



Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton
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Colonial Wives will be the topic of the May Meeting

Coincident to Mothers Day, the Historical Society's general meeting on Monday evening, May 12, 1997 will feature an interesting and informative program about women in our Early American history. The program is entitled **"Our Founding Mothers: Wives of the American Revolution"**.

The program presenter will be David Kimball, Historian of the Burlington County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

The founding fathers of our country were very often away from their homes, when abroad or particularly, while meeting with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Much of what is now well known about the early plans of these revolutionaries was, of course, recorded in the medium of the day - the written word.

Privately, however, and little known to many, the now almost lost art of letter-writing flourished between these gentlemen delegates and their partners in marriage - their wives. Letters were used to direct household activities, inform spouses of important dates and activities, and sometimes even to confide national secrets.

Mr. Kimball's study of personal letters between the Founding Fathers of the United States, and their wives, has revealed illuminating information about the roles of these women in their marriages, and in the Revolution. Revealed in these correspondences are the burdens that these colonial women bore at home, the suggestions that they made, and the secrets that they shared with their husbands.

Prior to his current duties, Mr. Kimball's career spanned 34 years with the United States Park Service as Historian and Park Planner at Independence Hall National Park, in Philadelphia, Pa. His final assignment in that capacity was the

Bicentennial Celebration of the United States Constitution in 1987.

The program will take place at 8:00 pm in the Riverton School, Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton, NJ. All members of the public, whether Historical Society members or not, are invited to attend this meeting. Please enter through the School's main entrance facing Fifth Street and turn right at the first corridor to the Media Room (Library). The school and meeting room are handicapped accessible. Refreshments will be served afterwards.

Riverton Yacht Club Seeks Grant Funds for Pier Re-Building

The Riverton Steamboat Pier was located here in 1851, as part of the original plan for Riverton, by Philadelphia Architect Samuel Sloan. It was an important transportation link to the new "suburban village" of Riverton, for which Sloan designed the village plan.

Where the development of nineteenth century towns, such as Riverton, were typically linked to the expansion of railroads, Riverton has the characteristic of also containing a transportation connection via the Delaware River - a connection that, uniquely remains to this day.

The Riverton Yacht Club building was erected in 1880 under the requirement that the pier continue to function as a steamboat landing. The Club, which we all know today as our handsome Victorian Stick Style building, was designed with its trademark passageway through the center of the building, in order to allow access to the end of the pier for wagons and carriages.

The Riverton Yacht Club has maintained the building and the last remaining Delaware River steamboat pier, since 1880. The active membership is currently about sixty five members, after

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Daniel T. Campbell, AIA Editor

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having been over one hundred members in the 1960's and 1970's. Active local memberships have declined the most. The Yacht Club has found it increasingly difficult to raise money for the continuous and long term maintenance of the pier.

For about five years, there has been a Federal funding program, in place, called the Interstate Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). A portion of these funds are set aside for the preservation of historic transportation facilities.

After difficult soul searching about losing control of what the Club considers their property, The Yacht Club Board of Directors has authorized the creation of a tax exempt historic charitable foundation - The Riverton Steamboat Landing Foundation. This new status has allowed the new foundation to apply for the ISTEA grant monies. A grant application was filed by the newly-formed foundation on February 18 of this year.

The new status also will require that the pier and building be officially open to the public, as opposed to the informal policies of guest privileges and visitation excersized in the past. The upstairs of the building, which during steamboat operations was the passenger waiting room, will become the Steamboat Landing Museum. In it will be displayed historic photographs with explanatory notes and Delaware Estuary Outreach Project Information. Many details are yet to be finalized, and it may be two years before all items are done.

The Riverton Yacht Club strives to be a good neighbor to everyone in Riverton. The presence of the building and the pier provide a tangible link to the historic origins of Riverton. Civic groups, including the Historical Society, have provided letters in support of the ISTEA grant. Individuals who have the time or inclination to write letters of support are encouraged to do so. We have a list of State Agencies which are currently reviewing the Yacht Club's application. Please feel free to contact the writers:

Daniel T. Campbell, President, HSR

Hank Croft Jr., Vice Commodore, RYC

Board of Directors Election to be Held at May Meeting

The Nominating Committee announces the following candidates for three year terms on the Board of Directors:

For Re-election: Richard Wark of 406 Howard Street who is a present Board Member and curator of our archives; Joseph Farrell of 201 Main Street, currently our Vice President.

For New Election: Mary Walling, a former Moorestown resident, who then resided in Vermont for several years and recently returned to the area to live in Riverton at 431 Thomas Avenue with her husband Kent; Gerald Weaber who is employed at the historic Eastern State Penitentiary in the Fairmount section of Phila. and resides at 301 Second Street with his wife Patricia Lynch.

Society members are urged to attend the May meeting and support these candidates for election to the Board of Directors. Our thanks to out-going Director Karyl Chericco!

Happening Around Riverton

Deborah Hospital Designer Show House, currently showing at 101 Lippincott Avenue. Tickets available at the door.

Olde Tyme Riverton Porch Party, June 1, 12:30 pm. Lunch on local Victorian house porches, music, antiques. Tickets available in May - \$15. For more information contact Marjorie Thomson at 786-1979.

Burlington County Historical Society Annual Meeting: Thursday, May 15th, 8:00 pm at the Corson Poley Center, 454 Lawrence St., Burlington. Program: "Understanding History through Music - Songs of River and Sea". No ticket or reservation required 386-4773 for info.

Residents of Riverton or elsewhere who have old photos, letters or other memorabilia of Riverton, are encouraged to donate them to the Historical Society, rather than discarding them. We will store such items in our archives. They will be appreciated and well cared for! Thanks, and we will see you at the May meeting, the Fourth of July Parade (Riverton's 100th) or in September!

Yesterday...

By Betty B. Hahle

The year 1929 began without a clue that it would be remembered as the year of the Great Depression, a turning point in history for the entire world.

Times were good. There was prosperity, peace, available jobs, better awareness of health and social needs and progress being made in meeting those needs. Women had won their right to vote; prohibition had become law, and although that law was often ignored and corruption and organized crime followed it, those things seemed far away to most, if recognized at all. The stock market kept improving, and even housewives and clerks and cab drivers began to invest, believing that they, too, would become rich. Many investors bought on margin, or credit, and were soon deeply in debt.

There had been a 25-year building boom in Riverton (with a break for the World War) as the remaining farmland above the railroad was developed. There were very few building lots left, although below the railroad there were still some fields of corn and cabbage. Most of the new houses were smaller and simpler styles than those of earlier developments, and were owned by the families living in them. Architect Gustav Stickley, who began publishing his designs in *The Craftsman* in 1901, greatly influenced building in New Jersey with his simple, practical, and economical lines, without the ornamentation of earlier periods. Patterns could be obtained for as little as \$3, and local builders could easily follow them.

Homes were neat, neighborhoods friendly. But property lines were often boldly marked by low fences or privet hedge, or strategically placed flower beds. Flower gardens in Riverton were especially pretty and varied, due to the Dreer Nurseries located here. Most also had a back-yard vegetable garden, and some still raised a few chickens.

Since electricity became available new labor saving appliances became desirable for laundry and cleaning and keeping foods. Advertisements appeared for them on billboards and on radio, creating a strong desire to enjoy these advantages, and credit was easy, too. For many, debt soon increased to a risky level.

Riverton was originally designed in the 1850's and 60's for residences, without stores or businesses, and so it remained for a quarter of a century. Then a few simple shops opened in owners' homes. It was not until this century that there was a central business district in this town, including Mrs. Laura Hewlings at 713 Main Street, listed as "mfr. Pure Foods."

A business center, at the junction of Main, Howard, and Broad Streets at the railroad crossing was coordinated by a brick industrial building on each corner. The Price building on Broad above Church Lane, was built in 1891. The Roberts building on the point had been erected a year earlier, after fire destroyed the original frame building. Newest was the Williams Wright building of brick and stucco, in 1923. Above the railroad the Collins building had been designed and built in 1914. The Evans building, dating from circa 1881, was frame. Eventually it was covered with siding simulating brick. Still later it burned, so it is gone.

The brick school on 5th street, built in 1910 and expected to provide plenty of space for many years, was soon overcrowded, as more young families came to Riverton. In 1929 the School Board sought bids for a 2-room portable building, to be set on concrete foundation and heated with stoves, to relieve overcrowding. The need for a school nurse was under consideration, and the Visiting Nurses offered their services for \$300 a year. Miss Hannah Chew, principal, urged having a nurse in time for the Spring round-up, but not all were in favor of it. Mrs. Hetty (Lippincott) Miller retired from the Board after serving on it for 30 years. When she was given a gift, which was a large globe, she said she didn't know why they had chosen that, but that as a child there had always been a small globe in her home, and she had always wanted a big one for herself. She added that she would always be interested in education.

Cars and trucks were making deep inroads into the railroad's long grip on transportation. A survey taken in 1929 showed that there was 1 car for every 5 people in the USA, a greatly increased ratio from only a short time ago. In Riverton there were new drivers every week; carriage houses became garages, and new garages were built. Mr. Cole, milk dealer at 501 Main Street, had a group of garages erected at the back of his property, facing Howard Street. There were 5 auto agencies and 2 service stations in town: Clarence Bell's at 611 Thomas Ave.; Broad St. Garage (10 Broad), that earlier had serviced carriages, now serviced cars. It was run by (?) Worton and Elmer Vaughn. Jos. Friday was located at 502 Main St, and Taylor Motor Co was at Broad & Fulton. Woolston's, on Howard just below Broad, had recently added Hupmobiles to their Star Agency line. McCoy's Service Station was at Broad & Linden, and Sun Oil Service, run by LeRoy Schneider, was at Broad & Main (now the bakery parking lot.)

Nationwide, businesses were merging and large corporations forming; a new group of wealthy men was growing. Wages for workmen grew only slightly. Locally, businesses were also growing and

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expanding. James Taylor's earlier service station had burned shortly after the "Romance of Riverton" movie was made in 1926. His new building, designed and erected by Eichner and Weber of Palmyra, opened on March 22, 1929. Constructed of concrete blocks with a brick front, there was a large showroom, with a balcony office at the back of it, and space for 3 cars on the floor. It cost \$10,000. (Today it is Erin Cleaner's.)

J.S. Collins & Son erected 3 coal silos near the railroad siding, constructed of tile. Each was 16 ft. in diameter, 40 ft. high, and held 400 tons of coal. They were filled via an endless chain of buckets that dropped coal onto a chute at the top, allowing it to slide down without breaking up. It was emptied from the bottom, with screens arranged to minimize dust and dirt. They were in operation by April 1, a town landmark for many years. (Does a reader remember when they were demolished?)

Stiles drug store had closed briefly, and reopened late in March under the direction of B.E. Blakenbush, of Merchantville, who had been working for Stiles. The soda fountain had a new electric refrigeration system, and refreshment tables were added. Bryers Ice Cream was served exclusively. In Stiles there were a Circulating Library, various gift and toilet articles and patent medicines as well as a prescription department. Free delivery was offered "any time, any place." Mr. Stiles still lived at 608 Main, next to the drug store, where the Mattis Meat Market operated from the 1st floor.

Riverton Market House was purchased by William Uhr of Overbrook, who added fruits and vegetables to the usually stocked meats and deli items. Formerly Cliff Taylor's store, it was located in the old Gas Company office building (bakery now) and the entry was from Broad Street, between the 2 store windows. A large sign hung over the door.

In January 1929 the Palmyra Women's Club was organized, and Mrs. Rowland Dunn, wife of the dentist, was elected the Club's 1st president. The Club dissolved in 1958/9, and Porch Club of Riverton accepted 43 of their members into its Club.

Headlines were made in the New Era when Elaine Groves was given a 3000 mile airplane trip across the country for her 21st birthday by her father, F. Stanley Groves, Jr. They had been to Honolulu when Mr. Groves got the idea and chartered a plane and 2 pilots at Los Angeles for the trip home. It was said to be the first time such a thing had been done. Fog was encountered in Texas, and again in Maryland, which was reached on the 4th day of the flight. The rest of the trip home to Riverton was made by train.

Borough Council had many problems to deal with, a good number of them dealing with streets and sidewalks. Sidewalks on Midway were in poor

condition, and on Elm not everyone had complied with the law to provide walks across their properties. Also Elm Ave. residents petitioned for a refund from their taxes because their street had not been oiled, as promised. The sluice gates at the lily pond at Memorial Park were in need of repair, and authorization was given. (The Park was used, but not yet developed).

The river wall on Bank Avenue was in need of repair, and owners were ignoring it. When Riverton was founded the landscaped bank and stone wall were part of the overall plan, and the first thing constructed in the new village. Founders were cognizant that the riverfront was limited in area, but beautiful, and should be open for all to enjoy. Accordingly, they wrote Deeds giving ownership to individuals, but requiring that a public right of way, Bank Avenue, be maintained across their properties, and no permanent structure of any kind erected between street and riverwall. This open riverbank restrictions were carried into new deeds as the village expanded above and below the original 9-property riverbank width.

When the village had become a borough in 1893, one of the earliest ordinances passed was for sidewalks to be provided across properties — including Bank Avenue. In 1929 Bank Avenue was listed in Directories as open all the way from Morgan Ave. to Fulton St. Early in this century there was a footpath between roadway and riverwall, but it has long since disappeared. Properties have changed owners many times in the 148 years since Riverton was founded, and periodically differences arise over upkeep and rights and responsibilities.

In 1929 the wall was in need of repair, and owners said that since the borough had put lights along the street, and fireplugs, and policed the area, and since it couldn't be closed off because of the length of time it had been open to public use, the borough might as well do everything. The newspaper said that the "riverbank has always been a place where residents delight in taking visiting friends, a place of beauty, that has become a disgrace."

Eventually agreements were reached, and the riverbank was once again beautiful and cared for. A walk along the river today is shocking. While some properties are well kept and lovely, others are indeed "a disgrace" as they were in 1929. In some sections there is rubble where lawns used to be, trees gone have not been replaced, sections of wall are dangerously in need of repair — or are completely gone.

Access to the scenic riverfront of Riverton by the public is a privilege that should not be abused. But neither should neglect by property owners be tolerated. It does not present the best image of Riverton to see it this way.

Betty B. Hahle