

# Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton  
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## General Lafayette to Attend March Meeting

A meeting of the Historical Society of Riverton will be held on Monday, March 11, 1996, at 8:00 P.M. in the Riverton Public School Media Center.\* The school is located at Fifth and Howard streets. Attendees can enter the building through the main door located on Fifth Street. After a short business meeting, the Marquis de Lafayette, portrayed by Carl D. Homan, will present an address about his life and service to the American patriots.

La Marquis de Lafayette was born into a military family. By the age of 14, the Marquis had enlisted in the French Army as a member of the Musketeers. That was followed by a stint in the Dragoons. At age 19, he volunteered his services to the American Colonies at no charge. He was given the rank of General by George Washington. Lafayette was of great value to the fledgling American Army, wintering in 1777-78 at Valley Forge with the ragtag troops and suffering the same cruelties of weather as the enlisted men.

Prior to Valley Forge, however, Lafayette displayed his military prowess right here in New Jersey. Suffering from an unclosed wound, Lafayette was not deterred when he set out from Greene's camp at Haddonfield with the intention of reconnoitering Cornwallis and his troops. He left his troops on The Kings Highway near present-day Haddon Heights and traveled cross-country to Sandy Point at the mouth of Newton Creek, pursued by a squad of Dragoons.

Observing the British troops in Gloucester, Lafayette again evaded the enemy and returned to his waiting men. Rallying his light horse, riflemen and militiamen, he attacked the Hessian pickets serving as the outer perimeter guard to Gloucester. A force of 350 Hessian soldiers with field pieces were no match for the gallantry of Lafayette and his troops. The General and his army pushed the Hessian back at least one-half mile, making the enemy soldiers run for their lives. British reinforcements were sent out twice from

the main cadre at Gloucester, but none of the ground surrendered to Lafayette was reclaimed by the enemy. Only the arrival of darkness halted further action by the Americans. The General ordered his men back to Haddonfield in a slow march, savoring their victory.

In a dispatch to General Washington, Lafayette remarked about this incident,

*I take great pleasure in letting you know that the conduct of our soldiers was above all praise. I never saw men so merry, so spirited and so desirous to go on to the enemy, whatever force they might have, as that small party in this little fight.*

It was on this occasion that Morgan's Rangers drew from Lafayette the notable compliment: *I found them even above their reputation.* In this action, the Americans had only one killed and six wounded while the British suffered sixty losses through death, wounds and captures.

Mr. Carl D. Homan is a graduate of Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia. He attended Drexel University and studied mechanical engineering. Vocationally, Mr. Homan became a cost estimator in the contracting industry and retired about eight years ago. A resident of LaFayette Hill, Pennsylvania, Carl's interest in Lafayette was kindled during a freemasonry assignment. Homan had ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War. During World War II, he served with the Seebies in the Pacific Theatre of operations.



## Upcoming Program Schedule

Frank Wagenknight, our Program Chairman, would like to remind the membership of the final program planned for this season:

May 13, 1996—Lighthouses of the East Coast

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

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## **Planning Board Discusses Possible Bed and Breakfast Ordinance**

by Dan Campbell

There has been discussion in Riverton over the past year among Planning Board members, the Business Association, and the Architectural Review Committee, about the possible benefits of permitting "Bed and Breakfast" type accommodations in the borough. Consequently, in-depth research was done by some members of the Planning Board, including examination of policies in place in such areas as Moorestown & Cape May, NJ, Baltimore County, MD and Charleston, SC. This led to a draft ordinance, that was presented for discussion only, at the February 20 Planning Board meeting in Riverton.

The positive benefits are the income incentives that would be provided to owners of some of Riverton's larger homes, the income to the borough that licensure fees would provide, employment opportunities, and the boost to the business community that visitors to Riverton might bring. The negatives would be possible impacts upon the residential character of neighborhoods, and the adequacy of parking facilities.

Of the two types of establishments available, "Bed and Breakfast Home," and "Bed and Breakfast Inn," the Home Type is being considered, as it is expected to be of the least negative impact. Briefly, some highlights of the draft ordinance are as follows:

1. Only four homes would be issued the required permit at a time, all located in the historic district, at a minimum of 400 feet apart.
2. The Bed and Breakfast operator would be required to be the owner in residence on the premises and would be permitted to use no more than 50% of the bedroom units, to a three rooms maximum, for guests.
3. Off-street parking would be required, one space per room plus one per employee (the owner considered an employee). Lodging would be for a 14 day maximum.
4. Breakfast would be the only permitted meal, with all preparation areas subject to already established New Jersey Health and Building Codes.
5. There could be no adverse affect on the surrounding neighborhood as determined by the Planning Board, or on the historic building, as determined by the Architectural Review Committee.

In the past, Riverton has been a vacation area through many types of accommodations. Therefore, the general concept is not out of character with Riverton's history. The additional income to owners of larger homes could help those owners to preserve their historic properties. Can this be done with minimal impact to the historic district and neighborhoods? The Planning Board is taking careful measures to make it so.

Remember, currently there is only a draft written. We will all continue to discuss this idea as it develops further. What do you think? If we all talk about it and make our views known to the Borough, perhaps they can revive a use in Riverton that has many benefits and few impacts.

## **Coming Events of Interest**

**The Friends of Independence National Historic Park** is sponsoring a variety of trips this coming Spring. The excursions start on April 25 with a visit to our hometown, Riverton. Scheduled for 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, this boat and bus trip includes a cruise along the Delaware, lunch at the Riverton Country Club, and a wonderful sample of Victorian residences in this one-square-mile enclave. If you would like to gain a new perspective of Riverton, call (215) 928-1188.

**The Porch Club** will hold its Annual Dessert/Card Party on March 19. Tickets are available from Porch Club members or at the Riverton Free Library. On May 11, the Porch Club's Garden Tour will be held. Tickets are \$14.00 with lunch at the Clubhouse included; or \$8.00 for the Garden Tour alone. Tickets are available in local shops and from club members.

**The Annual Moorestown Antiques Show** will be held on March 22, 23, 24, at the Moorestown Friends School Gymnasium, sponsored by the Moorestown Y's Men Club.

**Clara Barton**, a video about the life and times of this remarkable New Jersey woman will be shown at the Burlington County Historical Society's Corson Poley Center on Sunday March 24, 1996 at 4:00 PM. The program is presented for Women's History Month (March), and will be followed by light refreshments.

**Dating Your Old House**, presented by Phil Hayden, will be featured at the Burlington County Historical Society's April 21 meeting, beginning at 4:00 PM. The meeting will be held at the Corson Poley Center, behind 457 High Street in Burlington. Those of you who are researching the history of an historic residence will surely benefit from this expert advice.

## Yesterday...

by Betty B. Hahle

When Riverton was a new village mail was not taken for granted as it is today. Letters were the only links between family members or branches living in distant areas, and their news was eagerly anticipated. Letters were saved to be read and re-read, for they did not come often.

Mail for the village went to Mt. Holly, where a post office had been opened in 1800, or to Burlington (opened 1797). Notice of letters waiting would be published in the newspaper, and it was up to the addressee to go to get it (and to pay for it, plus a two-cent fee, if it had not been prepaid). An 1847 Act of Congress had authorized the Postmaster General to have stamps printed, to be attached to letters or packets, to show prepaid postage. The first two stamps printed were a 5¢ stamp picturing Ben Franklin, the first postmaster, for letters traveling up to 300 miles, and a 10¢ stamp with George Washington for those going further. The first 2¢ stamp (Andrew Jackson) was printed in 1861. The stamps did not always adhere well, and many letters without stamps, or those waiting too long to be claimed, were put into Dead Letter bags and taken outside and burned. Newspapers were mailed free, in this period, if printed and sent within the same county. Later, when postal fees included papers, they changed distribution methods by using delivery boys.

After Palmyra's post office became well established, Riverton's mail arrived there. Residents could either go there for it, or have it brought to their homes by a volunteer carrier (for a fee.) Then in 1871 Riverton got its own post office. The postal area was small—still the original village size—for none of the extensions that would soon expand the community had yet begun. The "office" was in a room at the train station, which was the Mattis home. Charles Mattis served as Station Master and Post Master. The station platform was a porch on the side of the house facing the single track line of the Camden-Amboy railroad. The house stood where the War Memorial is today, and was razed in the 1930's.

In 1881 a newspaper item noted that the local post office was not paying—it seems that too many people were mailing their letters in Philadelphia, instead of at the local post office in Riverton. It pointed out that the postmaster got a commission based on the number of letters he stamped, and not on sale of stamps, as had been the practice earlier. Residents were urged to use the station letter box more often.

In the early 1880's the post office moved briefly to a small store across the track, which no longer exists. From 1882 letters had to be stamped with the time

received, the result of complaints that were made to Washington that deliveries were often not prompt. The newspaper reporter said "officials will have to be more careful and look in the boxes when inquiries are made, and not trust to memories."

Then the post office moved to Cowperthwaite's drug store "between 3rd and 4th sts. on Main" (#304) and began its long association—more than a century—with Main Street. The post office was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day except Sunday. At least eight mail trains stopped at Riverton daily—three each way to and from Philadelphia, and one each way to and from New York. Letters were hand-stamped, with a record set at 240 pieces stamped per minute. The village was growing, became a borough, and it was apparent that a system for identifying houses was needed. The first Borough Council determined that houses must be numbered, and by 1896 assessor Pancoast had devised a numbering system and notified home owners of the numbers assigned to them. House numbers were not popular with the residents, and it was years before they were actually in use.

In 1898 the post office moved from Cowperthwaite's to Parry's office at 520 Main (later renumbered), then to 528 Main (now a remodeled office building), and then across the railroad to the Rudderow building just vacated—by government request—by the Porch Club. Originally the Episcopal Church's Sunday School building, it had been purchased and moved to 609 Main St. by Samuel Rudderow, who rented it, then lost it through bankruptcy to Cinnaminson National Bank. When the Government asked for the building for a post office, Porch Club was asked to give up their lease. They did, and the Bank gave the government a ten-year lease for the property at \$700 annually. The post office was there until 1928.

In 1901 Riverton's was a 2nd class post office, and the only one between Camden and Burlington that was open on Sunday. The carriers delivered mail twice daily, over routes that added up to twenty walking miles. They served 210 families and handled 800 pieces of mail. Soon the post office reached 1st class rank, largely because of the volume of mail generated by the Henry A. Dreer Nursery located here.

Cars began to influence transportation, and in 1915 the Government notified our local postmasters that three horse-drawn rural routes in Riverton and Palmyra would be combined and served by one car. The postmaster's salary was raised to \$2,200 a year. Within the borough Council was again calling for the use of house numbers, and the clerk prepared an updated list from the assessor's maps. Many still clung to the names they had given their homes in the past. Ezra Lippincott's home (303 Bank Ave.) was



referred to as *The Mansion*. Dr. Mills' house at 106 Lippincott was known as *The Twin Pines*. N. Myers Fitler called his home at 109 Bank Ave. *Graystone*, and his brother's (C.C. Fitler) home at 11 Bank Ave. was first called *River's Edge* and then later *The Anchorage* for a large anchor displayed on the sloping lawn. The Sloan-designed founder's house at 311 Bank Ave. became *Red Gables*—not from the paint color, but for the reflection from the sun setting across the river. D.H. Wright's house at 505 Bank Ave. (now gone) was called *Banksmere*, and the Ogdens at 503 called their home *Oakdene*. Charles L. Flanagan (P.M. from 1907-1918) named his home on Main St. *The Maples*.

By 1920 both Riverton and Palmyra qualified for full mail carrier service, and the extended routes were put into operation as soon as each house along a route provided a suitable receptacle for mail deliveries. There were more cars on the roads, and it would seem that drivers tended to make their own rules: in July, 1921, police officers were stationed in front of the post office (609 Main St.) for several days to stop cars from being driven right up onto the sidewalk. The 1926 film, *Romance of Riverton* shows this building, with mail carriers Ed Faunce and Edson Carhart standing on the steps. Ross Mattis, not shown, was postmaster at that time.

Trains ran through town with a frequency most residents today can't imagine. Children liked to watch them, and to wave as they went by. They were usually rewarded with a wave in return from an engineer, a conductor on the step of the caboose, or a clerk in a mail car. If memory serves well, mail trains slowed, but did not stop, when nearing the station, and through the open door one could see two clerks at work inside. One, wearing suspenders, with shirtsleeves rolled up,

and wearing a hard, black cap with a visor, would stand at the door, holding a pole with a hook on one end. As the train moved by the station he would catch up the bag of outgoing mail from a high wagon, and at the same time kick off the incoming mail bag onto the station platform, all in one graceful motion. Some stations had a sort of gallows to hold mail bags within reach of the mail clerk's hook.

The post office moved again in 1928, just next door, to 611 Main, which had just been vacated by Cinnaminson National Bank when it moved into its new building at Main/Harrison sts. In 1938 the Government asked for bids for a more permanent post office. The two Italianate houses at 613 and 615 were obtained and demolished, and a 60x60 foot building was erected. It cost \$82,000 for lots, building, and fixtures, the *New Era* said, and was dedicated in July, 1940. It served Riverton until 1990, when the main office was moved to Cinnaminson, where more space was available for the ever increasing volume of mail, work forces, and delivery routes. Now the building serves as a small branch office.

On January 1, 1952 the penny post card became a 2¢ card. Since then postage rate increases have come more often, and in bigger amounts each time. Advertising mail has become a large part of the Postal Department's work; each year there are more issues of colorful new stamps printed, which appeal to collectors—and yield profits for the department, since they are not used.

Today there are many forms of communication from which to choose, increasingly fast and efficient. The art of the properly handwritten letter is becoming lost, and we tend to recall the colorful days of the past with nostalgia. Do you suppose that today's practices will be similarly recalled by a future generation?

