

Researching Your Riverton Home

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A Presentation for the Historical Society of Riverton
February 23, 2016
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SLIDE 1: **Researching Your Riverton Home**

Welcome to the General Meeting of the Historical Society of Riverton.

I am Pat Solin. My husband, Barry, and I have lived in Riverton, on Main Street since April 22, 1983. Some of you may know our four children, Mike, Paul, Matt, and Anna, and may also know that I was the school librarian at the Riverton Public School from 1995 until 2005.

I sincerely thank John McCormick for all his technical work on this presentation, as well as for his keen editing!

I might be introducing new information, so I have prepared a handout that you can use now, and take home with you as a reference. John will be uploading this presentation to the HSR's *Gaslight News* website, too, for later reference. But if you have questions, I would be pleased to answer them as I go, or I will be happy to speak to you after the presentation is concluded.

SLIDE 2: (none)

SLIDE 3: (none)

SLIDE 4: **Do You Know a Bit of Riverton History?**

Some towns and cities in the US were founded so much earlier than our 1851 date. Certainly, there is a history to the land and our community before the establishment of Riverton! However, this guide is to help our current residents extend their and our knowledge of the history of the town -- its homes and businesses, and its residents, primarily after its 1851 founding.

SLIDE 5: **A Brief History**

The primary tract of land that was first developed in 1851 was along the Delaware riverfront, what is now Bank Avenue, and then down Main Street, ending at the railroad track.

Farmland was purchased from the Lippincott family members by the Riverton Improvement Company, who in turn, sold plots of land, per the town design by architect, Samuel Sloan.

With notable exceptions of some earlier residential homes, additional buildings were developed over time, extending up Main Street, and spreading wider and wider to additional streets.

Also, when doing your research, remember that Riverton was a part of Cinnaminson and Chester before it became its own borough on January 1, 1894.

SLIDE 6: **Do You Have a Current Deed to Your Property?**

An excellent first step to researching your property is to locate the deed to your property, a primary resource document.

Your deed is loaded with pertinent information about your home and the people who owned it.

In it, you will find information about property lines, dates it was bought and sold, who sold, and who purchased it, and for what price.

SLIDE 7: Most likely your own, current deed will be limited to whoever was directly your previous owner/s, establishing your right to your property.

SLIDE 8: Make sure to get all the information as listed, above, for each deed you find.

SLIDE 9: **No deed?**

If you cannot find your current deed, you can search online using the Burlington County Public Records Electronic Search System (PRESS) <http://press.co.burlington.nj.us/press/index.aspx>

Select *County Clerk* from the menu at the left, then *Property Records* in that drop box.

Here is the direct link to the deed search. <http://press.co.burlington.nj.us/press/clerk/ClerkHome.aspx?op=basic>

SLIDE 10: **How Do I Search Further Back for Previous Deeds?**

If you need to go back to find the first owner, you must go from the most current deed to a preceding deed to document the age and owners of your home.

Your current deed will have information in it for the previous deed's date, grantee/grantor, book and page number, etc.

Use this information to gather the information as listed in Slide 8, above, going as far back as your online access will allow you to do.

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SLIDE 11: What do I do if I cannot go further back using the online PRESS?

Once you have gone as far back as you are able to online at home or at the library, you will have to continue to research the old, traditional way, by going to the deed books that are located at the Burlington County Clerk's Office, County Government Office.

I found the woman who is in charge of the deed books to be extremely pleasant and helpful. She showed me how to use *their* online search tool at the Mt. Holly office, finding all my previous deeds by book and page number, and then directing me to the "tombs" where the old deeds are stored.

Once in the archives, I was able to read the actual, old deeds, and continue my own search back to the very first deed written for the sale of the property to the Riverton Improvement Company.

(As an aside, sometimes properties are passed down to others via wills. Your research may require you to research this data, too. If the will was probated in Burlington County, it is my understanding that there is an index of wills that you can access, should you need to do so.) Again, be certain to get all the relevant information from each deed so that you can go back to the previous deed.

Note: the photo in the ellipse at the right shows the front of the government office complex. When you park across the street in the lot, go to the left of this building to the building at the back of it. In the square photo, the entrance to the Clerk's Office is in the tall building at the rear.

SLIDE 12: Finding Your Houses' Roots

Now that you have searched back to the very first deed, finding all the original owners, it is now time to know a bit more about the people who owned your home.

With a nod to the PBS series, *Finding Your Roots*, you can continue your research to find out, not just more about the kind of house you own, but about the people who lived in your home over the years, too. This information can add interest to your historic plaque!

Here are just a few of the many resources you can use to learn more about your home's history.

SLIDE 13: What qualities of your home make it special to you?

Take photos, read up on the features that may be original to your home, or like many homes, have gone through multiple renovations and additions.

Do you have unique flooring? Square nails? Any original stained glass transoms or panels? Make a list and document what is historic about your home. Use these features to help determine the architectural style.

SLIDE 14: More Resources

One book that might save you some time is located in our library. [Historic Riverton: Notable Architecture, People and Events, 1775-1930](#). This book can be purchased through the Historical Society of Riverton.

You can find online the application for Riverton's historic district designation. About 500 structures are detailed in this document, which might help you with your research.

Another great resource: [Structure and Ornament: A Guide to Architectural Styles in Burlington County, New Jersey, 1700-1900](#), text by Keith W. Betten, artwork by Mildred Engle. c.1979. (Thank you, Keith, for your help with my house's research!)

The HSR has a handy and informative [Self-Guided Walking Tour](#) of our town. It has a wealth of information of housing styles and architectural design information.

SLIDE 15: Maps

Early maps of Riverton are wonderful, visual aids to see how the town developed, and, perhaps, how your own home changed over the years. These two, only about a year apart, show homes and businesses. Note the changes of additions, and some structures that were not added to the 1860 map!

SLIDE 16: "Gold Standard": 1890 Bird's Eye View

As a very accessible, local tool, check out this 1890 depiction of Riverton. This beautifully detailed bird's eye view marks a mid-point in the development of the town. It is especially helpful since the 1890 US Census is not available for this decade.

If you see your home, its shape may be the same or different, its property lines might be the same, or have changed. If you do not see your home, your search can begin after 1890.

By the way, the Riverton Free Library offers black and white copies of this map for \$5. A bargain! And many residents, like myself,

have it framed and displayed in our homes.

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SLIDE 17: Sanborn Insurance Maps

These early insurance maps are remarkable! You can reach them free, online.

Thank you, Princeton University for making these so accessible!

SLIDE 18: 1895 Sanborn Insurance Map

This is the first of a series of Riverton Sanborn Insurance maps. You can see the street layout, with houses' structures (e.g. how many floors, property lines, porches, etc.) for Riverton homes over the years.

SLIDE 19: 1896 Detail of Sanborn Map

I started my research with the 1895 map. Our home was not within the scope of that particular map, so I had to check the next series, the 1896 maps – and found my house! I was able to zoom, or enlarge a specific area of one of the sheets so that I could see our house in greater detail -- its property lines, number of stories of each section of our house. I found two surprises – it once had a wrap-around porch, and the property lines were different than they are, today.

Over the years, the look of homes change with each new owner. As more and more research is completed, new information can reveal more accurate information, too.

Be sure to check each of the Sanborn series to see how your house and property changed!

SLIDE 20: Detail of Sanborn Maps

This 1900 map detail shows, near 4th and Main, the Lyceum, once a center of Riverton social and cultural life.

For my house, the one in the red circle, the maps reflects a new and different property line from the previous map. That line between 406 and 408 are still not what is our current line – you may need to check the changes in your property lines, too.

SLIDE 21: Detail of Sanborn Maps

By 1919, the Lyceum is gone. Property lines are once again changed. Notice a new house is built where the Lyceum once stood.

SLIDE 22: Detail of Sanborn Maps

Another sheet of the 1900 map depicts the *old* Riverton Public School at the corner of 4th and Howard (now the blacktop playground). Homes are on the block where the current Riverton School will be built in 1910.

The little deconsecrated chapel behind the school served as Public School #2 until it was later moved and repurposed for use on Main Street. Maps provide an excellent visual record of changes to our community.

SLIDE 23: Detail of Sanborn Maps

Maps are so helpful to visualize that boundaries do change over the years; things disappear and sometimes even move. We can see the development of our town, of our own homes, with this wonderful, online map collection.

In the 1911 map, there is a new school on the lot at 5th and Main Streets, Public School #3.

Public School #2 was no longer in use; Public School #1 would later be razed to make room for the playground.

SLIDE 24: United State Census

Now, for the people who owned or lived in your house...

The United States federal government has been completing the US Census every ten years since 1790. Again, for your research, you probably do not need to go back any further than the 1850 US Census.

Be forewarned -- streets were not named, nor were house numbers standardized until after 1880 (at least in Riverton). So in order to find the name of a former property owner from you deed prior to 1880, you will have to hunt early records page by page for the Chester or Cinnaminson area, but with no street name or house number to guide you.

Successful researchers will find a wealth of information about homeowners – number of people in the house, their ages, their ethnicity, whether they could read and write English, the country of their birth, and the occupations of the people in the household. It can be fascinating to uncover these details!

The original US Census is retained at the National Archive. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed most of the 1890 records. The heyday of much construction in Riverton was at that time, so you might want to rely on the 1890 and 1895 maps for some details until you reach the 1900 US Census.

Birth and death dates, parish records, migration records, military records, *and* US Census records can be accessed free at the online resource created by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), FamilySearch.org.

Another, extensive genealogy online resource is Ancestry.com. You can visit the Riverton Free Library and access their site free by using the library's subscription.

Finally, for those who wish to do greater research on family histories, be sure to check out the online Genealogy Research site of the Burlington County Library System. <http://explore.bcls.lib.nj.us/genealogy>

SLIDE 25: **Local, Historic Newspapers**

Our own HSR online resource of historic newspapers can be searched by key word.

Due to the condition of the print, access to all relevant articles can be hit or miss, but scanning through newspapers from the time when you know that a resident of your house had a home or business in town can be successful, too. <http://rivertonhistory.com/historical-local-newspapers/>

SLIDE 26: Have you ever seen the HSR's The Romance of Riverton, the 1926 film? You can see homes, businesses, and homes as they looked in the 1920's.

This 1929 Manning's Riverton Classified Business Directory, a kind of "Yellow Pages," has the names and addresses of local Riverton businesses.

SLIDE 27: (none)

SLIDE 28: (none)

SLIDE 29: **HSR Plaque**

I welcome those on the Plaque Application Committee, Bill Brown and Bill McDermott, to provide guidance on how you can apply for a Historic Society of Riverton house plaque.

SLIDE 30: (none)

