new mayor was the first leader of Philadelphia city government granted

Actress and historian Jo Ann Tufo captivated members with her dramatic portrayal of Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln.



# Mrs. Lincoln takes tea at the New Leaf with a few intimate friends



HSR member, Mrs. Pat McDermott, won a copy of a new book about Mrs. Lincoln as her birthday was closest to Mrs. Lincoln's



December 13th birthday.

On November 7th Riverton welcomed Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of President Lincoln, to the *New Leaf Tea Room* for a special afternoon tea. Guests were treated to an exquisite light lunch tea complete with a Civil War era reenactment by actor Joann Tufo, who portrayed a compelling Mrs. Lincoln.



tears to the eyes of guests upon hearing the tale of personal loss by the President's wife who outlived three of her four sons and lost her husband to an assassin's bullet.

The public education program was jointly sponsored by the *Historical Society of Riverton* and the *New Leaf Tea Room and Gift Shoppe*. A special note of thanks was given to Phyllis Rodgers for hosting the program at her tea room in Riverton.

-GW 

# A founder's descendant shares marvelous memories of an idyllic life on the riverbank



**Edwin H. Fitler**  
Rope manufacturer,  
Mayor of Philadelphia  
1887-1891

**FITLERS** from 1

mansion on 16<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Streets and also at his country seat at *Luzon* in the Torresdale section of Philadelphia, and later he lived in a summer home in Riverton overlooking the Delaware River.

Mayor Fitler's sons lived in Riverton while managing the family cordage business, making twine and rope, in the Bridesburg section of Philadelphia. *Edwin H. Fitler & Company* made Mayor Fitler a multi-millionaire in the late 19th century.



**Edwin H. Fitler & Company**

**Nathan Myers Fitler**  
Husband to Mary Biddle Fitler; a favorite uncle of Miss Barbara



At the time of his death in 1896, at the age of seventy-one, Mayor Fitler's net worth was more than three million dollars. An intensely patriotic citizen, Fitler raised and equipped a regiment from his employees at the cordage business to fight in the American Civil War. Later, Fitler was active in organizing and promoting Philadelphia's

great Centennial Exposition of 1876 and served on its board of finance.

## Great-grandchild of Riverton founder fondly recalls halcyon days

Last December, I interviewed one of the few surviving great-grandchildren of Robert Biddle, one of Riverton's founders in 1851. Mrs. Barbara Page Bartholomew, a former Riverton resident and descendant of the local Henry and Charles Miller Biddle family, now lives with her daughter in Newtown Square.

Barbara Page Bartholomew was born in 1912 in Riverton to Lilian Biddle and Walter Page, who raised three children, Jean Biddle Page, Walter Biddle Page and Barbara Page (Miss Barbara). During my visit I showed Miss Barbara early stereo viewer slides and postcard images of Riverton. The photographs stirred childhood memories, laughter and some tears as Miss Barbara shared her memories of life on the riverbank. She took particular note of one photograph of a horse-drawn carriage on the riverbank driven by a coachman wearing a suit and top hat and accompanied by two finely dressed women.



Author Mary Biddle Fitler on left in carriage on Bank Avenue in Riverton with Mrs. Fitler.

She took a magnifying glass and studied the images of the carriage passengers. Miss Barbara was thrilled to identify the image of her mother's younger sister, Mary Biddle Fitler, sitting in the Fitler carriage. Mrs. Bartholomew recalled her teenage years working for her aunt, Mary Biddle Fitler, who authored four books using Riverton as a backdrop for an adventure series for children featuring the character *Reddy*.

Mrs. Bartholomew typed her aunt's manuscript drafts for some of the books in the *Reddy* series. The other books included *Kid*, *Anna Mary*, and the *Big Wharf*. It took Mrs. Mary Biddle Fitler seventeen years and countless manuscript submissions to finally attract a publisher for her *Reddy* book printed in 1929. (The Historical Society of Riverton website features an article on the *Reddy* book series at [www.gaslightnews.homestead.com](http://www.gaslightnews.homestead.com))

Miss Barbara recalled a Riverton where almost everyone living on the riverbank seemed to be a Biddle or Fitler. There were the Biddle boys and their *Biddle Motor Car Company* who turned down an offer by Walter Percy Chrysler to join his enterprise. The *Biddle Car Company* was bought and moved to New York in 1920 by a consortium of owners including Philadelphians Walter H. Lippincott, G.H. Stetson, the hat manufacturer, and Myers Fitler.

Miss Barbara was fond of her aunt's husband, Nathan Myers Fitler, whom she

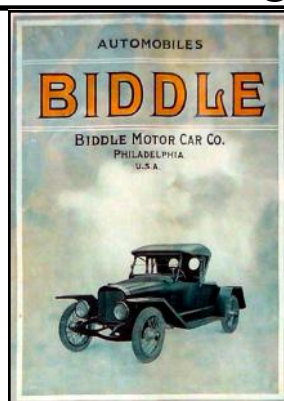
affectionately called Uncle Myers and who she said built the first swimming pool in Riverton. Nathan Myers Fitler and Mary Biddle Fitler lived in the home known as Graystone at 109 Bank Avenue. The first swimming pool in town was on the same property where the Fitler playhouse once stood. The playhouse, where Miss Barbara played as a youngster, was later the home to Anne Knight-Ruff, author of *Ruff Copy*, located at 4 Thomas Avenue behind Graystone. The pool once owned by Ms. Ruff was not the original Fitler pool. Recently the property at 4 Thomas Avenue was razed and the lot split into separate parcels where two modern homes were built.

A news story in *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* announced, "Riverton - March 31st, 1902 One of the prettiest weddings of the season occurred today, when Miss Mary Biddle, eldest daughter of Mrs. Henry S. Biddle, was married to Mr. Nathan Myers Fitler, grandson of the Edwin H. Fitler, former Mayor of Philadelphia".

THE CHILDREN OF EDWIN H. FITLER, JR. OF RIVERTON 1880S-1920S

The children of Edwin H. Fitler, Jr., son of the Philadelphia mayor, lived in Riverton earning fame, fortune and some notoriety as nationally ranked female amateur golfers, horsewomen, and yachtsmen. A Fitler cousin in 1963 received national attention when news of her relationship with Governor Nelson Rockefeller thwarted his bid for the Republican nomination for President of the United States.

Mayor Fitler and his wife, Josephine R. Baker, kept a summer home in Riverton. Four of their five grandchildren were born in Riverton. Mrs. Fitler died in her Riverton summer home after a prolonged illness in 1906. She was a member of the Porch Club and Christ Church. Christ Church was important to the Riverton Fitlers. Nathan Myers and Mary Biddle Fitler were married at Christ Church in 1902 by the Rev. R. Bowden Shepherd. Nannie H. Myers Fitler, wife of Edwin H. Fitler, Jr.,



An undated ad for the Biddle Motor Car Company

Miss Barbara recalled a Riverton where almost everyone living on the riverbank seemed to be a Biddle or Fitler. There were the Biddle boys and their Biddle Motor Car Company who turned down an offer by Walter Percy Chrysler to join his enterprise.

Mrs. Bartholomew typed manuscripts for her aunt, Mary Biddle Fitler, author of four books using Riverton as a backdrop for an adventure series. Illustration from *Anna Mary - A Girl of the Nineties* by Mary Biddle Fitler





# Cordage wealth provided a lavish life for three generations of Fitlers

FITLERS from 3



A portrait of a younger Barbara Page Bartholomew, born 1912, daughter of Lilian Biddle who was sister to author Mary Biddle Fitler - the subject of an interview by Gerald Weaber

left a five thousand dollar bequest to Christ Church. A stained glass window stands at Christ Church in memory of the Fitler family.

Mayor Fitler's grandsons actively participated in the management of the Fitler rope works until its purchase by Columbian Rope Company in 1948. The wealth produced by the Fitler Company endowed three generations with the resources to live lavishly on Philadelphia's Main Line and in Riverton.

Mayor Fitler's two sons, Edwin H., Jr. and William Wonderly Fitler, managed the cordage enterprise alongside their father until the Mayor's death in 1896. Edwin H. Jr. served as President and Treasurer for the cordage works from 1896-1898 until the stress of daily affairs required his hospitalization. Edwin, Jr. moved from their Walnut Street home in Philadelphia to Riverton for the summer of 1898.

**Nathan Myers Fitler, also known as N. Myers Fitler**, the eldest son of Edwin H. Fitler, Jr., was born in Philadelphia, trained as a stockbroker and later served as president of the cordage company. Nathan and Mary Biddle were married in 1902 at Christ's Church. The 1910 census shows Nathan

The local newspaper wrote that on February 13th, 1909, "Edwin H. Fitler, Jr. and two friends rowed across the Delaware River from the Fitler home to Disston's wharves in Tacony, braving chunks of floating ice...took more than two hours...Fitler is in the habit of going (across the river to work) daily via motor launch from his home to Phila., then by trolley to the Fitler cordage works, unless the river is frozen over..."

Myers living at 109 Bank Avenue with his wife Mary Biddle age 31; Ralston age 10 months; N. Myers, Jr. age 6; Henry age 4; and Martha age 7; identified as a sister

and six servants. The family moved from Riverton and lived in Wynnewood, Pa. for the remainder of their lives where Mary Biddle Fitler, author of adventure books for children, died in suburban Ardmore, PA in 1966 at the age of 87, having served three terms as chairman of the Devon Horse Show.

**Clarence Cecil Fitler, also known as C. Cecil Fitler**, was born in Riverton and the second Fitler brother to marry a Riverton girl whose mother was a Biddle. An April wedding in 1904 united C. Cecil Fitler and Miss Edna Helen Frishmuth. Between 1907-1911 the couple gave birth to two daughters and one son while living at 11 Bank Avenue. In 1910 C. Cecil,

age 27, lived with his wife Edna age 26; daughter Margaret 2 years old; and Mr. Fitler's youngest brother Dale B. age 21 years. By 1920 the household had six servants, who outnumbered the three family members living in the grand home at 11 Bank Avenue.

A *Trenton Times* headline on Aug. 20, 1908, read, "*Say Ticket Agent Used Hatchet*". The article told the story of Pennsylvania Railroad ticket agent Charles Silverthorn, who was arrested for allegedly striking C. Cecil Fitler in the shoulder with a hatchet following Mr. Fitler's complaint that the ticket agent was discourteous to his wife, Mrs. Edna Frishmuth Fitler of Riverton, earlier that day.

In 1911 Mrs. C. Cecil Fitler's horses, *Pink Lady* and *Pandoria*, finished first and second in the harness horse division at the *Monmouth County Horse Show*, and her horse *Florham King* took ribbons in both the pair and tandem classes. Sadly, in the

## HOME FOR NINE

3 Fitlers

6 servants



The Fitler

Residence at

11 Bank Avenue



The next issue of *Gaslight News* will feature an article by Mrs. Phyllis Rodgers, Vice President of the Historical Society of Riverton, in which she will trace the history of that grand Bank Street home and outline the painstaking efforts by a local family to restore it in the 1980s.



same year, Mr. & Mrs. Fitler buried their infant daughter, Edna Faith.



George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress)

Mrs. C.C. Fitler riding her horse & carriage

Mrs. C. Cecil Fitler was born Edna Helen Frishmuth, daughter to John C.W. and Hannah M. Biddle of Riverton. C. Cecil died in 1925 after a distinguished career with the Edwin H. Fitler Company.

**Edwin H. Fitler III** was born in Riverton in 1883 and later lived with his wife, Elisa, at “The Terraces” in Rosemont, PA. Elisa qualified for the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual National Ladies Golf Championship sponsored by the United States Golf Association in 1913. She played as a nationally ranked ladies amateur golfer, as did her sister-in-law, Mrs. C. Cecil Fitler of Riverton. Our research retrieved copies of passport applications for brothers C. Cecil and Edwin, 18 and 17 years of age, respectively, dated April 1900 just prior to their September trip to the tomb of their Irish ancestors. Mr. Fitler’s son, H. Biddle, worked as a sales manager at the Fitler rope works until his untimely death in 1936. He fell from a hotel window in New York at the age of thirty. Mr. Fitler III worked as a stockbroker in Philadelphia. Both he and his wife were avid golfers at the Merion Cricket Club until his death in 1945.

**Dale Baker Fitler** was born in Riverton exactly nine months after the famous snow blizzard in March 1888. Drifts reached fifteen to thirty feet high along the river-bank. Dale lived in Riverton for a time in his early twenties with his older brother, C. Cecil, at 11 Bank Avenue. He owned an investment trading business located at the Union League building in Philadelphia and later lived in Ardmore, Pa.

**Margaret Fitler**, the only daughter of Edwin

H. Fitler, Jr., was born in Riverton and married Oliver G. Willitts of New York in 1915. The couple lived in Riverton at 309 Bank Avenue.

### The Fitler legacy in US history

William Wonderly Fitler successfully led the Fitler enterprise after 1898 and raised his daughter, Rachel, and his son, William Wonderly, Jr., in Philadelphia before moving to the Main Line. William Wonderly, Jr. was a businessman and yachtsman whose first marriage lasted only ten years. His daughter Margarett was born in 1926. She was known to the girls at the Shipley School in Bryn Mawr as *Happy* for her “bright smile and perpetual good humor”. Happy Fitler-Murphy married Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1963.

Happy Fitler-Murphy was thrust into the public eye when, within weeks of her divorce, she married Rockefeller. Happy was compared to the Duchess of Windsor and accused of costing Rockefeller the opportunity of becoming President of the United States. News accounts compared the Governor to the Duke of Windsor, who gave up the throne of England for the woman he loved.

Nelson Rockefeller finally realized his childhood dream to hold national office when President Ford appointed him Vice President of the United States following the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in 1974.

Margaretta “Happy” Fitler was the great-granddaughter of both Civil War General George Gordon Meade, who commanded the Union troops at Gettysburg, and Philadelphia Mayor Edwin H. Fitler.

### HISTORICAL NOTE The Blizzard of 1888

One of the most famous snowstorms in American history, it hit the eastern United States March 11th and 12th 1888. *The Great White Hurricane* paralyzed communities from Maine to Chesapeake Bay. Cities became isolated when telephone and telegraph wires snapped, trains stopped, and roads became impassable. The National Weather service estimated that 40 inches of snow covered New York and New Jersey. Philadelphia claimed high winds blew up to 60 miles an hour, creating snowdrifts 40 to 50 feet high. Hundreds of deaths were reported. In NYC, the resulting transportation crisis led to the creation of the New York subway system.



It is widely acknowledged that his marriage to the just-divorced Margaretta Fitler Large cost Nelson Rockefeller his bid for the 1964 Republican nomination for US President.

-GERALD WEABER 

⑥ THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

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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 about the fascinating Fidler family by Mr. Gerald Weaber complete in this issue. Also, read about the Nov. 30 meeting and the tea with Mrs. Lincoln.

# Gaslight News

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Last issue showed this uncaptioned photo. HSR member Mrs. Elsie Waters well remembers the annual Riverton Field Day as it was observed in 1932: *What excitement—Field Day was coming! We got white sneakers for the day. We took flowers to school to decorate the May Poles. We upper-class girls donned our black bloomers, our middy blouses, and our new sneakers. We marched out to the field at Memorial Park to do our exercises with dumbbells and Indian clubs to band music. After that, we went into tents set up at the park to change into our pretty dresses for the May Pole Dance. Such fun dancing around the May Pole, weaving pretty colored ribbons under and over to make a pretty design.* Thank you, Elsie!



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

## Riverton Halloween Ghost Tour a Success

The HSR wishes to thank our many members and volunteers who contributed to the success of our *Halloween Ghost Trolley Tour* through the historic district of Riverton last month. Trolley riders claimed to see the Jersey Devil, Sabrina, a local psychic medium, Blackbeard the pirate and other apparitions.

Our appreciation to *The Beneficial Bank* and the *New Leaf Tea Room and Gift Shoppe* in Riverton and the *ShopRite Supermarket* for their generous support of our ghost tour benefiting the Historical Society of Riverton. -GW