



Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON, Inc.

Riverton, N.J. 08077

Founded 1970

Inc. 1978

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Meeting: Monday, October 1, 1990 8 p.m. Music Room, Riverton School
Program: "Palmyra's Independence Fire Company"

.....Matthew Gideon

Have you ever wondered what it would be like not to have a Fire Company? Or how to start one? Come out and hear how Palmyra's company was formed, who were included in its earliest members, and some of the problems they encountered in getting funds, equipment, members, and in organizing their group of volunteers.

Matt Gideon was born in Palmyra and has been a member of Independence Fire Co. for almost twenty years. Presently living in Cinnaminson, with his wife and three small children, he is a machinist who majored in biology and history during college years. A few years ago he was given a coat worn by an early fireman, and it prompted him to do some research about the fire company. His interest has continued to grow: he is now the company's historian, and is writing a book on its history. Last year he produced the popular video tape, "Glimpses of Palmyra and Riverton N.J." from some of Dr. LeFavor's movies taken in the 1930s, now in possession of Walter Poulson, another dedicated fireman.

Matt will have an interesting tale to unfold, with many anecdotes, and will also bring some artifacts for display. His talk will focus on the company's earliest years, from 1886 into the present century.

This year's meeting/program dates are: October 1st; November 26; January 14, 1991; March 4; and May 6. Programs will have varied subjects--November's will be on Historic Registration, how local governments help with preservation, slides of registered--and eligible--properties, etc. Mark your calendars NOW.

Your Board of Directors: (term ending 1991) Sara Guertler, publicity chairman; Richard Wark, Curator; Betty Hahle, president. (1992) Paul Daly, treasurer; Nancy Washington, Helene Styer, hospitality; Dan Campbell, secretary, Awards chairman; 1993: Paul Schopp, vice-president, Ways & Means ch; Rod Zwirner; Harry Richman, membership; Bob Smyth, programs.

There is a vacancy at this writing caused by the death of Ted Hunn, who had been appointed to fill an unexpired term.

We need members who attend meetings, but also those who become involved in the Society's affairs and activities. If you would like to be more involved by serving in any capacity, contact a Board member, or note it when you send in your dues.

Over the summer....

We distributed 800 souvenir cards along the 4th of July Parade route...

Attended various meetings and functions, including workshops on conservation and the writing of Grants...

Received from the Cultural and Heritage Commission a copy of its latest publication: Burlington County Historic Sites on the State and National Registers. (We will have some copies available at our October meeting for your convenience--\$2.00)

Were asked to give talks on Riverton history at the Baptist Home--and did, twice...

The collection of New Eras generously loaned by Freddy DeVece have been filmed,

although not yet returned. These records will provide a source of local history not available anywhere else, and will be made available for researchers' use. All the necessary parts for the gooseneck station lights from Riverton station have been assembled, and the lamps are expected to be in place before Christmas.

Awards...

Recipients of Letters recognizing preservation efforts were named at the May meeting, and were: Mr./Mrs. Anthony Gizzi, 900 Main Street, for having water damaged wood at original entry and under slate roof repaired, using like materials, saving slate. Mr./Mrs. Kenneth Renn, 412 Main Street, for restoration work that replaced missing wood trim/arches on porches with carefully replicated pieces.

Historic Nomination...

The Steering Committee appointed last Spring by Borough Council, and consisting of 3 representatives each from APR and our Society, with 1 Council representative, to develop a plan for the Nomination of Riverton, proved to be unworkable. The only plan considered was one proposed by APR a year ago that we did not think feasible then or now--solicitation of funds from residents and the formation of still another non-profit organization. We could not support a plan that had no budget, no idea of what was needed in either funds or work to be done, who would prepare the Nomination and terms for working, or a group that functioned in a very loose way.

The statement that appeared on the back cover of the Fourth of July Program Book came as a surprise to us, for our representatives had not been included or given approval of such action. We took our concerns and questions to Mayor Engle, and after his unsatisfactory response, held a meeting (Historical Society representatives and officers) to decide what to do. It was unanimously voted to resign at once from the Steering Committee, and to sever all connections with the plan being set in action, and Council was so advised by letter. After this, Councilman Jim Johnson asked to meet with us to discuss our views and suggestions, and then did the same with APR, seeking a more workable approach to the project. Since late August, nothing further has been heard.

Since Grant funds formerly available to obtain the necessary help of a special Consultant for preparation of a Nomination, possibly this is NOT the best time to pursue the matter. We have long advocated nominating Riverton for inclusion on the Registers of Historic Places, but as much as we would like to see this, and think it should be done, of far greater importance is what we do with what we have that makes us eligible for that recognition. This is something only we, as residents, and our own local government, can do.

For example, Borough Council and its various committees could, at no cost beyond the normal operating expenses, upgrade its Ordinance regarding historic buildings to include all structures 50 or more years old, in keeping with National guidelines. It could also recognize and provide protection for components contributing to Riverton's qualification: our prevailing streetscape (grassy plot, sidewalk, grass strip, curb, street), the remaining brick and slate sidewalks, brick cross walks, brick carriage driveways, stone curbs. It could enforce existing laws that sidewalks be properly maintained--especially those brick walks badly overgrown--and keep the riverbank open and unobstructed.

It could upgrade the Review Committee by not only having the best qualified people in representative fields on it, but also by encouraging (or requiring) attendance at at least one workshop each year, to keep abreast of trends, new materials approved, etc. And finally, it should make a requirement for serving within our local government a reasonable knowledge of Riverton's history and heritage. In these ways we could effectively preserve our particular heritage, and build a solid future.

Plaques...

A plaque will soon appear on 412 Main Street, the home of Ken and Janice Renn. Their home, a (painted) brick Second Empire style twin, was built circa 1873 by John Thornton, squarely in the center of three lots he had recently purchased. Thornton

had exclusive rights to sell steel needles manufactured in England, in America. He built several homes in Riverton, and also had a small showroom at the upper end of this property. In 1901 Mrs. Alfred Smith rented the little shop for her dry goods and notions store, a familiar part of Riverton's life for many years. The Smith family purchased the property in 1905, and Miss Edith carried on the business until shortly before she died. In 1946 heirs divided and sold the property. The shop became the Sharon Shop, and today is offices.

Built of American brick with a Mansard roof, the front section is 3-stories, and the back section 2-stories. There are front and side porches with slender square columns with capitals supporting spandrel arches between them. Front and side bay windows have rounded tops, Gothic colonets between each bay, wood panels below, and beautiful iron cresting above. Below the mansard edge is a decorative cornice with carved rosettes between closely spaced brackets (readily visible with a new painting color scheme). Many fine features are inside--plasterwork ceilings, carved slate mantle in living room, hallway arches and transoms, original hardware, etc. An earlier owner replaced the wood porch floors with cement, and made some inside alterations to convert a portion into apartments, but the present owners have done some restoration, and enjoy its return to its original one-family use.

There is a hairpin/spear wrought iron fence, with gate, across the front of the property, and down the upper side of it.

A Tour...

Our Historical Society will sponsor a guided walking tour of Harleigh Cemetery, Haddon Avenue, Camden, on Sunday afternoon, October 21st, 2 p.m. Custodian Robert Smyth, who is also a member of our Board, will lead the tour. Cost, \$3. for members.

Harleigh Cemetery was founded in 1885, and is laid out as a park lawn cemetery. It now covers about 150 acres, is rambling and picturesque, with gate houses, lakes, gardens, and plantings--which attract many species of birds. Its broad, tree-lined drives are like those of Laurel Hill in Philadelphia. When founded, the managers followed the lead of other such cemeteries, and offered a free lot to a prominent local person--in this case, Walt Whitman--to attract other buyers. There are many kinds of memorials in this cemetery, and well-known personages buried there. There is a life-size bronze elk, a large Celtic cross rising 20 ft. over the grave of a Civil War hero (one of only two such crosses known to have been designed by Stirling Calder), and Whitman's own tomb, on a hillside and constructed uniquely of granite quarried in Mass. Legend says he often visited the site he had selected and designed, and brought friends and visitors to admire it, too.

The walk will take about 90 minutes, and should be informative, interesting, and a most pleasant October afternoon walk. Call 829-6315 for information, and return registration form as soon as possible.

Yesterday...

It is often difficult to determine exactly when a town began. Most have grown from a small cluster of buildings around a focal point--hotel, industry, large farm--and gradually a descriptive name was attached to the area. Many such groups were once at crossroads within Cinnaminson, and most have now been forgotten.

Exactly when Palmyra really began is difficult to pinpoint. There were the usual scattered farmhouses throughout the area, and after the Camden-Amboy line was completed in the area, in 1834, a small number of buildings were erected on either side of the line in what is now West Palmyra. Larken's Hotel, later owned by Levis Wallace, at Broad/Arch Sts. (now gone), was an early gathering place. It was conveniently right across from a train-stop, and its bar undoubtedly contributed to the early names of Jugtown and Rumtown. Another name, Haiti, may have been adopted in reference to an early distiller in the area. A Toy deed from 1849 noted the area as Texas, a name popular around the time the state of that name joined the Union. With the acquisition of a post office, the present name was adopted: Palmyra.

There are several versions of how the name was chosen, and more than one date for the

date it became a post-town, but which is correct will not be argued here. Isaiah Toy did apply for the post, and was the first postmaster. Formerly one had to go Mt. Holly to pick up mail, a good trip even though receiving mail was an event, and not the daily convenience we take for granted today. Although the most often date cited is 1865, when West Palmyra's population reached 100, a list from Washington D.C. published in 1882 in the New Jersey Mirror of the County's post-offices and dates, says it was 4 August, 1851.

Whenever it was, mail was dropped off the train in a sack at the small wood platform across from the Hotel, and was probably distributed from there. A few years later Mr. Springer became the postmaster, and provided mail space in his general store on Broad St., below what is now LeConey Ave.; when he sold his store in 1880 he wanted the position (which he resigned) awarded to the new owner. Several others applied for appointment, and there were many arguments and some hard feelings before it was settled. Later, the postoffice was in Winfield Rudderow's store, corner of Broad/Cinnaminson. In 1888 when he sought re-appointment, he campaigned on a promise to erect a glass-front building next to his store for the purpose, with boxes high enough for residents to see at a glance if they had mail waiting. It was many more years before the post office had its own building, and each move added to a rich history.

A map dated 1877 shows the first actual development, the Dilworth Buckman farm that had been purchased by Philadelphian Joseph W. Souder, about 1850. When he suffered financial losses, he divided the farm into building lots and put it into an agent's hands to sell. It was a narrow strip, from Vine to just below Arch on Broad (then Railroad St.), and angled westward as it went toward the river. There were a few more buildings on both sides of the railroad, and the Methodist church and graveyard; Cinnaminson Ave. was above the railroad only, and had few houses on it. The school house stood on the lot where the old brick schoolbuildings stand today, awaiting their fate. Across the street was a Toy house, and above him, Charles Hall's property. On the Souder plot, just 6 houses are shown.

In 1881, after he had sold a piece of his farm to the railroad for a station, Wm. F. Morgan laid out a 10-acre section above the tracks into building lots. Ads mentioned the convenient location, with transportation, school, and churches nearby. It also said that Palmyra had been growing rapidly in the past three years. The village grew again when, five years later, executors opened up William Wallace's 80 acre estate for development.

With more homes and families, there were more children. Palmyra's schools had a capacity of 98 children, and had 115 attending. Meetings were held, and solutions suggested: enlarge, build, or ask Riverton to join them and build a large school to accommodate 400 children from both towns, which would be big enough to have graded classes. In 1887 Palmyra enlarged its school by adding another floor with 3 classrooms. They advertised also for a janitor--salary, \$50 a year. William Thomas of Riverton and Joseph Morgan of Palmyra worked together to grade streets and to upgrade walks on Maple Avenue and 4th Street, leading to the new Berkeley Hall. That year local homes were canvassed to take a system for numbering houses, but it was premature: the houses were still too scattered. However, within two years such a system was adopted, and residents were busily trying to learn their house numbers. Jos. Roberts, at his family grocery stores in Riverton and Palmyra, offered fresh eggs at 25¢ a dozen, sugar cured hams at 14¢ a pound, and choice coffee, 22 ¢ lb.

Palmyra got a new "town hall" in 1885/6, a 42x72 ft. building at the corner of Broad and Cinnaminson. It had a large outside stairway, 6 stores on the first floor, lecture hall on second, and lodge rooms on the third floor. It was called Morgan Hall, later the POS of A Hall, and was demolished in the 1960s, after a long and colorful existence. Meetings of all types were held there, and in 1888 a "Mass meeting" strongly Democrat in nature, drew supporting reviews in the papers. There was also concern over a new law that limited polling of votes to 10 hours 51 minutes. With 600 eligible voters in Cinnaminson, and "working men" having to vote late in the day, after work, and subtracting time expected to be used up settling contested votes, it left barely a minute per vote, and feelings ran high that some voters

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would thus be disenfranchised.

An 1886 map shows further growth in Palmyra. A Toy farm below the railroad, between the farms of Benjamin Hubbs and Elias Morgan, had been opened up; more buildings were along Broad Street, although there were still no buildings below 4th street. There were some buildings shown on Morgan's development, and many lots had names of new owners. There was a movement to open Horace Avenue to Broad, and other streets were being laid out, although not yet opened. The street around the depot was moved back 30 feet, and, regrettably, many fine, large maple trees were lost in the process.

In 1890 Garfield and Parry Avenues were opened for public use--and the following year Charles Vorhees graduated from Philadelphia Dental School, and became "a full fledged dentist." As bicycles increased in popularity Palmyra's township Committee laid out a bicycle path along Cinnaminson Avenue. And riders often took long rides--Frank Lyster, of Morgan Avenue, was riding home from Atlantic City when he collided with another rider, and both ended up with injuries.

More people brought about more ideas, demands for services NOW, thoughts on independence, and tempers often were short. Those in the new sections of town tended to identify with Riverton--even their deeds contain liquor clauses similar to Riverton's--and those in the earlier sections tended to identify with West Palmyra, leading one reporter to write that something would have to be done to get people to work together, that it was impossible to bring the two ends of Palmyra together on anything.

But they continued to work things out, and in 1894 the population reached 2000, and they separated from Cinnaminson as an independent township, which they remained until February 1923, when they incorporated as a borough.

Palmyra has lost a number of wonderful old buildings through demolition and/or modernization, but still has some fine examples of Victorian architecture, some large, old barns, and a few earlier buildings. They are worth recognizing, appreciating, and saving.

. bbh

Reminder...Dues are payable now--use the enclosed slip to renew today--or to join the Historical Society of Riverton.

Clip and bring or mail to: Historical Society of Riverton, c/o 405 Midway, Riverton 08077

Guided Tour of Harleigh Cemetery
Haddon Avenue, Camden, N.J.

Sunday, October 21, 2 p.m. (about 90 minute walk)

Name.....

Address:.....

Phone:.....

Drive own car:..... Take how many riders?.....

Need Ride?.....

Check: \$3.00 donation, made out to The Historical Society of Riverton

Non-Members: \$5.00