



Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

Riverton, N.J.

08077

Founded 1970

Inc. 1978

Sept.- Oct. 1992

vol. xx-1 (#67)

Meeting: Monday, October 12, 1992

8 p.m.

Auditorium, Riverton School

Program: "Ships of Exploration"

.....William Ward

On this Columbus Day anniversary night, come and hear about some other explorers who made the voyage across the sea, many years ago. Explorers such as Henry Hudson, who sailed into the Delaware Bay, will be introduced, as we learn why they came, what navigational equipment they had, what they found in their travels.

Mr. Ward is the Director of Education of Philadelphia Maritime Museum, and will bring some artifacts for display and discussion. He encourages audience participation in his programs, and promises some fun in the process.

School students are invited to attend this meeting, with their parents--it should be of interest for students from 4th grade, upward.

Special Event:

The Historical Society of Riverton is sponsoring an Essay Contest for Riverton School students of 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, in celebration of the Columbus Quincentenary. A prize will be given for the best essay on the Significance of Columbus' voyages, in each of the participating grades at the meeting. The winners will be our special guests for the evening.

The current year's program dates have been announced by chairman Frank Wagenknight, and are as follows: November 30, "Christmas Customs of the Pinelands"; January 25, 1993, "Anniversary Clocks"; March 15, "Signs"; May 10, Annual Meeting date, "Covered Bridges".

Here, also, is a list of your Officers and Board members: class of 1993, Paul Schopp, vice-pres.; Rodman Zwirner; Harry Richman, Membership; Virginia Kline (completing the unexpired term of Robert Smyth); Class of 1994: Richard Wark, curator; Frank Wagenknight, programs; Grace Coles, publicity; Betty Hahle, historian/editor Newsletter. Class of 1995, Paul Daly, treas.; Nancy Washington, sec.; Dan Campbell, Pres.; and Jack Laverty.

Over the Summer....

Eight hundred souvenir cards were distributed to spectators along the Parade route on the Fourth of July. These small cards, with a few Riverton facts, carry our gaslight insignia and list meeting dates. They seem to grow in popularity each year...

On August 4, without fanfare or notice, the Station Lights donated to Riverton by the Historical Society were turned on for the first time!

Late in 1988 we were approached by someone who had 2 gooseneck "platform lights" that had graced Riverton's Station, and wanted to sell them. After determining that the Mayor and Borough Council were interested in having them, and would install and maintain them, they were purchased in early Spring, 1989. One shade and fixture were missing, and so were the bases. They needed work.

Rick Wark chaired the project, did much of the work, and obtained donations of pipe and threading that were needed. Paul Schopp contacted NJ Transit, and they donated

bases from the Absecon station platform being razed, that matched Riverton's. In 1990 Dan Campbell drew plans for placing the lights in front of Borough Hall, which were approved by Council. The shade/fixture proved the most difficult part of the restoration project, finally resolved when Mr. Love agreed to trade one he had that met our need for one similar in style. Councilman Jim Johnson got bids for the installation work necessary, and...the lights were turned on, on August 4th.

The station lights are not at their original site, since the station and platform are long gone, but are where everyone will see them, in front of the new Borough building. A Riverton Station plaque will be attached to each post, duplicating those on the original station. A part of Riverton's history has been brought home, and we thank all of those who donated their time, effort, and materials to this project.

Also over the summer, the Borough's "Historic District" was extended. The recommendation was made by the Planning Board, and Council voted for it, to include all of the borough below the railroad in the designated district, even though some sections are as recently built upon as the 1980s. By contrast, Main Street and Cinnaminson, above the railroad, were built up as far as 8th street in the 1880s and 1890s, and the cross streets were opened and developed shortly after 1900. These are NOT included.

The purpose of a local Historic District, according to the Citizen's Guide to Creating a Historic District, published by the NJ Department of Community Affairs, is to protect local interests such as notable architecture, building construction of a style or method of note, or association with a person or event of local importance. It is less stringent than State and National Registers suggest, and is controlled only by local zoning laws to maintain and preserve at least the exteriors of such buildings and neighborhoods, and to help direct adaptive use of otherwise unused and neglected buildings. The latter are most often found in run-down business districts in communities that grew up around them, then moved beyond them. Riverton, founded in 1851 as a residential community, without factories or business centers, does not have that problem.

Although proposed changes to any building erected before 1915 are supposed to be presented to the Architectural Review Committee, dates are often "not known", and it's an easy loop-hole. A walk through Riverton above the railroad will attest to this.

Celebrations.....

Five Hundred years ago Columbus made his historic voyage to the western hemisphere, and ended forever the isolation between east and west. The exchange of plants, animals, customs, knowledge, politics between the hemispheres altered the lives of people not only in the Americas, but also throughout Europe. With settlement following discovery and exploration, the United States became a country of history: the first "world nation" where people have biological, cultural, and social ties to all other parts of the earth.

While some customs and exchanges were surely not desirable, the greater picture is positive, and there are many reasons to celebrate this Quincentenary year.

Two hundred years ago Trenton became the permanent capitol of New Jersey, and our first State House, or capitol building, was erected. If you have not yet seen the restored sections of it, this would be a particularly good time to do so.

Around the State House is a complex of many points of interest--Old Barracks, Old Masonic Lodge, State Museum/Planetarium, Mill House Historic District, William Trent House, and much more. From October 23-30 the State House will be celebrating "200 Years of History". There will be tours, demonstrations, artisans demonstrating their crafts, etc. An original manuscript of the Bill of Rights will be on display. Info available from Trenton Convention/Visitors Bureau. Phone (609) 777-1771.

One hundred years ago the Pledge of Allegiance was composed. Francis Bellamy, an assistant editor of "The Youth's Companion" an educational publication, wrote it for the celebration of Columbus Day in public schools, for that year. It became popular overnight, and was soon a classroom ritual. It's one of the earliest verses learned by children.

Two changes have been made to the original pledge: in 1923 the National Flag Confer-

ence of the American Legion changed "allegiance to my flag" to ... "the Flag of the United States of America." In 1954 a Bill was introduced to add the words "under God" to the pledge, and was signed into law by president Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Reminders, and Other Things.....

Membership renewals are now due, and a form is included with this Newsletter. We have about 130 members, not all of whom are active. If each member made an effort to bring in 1 new member this year, think what we could accomplish! Will you try?

Notepaper is still available at the Library and Victorian Thymes, and also from John Parry. The price has not increased since 1983/4, and is a bargain. Two scenes on 15 triple fold notes with envelopes per box, \$3.50. Stock up now.

Tapes--The Romance of Riverton, made from the original 1926 silent black/white movie, complete with booklet identifying places and people, are still available at \$17.95. Call 786-8660 or 829-6315.

Plaques are available for owners of buildings significant because of age (100 yrs) or outstanding architectural style, or local historic association. Applications available by calling 829-6315.

University City has added the names/biographies of 3 families associated with Riverton to their list of notables buried at Woodlands Cemetery. They are Henry A. Dreer, Nurseryman; John Fraser, architect; Joseph Campbell, Campbell's Soup.

Locally, Morgan Cemetery is the resting place of many associated with Riverton and Palmyra history--founders of churches, innovators of improvements, etc. Is anyone interested in starting a similar file here? It would be a valuable resource.

Sympathy is extended to the family of Giles Knight, who died recently. Giles was an original member of the Historical Society of Riverton, and active for many years.

Yesterday.....

One day in late August, or early September, there's a subtle change in the air. One evening at dusk, or in a pre-dawn hour, waterfowl are heard, migrating overhead. Then, though flowers still bloom and grass needs mowing, the message comes across: summer is over, and Autumn has come.

Autumn turns thoughts to school--taken for granted, today. But in 1851, when Riverton was founded, the New Jersey Mirror wrote "the system of free public schools is the pride and joy of New England; let New Jersey come forward in this great work (so) every son and daughter shall enjoy the blessings of at least a common school education."

Riverton School District, or Cinnaminson #7, was incorporated in 1865, and a 1-room schoolhouse erected at 4th/Howard Streets. The district was very large, including parts of Palmyra and East Riverton, and there were more than a hundred eligible children living in it. Not every child who was eligible attended school every day--some, not at all. Average attendance was 50 children each day. Once, in 1868, 80 children showed up. There was 1 teacher, paid \$20 per month--as funds were available. School was financed in part by public funds (\$228.98 in 1865/6) and in larger part through "subscriptions" or donations--including coal, wood, or services.

Those who paid school taxes, collected at the door by the local collector, were entitled to vote on school matters. In 1868 Riverton had 43 such voters. Some of those men had children in the school, but more did not--their children attended Friend's or other private schools. School business was run by Trustees, headed by a Township Superintendent, and a local clerk. This system was soon changed, but not until 1879 did Legislation mandate specified quarterly meetings, held at the schoolhouse, where all school business was discussed and voted upon. Bills then had to be verified, and recorded. Some early Trustees of Riverton School were John Fraser, Squire Ourt, Edward Ogden, Wm F. Dreer.

Schoolhouses were drafty, stuffy, crowded. Incomes could be augmented from renting the building when not used for school, but funds often ran out before the school year did. In 1871 State Legislature established free schools throughout the state, financed by a

2-mill per dollar tax on real and personal property. This replaced local collections, and was collected with other taxes, to be distributed in May each year. Methods of computing distribution changed, from time to time, between head counts and property values within a district.

Laura Pancoast's school report in 1876 listed 40 children, ages 5-14, to whom she taught the following: 1, the alphabet; 39, spelling; 24, writing; 34, reading; 8, grammar; 33, arithmetic; 8, history. Her salary was \$40 per month.

In 1879 the Catholic congregation purchased a lot near the schoolhouse and erected a chapel. Seventeen years later, after deconsecration, the School Board purchased it for \$1000, then spent \$2282.65 to remodel it for use as a school. It was moved closer to the existing schoolhouse, named School #2, and opened as the 1st Froebelian Kindergarten in Burlington County. This was a relatively new concept, that of a free public introduction to regular school, for 4-year-olds. School #1 was a 6-room, 2-story schoolhouse erected in 1892, after many years of remodelling, enlarging, repairing, and arguing about the original building. In 1886 teacher Martin Creek had listed 75 pupils in his class, with 86% attending daily. Quigleys, Hullings, Farrows, Hemphills, and FAunces were among the pupils he listed.

There were other problems, too--such as livestock wandering into the schoolyards. In 1880 a photographer had had to wait to record the school and children until a cow, ambling down the road, passed out of the camera's range. Legislation was passed to restrict livestock from wandering, but left it up to each community whether or not to adopt the law, and to enforce it. Cows were still very much in evidence in Riverton in 1910.

Mothers were increasingly concerned about the lack of sanitation and ventilation in schools, and the treatment of some children by some schoolmasters. They fought for improving conditions, and were called "strong-minded women" and "lunetics" by the men who felt children should not be "coddled." At a Teachers Institute in Mt. Holly, 1880, a speaker said "most train stations are planned more carefully and made more comfortable than schools are." In 1898 Riverton voted in its 1st woman on the School Board--the 1st in the county. Changes came, but slowly.

Crowded conditions continued--space was rented in Roberts Hall, the Porch Club bld, and other spots, to handle the overflow of children. In 1909 there were 300 children enrolled in the school, and again there was the debate: extend the old school, or build a new one? Option was taken on the old bicycle race track grounds above the railroad to build a new school, while retaining the old one for a High School. Eventually, new plans were made, approved, land obtained, and in 1910 an 11-room brick school house was erected on 5th Street. And that May the Board voted to end High School classes in Riverton, and send students to Palmyra's new High School. The old K building was sold and removed, the frame schoolhouse razed, and the land became a dirt playground. The school bell still rang each day, via a rope through the roof on the 3rd floor, pulled by janitor Mr. Leatherbury.

Times changed...manual training was promoted, in 1911, because 56 of each 1000 children attending public school never reached High School. In 1927 388 children attended RPS, 29 graduated, all attended High School. Showers were installed in the basement of the new school--sports were popular with children and adults. In 1912 a new kind of reader was introduced, with words under pictures, to be matched up by the student on another page. Music was added in 1916--a glee club formed--singing to the teacher's pitch-pipe from notes she drew on large cards. Later a piano was added. Sanitation was still a problem, apparently, for in 1919 the Brd. of Health reported it was dirty: laws said a school had to be swept twice weekly; it was done only once; daily attendance was 325.

Overcrowding was soon a problem all over again. Additional properties were acquired, remodelling done, facilities built and expanded. More teachers were added, materials and curriculum upgraded, opportunities increased.

What do you suppose the children and their teachers would say, if they could visit Riverton School today? Really, we've come a long way.....