



# Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON  
Riverton, N.J. 08077

Founded 1970 Inc. 1978  
Sept-Oct 1988 vol.xv-1 (#51)

Program:

Monday, October 3, 1988 8 p.m. Music Room, Riverton School  
"New Jersey Collections"

.....David C. Munn

David Munn is an avid collector of books and pamphlets pertaining to life in New Jersey. He also has a long list of credits for publications of his own, in addition to degrees earned, preservation projects, positions held, and memberships in various organizations. He is currently the director of Cherry Hill Free Public Library, and lives in Camden, with his wife and children.

Friday, October 14, 1988 8 p.m. Auditorium, Riverton School  
"Romance of Riverton"

Once again, in response to many requests, we will show the 1926 black/white, silent film made for the Chamber of Commerce to extoll Riverton's virtues. This time we will also show some slides, and possibly some old "home movies" of Riverton, as well.

All are welcome to our programs. The movie night is a special event, this year, and if you haven't seen it before, here's your chance to enjoy a fanciful "history" and scenes from 60 years ago. If you have seen it before, you'll be surprised to find you see new things in the film each time you do see it. The auditorium is big--invite friends and neighbors to enjoy this evening with you. No charge..(but a donation box will be available for those wishing to contribute something...).

Other meetings this year: subsequent Newsletters will give more detail, but so that you can note the dates now, these are the programs planned for this season: November 28, Traditional Basketry, tracing baskets from native Indians to modern times; January 23, Trains...; March 13, Antiques and Auctions; May 8, River Transportation.

Update:

Morgan Cemetery...Messages and letters to Norman Brewer, present owner of the cemetery, went unanswered, as we urged him to retain the iron fence along Cinnaminson Avenue. It was sold, and will re-appear on a private property in Riverton. Some improvements have been made, such as paving the circular roadway in the cemetery, removal of wild growth and trash, and re-setting of some stones. However, vandals continue to topple them again, and to mar headstones with spray paint. Building along the former back portion of the grounds is almost complete, after which fencing of the entire cemetery is expected to be done. The Cemetery Board has received some complaints, and continues to watch what is being done here.

Notes:

It has been a busy summer! Rick Wark carried a Historical Society sign on his small fire Engine, from which cards bearing local historical data were distributed, in the Fourth of July parade.  
..A Plaque was approved for Jack and Ginny Mathews' house at 719 Main

street, certifying its erection in 1885.

..We showed a slide/tape presentation on Records Management, produced by AASLH, to our Borough Council, as a first step toward better care of our town's records.

..Mayor Walter Engle called together representatives from various organizations in town to form a committee to coordinate projects that are proposed affecting Riverton. Any such project being considered will be first presented to this committee; if it is agreed that it would be beneficial to the town, they will present it to the Borough Council for their approval. The group will also act as a "brainstorming" source of ideas to encourage improve communication, education, and pride in Riverton. The present Historical Society representatives are John Parry and Betty Hahle. Bring your ideas and suggestions to them, for consideration by the group.

..AND--a fund-raiser, THE GAME OF RIVERTON NJ, was begun. Over the summer months ads were sold to local business and professional people, a design for the center of the board was drawn, and publicity was sent out. There has been good response. The games, played like Monopoly, with local ads replacing "boardwalk" etc., carries a theme of local history, and will be available early in October. They will sell for \$12 each, and will be available at several locations in town. There is a limited number available (300 games) and many have placed advance orders with us. We can re-order, but there is a minimum order required, and delivery takes 7-8 weeks, so if you plan a GAME OF RIVERTON NJ for a Christmas gift, get yours early!!

Quick action on the part of one resident recently, saved the slate curbing along Howard St., which is being re-paved. He brought the matter to the attention of the Mayor, who took steps at once to ensure its preservation.

Many things contribute to Riverton's identity. Not only its founding plan and controlled development as a residential town, the riverbank, the shade trees along wide streets, the gaslights, but also the remaining brick and slate sidewalks, slate and Belgian block curbs, mounting blocks, carriage driveways of small, hard brick, brick crosswalks in streets--these, as well as the architecture, are a part of our heritage. In recent years, despite legislation recognizing the historic significance within our town and Ordinances meant to protect them, there have been many changes. In the past few years new houses of inappropriate styles have appeared in older neighborhoods; alterations have disqualified some buildings for historic register inclusion; new brick walks have replaced grass and/or cement sidewalks laid at the turn of the century. Some brick sidewalks, long neglected, are overgrown with weeds; some are buried under dirt.

Preservation begins with education and neighborhood pride. Everyone can--and should--help.

have received a publication from IRS regarding deductibility of payments made to charities during fund-raising events. Remember, if for the "donation" you have received something of comparative value, it is NOT a gift, and is not deductible. If you have a question, you may read this pamphlet.

ison E. O'Donnell, former chief curator, has assumed the title of Acting Director of the N.J. Historical Society. Dr. Rosen left to become Director of the Milwaukee County Public Museum.

nden County Historical Society has initiated a special program to demonstrate Open Hearth Cooking each 4th Wednesday, from October through May, 1989. It is from 9:45 to noon, costs \$4 per person, and groups of 10 are suggested. Docent-guided tours of the museum and Pamona Hall are also available. Call 964-3333 for further information.

rkshops are a great source of information, from speakers, pictures (slides), hand-outs, and books available for purchase. One on Sept. 17th at St. Mary's Guild House in Burlington, given by Preservation New Jersey, was outstanding. It began with hints for house histories, and ways to deter-

mine age using clues from construction, stairways, woodwork, mantles, etc., and went on to old house maintenance.

The tongue-in-cheek definition of an old house, "a void in space into which you pump an infinite amount of money" in no way dampened the enthusiasm of the audience, but caught one's attention for a sound outline of preventive maintenance, rather than crisis maintenance.

The workshop included a talk on gardens. Not a great deal of information is available on this topic, so it was particularly interesting to learn that foundation plantings, taken for granted today, were never used before this century. Fences, originally to keep farm animals from straying into gardens, were generally 5 ft. in height. Picket fences followed rail fences, and these, in turn, in the 1870's gave way to iron fences, which were in keeping with open-ness out front, although hedges might be used in back.

In the same period houses were "clean"--no vines or plantings close to the house, although sweet shrubs might be planted near a window. Trees were placed to enhance the vista. Flower gardens were here and there, and included varieties of flowers and herbs, all together. By the late Victorian period vines were on porches, and outbuildings such as gazebos; urns of flowers dotted lawns, and in summer a plant table by the walk held plants kept indoors during the winter.

Early garden walks were not of brick, but of dirt, or later, of gravel. A good source for learning about gardens of an era is an Atlas's pictures, and old photos. Downing's book, published 1841 and republished in paperback, is also helpful. It is wise to check lists of plants available in a given period--many of today's common flowers were not available then.

Yesterday.....

Fifty years ago Dreer's nurseries in Riverton would have been a blaze of color in October, as chrysanthemums of every color and shade, size, and variety would be coming into full bloom. Row upon row was along today's Cedar St. as far back as the dump (site of apartments), and would bloom through November. Perhaps they were appreciated more, then, when each species had its own particular season, and had not yet been made to follow the dictates of man, instead of nature. It was a spectacular sight.

Henry A. Dreer was 20 years old when he started his plant store and nursery in Philadelphia, in 1838. His first shop was on Chestnut St., and the nursery was on the Hamilton estate, called "Woodlands". (now Woodlands Cemetery). The nursery moved in 1850 to 35th street, and again in 1873, when it crossed the Delaware to its permanent home in Riverton.

The Philadelphia store had stock, potato and onion sets in cold storage, sales rooms, printing presses for seed envelopes and boxes, and other machinery. Seed arrived from many places, and was cleaned by gravitating through a machine on the 3rd floor to the 1st, after which girls on the 3rd packaged them. There was also a greenhouse for testing germination of vegetable, flower, grass, clover, and farm seeds. By 1890 most of Dreer's seeds, once imported, came from Riverton, or from growers in California, Oregon, Texas, Tennessee, and Florida. The store made several moves up Chestnut St., then in 1924 settled into a new, 8-story building on Spring Garden St. J. Otto Thilow became manager of the store, before the turn of the century, and George D. Clark managed flower seeds and bulbs.

Henry A. Dreer anticipated the need for space to expand, and in 1867 purchased from Thomas Ridgway (for \$11,500) 115 acres of "upland meadows or swamp, and river flats", between the Delaware river and C&A railroad, Fulton st. and Pompeston Creek, in the new village of Riverton. He began to prepare for the move by building 8 glass houses (to which 6 at the old site were added in 1873), and a 3-story stone packing house (which today is the office building of National Casein of NJ). Soon a pier on

the creek and a steam-powered Saw-Mill were added, which used 150,000 ft of board, from which 2 carpenters made packing boxes. Bird houses of cedar were also made and sold at Dreer's, for birds controlled insects, and were a part of a balanced ecology. Jacob D. Eisele joined Dreer's soon after the move to Riverton was made, and soon became its manager, assisted by George A. Strohleln.

Early stock was mostly bedding plants, but in 1880 palms and ferns, formerly imported, were started here. More greenhouses were needed, for in short time Dreer's had over a million palms ready for sale, plus half as many seedlings, and a like number of ferns. A water garden was developed on 5 acres of boggy wasteland between greenhouses and creek. Several springs there fed the ponds, 15 in all, surrounded by a dyke. Here were bamboo, iris, peonies, tropical grasses, and water lillies--including the Victoria Regia with pads 6 ft. across and able to support an adult's weight. Until Dreer's introduced their own new varieties in 1899, France had been the only country successful in hybridizing waterlilies.

The Nurseries continued to expand, reaching a total of 295 acres in Riverton and Cinnaminson (along the railroad). They advertised "everything for garden, greenhouse, and farm", offering farm implements, garden calenders, books on birds and beekeeping, and others, as well as plants, bulbs, seeds.

At the Centennial Exposition invitations were issued to visit Spring Grove Nurseries and Seed Farm in Riverton, via Amboy division of the Pa. RR, or by steamboat. An annual Gardener's Day was established, and in 1897 a reception for 1500 visitors to Riverton resulted. Flower shows were held here and in other cities, and Dreer's was instrumental in establishing the Philadelphia Flower Show.

Henry A. Dreer died in 1873, soon after the Nursery moved to Riverton. His son, William F., had been associated with him since 1865, had travelled and studied in Europe at various nurseries, and carried on the business. In 1874, when Calvary Presbyterian Church was organized, he was one of the incorporaters, and gave a lectern in his father's memory. In 1892, when he was 43 years of age, Dreer's was incorporated, with department heads becoming stockholders. He died in 1918.

William F. Dreer left no children of his own, to carry on the business. In 1893, when the death of an employee left 8 children orphaned, he took the 2 youngest (newborn and 2-yr-old), both girls, into his home as his wards. In time Florence Philp, who used the Dreer name, married Herman Hessenbruch who became president of Dreer's. The year 1933 dealt a serious blow to Dreer's, when Thilow, Eisele, and Strohleln died within a short period. Changes, then a War, hastened closing the doors for the last time, in 1944.

Today it is hard to imagine gardens of 10,000 cannas, of 200 varieties, in bloom. Or an acre of petunias, 100 acres of hardy perennials and shrubs, or more than 500 varieties of roses laid out in beds by color. They bloomed, in succession, from early Spring until early December, and one horticulturist was prompted to call the sight "Dreer's living catalog".

Dreer's influence can be felt today, from early growth of the village, to better rail and boat schedules, to a 1st Class Post Office rating, to the many improved strains of plants they developed, under highest standards. Riverton's gardens probably had more flowers, of more varieties, than those in other places at the same periods. And many were added to by snatching from smoldering piles of plants, particularly roses, those not measuring up to standard and ordered destroyed. Many of these survived and were enjoyed in local gardens--perhaps the more so, for their acquisition by rescue!

After liquidation the greenhouses were razed and in 1947 the land was available for development. An era had ended.

Reminders...

- ..order your Game of Riverton NJ early, so you will avoid disappointment at the last minute.
- ..Notepaper and Self-Guided Walking tour folders are at the Library and the Victorian Thymes; stock up now.
- ..Zurbrugg's Decorator Showcase this year is in Moorestown, on Oak Ave. beginning this week.
- ..Friday, Sept. 30, is American Indian Day, at the Powhatan Renape Nation, Rankokus Reservation, on Rancocas Road. A traditional Pueblo feast will be prepared and served, from 3 p.m. Call 261-4747 for info.
- ..N.J. Historical Society will begin a Workshop series, Caring for Collectables, Sept 24...Oct 22...Nov 12, at 230 Broadway, Newark. Call Tues-Fri, area 201, 483-3939.
- ..The Annual Chatsworth Cranberry Festival will be October 16 & 17, with music, contests, and more. Info: 894-9232 or 859-9701.
- ..October 8th is the Apple Festival at Kirby's Mill. A great event...
- ..Salem Historical Society will hold an Annual Dinner October 28 to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Colony of New Sweden. Speaker is Swedish Ambassador, Count Wilhelm Wachtmeister. Cocktail hour and dinner, at Salem Country Club, Salem. Of particular interest to those of Swedish descent. Call office at 935-5004 for info and/or reservations.
- ..Last, but by no means least, another PNJ Workshop will be held this Saturday, Sept. 24, at Pennington, on Local Preservation Issues. It will cover zoning, issues and challenges, design reviewing, controversial questions regarding properties, and more. Although registration deadline is at hand, those involved in Planning and Zoning Boards, Review Committees, and Borough Council, as well as others interested in preservation, should make an effort to go. Fee, \$15. Phone 201-359-4557 NOW.

Tear off and return to: Historical Society of Riverton  
 c/o John Parry, Treasurer  
 803 Main Street  
 Riverton N.J., 08077

Renewals are payable on or before November 1st; New Members welcome at any time. (Please include SASE if a receipt is wanted) 1988/89

Membership rates: Individual, \$3.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Husband/Wife 5.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sr. Citizen (ea)2.00 \_\_\_\_\_

Donation: \_\_\_\_\_

Total enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Add any suggestions or special interests in space below: