

Comments for Dedication of Riverton Bicycle Track Monument

We are gathered here today to dedicate a monument to the Riverton Velodrome or bicycle track. While this is purely a local event, it has national implications because late-nineteenth century cyclists led the way in promoting the “Good Roads” movement around the country and in New Jersey. In 1894, the first Public Road Commissioner in the state specifically credited members of the League of American Wheelman with solidifying the need for an improved network of roads across New Jersey. The outdated paving technology then in use on roadways proved unworkable and often disastrous for the narrow wheels then found on bicycles. So the next time you are driving on a well paved road and see a cyclist, give a wave of thanks for what the sport has accomplished to everyone’s betterment.

Rob Gusky and his intrepid riders who just completed the Historic Riverton Century last evening represent an unbroken line of American men and women who believed in rugged individualism. Ushered in during the reform movement of the late nineteenth century, the flowering of interest in physical culture led to the Golden Age of Cycling in the 1890s. Most communities in Burlington County and throughout New Jersey hosted one or more wheelman clubs as men and women embraced the freedom and fresh air offered on the seat of a bicycle. Both racing and endurance rides elicited the best competitive spirit among these clubs.

The original run from New York City on June 8, 1895 was known as the Tri-State Relay Race and original plans called for it to terminate in Philadelphia, but Philadelphia law prevented high-speed riding through the streets of that city, so race officials ordered the change to Riverton and a finish at the bicycle track. The

Athletic Association would even offer a special prize for the race. The riders entered the track grounds from the southwest corner, where track personnel constructed a special gate for the occasion. The racers entered the track and never missed a pedal stroke as they completed four laps, comprising the last full mile of the race. A crowd of over 5,000 people filled the grandstands and bleachers to cheer on the riders. Spirited arguments arose about who held first place, but, in the end, Reading, Pennsylvania resident, C.W. Krick, of the Falcon Club finished first on the track. The New Jersey contingent, however, had maintained a careful accounting of all the relay legs and the New Jersey riders won the Tri-State Relay Race by possessing the most points.

In 1894, the Riverton Athletic Association had first constructed the track upon which the Tri-State riders completed their final mile. When finished, many cyclists viewed the track as the finest and widest quarter-mile track in the United States. It opened formally on July 4th, 1894 with a grand diamond tournament. The athletic Association had acquired this property in 1885 from the Lippincott Estate. In 1890, the famous birds-eye view of Riverton, published by Riverton resident and lithographic artist, Otto Koehler, depicts this land as the “baseball grounds.” The association held races and other events at the track throughout the 1894 season. By April 1895, the newspapers reported the track was “newly rebuilt” and would offer cyclists an opportunity for even faster speeds while racing. The season of 1896 proved to be the last for the track. The facility closed when the Burlington County Sheriff attached the athletic association’s assets at the track for defaulting on debts. This ended the bicycle track in Riverton.

In 1902, Charles M. Biddle acquired the property and in June 1904, Biddle filed his plan for the “Lippincott Extension” with the Burlington County Clerk’s Office. The plan divided the property between South Broad Street and Cherry Lane into building lots, but fails to divide most of the land between South Broad and Harrison, Lippincott and Thomas into building lots, leaving the site of the bicycle track undeveloped. In July 1909, Biddle filed a second plan in the county clerk’s office. The second plan laid out additional building lots between South Broad and Seventh streets and between Lippincott and Thomas, although it left two-thirds of the block between Broad and Harrison devoid of lots, extending westward from Lippincott.

It is good and fitting to mark the site of this once famous quarter-mile bicycle track in Riverton to help future generations understand and appreciate the historical tapestry that is our town of Riverton.

Thank you for your kind attention!