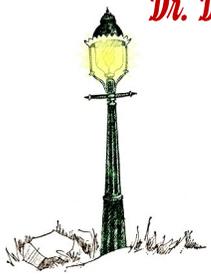


Dr. Daisy Century portrays Harriet Tubman at March 25 HSR meet. See page 3 for details.



# Gaslight News

[rivertonhistory.com](http://rivertonhistory.com)

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Historical Society of Riverton

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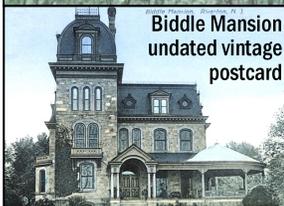
Incorporated 1978



RESIDENCE OF CHARLES M. BIDDLE Cor. Bank and Lippincott Aves., Riverton, New Jersey, 10 miles from Philadelphia

"The most notable residence of Riverton, picturesquely situated on the Delaware..."  
*Philadelphia and notable Philadelphia's.* New York: King, 1902, pg. 92

**“ The unique green serpentine that had so long characterized the mansion was now becoming the downfall of the house. Although I loved the look of it, I was determined to examine all options to save my home. ”**  
- Mrs. Helen Hughes



Biddle Mansion undated vintage postcard

## Historic riverfront mansion undergoes facelift

Decades of neglect to the exterior had undermined the safety and comfort of the residence

Thanks to its façade of green Pennsylvania serpentine, there may have been no more recognizable home on the riverbank than the stately mansion at [207 Bank Avenue](http://207BankAvenue.com) originally built for [Charles Miller Biddle](http://CharlesMillerBiddle.com), son of one of Riverton's

founders. Serpentine has a distinctive pattern and color, reminiscent of snake-skin. However, its outward charm concealed an underlying problem that threatened the very survival of the structure.

In the following personal account, Mrs. Helen Hughes outlines the process that led to the dramatic change she made to the building's exterior over the past year. - JMc, Editor



Hannah and Charles Biddle in the solarium at 207 Bank Ave. undated HSR archive photo

In 2007, [Preservation New Jersey](http://PreservationNewJersey.com) decried the mansion's "current state of decrepitude" and placed it on its [Ten Most Endangered Historic Sites in New Jersey](http://TenMostEndangeredHistoricSites.com). I purchased this diamond-in-the-rough in 2012 (See [GN #149](http://GN#149)), and immediately undertook [extensive renovations](http://extensiveRenovations.com) for which the Historical Society of Riverton recognized with a [Daniel Campbell Riverton Preservation Award](http://DanielCampbellRivertonPreservationAward.com) in 2014.

By 2017, however, the once splendid stone façade had so seriously deteriorated that the grand old dame of the riverbank was in desperate need of a facelift. How to safely stabilize the hazardous stone, and stop water, wind, and cold weather from permeating the house proved to be an agonizing decision.

That distinctive green serpentine stone cladding was actually not part of the original plan.

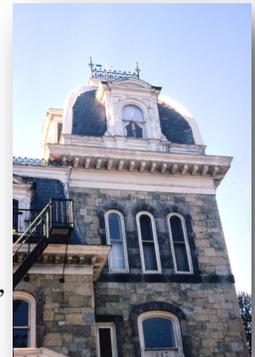
A physician started construction of the residence in the early 1850s, but was unable to financially carry the burden of the house. The Civil War placed the project on hold. The Biddle family entered at some point. Rumor has it that Mrs. Biddle would not move into the mansion unless the builder changed the exterior from brown to green.

In the 1970s, someone tried to apply stucco to the building, perhaps to cover the deteriorating stone or to "update" the look of the mansion. They roughed up the stone hoping the stucco would adhere to the stone, but it did not, and the process only contributed to further deterioration. A combination of weathering, neglect, and a lack of maintenance through the years had caused the stone slabs to become paper-thin, flake, and turn to sand.

One could lean against exterior walls and literally see into the house! Wind, cold, and water leaked right through the walls. On rainy days, I sat in my library and watched the water stream across the floor. The structure of the house had become compromised.

Water intrusion was causing the entire front wall of the house to pull away from the rest of the house, and eventually, it was going to fall. The unique green serpentine that had so long characterized the mansion was now becoming the downfall of the house. Although I loved the look of it, I was determined to examine all options to save my home.

Masonry work has been in my family for generations. I am well aware of stone, what it takes  
See **MANSION** on 2



The convex mansard tower before the 1978 fire that destroyed it  
PHOTO: Michael Robinson

### In this issue

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## MANSION from I

to keep it in place, and the hazards that occur when masonry work fails. Over the last six years, I have relentlessly researched how to preserve serpentine stone. I visited buildings with the same mineral. Experts at the University of Pennsylvania told me that masons cut their stone into blocks, not slabs. Blocks are hardy and can withstand the wear and tear of the climate and time. I consulted countless construction people who told me that one could only see this kind of construction in Europe. Contractors loved the place, but confessed that they would be in over their heads with this project.

The consensus was that sealing the stone to stop the ongoing deterioration was the best option. I tried two different sealers in two different areas. One area in the back failed almost immediately; a stronger sealer tested on the covered porch failed within a year. The flaky stone façade continued to crumble, granulate, and fall. Bottom line – one cannot seal sand.

In a perfect world, I would remove the old stone, purchase replacement material, establish a new foundation to bear the weight, rebuild the underlying brick wall, and install the new stone three-plus stories up on a 10,000 square foot house.

I would have done so had the New Jersey Historical Society or some preservation organization helped with funding, but instead, the expense fell entirely to me.

Yet, the unsafe crumbling and indoor waterworks demanded that I do something, and soon!

Stucco proved to be the only feasible and affordable solution. The challenge would be to find someone with the enthusiasm, skill set, and guts to tackle the job.

**Caroline Slim** and her crew from **James R. Slim Plastering** agreed to tackle the intimidating task.

Caroline Slim explains...

On a brutally cold, windy day in early 2017, we met with general contractor **Jim Godwin** of JFG Construction to look at the well-known and well-loved Biddle Mansion. From a distance, it was an imposing and elegant mansion clad in green serpentine; up close, however, what made the façade truly impressive was the mystery of how any of it remained.

Beige concrete patches marred the multi-toned green walls. Voids around windows and corners caused leaks and drafts.

Spalling and a previously botched stucco job took this well beyond a simple repair. That day every stone



Work is underway to stabilize the exterior, April 2018  
PHOTO: Roger Prichard

we touched crumbled under our fingertips; layers of stone and mortar reduced to sand.

Most people will fortunately never know what goes in to restoring an old home, let alone a pre-Civil War riverfront mansion. On a subsequent visit, Helen walked us through the converted first floor apartment, told us about the renovation and preservation efforts previously taken, and we saw first-hand how well cared for the property was.

On paper, our scope of work was simple: wire lath and stucco the exterior. We scaffolded the entire building, removed the loosest stone, and installed over 7,000 square feet of wire lath **Tom Kulp**, an engineer of **PMH Associates, Inc.**, determined that window surrounds had pulled away from the structure, requiring the façade to be tied back to the framing with various ties and epoxies.

Over the wire, workers applied scratch and brown coats, utilizing a “double-scratch” scratch method to build up the more uneven parts of the walls. Since turning the Biddle Mansion into a misshapen, peeled avocado wasn’t the goal, we matched Parex acrylic stucco to an old Manning Flexlite color, Pewter, and textured it to mimic an old-fashioned stucco lace texture.

The project spanned six months, three seasons, afforded some amazing views of the Delaware, and required more than one person to overcome a fear of heights. We hope our work will enable this beautiful, grand residence to remain a home for generations to come.

The Biddle Mansion now has a wonderful new exterior. For those of you who mourn the green serpentine, you have my deepest sympathy. I

too went through a period of loss and grieving. Yet, every time it rains, I can now enjoy my rooms without pulling my furniture away from the walls. When I sit on the porch, nothing falls on my head. Floors do not shake as hard when a nor’easter strikes, and I do not lie in bed worrying about which direction my front wall may fall. I will not lie. It feels so good to be home.

And to all you lamenters and second-guessers, naysayers and would-be stonemasons, I say, “Dilly, Dilly.”\*

\***Dilly-Dilly:** Bud Light coined the catchphrase “Dilly Dilly.”

It has variously been defined as “a sort of medieval form of ‘cheers’” and “a word that shows approval of an action.”



Biddle Mansion, April 2018  
PHOTO: Roger Prichard

- MRS. HELEN HUGHES



## Dr. Daisy Century portrays Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman at RFL April 25 at 7pm

On Wednesday, April 25, at 7pm, **Dr. Daisy Century** brings her one-woman historical interpretation of **Harriet Tubman** to Riverton Free Library. Dr. Century considers Tubman her role model, someone who encouraged her to put others first and to lead by example.

Tubman, who rescued more than seventy slaves using the Underground Railroad, shows us a woman who found freedom for herself and then made sure others were brought to freedom. Century's Harriet Tubman takes each and every audience member along for this ride.

Since 1999, Dr. Century has appeared in venues that include the National Defense Organization, Belmont Mansion, National Archives, Sojourner Truth House, Theodore Roosevelt National Historic Site, the Helicopter Museum, and numerous schools, libraries, museums and historic sites throughout New Jersey. The HSR is privileged to bring her to our audience.

- excerpted from [http://ahtheatre.org/america/actor\\_historians/daisy-century](http://ahtheatre.org/america/actor_historians/daisy-century)



## Arbor Day event marks Riverton's 30th year as Tree City

The **Borough of Riverton** was selected to host an Arbor Day celebration at Riverton Memorial Park on Friday, April 27, at 10:00 am to honor Riverton's 30th year as a Tree City USA and to celebrate its accomplishments in working to develop a sustainable urban forest canopy through diversity.

The NJ Urban & Community Forestry Program (NJUCF) will partner with the Borough of Riverton, the New Jersey Tree Foundation, and Riverton School to recognize that anniversary by planting thirty (30) trees throughout the Borough.

Riverton's urban and community forestry program is a beacon for communities statewide demonstrating how a diverse urban forest can provide environmental, social, and

economic benefits to your community.

Riverton has a wonderfully active and engaged Shade Tree Board, chaired by [Barry Emens](#).

Please join in celebrating the tremendous benefits that trees provide each day along with local and area arbor experts. Tree plantings around town, educational programs, in concert with musical performances by students from Riverton Public School will round out the celebration.

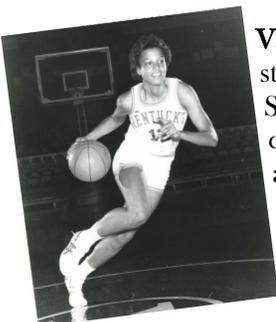


- excerpted from

[www.riverton-nj.com/arbor-day-2018-in-riverton/](http://www.riverton-nj.com/arbor-day-2018-in-riverton/)

## A family legacy still endures

Valerie Still imparted stories of her women's hoops career as well as those of her accomplished Still Family ancestors



Valerie Still remains the all-time leading University of Kentucky scorer. IMAGE CREDIT: [www.kentucky.com](http://www.kentucky.com)

Valerie Still chronicled her own life story at the February meeting of the Society, recounting her legendary career as a women's basketball player as well as describing the impressive legacy left by her Still Family forebears.

Ms. Still continues to hold the title of all-time leading scorer and rebounder (men or women) at the University of Kentucky. For years she played in the American Basketball Women's League, and is a

nominee to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

After retiring from basketball, Valerie undertook to discover more of her Still Family heritage. Her cousin **Caroline Still Wiley Anderson** was one of the first female African American doctors in Philadelphia. **Dr. James Still**, her great-great-grandfather, born to former slaves, was a New Jersey physician known as "The Black Doctor of the Pines." Her great-great-granduncle **William Still** is known as the Father of the Underground Railroad.



Dr. James Still

Valerie tells her story in a memoir: [Playing Black and Blue; Still I Rise](#). Riverton Free Library will host a book signing on Tuesday, May 1 at 7:00 pm.

- MRS. SUSAN DECHNIK





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# THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

## Steamboat Landing Marker

Roger Prichard, point man for the Historical Marker Program, tells how teamwork, research, design principles, and a bit of luck led to its completion



Riverton Steamboat Landing Historical Marker (See a larger resolution image on [rivertonhistory.com](http://rivertonhistory.com).)

I modeled this marker after **Bob Foster's** wonderful design for the [Smiths' Caleb Clothier House](#) at 503 Bank Avenue. Larger and intended for a more open area, this one needed eye-catching graphics to engage viewers from a distance. The big steamboat image and addition of sub-headings invite passersby to draw closer.

**Nick Mortgu** referred us to the long sought after original [steamboat print](#) that spawned all of the reproductions made over the years. The detailed print, about 15"x 20", hangs in **Barbara Lip-pincott Martin's** hallway at 501 Bank (the Dillwyn Parrish House).

The [Riverton Steamboat Landing Foundation](#) had considered locations, but the only obvious place was the RYC parking lot, which is full of cars and boats and has awful sightlines. It dawned on me that it might work well to be where the photographer stood, c1905, to take this most famous of our photos. I walked around with a copy of the photo until I got the perspective right. Luckily, it

was on Borough property, and Riverton Borough Council graciously permitted the HSR to plant the marker there.

**Paul Schopp** was key, of course, in supplying information, fact-checking, and the fine scan of his print of "[Riverton Landing, 9 Miles from Philadelphia](#)" woodcut.

**Becky Ratcliff** took the fine modern photo of the boats with the colorful spinnakers.

The blue vignette is a detail from the Otto Kohler "[Birds Eye View of Riverton - 1890](#)", which I scanned years ago.

The timetable and freight bill are images I saved from eBay when I was unsuccessful in bidding on them.

Newspapers.com supplied the newspaper clippings. The one looking for contractors to build the wharf was serendipitous - I was looking for variants of "Daniel Leeds Miller, Jr.", the principal founder of the town and the man who built my house.



Riverton Steamboat Landing Marker Dec. 2017, L-R: Roger Prichard, Bill Brown, John Lavery

**Bill Brown** and **John Lavery** did much of the heavy digging, concrete mixing, etc. **Phyllis Rodgers** found a company named **EnviroSigns** to make the markers. We've been very pleased with their service and the quality of both the panel itself and the heavy powder-coated aluminum stand.

- ROGER PRICHARD



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

Readers: Mrs. Helen Hughes outlines the process that led to the dramatic change she made to the Biddle Mansion exterior over the past year. See a recap of Valerie Still's presentation, and blurbs for upcoming Harriet Tubman and Arbor Day events.

## Gaslight News

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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

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## More Vets' Names

Names of these veterans will be installed on the Riverton War Memorial Honor Roll Sunday, May 27, 2018 at 10:15-10:30 am.

- William J. Bohley Sr. U.S. Army**
- William J. Bohley Jr. USMC**
- Brian R. Bohley Sr. USMC**
- Brian R. Bohley Jr. USMC**
- Paul V. Breslin U.S. Army**
- Jerry E. Hendricks U.S. Navy**

Any current or former resident of the Borough, who served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the US during a time of war, is eligible to have their name placed on the Memorial. Names are added on Memorial Day & Veterans Day.

To verify eligibility, you must present a copy of your discharge papers (DD-214) or a copy of your military orders. Drop off at the Borough Hall, in care of **Bill Brown** or **Bob Smyth**. Bill can be contacted at 856-303-8513 or [JYD9168@verizon.net](mailto:JYD9168@verizon.net)

Please include a contact number.

★★★★★★★★★★ -JMC



## Historical Interpretive Marker Program Report

This program is moving along - two markers in place, two on order, and the research for the next two is mostly complete!

The first two have produced lots of positive reaction. Both are on Bank Ave. - the **Caleb Clothier House** at 503 Bank and the **Riverton Steamboat Landing** on the grass at the foot of Penn St.

The two on order are for the **Riverton Free Library** and **Riverton Public School**. Look for a May installation.

Finally, HSR member **Mike Kearney** signed on for a marker for his two properties—the **Robert Biddle House** at 309 Bank and the **William Parrish House** at 311. **Roger Prichard** is working with **Colin Cattell's** initial research and is close to starting the design layout. Look for these in early summer.

Special thanks again to **Carlos Rogers** and the **Historic Riverton Criterium** for the gracious grant which has made this program possible.

- ROGER PRICHARD

