



F.M. Dampman, the winner of the individual match race in 1895, made the trek from NYC to Riverton in ten hours, forty-three minutes.

wheelmen raced on a track at Lippincott & S. Broad in Riverton, NJ.

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

Riverton's 21st century cycling events have late 19th century roots

Before the first Tour de France and long before Carlos Rogers originated the Historic Riverton Criterium or Rob Gusky conceived of the Historic Riverton Century,



“Bicycle Girls and Their Summer Road Gowns,” *The San Francisco Call*, May 29, 1898, p27

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 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 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, the Club purchased land from the Lippincott property at the corner of South Broad Street and Thomas Avenue on April 29, 1885, and relocated the ball field to their new home.



The Riverton 1872 Riverton Ball Club of whom *Sporting Life Magazine* said in April, 1922, “...this club made the game it is today.” IMAGE PROVIDED BY MR. BILL HALL

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.

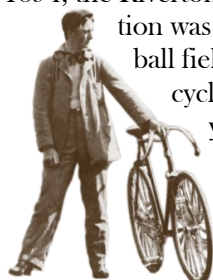
As baseball participation waned, cycling in Riverton gained traction

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, the 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.



Unidentified Riverton cyclist, c.1895, IMAGE CREDIT: MR. ED GILMORE

Bicycle racing began in France and spread to US

Paris, France hosted the world's first recorded bicycle race 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 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 improve-

ments. 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.

A GRAND BICYCLE MEET
At RIVERTON, N. J.
ON **JULY 4th**
OPENING OF THE NEW TRACK, pronounced by experts the finest quarter-mile track in the country.
10 OR 15 DIFFERENT EVENTS.
\$500 IN PRIZES.
Commencing at 2 P. M. sharp. Take Steamers
COLUMBIA
AND
TWILIGHT
From Chestnut St. Wharf at 10.30 A. M. and 2 P. M.
Returning, leave Riverton 5.05 and 6.10 P. M.
EXCURSION. 25c.

Grand Bicycle Meet, 1894-07-04,
Philadelphia Inquirer, pg. 8

The Philadelphia Inquirer advert for the July 4th, 1894 opening of the track proudly declared it was "pronounced by experts as the finest quarter-mile track in the country." Just two months later, newly installed arc lights introduced the area to the novelty of night bicycle racing. Things would get even brighter for the fledgling cycling club.

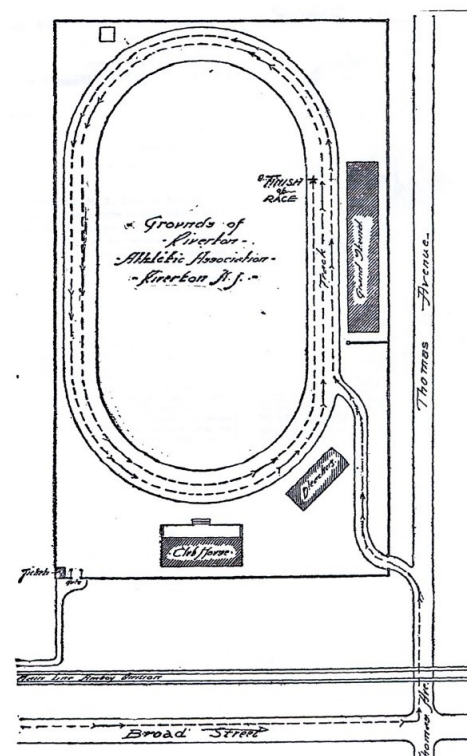
The race is on!

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 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 receive 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.



Bicycle track bordered by Lippincott and Thomas Aves. and S. Broad, *New York Times*, June 4, 1895

The Times invited Class A cyclists to participate in the 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 started at least one hour 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. The Times published a map with specific street names and their turns 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.”



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 at left.
PHOTO CREDIT: MR. ED GILMORE

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.

Alas, the glorious days of bicycle racing in Riverton were 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 former Riverton Town Historian, [Betty Hahle](#), by 1909, unable to pay the rent on the leased land, the track was demolished and the land sold for housing.



Special race prize
NY Times, June 4, 1895

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.

Carlos Rogers reboots the Riverton cycling legacy for the 21st century

June 2011 saw the beginning of a new Riverton tradition when cycling competitors from several states converged on the gaslamp lined streets of our village for the first [Historic Riverton Criterium](#).

To the uninitiated, a criterium is a bicycle race of a specified number of laps on a closed course over public roads closed



2011 Historic Riverton Criterium
IMAGE CREDIT: LEE ROGERS

to normal traffic. According to USA Cycling, it is the most popular form of competitive road cycling in the US. This exciting sport brings the thrill of high-speed racing to Main Street, USA where the action unfolds to within feet of spectators lining the one kilometer course along neighborhood streets.

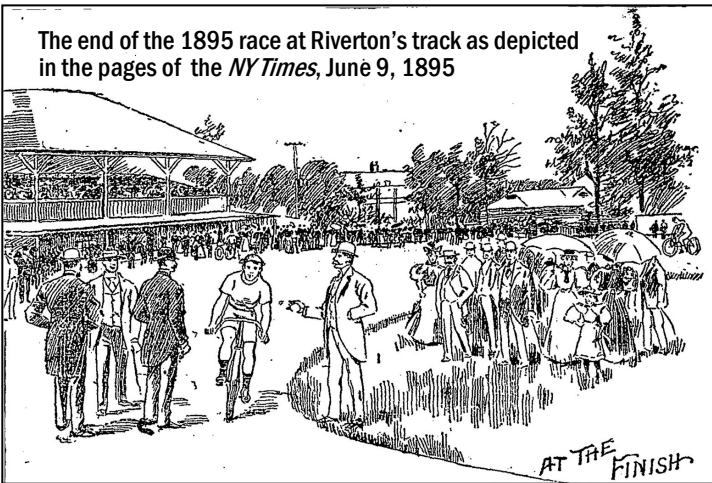


Carlos Rogers, race promoter, businessman, philanthropist, 2016 IMAGE CREDIT: JM

Race promoter Carlos Rogers, himself a former competitive cyclist, planned with USA Cycling officials, lobbied borough council, and worked with borough employees to bring this family-friendly event to his adopted hometown.

The event has now evolved to attract men and women amateur and professional riders from across the region

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





THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

competing for a share of cash prizes and primes.

In addition to providing cash prizes for the racers, a part of each year's event proceeds has also benefited the following local charities and organizations:

- Riverton Memorial Park
- Riverton Shade Tree Commission
- Boy Scouts
- Palmyra Ambulance Association
- Riverton Free Library
- Christ Episcopal Church
- Pal/Riv Athletic Assn.
- Riverton Fire Department
- Riverton Public School PTO
- Historical Society of Riverton
- Police Unity Bike Tour
- Palermo Children's Education Trust
- Bike MS

Incredibly, the Historic Riverton Criterium has donated over \$25,000 so far! This year's main beneficiary is the [Bread of Life Food Pantry](#). Carlos is doing a "Fill the Truck" food drive the day of the race. Bring non-perishable food items to

support the Bread of Life Food Pantry in Palmyra.

Whether one is aware of the nuances of competitive cycling or not, spectators enjoy the experience of feeling the whoosh of riders careen by as fans cheer and clang cowbells in support of their favorites. Food and refreshment vendors, cyclists on antique bicycles, live music, and a balloon twister's creations fuel the fun and excitement.

We thank Carlos Rogers for originating this excellent kickoff to the Riverton summer calendar. Comparisons to Riverton's Glorious Fourth are high praise indeed for this classic tradition that now has a secure place in Riverton history.

Rob Gusky recreated the 1895 NYC to Riverton bicycle race in 2014

In December 2013, Carlos Rogers emailed friends in the cycling community to help "set the wheels in motion" for a fellow cyclist's proposal to recreate the 1895 New York Times Tri-State Relay Race from New York City to Riverton, on the Saturday preceding the 2014 Historic Riverton Criterium.

Ex-Riverton resident Rob Gusky Rob Gusky organized the [Historic Riverton Century Ride](#) in 2014 and again in 2016. In each, riders bicycled about a hundred miles, or a "century," ending up in Riverton the

day before Carlos Rogers' Historic Riverton Criterium.

The logistics of pulling off a successful bike ride over today's congested roads and highways were considerable, so Rob soon enlisted a cadre of amateur cyclists to strategize a plan for overcoming the many obstacles to completing such a grueling run.

A separate piece of this ambitious undertaking was Rob's successful effort in 2014 to fund the installation of a historic marker at the former site of the Riverton Bicycle Track at Lippincott Ave. and South Broad where the Tri-State Relay Race finished on June 8, 1895.

Pinch hitting for Rob this year, who will stay home in Wisconsin for his daughter's graduation, [Cynergy Cycling Club](#) instead will host on Saturday, June 10 several organized club morning distance rides of 15, 25, 35, 45 and 50 miles each, beginning and ending in town. The club will also hold a Bicycle Safety Rodeo, and a Community Ride around town. Then, Sunday, all the excitement of the 7th Annual Historic Riverton Criterium serves as the climax for the weekend.

Surely, these events add another rich chapter to the Riverton bicycling legacy, which originated in the Borough during the late 19th century.

For more information and images visit these links for [The Historic Riverton Criterium](#), [The Historic Riverton Century](#), [The Historical Society of Riverton](#), and the April HSR presentation, [Riverton Bicycling Then & Now](#)

**MRS. PATRICIA SMITH SOLIN
AND JOHN MCCORMICK**



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EVENT PHOTOS: JM



Bike Track Marker Dedication, 2014
IMAGE CREDIT: JM



Historic Riverton Century Ride, June 7, 2014
IMAGE CREDIT: HOLLIE SHANER MCRAE