

Gaslight News

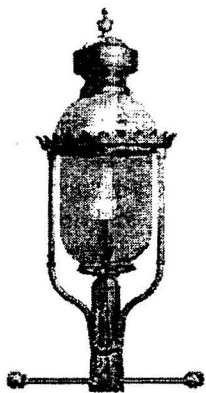
The Historical Society of Riverton
Riverton, New Jersey

Founded 1970

Incorporated 1978

May/June 1995

volume: XXIII, no. 4 (#27) 78



Program on Roebling, the man and the town, to be featured at May Meeting

A meeting of the Historical Society of Riverton will be held on Monday, May 8, 1995, at 8:00 p.m. in the Riverton Public School Media Center. The school is located at Fifth and Howard Streets and attendees can enter the building through the main door located on Fifth Street. After a short business meeting, guest speaker Louis Borbi will present a program on John A. Roebling, his company, and the town of Roebling, New Jersey.

John Augustus Roebling, a man trained in architecture and engineering at the Polytechnic Institute of Berlin, emigrated from Prussia in 1831 to escape political and religious persecution. Landing in Philadelphia, Roebling and those who emigrated with him traveled to the Pittsburgh area and created a community called Saxonburg. In 1837 he obtained a position with the Pennsylvania State Canal Commission and put his formal training into use. This commission was charged with the construction of a truly intermodal transportation system stretching from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Using a combination of railroads, canals and incline planes, this system had a tremendous impact on Pennsylvania commerce and permitted an increased pace to America's westward expansion. Roebling assisted with the construction of the Portage Railroad, the incline plane that carried canal boats on railroad carriages up the Allegheny Mountains using ropes and winches for locomotion. These ropes were subject to frequent breakage, causing the canal boats carriages to descend back down the mountain and smashing at the bottom. In addition, the ropes were very expensive.

In 1840, Roebling stumbled upon an obscure German engineering monograph outlining the manufacturing of rope from metal wire. He instantly realized that this would solve the State's problems on the incline planes. He sold his first wire rope to Pennsylvania in 1841. Roebling then used his new product to construct a suspension aqueduct across the Allegheny River in 1844, proving the viability of wire rope for the construction of suspension bridges.

In 1848, his wire rope was in high demand, so John Roebling purchased a three-acre site in Trenton, New Jersey to construct his first real manufactory. This location was chosen due to the various modes of transportation available

(continued on page 2)

A Short Look Back and the Long Look Ahead

A Message from the President

In one's life, or in the life of an organization, it is relatively easy to take a look back at your history and to identify the good times – and also the bad times. I wish for all of us that there will always be more of the former than the latter!

It is much more difficult, by comparison, to look ahead into the future of an organization in order to plan for many more good times – and none of the bad. As your Board of Directors that task is our duty from time to time, especially in such transitional times as these. We must address these highlighted items if we are to continue and to grow:

Leadership: The last several decades have been increasingly transitional for Riverton. Long time residents move away or pass on and younger people discover the qualities of Riverton and move in. In the Historical Society, too, the past few years have been transitional, in the composition its leadership. Betty Hahle has stepped down from her exemplary position as president to be replaced (with some trepidation) by me as President. Our Vice President, Paul Schopp, has done an excellent job of taking over the editorship of this paper, which is the heart of the group's communication.

We continue to have an excellent group of people on your Board of Directors. They arrange the programs so skillfully, track the membership and recruit new, and serve on the various committees that run the organization. I thank all of the board members for their enthusiastic participation! Together we will plan many more years of excellent programs and activities in the Historical Society of Riverton. If you are asked to join this fine group sometime in the future please consider it seriously – it will be very rewarding.

Membership: Members are the life-blood of our existence. Last Fall we delivered a copy of the Gaslight News to all the houses in Riverton (we are indebted to the local Boy Scout troop for making the actual deliveries). That publicity resulted in a payback of over thirty households joining the Society as new members (so great was the response, that we may have missed a few of you new enrollees in delivering this year's issues of the News – if we did, I personally apologize to you). Our mailing list has recently been updated, so you will all be receiving your Gaslight News.

(continued on page 2)

is a production of the Historical Society of Riverton and is published four times a year.

Daniel T. Campbell.....President
Paul W. Schopp.....Editor
The Historical Society of Riverton
Riverton, New Jersey 08077

Roebling

(continued from page 1)

(canal, railroad and river) and the nearby rolling mills of Peter Cooper, who supplied Roebling with the iron needed to produce his wire rope.

After constructing various suspension bridges that awed the world as engineering marvels, he received a contract to construct the Brooklyn Bridge. While locating one of the towers, a ferryboat crashed into the pier he was standing on, crushing Roebling's leg. He died of tetanus poisoning 24 days later, on July 22, 1869. John Roebling's son, Washington continued his father's work, but developed nitrogen narcosis while descending to one of the caissons on the river bottom. He was forced to retire to bed. However, he continued to direct the bridge construction by use of a telescope.

At the turn of the century, the Roebling Company was facing a major problem. By this time, the company was producing steel wire cables instead of its former iron wire rope. The firm was purchasing most of its required steel rods from overseas. Transportation was slow and tariffs stifling. Management determined that survival demanded the company manufacture its own steel for wire production. A Trenton site was ruled out because of cost. But several miles down river, a large tract of land was available between Florence and Kinkora. Charles Roebling acquired this site and began the work necessary to create an open-hearth steel mill, wire plant and complete town for 4,000 residents out of a former peach and potato farm. The furnace was lit for the first time in 1906. Much of the labor for the mill were recent emigrants from Eastern Europe. Even though the mill is shut down today, the town of Roebling stands as a living monument to the collective genius of the Roebling family.

Officers Slated for Election

At the annual meeting of the Society on May 8, 1995, the election of new officers will be held. This year, in an unusual event, all four officers whose terms are completed, have chosen to run for re-election. They are: Daniel Campbell, Paul Daly, Jack Laverty and Nancy Washington. Dan has served as our president for his past term. Paul Daly has done an excellent job as treasurer for many years. Jack Laverty had the important role as our membership chairman in his recent term. Nancy Washington has been our recording secretary, and is a long time member of our Board. All members are encouraged to attend the May meeting and participate in the election of officers.

President's Message

(continued from page 1)

I'd like to use this message to welcome all the new members to the group! This organization will need an insurgence of new, younger members if it is to continue well into the future. I encourage all members, past and new, to get involved with Society activities; they are interesting and they are fun!

Service: To continue, the Historical Society must be of service to its membership and its community. The bi-monthly programs are interesting and educational for the group. In the future I hope to have the Society serve as a resource and a forum of ideas for people who are researching family or structure histories, restoring Riverton buildings back to original condition, making renovations that are sympathetic to the original style, or simply maintaining their homes or offices in their present good condition.

The Society has donated, and will continue to donate, a stock of books for this purpose at the Riverton Library. This has been augmented this year by a collection gathered by the Borough's Architectural Review Committee for the same purpose - to assist Riverton residents in maintaining the historical appropriateness, and thereby, the physical value of their properties.

Lastly, a couple of things will happen by the end of 1995 that will have a beneficial impact on Riverton's future:

1. Riverton's nomination to the NJ State and National Historic Registers will be submitted, and we assume, accepted. This will not create any new regulation upon Riverton's privately owned properties, however, we hope it will cast a new level of pride for Riverton's history.
2. Riverton will be writing a new Master Plan for Development (required every six years) and submitting it to the State of New Jersey for adoption. This Master Plan will be the new mandate under which the Riverton Planning Board will operate and it will dictate future changes to the Zoning Ordinance that does regulate how owners can treat their properties.

I am pleased to say that individuals from The Historical Society are and will be directly involved in both of these efforts. I encourage all of you to follow these developments and voice your opinions when they are sought by your government leaders. It is in our best interest to use our influence, as a group, in the advocacy of historic preservation issues that come before our governing body, the Borough Council.

If this all sounds like serious work, it is! Fortunately, it all begins with the easiest task of all: Attend the Historical Society meetings; hear the programs; and "Get to Know" your historically-minded neighbors. We can all learn from and enjoy the programs about regional and Riverton heritage. Then, as a healthy, social organization, we can approach these future issues together. — Dan Campbell

—RIVERTON—

A Century of Distinction as a Borough

Coming Events of Interest

Yesterday...

by Betty B. Hahle

Historic Preservation Week (May 13-21) Celebrations:

The Haddonfield Preservation Society will sponsor a Candlelight Tour of Historic Houses on Friday, May 13, and guided tours of the Indian King Tavern on May 14. The Indian King was an early inn and tavern, built in 1750, and is now a state museum. Information: (609) 429-5486

Cape May will hold self-guided tours of at least ten famous houses and guesthouses, including the 1879 Emlen Physick Estate, on May 13, 1-4pm. Tickets may be purchased on May 13th at the Washington Street Mall Information Booth at Ocean Street. Call (609) 884-5405 for information. Admission: \$15 adults; \$7.50 children.

An exhibit at Batsto Village from May 14th - September 15th, 9am to 4pm will focus on the restoration of the village since state ownership (1954-present). Native materials used in the construction and restoration of Batsto's historic buildings will be featured along with photographs. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, from 10:30am-3:30pm, there will be tours of the mansion with a \$2 admission fee. Information: (609) 561-3262

Smithville Mansion, the 1840 Greek revival estate was the center of the manufacturing town where Hezekiah Bradley Smith, inventor and legislator, had his woodworking and machinery factories. Tours: May 14th & May 17th, 1pm, 2pm, and 3pm, (45 minutes), Smithville/Jacksonville Road, Mount Holly. Information: (609) 265-5068. Admission: \$5 adults; Seniors/students: \$4.

Other Events of Interest:

Passing the Torch: New Jersey's Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of Women's Right to Vote. A 15-mile human chain will be created from Independence Hall in Phila, PA to Paulsdale, in Mt. Laurel, NJ. Paulsdale is the birthplace of Alice Paul, the New Jersey Suffragist who played a pivotal role in the final battle to win the vote for women. To reserve a place in line, and to purchase your "torches" (flashlight) please call well before May 15: (609) 231-1885.

Home Tour, Floral Competition, and Classic Car Display sponsored by the Merchantville Historical Society, Sunday May 21, 1995, noon to 5pm. Donation \$7.00. For more information call (609) 665-2264.

It's Official: Betty Hahle is now the Riverton Borough Historian

Our own Betty Hahle was officially made the Borough Historian at the March 9, 1995 Borough Council Meeting. While she has been unofficially serving in this capacity for many years, it is great that she has finally received the recognition she so richly deserves. Betty is currently recuperating at home from hip surgery. A note or card of cheer would be most welcome by her. Make it a very speedy recovery, Betty!



Streets and roads make the framework of a town; their design and maintenance strongly influence the type of community the town will become. Broad tree-lined streets, some still lit by gaslights, have become a hallmark of Riverton.

A century before Riverton was founded a narrow dirt road from the Delaware River wound its way inland past farms, woods, school and Meeting at Westfield, and on to the village of Moorestown, all within the old township of Chester. Parts of the road followed old Indian trails that led from the river to the Atlantic ocean. And a very small part of that road became Main Street in 1851, when architect Samuel Sloan laid out the streets for the new village of Riverton.

Sloan's pattern set the design, and as the village was extended by Lippincott and Thomas families (they were cousins) the pattern was continued. Streets were wider than most new developments of that day, and were promptly landscaped. They were maintained at first by the founders' Riverton Improvement Company, for a period of twenty years. After dedication of existing public streets in 1879 Cinnaminson, the parent township, assumed care of the streets in Riverton. When Riverton opted for independence as a borough, in December 1893, that care became one of their responsibilities.

Bank Avenue along the riverfront was the first new street opened. The founders, mindful of the attraction of the river to all residents and the limited footage available, ensured perpetual access to all by easements and restrictions in the deeds issued. Title goes to the low water mark, but easement is specified as "over, under, and across as much of the property as is included in said Bank Avenue, as a public highway." A clause restricts the erection of any permanent structure on the riverbank between roadway and river wall - which is to be maintained by owners like the original section. With extensions to the village a condition for inclusion was to continue the park-like riverbank with its restrictions and easements, and eventually there was a landscaped riverbank from Morgan Avenue to the Pompeston Creek. The public roadway stopped at Fulton Street, but was closed above Howard early in this century. In 1932 an owner attempted to close another section to public use, but the legal opinion stated that use of Bank Avenue as a public highway had produced a public trust for several generations, and could not be overturned.

The original village was bounded on its lower edge by the Lippincott farm, with a narrow lane called Tin Cup Alley from Main Street to the angle of the street, and Cottage Street from there to the river. Cottage was never built upon, and was closed in 1929. In 1898 the alley, and another between Lippincott and Thomas Avenues were renamed Church and Maple Lanes, respectively. Above Fulton Street two streets, Clarkson and Clifton, were planned but not developed. The Henry A. Dreer Nurseries bought that large area in 1868. Today's Martha's Lane is approximately where Clifton Street would have been. Dreer also had a Magnolia Street above the railroad, roughly where the

roadway by the Memorial Dogwoods in Memorial Park is now. Another small lane is the walkway between Main and Cinnaminson Streets below Freddy's Shoe Shop, set aside by Mrs. Anna Rudderow in the 1880s between her home property and that of the feed and lumber yard. Recently Council named it Mattis Lane, for Ogden Mattis, Riverton's first stationmaster. The station was a lean-to shelter from his home on the corner of Main above the tracks, where the Memorial Site is now.

Cross streets were given numerical names. The first one above Bank Avenue was First, or Front Street. It was narrow and ran the width of the existing village, to Howard Street. It was not built upon, except for carriage houses, and eventually became known as Carriage House Lane. In 1865 the street was closed between Penn and Main, and in 1886 from Main to Howard.

The street by the railroad has had various names: Sixth Street, Railroad Street, Public Road (to Camden, or to Riverside), Broadway, and finally, Broad Street. Where it crosses the Pompeston into East Riverton we ride across without notice, but before 1880 it was often difficult to cross. The roadway was narrow, and over swampy land, and often covered with water. That year the roadway was raised and land filled in, to the relief of those using it. In 1887 the Creek was improved by dredging to 30 feet wide with a channel 14 ft. deep at low tide, so that sloops and other craft could reach wharves to unload building materials, manure, and other merchandise. In 1917 the creek's course was changed, to eliminate a wide loop through the Dreer property, and follows the course we are familiar with today. In the first decade of this century a succession of new streets were opened above the railroad, as the remainder of the Lip-pincott and Thomas farms were opened for development. Highway, Midway, Park, Harrison, Shrewsbury, Cherry Lane all appeared in succession. Then First and Second Avenues – soon changed to the more familiar names of Linden Avenue and Elm Terrace. When the McVaughs acquired the liquidated Dreer property about 1948, the remaining new streets were opened. Cedar Street, from railroad to 8th, had been trial gardens for roses. Above 8th it was wooded – those familiar with the *Romance of Riverton* film may recall scenes of an "Indian" racing through the woods – and hardly connect it with Cedar Street above 8th today.

Maintenance and improvement of streets was a constant need, and not always a priority, after the Riverton Improvement Company went out of existence. Main Street was full of holes, which became large puddles in rainy weather. In 1880 a newspaperman was prompted to say that there were so many potholes that puddles made it resemble fish ponds, and "residents would be obliged if the Fish Commissioner would send us a stock of tadpoles – they would make good frog ponds and keep boys amused and out of mischief." The road from pier to Westfield was the county's first Telford road – a hard surface of stone of varying sizes topped with fine gravel and rolled. But it extended only in the center of the road, and after a while washed out and had to be repaired again – at some cost. Sometimes property owners were assessed a part of the cost to the township or county for the work done.

In summer, roads were dusty, and people cried out for relief. The Village Improvement section of the Porch Club sent a delegation to Borough Council in 1902 to plead for a watering-cart, to wet down dusty streets in summer. They tried again and again, and in 1904 took matters into their own hands and sought subscriptions from homeowners, bought a watering cart and hired a man to run it through the town. Each year they offered the cart to the town if they would operate it, and each year it was refused. By 1919 the town had come up with oiling and sanding streets, and the Porch Club's cart was retired.

Oiling/sanding presented its own problems. Tars and different materials were tried, and if not enough sand were applied, the sticky stuff clung to shoes or feet and was tracked into homes. Too much sand brought clouds of dust into homes, so that windows could not be opened for relief from summer heat, and even so, a coating dust was everywhere.

In time macadamized streets solved many problems. Thomas Avenue was given wide brick gutters in 1911, and the center of the roadway macadamized. For many years schoolchildren enjoyed roller-skating or sledding down the hill between Park and 7th or Harrison Streets., which the police roped off after school hours.

Roads beyond the limits of Riverton were important, too. In 1853/54 a turnpike was commissioned from Camden to Westfield (at Moorestown-Riverton Road crossing) and gradually edged its way northward. In 1897 surveying began in anticipation of turning it over to the state as a free road. By the 1930s State Highway 25 was 88 miles long, from Camden to Jersey City, and had earned the title of "the death highway." In 1948 truck traffic had increased – to the degree that traveling it was even more hazardous, and Riverton residents strongly urged installation of a traffic light at the intersection. There was none between Cove Road in Merchantville and the Burlington-Mt. Holly intersection, in Burlington. Many Riverton children attended schools in Westfield and Moorestown, and crossing the highway was almost impossible for school buses or private cars.

Over the years Riverton's streets have been opened, closed, widened, graded, surfaced and resurfaced – with everything from stone to oyster shells to ashes to tar to asphalt and so on – they have had crossings improved, been lighted in various ways, been curbed and paved. Trees flanking them have been cared for (early on by property owners, who sometimes trimmed them with bizarre results) and replaced when storms or age or disease have taken their tolls. Our streets define and connect neighborhoods, offer vistas, yield artifacts and bits of history. They are an important part of our heritage.



Please correct your previous issue of the GLN to be "February/March/April – volume: XXIII, no. 3 (#76). Sorry for the error. Hope you have a happy and safe summer season. Enjoy the peaches and strawberries and don't forget to take a gaslight stroll or two. Riverton is beautiful at dusk! See you in the Fall!

–Paul W. Schopp–